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# Documented file

## *Self-eaters*

by Eva Doumbia

In collaboration with Armand Gauz

translated by Amélia Parenteau

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Contxto is coordinated by ARTCENA, with the French Ministry of Culture, the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Institut Français and the SACD (French Society of Dramatic Writers and Composers)

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*This file is part of a **full Contxto resource kit**, complete with a video interview with the author filmed by ARTCENA and available [on our website](#).*

# I . The play

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## 1. OVERVIEW

"Reading about thieboudienne (fish and rice), I discovered that Senegal's national dish has only been eaten since the 18th century, and was probably brought over by European colonists. I wanted to find out more, and began learning about how tastes, smells, fragrances, and culinary pleasures are all mixed in with travel, conquest, dispossession, deportation, and slavery. I learnt that here too, history is all around us, in the food we eat. I wanted to move away from the African/European diametric within me, to look at other forms of exile. I met with others, and heard Japanese, Vietnamese, and American stories."

Eva Doumbia

The narrative takes place in a community hall, church, village square, or theatre. Believers (the audience and actors) have come together for a ceremony, a banquet and ritual rolled into one. Imagine it as being a commonplace ceremony, one that everyone knows, where all are familiar with the gestures, words, and songs.

## 2. PRESENTATION

" There are two pillars within my work: the first being narrative, and the second something akin to assembly theatre. *Autophagies* follows in the line of *Moi et mon cheveu*, a cabaret show that looks at how Black hair is wrapped up in a history of othering and colonisation. The idea was to demonstrate that beauty is political, too. *Autophagies* is more autobiographical. In the 1980s, my father Amadou Doumbia opened the first African restaurant in Le Havre, where he lived. The menu included mafé. We rarely ate this at home, as my mother (a teacher from Normandy) called the shots. We ate African food when friends from the Cote d'Ivoire came over. I still remember all the dishes laid out in the middle of the table, with everyone helping themselves with their hands, except for us: we were French children, and used spoons. For a long time, I thought this chicken and peanut butter dish was a traditional West African dish, but it wasn't at all. I found out that Mali's national dish only emerged in the 18th century, probably imported along with other culinary habits, by European colonists. I then started wondering where most of the food we eat in Africa today comes from: bananas, rice, chocolate, pineapple, mango. I realised that none of them would grow in Sub-Saharan Africa. None of them are native crops.

Tastes, smells, fragrances, and culinary pleasures are all mixed in with travels, conquests, dispossession, deportation, and slavery. History is all around us, even in the food we eat. Eating food (to feed oneself) is to feed off oneself. The idea here isn't to guilt-trip, but to raise awareness of the passive role we play within a chain that started well before Antiquity, with the founding of the very first empires.

I travelled the world for the play, on trips to Mali, the Ivory Coast, New Orleans, and beyond. Each time, I visited people's houses, collecting culinary experiences. I also read up on how we process and transport food. Why and how did rice become Africa's most widely-eaten grain when it doesn't even grow there?

*Self-eaters* goes further than my previous works, as it links the memory of colonisation with current exploitation practices. The play reminds us that in today's world, to feed oneself is to eat up others, in a symbolic sense. When I eat a tomato, for example, I am also consuming the work of all the people who were exploited in the process of getting that tomato onto my plate. In a way, that

makes me a slaver. It's much deeper and more complex than a basic, everyday need. Eating alters the landscape and transforms the world."

Eva Doumbia

### 3. EXTRACTS FROM THE TEXT



My roots aren't in France, but you can live without your roots. I'm in France without roots. Sugarcane isn't cultivated in France. My mother is of Indian descent. She has straight hair, and my grandmother was Chinese. Oh yes Madame, that's... That's Réunion Island... Between 1833 and 1848, catching wind of trouble following the independence of Saint-Domingue (that was Haiti's name), with various abolitionist movements in the French and English empires, the sugar planters of Bourbon Island (that was Réunion's name) came up with the idea of indentured servitude: contracts at first for three, then five years, for the Indians. A little arrangement between colonizers. Certain people say there was little difference in treatment between the Indian indentured servants and the Black slaves. I say: well really, it's complicated: the coolies, as they were called, were voluntary and even if it wasn't very much, they were paid. And at the same time, they were mistreated, they were saddled with debts to force them to stay on the land. Anyways, coolies, indentured servants, that's my story... Réunion Island cultivates sugar on fifty-seven percent of its viable agricultural land. Réunion Island is the sugar island, I am sugar. I'm not addicted to sugar, but I am sugar. My mother told me they would beat her with a sugar cane. I ate her cries. Indentured servitude nourished me, I am the sweat of the indentured workers in the sugar factory.

530 is the real number for 2022. Because it was in 1492 that it all began. 2022 minus 1492 equals 530. We're now in the year 530 after Columbus. The year zero of my story is 1492. In year zero, Christopher Columbus set foot on a land he believed to be Indian. He was seeking Genghis Kahn in the Caribbean; the colonizer is compass-less. "Pre-Columbian," "Colombia," "Meso-Columbian" are the words of my disoriented shame. Disoriented, as you recall, to be disoriented, is to not know where the Orient is. In 1502, that is it say in year 10 of our era, the Caribbean sovereigns offered cocoa beans to the man with the catastrophic last name. Columbus the colonizer threw the precious beans into the waves, believing they were dried goat excrement. They say it was Spanish Carmelite nuns who added a touch of sugar to cocoa for the first time. They say. Some people get to narrate when others don't have any successors left to tell their stories. Everything ramps up during the Renaissance, and it's even worse in the Modern Era. In the 17th century, that is to say, the third of our Columbian era, here, princes' courts' pastry chefs built gold candy monuments that rotted the Sun King's teeth, while there, the Amerindian pyramids were destroyed. Exportation, importation. Exploitation. Extermination. Nobody will ever again be able to say with precision the violence endured by those first nations who never understood why they were treated so badly. Deportation. Europe's indentured servants, slaves, whores, assassins, debtors, and all the other sinners won't suffice either to feed the sugar plantation's greed. Importation. Spain, France, Holland, Portugal, Italy, England, there they dance the Viennese waltz and the creamy-sugary-chocolate. The cane's fire lights up the bacteria lodged in the inbred tyrants' decaying teeth. Jams and molasses drip in the palace and on the farms. Everyone looks for sugar or molasses for their game birds, their roasts, or to embellish their black bread. Importation. Deportation. Exploitation of human energy. They import men from what they called Africa to this continent that they hadn't yet named America. Import-export.

One day in October 528 after Columbus, in our twenty-first century's epidemic beginning, as I was crossing a Parisian train station, signs from shops declared essential by the government were blinking: chocolate sweets, teas, coffee, and gold made on assembly lines are remnants of murderous affectations. That which is rare is expensive, that which is no longer rare is no longer expensive. Agricultural exploitations and little foreign plantations. What remains is the exploitation of distant bodies. Delocalization."



It might seem strange for me to speak all alone, standing in this 300 km<sup>2</sup> field where there are only clones of me. No other vegetables, nothing but us on half of Switzerland, if we accept that almost all living species disappear there, bankers and their safes included. This is what a biological success looks like, even if this triumph has the muddled sweet-salty-sugary-bitter taste of a jar of Nutella, TM.

The ancestors understood right away what a miracle we were. Because like we say in French, “dans le cochon, tout est bon.” In the pig, everything is good. Same with me, the palm tree.

My pulp provides a red oil that nourishes men and spirits (any charm isn’t worthy of the name if it isn’t anointed with it). From my pits, they extract an oil that maintains the skin’s beauty and serves in numerous medicinal formulas. My deseeded and dried pods are fire starters. My hollowed-out shells embrace each other while emitting a smoke that all pests fear, especially mosquitos. My branches are woven together to form reams used as roofs or fences. From my leaves, they make a textile fiber. Gathered in bouquets, my veins form brooms. The liquid extracts from my heart efficiently replace mother’s milk. The famous Ivorian “palm wine” is a fermented version of this “milk.” My long, straight trunk serves as a construction pillar. My roots slow down the soil’s erosion. Even dead, I harbor succulent caterpillars and serve as a breeding ground for the best mushrooms in the undergrowth... The Industrial Revolution will upset this old relationship with men, animals, and plants of the forest.

In the beginning of the 19th century, Europe needed oil for its numerous steam machines thirsty for lubricants. You’re correct in guessing which is the most available, the easiest to transport and transform... They take away the squirrels and the palm rats’ exclusive dominion over the plantations. After that, the fields are planted and maintained by men’s hands. A month doesn’t go by without them finding a new industrial application for my oil. The Swiss Lever company creates tons of soaps for such a good price that for the first time in history, even poor people can be clean.

I bring glycerins to the Norwegian Nobel that make an explosive find. I dethrone wax and soot for making candles. I create fire with Napalm. I am in all the chemical formulas. Recently, they found me an opening in fuels. In the food industry, they hit the jackpot. Every time they need a fat, that is to say, all the time, I’m there. The question isn’t knowing which processed food products I’m in, but rather those I’m not.

Today, they no longer want my beautiful orange oil, rich in vitamins. They transform it into a golden liquid. It creates a rush in supermarkets and cardiovascular systems. They eat me and get sick from it. And me too, I eat! Forests, rivers, lakes, animals, lands, traditions... I eat everything. On these lands, nothing but me and mine remain, pampered in our half of Switzerland. We should be happy... But what is happiness worth when you’re only with yourself?”

**Extracts from *Autophagies*  
by Eva Doumbia, translated by Amélia Parenteau**

## 4. SELECTED PRESS REVIEWS

*“Eva Doumbia combines cooking and food with words to create a breed of hybrid theatre that reflects who she is. A form of theatre in which cultures interact and disciplines collide in a happy tangle that is not without confrontation or struggle. [...] In Autophagies, Eva Doumbia leads her La Part du Pauvre/Nana Triban company deeper in exploring cookery as a theatrical ingredient. A bridge between the senses and thought, expressing the violence and domination at the heart of the director’s approach to theatre, and helping to go beyond, drawing crossroads and creating reconciliation.*

*[...] By using food to depict her personal story – Eva uses banana to share her past, sugar to show Olga, and rice to explore Angelica –, each of the three women takes on the food’s clichés to better shatter them.*

*The three artists all have double- or triple-fold cultural heritage, and stroll past seeds and other foods just as they wander through the stories of their ancestors and the writing by Eva and Ivorian writer Armand Gauz: with a radiant joy expressed through intimate sharings and more formal, academic lines.*

*All these ingredients come together in a shared present flavoured with mafé. And the dish’s generosity wins out over the violence it stems from, without ever erasing it.”*

Anaïs Heluin, Sceneweb, 15 July 2021

*“Drawing on her family legacy and her role as a woman seen as Black first and foremost in the eyes of French society, Eva Doumbia offers up an incisive, insightful reflection on the racial relationships that emerged from France’s history of colonisation and slavery, through an original medium: food. At the end of the performance (still in progress, but highly promising), she invites the audience to share the meal she has prepared on stage, to honour the victims of this ever-present past. “I wanted to make sense of what we eat, taking Black history as my starting point and examining modern forms of slavery, including industrial factory-farming. I struggle to see industrial meat farms as any different from slavery, just because the victims aren’t human. We cannot know the experience of other living creatures.”*

Séverine Kodjo-Grandvaux, Le Monde, 30 July 2017

*“At the heart of this “culinary performance” as the director calls it, lies a fascinating purpose: showing how a national dish is prepared, through the ingredients that comprise it. Shining a light on their links with a country’s past, particularly when the country in question was once colonised, just as one might unearth roots. In mafé, the ‘traditional’ West African chicken and peanut butter dish, where do the rice and peanuts come from? Can eating ever be a neutral act ? ”*

Anne Diatkine, Libération, 18 July 2021

## 5. THE PLAY IN FRANCE

### Staging by Eva Doumbia

*Self-Eaters* was created by Eva Doumbia and her company *la Part du Pauvre / Nana Triban* in collaboration with the dance company *N’Soleh* based in Abidjan and the company *Kuma So* based in Bamako during the Festival d’Avignon 2021.

The play will go on tour in 2022/2023 among others in Théâtre du Nord, CDN Lille-Tourcoing-Hauts de France and in Théâtre du Point du jour in Lyon.

## II. The playwright

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### EVA DOUMBIA



Director, writer, and actor Eva Doumbia was born and raised in the suburbs of Le Havre, in Normandy, in a community made up of working-class locals, trade unionist teachers, immigrant workers, and African students.

After studying literature and theatre at the Université de Provence in Marseille, she embarked on a stage directing course at the Unité Nomade de Formation led by Jacques Lassalle, Krystian Lupa, André Engel and Dominique Müller, and studied technique at the TNS under Pierre Mélé, André Serré and Marion Hewlett.

In 1999, she set up La Part du Pauvre/Nana Triban based between Marseille and Abidjan. She was a Théâtre des Bernardines associate from 2007 to 2013, and has been State-subsidised since 2010. She was an associate artist at the Ateliers Médicis in Clichy Montfermeil. Her company is still based in the Théâtre des Bains Douches in Elbeuf, a multicultural, working-class town.

Her work as an artist takes a poetic approach to reflecting on multiple identities, and deftly aims to build bridges between worlds: Europe, where she was born and still lives, Africa, where her father is from (Abidjan, Bamako, Ouagadougou, Niamey, Brazzaville, Libreville), and the Americas (Haiti, the US, Brazil, and beyond).

She gets out of the theatre on a regular basis, putting on performances or small-scale shows in unusual settings. She writes her own plays, and draws on the works of Edward Bond, Alfred de Musset, Peter Turrini, Lars Noren and Bertolt Brecht. As something of a talent-spotter, she has brought writings by Kouam Tawa, Dieudonné Niangouna, Aristide Tarnagda and Léonora Miano to life. She has also adapted novels by Chester Himes, Maryse Condé, Yanick Lahens, Fabienne Kanor, and Jamaica Kincaid for the stage.

In February 2015, the Carreau du Temple commissioned her to create the AfricaParis weekend event. Supported by the Friche Belle de Mai, the Festival de Marseille and MP2018, she launched the Afropea festival in 2016, with the upcoming edition accredited with the Africa 2020 label.

*Anges Fêlées*, her debut novel, is published by Vents d'Ailleurs, with her second, *Le lench*, published by Actes Sud.

In 2017, she was awarded by the Institut Français the Hors les Murs writing grant (formerly Médicis/Hors les Murs) for *Philip Morris*, set between Normandy and Louisiana. As founding member of Décoloniser les Arts, she contributed to the collective's eponymous book (2018).

Her last production, *Self-Eaters* is a culinary performance co-written with novelist Gauz, and was created at the Festival d'Avignon in 2021.

## PRIZES, AWARDS

*Le lench*, Aide à la création de textes dramatiques - ARTCENA, 2019

*Le lench* selected by the reading committee of the review La Récolte, 2019

*Le lench* selected for the Public Readings of the French language Festival, CDN de Normandie-Rouen, 2019

*Le lench* selected by the Reading Committee of the Théâtre du Rond Point, 2017

*Le lench*, finalist of The Grand Prix de littérature de textes dramatiques, 2021



### III. The translator

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#### AMELIA PARENTEAU



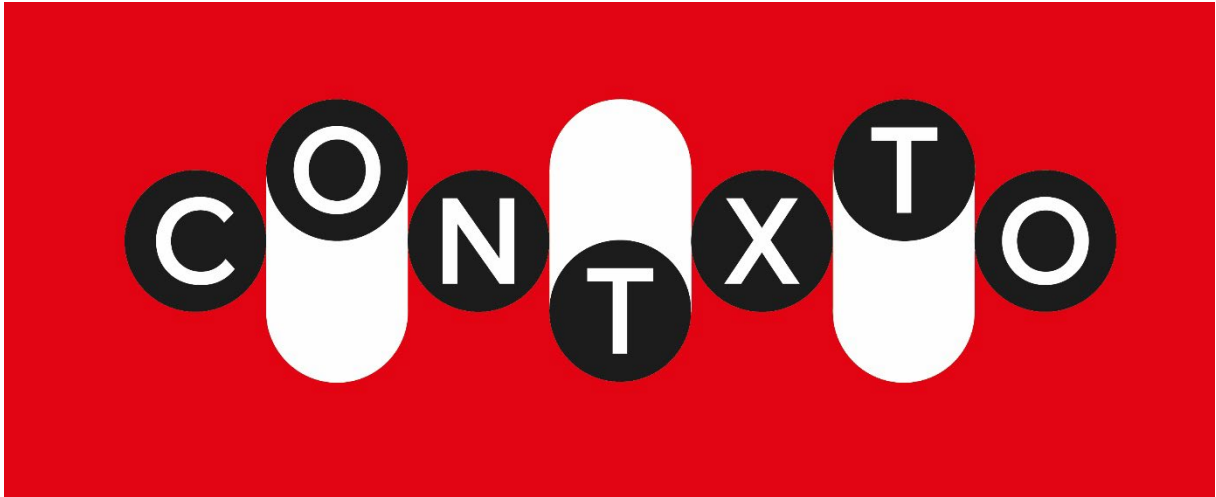
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Amelia Parenteau is a writer, French-English translator, and theater maker with a passion for social justice, based in New Orleans. An alumna of Sarah Lawrence College, she has worked with 600 HIGHWAYMEN, Ping Chong + Company, The Civilians, the French Institute Alliance Française (FI AF), The Lark, the New York International Fringe Festival, the Park Avenue Armory, and Theatre Communications Group in New York City, as well as Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, RI, People's Light in Malvern, PA, the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, CT, the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris, France, and Intramural Theater and No Dream Deferred in New Orleans, LA. She has translated plays by Charlotte Boimare and Magali Solignat, Penda Diouf, Sedef Ecer, Alain Foix, Leslie Kaplan, and David Lescot, several of which have had staged readings in New York City and Princeton, NJ. She has interpreted for numerous artists and arts professionals including

Hortense Archambault, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Caroline Guiela Nguyen. Her writing and translations have been published in numerous outlets including American Theatre Magazine, Asymptote, Contemporary Theatre Review, and HowlRound.

## IV. The Contxto network

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In order to raise the international profile of francophone dramatic writing, ARTCENA joined with the **French Ministry of Culture**, the **French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs**, the **Institut Français** and the **SACD** (French Society of Dramatic Writers and Composers) to launch Contxto.

This network aims to support the translation, promotion and international staging of works by Francophone playwrights. Contxto enjoys international presence thanks to its partner members, Instituts Français branches around the world and embassy services, drawing on their expertise and networks of local operators.

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