African Modes of Self-Writing

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translated by Steven Rendall

The only subjectivity is time. . . .
Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps*

Over the past two centuries, intellectual currents have emerged whose goal has been to confer authority on certain symbolic elements integrated into the African collective imaginaire. Some of these trends have gained a following, while others have remained mere outlines. Very few are outstanding in richness and creativity, and fewer still are of exceptional power.

At the intersection of religious practices and the interrogation of human tragedy, a distinctively African philosophy has emerged. But governed though it has been, for the most part, by narratives of loss, such meditation on divine sovereignty and African people's histories has not yielded any integrated philosophico-theological inquiry systematic enough to situate human misfortune and wrongdoing in a singular theoretical framework.[1] Africa offers nothing compara-

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1. See, e.g., Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianisme sans fétiche: Révélation et domination* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1981); Jean-Marc Ela, *Le cri de l'homme africain: Questions aux chrétiens et aux églises d'Afrique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1980), and *Ma foi d'africain* (Paris: Karthala, 1985); and Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *Tales of Faith: Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa* (London: Athlone, 1997).

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ble, for example, to a German philosophy that from Luther to Heidegger has been based not only on religious mysticism but also, more fundamentally, on the will to transgress the boundary between the human and the divine. Nor is there anything comparable to Jewish Messianism, which, combining desire and dream, confronted almost without mediation the problem of the absolute and its promises, pursuing the latter to its most extreme consequences in tragedy and despair, while at the same time treating the uniqueness of Jewish suffering as sacred at the risk of making it taboo.[2] It is true that, following the examples of these two metanarratives, contemporary African modes of writing the self are inseparably connected with the problematics of self-constitution and the modern philosophy of the subject. However, there the similarities end.

Various factors have prevented the full development of conceptions that might have explained the meaning of the African past and present by reference to the future, but chief among them may be named historicism. The effort to determine the conditions under which the African subject could attain full selfhood, become self-conscious, and be answerable to no one else soon encountered historicist thinking in two forms that led it into a dead end. The first of these is what might be termed *Afro-radicalism*, with its baggage of instrumentalism and political opportunism. The second is the burden of the metaphysics of difference (*nativism*).[3] The first current of thought—which liked to present itself as "democratic," "radical," and "progressive"—used Marxist and nationalist categories to develop an imaginaire of culture and politics in which a manipulation of the rhetoric of

2. See Gershom Scholem, *Aux origines religieuses du judaïsme laïque: De la mystique aux Lumières,* ed. Maurice Kriegel (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2000); Yitzhak F. Baer, *Galout: L'imaginaire de l'exil dans le judaïsme*, trans. Marc de Launay (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2000); Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (New York: Grove, 1978); and Sylvie Anne Goldberg, *La Clepsydre: Essai sur la pluralité des temps dans le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000).

3. To be sure, the two currents of thought adhere to no single theory of identity, politics, or culture. For different critiques, see Amady A. Dieng, *Hegel, Marx, Engels et les problèmes de l'Afrique noire* (Dakar: Sankoré, 1978); Bogumil Jewsiewicki, *Marx, Afrique et Occident: Les pratiques africanistes de l'histoire marxiste* (Montreal: McGill University, Centre for Developing-Area Studies, 1985); and Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 41–46. See also Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 166–91. It can further be argued that in its attempt to reconceptualize the problem of the subject, African feminism does not fundamentally alter the dominant African Marxist, nationalist, or nativist understandings of subjectivity or concepts of human intentionality. See, e.g., Amina Mama, Ayesha Imam, and Fatou Sow, eds., *Engendering African Social Sciences* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997); and Ifi Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (London: Zed, 1997).

autonomy, resistance, and emancipation serves as the sole criterion for determining the legitimacy of an authentic African discourse.[4] The second current of thought developed out of an emphasis on the "native condition." It promoted the idea of a unique African identity founded on membership of the black race.

Fundamental to both currents of thought are three historical events, broadly construed: slavery, colonization, and apartheid. A particular set of canonical meanings has been attributed to these three events. First, on the level of individual subjectivities, there is the idea that through the processes of slavery, colonization, and apartheid, the African self has become alienated from itself (*self-division*). This separation is supposed to result in a loss of familiarity with the self, to the point that the subject, having become estranged from him- or herself, has been relegated to a lifeless form of identity (*objecthood*). Not only is the self no longer recognized by the Other; the self no longer recognizes itself.[5]

The second canonical meaning has to do with property. According to the dominant narrative, the three events have led to dispossession, a process in which juridical and economic procedures have led to material expropriation. This was followed by a unique experience of subjection characterized by the falsification of Africa's history by the Other, which resulted in a state of maximal exteriority (*estrangement*) and deracination. These two phases—the violence of falsification and material expropriation—are said to be the main components of African history's uniqueness and of the tragedy that is at its foundation.[6]

Finally, there is the idea of historical degradation: slavery, colonization, and apartheid are supposed to have plunged the African subject not only into humiliation, debasement, and nameless suffering but also into a zone of nonbeing and

4. This approach contrasts with the politics of black radical activity in the United States during the twentieth century. In the latter case, attempts were made to organically conjoin Marxism and Black Nationalism, to develop a praxis that would attend to both *class* and *race* in promoting social transformation. See, for example, Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and the essay by Brent Hayes Edwards, "The 'Autonomy' of Black Radicalism," *Social Text*, no. 67 (2001): 1–12.

5. Whether discussing it under the term *alienation* or *deracination*, it is francophone criticism that has most fully conceptualized this process. See, in particular, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [*Peau noire, masques blancs*], trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967); Hamidou Kane, *L'aventure ambiguë* (Paris: Julliard, 1961); and Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu: Authenticité africaine et philosophie* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1977), and *Christianisme sans fétiche.*

6. This is particularly applicable to English-language studies of Marxist political economy, anthropology, or history. Sometimes these also rely on nationalist and dependentist theses. See, e.g., Claude Aké, *A Political Economy of Africa* (Harlow, England: Longman, 1981); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981); and, on a more general level, Samir Amin, *Le développement inégal: Essai sur les formations sociales du capitalisme périphérique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1973).

social death characterized by the denial of dignity, heavy psychic damage, and the torment of exile.[7] These three fundamental elements of slavery, colonization, and apartheid are said to serve as a unifying center of Africans' desire to know themselves, to recapture their destiny (*sovereignty*), and to belong to themselves in the world (*autonomy*).

By following the model of Jewish reflection on the phenomena of suffering, contingency, and finitude, these three meanings might have been used as a starting point for a philosophical and critical interpretation of the apparent long rise toward nothingness that Africa has experienced all through its history. Theology, literature, film, music, political philosophy, and psychoanalysis would have had to be involved as well. But such a synthesis did not occur.[8] In reality, the production of the dominant meanings of these events was itself colonized by the two ideological currents introduced above—the one instrumentalist, the other nativist—that claim to speak in the name of Africa as a whole.[9]

In the remarks that follow, I examine these two currents of thought and draw out their weaknesses. Throughout this discussion, I propose ways out of the dead end into which they have led reflection on the African experience of self and the world. Against the arguments of critics who have equated identity with race and geography, I show how current African imaginations of the self are born out of disparate but often intersecting practices, the goal of which is not only to settle factual and moral disputes about the world but also to open the way for *self-styling*. By emphasizing historical contingency and the process of subject formation, my aim is to reinterpret subjectivity as time.

7. On the problematics of slavery and reparation, see J. F. Ade Ajayi, "The Atlantic Slave Trade and Africa," and "Pan-Africanism and the Struggle for Reparation," in *Tradition and Change in Africa: The Essays of J. F. Ade Ajayi,* ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2000). Cf., for a more subtle and sophisticated interpretation of slavery and its impact, Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); and, on "dispersion" as seen from the other side of the Atlantic, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

8. To be sure, attempts have occasionally been made at such a project. Apartheid has been the subject of constant biblical interpretation. See, among others, Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition: Sermons and Speeches*, comp. Mothobi Mutloatse, ed. John Webster (New York: Orbis, 1984); and Desmond Tutu, *Hope and Suffering* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984). Colonization has also been the subject of such interpretations. See, e.g., Oscar Bimwenyi-Kweshi, *Discours théologique négro-africain: Problème des fondements* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1981); and Ela, *Le cri de l'homme africain* and *Ma foi d'Africain.*

9. See, e.g., Thandika Mkandawire and Charles C. Soludo, *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1999).

The Instrumentalist Paradigm: Primal Fantasies

The current of thought marked above as Marxist and nationalist is permeated by the tension between voluntarism and victimization. It has four main characteristics. First of all, it exhibits a lack of self-reflexivity and an instrumental conception of knowledge and science, in the sense that neither is recognized as autonomous. They are useful only insofar as they are mobilized for service in partisan struggle.[10] To this partisan struggle is attributed an intrinsic moral significance, since it is alleged to oppose revolutionary liberation to the forces of conservatism.[11]

The second characteristic is a mechanistic and reified vision of history. Causality is attributed to entities that are fictive and wholly invisible, but are nevertheless said to determine, ultimately, the subject's life and work. According to this point of view, the history of Africa can be reduced to a series of subjugations, narrativized in a seamless continuity. African experience of the world is supposed to be determined, a priori, by a set of forces—always the same ones, though appearing in differing guises—whose function is to prevent the blooming of African uniqueness, of that part of the African historical self that is irreducible to any other.

As a result, Africa is said not to be responsible for the catastrophes that are befalling it. The present destiny of the continent is supposed to proceed not from free and autonomous choices but from the legacy of a history imposed upon Africans—burned into their flesh by rape, brutality, and all sorts of economic conditionalities.[12] The African subject's difficulty in representing him- or herself as the subject of a free will is supposed to proceed from this long history of subjugation. This construction of history leads to a naive and uncritical attitude with regard to so-called struggles for national liberation and to social move-

10. See, e.g., Jacques Depelchin, "African Anthropology and History in the Light of the History of FRELIMO," *Contemporary Marxism*, no. 7 (1983): 69–88.

11. This tendency took shape during the last quarter of the twentieth century in ideological production issuing not only from national institutions, such as the University of Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania), but also from regional ones, such as the Southern African Political Economy Series (SAPES) Trust, based in Harare (Zimbabwe), and continental ones, such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), based in Dakar (Senegal). For a theorization, see Claude Aké, *Social Science as Imperialism: The Theory of Political Development* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1982), and *Revolutionary Pressures in Africa* (London: Zed, 1978).

12. See the ideological criticisms of structural adjustment programs and the continuous conceptual dependence on a developmentalist paradigm in Thandika Mkandawire and Adebayo Olukoshi, eds., *Between Liberalization and Oppression: The Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995).

ments; an emphasis on violence as the privileged avenue for self-determination; the fetishization of state power; the disqualification of the model of liberal democracy; and the populist and authoritarian dream of a mass society.[13]

The third characteristic is a desire to destroy tradition and the belief that authentic identity is conferred by the division of labor that gives rise to social classes, the proletariat—urban or rural—playing the role of the universal class par excellence.[14] The dictum that the working class is the only practical agency that can engage in universal emancipatory activity results in the denial of any possible multiplicity of foundations for the exercise of social power.[15]

Finally, this Marxist-nationalist school of thought relies on an essentially *polemical* relationship to the world, a relationship based on a troika of rhetorical rituals. The first ritual contradicts and refutes Western definitions of Africa and Africans by pointing out the falsehoods and bad faith they presuppose. The second denounces what the West has done (and continues to do) to Africa in the name of these definitions. And the third provides ostensible proofs that—by disqualifying the West's fictional representations of Africa and refuting its claim to have a monopoly on the expression of the human in general—are supposed to open up a space in which Africans can finally narrate their own fables. This is to be accomplished through the acquisition of a language and a voice that cannot be imitated because they are, in some sense, authentically Africa's own.[16]

Yet what might appear to be the apotheosis of voluntarism is here accompanied by a lack of philosophical depth and, paradoxically, a cult of victimization. Philosophically, the Hegelian thematics of identity and difference, as classically exemplified in the master-bondsman relationship, is surreptitiously reappropriated by the ex-colonized. In a move that replicates an unreflexive ethnographic practice, the ex-colonized assigns a set of pseudohistorical features to a geographical entity which is itself subsumed under a *racial name*. The features and

13. On social movements, see Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, eds., *African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995). On the populist critique of liberal democracy, see Claude Aké, *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2000); and Issa G. Shivji, *The Concept of Human Rights in Africa* (London: CODESRIA, 1989), and *Fight My Beloved Continent: New Democracy in Africa* (Harare: SAPES Trust, 1988).

14. See, e.g., Mahmood Mamdani, ed., *Uganda: Studies in Labour* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1996); Issa G. Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

15. One recent example is Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996). See also Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

16. See, e.g., Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa,* vol. 1, *The Nineteenth Century* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1993), and *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997).

the name are then used to identify or make possible the recognition of those who, by virtue of possessing those features or bearing that name, can be said to belong to the racial collectivity and the geographical entity thus defined. Under the guise of "speaking in one's own voice," then, the figure of the "native" is reiterated. Boundaries are demarcated between the native and the nonnative Other; and on the basis of these boundaries, distinctions can then be made between the authentic and the inauthentic.

In the critique that follows, I will be arguing (1) that such nationalist and Marxist narratives of the African self and the world have been superficial; (2) that as a consequence of this superficiality, the formulations of self-government and autonomy they engender are founded, at best, on a thin philosophical base; and (3) that their privileging of victimhood over subjecthood is derived, ultimately, from a distinctively nativist understanding of history—one of history as sorcery.

Self-affirmation, autonomy, and African emancipation—in the name of which the right to selfhood is claimed—are not new issues. As the Atlantic slave trade came to an end in the middle of the nineteenth century, doubts among Europeans regarding Africans' ability to govern themselves—that is, according to Hegel, to control their predatory greed and their cruelty[17]—gained impetus. These doubts were connected with another, more fundamental doubt that was implicit in the way modern times had resolved the complex general problem of alterity and the status of the African sign within this economy of alterity. Both Western philanthropic movements and the African intelligentsia of the times responded to this doubt from within the paradigm of the Enlightenment.[18]

The Legacy of the Enlightenment To draw out the political implications of these debates, I should perhaps first remark the project, central to Enlightenment thought, of defining human nature in terms of its possession of a generic identity. The rights and values to be shared by all are derived from this identity, universal in essence. It is identical in each human subject because it has reason at its center. The exercise of reason endows individuals with not only liberty and autonomy, but

17. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1991), 91–99.

18. To be sure, Enlightenment discourse on race was not univocal. Nevertheless, it can be said that, for the most part, its thinkers joined in debate on common discursive terrain. As Paul Gilroy shows, the extensive debate as to whether "Negroes" should be accorded membership in the human family was central to the formation of the modern episteme. See Gilroy, "Race Ends Here," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998): 838–47. See also Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000): 821–65; and, more generally, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Race and Enlightenment: A Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997).

also the ability to conduct life in accordance with moral principles and an idea of the good. The thing to note here is that outside this circle, there is no place for a politics of the universal. And for European thinkers of the period of abolition, the question was indeed whether Africans were to be situated inside or outside the circle—that is, whether they were human beings like all others. In other words: Could we find among Africans the same human person, merely disguised by different designations and forms? Could we consider Africans' bodies, languages, works, and lives as products of human activity, as manifesting a subjectivity—that is, a consciousness like our own—that would allow us to consider each of them, taken individually, as another self (*alter ego*)? The Enlightenment's response to these questions can be traced through three distinct intellectual moments with distinct political implications.

An initial set of answers suggested that Africans be kept within the limits of their presupposed ontological difference. This school of Enlightenment thought—as exemplified by positions taken by Hegel and Kant—identified in the African sign something unique, and even indelible, that separated it from all other human signs. The best testimony to this specificity was the black body, which was supposed not to contain any sort of consciousness and to have none of the characteristics of reason or beauty.[19] Consequently, it could not be considered a body composed of flesh like one's own because it belonged solely to the order of material extension and of the object doomed to death and destruction. It is this centrality of the body in the calculus of political subjection that explains the importance assumed, in the course of the nineteenth century, by theories of the physical, moral, and political regeneration of blacks and, later on, of Jews.

According to this darker side of the Enlightenment, Africans developed unique conceptions of society, of the world, and of the good that they did not share with other peoples. It so happened that these conceptions in no way manifested the power of invention and universality peculiar to reason. Nor did Africans' representations, lives, works, languages, or actions—including death—obey any rule or law whose meaning they could, on their own authority, conceive or justify. Because of this radical difference, it was deemed legitimate to exclude them, both de facto and de jure, from the sphere of full and complete human citizenship: they had nothing to contribute to the work of the universal.[20]

19. On the centrality of the body in Western philosophy and its status as the ideal unit of the subject, the site of the recognition of his or her identity, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 81–234. On the "weight" of the body of the colonized, see Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110–13.

20. On this point and the preceding discussion, cf. Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Les citoyennetés en Révolution, 1789–1794* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992); Pierre Pluchon, *Nègres et*

A significant shift occurred with the advent of the formal, state-directed colonization of Africa in the late nineteenth century. While the principle of ontological difference persisted, the concern for self-determination became connected with the imperative to "become civilized." A slight slippage thus was introduced within the old economy of alterity. The thesis of nonsimilarity was not repudiated, but it was no longer based solely on the emptiness of the sign as such. The sign was given a name: *custom*. If Africans were different kinds of beings, that was because they had an identity of their own. This identity was not to be abolished. On the contrary, difference was to be inscribed within a distinct institutional order, a native order forced to operate within the fundamentally inegalitarian and hierarchized colonial framework. In other words, difference was recognized, but only insofar as it implied inequalities that were, moreover, considered natural to the extent that it justified discrimination and, in the most extreme cases, segregation.[21]

Later, the colonial state went on to use this concept of custom—that is, the thesis of nonsimilarity, in a revised edition—as a mode of government in itself. Specific forms of knowledge were produced for this purpose; such was the case of statistics and other methods of quantification, as deployed in censuses and various other instruments like maps, agrarian surveys, and racial and tribal studies.[22] Their objective was to canonize difference and to eliminate the plurality and ambivalence of custom.[23] There was a paradox to this process of reification. On

Juifs au XVIIIe siècle: Le racisme au siècle des lumières (Paris: Tallandier, 1984); Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1979); Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Imprimerie de la Société littéraire et typographique, 1785); and Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

21. The most fully realized institutional form of this economy of alterity was the system of apartheid, in which the hierarchies were biological in nature. A less extreme version was "indirect rule," a not very onerous form of domination which, in the British colonies, made it possible to exercise authority over natives with few soldiers by making use of the natives' passions and vices. Cf. Lucy Philip Mair, *Native Policies in Africa* (London: Routledge, 1936); Frederick John Dealtry, Baron Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: Blackwood and Sons, 1980).

22. See "Number in the Colonial Imagination," chap. 6 in Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). For a study of the appropriation of these techniques by postcolonial elites, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

23. This was done notwithstanding the fact that "custom" varied radically from place to place. As was the case elsewhere, "custom" became the trope for social order in African societies thought to be outside of history, devoid of individuals. It could, from the colonial moment on, be reproduced through the force of law. On similar experiences in a different part of the colonized world, see Nicholas B. Dirks, "The Policing of Tradition: Colonialism and Anthropology in Southern India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39 (1997): 182–212.

the one hand, it looked like recognition. But on the other, it constituted a moral judgment, because ultimately, custom was only made specific the better to indicate the extent to which the world of the native, in its naturalness, failed to correspond with our own—that it was, in short, not part of our world, and thus could not serve as the basis for a praxis of living together in a civil society.

The third approach offered by the Enlightenment had to do with the politics of assimilation. Here, a comparison with the Jewish experience is worth making. Just as with the figure of the "blacks," the invocation of the figure of the Jews as an archetypal Other to the West was central to the Enlightenment notion of *Bildung* (the formative process by which the individual moves toward autonomy). Jews were perceived as the negation of the Enlightenment's promise of an emancipation through the use of reason. In principle, the concept of assimilation was based on the possibility of an experience of the world common to all human beings—or, rather, on the possibility of such an experience as premised on an *essential similarity* among human beings. But this world common to all human beings, this similarity, was not supposed to have been given a priori to all.

The black, especially, had to be *converted* to it. This conversion was the condition for his being perceived and recognized as a fellow human being and for his otherwise indefinable humanity to enter representation. Once this condition was met, the project of assimilation could proceed, with the recognition of an African individuality distinct from generic tribal identities. African subjects could have rights and enjoy them, not by virtue of their subordination to the rule of custom, but by reason of their status as autonomous individuals capable of thinking for themselves and exercising reason, the peculiarly human faculty.[24]

To recognize this individuality—that is, this ability to imagine goals different from those imposed by custom—was to do away with difference. The latter had to be erased or annulled if Africans were to become like us, if they were henceforth to be considered as alter ego. Thus, the essence of the politics of assimilation consisted in desubstantializing and aestheticizing difference, at least for a category of natives (*les évolués*) whose conversion and "cultivation" made them

24. In practice, the new subjects created by the politics of assimilation were cast as homogeneous reproductions of the metropolitan subject. Christopher Miller rightly states that the "theory and practice of assimilation stressed continuity with the metropolitan country and the reproduction of 'her' values, while ignoring or denying the truly profound break that colonial subjects were experiencing in relation to their own cultures" (Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 122). As Fanon makes clear, race would remain the barrier between the *assimilé* and Frenchness; the amount of Frenchness available to the colonized would be restricted by biology. See *Black Skin, White Masks*, chap. 5.

suitable for citizenship and the enjoyment of civil rights. Assimilation thus inaugurated a passage from custom into civil society, but by way of the civilizing mill of Christianity and the colonial state.[25]

During the nineteenth-century conjuncture of abolition and the advent of formal colonialism, when African criticism first took up the question of selfcraft in terms of self-government and self-imaging, it inherited these three moments, but did not subject them to a coherent critique. On the contrary, subscribing to the program of emancipation and autonomy, it accepted, for the most part, the basic categories then used in Western discourse to account for universal history.[26] The notion of "civilization" was one of these categories. It authorized the distinction between the human and the nonhuman—or the not-yet-sufficiently human that might become human if given appropriate training.[27] The three vectors of this process of domestication were thought to be conversion to Christianity, the introduction of a market economy, and the adoption of rational, enlightened forms of government.[28] In reality, it was less a matter of understanding what led to servitude and what servitude meant than of postulating, in the abstract, the necessity of liberating oneself from foreign rule.

To be sure, African thinkers took seriously the challenge of colonial disruption. Seeking to be their own masters, they at times interrogated the moralities of colonial modernity in vernacular accents. At other times, they sought to capture the material benefits of colonial rule for their own advantage. Leaders of resistance at one moment in history, many shuttled between principled options and dubious alliances. Following a "zigzag line of a hundred tacks," most inhabited the ambiguous and largely uncharted zones of dependence.[29] In their polemical use of the West's ideas, they imported new concepts and discursive models "in order to defend new frontiers of locality" and to tame what they perceived as modernity's threats. In the process, they invented a narrative of liberation built

25. Even when the postulate of equality among human beings was admitted, colonization was sometimes justified in the name of "civilization." See, among others, Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la colonie en Algérie* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1988). On the ambiguities of French assimilation policies, see Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

26. Cf. the essays in Henry S. Wilson, ed., *Origins of West African Nationalism* (London: Macmillan–St. Martin's Press, 1969).

27. Cf., e.g., Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, "Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres," in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1849).

28. See Edward W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967).

29. See Shula Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth-Century Natal* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1986).

around the dual temporality of a glorious—albeit fallen—past (tradition) and a redeemed future (nationalism).[30]

But for the first modern African thinkers, liberation from servitude was equivalent above all to acquiring formal power. The basic moral and philosophical question—that is, how to renegotiate a social bond corrupted by commercial relationships (the sale of human cargoes), the violence of endless wars, and the catastrophic consequences of the way in which power was exercised—was considered secondary. African criticism did not assume as its primary task a political and moral philosophical reflection on the nature of the internal discord that led to the slave trade and colonial domination. Still less did it concern itself with the modalities of reinventing a being-together in a situation in which, with regard to the philosophy of reason that it claimed to espouse, all the outward appearances of a possible human life seemed to be lacking, and what passed for politics had more to do with the power to destroy and to profit than with any kind of philosophy of life or reason.

To be sure, in the post–World War II period, African nationalisms came to replace the concept of "civilization" with that of "progress." But they did so the better to endorse the characteristic teleologies of the times.[31] Such was the case of Marxism.

In Marx's narrative, both the subject and the telos of history are known. In this tradition, the ultimate frontier of history is a commodity-free society. To decommodify economic and social relationships entails the abolition of the power of the market and the collapse of the distinction between state and society. Such processes, and the ensuing formation of new relations of production, may involve a coercive logic or even terror. The latter may be mobilized as a means to facilitate the passage of history. As for Marx's subject, he or she exists wholly as a mere reflection and effect of material production. Revolutionary violence is conceived as a force of cohesion, the purpose of which is to produce a moral refashioning of the subject, a transformation of his or her consciousness as well as material conditions.[32]

30. See Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938); and John Lonsdale, "Jomo, God, and the Modern World," in *African Modernities? Duration and Disjuncture*, ed. Jan-Georg Deutsch, Peter Probst, and Heike Schmidt (London: James Currey, in press).

31. In later modernity, Western philosophical criticism has begun moving away from some of the most radical Enlightenment propositions. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures,* trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

32. Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*, vols. 1 and 3, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1976, 1981). On violence see Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Commu-*

If, in the Western experience, Marx's theory equated modernization with modernity and was conceived as a science, the same narrative in the African context soon became associated with politics as a sacramental practice. As such, politics required the total surrender of the individual to a utopian future and to the hope of a collective resurrection that, in turn, required the destruction of everything that stood opposed to it. Embedded within this conception of politics as pain and sacrifice was an entrenched belief in the redemptive function of violence. As an offering of one's life on the public altar of the revolution, violence could be expiatory or substitutive. It could also imply self-sacrifice—in which case the logic of sacrifice was linked with that of the gift. Expiatory, substitutive, or self-sacrificial, violence was deployed—and death unleashed—in the name of a Marxist telos. Murder itself was commuted and concealed through ascription to a final moral truth, while the proof of virtue and morality lay in pain and suffering.[33]

The possibility of a properly philosophical reflection on the African condition having been set aside, only the question of raw power remained: Who could capture it? How was its enjoyment legitimated? In justifying the right to sovereignty and self-determination and in struggling to wrest power from the colonial regime, two central categories were mobilized: on one hand, the figure of the African as a victimized and wounded subject, and on the other, the assertion of the African's cultural uniqueness.[34] Both required a profound investment in the idea of race and a radicalization of difference itself.

At the heart of the postcolonial paradigm of victimization, we find a reading of the self and the world as a series of conspiracies. Such conspiracy theories have their origins in both Marxist and indigenous notions of agency.[35] In African history, it is thought, there is neither irony nor accident. We are told that African history is essentially governed by forces beyond Africans' control. The diversity

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nism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky, 2d English ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961). For critiques, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); and Hannah Arendt, *La crise de la culture; Huit exercices de pensée politique* [*Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*], trans. Patrick Lévy (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 28–57.

33. See, for instance, the texts collected in Aquino de Bragança and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *The African Liberation Reader* (London: Zed, 1982).

34. See Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Renascent Africa* (London: Cass, 1969); Kwame Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom: A Statement of African Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1961); Amilcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970).

35. This is especially the case with respect to notions of witchcraft. See Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, trans. Geschiere and Janet Roitman (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

and the disorder of the world, as well as the open character of historical possibilities, are reduced to a spasmodic, unchanging cycle, infinitely repeated in accord with a conspiracy always fomented by forces beyond Africa's reach. Existence itself is expressed, almost always, as a stuttering. Ultimately, the African is supposed to be merely a castrated subject, the passive instrument of the Other's enjoyment. Under such conditions, there can be no more radical utopian vision than the one suggesting that Africa disconnect itself from the world—the mad dream of a world without Others.

This hatred of the world at large (which also marks a profound desire for recognition) and this paranoid reading of history are presented as a "democratic," "radical," and "progressive" discourse of emancipation and autonomy—the foundation for a so-called politics of Africanity.[36] Rhetoric to the contrary, however, the neurosis of victimization fosters a mode of thought that is at once xenophobic, racist, negative, and circular. In order to function, this logic needs superstitions. It has to create fictions that later pass for real things. It has to fabricate masks that are retained by remodeling them to suit the needs of each period.

The course of African history is said to be determined by the combined action of a diabolical couple formed by an enemy—or tormentor—and a victim. In this closed universe, in which "making history" consists of annihilating one's enemies, politics is conceived of as a *sacrificial process*, and history, in the end, is seen as participating in a great *economy of sorcery*.[37]

The Prose of Nativism

Parallel to this current of thought that seeks to found a politics of Africanity on the categories of Marxist political economy (while viewing politics as sacrifice and history as sorcery), a rhetorical configuration has developed whose central thematics has to do with cultural identity. This current of thought is characterized by a tension between a universalizing move that claims shared membership within the human condition (*sameness*) and an opposing, particularistic move.

36. See Archie Mafeje, "Africanity: A Combative Ontology," *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1 (2000): 66–71. For different views, see, in the same issue, Wambui Mwangi and André Zaiman, "Race and Identity in Africa: A Concept Paper," 61–63; Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, "Race, Identity, and Africanity," 63–66; and Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, "A Word from a Non-Black African," 74–75.

37. This is something that the vernacular language fully recognizes, but that the Marxist lexicon nevertheless prevents African intellectuals from naming as such. See, e.g., Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, "Mobutisme après Mobutu: Réflexions sur la situation actuelle en République Démocratique du Congo," *Bulletin du CODESRIA*, nos. 3, 4 (1998): 27–34.

This latter move emphasizes difference and specificity by accenting, not originality as such, but the principle of repetition (*tradition*) and the values of autochthony. The point where these two political and cultural moves converge is race. Let me briefly survey the history of its problematization in African thought.

To begin with, there is the notion of race and its long-privileged status in historically contingent practices of recognizing human attributes. Historically, most nineteenth-century theories established a close relationship between the human subject and the racial subject. Race was understood as a set of visible physiological properties and discernible moral characteristics. These properties and characteristics were supposed to mark distinct human species.[38] Moreover, such marks made it possible to classify these species within a hierarchy whose violent effects were at once political, economic, and cultural in nature.[39] As I have already indicated, the classifications dominant during the period of the Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath actually excluded Africans from the circle of humanity or, at best, assigned to them an inferior status in the hierarchy of races.

This denial of humanity (or attribution of inferiority) has forced African responses into contradictory positions that are, however, often concurrently espoused.[40] There is a universalistic position: "We are human beings like any others."[41] And there is a particularistic position: "We have a glorious past that testifies to our humanity."[42] Discourse on African identity has been caught in a dilemma from which it is struggling to free itself: Does African identity partake in the generic human identity?[43] Or should one insist, in the name of difference and uniqueness, on the possibility of diverse cultural forms within a single humanity—but cultural forms whose purpose is not to be self-sufficient, whose ultimate signification is universal?[44]

The apologetic density of the assertion "we are human beings like any others"

38. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

39. See Pierre Guiral and Emile Témime, eds., *L'idée de race dans la pensée politique française contemporaine: Recueil d'articles* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1977).

40. With regard to the other side of the Atlantic, see Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of *Diaspora*," *Social Text*, no. 66 (2001): 45–75.

41. Cf. the importance of this theme in Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks.* See also Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1955); and, more generally, Léopold Sédar Senghor's poetry.

42. See, e.g., Cheikh Anta Diop, *Antériorité des civilisations nègres: Mythe ou vérité historique?* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1967).

43. On this, see Fanon's last pages, *Black Skin, White Masks.*

44. This is Léopold Sédar Senghor's thesis. See Senghor, *Liberté I: Négritude et humanisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), and *Liberté III: Négritude et civilisation de l'universel* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

can be gauged only with respect to the violence of the denial that precedes it and makes it not only possible but necessary.[45] The reaffirmation of a human identity that has been denied by the Other belongs, in this case, to the discourse of rehabilitation and functions as a mode of self-validation.[46] But although the aim of the discourse of rehabilitation is to confirm that Africans too belong to humanity in general, it does not challenge the fiction of race.[47] The defense of the humanity of Africans is almost always accompanied by the claim that their race, traditions, and customs have a specific character.

In dominant African narratives of the self, the deployment of race is foundational not only to difference in general, but also to the idea of the nation, since racial determinants are supposed to serve as the moral basis for political solidarity. In the history of being African, race is the moral subject and at the same time an immanent fact of consciousness. The basic underpinnings of nineteenth-century anthropology, namely, the evolutionist prejudice and the belief in the idea of progress, remain intact; racialization of the (black) nation and the nationalization of the (black) race go hand in hand. Whether we look at negritude or the differing versions of Pan-Africanism, in these discourses the revolt is not against Africans' belonging to a distinct race, but against the prejudice that assigns this race an inferior status.

The next item to consider is tradition and the privileged place it occupies in this nativist current of thought. The starting point here is the claim that Africans have an authentic culture that confers on them a peculiar self irreducible to that of any other group. The negation of this self and this authenticity would thus constitute a mutilation. On the basis of this uniqueness, Africa is supposed to reinvent its relationship to itself and to the world, to own itself, and to escape from the obscure regions and the opaque world (the "Dark Continent") to which history has consigned it. Because of the vicissitudes of history, Africans are supposed to have left tradition behind them. Whence the importance, in order to recover it, of moving backward, which is the necessary condition for overcoming the phase of humiliation and existential anguish caused by the historical debasement of the continent.

45. Cf. the problematics of race in the United States as discussed in Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), and Lewis R. Gordon, ed., *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

46. See Abiola Irele, "African Letters: The Making of a Tradition," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5 (1991): 69–100.

47. Cf. Kwame Anthony Appiah's criticism of texts by Alexander Crummel and W. E. B. Du Bois in *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London: Methuen, 1992) chaps. 1–2. See also Appiah's "Racism and Moral Pollution," *Philosophical Forum* 18 (1986/87): 185–202.

The emphasis on establishing an "African interpretation" of things, on creating one's own schemata of self-mastery, of understanding oneself and the universe, of producing endogenous knowledge have all led to demands for an "African science," an "African democracy," an "African language."[48] This urge to make Africa unique is presented as a moral and political problem, the reconquest of the power to narrate one's own story—and therefore identity—seeming to be necessarily constitutive of any subjectivity. Ultimately, it is no longer a matter of claiming the status of alter ego for Africans in the world, but rather of asserting loudly and forcefully their alterity.

It is this alterity that must be preserved at all costs. In the most extreme versions of nativism, difference is thus praised, not as the symptom of a greater universality, but rather as the inspiration for determining principles and norms governing Africans' lives in full autonomy and, if necessary, in opposition to the world. Softer versions leave open the possibility of "working toward the universal" and enriching Western rationality by adding to it the "values of black civilization," the "genius peculiar to the black race." This is what Léopold Sédar Senghor calls *le rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir* (the meeting point of giving and receiving), one of the results of which is supposed to be the *métissage* of cultures.

Since the nineteenth century, those who maintain that Africans have their own cultural identity, that there is a specific African autochthony, have sought to find a general denomination and a place to which they could anchor their prose. The geographical place turns out to be a tropical Africa, bounded as a thoroughly fictional realm in opposition to the phantasmatic anatomy invented by Europeans and echoed by Hegel and others.[49] Somehow, the disjointed members of this imaginary polis must be glued back together. The dismembered body of the continent's history is therefore reconstituted in the light of myth. An attempt is made to locate Africanity in a set of specific cultural characteristics that ethnological

48. On these debates, see Julius Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), and "How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought," in *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry,* ed. Ivan Karp and D. A. Masolo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 187–214; Paulin Hountondji, ed., *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997); Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Sankofa, 1996), and *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

49. See Hegel's geography of Africa in *Philosophy of History.*

research is expected to provide. Nationalist historiography sets out in quest of the missing remainder in ancient African empires and in pharaonic Egypt.[50]

In the prose of nativism (as well as in some versions of the Marxist and nationalist narratives), a quasi-equivalence is established between race and geography. Cultural identity is derived from the relationship between the two terms, geography becoming the privileged site at which the (black) race's institutions and power are supposed to be embodied.[51] Pan-Africanism in particular defines the *native* and the *citizen* by identifying them with black people. In this mythology, blacks do not become citizens because they are human beings endowed with political rights, but because of two particularistic factors: their color and a privileged autochthony. Racial and territorial authenticity are conflated, and Africa becomes the land of black people. Since the racial interpretation is at the foundation of a restricted civic relatedness, everything that is not black is out of place, and thus cannot claim any sort of Africanity. The spatial body, the racial body, and the civic body are thenceforth one, each testifying to an autochthonous communal origin by virtue of which everyone born of the soil or sharing the same color or ancestors is a brother or a sister.

The idea of an Africanity that is not black is simply unthinkable. Whence the impossibility of conceiving, for example, the existence of Africans of European, Arab, or Asian origin—or that Africans might have multiple ancestries. One result of the Atlantic slave trade is that blacks live in faraway places. How should we account for their inscription within a nation defined racially and geographically, when geography and history have cut them off from the place from which their ancestors came? Since the African geographical space constitutes the natural homeland of black people, those whom slavery has taken away from it must "return to the land of [their] fathers . . . and be at peace."[52]

The Shattered Mirror

We have just seen that dominant African discourses on the self developed within a racist paradigm. As discourses of inversion, they draw their fundamental cate-

50. See Joseph Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire de l'Afrique noire d'hier à demain* (Paris: Hatier, 1972); Cheikh Anta Diop, *L'unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire: Domaines du patriarcat et du matriarcat dans l'antiquité Classique* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1959); Théophile Obenga, *L'Afrique dans l'antiquité: Egypte pharaonique, Afrique noire* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1973).

51. Ironically, we find the same impulse and the same desire to conflate race with geography in the racist writings of white settlers in South Africa. For details, see J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988).

52. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, 124.

gories from the myths they claim to oppose and reproduce their dichotomies: the racial difference between black and white; the cultural confrontation between civilized peoples and savages; the religious opposition between Christians and pagans; the very conviction that race exists and is at the foundation of morality and nationality. They are inscribed within an intellectual genealogy based on a territorialized identity and a racialized geography, the myth of a racial polis obscuring the fact that while the rapacity of global capitalism may be at the origin of the tragedy, Africans' failure to control their own predatory greed and their own cruelty also led to slavery and subjugation.[53] More fundamentally, behind the dream of political emancipation and the rhetoric of autonomy, a perverse operation has been taking place, the result of which has only strengthened Africans' ressentiment and their neurosis of victimization.

Of all the attempts that have been made in the course of the twentieth century to break with this empty dream, this exhausted mode of thought, two are of particular interest for our discussion. First of all, there are the efforts to deconstruct tradition (and thereby Africa itself) by showing the latter to have been invented.[54] From this point of view, Africa as such exists only on the basis of the text that constructs it as the Other's fiction. This text is then accorded a structuring power, to the point that a self that claims to speak with its own, authentic voice always runs the risk of being condemned to express itself in a preestablished discourse that masks its own, censures it, or forces it to imitate.

This is as much to say that Africa exists only on the basis of a preexisting library, one that intervenes and insinuates itself everywhere, even in the discourse that claims to refute it—to the point that with regard to African identity and tradition, it is now impossible to distinguish the "original" from a copy.[55] The same can be said of any project aimed at disentangling Africa from the West. In a related vein, a second avenue has problematized African identity as an identity in formation.[56] From this point of view, the world is no longer perceived as a

53. See Joseph Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade (1730–1830)* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

54. In his study of the foundations of discourse about Africa, Mudimbe notices that "Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order. Even in the most explicitly 'Afrocentric' descriptions, models of analysis explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer to the same order" (Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988], x).

55. For a case study, see Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

56. See Appiah, *In My Father's House.* In a later study, Appiah denounces the narrowness of

threat. On the contrary, it is imagined as a vast network of affinities. In contrast to unanimist mythologies, the essential message here is that everyone can imagine and choose what makes him or her an African.

In large measure, both of these criticisms are driven by methodological considerations. They do not go to the heart of the matter: How to deal with the specters invoked by the nativists and so-called radicals in their respective attempts to hypostatize African identity—at the very time when the imaginative and social practices of African agents show that other orders of reality are being established. In other words, how should we conceive, creatively and in their heteronomy, the all-purpose signifiers constituted by slavery, colonization, and apartheid?

On the philosophical level, priority must be given to interrogating the imprisoning model of a history that is already shaped and that one can only undergo or repeat—and to addressing that which, in actual African experiences of the world, has escaped such determination. On a more anthropological level, the obsession with uniqueness and difference must be opposed by a thematics of sameness. In order to move away from ressentiment and lamentation over the loss of a *nom propre*, we must clear an intellectual space for rethinking those temporalities that are always simultaneously branching out toward several different futures and, in so doing, open the way for the possibility of multiple ancestries. Finally, on a sociological level, attention must be given to the contemporary everyday practices through which Africans manage to recognize and maintain with the world an unprecedented familiarity—practices through which they invent something that is their own and that beckons to the world in its generality.[57]

Let me briefly examine some of the genuinely philosophical inquiries neglected

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nationalist positions, emphasizes the possibility of double ancestry, and affiliates himself with a "liberal cosmopolitanism." See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997): 617–39.

57. In recent years, various studies have shown how, beyond claims to Africanness, Africans have constantly negotiated new positions in the spaces between cultures and have disrupted the signs of both identity and difference. See, among others, Karin Barber, ed., *Readings in African Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael, eds., *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jonathan Haynes, ed., *Nigerian Video Films* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000). For two case studies on the complex entanglements of so-called traditional and global intellectual traditions, see Peterson Bhekizizwe, *Monarchs, Missionaries, and African Intellectuals: African Theatre and the Unmaking of Colonial Marginality* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2000); and Stephanie Newell, *Ghanaian Popular Fiction: "Thrilling Discoveries in Conjugal Life" and Other Tales* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

by African criticism in its reflection on slavery, colonization and apartheid. The first question that should be identified concerns the status of suffering in history—the various ways in which historical forces inflict psychic harm on collective bodies and the ways in which violence shapes subjectivity. It is here that a comparison with other historical experiences has been deemed appropriate. The Jewish Holocaust furnishes one such comparative experience.[58] Indeed, the Holocaust, slavery, and apartheid all represent forms of originary suffering. They are all characterized by an expropriation of the self by unnameable forces. In each case, the forces assume various forms. But in all, the central sequence is the same: to the orgiastic intoxication summoned by the administration of mass murder corresponds, like an echo, the placing of life between two chasms, so that the subject no longer knows if he or she is dead or alive. This combination of destructive animus and the dislocation of the self constitutes the Dionysian terrain shared by these three events. Indeed, at their ultimate foundation, the three events bear witness against life itself. On the pretext that origin and race are the criteria of any kind of valuation, they indict life. Whence the question: How can life be redeemed, that is, rescued from this incessant operation of the negative?

The second question has to do with the work of memory, with the function of forgetting, and with the modalities of reparation. Is it possible to lump together slavery, colonization, and apartheid as a memory? That is to say, not in a sort of distinction between before and after or past and future, but in what might be termed the *genetic power* of these events—their revelation of the impossibility of a world without Others and of the weight of the peculiar responsibility incumbent upon Africans themselves in the face of tragedy (which is not the only element!) in their history. It is here that the comparison between African and Jewish experiences reveals profound differences. In contrast to the Jewish memory of the Holocaust, there is, properly speaking, no African memory of slavery;[59] or, if there is such a memory, it is one characterized by diffraction.[60] At best, slavery is experienced as a wound whose meaning belongs to the domain of the uncon-

58. See Laurence Thomas, *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

59. On Jewish memory, see, among other studies, Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982). For a philosophical critique, cf. Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

60. See Madeleine Borgomano, "La littérature romanesque d'Afrique noire et l'esclavage: 'Une mémoire de l'oubli'?" in *Esclavage et abolitions: Mémoires et systèmes de représentation*, ed. Marie-Christine Rochmann (Paris: Karthala, 2000), 99–112.

scious—in a word, witchcraft.[61] When efforts at conscious recollection have been made, they have scarcely escaped the ambivalence that characterizes similar gestures in other historical contexts.[62]

There are two reasons for this difficulty with the project of recuperating the memory of slavery. First, between African Americans' memory of slavery and that of continental Africans, there is a shadowy zone that conceals a deep silence—the silence of guilt and the refusal of Africans to face up to the troubling aspect of the crime that directly engages their own responsibility. For the fate of black slaves in modernity is not solely the result of the tyrannical will and cruelty of the Other, however well established the latter's culpability may be. The other primitive signifier is the murder of brother by brother, "the elision of the first syllable of the family name," in Jacques Lacan's phrase—in short, the divided polis. Along the trajectory of the events that led to slavery, this is the trail that dominant African discourses of the self try to erase.

The ablation here is significant, because it enables the functioning of the illusion that the temporalities of servitude and misery were the same on both sides of the Atlantic. This is not true. And it is this distance that prevents the trauma, the absence, and the loss from ever being the same on the two sides of the Atlantic.[63] As long as continental Africans neglect to rethink slavery—not merely as a catastrophe of which they were but the victims, but as the product of a history that they have played an active part in shaping—the appeal to race as the moral and political basis of solidarity will depend, to some extent, on a mirage of consciousness.[64]

61. See, e.g., Rosalind Shaw, "The Production of Witchcraft/Witchcraft as Production: Memory, Modernity, and the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone," *American Ethnologist* 24 (1997): 856–76. Cf. *Route et traces des esclaves*, special issue, *Diogène*, no. 179 (1997).

62. See T. A. Singleton, "The Slave Trade Remembered on the Former Gold and Slave Coasts," *Slavery and Abolition* 20 (1999): 150–69; and Edward M. Bruner, "Tourism in Ghana: The Representation of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora," *American Anthropologist* 98 (1996): 290–304. In the postapartheid context, see the description of "township tours" by Steven Robins, "City Sites," in Nuttall and Michael, *Senses of Culture*, 408–25.

63. On the status of these categories in general and their role in Jewish consciousness in particular, cf. Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999): 696–730.

64. In their "Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History: The Institutional Foundations of the Old Calabar Slave Trade," *American Historical Review* 104 (1999): 333–55, Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson show how African dealers in slaves and British merchants adapted the local institution of debt bondage, or "pawnship," as a way of securing credit (or goods advanced against the delivery of slaves). For a general discussion on human pawnship in Africa, see Toyin Falola and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., *Pawnship in Africa: Debt Bondage in Historical Perspective* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994).

The second challenge to the recovery of memory is of another order. In certain parts of the New World, the memory of slavery is repressed by the descendents of African slaves. The family drama at the origin of the tragedy as well as the misery of their existence in the present are constantly denied. To be sure, this denial is not equivalent to forgetting as such. It is simultaneously a refusal to acknowledge one's ancestry and a refusal to remember an act that arouses feelings of shame. Under such conditions, the priority is not really to reestablish contact with oneself and with one's origins.[65] Nor is it a question of restoring a full and positive relationship to oneself, since this self has been damaged and humiliated beyond any limit. Because the narrative of slavery has been condemned to being elliptical, a ghost persecutes and haunts the subject and inscribes on his or her unconscious the dead body of a language that must constantly be repressed. For in order to exist in the present, it is considered necessary to forget the name of the father in the very act in which one claims to ask the question of origin and filiation. This is notably the case in the Antilles.[66]

A third lacuna in African philosophical reflection on the three events is presented by the question of the symbolism of exile. The metaphor of the concentration camp is used to compare the condition of slavery with the predicament of European Jewry as well as, on a more general level, relations between race and culture in modern consciousness. But there is something hasty and superficial about this comparison.[67] In fact, the Jewish imagination constantly oscillates between a plurality of contrasted myths and unresolved, but productive, tensions—the myth of autochthony versus the reality of forced displacement, the empirical fact of dislocation versus the promise of return—in short, a temporality in suspense, in which resides the twofold visage of the diaspora and Israel, the absence of territory in no way signifying the interruption of Jewish continuity. And finally, beyond contingency, fragmentation, and terror, there is a Book, the Torah, a text continuously reinscribed through a process of exegesis and commentary.

Beyond the appearance of fractures and diffraction, the experience of African

65. Compare Lucien Taylor, "Créolité Bites. A Conversation with Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael-Confiant, and Jean Bernabé," *Transition* 74 (1998): 124–60, with Peter Hallward, "Edouard Glissant between the Singular and the Specific," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 11 (1998): 441–64.

66. On these questions, see Daniel Maragnes, "L'identité et le désastre: Origine et fondation," in *Mémoire juive, mémoire nègre: Deux figures du destin,* ed. Roger Toumson (Châteauneuf-le-Rouge, France: Vents des Iles, 1998).

67. Paul Gilroy, "Between Camps: Race and Culture in Postmodernity. An Inaugural Lecture," *Economy and Society* 28 (1999): 183–97.

slaves in the New World reflects a more or less comparable plenitude of identity, even if the forms of its expression differ, and even though there is no Book as such. Like Jews in the European world, they have to narrate the self and narrate the world, approaching this world from a position in which their lives, their work, and their way of speaking (*langage*) are scarcely legible, enveloped as they are in ghostly contours. They have to invent an art of existing in the midst of despoliation—even though, by this date, it is almost impossible to reenchant the past and cast a spell upon the present (except, perhaps, in the syncopated terms of a body that is constantly made to pass from being to appearance, from song to music).[68] But that said, the similarity ends. In contrast with the case of the Holocaust, black peoples' experiences of slavery in the New World and elsewhere have not been interpreted in any way—philosophically, politically, or culturally—that brings out the possibility of founding a universal telos.[69]

Marxist and nationalist criticism has underestimated the wide variety of African experiences of colonial conquest. Recent historiography has shown that Africans gave very different answers to the choices forced on them by European invasion. The social divisions constituted over the period of the Atlantic slave trade had sharpened under the test of colonialism. New sources of wealth acquired during the heyday of the slave trade and its aftermath overturned preexisting social orders. The two major monotheistic religions, Islam and Christianity, questioned the cosmological bases of local societies. As political violence and extortion intensified during the second half of the nineteenth century, the exercise of power was released from mediation by any discourse of political responsibility. The shifts in relations of power, exacerbated by local wars of succession, resulted in a comprehensive crisis of authority. In most places, the colonial advance across the interior of the continent could be said to have taken the character of a creeping slave revolt.[70]

In many ways, colonization was a co-invention. It was the result of Western violence as well as the work of a swarm of African auxiliaries seeking profit. Where it was impractical to import a white settler population to occupy the land, colonial powers generally got blacks to colonize their own congeners (*congénères*) in the name of the metropolitan nation. More decisively, "unhealthy"

68. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*; and Stuart Hall, "Nihilism in Black America" in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Michele Wallace and Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992).

69. See Howard H. Harriott, "The Evils of Chattel Slavery and the Holocaust: An Examination of Laurence Thomas's Vessels of Evil," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1997): 329–47.

70. John Lonsdale, "The European Scramble and Conquest in African History," in *The Cambridge History of Africa,* vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

though it may appear to a critic, it must be recognized that colonialism exercised a strong seductive power over Africans on a mental and moral no less than material level. Manifold possibilities of upward mobility were promised by the colonial system. Whether such promises were actually fulfilled is beside the point. As a refracted and endlessly reconstituted fabric of fictions, colonialism generated mutual utopias—hallucinations shared by the colonizers and the colonized.[71]

The above examples suffice to show that by resorting to expedients and failing to address these central questions about life—its forms, its possibilities, and what denies it—African criticism, dominated by political economy and by the nativist impulse, has from the outset inscribed the quest for political identity within a purely instrumental and short-term temporality. When the question was asked, during the heyday of colonialism, whether self-government was possible, it was never to engage the general question of *being* and *time*—in other words, of life—but rather to facilitate native people's struggle to take over the apparatus of the state. The power to risk one's life—that is, in Hegel's terms, the ability to put an end to the servile condition and be reborn as the subject of the world—peters out in the prose of autochthony. And in the end, it can be said that everything here comes down to that one, perverse structure: autochthony.

Self, Polis, and Cosmopolis

So where are we today? What ways of imagining identity are at work and what social practices do they produce? What has happened to the tropes of victimization, race, and tradition?

First, I must note that the thematics of anti-imperialism is exhausted. This does not mean, however, that the pathos of victimization has been transcended. The anti-imperialist debate was in fact revived during the 1980s and 1990s in the form of a critique of structural adjustment programs and neoliberal conceptions of the state's relation to the market.[72] In the interim, however, the ideology of Pan-Africanism was confronted by the reality of national states that, contrary to received wisdom, turned out to be less artificial than had been thought. A more significant development has been an emerging junction between the old anti-imperialist thematics—"revolution," "anticolonialism"—and the nativist theses. Fragments of these imaginaires are now combining to oppose globalization, to

71. Cf. Françoise Vergès's reading of Fanon in "Creole Skin, Black Mask: Fanon and Disavowal," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997): 578–95.

72. See, e.g., Mkandawire and Soludo, *Our Continent, Our Future.*

relaunch the metaphysics of difference, to reenchant tradition, and to revive the utopian vision of an Africanity that is coterminous with blackness.

The thematic of race has also undergone major shifts. The extreme case of South Africa (and other settler colonies) has long led people, both in the West and Africa, to think that the polar opposition between blacks and whites summed up by itself the whole racial question in Africa. However, the repertoires on the basis of which the imaginaires of race and the symbolism of blood are constituted have always been characterized by their extreme variety. At a level beyond that of the simple black/white opposition, other racial cleavages have always set Africans against each other. And here may be enumerated not only the most visible—black Africans versus Africans of Arab, South Asian, Jewish, or Chinese ancestry—but also a range of others that can attest to the panoply of colors and their annexation to projects of domination: black Africans versus Creoles, Lebanese-Syrians, métis, Berbers, Tuaregs, Afro-Brazilians, and Fulanis; Amharas versus Oromos; and Tutsis versus Hutus, to give some representative examples.

In fact—no matter what definition one gives of the notion—the racial unity of Africa has always been a myth. But this myth is currently imploding under the impact of internal (as well as external) factors connected with African societies' linkages to global cultural flows. For even if inequalities of power and access to property remain (not to mention racist stereotypes and violence), the category of *whiteness* no longer has the same meanings as it did under colonialism or apartheid. Although the "white condition" has not reached a point of absolute fluidity that would detach it once and for all from any citation of power, privilege, and oppression, it is clear that the experience of Africans of European origin has taken on ever more diverse aspects throughout the continent. The forms in which this experience is imagined—not only by whites themselves, but also by others—are no longer the same. This diversity now makes the identity of Africans of European origin a contingent and situated identity.[73]

The same might be said of Luso-Africans and Africans of South Asian or Lebanese-Syrian origin, even if the historical conditions of their becoming citizens and their positions on the social map differ from those of whites and blacks.[74] The case of North Africans of Arab origin suggests transformations of

73. Cf., e.g., Ian Smith, *The Great Betrayal: The Memoirs of Ian Douglas Smith* (London: Blake, 1997); Eugene De Kock and Jeremy Gordin, *A Long Night's Damage: Working for the Apartheid State* (Saxonwold, South Africa: Contra, 1998); and Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998). More generally, see Sarah Nuttall, "Subjectivities of Whiteness," *African Studies Review* 44 (2001): 115–40.

74. See R. G. Gregory, *South Asians in East Asia: An Economic and Social History, 1890–1980*

another kind. On the one hand, the historical relations and influences between the Mediterranean Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa are continually both repressed and narrativized in folklore. Officially, as a matter of state policy, Maghrebi identity is Arabo-Islamic. Given a historical scope, however, it can be seen to proceed from a syncretic mixture of Saharan, Berber, Peninsular Arabian, and even Jewish and Turkish contributions.[75] On the other hand, Islam has served as the idiom of a sociocultural matrix within which adherence to the same faith and belonging to a single religious community do not do away with a master-slave relation, as we see in Mauretania or, farther to the east, in the Arabo-Nilotic region (Sudan in particular).

What can be seen here is that the symbolism of blood and colors proceeds by degrees. And as in other parts of the world, race, class, ethnicity, and gender in Africa intersect and produce, despite the ambivalence inherent in such operations, effects of violence. In general, it can be said that the forms of racial consciousness are changing all over the continent. The production of racial identities beyond the binary black/white opposition increasingly operates in accord with distinct, contingent logics as old demarcations lose their mechanical aspect and opportunities for transgression multiply. In many ways, the instability of racial categories is demonstrating that there are several kinds of whiteness as well as of blackness.[76]

Let me focus here on the trope of tradition. The project of reenchanting tradition is based on a set of fragmentary ideas and social practices—on an imaginaire that draws its referents from both local and global sources. The most powerful vectors of this imaginaire are the communitarian movements. By contrast with a universalist, cosmopolitan view, which would tend to emphasize the ability to detach itself from any kind of essence, these movements draw their power from the rehabilitation of origins and membership. The idea is that there is no identity that does not in some way lead to questions about origins and attachment

(Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993); also Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man, *Colour, Confusion, and Concessions: The History of the Chinese in South Africa* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996); and Peter Mark, "The Evolution of 'Portuguese' Identity: Luso-Africans on the Upper Guinea Coast from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 40 (1999): 173–91.

75. Cf. *Africanité du Maghreb,* special issue of *Africultures* 13 (1998); and *Afrique noire et monde arabe: Continuités et ruptures,* special issue of *Cahiers des sciences humaines* 16 (2000).

76. Cf., in another context, Livio Sansone, "The New Blacks from Bahia: Local and Global in Afro-Bahia," *Identities* 3 (1997): 457–93.

to them—no matter what definition of them is given or how much fiction may be inherent in that definition.

The *différend* concerning origins is supposed to be the starting point for becoming conscious of identity. At the same time, however, every such identity is expected to be translated into territorial terms. Indeed, to this way of thinking, there is no identity without territoriality—the vivid consciousness of *place* and mastery of it, whether by birth, by conquest, or by settlement. Territoriality in its clearest manifestation is to be found in the cult of locality—or, in other words, home, the small space and inherited estate where direct, proximate relationships are reinforced by membership in a common genealogy. This is the same matrix, real or supposed, that serves as the foundation for the civic space; in fact, funerals and burials are one of the chief ways of ritualizing membership in the civic space, as enacted within the boundaries of home.[77] It can thus be seen that from a combination of ideological categories (membership and origins) and spatial categories (territory and locality) emerges citizenship, which might be defined as the ability to enjoy a home, the ability to exclude foreigners from this enjoyment, the right to protection and to access to a range of collective goods and resources situated in the space thus delimited.

It can further be stated that, under contemporary processes of globalization, the idioms of kinship deployed in this process of claiming citizenship—relations such as filiation, genealogy, and heritage—can be converted into recyclable resources. One of the vehicles of this conversion is the international lexicon of rights. Whether the right being invoked in a given argument cites the protection of the environment or the claims of minorities or indigenous peoples, in each case the strategy is to assert a wounded identity. The wound is configured in the deprivation of specific rights that a discrete community then attempts to recover through this recourse to the international lexicon. Another vehicle for reenchanting tradition and recycling local identities that is coming to the fore is the market. The market's role in the process is particularly apparent in the contexts of tourism and the politics of heritage.

States of War and Regimes of Divine Sovereignty But if global processes of symbolic exchange enter African subjectivities at (among other levels) the commodification of identities under the sign of tradition, one of the chief sites of

77. See Kwame Arhin, "The Economic Implications of Transformations in Akan Funeral Rites," *Africa* 64 (1994): 307–21; and Sjaak van der Geest, "Funerals for the Living: Conversations with Elderly People in Kwahu, Ghana," *African Studies Review* 43 (2000): 103–29.

mediation between global flows and local practices of reenchanting tradition turns out to be war—or, more precisely, *the state of war*. Getting beyond a consideration of its empirical aspects (e.g., the formation of militias, the privatization of violence, arms trading, and smuggling), the state of war in contemporary Africa should in fact be conceived of as a general cultural experience that shapes identities, just as the family, the school, and other social institutions do. And in a still more determinative manner, the state of war invokes regimes of subjectivity that must be explored briefly.

First among the state of war's effects can be identified as an entry into a *zone of indistinction*. This is a space set outside human jurisdiction, where the frontiers between the rule of law and chaos disappear, decisions about life and death become entirely arbitrary, and everything becomes possible.[78] In most contemporary war zones in Africa, the descent into indistinction is marked by an unprecedented degree of torture, mutilation, and mass killing.[79] Progressively, the spread of terror fragments inhabited spaces, blows apart temporal frames of reference, and diminishes the possibilities available to individuals to fulfill themselves as continuous subjects.[80] The ensuing spectacularization of suffering only serves to reinforce this process through the bequest of traumatic memories. The horror of bodily injury is everywhere to be seen. Trauma has become something quasi-permanent. Memory is physically embedded in bodies marked with the signs of their own destruction, moving through a general landscape of fragmentation and economic decay. In many places, life has taken the form of a continuous journey. One leaves one space and establishes oneself in another only to be dislodged by terror, confronted by unpredictable circumstances, and forced to settle once again where one can.[81]

The second effect that should be remarked upon is the *sacrificial dimension of war*.[82] As shown elsewhere, in several regions of the continent, the material

78. On these discussions, see Jenny Edkins, "Sovereign Power, Zones of Indistinction, and the Camp," *Alternatives* 25 (2000): 3–25.

79. Cf. Inge Brinkman, "Ways of Death: Accounts of Terror from Angolan Refugees in Namibia," *Africa* 70 (2000): 1–24.

80. See Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi: Le livre des ossements* (Paris: Stock, 2000); Thierno Monenembo, *L'aîné des orphelins* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

81. Here, I draw my inspiration from Daniel Pécaut, "Configurations of Space, Time, and Subjectivity in a Context of Terror: The Colombian Example," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 14 (2000): 129–50.

82. A dimension that we also encounter in autochthonous practices and that monotheistic religions have only accentuated. See Robin Law, "Human Sacrifice in Pre-Colonial West Africa," *African Affairs* 34 (1985): 53–87; and, more generally, J. Milbank, "Stories of Sacrifice: From Wellhausen to Girard," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 12 (1995): 15–46.

deconstruction of existing territorial frameworks goes hand in hand with the emergence of war economies (and of war as a general economy) in which violent conflicts no longer necessarily imply that those who have weapons oppose each other. Many conflicts are likely to oppose those who have weapons and those who have none. In those contexts, a marked disconnection between people and things ensues, the value of things surpassing that of people. The resulting forms of violence have as their chief goals the physical destruction of people (massacres of civilians, genocides, various kinds of maiming) and the primary exploitation of mineral resources.[83] Most of these events stem from the idea of history as a sacrificial process.

Here, the word *sacrifice* has two senses: self-sacrifice (putting one's life at someone else's disposal, getting killed for a cause) and mass murder (the physical annihilation of countless human lives). On the one hand, self-sacrifice implies that one will put to death other human beings who are identified with the "enemy." One accepts that one may be killed during this process; indeed, one believes that in such a death is found the essence of life. On the other hand, massacre constitutes the most grandiose sign of both sovereignty and what Georges Bataille called *expenditure*.[84] More than anything else, it marks the limit of the principle of utility—and thus of the idea of the preservation—of human lives. Massacre inaugurates a sovereignty of loss through the spectacular destruction and bloody waste of human beings.

It is a characteristic of actual corpses, dead things, that they all seem frozen in pastness. Doubts emerge as to whether those apparently animate beings who seem to be alive are really alive, or whether they are only the figurative corpses of what had once been alive and are now but shattered mirrors at the frontier of madness and abjection.[85] The function of this Dionysian violence is not to stun or even to dazzle.[86] Nor is it part of a consumptive process of manducation and dejection. This process is no longer a matter of appropriating the Other or turning him or her into chattel or merchandise, as happened during the period of the

83. Cf. Achille Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa," *Public Culture* 12 (2000): 259–84.

84. Georges Bataille, *La part maudite, précédé de La notion de dépense* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967).

85. On "corpses" and "abjection," see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

86. On the Dionysian character of the process, see Harris Memel-Fotê, "La fête de l'homme riche dans le Golfe de Guinée au temps de l'esclavage, XVIIe-XIXe siècles," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 131 (1993): 363–79.

Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath. Rather, it is a question of abolishing, once and for all, the very idea of a *debt owed to life*.[87]

But in the act that consists of putting to death innumerable sacrificial victims, the agent of the massacre also seeks to transcend and reinvent the self. Trembling with drunkenness, he or she becomes a sort of work of art shaped and sculpted by cruelty. It is in this sense that the state of war becomes part of the new African practices of the self. Through sacrifice, the African subject transforms his or her own subjectivity and produces something new—something that does not belong to the domain of a lost identity that must at all costs be found again, but rather something radically different, something open to change and whose theory and vocabulary remain to be invented.[88]

The third feature of the state of war to be discussed here is its relation to two central determinants already identified in the experiences of slavery and apartheid: life and property. Life is a factor here to the extent that the state of war authorizes power, even naked force, to be exercised in the extreme, in an absolute manner. As a result, the calculus governing cultural and political practices no longer has as its goal the subjection of individuals so much as the seizure of power over life itself. Its function is to abolish any idea of ancestry and thus any debt with regard to a past. There emerges an original imaginaire of sovereignty whose field of exercise is nothing less than life in its generality. The latter may be subject to an empirical, that is, biological death. But it can also be seen to be mortgaged, in the same way that objects are, in a general economy whose terms are furnished by massacres and carnage, in the manner of capital, labor, and surplus value as disposed in the classical Marxist model.

Alongside the state of war, the other form of instituting imagination through which the junction between the cosmopolitan and the local is effected is the state of religion (*l'état de religion*). On this front, the most significant development of the last quarter of the twentieth century has been the unprecedented growth of Pentecostal Christianity among popular and elite urban sectors in Africa. Crucial to this expansion have been four structures of meaning, each of which provides a means of psychic negotiation, self-styling, and engagement with the world at large. These are: the gift of tongues (the ability to speak in both heavenly and human languages), the gift of divine healing and prophecy, the ethics of sainthood, and the ethos of prosperity.[89]

87. Cf. Achille Mbembe, "Political Imagination in Times of War" (forthcoming).

88. See Ahmadou Kourouma, *Allah n'est pas obligé* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

89. On the ethics of sainthood and the ethos of prosperity, see Ruth Marshall-Fratani, "Prospérité

In contemporary Africa, it is the subject's relation to divine sovereignty that serves as the main provider of meanings for most people. This can be said even though the various discursive formations whose symbolism is established in religious authority are far from being homogeneous. Almost everywhere, contemporary practices in the course of which divine power is mimed or staged are linked with the process of reinventing the self and the polis, in its twofold sense—earthly polis and heavenly polis (the Kingdom). Such a categorization does not reflect solely a division between this world and the beyond. It also indicates how the self arises from the interaction between the world of the empirical and what cannot be reduced to it. Through specific rituals and celebrations of various kinds, religious practice is becoming the site where the networks of a new, nonbiological relationship among members of a family or even an ecumene are formed, at the same time as notions of divine sovereignty and patronage are transformed and new dogmas emerge.

More fundamentally, the development of a new religious imaginaire is based on the mobilization of three ideosymbolic formations whose hold on contemporary conceptions of the self is evident: the exercise of charisma (which authorizes the practice of oracular pronouncement and prophecy, of possession and healing); the logic of sacrifice (mourning and funerals); and, finally, the domain of the miraculous (that is, the belief that anything is possible). Charisma is particularly interesting in that it encompasses two apparently contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, it represents the zenith of individuality as well as of shared experience. Although not every member of the congregation is supposed to be endowed with prophetic gifts per se, each one nevertheless is granted unobstructed access to the same source of power—divine grace.[90] On the other hand, charisma marks investiture with a distinct, autonomous power and authority that is benevolently exercised in the service of a community. The exercise of this authority places the thaumaturge in a hierarchical relationship with those who are not endowed with the same magic, the same know-how. An attempt is made to manage the "real world" on the basis of the conviction that all symbolization refers primarily to a system of the invisible, of a magical universe, the present belonging above all to a sequence that opens onto something different.

Finally, let me gesture to the problem of the object of desire in an economy of

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miraculeuse: Pasteurs pentecôtistes et argent de Dieu au Nigéria," *Politique africaine*, no. 82 (June 2001): 24–44.

90. Cf. Raphael Falco, "Charisma and Tragedy: An Introduction," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 16 (1999): 71–99.

scarcity as one more transformative force in contemporary African practices of self formation.[91] It may be said that the sites and the vectors of this imaginaire of consumption are to a large extent the same as those found elsewhere in the world. But one development in particular deserves special recognition here. This is the phenomenon, in all its manifold aspects, of an economy of desired goods that are known, that may sometimes be seen, that one wants to enjoy, but to which one will never have material access. There is an element of fictiveness to these coveted goods. For in the situation of chronic scarcity, what is decisive in the formation of subjectivities is not the actual consummation of exchange relations on the material level. Where the capture and consumption of desired but inaccessible goods becomes problematic, other regimes of subjectivity come into the making.

Where shortage and scarcity prevail, the appropriation of desired goods may take place through pillage and violent seizure. If not, it can be realized only through shadow interventions in the phantasmatic realm.[92] Fantasies are thus focused on purely imaginary objects. The powers of imagination are stimulated, intensified by the very unavailability of the objects of desire. The practices of plundering, the various forms of mercenary activity, and the differing registers of falsification are based on an economy that mobilizes passions such as greed, envy, jealousy, and the thirst for conquest. Here, the course of life is assimilated to a game of chance, a lottery, in which the existential temporal horizon is colonized by the immediate present and by prosaic short-term calculations. In the popular practices of capturing the flows of global exchange, rituals of extraversion are developed—rituals that consist of miming the major signifiers of global consumerism.

Conclusion

Attempts to define African identity in a neat and tidy way have so far failed. Further attempts are likely to meet the same fate as long as criticisms of African imaginations of the self and the world remain trapped within a conception of identity as geography—in other words, of time as space. From that conflation has resulted a massive indictment of the twin notions of universalism and cosmopolitanism, and in their place a celebration of autochthony—that is, a construction of

91. Cf. Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "The Quantity of Style: Imaginary Consumption in the New Russia," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 7 (2000): 97–121.

92. See Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony," *American Ethnologist* 26 (1999): 279–303.

the self understood in terms of both victimhood and mutilation. One of the major implications of such an understanding of time and subjectivity is that African thought has come to conceive politics either along the lines of a recovery of an essential but lost nature—the liberation of an essence—or as a sacrificial process.

To be sure, there is no African identity that could be designated by a single term or that could be named by a single word or subsumed under a single category. African identity does not exist as a substance. It is constituted, in varying forms, through a series of practices, notably *practices of the self*.[93] Neither the forms of this identity nor its idioms are always self-identical. Rather, these forms and idioms are mobile, reversible, and unstable. Given this element of play, they cannot be reduced to a purely biological order based on blood, race, or geography. Nor can they be reduced to custom, to the extent that the latter's meaning is itself constantly shifting.[94]

But by now, the all-too-familiar and clichéd rhetoric of nonsubstantiality, instability, and indetermination is just one more inadequate way to come to grips with African imaginations of the self and the world.[95] It is no longer enough to assert that only an African self endowed with a capacity for narrative synthesis—that is, a capacity to generate as many stories as possible in as many voices as possible—can sustain the discrepancy and interlacing multiplicity of norms and rules characteristic of our epoch.

Perhaps one step out of this quandary would be to reconceptualize the notion of time in its relation to memory and subjectivity.[96] Because the time we live in is fundamentally fractured, the very project of an essentialist or sacrificial recovery of the self is, by definition, doomed. Only the disparate, and often intersect-

93. See T. K. Biaya, "Crushing the Pistachio: Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago," *Public Culture* 12 (2000): 707–20, and "Les plaisirs de la ville: Masculinité, féminité et sexualité à Dakar, 1997–2000," *African Studies Review* 44 (2001): 71–85. See also Dominique Malaquais, *Anatomie d'une arnaque: Feymen et feymania au Cameroun,* Les études du CERI, no. 77 (Paris: Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, 2001).

94. Cf. Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

95. See AbdouMaliq Simone, "The Worldling of African Cities," *African Studies Review* 44 (2001): 15–41; Mamadou Diouf, "The Senegalese Murid Trade Diaspora and the Making of a Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," *Public Culture* 12 (2000): 679–702; and Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

96. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); James Ferguson, *Expectation of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

ing, practices through which Africans *stylize* their conduct and life can account for the thickness of which the African present is made.

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Responses to "African Modes of Self-Writing" will appear in Public Culture*, fall 2002.*

Obverse Denominations: Africa?

Ato Quayson

Let us note first of all the polemical mood in which Achille Mbembe's "African Modes of Self-Writing" (*Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73) is styled. A response that any polemical piece encourages is the desire to isolate its more extreme propositions for refutation. A refutation could also be undertaken on methodological grounds. One could say that the essayist has not taken account of enough scholarship, that the polemical propositions have been carelessly established, and that the entire set of questions could have been better posed in a different light.

But such a response would signally fail to register interest in the essay in its fundamental purpose, which is to get us thinking rigorously about what we mean when we invoke an "African" identity. The autochthonous denominations of this identity, as Mbembe shows, have led to a fixation with narratives of victimhood and with an interpretation of history as sorcery—that Africans have been accidentalized and mutilated by historical processes over which they have had little or no control. Slavery, colonialism, and a rabid globalization are named as the villains in this tragic drama of dispossession. Mbembe is generally right in pointing out that these autochthonous determinations have served to obscure a number of vectors of our history, such as our own contributions to some of our woes and tribulations, and the multiple trajectories of our contemporary identities.

But this critique of autochthonous determinations leaves out an important question, one that may be formulated in a variety of ways: Why does this explanatory

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impulse persist in African modes of self-writing up to the present time? Are Africans somehow so compulsive in their dreams of a pure and nativist identity that they fail to conceptualize the issue in any other way? Why this obsession? To try to gesture toward an answer, I want to suggest a polemical formulation of my own: *There are no blacks in Africa.*

What I mean by this is that *blackness* (read here: *Africanness* also) is first and foremost a location within a structure of determinations. This structure writes itself in history as a series of cross-cultural encounters in which blackness has always had a particular quality of impoverishment and evolutionary backwardness as its signature. No idle semiotic structure, it spawns material effects. In a quite real sense, all changes to the knowledge-economy nexus within which "Africans" are denominated have to go through a series of genre chains in which knowledge is aligned with management (in the economic as well as political sense) and with power. These genre chains are partly situated within Africa's self-conception. But they are also heavily dependent on debates about Africa from outside the continent.

The persistence of the autochthonous denominations that Mbembe laments, therefore, might fruitfully be read as the African's sustained enactment of a semiotic overload of the place assigned to him or her within the denominating structure.[1] This point is not, in fact, far distant from what Mbembe himself has to say about the way nativist thinking originates in the need to respond to the negations of blackness embedded in Western philosophical discourse. My point augments this view in suggesting that nativism becomes a means of overloading the denominating structure with precisely that which the latter names as negative. This is seen as a necessary move to arrest the play of significations within the denominating structure and to force it to confront, in its starkness, that which had been designated negative. The issue that needs to be confronted in this scenario is whether—given this denominative excess from the domain of the negative—the possibility of self-reflexivity gets lost in an ensuing obsession with the structure of obverse denomination.

It is here that we can join Mbembe in lamenting the lack in African modes of self-writing of the transcendental orientations that have enabled German and Jewish thought to integrate forms of the radical negation of identity. What I understand by this comparison is that we must be prepared in our own thought to

1. The understanding of these structures or systems at intersecting global and local levels, and our capacity to intervene in and manipulate them strategically, are the subjects of a fascinating essay by Denis Ekpo, "Toward a Post-Africanism: Contemporary African Thought and Postmodernism," *Textual Practice* 9 (1995): 121–35.

contemplate the total negation of what *Africa* means—before we can put it to any good use post-slavery, -colonialism, and -apartheid. And this negation has to be assimilated to our own thought, not as an internalization of absolute victimhood, but as the productive means by which we simultaneously let go of and assert our identities. The crucial thing to bear in mind in this regard is that at no point in our history have Africans actually been in a position to trigger and control the direction and rate of transformation of the genre chains that shape the structures within which we are denominated. We have always been consigned to responding from the place where we ought not to have been standing.

Two vectors of the strategic reformulation of the denominating structure have to be noted, however. The first is that, as noted above, the structure is not just a structure of knowledge but has direct material effects. When Africa is named on Western television as a kaleidoscopic problem with AIDS, wars, and political instability as its sigla, this is no mere device of the production of a form of demeaning knowledge for Western consumption. There is more than enough evidence on the continent to sustain the thesis that Africa *is* in crisis. To change the perceptions of our backwardness that then force us to make anguished claims of selfhood, we Africans will have to attend to the material details of our nightmare at the same time as we seek a better denomination. In other words, changing the way we represent ourselves has to go hand in hand with our own robust attempts at stemming the tide of confusion that engulfs Africa on a daily basis.

In this regard, another element of Mbembe's polemical discussion becomes pertinent. Toward the end of his essay, he draws attention to the effects of violence in creating various new forms of subjectivities and modes of being in the world. But the violence of war he presents, and the negation that it produces, are much more part of the fabric of everyday life in Africa than Mbembe suggests. Much of the continent is pervaded by what might be termed *cultures of impunity*. A minor traffic infringement may cause a person instant and violent retribution from bystanders. To fall in love with the wrong partner may invite physical mishaps of unimaginable sorts. A minor altercation in a shop may lead to assault and battery, and so on and so forth. The worrisome thing is that this culture of impunity often marks *all* levels of civic society and polity—from the excesses of totalitarian regimes to the banality of police procedures and all the way down to the breakdown of civil address between neighbors. The conditions for these cultures of impunity vary, but their effects are the same in one respect: vigilance about one's physical safety becomes a necessary condition of existence on the continent. In this sense, war is only an exacerbation of what is essentially an endemic form of social disorder, whose spasmodic expressions can be seen today

in the violent land seizures in Zimbabwe, the chaotic violence on the streets of Lagos, and the pillage of natural resources in Sierra Leone, Angola, and other places.

These conceptions by no means address comprehensively the task that lies ahead in formulating productive modes of self-writing in Africa. But attempting to free ourselves from calcified processes of thought is surely the crucial first step.

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Toward a Critique of Consumer Imperialism

Paul Gilroy

For me, reading Achille Mbembe's absorbing piece ("African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73) conjured up the well-worn modernist image of the critical philosopher as an escapologist: Initially imprisoned and confined by a host of ingenious shackles and devices, he disappears from view before publicly shrugging them all off after some secret minutes of unseen but energetic activity. He stands now before an appreciative audience absolutely untrammeled, in this case, with only a few Derridean or Lacanian fig leaves to conceal the shame that attends his postcolonial renaissance.

It is an impressive performance of the very autonomy to which his piece is addressed: a learned, provocative, and worthwhile essay that offers a wealth of subtle insights. They echo in and reverberate through my own thoughts, and there is much agreement between us, particularly on issues flowing from his courageous diagnosis of authoritarian political cultures and their claims upon the political and philosophical languages of Africa and its diasporas. In entering these difficult and contested areas, Mbembe touches on matters of the greatest importance for both Africa and those various diasporas. That necessary distinction splits authentic and differentiated "Africans" from "Negroes," whose supposedly simpler modes of being in the world were invented in slavery but are, in reality, no less heterogeneous. This division is difficult to manage within an analysis that ducks the implications of seeing that African-descended people in the United States occupy economic and communicative locations very different

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from those that play home to their racialized siblings in the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa itself.

I want to endorse Mbembe's timely rejections of culture as property and identity as a unitary phenomenon or "substance." I would also like to applaud his tantalizing grasp of "race" as the "blind spot" of modernity and his acute observations on the culture of freedom as a practice of domination. His passing remarks to the effect that it is "race" that makes it possible to found difference in general, and the existence of nations in particular, deserve to be elaborated at length and explored carefully.

I suspect that there are also substantive disagreements between us, but the density and momentum of this essay makes them hard to hold on to. They emerged briefly into focus as a result of my disinclination to follow him into the dense philosophical thickets where he imagines that the evasive, wounded quarry of African self-knowledge can be located. It may be that he is caught because, by posing the problems involved in the attainment of selfhood in this particular manner, he is already open to the accusation that he is playing the very German game he has expounded and expressly forbidden. Indeed, to name this political problem in terms of the *selfhood* of the African subject may already be to have been defeated by the well-oiled workings of an alien philosophical idiom.

The hopeful transition heralded but never completely identified by the colonial humanists of the Second World War period, particularly Léopold Sédar Senghor, anticipated that African culture and critique would manage an imaginative ethicopolitical leap in which particularity would be reconciled with universalism. Their dream shadows Mbembe's own. However, if the relationship between African self-possession and African self-government is eventually to be resolved, this postcolonial project requires additional resources. To put this more bluntly, it needs tactics that do not reduce the philosophical inquiries demanded by racial slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and, yes, globalization to a choice between flight and melancholic resignation.

There is a particularly big hiccup when Mbembe switches from the uncomfortable but creative task of critique to the different work of obligatory reconstruction. The fireworks with which he has led his readers through his own speculations anticipate and deserve a more substantial conclusion than the one he offers. It might lie, perhaps, in a better account of how the counterdiscourses of colonial "transmodernity" contain, but could also supersede, the philosophical approaches to which he remains bound even in his engaging performance of escaping them. This alternative option would demand a frontal rather than an oblique encounter with the conceptual problems bequeathed by Europe-centeredness. It

necessitates that we press Mbembe on some of the more cryptic formulations in which he drifts back toward the unsatisfactory "traditional" responses he considers to have been already well mapped by sages like Senghor and Kwame Anthony Appiah. This is a long way of saying that the oscillation he dislikes—between a brutally racialized world and a prematurely and unconvincingly universalized one—gets repeated in his own argument. He names a problem that he has not been able to resolve.

If I understand it, I do not want to concede Mbembe's suggestion that the thematics of anti-imperialism has been exhausted. It seems to me that we are now on the edge of a richer and more profound indictment of the catastrophic modernity inaugurated by Europe's colonial and imperial power than the makeshift, preliminary diagnosis that served the very different political interests of national liberation movements during the Cold War. Translocal opposition to the widening gulf between the overdeveloped world and the rest of our planet supplies the principal ethical imperative for this enterprise. Indictments of what we could call consumer imperialism are being articulated from inside the fortifications of overdevelopment as well as outside them. They challenge the politics and the ethics of Africa's diaspora as well as the institution of its selfhood. This utopian project will draw additional energy from struggles against biocolonialism and contribute it, in turn, to a renewed sense of the planetarity of our political hopes.

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The Subject in Africa: In Foucault's Footsteps

Bogumil Jewsiewicki

translated by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

How can the world be an object of knowledge and at the same time a testing place for the subject?
Michel Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet*

Following the path traced by Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe (in "African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73) takes us into a properly iconoclastic reflection on practices of the self in relation to Africa. It is on purpose that I write "in relation to Africa": Mbembe refuses to deal with the subject whose particular quality is that of being "African." That is a quality imposed upon the subject—sometimes self-imposed—either by virtue of his or her continent of "origin"[1] or by virtue of invention by the Other, who vis-à-vis the subject is then affirmed as anything but African. An image taken from the Austrian writer Robert Musil can underscore the fundamental characteristic of this position: Mbembe deals with a subject without (particular) qualities—at the risk of being accused of false consciousness by all who identify him according to the color of his skin.

Assuming a Promethean challenge, Mbembe begins with an assertion of Cartesian derivation: All people are by nature in a position to enunciate their

1. The term *origin* is understood here in the contemporary African sense of a way to describe a person in terms of the pre-"modern" place of birth of his or her male ancestor: thus, the village in relation to the city; Africa in relation to the West.

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own identity. They are not bound to submit beforehand to any transformation, or conversion, or to follow any master. Identity being a political formulation of the self's relation to the Other, it is correct to follow Descartes in the assertion that every human being is capable of attaining the truth as well as his or her identity, as long as he or she applies the right method.

But herein lies a serious pitfall. Who formulates the right method, and on what bases? The title of Mbembe's article suggests that within the problematic of identity formation, narrative can take the place of the Cartesian method as applied to the search for truth. Mbembe seems to believe that self-writing is not possible without the mastery of time; his epigraph cites Gilles Deleuze, who emphasizes time as a condition of subjectivity. Yet having taken this other path, we find ourselves back exactly where we started. For *narrative* here refers to the religion of the Book (it makes little difference whether by this is meant the Book of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam) as a condition for acceding to the mastery of time. And precisely in being recognized by the Other, subjectivity is placed at risk of being wrested from the subject.

Shouldn't the question be framed in other terms? This relation to the Other that constitutes identity could be formulated in terms of co-presence rather than in terms of succession. Identity would then be organized according to the category of space rather than that of time. Could not identity be conceived as performative—*transactional*, as Foucault (2001) says—rather than normative?

I must proceed schematically in order to point out what I consider to be the most important features of Mbembe's approach. First, to place his reflections in philosophical context, the question should be raised of the path and the master. Beginning with the title, then, it is clear that marking out the route and accompanying Mbembe is the Foucault of the 1980s—"Writing the Self" was published in 1983—Foucault, that is, as the historian of the subject rather than the historian of power. The point of departure from which Mbembe conceives of the subject and of the enunciation of identity becomes clear in the context of Foucault's earlier publications.

In Africa, the subject's own place—his or her *lieu propre*, to use Michel de Certeau's term—is indiscipline. With regard to memory, it is this identity as his or her own place that locates the subject's relation to the past. One way of making the past present is to follow Plato, as in Paul Ricoeur (2000): guided by a master, the subject remembers the knowledge that he or she already possessed by virtue of his or her inherent humanity. But preferable to this approach, perhaps, is the path of remembering experience. Starting from that place in which the memory works, a place that is his or her own—*propre* to him- or herself—the subject

makes contemporary those elements of experience that illuminate the present and the future. This second path is the one Mbembe has chosen in order to deconstruct the theories of the "African subject" who has followed the master's path.

Foucault, primarily—but also Certeau (1984) and Pierre Nora (1996–98), more implicitly—accompany Mbembe as he traverses, at breakneck pace, three forms of Western reflexivity: (1) memory that recognizes; (2) meditation, possibly leading to asceticism, a test of the self as an ethical subject of the truth; (3) the Cartesian method, which makes it possible to determine which certitude can serve as a criterion for all possible truth. This is the route taken by Mbembe to unmask those theories of the African subject that situate slavery, colonization, and apartheid as ordeals. Passage through these ordeals is supposed, in these theories, to have united African aspirations to sovereignty, dignity, and knowledge. Mbembe argues that there is no African subject who, as a victim of injustices, has a particular mission whose accomplishment would confer an identity and a duty for unity. For him, there is no African subjectivity that constitutes a collective destiny forged by history, whether the latter is written in terms of laws or of contingencies.

Foucault writes of a progressive movement of truth toward the organization of objective knowledge. Is this the meaning of Mbembe's closing sentence: "Only the disparate, and often intersecting, practices through which Africans *stylize* their conduct and life can account for the thickness of which the African present is made"? The frame of the subject who lives in Africa is the *présent-maintenant* of Walter Benjamin (1991), mastered by indiscipline. The latter term is the space dominated by tactics, as Certeau would say; cut out of his or her past, the subject is removed from his or her own place (*lieu propre*).

Memory, as a mode of returning to experience, illuminates the *praemeditatio malorum* practiced by the subject.[2] But in Africa, where societies have been marked by the slave trade and by colonization, indiscipline offers the subject its sole tactical recourse—a negative one, to boot. Indiscipline makes it possible to resist, to remove oneself from the actions of the Other, to act as if one has been

2. Michel Foucault (2001) maintains that one should assume the *future* as a realm of the imagination in the form of the Stoics' *praemeditatio malorum*. Through the test of nonreality, the *praemeditatio malorum* makes available a truth that will become useful when the event takes place. In contemporary Africa, political thought has been applied to history as a realm of the imagination, opposing a past of suffering to a radiant future of ideological volunteerism. Institutions have thus always been found at a loss when it comes to the event; in contrast, individuals have never failed to practice the *praemeditatio malorum*, either in the form of sorcery or in the form of Christian witnessing.

converted—sometimes, indeed, to the point of believing it oneself. But by the same token, it does not allow one to impose one's own priorities. Is this the reason for the historical failure of independence movements in Africa to establish a truly new social order? This same indiscipline, which had defeated colonial discipline, could not positively sustain a state order. And so the (neo)colonial order in turn succumbed to indiscipline.

Mbembe's reasoning goes quite effectively against the grain of a framing of memory as a miracle that would restore the lost truth. Such a practice of memory can dispense with neither the mediation of a master nor the subject's passage through conversion. And the experience of the past century shows that the master in question is the missionary so abhorred by Mbembe.

But is a rupture with the father the best way to demonstrate the futility of any claim of paternity on his part? In order to normalize the "primitive" within the exoticism granted it to make it predictable, Western science has constructed filiation as an African social order. Intellectually, Westerners are therefore the fathers (or maternal uncles) of the "primitive." It must be shown that for the descendant, this paternity is but a historical contingency. But is it merely a question of imposture or invention on the father's part? It should also be asked: Are the subjects up to the task of banishing this scent of the father that taints their practice of self? Should they declare themselves orphans, with respect to the father (Mudimbe 1982)?

Identity and the father are historically formed, and therefore particular, categories of perception. The subject has the right to choose among several "subjectivation[s] of the truth" (Foucault 2001). Subjectivity must be conceived in terms of its relational and transverse enactment in the world among Others. This relation to the Other is indispensable for theorizing the enunciation and experience of identity as a modality of being.

But who is the self's Other, the relation to whom is indispensable to the styling of the self? What relation enables one to act as the subject of oneself? To the extent that Mbembe is opposed to the idea of a totalizing Africanity, deconstructing the idea of any such identity that reduces the subject to its application, it becomes meaningless to define the Other in terms of non-Africanity. This is the provincialization of the West, since it is no longer necessary as the subject's Other.[3] The

3. Must we follow the fraudulent "father" and subscribe to the claim of philosophy to universality in order to attain the truth? Should we not follow Martin Heidegger, who would have pronounced on philosophy the verdict of its Westernness—of provincialism (see Gendreau-Massaloux 2001)?

Other who really matters is the one with whom the subject shares the space of a village, a city, a diaspora. If identity is not an essence but a relation to the Other, as Emmanuel Lévinas (1981) maintains; if every human being possesses the quality of formulating and enunciating his or her identity as constructed in the relation to the Other, the one who elicits the enunciation of identity is the one who is closest. Time, constructed in the mode of Benjamin's *anachronism* (as distinct from Deleuze's time), enables subjects to confront other subjects who are their contemporaries,[4] including those who have been recalled from the past by the work of remembering experience.

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4. See Bazin 2000.

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Contemplating Uncertainty

Jane I. Guyer

For me, it is impossible to take Achille Mbembe's essay ("African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73) head on. It has facets, some clear and some opaque, some true in their refraction and some distorting. I am not yet sure that they add up coherently, and therefore walk around the argument, picking out striking angles and vantage points, leaving any thought of synthesis to the end.

1. Mbembe's attack on African modernist self-writing as impoverished (thin, superficial, reductionist) evokes a confusion of ironies and contradictions that would take a much longer comment to dissect. In fact, I have argued that all new anthropological and philosophical writing on self-knowledge in African "traditions" suggests precisely the opposite: a plenitude in the composite internal architecture of personality; a will to self-realization; and an openness to a future that is shaped by divinatory practice, as opposed to resignation to destiny (Guyer 1996). By way of illustration, Mbembe's aspiration for self-writing can be juxtaposed with Yoruba expositions of self-practice in the here and now. "African identity does not exist as a substance. It is constituted, in varying forms, through a series of practices, notably *practices of the self*" (Mbembe 2002: 272). "As a 'vital spirit,' *emi/inu* (the individual) is certainly more or other than material substance. As a second vital element, it is this *aje emi/inu* that the person can send out or use to go out and away from himself to accomplish those things that make him extraordinary" (Hallen and Sodipo 1997: 110). In Mbembe's argument and in

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Yoruba spiritual practice alike, identity refers not to nature but to scope and effectivity in life, in the world.

There is an endless regress of questions here: Do *both* depictions—thin/modern and complex/traditional—need reflexive reexamination, as simplifications that arise, to varying degrees, out of a conviction that trespasses beyond the evidence? Or has there in fact been a modernist rejection of wellsprings of self-realization that could emanate from within African "tradition"? And if so, how would reconnecting to it differ from the will to authenticity that Mbembe finds so philosophically vacuous? After all, both of the bodies of thought with which he contrasts modern African writing—Jewish messianism and German transcendentalism—are self-consciously and authoritatively *traditions*, generated from diligent study imposed by one generation on the next. What accounts for their "richness": the fundamental propositions of the message, the relentless discipline of its transmission, or the tensions of rebellion and rethinking that such discipline inevitably provokes? Mbembe's diagnosis of the "problem"—its locus, its scope, its place within a broader constitution of self-being—remains unclear on these points, all of which carry implications for what I take to be his driving interest: not the self per se, but the future that it can bring into being.

2. Mbembe's essay seems to me better understood not as an analysis of self but as an expression of profound disappointment with the written body of modernist thought that purports to provide the inspiration and guiding pragmatics for moving toward an imaginable future. In his view, such work is simply not compelling enough for the task. Religious or military insurgency supplies even more superficial and distasteful alternatives to modernist autochthony. By implication, he places this failure at the feet of African scholars and thinkers who have not aspired ambitiously or desperately enough, have not imagined at the limits of possibility, unlike others in the face of profound existential challenge.

It is worth taking a sociological detour here. If the power of the African pen in shaping the future seems lacking, at least part of the problem lies in the times we live in. The age of secular intellectual social vision may well be on the wane everywhere. It was the modern state- and nation-building project that created the public sphere in which debates about that vision could flourish. With the rise of a market ideology, knowledge becomes more focused and more technocratic. Thought that encompasses being and the future finds no platform for implementation and therefore no podium for exposition and serious debate.

For Africa, this moment truncates a nationalist and pan-African debate that had only just begun, at least by the standards of the two great traditions with which Mbembe contrasts it. Both Jewish messianic thought and German tran-

scendentalism have undergone successive phases of development, from charismatic precision to diligent appropriation and routinization, each of which takes time, a certain fixity of circumstance, and traditions of passing the mantle of responsibility from one thinker to the next. All three circumstances have been elusive in modern Africa. Turbulence has been recurrent, a condition that must surely foreshorten people's horizons from distantly achievable utopias to the pragmatics of tomorrow. And the fact that African modernist thought is secular makes passing the mantle contingent on the existence of arenas provided by the state and the economy, neither of which has allocated sufficient resources to intellectual life for at least twenty years. For the development of philosophy, these are highly unfortunate conditions, far from ideal given the depth of thought and study required. But although it is no wonder that a thinker like Mbembe can feel deeply disappointed with what has been achieved, the situation affords no cause for shame. And, as I suggest below, there is far more to work with than he gives credit for.

3. That said, the most positive aspect of the essay is its challenge: Mbembe throws down the gauntlet and it does *have* to be picked up. African existence demands risky and ambitious thought. Polemics help to provoke the mind, but there remains work to do beyond the polarizing moment. And the very conditions that make a modern tradition of thought so difficult to realize in Africa are the parameters that can shape it in unique ways. No other region has undergone the length and intensity of turbulence and partial sovereignty that Africa has experienced since Independence. It is this—and not suffering in a transhistorical sense, or "sacrifice" cast in terms of a universal symbolism—that characterizes the African present. And on this score there certainly are some African contributions of real brilliance, such as Sam Nolutshungu's *Limits of Anarchy* (1996), Siba Grovogui's *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans* (1996), and Mbembe's own *Afriques indociles* (1988).

These are all analytical works of great importance. Perhaps there is not yet a contemplative scholarship—on argument and mediation, on provisional legitimacy, on the normalization of uncertainty—to meet them, but the seeds do exist. Many scholars, including some of those whom Mbembe subjects to the full force of his disappointment, seem to me to be on the verge of connecting contemplation, agency, and effectivity to the real politics and economics of life on the continent in new ways. With his incomparable ability to bridge literatures in provocative ways, Mbembe needs to write a sequel to this essay on African expositions of existential uncertainty. May we commission it?

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Afro-Pessimism's Many Guises

Bennetta Jules-Rosette

Achille Mbembe's brilliant exercise in Afro-pessimism, "African Modes of Self-Writing," (*Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73) is neither about the self nor about writing. Rather, Mbembe substitutes ideologies without agency for concepts of the self. Is time really the only subjectivity, as Mbembe asserts at the opening of his article, or is he proposing an eschatological ideology of doom for Africa? Ideologies do not define and inscribe the self. They are, instead, robes—or trappings—for the presentation of self. The demand for self-identification emerges in the creativity of empty spaces where ideological discourses have left their traces (cf. Bhabha 1994: 51–52). Mbembe's African "self" is a unidimensional subjectivity—condemned to choose between material scarcity and ideological impoverishment, between Marxism and nationalism, between racism and mock democracy, between deconstruction and structural adjustment.

Moving nimbly from Hegelianism to postmodernism, Mbembe fixes a steely gaze on Africa's master narratives and cultural tropes. He asserts: "On a sociological level, attention must be given to the contemporary everyday practices through which Africans manage to recognize and to maintain with the world an unprecedented familiarity—practices through which they invent something that is their own and that beckons to the world in its generality" (258). Yet in balancing universalism against particularism, Mbembe covers numerous philosophies of the invention of Africa with blanket criticisms and provides little discussion of the creative spaces opened up by cultural resistance.

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In his classic treatise, *L'autre face du royaume*, V. Y. Mudimbe (1973: 102) develops a troubling metaphor for the condition of the African intellectual:

> To adopt an image, everything takes place as if the African intellectual were trapped in an elevator that perpetually goes up and down. In principle, a single gesture would be sufficient to stop the machine, get out, and rent an apartment or room; in sum, live and experience the reality of the world. But apparently, he does not understand that the initiative to escape belongs to him.

Mudimbe's anecdote refers not only to the legacies of colonialism, but also to a restricted menu of cultural choices in contemporary African societies. When the only options for the preservation of selfhood rely on oppressive political and economic ideologies, one might as well close the elevator door and stay inside.

While in the 1960s and 1970s African intellectuals played crucial roles across the continent in shaping independence struggles and new nation-states and in introducing such philosophies as Pan-Africanism, *négritude*, and African Humanism—all critiqued as inadequate by Mbembe—the contemporary plight of bourgeois intellectuals as political and economic refugees has left a void in many African nation-states (Mazuri 1990: 32–38). In part, this void has been filled by grassroots intellectuals, religious leaders, artists, and entrepreneurs. This development is not a product of proletarian nostalgia, as Mbembe suggests, but merely a fact of daily life. These organic leaders occupy an empty space of creativity where new ideologies and cultural strategies are shaped and deployed. It is in this milieu that the responses to the devastation of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid analyzed by Mbembe must be traced. The grassroots base of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement is a case in point.

Another creative space emerges around what Afro-Parisian novelist and social critic Calixthe Beyala (1995: 20–22) terms *feminitude*, or the cultural and domestic resistance of African women. From Nigerian market women to Congolese *cambistes* (street bankers), African women have occupied creative spaces from which they have influenced the course of history. Mbembe avoids any systematic discussion of gender as an aspect of selfhood or subjectivity. Instead, he privileges dominant ideologies, institutions, and public instruments of power over private sources of resistance. The absence of any treatment of women's initiatives and unique inscriptions of selfhood is both a theoretical and empirical lacuna in Mbembe's argument.

This oversight has further consequences for the diasporic component of Mbembe's essay. In his critique of traditionalist essentialism, Mbembe downplays

the fact that traditions were, indeed, transmitted across the Middle Passage and may be revived, and even reconstructed, for legitimate cultural purposes. Cynthia Schmidt's (1998) fascinating research on the transmission of Mende chants from the villages of Sierra Leone to the rice paddies of South Carolina comes to mind, not just as a Herskovitsian shipboard retention, but as a case of cultural reinvention. The "return" of the African American women songsters to meet their fictive kin in Sierra Leone is a moving example of self-writing and the hermeneutic reconstruction of culture. This case also illustrates some of the pitfalls and paradoxes surrounding myths of African authenticity, which Mbembe both critiques and tenaciously retains.

With the African continent pushed to the margins of the contemporary global scene, Mbembe's act of self-writing is a chilling reminder of the continent's fragile future. Far more than an instance of "salvage social history," Mbembe's essay places Africa's dire situation in perspective. But it offers no solutions. The only hope for Africa—and therefore the world—in the turbulent twenty-first century lies in a creative spirit.

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The Power of Words

Françoise Vergès

In "African Modes of Self-Writing" (*Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73), Achille Mbembe questions the two currents of thought that have dominated studies on Africa. He proposes a reformulation of the project of modes of self-writing. As usual, his essay promises to open up a fecund and productive debate. My comments and suggestions will be brief.

On the Critiques of Afro-Radicalism and Nativism

Mbembe offers some answers regarding the attraction exercised by these discourses: the benefits of victimization (political and psychological); the benefits of projection onto the Other (the West) of what is wrong with Africa (we, Africans, are not responsible for the ills that befall us); the fiction of authenticity. They are pertinent, and it will be difficult, from now on, to ignore them. However, it seems to me that they do not exhaust the field of explanations. It would be interesting to go further and pursue a genealogy of these modes of writing "Africa." When did they start to capture the African intellectual imagination? How do they differ from similar discourses in Asia and Latin America? Beyond their limits and weaknesses, what do they say about African imaginaries? Why has political economy such potency in Africa? What are the intimate connections between political economy and nativism in Africa?

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Some Suggestions Would it help us to look at the hegemony of the discourse of political economy (often combined with that of nativism) using the following approach: a return to the symbolics of an economy that has constructed and transformed Africa into raw material? The task would be to rewrite the economy of Africa, escaping the twin pitfalls of dependency and underdevelopment. Here we could adopt and adapt Georges Bataille's (1988–91) notion of "general economy."

Death Expectancy

Progress, in the sense of a better life—clean water, good health, education, hope, decent housing, safety—is often measured in terms of life expectancy. Although there have been debates on how to measure life expectancy, it is commonly understood that the older an individual can become in a given society says something about the amount of protection that society can offer its members. Life is associated with hope, expectations, things to come; death is deferred to the future, something that will happen to close a fulfilled life. In Africa, Mbembe suggests, death is a strong, immediate presence *from birth*.

We could thus speak of a life measured in terms of "death expectancy." To avoid falling into pessimism and passivity, we would have to look at the ways in which death is tricked, deceived, outmaneuvered. Contrary to the dominant assumption, Africa is not locked into the past. Rather, many of its situations prefigure things to come. The effects of the cannibalism, violence, and frenzy of unrestrained capitalism can be observed in the cannibalism, violence, and frenzy of unrestrained death as horizon of life in Africa. A first step: it would be in the anthropological observation of daily life in Africa that we could find the philosophy that Mbembe aspires to build.

The Paroles of the Dead (*La parole des morts*) Mbembe's analysis of the role of the past in constructing the present evokes a publicity campaign for Amy Tan's novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, which can be seen in the London tube. It runs: "The past lay in her bones for eternity." A frightening image, but one that evokes the current translation of the past in literature, cultural studies, politics of commemoration. I will not review the contours of that debate here. I want rather to suggest something to Mbembe. Once we have looked at the limits, problems, and weaknesses of the obsession with the current translation of the past, would it still be fruitful to perceive recent invocations of the dead—South Africa's Truth and

Reconciliation Commission, the debates around the Rwanda genocide, the UN Conference against Racism at Durban—as attempts to rewrite history?

For the dead of the slave trade, colonialism, and racism exist under a single name. Again, this is not a matter of individual lives, of subjectivity, or of a reified *death*, but rather a name to invoke. And in apprehending its current irruptions into public space, could we heed that name as: "We cannot continue to ignore them. They have not been properly buried. They are *present* here, and now they are with us; they speak, and they tell us that a proper burial means not simply a day of commemoration, a monument, a museum—but more justice, more equality, *less death*." The dead are not to be convoked as ghosts but as living witnesses.

The Economy of War Mbembe insists on the importance of studying war in Africa beyond the framework of "ethnic wars," barbarism, or humanitarian emergency. I offer the following questions to further Mbembe's proposal: What would it be like to look at war through a Braudelian approach of the *longue durée*? Where, how, and why is the figure of the warrior the embodiment of manhood and masculinity on the continent? What is the symbolic economy of the African war? In fact, what is *the African war*?

Two Final Remarks

I am afraid I do not agree with the author when he regrets the lack (in Africa) of a body of thought comparable with German philosophy or Jewish messianism, because he seems to attribute to these traditions a place above any other. That may not be his intent, but I was slightly surprised that he chose to launch his argument thus. His powerful critique of the dominant discourses that have too often contributed to the poverty of research in Africa did not need such an introduction.

In his conclusion, Mbembe proposes to turn to "the disparate, and often intersecting, practices through which Africans *stylize* their conduct and life" in order to grasp something of the "African present." Yes, and may I add that no practices of the self can be understood outside of the webs of connections, debts, filiations, fantasies, practices, and politics of friendship, through which the self constructs his or her sense of existence. This is not akin to Levinas's proposal, but rather closer to the Freudian proposal, reworked by Lacan, and in fact found in many philosophical traditions: the death of an illusion, that of a possible idyllic harmony. Dissonance, disharmony, and friction constitute our present. Mbembe's

text is, once again, deeply challenging. He invites us to accept the discourse of the African subject as it is presented to us, as it is, in order to displace it.

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Historical Colonialism in Contemporary Perspective

Arif Dirlik

I offer here a few thoughts provoked by Achille Mbembe's eloquent reflections on questions of African identity ("African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73). Mbembe writes in the philosophical mode. His critique of the two different approaches to the question of African identity represented by Afro-radicalism and nativism focuses on their problematic assumptions, but largely bypasses questions of historicity—the circumstances, in other words, that rendered those assumptions plausible, and also made it possible to overlook their limitations and contradictions. We might well ask ourselves why it is that an awareness of these limitations and contradictions (of which his essay marks an exemplary moment) has moved to the foreground in the present.

Especially important in this regard is Mbembe's observation that "the thematics of anti-imperialism is exhausted" (263). Anti-imperialism does not make much sense when colonialism as a system has disappeared from much of the world, and it is no longer all that easy to distinguish colonizers from the colonized in configurations of global power. The vast majority of the populations of formerly colonized societies live in conditions of despair, to be sure, but it is no longer very plausible to offer colonialism as an explanation of their condition. Marginalization, rather than any systematic colonial exploitation, better explains it. Where systematic exploitation prevails, as with the vast armies of labor—especially women's labor—that supply commodities for those around the world who can afford them, it is perpetrated by transnational capital in complicity with

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nation-states and native entrepreneurs. Such nation-states were the products of colonialism and may be stamped with the legacies of their colonial pasts, but it would be misleading to view them as *colonial* in any proper sense of the term; this is especially so since the elites responsible for their management are no longer excluded from contemporary configurations of global power at the political or economic levels but are very much part of them. A preoccupation with colonialism and colonial legacies distracts attention from the appearance of global class structurations that cut across the former worlds of the colonizers and the colonized, or the Three Worlds of an earlier modernization discourse.

As with colonialism, so with nationalism. Neither the organization nor the ideology of nationalism has disappeared from the world. Nationalism continues to be a powerful idea in the search for identity, not just in postcolonial societies but globally. But there are also important forces that attenuate the system of nation-states that only a generation ago still appeared to be in the process of its global fulfillment. National economies may not be a thing of the past, but the dream of economic autonomy that motivated a generation of national liberation movements and ideologies is. Nation-states may be more powerful than ever before in their capacity to survey and discipline their populations, but—with the proliferation of extranational organizations that intrude increasingly in the space of the national—national sovereignty is no longer to be taken for granted. Meanwhile, populations spread around the world in search of wealth or livelihood, making it impossible to identify *nation* with a discrete territory; the so-called diasporas are at once signs of the increasingly problematic identification of the nation with a national space, and of new projections of nations into spaces beyond formal boundaries. Seemingly more desirable than ever in the face of these developments, the much-sought "national self" is now also more elusive than ever as populations become dispersed over a wide variety of cultural spaces.

This double transformation—the scrambling of colonial spatializations of the world and the problematization of national spaces—has done much to call into question identities that earlier anticolonial ideologies took for granted. Postcolonial criticism, as it has unfolded over the last decade, has played a crucial part in bringing this question to the foreground of intellectual recognition—at least in the "First World." But even this new phase of criticism has remained preoccupied with the legacy of colonialism. Its key move has been to introduce questions of culture and cultural identity—either as a substitute for, or in addition to, the earlier preoccupation with the material conditions and consequences of colonialism. By far the most important contributions have been those that have brought cultural questions into discussions of political economy, opening the way to a more

holistic understanding of colonialism. Of these approaches, perhaps the most salient has been the critique of claims to nation and national identity.

Postcolonial criticism has revealed the impossibility of any clear-cut cultural distinction between colonizer and colonized, showing how the cultural formations of one are incomprehensible without reference to the cultural formations of the other. But few postcolonial critics of whom I am aware have been prepared to go so far as to argue that the postcolonial nation-state itself was a product of colonialism—itself, that is, colonialist in its assumptions of national economic and political organization and its aspirations to the purity and homogeneity of national identity. Such a proposition would have been impossible to entertain for an earlier generation involved in the struggle for liberation, where a unified national entity was the only conceivable agent capable of overthrowing colonialism and withstanding its ravages (which were not imagined, but quite real). While it is in many ways tacitly present in most contemporary postcolonial writing, however, it has not found explicit articulation.

This reticence may be attributed to a preoccupation with the legacy of Eurocentrism. Alternatively, it may be put down to the implicit nationalism of a good deal of postcolonial criticism, which has been more concerned to bring "national" pasts into a global dialogue than to question assumptions of national voices and cultures in the first place. It is in this latter sense that postcolonial criticism in its most recent articulation is revealed to be still entrapped in the legacies of colonialism; the increasingly formulaic litanies of hybridity and in-betweenness—which global transformations have already rendered into banalities of everyday life—betray signs of exhaustion. On the other hand, in its preoccupation with Eurocentrism, postcolonial criticism has also refused to confront an increasingly audible revival of traditions that—while perhaps serving as antidotes to Eurocentrism—nevertheless present serious problems of their own, as the values they espouse are neither necessarily progressive nor to the benefit of the peoples they purportedly represent.

There is a new world situation at hand, in other words, and this world situation itself calls into question postcolonial arguments of various kinds spanning the half century from post–World War II decolonization to the appearance of the paradigms and ideologies of "globalization" at century's end. Anticolonial ideologies no longer make sense, as they appear in hindsight not only to have been futile but also to have shared in the assumptions of the very colonialism they sought to overthrow. More recent postcolonial arguments ignore their own entanglement in contemporary configurations of power as well as ways in which their efforts to deconstruct an earlier anticolonialism may be complicitous with these

new configurations—whether or not so intended. Colonialism itself, far from being "the highest stage of capitalism," appears in hindsight as simply one more stage in the fulfillment of capitalism's historical destiny—which now seems to have been realized in the ideology (if not the reality) of globalization. These developments recast colonialism in an entirely different, if not altogether novel, light; this is what I think Mbembe has in mind when he writes that

> In many ways, colonization was a co-invention. It was the result of Western violence as well as the work of a swarm of African auxiliaries seeking profit. Where it was impractical to import a white settler population to occupy the land, colonial powers generally got blacks to colonize their own congeners (*congénères*) in the name of the metropolitan nation. More decisively, "unhealthy" though it may appear to a critic, it must be recognized that colonialism exercised a strong seductive power over Africans on a mental and moral no less than material level. . . . As a refracted and endlessly reconstituted fabric of fictions, colonialism generated mutual utopias—hallucinations shared by the colonizers and the colonized. (262–63)

What these lines suggest, at least to me, is that it may be about time to close the chapter on colonialism and turn attention once again to the problematic of capitalism. This is not to suggest that either the contemporary world or contemporary capitalism may be comprehensible without reference to the history of colonialism. But a preoccupation with the legacy of the past may also obstruct recognition of problems that have emerged in the present—problems that, however new, also recast our understanding of the past. Capitalism has seemingly emerged from its colonial past (and its confrontation with socialism) stronger than ever before. But as against capitalist triumphalism, it is the brutalized condition of a permanent state of war—the image Mbembe presents of the contemporary African condition—that may well provide the most apt heuristic for understanding the world as we inhabit it now. If global capital and colonialism are to be held responsible for this world, it is then necessary at the least to recognize that other agents—including the colonized—have been and are complicit in their networks.

This is a world that needs urgent attention. Absorption in the past without recognition of transformations in the present is not the best way to direct it. That, at any rate, is how I read this provocative—in the best sense—essay.

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Postcolonial Performatives of Victimization

Kimberly Wedeven Segall

What remains unexplained by Achille Mbembe's diagnostic of postcolonial victimization is the paradigm's reliance on a continuous dialectic of interpellation and resistance. How has the language of victimization continued to invade Africa? How has the meaning of the victim signifier changed with translation and adaptation? How have quotidian and artistic acts resisted this victim paradigm? To address such unanswered questions as these, I propose that Mbembe's project ("African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73) be taken a step beyond the essay's critiques of recognition and simulacrum among colonizers and colonized, and of conceptions of victim subjectivity based on the fateful epistemology of witchcraft. The contemporary globalization of national law, local adaptations to it, and the resistance of postwar trauma set the conditions for what might be termed a *postcolonial performative of victimization*.

Law complicates postcolonial identifications. As recent criticisms of the U.S. court system reveal, legal language and narratives, as cultural constructs, influence national history and constructions of identity. In postcolonial states, the globalization of legal systems closely follows the development of nation-states, international trading demands, and government transitions after civil war. The constitution of courts in postcolonial and postwar societies begets transitional amnesties, reparations, or silent amnesia, and public hearings and mandates inaugurate forums for testimony that have powerful effects on the way stories of the

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past will be reconstructed or obliterated. Indeed, these postcolonial legal narratives and identities set precedents for national identifications and bolster the central democratic state. The conventions of legal discourse and procedure also constrain subject narratives—through, for example, the imposition of time constraints, formalized qualifications for benefits, codified identifying language as deployed in legal mandates, and narrative formulas that require condensed beginnings and conclusions, not to mention the hermeneutics of audience expectation and media interpretation. To ignore the cultural invasion of legal forms and local adaptations to them—as exemplified in the operations of the postcolonial performative of victimization—thus courts the charge of a cultural blindness, an academic imperialism.

An investigation into the structuring of law and legal identities in postcolonial countries leads to a second problematic: postcolonial trauma. The Enlightenment called for a structuring of reason, and the state responded with a legal forum dependent on ocular proof, fact-fulfilled theses, and limited narratives in Socratic form. Storytelling was invited on the condition that it was highly directed, and in many ways testimony does trouble legal systems with its traumatic and cathartic interludes. In a state forum, traumatic interruptions of weeping can limit legal procedures of questioning, interrupt the concrete evidence, and influence national catharsis (much in the manner of Julia Kristeva's "pre-symbolic"). Traumatic memory revises itself to work toward healing, refining or resisting legal precedents. Haunting revisions of trauma erupt in local storytelling, performance, and other artistic works—interventions potentially disruptive not only of the constructions of law, but also Mbembe's severe dichotomy of sacrificial victims and war-goaded subjectivities.

In a postcolonial state, the testimony of traumatized witnesses inflects legal claims both past and present. In South Africa, the performative language of victims inundated the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995, the mandate for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Verdicts such as those for amnesty applicants, "you were under political orders," or for reparations, "you are a victim of human rights violations," constructed multiple scenarios for victim speech acts. A performative, as Judith Butler argues, is where the "act of recognition becomes an act of constitution . . . the terms by which recognition is regulated, allocated, and refused are part of larger social rituals of interpellation."[1] The cursory narrative structures and victim identifications of a legal ritual

1. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 25–26.

such as that inaugurated in South Africa provide an overt way to speak of the tragedy of the past, often for the first time in public. Law thus structures a space for the marginalized to speak and augments acceptance for these tragic tales, breaking the silence often surrounding atrocity. However, these public spaces and processes, frequently marked by implicit performance and language demands, select for specific *victim-acts*.

The complexity of postcolonial acts resides in temporality. While the term *victim* may capture the helpless psychological position of a subject during the moment of torture and terror, the second performance of identity under the structure of law enforces a continued victimization role. Public performers, Erving Goffman argues, must maintain a group identity for staking convincing claims, as in the case of reparation.[2] This second "staging" of victimization resubjects the individual to feelings of helplessness, feelings that may only be altered in legal, local, or artistic settings if the subject is given the agency to perform complex roles—not just "victim," in other words, but "fighter," "survivor," "healer," "community member." While law establishes a precedent of relating injury, artistic performances can trace unfinished traumatic hauntings, the ghostly memories not yet put to rest by the state-sponsored forum.

Because of the paradoxical nature of trauma, which is virtually unspeakable because of the shocking nature of its originary event and which, when spoken, must be approached through continually changing and revised memory forms to avoid reentering shock, traumatic narratives challenge law's desire for stasis and reflect both the influence of and resistance to postcolonial victim-acts. Trauma attains permanence, Mbembe argues, through embodied memory, as made evident in Africa's fractured countries and wounded bodies. Yet cultural contestation over the interpretation of injury, and trauma itself, presents a site for possible resistance and change.

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2. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: Social Sciences Research Centre, 1958), 64.

Keeping Africanity Open

Souleymane Bachir Diagne

Achille Mbembe's text ("African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73) can be read as carrying out a double movement of desubstantiation: on the one hand, desubstantiation of difference, and on the other, desubstantiation of identity. The first movement corresponds to a critique of discourse about what it means to be "African" in some unique sense—the "metaphysics of difference," as it is called. The second aims at answering that question by explicitly stating that "Africanity" must be seen as an open question. It appears to me that what is at stake in this essay is *authenticity*. And one of the essay's great achievements is to propose a quite new understanding of that concept.

1. *Authenticity* here conveys the idea that meaning does not come from the past (the figure of tradition, or repetition); that it is not a projection of tradition on the present and the future. On the contrary, it is the future that continuously sheds its light on the African past and present and endows them with meaning. Mbembe is dealing here with a philosophy of time conceived as creative duration, as a continuous unfolding of multiple possibilities that are open to true—that is, *authentic* or *affirmative*—subjectivity. This conception is quite contrary to a notion of time understood in terms of space rather than of duration proper—of time as the transmission (or tradition) of a meaning from the past toward the future, whence the notion of disruption of the continuum as a loss of meaning. In a word, what the essay calls for is an authenticity that could be defined as an *anticipatory attitude* toward the world.

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2. Authenticity is also *exploratory attitude*. Self-writing, as we understand it from Mbembe's essay, is not to be understood as a practice of writing of or about a preconstituted self. Neither at its beginning nor its end can the self be said to be immanent in the process of writing. To get out of the dead end of the invented self —*invented* in the sense that the author speaks of Africa as invented— Mbembe calls for the continuous and open-ended invention of the self through writing. We can see that in this aspect, his argument comes quite close to the way in which *créolité* has spoken of itself as being the creation of its own hybrid language, a braid of multiple narratives containing the possibility, which remains always open, of multiple ancestries (see Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant 1989). *Affirmative* subjectivity has to do with permanent decentering and with proliferation; Gilles Deleuze's notion of the rhizome could be evoked here.

3. It follows that what authenticity is *not* is a central question for the author in his effort to establish what has led the discourse of Africanity to a dead end. One of Mbembe's critical affirmations here is to say that authenticity is not to be understood as the reconstitution of one's coincidence with one's essence. Authenticity is not, in other words, the outcome of a project of transcending alienation, deracination, or dispossession—the production of what Kwame Nkrumah (1964) had called in his *Consciencism* a "New Harmony." Nor is it the result of overcoming falsification—for example, falsification of African history/identity in the colonial discourse.

The African discourse that relies on this inauthentic understanding of subjectivity is, according to Mbembe, that which understands Africanity in an ontological sense. "We proclaim 'Africanity,'" Archie Mafeje (2000), for example, says, "as the affirmation of an identity that has been denied and demeaned." Mbembe's contention—and this is an important point—is to reply that writing back is not self-writing. This sort of practice of writing back fails in its purpose—misses its mark of authenticity—because it is not *affirmation* but *resentment*, to use Mbembe's Nietzschean categories.

In his endeavor to clear the way for an authentic understanding of subjectivity, Mbembe's genealogical critique of African discourse nevertheless appears in places to be too quick and allusive. He is seen here and there to be battling arguments that nobody actually ever really upheld. As a matter of fact, to assimilate—as in his allusive footnote 48—Kwasi Wiredu's notion of "an African perspective" (or what he calls elsewhere "an African orientation in philosophy") or Paulin Hountondji's examination of "endogenous knowledge" to "demands for an 'African science,' an 'African democracy,' [or] an 'African language'" (255) is to dispatch work hastily, given what these authors' reflections actually reveal when seriously

examined. Also, to dismiss the concept of disconnection—whatever the critiques that could be addressed to Samir Amin on this point—as being simply "the mad dream of a world without Others" (252) does not seem very convincing. The same is true for Mbembe's affirmation that the critiques that have been articulated against structural adjustment programs in Africa (Thandika Mkandawire's work is alluded to here) and which the World Bank itself is taking into account are merely but another expression of the "pathos of victimization" (263). Indeed, exemplifying this style of allusion is the author's blanket dismissal of the opposition to a certain face of globalization as a way simply "to relaunch the metaphysics of difference, to reenchant tradition and to revive the utopian vision of an Africanity that is coterminous with blackness" (263–64). There is no need, in this essay, for such polemical and approximate assertions. Mbembe's challenge to the partisans and practitioners of Africanity speaks for itself: to reformulate Africanity as an open question—for the sake of creativity.

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Social Imaginary, Ethics, and Methodological Individualism

Candace Vogler

It may be impossible to do ethics without engaging the individuating question, What should I do? or, more generally, How should I live? It may, in turn, be impossible to engage these questions without appreciating their impersonal dimension, a dimension that owes much to the operations of the social imaginary. Crudely put, *imaginaries* are complex systems of presumption—patterns of forgetfulness and attentiveness—that enter subjective experience as the expectation that things will make sense generally (i.e., in terms not wholly idiosyncratic). Accordingly, action-guiding, personal answers to ethical questions will turn on some mode of more general sense-making—What should *I* do? and How should *I* live? can be restated as What should *one* (in my circumstances) do? or How should *one* (in my circumstances) live? "In my circumstances" becomes the point of contact between the personal question and the general, socially extended imaginary frame—that is, "my circumstances" both are and are not mine alone.

The actual or potential commonality of circumstance, and the presumption that there will be a take on circumstances that lets sense-making happen, draw together questions about philosophy, ethics, politics, and the social imaginary. In "African Modes of Self-Writing" (*Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73), Achille Mbembe argues that the multiplicity of narratives about African history, spirituality, and people have failed to provide a take on Africa "systematic enough to situate human misfortune and wrongdoing in a singular theoretical framework" (239). While the failure is at once philosophical, ethical, and political, the

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latter two aspects of the problem give it significance. For although philosophical inquiry almost never yields uncontroversial systematic theoretical frameworks for thought on *any* topic, continuing philosophical controversy rarely matters much outside the bounds of disciplinary philosophy. The absence of a serviceable imaginary may have grave consequences, however, and it is this lacuna that Mbembe marks and remarks in his extraordinary essay.

What goes unquestioned in the essay is the threefold assumption: (1) that genuine ethics or social and political philosophy is the philosophy of subjectivity; (2) that philosophies of subjectivity provide frames for interpreting individuals' experiences, circumstances, and activities; and (3) that, in consequence, philosophies of subjectivity concern "modes of self-writing" understood in terms of (idiosyncratic or widespread) psychologies of self-representation. Real socioethical philosophy, the story goes (and Mbembe apparently agrees), is about how individuals understand themselves and their world. Real socioethical philosophy seeks to reveal the ethical grounds for individuals' actions, projects, self-conceptions, and so on, by situating the individual in the world in a way that makes sense of selves in their circumstances. And congeries of similarly situated individuals may share systematic modes of self-representation. It may even be that *all* individuals—insofar as they are, say, rational, or self-interested, or caring, or sociable, or challenged with living authentic lives of their own devising—can share a mode of self-representation geared to the feature that they have in common.

Mbembe rejects the privileging of collective over individual that marks various Marxisms, and he sees in economistic discussions of colonial and neocolonial social relations the rise of an unproductive trope of victimization as this discourse's sole contribution to a philosophy of the subject. But vulgar Marxism is not the only mode of social thought that rejects methodological individualism, and it is unclear that the ethical questions Mbembe locates at the center for African philosophy—"how to renegotiate a social bond corrupted by commercial relationships (the sale of human cargoes), the violence of endless wars, and the catastrophic consequences of the way in which power was exercised" (250); and how to develop "modalities of reinventing a being-together in a situation in which . . . all the outward appearances of a possible human life seemed to be lacking, and what passed for politics had more to do with the power to destroy and to profit than with any kind of philosophy of life or reason" (250)—can be addressed from a perspective that tends to treat the social as an aggregate—that thinks that collectivities form when several persons experience the same shifts of interior orientation and draw together through this echoing, prefabricated commonality.

To note the need for a new African imaginary, and to suppose that philosophy might be of service in articulating it, do not require assuming that congeries of disturbed lives will have to be remade individually from the inside out in order to allow for more effective modes of collectivity. After all, the new shapes that reimagined lives take on under the pressure of shifts in the social imaginary are often only available to individuals *retrospectively* and find their first articulations in shifting social relations and points of practice. In short, even if we accept the modern European idea that moral, political, and social philosophy is the philosophy of subjectivity—which I take to be an especially dubious Hegelian legacy—we do not need to fall in with taking the philosophy of subjectivity to amount to aggregative accounts of what springs from, and is then shared across, individual centers of interiority. We could instead start from complex scenes (social, historical, political, material) in which individuals find themselves (often with very little determinate practical orientation and no especially coherent basis for making sense of their situations)—scenes that give rise to many significant shifts in collective and individual life, some of which eventually congeal as shifts in self-representation.

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On the Power of the False

Achille Mbembe

Translated by Judith Inggs

In the essay "African Modes of Self-Writing" (*Public Culture* 14 [winter 2002]: 239–73), I develop the idea that Marxism and nationalism, as practiced in Africa throughout the twentieth century, gave rise to two narratives on African identity: *nativism* and *Afro-radicalism*. I contend that the objective of these two discourses was not only to pronounce once and for all the "truth" on the issue of what Africa and Africans are (theory), but also to chart what might or should be the destiny of Africa and Africans in the world (praxis).

I state that when analyzed closely, these two orthodoxies are revealed to be faked philosophies (*philosophies du travestissement*). As dogmas and doctrines repeated over and over again rather than methods of interrogation, they have led to a dramatic contraction and impoverishment both in the modes of conceptualizing Africa and in the terms of philosophical inquiry concerning the region. Nativism, everywhere actively lamenting the loss of purity, is a form of culturalism preoccupied with questions of identity and authenticity. Faced with the malaise resulting from the encounter between the West and the indigenous worlds, nativism proposes a return to an ontological and mythical "Africanness" in which the African subject might once again say "I" and express him- or herself in his or her own name. Drawing its fundamental categories from a Marxist political economy, Afro-radicalism claims to have founded a so-called revolutionary politics, which seeks to break away from imperialism and dependence.

Despite their differences, these two accounts share the same *episteme*. I show

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that, on the one hand, both rely on an idea of "good" and "evil"—a moral economy—whose power of falsification derives from its opaque ties with the cult of suffering and victimization. On the other hand, both consist of superstitions that function to persuade us that nothing is happening in Africa because history (the slave trade, colonization, and apartheid) has already happened, and anything more would be nothing but a repetition of these originary events. Further, the African subject cannot express him- or herself in the world other than as a wounded and traumatized subject. In the essay, I demonstrate that these two narratives falsify the event itself (whether slavery, colonization, or apartheid) in the very act in which they claim to name it and to decode its significations. What I am being asked to explain (Vergès, Quayson, Segall) and what seems to be denied (Guyer, Jules-Rosette) is that such superstitions continue to beleaguer the African discourses of the self, turning them into discourses that are both possessed and haunted.

The above argument can be further expanded. It can be argued that the idea of good and evil on which nativism and Afro-radicalism are based so strongly resembles the "slave morality" described by Nietzsche that the two are virtually indistinguishable. For Nietzsche, this was a morality produced by "weak individuals" perfectly satisfied with the limits of their own existence. "Drunk with malice," "endowed with teeth and stomachs to digest even the most indigestible meat," they are seduced by servitude and its hidden lures: frivolity and hollow vanity, gluttony and envy, the excesses of the flesh and of the senses.[1] No doubt it would be inappropriate to describe our nativists and Afro-radicals in this way. However, the question of whether or not there is a fundamental relationship between the "slave morality" described by Nietzsche on the one hand and the nativist and Afro-radical vision of history as sorcery on the other is a legitimate one, and it has to be asked. If there is a relationship, then it is regrettable that these indigenous forms of thinking continue to profit from a general sense of complacency—a situation Guyer seems to defend with the worn-out pretext of miserabilism (lack of resources, state and market oppression, and poverty).[2]

The way out of this dead-end is not to be found in ethno-philosophy, this impoverished form of orientalism criticized many times by Africans themselves and which Guyer surprises me by espousing—no doubt in a moment of distrac-

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Par-delà bien et mal: Prélude d'une philosophie de l'avenir*, trans. Cornelius Heim (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 61.

2. This argument is used too often by African scholars themselves, which obviates the need for a rigorous sociological analysis of the actors and institutions of knowledge production. See, e.g., Mahmood Mamdani and Mamadou Diouf, eds., *Academic Freedom in Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1994).

tion.[3] Nor is it to be found in so-called "African feminisms" and "womanisms" as Jules-Rosette seems to hope. The philosophical poverty of these discourses is notorious, and several isolated attempts to correct this shortcoming have not succeeded. The essay shows that both as a political weapon and as a system of knowledge, Marxist and nationalist catechisms today are no more than hollow constructs of dead elements. "The statues are now corpses from which the enlivening soul has flown," as Hegel wrote.[4] The questions that permeate—explicitly or implicitly—all the critiques of the essay suggest that this corpse continues to rise after each burial.

Of these questions, five in particular merit attention: If there is no Africa in a "natural state" (Quayson, Diagne, Jewsiewicki, Gilroy), what then is Africa the sign for? How can we avoid speaking of or representing this sign as if it were a thing that roams the world in the form of a monstrous and terrifying mask—"Afro-pessimism" (Jules-Rosette, Vergès)? What is the status of philosophy in such a work of representation (Vogler, Jewsiewicki, Vergès)? How can we decode the world after slavery and colonialism, and how can we interpret contemporary struggles taking place on a global scale (Gilroy, Dirlik, Jules-Rosette, Vergès, Quayson)? And how, in this decoding of the world, can we rethink the status of the African subject (Jewsiewicki), not in its generality (the *nunc stans*), but from the experience of uncertainty (Guyer, Segall)—not an abstract concept of uncertainty, but a *radical uncertainty* instantiated in my opinion by the omnipresence of death and the predominance of politics as the work of death (*necropolitics*)?

The Three Systems of Knowledge

Despite what nativism and Afro-radicalism have led us to believe, the replies to these questions are not obvious, and most require a detour into history. To a great degree, what is called *Africa* is first and foremost a geographical accident.[5] Moving from the sphere of geography to the sphere of representation, this accident is

3. Read the critiques by authors as diverse as Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu: Authenticité africaine et philosophie: Essai* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1977); and Marcien Towa, *L'idée d'une philosophie négro africaine* (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1979). Souleymane Bachir Diagne suggests going beyond ethnophilosophy by investing in linguistic philosophy and cognitive anthropology. See "Revisiter 'la philosophie bantoue': L'idée d'une grammaire philosophique," *Politique africaine*, no. 77 (2000): 44–53.

4. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, trans. Jean-Pierre Lefebvre (Paris: Aubier, 1991), 489.

5. See Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

subsequently invested with a multitude of significations, diverse imaginary contents, or even fantasies, which, by force of repetition, end up becoming authoritative narratives. Along the continent's Atlantic coast, these imaginary contents are formed around narratives, legends, and stories that, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, were transformed into genuine systems of knowledge and institutional practices whose effects have endured until today.

Taking a rather different path, but based on occasionally similar repertoires (especially commerce and religion), the same process was to affect the Islamic belt from the ninth century onwards. The systems of knowledge referred to above claim to grapple with not only the physical contours of the continent but with its very essence: the morals and customs of its inhabitants, its genealogy, and, more generally, what might be called its cultural and symbolic attributes. In the process, a grammar is invented that would make explicit the differences between this continent and the rest of the world.[6] This grammar of difference not only sets Africa apart, it also claims to state the conditions under which Africa could become part of the universalizing project of modernity.

Three of these systems of knowledge in particular have endeavored to establish their authority over what Africa signifies. The first is Islam, itself a cosmopolitan project *avant la lettre*. As one of the most ancient repositories of African identity, at least in some regions, Islam far predates the colonial moment in Africa. It is made up of different traditions organized into brotherhoods at whose core the religious elites reinterpret the Koran, teach it, and translate its protocols into a juridical order that can be imposed on believers and nonbelievers alike. Thus Islam operates as a formal technology of governance, as a figure of sovereignty, and as a fabric of subjects.[7]

Despite their diversity, these traditions have one thing in common: the central role they give to faith in defining identity, politics, and history. In many respects, they are bearers of an authority characterized by a desire for mastery and the potential for conquest. The rules of governance, the rituals of belief, and the modalities of trade are all linked to one another. Indeed, if anything distinguishes Islam from other religions in Africa, it is the way in which the rituals of piety echo the rules of war. In seeking to impose itself, the Islamic faith does not

6. See Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 209–43. For a recent study of this process, see Johannes Fabian, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

7. See Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, eds., *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

eschew the use of force or even a certain aesthetics of violence. Holy wars and forced conversions are legitimized by the need for moral righteousness. Where forced conversion takes precedence over voluntary membership, a master-slave relationship is superimposed on the relationship between believer and infidel.[8]

While the laws of religion define the modalities of belonging and exclusion, the observance of religious precepts is the condition for admission into an imaginary nation whose physical and symbolic boundaries extend far into distance: the *umma*. Outside this domain consisting of the "community of believers," its towns, caravans, merchants, and scholars, there is only impiety. Everything and everyone located beyond the limits of the world of the Revelation (the *dar al-Islam* or the empire of Islam) can therefore be plundered or is in principle destined for slavery. The new lands that have to be "opened up" to Islam constitute, strictly speaking, the *dar al-harb*, the land of war. Notwithstanding this belligerent impetus (along with the desire for wealth and the materialist brutality that is its corollary), Islam, in its penetration of Africa, presents itself to the converted as an ethical project in and of itself.[9]

The second system of knowledge is Christianity. Right from the beginning, the Christian narrative of Africa is dominated by the motif of darkness. Theologically speaking, "darkness" constitutes a primordial tragedy if only because, in the state of darkness, the truth is shrouded in all kinds of superstitions. According to the Christian narrative, Africa is the metaphor par excellence of the human fall into a state of sin. Inhabited by human figures bound in the shadow of night, Africa is seen to live at a distance from the divine.[10] Indeed, this is the essence of paganism: disguise and masks, a lack of discernment, a corruption of being.

Christianity replaces the belligerent impetus characteristic of Islam with another figure of violence: that of mercy and of pity. The Christian project of deliverance involves throwing off the chains, that is, separating the world of appearances and falsity (sin) from the truth (redemption). For appearances feign a presence. And it is this presence that must be awakened. Christianity thus rejects a material life, empty of all moral and aesthetic content, and an unchang-

8. Martin A. Klein, "Social and Economic Factors in the Muslim Revolution in Senegambia," *Journal of African History* 13 (1972): 419–41.

9. See John O. Hunwick and R. S. O'Fahey, eds., *Arabic Literature of Africa*, vol. 1, *The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to ca. 1900*, comp. O'Fahey (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994); vol. 2, *The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa*, comp. Hunwick (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995).

10. Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianisme sans fétiche: Révélation et domination* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1981).

ing world, populated by masks and fetishes, a multitude of profane objects and crude human forms.

The proposed alternative is an initiation into the truth, a key to happiness, and a promise of a new life. In doing so, however, the world of allegory characteristic of pagan existence is not simply eradicated. Christianity establishes a new relationship between that world and the world of the event. The event is the promise of redemption. Redemption consists of a set of ideas that, because of their ability to enchant, could be defined as magico-poetic. This is true of the resurrection of the dead—a sublime dream dominated by the desire for absolute time, the infinite expanse of both the time and space of immortality. For this promise of redemption to be fulfilled, a dissolute existence (tradition and custom) must be abandoned. Conversion to revealed truth entails, in turn, a genuine work on the self (*travail sur soi*), the erasure of any distinct and separate identity, the abolition of difference, and the adherence to the project of a universal humanity.[11]

Colonization is founded on a similar universalizing project. On a rhetorical level, colonization is the daughter of the Enlightenment. As such, colonial rule is supposed to operate as a regulating mechanism that ultimately leads to the triumph of "universal reason." In this instance, "universal reason" presumes the existence of a subject by the same name, whose universality is embodied in his or her humanity. The recognition of this common humanity is what enables each individual to be considered as a juridical person in civil society. The colonial order formalizes two mechanisms that organize society and politics, both justified by reference to reason: the state and the market. The state appears first in its primitive form, that of *commandement*, before turning into a device for civilizing morals. The market first enters into the indigenous imaginary in its most abject form: the traffic in human beings.[12] It then gradually transforms into a machine for the production of desires. Soon after the Second World War, the colonial system presented three other kinds of goods to the colonized—citizenship, civil society, and the nation-state—to which, however, it denied access until its final phase. Like Islam and Christianity, colonization is a universalizing project. Its ultimate aim is to inscribe the colonized in the space of modernity.

11. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997).

12. Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

The Power of the False

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, African discourses of the self have challenged the legitimacy and the truths of the narratives proposed by these three systems of knowledge and have sought to dislodge the canon instituted by them. And yet, in attempting to delegitimize these orders, nativist and Afro-radical narratives still subscribe to the postulate of difference, even if they distance themselves from the most crude and most brutal aspects of the Western grammar of alterity. Indeed, it is in the name of difference that they oppose the thematic of the universal, even the thematic of modernity, regarding these as no more than a series of subterfuges intended to disguise the violence of imperialism.

Nativist and Afro-radical discourses of the self are both projects of self-regeneration, self-knowledge, and self-rule. Self-knowledge and self-rule are justified in the name of autochthony. According to the argument of autochthony, each spatio-racial formation has its own culture, its own historicity, its own way of being, and its own relationship with the future and with the past. Each has, as it were, its own certificate of origin and its own telos. In all cases, the idea is that the encounter between Africa and the West resulted in a deep wound: a wound that cannot heal until the ex-colonized rediscover their own being and their own past.

How to explain this fixation on the past and this frenetic claim to the status of victim? One reason is that as a dominant trope of nativist and Afro-radical discourses, the past is imagined as not only the home of the truth of the self but also the site of its falsification through the violence committed by the Other. To summon the future, one must first unlock the past, or more precisely, break the chains that link that past to a demonic lie: the supposed existence of a *hole* at the very heart of the African being.[13] A horrific thought, the hole invokes the contested humanity of the African on the one hand and the apparent meaninglessness of his or her life, labor, and language on the other.

However, for African criticism to accept the filling of the hole as the ultimate task—that is, to designate as African thinkers' only meaningful task the denial of the originary negation—is to be inhabited by and "spoken" by the demon of the Other. The task today is therefore to think for and from oneself. Despite what nativism and Afro-radicalism and have led us to believe, thinking for and from oneself cannot be separated from thinking about and for the world. To think for and from oneself means abandoning a practice that restricts intellectual and philosophical inquiry in Africa to being nothing more than the repression of a

13. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

fantasy written on one's own consciousness by someone else and internalized to the point of compulsive repetition. As the essay suggested, thinking for and from oneself in the world requires two approaches. The first is political philosophical.

Indeed, the fact is that the history of continental Africa does contain in its midst an element of terror, a cavity, which is not that which Hegel and the others call ontological. The cavity in question consists, over the *longue durée*, of a collection of dead things and masks, a litany of horrors which, taken to their extreme, almost always produce half-human, half-animal figures that have the particular characteristic of devouring themselves. This *auto-devoration* is the absolute signifier. It is the power of the negative near which a truly radical thought must dwell. While not the only language, philosophy might allow African criticism to radically confront the material nature of this power, its brutality, and its familiarity with death. It might allow us to get to the roots of things and to ask ourselves why, in Africa, the struggle for human sovereignty and the satisfaction of biological needs almost always seem to go together with orgiastic participation in different forms of human destruction.

Asking this kind of question is not, strictly speaking, "Afro-pessimistic"—a red flag waved by those afraid of radically confronting the abyss at those wishing to escape the dead end of developmentalism and populist romanticism. Indeed, the urgency today is to restore a separation on an intellectual level between *the desire to know and to think* and *the urge to act*. The two moments are both legitimate, but there needs to be a line of autonomy between them. Perhaps we can then avoid those simplifications (who is the victim? who should be blamed?) that are always stressed at the cost of critical thought. It might eventually be understood that there are several figures of the struggle, and not all can be colonized by those whose single aim is the satisfaction of biological needs.

Multiplicity and Proliferations

The other approach to thinking for and from oneself is historical. In fact, if nativism and Afro-radicalism fixate on the past and envisage a correlation between geography (an accident) and destiny, the effective practices of social actors proceed according to the principle of composition. The nativist thesis—that an eternally open wound resulted from the encounter between Africa and the world—does not withstand examination. Contemporary African cultural formations have not emerged out of people's experiencing the past as a fate set in stone; rather, they often derive from an ability to treat the past both as open-ended and as an

interlude—a negotiation of those aspects or fragments of the past necessary for life to go on in the present.

Likewise, Africans have responded to the Islamic project by means of creative assimilation. In these cultures marked by orality, the hegemony of the Book is made relative. The doctrinal core is reinterpreted and recited in a way that largely leaves open to negotiation the question of what constitutes an Islamic society or government. Leaving such a question open may in itself be regarded as a refusal to bring closure to the encounter. Muslim Africa also produces its own reformers. Many are healers, others are warriors or merchants. Scribes, scholars, jurists, and even slaves build the terrestrial polis and reinterpret the texts inherited from the Prophet, their eyes fixated on earthly commodities and, in some cases, lured by sex, luxury, guns, and power. Paying attention to the myriad details of the location and the situation, they rewrite Islam itself as well as African identity, often in unexpected ways, in a daring commerce with the world.[14] Several varieties of Islam and political cultures of the religious emerge from this process.

At the core of several of these traditions of Islam, the state is only one example of the possible forms of social organization legitimized by the Prophet. In other traditions, it is the political authority itself that is shrouded in suspicion. Does it not risk corrupting the religious? Elsewhere, the Islamic organization of the polis is not based on inherited status but on spiritual submission to the sheikh. Elsewhere again, voluntary membership of the brotherhood takes precedence over religious conscription. In all cases, the plurality of doctrinal responses is evident both from a theological point of view and from the point of view of popular practices. Ultimately, a pedagogy based on memorization gives birth to a religious and profane culture in which a complete mastery of the Arabic language is unnecessary and where esoteric signs carry as much, if not more, weight than do objective realities.[15]

Two factors explain this fluidity. The first involves the ability to extend and disperse across space—and thus negotiate long distances. In West Africa, for example, several networks link the Arab-Berber and the Negro-African worlds. The brotherhoods are dispersed around geographical poles from which they can expand outwards. Migrations and long-distance trade are therefore organized across borders and even across continents. However, whatever the degree of

14. Mamadou Diouf, "The Senegalese Murid Trade Diaspora and the Making of a Vernacular Cosmopolitism," *Public Culture* 12 (2000): 679–702.

15. Louis Brenner, "The Esoteric Sciences in West African Islam," in *African Healing Strategies*, ed. B. M. Du Toit and I. Abdalla (New York: Trado-Medic Books, 1985).

estrangement and mobility, the bonds of remembrance are always linking the migrant to a place of origin. Hence, identity is formed at the interface between the rituals of putting down roots and the rhythms of estrangement, in the constant passage from the spatial to the temporal, from geography to memory.[16]

The second factor is the mimetic spirit. The cultural history of Islam in Africa is marked by an extraordinary power of imitation and an unparalleled ability to produce resemblances between different signs and languages. African Islamic cultures are formed by assembling signs, symbols, and artifacts that mean different things in various languages and contexts and by organizing them around multiple central tropes that then function as both an image and a mirage, as a parable and an allegory. As a result, because it succeeds in weaving onomatopoeic relations between the religious dogma and what denies it in the practice of everyday life, Islam is the most perfect archive of resemblance in the history of contemporary African cultural formations.

Compared to the *longue durée* of Islamic presence on the African continent, the osmosis between Christianity and indigenous symbolic forms is relatively recent. African responses to Christianity as a universalizing project are, however, no less complex. African Christian theology has, since its beginnings, crystallized around the notions of loss, division, and the obliteration of identity that supposedly resulted from the encounter between Christian dogma and the indigenous universes of meaning. History and recent anthropology, however, reveal a very different picture. Far from leading to the erasure of the self as feared by African theologians, Christianity, without being divested of its *principium rationis*, was turned inside out, deconstructed, and then recovered in the ancestral masks and bric-a-brac. As an event, it first emerged in the Africans' consciousness as a field of signs that, once decoded, opened the way to numerous unorthodox practices.[17]

Africans used Christianity as a mirror in which to view their own pasts, presents, and futures. This to a large extent explains the apparent ease with which Christianity was domesticated and translated into local systems of intelligibility. At the same time, Christianity presented itself to Africans as allegory and aesthetics, hence the immense work (*travail*) on forms and languages to which it was subjected. One of these languages is that of the Holy Spirit. The other is embod-

16. Sophie Bava and Cheikh Gueye, "Le grand magal de Touba: Exil prophétique, migration et pèlerinage au sein du mouridisme," *Social Compass* 48 (2001): 421–30.

17. Compare Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 2, *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

ied in the idea of the resurrection of the dead. The power of the latter metaphor lies in its tragico-poetic depth, its dreamlike violence, and its capacity for symbolization. On the one hand, it became the manifestation, in all its splendor and misery, of the limits of the divine principle itself: the story of a god whose existence ends on a cross. On the other hand, it expressed in its absolute force the power of enchanting human life in that which is most intangible: the triumph of a man endowed with all the attributes of divine sovereignty, whose omnipotence bursts forth on the night of his death, as he leaves the sepulchre (resurrection). In most charismatic movements in contemporary Africa, these powers of enchantment and of symbolization are used as an inexhaustible resource. They are powers that enable the believer to think of his or her existence not in a purely politico-instrumental way but as an artistic gesture and an aesthetic project open as much to action as to meditation and contemplation.[18]

Conclusions

Three conclusions—explicit and implicit—can be drawn from the above argument. First, the examples quoted are enough to demonstrate the limits of nativist and Afro-radical writings of the self. They show that there can be no discourse on identity formation in contemporary Africa that fails to take into account the "heretical spirit" at the heart of the encounter between Africa and the world. It is this heretical spirit that enables the subject to inhabit several worlds and to place him- or herself on two sides of the image simultaneously. This heretical spirit operates by encasing the subject in the event, by splitting, dividing, multiplying, and converting things into their opposite (or their fake), and by the excessive theatricality accompanying all manifestations of life. It is also this heretical spirit that, taken to its extremes, produces situations of extraordinary instability, volatility, and uncertainty. If, as the nativists and the Afro-radicals contend, Africa has been falsified in its contact with the world, how do we explain the falsification to which Africa subjected the world, in its attempt to ingest it?

Second, these examples suggest that the experience of radical uncertainty is at the heart of contemporary processes of identity formation in the continent. In fact, in Africa today, life may suddenly take unbearable turns (war, extreme infla-

18. Compare with Michel Foucault's discussion of the Christian techniques of the self (disclosure of one's faults and desires, exhibition of humility and modesty, renunciation of bodily pleasures, and cure of the soul through confession and other sacraments) in Michel Foucault et al., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock, 1988).

tion, pandemics, etc.). The starkness of the violence and the crudity of the brutality may, on occasion, assume a nightmarish appearance, as reality and fable reflect each other, thereby transforming the very identity of the original and its referents. Each time, reality is erased, recreated, and duplicated. It is this power of proliferation (and its ability to obliterate the notions of truth and falsehood, of the real and the unreal, of the visible and the occult) that characterizes contemporary African experience, which is at least original, if not unique. These characteristics are threefold: an absence of sharp ruptures, a nonlinearity, and everywhere the swirling chain of fragmented events in which everything else is engulfed.

I should make it clear that, in such contexts, the debt between the rulers and the ruled is rapidly transformed into a debt of blood. Therefore, politics understood as the manipulation of the fear of dying—or the manipulation of the desire to live at any cost—represents the most radical vector of uncertainty. Politics becomes the means by which this fear and desire assert themselves in each individual. From this point of view, politics is a work of death since a relationship of relative equality is established between the capacity to kill and its corollary, the possibility of being killed in return.

This being the case, what relationship is there between language and what is called truth? What coefficient of truth can be granted to the sign that is Africa, which I said, right at the start, was above all a geographical accident? The examples quoted above indicate that there will always be a part of the sign that escapes the prison of our discourse. How, then, do we enrich the discourse so that this accidental sign can be represented as closely as possible? This requires developing a technique of reading (*lecture*) and writing (*écriture*) that would also be *an aesthetic of opening and encounter*.

But these are fragmentary encounters—ephemeral, disjointed, and occasionally unsuccessful encounters—with fields of knowledge and discourses outside of social sciences *stricto sensu*. This *écriture* must itself be closely linked to a way of reading (*lecture*) the archives of the present. The latter include not just philosophy, economics, or sociology but also visual, sung, painted, and narrated texts. These texts form part of the present memory of African societies. They come out of a particular practice of everyday life and constantly feel and nurture that life. Reading them means understanding the power of falsification at the heart of the memory of yesterday and of today. This memory includes in its diversity the experience that contemporary African subjects have of power, language, and life.

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