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## 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.<sup>1</sup> Africa offers nothing compara-

Ato Quayson and Ruth Marshall-Fratani critiqued an earlier version of this essay. Sarah Nuttall, Françoise Vergès, Carol Gluck, and Candace Vogler offered additional comments. Sustained encouragement came from Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Pierre Nora, Carol A. Breckenridge, Arjun Appadurai, and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar. Excerpts were presented at conferences in Cape Town in August 2000; Patna in February 2001; and Evanston, Illinois, in March 2001.

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).

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.<sup>2</sup> 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*).<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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. Mthobisi 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.<sup>10</sup> To this partisan struggle is attributed an intrinsic moral significance, since it is alleged to oppose revolutionary liberation to the forces of conservatism.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>—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.<sup>18</sup>

**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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> Their objective was to canonize difference and to eliminate the plurality and ambivalence of custom.<sup>23</sup> There was a paradox to this process of reification. On

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*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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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).<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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, *Renasant Africa* (London: Cass, 1969); Kwame Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom: A Statement of African Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1961); Amílcar 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.<sup>36</sup> 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*.<sup>37</sup>

### 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> There is a universalistic position: “We are human beings like any others.”<sup>41</sup> And there is a particularistic position: “We have a glorious past that testifies to our humanity.”<sup>42</sup> 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?<sup>43</sup> 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?<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup>

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.<sup>51</sup> 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.”<sup>52</sup>

### 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.<sup>53</sup> 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' resentment 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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 resentment 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.<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup> 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;<sup>59</sup> or, if there is such a memory, it is one characterized by diffraction.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> When efforts at conscious recollection have been made, they have scarcely escaped the ambivalence that characterizes similar gestures in other historical contexts.<sup>62</sup>

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.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup>

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, *Diogenes*, 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup>

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.<sup>67</sup> 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).<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup>

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.<sup>70</sup>

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.<sup>71</sup>

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.<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup>

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.<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup>

Let me focus here on the trope of tradition. The project of reenchanted 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

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(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.<sup>77</sup> 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 reenchanted 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.<sup>78</sup> In most contemporary war zones in Africa, the descent into indistinction is marked by an unprecedented degree of torture, mutilation, and mass killing.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup>

The second effect that should be remarked upon is the *sacrificial dimension of war*.<sup>82</sup> 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'ainé 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.<sup>83</sup> 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*.<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup> The function of this Dionysian violence is not to stun or even to dazzle.<sup>86</sup> 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*.<sup>87</sup>

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.<sup>88</sup>

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.<sup>89</sup>

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, non-biological 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.<sup>90</sup> 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.<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup> 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*.<sup>93</sup> 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.<sup>94</sup>

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.<sup>95</sup> 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.<sup>96</sup> 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 feymanie 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.*