Breaches in the Commonplace
Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony*

Ato Quayson*

Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 274 pp; bibl. + index) is a masterpiece of rhetorical and discursive styles. If you come to this book wanting to read only about political economy in Africa, you would be sorely disappointed. Even though its starting point is the African “postcolony”, it soon takes off in different directions.

The book is as much a *philosophical* treatise on questions of power as it is about African politics and political economy. My italicisation of the word philosophical is not idle, for, as I will be demonstrating later, the philosophical impulses in the book set up a peculiarly rich variety of perspectival modulations to the text. These perspectival modulations help to both generate profound insights, and, more significantly, to raise interesting questions about the constitutive difficulties that any discussions of Africa have to contend with.

These difficulties lie at different levels of the text: at the level of scholarly interlocutors, i.e. the manner by which to discursively postulate both an audience and a scholarly community with whom to disagree and debate; the particular philosophical prisms through which any discussion of Africa has to situate itself; and the ways in which in engaging with these traditions a curious refraction of assumptions comes to shape one’s own statements. The final, and perhaps most elusive difficulty to be overcome is that of the manner in which
to detail Africa not as a stable identity, but as itself a field of intersecting transitional realities moving at different rates of progress.

The difficulty here is on the one hand in having to hypothesize a structure of effects that might be generally labelled “African” and which provide a heuristic framework by which to bring certain issues into view, and, on the other hand the real need to avoid the pitfalls of homogenization attendant upon such an exercise. On the Postcolony suggests an engagement with these and other methodological problems making it a landmark text not just in terms of the thematic of African colonial and postcolonial realities, but more significantly, about the forms through which this thematic is to be methodologically refracted.

**An itinerary of discursive forms**

The six chapters of the book provide what might be described as an itinerary of discursive “forms”. These forms have at least three dimensions, each of which might be isolated for discussion. These are: 1) a disciplinary theme, sometimes historical (in terms of the archaeology of its structure), regularly political, and also, in the second part of the book, philosophical; 2) a resource matrix of examples, research materials and scholarly opinions from which the text sets out its own distinctive positions; and 3) a style of analysis, sometimes directly drawing from the resource matrix for extrapolations and sometimes more abstract in its determinations. These three dimensions of form are often supplemented by a fourth one which largely remains understated. This is the dimension of the personally felt investment in the object under analysis.

Recent well-known scholarly books on Africa allow types of form as I am elaborating here. Thus we see, for example, that Manthia Diawara’s *In Search of Africa* (1998) is loosely set around a quest motif. This motif itself has two sides. On a directly personal note is Diawara’s quest for an old childhood
friend with whom he grew up in Guinea before his parents forced exile into Mali. But this quest for a childhood friend becomes the vehicle for an exploration of his own identity as an African in which he has to excavate different types of knowledge about the continent. But, because Diawara is himself a diasporic African, his Africa is shaped by its relations to an Africana world view. Thus, various chapters of the book open with discussions of different African and African American theories ranging from Negritude through those associated with Sekou Toure, through Du Bois, Richard Wright and Malcolm X. We see, then that his quest is metaphorically through the sedimented crevasse of thinking about how to be African both on the continent and elsewhere.

Though also ostensibly a quest for an African identity, Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House* (1992) moves from the prehistory of thinking about Africa through the work of Crummel and others to discussions of the work of Soyinka and Pan-Africanism. He ends with an epilogue relating to his father’s death and the difficulties that his side of the family was put to in their bid to bury the late Joe Appiah. This epilogue might be interpreted as a poignant personal coda to his quest, which had hitherto been purely at a scholarly level and provides an interesting way in which to frame his own quest. The difficulties he and his family face bring to the foreground the various tensions in Africa between modernity and traditionalism that in his case have to be felt and negotiated at a very personal and painful level.

Valentin Mudimbe’s award-winning *The Invention of Africa* (1988), on the other hand, is a vigorous excavation of the Western archive through which an African gnosis is produced in the first place. His quest comes more from the rhetorical fervour of his questioning than from any clearly definable private quest motif, thus offering an alternative way of configuring the different dimensions of form as I mentioned earlier. *On the Postcolony* is quite different from any of these, precisely because it configures so varying forms of speaking about Africa that cannot be easily reduced to any single and overarching form.
Each chapter of Mbembe’s book has these elements of form in different configurations, and it is these varying configurations that contribute to what I described earlier as the perspectival modulations of the text. But as is the case in any book that has had a long gestation period, the perspectival modulations also come from the different points of focus in the text, some of which are set up as dialogues between different chapters in the book and others which are singularly focussed within particular chapters.

The Introduction, “Time on the Move” sets out the main issues that will be pursued in the rest of the text. Among these, the most recognizable in terms of previous work on Africa are those to do with the place of Africa in the Western imaginary. Mbembe notes, like others have done before him, that the “African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation.” Africa is often discussed in terms of ‘elementariness’ and ‘primitiveness’, a place of all that is ‘incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished’ (1).

This theme is taken up more fully in Ch. 5 “Out of the World”, where the discussion centres mainly on an elaborate debate with some of the classics of Western philosophy to establish what Mbembe describes as Africa’s ‘thingness’ and its ‘animal nature’ in as seen in the history of Western philosophy. The critical issue for him is that there has rarely been a discourse of Africa for itself. Africa has always featured as part of a Western imaginary, ‘the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity’ (3). But these observations of Africa's discursive place in the Western imaginary are linked to a major methodological problem, one which, as we shall see, Mbembe himself is not entirely able to resolve successfully: ‘There, in all its closed glory, is the prior discourse against which any comment by an African about Africa is deployed. There is the language that every comment by an African about Africa must endlessly eradicate, validate, or ignore, often to his/her cost, the ordeal whose erratic
fulfilment many Africans have spent their lives trying to prevent’ (5; italics added).

The issue then, is not just that of saying something new about Africa, but saying it under the full burden of a Western discourse that situates one’s own attempt in relation to it, and repeatedly establishes the new statement as an attempt to eradicate, validate, or ignore it. Even though this difficulty recalls what Mudimbe discusses as Africa’s “invention”, the idea that its gnosis is always already situated elsewhere, the issue that Mbembe foregrounds in his remarks is the constitutive nature of the agonism/antagonism that comes to inhere within the very foundational process of speaking about Africa and that ultimately shapes the tone as much as the subject matter of any self-conscious African disquisition about the continent.

The second central idea raised in the ‘Introduction’ flows directly from the previous one and concerns the question of how to establish Africa in its full historicity. For this, Mbembe proposes not to go the way of scholars who are merely satisfied by showing that Africans have had a rich and complex consciousness and have been capable of challenging their oppression. For him the task is to show that Africa is made up of a number of socially produced and objectified practices which, though embracing matters of discourse and language, are not simply reducible to them. Rather, these socially produced practices have as their main logic the production of meaningful acts (6).

Multiple Trajectories

Mbembe does not detail this idea through the anthropological discourses that might be thought to be the obvious framework for such a discussion, but instead uses Chapters 3 “The Aesthetics of Vulgarity” and 4, “The Thing and its Doubles” to indicate what he means by meaningful acts from the examination of the intersection of political, symbolic and ritual gestures within the public sphere. More specifically, Chapter 3 centres on his
well-known 1992 published in different versions in Africa 62 (1992) and in Public Culture 4.2 (1992) on the complex interplay of consent and coercion in the postcolony and the carnivalesque disposition of both rulers and ruled in the production and maintenance of hegemonic relations of power and subversion.

Chapter 4, on the other hand, is a reading of the representations of the African potentate through the modality of the derisive and pantomimic form of Cameroonian cartoons. The two chapters go together in displaying what the ordinary people think about postcolonial governmentality, a variegated concept which Mbembe generally discusses under the rubric of the term commandement, the key concept he elaborates in Ch 1. Mbembe identifies these politically and socially meaningful acts within certain historical sites and moments that he suggests are imbued with meaning that show that Africa, like all other human societies, is a place of multiplicity and simultaneities.

He argues that it participates in a complex order that has as a defining characteristic: the proliferation of contingent and unexpected turns. Crucially, however, the many fluctuations and indeterminacies that are seen in Africa do not necessarily amount to a lack of order. Rather, they show the degree to which African societies are ‘rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualized outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized’ (9). The pursuit of such “multiple trajectories” help to shape On the Postcolony at the micro-level of its discursive unfoldment, such that we detect a careful pursuit of multiple lines of argument that sometimes come together in the assertion of a particular insight, but at other times resist any easy assimilation into larger transcendent categories.

In situating the general discussion of governmentality or commandement, the second chapter is a masterpiece of multiple trajectories of focalization. Even though he opens the chapter by declaring two modest aims - the first to reflect upon the types of rationality used to rule and ensure the
provision of goods, and the second to examine the circumstances that have recently led to a crisis in power and, the attendant situation of extreme material scarcity, uncertainty, and inertia - he delivers much more than these modest aims. This chapter has a form different from the other chapters such as 3 and 4 directly related to contextual political analyses. In this chapter on the Commandement Mbembe makes some important programmatic statements.

The first is that in Africa, both before and after colonization, ‘state power enhanced its value by establishing specific relations of subjection’ (24). In the colonial era these relations of subjection derived from the constitutive violence inherent in governing the colonized in the first place. The act of colonial governance drew upon a prior act of linguistic and conceptual violence in which the native was situated as not just wholly other but as bestial and uncivilized. This was then used in various guises to justify acts of expropriation. Colonial governmentality situated itself in direct opposition to the liberal notions of right, thus revealing the essential void of those liberal notions in the first place. Among the key features of colonial governmentality was the arrogation to itself of the sole power to judge its own laws, thus producing a one-sidedness to the constitution of power.

For, as Mbembe notes, the colonial government gave to itself the supreme power to ‘provide a self-interpreting language and models for colonial order, to give this order meaning, [and] to justify its necessity and universalizing mission’ (25). The violence of colonial authority was thus both tangible and intangible, forming as a whole a particular political imaginary for the colonized. What is most significant about this phase of governmentality, however, is the degree to which the unconditionality and arbitrariness of colonial power was established and taken for granted. The colonial commandement combined in a curious form the prerogatives of royal authority with a liberal notion of rights, and yet even though these rights were partially expressed in the various institutional frameworks undergirding colonialism in different parts of the continent these did not actually specify a reciprocity of
legally codifiable obligations as such. The preferred means of the integration of a delimited political sphere were not freedom and consent, but coercion, violence and corruption with social policies tried by successive regimes ‘heavily determined by normative and disciplinary concerns’ (31).

These features of the colonial commandement then led to the progressive evolution of particular rituals of legitimation, many of which came together to shape a culture of impunity. It must be noted that the impunity was not just to be seen merely in direct gestures and acts of authoritarianism, rather it derived from the brutal fact that colonial authority was not built upon any political contract in which those who governed were obligated to those whom they governed and had specific relations of duty and respect. Worryingly, as Mbembe shows, this colonial governmentality was bequeathed almost intact to the postcolony, the situation becoming even more aggravated under African totalitarian regimes because the postcolonial commandement was articulated within the full glare of what following Appadurai (1996: 27-47) we might term the transnational ideoscapes of political ideology. Subjects no more, the postcolonial citizen was still under the domination of an unaccountable political order yet at the same time fully cognisant of what citizenship might mean in a globalized and transnational world.

The other main facet of the _commandement_ is what Mbembe details as the evolution of civil society. For him, the key feature of civil society is not its mechanisms for overcoming relations of subjection as described in the existing political science literature in terms of transitions to democracy. Mbembe proposes a different trajectory and significance for civil society, seeing it primarily as evolving from relations of class and ideas of civility. [1] In Europe both these elements were ultimately tied to questions of power, of who and which class, displaying the full forms of civility, had the right to arrogate to themselves the ownership of public authority, to make war and to raise taxes. We might also note that particularly in England in the nineteenth century, civil
society as essentially a mechanism for displaying and negotiating class relations came together particularly strongly around questions of law and order and on who was a criminal. As the literature abundantly shows, the lower classes were seen to be in need of policing, harbouring as it were impulses towards disorder and uncivility. With the progressive secularization of Western society, distinctions emerged between royal authority (then assimilated to different ideas of ecclesiastical authority) and more secular impulses, thus gradually leading to the establishment of laws to end the force of customs, traditions, and the power of authorities perceived as unjust and tyrannical.

As Mbembe asserts: ‘It is in this sense that the origins of the idea of civil society lie in the debate over the relationship between right and force - that is, in the way that, gradually, the juridical sphere became demarcated and its originality, distinctive value, and autonomy from state absolutism asserted’ (37). What one gleans from Mbembe’s discussion on the issue is the fact that structurally, civil society comes into being through various processes of relational differentiation from notions of civil behaviour as it is expressed by certain class fractions, from an acceptance of the foundations of ecclesiastical and royal authority and, finally, in the modern era, from the various forms of state power.

Thus, civil society is to be understood on the one hand as a particular practice of constructing, legitimating, and resolving disputes in the public domain, and on the other, in terms of ways of articulating relational differentiations among the practices, rituals and gestures that often separate the ruling classes from those they govern. The point is the implicit dichotomies between civil society and the state on the one hand, and between the lower classes and the aristocracy or bourgeoisie, on the other, have to be sifted fine to disclose the processual ways in which civil society becomes an intersectional feature of structure of any polity. Looked at in terms of relational differentiations, Mbembe’s later discussion of civil society
in Cameroon in his chapter on the ‘Aesthetics of Vulgarity’ then makes sense because civil society is seen strictly as a process of relationalities rather than a pre-given political structure that can be set in any straightforward way against political authority. It is the contradictory process of structuration that is significant in this regard.

Mbembe’s discussion of the evolution of civil society in Africa is intricately interwoven with an account of the material bases of the indigenization of civil society and the production of social networks. The discussion here turns on the establishment of what he describes as the ‘social tax’, the financial obligations that most successful Africans feel compelled to make to less successful members of family, clan or hometown. This social tax evolved in the colonial period from the constellation of distinctively indigenous interests that led to the realignment of alliances including economic ones both between natives and colonizers and between the natives themselves. As the major re-structuring of cash-crop production took place, it led to the development of a stratum of relatively well-off farmers who came to combine various roles including acting as a social base, a political auxiliary, and towards the end of the colonial period, an opposition force. With time a process of relational differentiation took place between farmers and local elites on the one hand, and farmers and the colonial government on the other, the agricultural nexus thus forming the basis of an ideal of civil society. At the same time, these farmers also provided the conduits through which the African economies were connected to the global markets.

Mbembe’s exploration of the material bases of civil society is quite insightful and unusual in that he incorporates the agricultural and rural nexus directly into the discussion of civil society, showing quite persuasively the flaws in current discussions that see civil society either solely as an urban form, or, indeed as not clearly articulated with rural economic base. Reading this section with the work of Subaltern Studies historiography in mind, one senses the potential for supplementing the discussions of civil society that have
assimilated it to the informal economy (largely an urban phenomenon; see McGaffey, Keith Hart and others, for instance) with a more wide-ranging examination of the place of the rural agricultural nexus in both the history and current directions of civil society.

The Commandement

It is Mbembe’s notion of colonial and postcolonial commandement that provides the link to the special emphases of Chapters 3 and 4. As I have already mentioned, Ch 3 is a version of his well-known essay on postcolonial governmentality. Mbembe brings an innovative note to the study of postcolonial African politics in his combination of Foucault, de Certeau and Bakhtin, and behind them of Castoriadis, Bataille and even Hegel, Heidegger and Habermas. The central focus of the chapter is on what he describes as the banality of power. Banality, in his terms, does not mean merely the ways in which bureaucratic formalities are routinized. Rather, he refers directly to those elements of the obscene and the grotesque, which in Bakhtin’s formulations are located in ‘non-official’ cultures ‘but which in fact are intrinsic to all systems of domination’ (102). He also has a wider interest in how such systems are confirmed or deconstructed.

His identification of the obscene and the grotesque as being intrinsic to specific systems of domination might be thought to be exorbitant, but he highlights this collocation to significant effect when he proceeds to trace the various ways in which postcolonial African leaders regularly focus on the hedonistic satiation of the body as a means of foregrounding their power. This satiation of the body is governed by a specific dynamic of public rituals, seen most effectively in ‘the rounds of administrative authorities, their discursive performances, ceremonies and banquets, official visits of foreign dignitaries, national holidays, presentations of medals, radio and press communications, tax collection; ordinary interactions between citizens, the police and
bureaucracy, school teachers and pupils, husbands and wives, church leaders and their flock’ [2].

Critically, however, the body and all its functions also provides metaphors by which the popular imagination also attempts to subvert the discourses of power. Here, however, the Gramscian notion of hegemony is being located in a peculiarly new way. Consent and coercion go hand in hand in the totalitarian African postcolony but in such a way as to appear quite unstable and difficult to completely identify solely with the politically dominant authorities. Mbembe grounds this particular instability in two main ways. Firstly, he elaborates the degree to which ordinary people discompose serious political slogans or ideas into metaphors of sexual and bodily functions. This is done by various linguistic devices involving puns, innuendoes and direct misinterpretations of official discourses. He draws examples of this from various African countries but focuses mainly on Cameroon.

The other way in which he consolidates his notion of the unstable relation between coercion and consent lies at a more complex level of his discussion and marks the specific configuration of his interdisciplinary model. In attempting to describe the special features of the African postcolony, he notes that it is ‘a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes’ (102). The influence of poststructuralist theories of the implicit links between images, stereotypes and power is very much in evidence. This would place Mbembe squarely among those who conflate the power-laden effects of real life events with the devices and import of textuality, thus rendering the real world graspable in essentially textual terms.

But Mbembe adds another dimension to his definition of the African postcolony that serves both to undermine this textualized and sign-oriented definition and to put it on a more secure footing. The African postcolony is not ‘just an economy of signs in which power is mirrored
and imagined self-reflectively.’ It is characterised further by ‘a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency towards excess and a lack of proportion as well as by a distinctive style in which identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation.’ The notion of excess takes us back to the notion of arbitrariness and the culture of impunity already identified in the colonial commandement. The relation between the governed and the postcolonial commandement is that of meaningful acts, acts that have a particular political as well as symbolic saturation. These acts predominantly centralise bodily functions, converting these into the idiom of a carnivalesque subversion of state authority.

It has to be noted that the emphasis on bodily functions plays a dual role in On the Postcolony. Even though in this chapter it relates directly to the meaningful acts of the governed in relating to and subverting hegemonic authority, the idea of bodily functions is re-iterated in other parts of the book to become one of the central organizing tropes and part of the resource matrix from which the various lines of argument are drawn. Chapter 4, for instance, though focusing on political cartoons of the potentate in fact turns out to be mainly about the bodily functions of the potentate. The cartoons that are chosen figure the potentate, often be-whiskered, fat and misshapen, in bed with his wife/mistress afflicted a nightmare, dressing up in front of the mirror, on a hospital bed, and even squatting to defecate.

These do not exhaust the cartoons, but seem to provide the main emphasis. The chapter is by far the least satisfactory in the book, the main reason being that we do not get an adequate historical contextualization of the cartoons. We do not know, for example, whether the cartoons have changed in style and content over the years to reflect changing concerns, and, more significantly, because the cartoons are mainly from Cameroon, we do not quite get the wider theoretical implications to be made for this particular form of political engagement in the African postcolony in general. The question of
bodily functions as an organizing trope is one to which we will return later in the discussion.

**Decentering the Divine**

Strictly speaking, the political theorizing of *On the Postcolony* stops with Ch 4. The next chapters, “Out of the World” and “God’s Phallus” are more philosophical in bent, with the last one being an elaborate venture into theology. It is perhaps here that another methodological issue in the book makes itself felt. For, even though the discussion of ‘divine libido’ in the final chapter can ultimately be connected to abstract notions of power, its relation to the multiple trajectories of the postcolony we have been served with in previous chapters is not at all straightforward. The theme that governs this chapter is that of divine power and some of the ways in which monotheism can be seen as imperialising.

The key assertion seems to be that Christian norms of monotheism are at heart a special way of endowing a particular institution (the Church) with a monopoly on truth. All contradiction is subsumed under the discursive disposition of a transcendental signified of ultimate value. Thus: ‘The imagined conflicts cannot concern either the ultimate meaning of itself or the ways in which this meaning is constituted, since, like this meaning itself, the modalities of its constitution belong to the system of unquestioned truths that are assumed to be unchallenged’ (215). One sees a tenuous link with the problem of arbitrariness that Mbembe has previously raised in his notion of *commandement*, but the chapter can be taken as almost free-standing and seems to be more a testament to his impatience with power, the divine discussion here representing an excavation of the primal scene of its articulation.

Furthermore, it also serves to highlight and render even more central the trope of bodily functions that could be observed in operation in chapters 3 and 4. Power is assimilated to the idea of coital excess, something which could
be discerned in different ways in the discussion of the colonial *commandment* and the postcolonial potentate. In “God’s Phallus” we find that these earlier sites were displacements of a more divine impulse: the impulse to exercise the power to name and create without fear of contradiction whatsoever. The significance of the chapter then, lies in the way in which, drawing on a theological discourse, it re-thinks the conditions under which contradiction is subsumed under the transcendental sign of (divine) Power that broaches no contradiction. If the relation between this chapter and previous ones in the book seems farfetched, it is because what has remained implicit throughout *On the Postcolony* is Mbembe’s concern to deconstruct and decenter the object he has concerned himself with. And since this object is mutually constituted as both “Africa” and “Power” their decentering takes him into a decentering of the divine, the ultimate source of logocentric political ideology.

Indeed, it is this barely glimpsed form of deconstructive disquisition on Africa and of Power that constitutes the most significant methodological problem to be faced by Mbembe in the *forms* in which he takes the African postcolony as an object of scholarly discussion in the first place. For, what the decentering and deconstructive manoeuvre have sought to grapple with is the problem of critical enunciation. How does one speak at all when everything one says is bound to emerge merely as the intimations of the familiar within an already well-grounded mode of systematicity?

The intimations of the familiar concerning Africa trouble the discursive forms that structure *On the Postcolony* in various ways. The first thing to note in this regard is the degree to which the discussion of Africa has to oscillate between vast generalizations about politics and social forms on the continent and specific case studies grounding these generalizations. The generalizations are most strongly felt in Chapter 2, “On Private Indirect Government.” The chapter is mainly about the collapse of the state in various parts of Africa and the various dimensions of transition that do not necessarily yield respite from
chaos for a mass of the population. Two very intriguing points raised in this chapter are the intricate relations between salary, citizenship and clientelism in Africa, the central point being that under certain regimes of arbitrariness, the salary is assimilated to questions of allegiance to ruling governments.

The second point, similar to the one that Chabal and Daloz make in Africa Works (1999) is that there is in the postcolony a careful instrumentalization of violence whose main aim seems to be the establishment of new forms of legitimate domination. Even the struggles against these forms of instrumentalized violence end up being reproductions of disorder such that they cannot easily be traced as movement towards democracy necessarily. The discussion in this chapter here sweeps across Africa without situating either the finer points of distinction between various forms of state collapse (for instance what is the difference in the kinds of chaotic transition between say Nigeria and Rwanda, Ghana and Kenya) or, more critically, in making room for the expression of the ways in which some African governments have conceptualized these chaotic transitions and attempted to direct them.

For the thing is not that African governments have not been aware of the pressures of transition but that they seem to have persistently failed in avoiding chaos. What has been the nature of these dreams of order which have been repeatedly frustrated by history? We do not get any answers to these questions in On the Postcolony. When it comes to specific case studies, as in the chapters I have already pointed out, the focus is mainly on Cameroon. But how does Cameroon come to occupy this discursive position of articulating in and of itself the whole reality of the African anguish? And yet, curiously enough, the generalizations about the place of Africa in the Western imaginary, the shape and style of commandement, arbitrariness and the culture of impunity and such ideas all seem, from the perspective of anyone conversant with the scholarly literature on Africa by both Africans and Westerners all appear quite true. But how is this seeming truthfulness discursively produced in On the Postcolony itself?
Why is it that as a reader, I find myself assenting without question, even while sensing that some of the assertions could well be refuted? As I want to show in the closing sections, the force of this apparent truthfulness lies in the fact that On the Postcolony cannot entirely escape reproducing intimations of the familiarity of Africa.

**Poetic License**

Chapter 5, “Out of the World” in its form captures the problem of familiar intimations most succinctly. The chapter ranges over a number of ideas in Western philosophy to do with Africa, but couples them to the foundational violence of establishing the colony in the first place. An assemblage of stereotypes about Africa are brought into view by Mbembe, all of which spell out certain constantly reiterated features in Western philosophy: the vertigo of bestiality, the teeming and threatening natural environment, the brutal and arbitrary social forms. In a word the total negation of civilization.

In its resource matrix, however, the chapter generates a particular problem of scholarly interlocution that is entirely different from what we see operating in other parts of the book. Throughout the book this has shown itself in the particular ways in which Mbembe identifies particular strands of debate in discussions of African political economy and situates these within his own texts. The rhetorical force underpinning On the Postcolony in its first part comes from the phenomenal powers of synthesis and assimilation that Mbembe deploys. Even though regularly citing specific scholarly works, these are not engaged with directly but are relegated to footnotes at the end of the text. This is in itself a rhetorically quite powerful style, but the problem arises when, in discussing the Western philosophical tradition, a different structure of interlocution takes over that induces Mbembe to pose questions and provide answers in terms of familiarity. But this
familiarity has some worrying implications, because to be familiar about Africa always involves postulating a common position as to its nightmarish quality.

In engaging with the Western philosophical tradition, Chapter 5 is a rich engagement with the images of Africa that is discernible in the philosophy of Hegel, Heidegger and others. Here, Mbembe sets up a direct structure of interlocution, extensively quoting from Hegel and others to debate points of detail and to establish his own argument. No longer is he content to intimate the familiar through a broad assimilation of ideas from the scholarship on Africa. Now, he feels compelled to identify specific passages for commentary. His comments are, as usual, quite pointed and insightful and what he says about Hegel's dependence on a specific structure of intimations about the continent is particularly pointed in this regard: ‘The verbal economy operates according to barely concealed laws. First, one takes anecdotes, fragments of the real world, scattered and disconnected things, things one has not actually witnessed but only heard from a chain of intermediaries. Then one eliminates all references to time. All the variety of the stories is ironed out; all local reference is removed. From these remains of the actual and of the froth of rumor, one makes furtive sketches, scenes rearranged as one likes, pictures full of movement - in short, a dramatic story in which words and images, in the final analysis, amount to very little’ (177).

But if this regular framework of familiar intimations is what allows Hegel to speak about Africa at all, what then are we to make of the uncanny parallels that are established between some of Hegel's remarks and Mbembe's own comments about the postcolonial African situation. First, Hegel, as cited by Mbembe in his text: “They do not invoke God in their ceremonies; they do not turn to any higher power, for they believe that they can accomplish their aims by their own efforts. To prepare themselves for their task, they work themselves into a state of frenzy; by means of singing, convulsive dancing, and consuming intoxicating roots or potions, they reach a state of extreme delirium in which they proceed to issue their commands. If they do
not succeed after prolonged effort, they decree that some of the onlookers - who are their own dearest relations - should be slaughtered, and these are then devoured by their fellows . . . The priest will often spend several days in this frenzied condition, slaughtering human beings, drinking their blood, and giving it to the onlookers to drink. In practice, therefore, only some individuals have power over nature, and these only when they are beside themselves in a state of dreadful enthusiasm.” (177).

Then next, Mbembe speaking about the postcolony through a passage from Sony Labou Tansi's *The Seven Solitudes*: “For a long time, the priest gazed at the pieces, unsure whether or not he should bless them. Mesmerised by the monstrous sight of humanflesh mixed up with cow’s flesh, he couldn't decide how many times he should cross himself in order to secure God's mercy. Such depth of human crudity sent him reeling, as if the meat, the blood, the strong odour of flesh had made him drunk. And the silence! The haughty silence of silenced flesh. And, above all, the rather silly smile on the corpse’s lips, at one mean and sublime.” The instruments that kill are the same as those used to eat. “The Providential Guide withdrew the knife and went back to his meat. . . which he cut and ate with the same bloody knife.” (200-01) In commenting on this passage, he says: ‘The fact is that power, in the postcolony, is carnivorous. It grips its subjects by the throat and squeezes them to the point of breaking their bones, making their eyes pop out of their sockets, making them weep blood. It cuts them in pieces and, sometimes, eats them raw (201). Even though this might be taken as a form of poetic licence, coming as it does after the Labou Tansi passage which has been used as a way of illustrating the excesses of power in the postcolony, it is not at all clear whether this is not to be taken as the assertion of straightforward opinion of disgust.

There is thus an uncanny parallel between Mbembe/Tansi on the postcolony and Hegel on Africa in the eighteenth century. What is the difference between the two images of Africa? It is as if the structure of interlocution in which Hegel’s intimations of the familiar are taken seriously as
a point of refutation, ends up producing a mirror image of its familiarity within Mbembe’s text itself. Which then raises a set of other questions: Might it be the case that in fact, Western philosophy was actually right about Africa? The fact that intimations of familiar horrors concerning Africa might actually have been are of course readily refutable, especially as can be shown that this generalization was serving a particular end of privileging the West's own sense of its superiority.

But if they were not correct, how come that Mbembe manages to slip into the same form of familiarity, this time, not detailing an anthropological case study of sacrifice and violence, but referring to a literary rendition of such a horror, the basis of which allows him to make a metaphorical link between power and sacrifice in Africa. Where, we might ask, does the “truth”, (however we like to define it) lie?

I think the cause of this conflation of “truths” comes not merely from any conceptual weakness in Mbembe’s methodological schema as from the fact that the object of study - Africa - is being examined from the standpoint of an implicitly historicist and developmentalist perspective. What we see here is that because Africa is being viewed from the standpoint of what it might have been, i.e. a collectivity of modern states with the full paraphernalia that define the modern state - citizen rights, democratic processes, a mastery over technology and means of production, a dominant place as an agenda setter in the league of sovereign nations, etc. -- the discourse about Africa of a necessity already passes judgement on it even as it is bringing it into view for discussion. And this judgement is always implicitly passed from the perspective of the already modern West. In other words, so long as Africa seems a “failed” experiment, the intimations of its familiarity are not of its barbarism but of its failure to be modern.

In this respect, the atavistic register that has marked discussions of it repeatedly configure the discourse of its backwardness in relation to a place
that is already forward, advanced, or indeed free. Any discourse that wants to name Africa is constrained to name it from the perspective of its not-fully realized potential, that is, from the view of a developmentalist standpoint that has to mask itself as merely ethical. And this is not an affliction solely of Mbembe’s text. It is an inherent and constitutive dimension of the social science framework that has, through various mutations, naturalized an evolutionary logic. Everything is seen from the implicit purview of this logic. The problem, to mis-echo Shakespeare, is not in our stars, but in the framework.

It is by no means clear that there is a way out of this impasse. The Afrocentric impulse, which tries to excavate the glory of things past as a means of rectifying the sorry contemporary picture of Africa and to provide models of African achievement to aspire to in the future is by no means unproblematic. The inherent optimism in the Afrocentric project requires serious qualifications in the face of what are serious contemporary problems on the continent. And the desire to detail as closely as possible the genealogies of the current confusion and to show the multiplicitous sources of this disorder are bound to seem somewhat pessimistic if not utterly devoid of hope. The third option is what On the Postcolony suggests, namely, that to think about the African postcolony one has to shape a restless discourse that in the end abjures easy discursive closure. It is an eloquent enterprise, a heady one, full of a righteous anger as well as a sadness about the failure of potential for the continent. But ultimately, it is also a discourse prepared to contemplate the negation of its own categories of thought even as it desperately seeks a form of disquisition that would help transcend the details of the nightmare. Mbembe shows us this and more. In the end On the Postcolony does not stop at intimating the familiar; it is an uncanny breach in the commonplaces of thought.

*The author is now based at University of Cambridge, UK.*
Notes


[2]. This list is taken verbatim from Mbembe's "Prosaics of Servitude and Authoritarian Civilities", a eloquent response to the critics of his essay in Public Culture 4.2 (1992). Ideally, the reply is best read alongside the chapter itself as it provides a deepening of some of the ideas he had developed in the earlier paper.

References


