

Achille Mbembe and the Postcolony: going beyond the text

In recent years, across a range of theoretical disciplines, from philosophy to cultural studies, from film theory to post-colonial studies, the idea that the object of study is a “text” has gained increasing prominence. Indeed, so widespread is this discourse of the text that the assumptions woven into the use of the word are most often passed over in silence. I find this silence regarding the use of the notion of text problematic. Text in our times (that of theorizing within a post-structuralist horizon) has become the fundamental element. It is now an *elementary* assumption that any phenomena – metaphysical, physical, cultural, conceptual, and so on, appears and *must* appear in the form of text, to be “read” and interpreted. Beyond the world of the book, it is now common to talk of “reading” films, plays, buildings and works of art. But why should this be so? Why is it that treating any form of reference as a textual reference is unquestionably repeated and reproduced in critical discourse? What are the assumptions that underlie the notion of textuality? What is the history of this movement towards the text, and what signs are there of how this historical movement is developing? Furthermore, if we have cause to become suspicious of or even reject textuality (for whatever reason), what might take its place?

My aim here is not to attempt to respond directly to all these questions. My focus is rather to examine an emerging voice within post-colonial theory, as a more channelled pathway into the critique of inscriptivism and an initial exploration of what lies beyond it. The Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe

has gathered critical attention in recent years, in part from his contributions to the journal *Public Culture*, and also because of his recent book, *On The Postcolony*. What is significant about Mbembe's project, in terms of a critique of the textual paradigm, is that he occupies an interstitial space somewhere between post-structuralism and existential phenomenology. I will claim that Mbembe fails in his stated intentions of thinking through postcolonial Africa, and that his project is theoretically confused and devoid of productive substantial argument. Furthermore, I will argue that the ultimate failure of his book is not to recognise all the important work that has already been written on Africa that avoids the criticisms he claims to apply to all existing African theory. Nonetheless, in spite of these irresolvable blindspots, I will also argue that, because of his theoretical location, his proposed project of opening up "another form of writing" for African discourse reveals an ambivalence towards the post-structuralist discourse of the sign, and therefore points the way forward for further research beyond the textual paradigm.

In the recently published collection of essays entitled *On The Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe's aim is to think African lived experience and forms of power beyond Western imposed reductivism. Focussing on detailed historical and cultural analyses of West Africa, and Cameroon in particular, Mbembe tries to show how new concepts and forms of writing are necessary in order to capture adequately the complexities of African life. To begin to see how Mbembe's work challenges textualism, we need to first of all situate his thinking, both from the point of view of tradition and in terms of method. The introduction, "Time on the Move," is in part an attempt to frame his project

theoretically, and at the same time clear away the enduring perceptions of Africa, African lived experience and the discourses that circumscribe both as overwhelmingly malignant. Mbembe contests, in emphatic terms, the ugly sisters of traditionalism or nativism on the one hand, and the patronising neo-liberal discourse of “good governance” on the other. He argues convincingly that European thinking on Africa continues to assume it is the final repository for the inaccessible, the “strange” and the incessant work of the negative. For example, he refers to political science discourse in terms of its “extraordinary poverty”, and denounces its founding tenets:

Mired in the demands of what is immediately useful, enclosed in the narrow horizon of “good governance” and the neo-liberal catechism about the market economy, torn by the current fads for “civil society,” “conflict resolution,” and alleged “transitions to democracy,” the discussion, as habitually engaged, is primarily concerned, not with comprehending the political in Africa or with producing knowledge in general, but with social engineering. As a general rule, what is stated is dogmatically programmatic; interpretations are almost always cavalier, and what passes for argument is almost always reductionist. (7)

It is in terms such as these that Mbembe’s polemical intentions are announced. The refreshing vigor of his language, reminiscent of Paulin Hountondji in his seminal text *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, induce

the feeling that the sacred cows of the “benevolent mission” in its contemporary guise will finally be put to rest. Mbembe is suggesting therefore what is long overdue - that the “polite violence” of Western discourse on Africa and its apparently neutral insistence on imposing specific judgment criteria are revealed for what they are: veiled forms of coercion or neo-colonialism. Economism and the tools of “best practice” will then be shown to be the very means by which political compliancy is achieved via strategies of theoretical obfuscation, while the continent burns.

However, in terms of theoretical context and methodology, the introduction raises more questions than it answers. In order to oppose nativism, negativism, exotification and obfuscation in relation to African theory, Mbembe’s theoretical armature is drawn from European sources. More specifically, his project is grounded in a hybrid amalgam of post-structuralist semiotics and existential phenomenology. Evidence of the former appears throughout the text, via references to the “African sign”, “the diffèrend”, the metaphorical use of the figure of “economy”, reference to post-colonial Africa as a “system of signs” and, above all, the repeated reflexive framing of his project as that of wanting to “write Africa”. The phenomenological influence, on the other hand, is most prominently stated in the introduction, through methodological mise-en-scène, such as in the following:

In this book, the *subject* [...] refers to two things: first, to the forms of “living in the concrete world,” then to the subjective forms that make possible any validation of its contents –

that objectify it. In Africa today, the subject who *accomplishes the age* and validates it, who lives and espouses his/her contemporaneity – that is, what is “distinctive” or “particular” to his/her present real world – is first a subject who has an *experience* of “living in the concrete world”. (Mbembe 17)

This tacit conglomeration of phenomenological and post-structuralist theoretical influences lies in a transverse relationship to the mode of African theory that Mbembe wants to install. That is, Mbembe wants to locate or align African theory at some point between concrete lived experience and economies of the sign. There is, however, a lack of clarity over exactly where this point of intersection might be. He indicates that post-structuralism lacks an adequate account of materiality on the one hand, therefore pushing him in the direction of the concrete engaged thinking of existential phenomenology. However, he also appears to be uncomfortable with a perceived subjectivism and Eurocentrism in the latter. To complicate matters further, these tensions threaten to collapse into the more general issue of theoretical colonialism; at times it is not clear how much of a Western theoretical paradigm, *if any*, Mbembe would like to appropriate. For instance, he clearly identifies a series of issues relating to the attempt to theorize African existence from a European perspective, as we see when he writes:

We should first remind ourselves that, as a general rule, the experience of the Other, or the *problem of the “I” of*

others and of human beings we perceive as foreign to us, has almost always posed virtually insurmountable difficulties to the Western philosophical and political tradition [...] Whether dealing with Africa or with other non-European worlds, this tradition long denied the existence of any “self” but its own. (2)

Here, Mbembe’s critique closely resembles that of Derridean deconstruction in ascribing to the Western philosophical enterprise as a whole a tendency to reduce the Other to the Same (what Derrida refers to as “logocentrism” or the “metaphysics of presence”). In which case, whilst one might initially agree with his characterisation, this agreement can only be fully granted if we also agree to bracket out key existentialist and post-structuralist texts that have explicitly set out to interrogate the question of alterity, from Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Blanchot through to Derrida. Unfortunately, *On The Postcolony* does not explicitly engage with any European theorization of alterity, so it is difficult to tell whether Mbembe would find sustenance from this body of work or not. Whatever position he might take in this regard, the introduction does suggest the substantive goal of the new project ahead:

African social formations are not necessarily converging toward a single point, trend, or cycle. They harbor the possibility of a variety of trajectories neither convergent nor divergent but interlocked, paradoxical. More philosophically, it may be supposed that the present as

experience of a time is precisely that moment when different forms of absence become mixed together [...] Research on Africa has hardly stood out for its attempts to integrate nonlinear phenomena into its analyses. Similarly, it has not always been able to account for complexity. (16 – 17).

From this evidence, it is clear that Mbembe wants Africa to be thought not only outside of reductivism, but also beyond essentialism. This is a key point, if we agree with Mbembe that African theory has often betrayed a lingering desire for a central focus or essence upon which to elaborate a continental project. In this sense, via the reference to non-linear complexity, Mbembe appears to be on the cusp of embracing the rich inessential pluralism of Gilles Deleuze and his intermittent intellectual collaborator Felix Guattari, who, in texts such as *Difference and Repetition* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, embrace non-linear phenomena with abandon.¹ However, this conceptual allegiance fails to materialise, and the reader is left wondering how the project of a “non-linear Africa” will be grounded in terms of a metaphysical framework. Indeed, at one point, after his fiery critique of political science discourse, Mbembe launches into an equally torrid dismissal of ‘Foucauldian, neo-Gramscian paradigms’ that ‘problematize everything in terms of how identities are “invented,” “hybrid,” “fluid,” and “negotiated”’. The proximity of this chain of metaphors to the Deleuzian project of nomadic contestation and creative conceptuality imply that Mbembe could not in fact embrace the Deleuzian enterprise. It is at this point that one wonders whether Mbembe’s project is

attempting to launch itself from some sort of autonomous metaphysical ground, or if not, to what extent European theory might be involved in his thinking if at all. The suspicion that he wants to begin with an autochthonous theory is confounded yet again towards the end of the introduction, where Mbembe alludes briefly to the notions of “entanglement”, “durée” and “displacement” as the theoretical cornerstones of his project, and even cites Foucault as an influence in an endnote. It would therefore appear that Mbembe views Foucault, and those influenced by him (and perhaps Deleuze as well), as by turns friend and foe. It is not at all clear however at which points Foucault/Deleuze are useful, when not and why. In which case, the question of theoretical colonization appears to be too tangled an issue to answer in Mbembe’s project. This view seems to receive backing from Mbembe himself:

To ask whether Africa is separated from the West by an unbridgeable gulf seems pointless. In an attempt to force Africa to face up to itself in the world, I have tried to state [...] some general questions suggested by concepts drawn from social theory [...] Where these concepts were manifestly incapable of describing the particular figures of reason in African history and the practices of our time, I have invented different modes of discourse, *a different writing*. (14)

The problem with this statement of method is that it simply does not amount to a clearly defined theoretical position, backed up by any semblance of conceptual systematicity. If, on the other hand, systematic thinking were deemed not applicable to the existential and metaphysical plurality that is Africa, then Mbembe would need to theorize the plural to a much more sustained level than he does. We would need to know at what level plurality operates and how; whether, for instance, plurality arises out of absolute ontological difference, or perhaps involves more of a fluid exchange across porous socio-existential boundaries.² From the evidence of the passage above, Mbembe's simple hope is to collect his concepts from "social theory" and, where necessary, invent a "different writing." What he fails to recognise is that this strategy itself is already theoretically, metaphysically and perhaps ideologically motivated and cannot be considered as a sort of neutral *bricolage*. For instance, we can ask why should it be that in order to theorize Africa adequately beyond the limitations of Western theory, the supplement should take the form of *writing*?³ And why chose "some general questions suggested by concepts drawn from social theory" over others? Further, how does one bridge the gap between European social theory and the new project of "different writing"? Surely, what is required is an underlying theoretical and methodological framework that attempts to accommodate both social theory and the new African theory Mbembe's project attempts to announce? Perhaps more fundamentally still, the question remains as to why Mbembe thinks that a different writing is in order. Conscious or not, the monumentalist and revolutionary ambition of announcing a completely new form echoes the manifestos of various avant-garde art movements in 20th century Europe,

such as futurism, dadaism and situationism. As with these projects, there is the proclaimed necessity of beginning again, and as a corollary, the necessity to dismiss and then erase the past. This tabula rasa approach is deeply problematic, not least from an African perspective. The implicit assumption is that there is no pre-existing form of African theory that deserves to survive the criticisms Mbembe has mounted. The problem with this assumption is that it only works if we consider that all African theory neatly slots into Mbembe's principle target zones of nativism, neo-liberal discourse, or finally what he refers to as Afro-radicalism (that is, various strands of African nationalism and Marxism). As several commentators have pointed out, such a view can only be generated thanks to a severely constricted and, dare one say it, *reduced* account of African theory.⁴ It is not difficult to challenge Mbembe's critical taxonomy of African theory with some counter examples. Let us for brevity's sake attempt to categorise simply one name, already cited in this text: Paulin Hountondji. According to Mbembe's understanding, should the Beninese philosopher be denounced as a nativist, a neo-liberal or an Afro-radical? Indeed, how would we categorise any of the following according to Mbembe's schema: Wole Soyinka, Valentin Mudimbe, Chinua Achebe, Nawal El Sadaawi, Amina Mama, Cornel West, Abiola Irele, bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, Fatou Sow, Mariam Bâ, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison?⁵ From this list alone, a host of questions to put to Mbembe arise: who qualifies as an "African" writer? Does one have to live on the continent? How would his taxonomy apply to diasporic or exiled Africans? Moreover, how can Mbembe's text enable a thinking through of different historical experiences and legacies of colonialism? From direct rule to indirect rule, the many different forms of

colonialism have each led to constellations of race, class and gender that are specific to each situation. Can Mbembe's thought encompass these differences? Finally, can Mbembe account for other ways of writing Africa that lie outside of the academic or literary text? What if we can uncover other forms of writing history elsewhere, in cultural practices or other forms of unofficial phenomena?

Let us leave these troubling questions of taxonomy and tradition to one side, in order to proceed more directly towards an understanding of how textualism influences and distorts Mbembe's thinking. Beyond his theoretical framework and methodology, we should now ask what the project of thinking African non-linear complexity amounts to. What is the content of the new form of African writing Mbembe proposes? The abiding theme is that of theorizing *power* in Africa. As several commentators have noted, his work appears, after all the oblique references and allusions to Deleuze, Bergson and Merleau-Ponty, to be most strongly influenced, from the point of view of power, by a mixture of Foucault, Sartre and Hegel, with Nietzschean resentment hovering at the margins.⁶ Throughout the main chapters of the text, there is a stress on the various ways in which Africans are subjected to diverse forms of power – via what Mbembe refers to as “commandement”, “indirect private rule”, “entanglement” and, in the final chapter, the unifying force of the “monotheistic phallus” of Christianity. African existential complexity appears throughout the text to be driven by the work of the negative, through the forces of destruction, complicity and decay. There is, in fact, precious little in the way of African “living in the concrete world” or “accomplishing of the age” that Mbembe had

promised in the introduction. In terms of an underlying theory of power, this amounts to a heavy privileging of African *power over* (power as limitation and imposition), and scant attempts to theorize *power to* (power as capacity and agency). The “negative interpretation” that for Mbembe characterizes previous discourses on Africa in the introductory chapter therefore gets replicated in his own work. In this sense, the abiding specific theoretical optic that resonates throughout the text is Foucault’s genealogy of power and history. In the words of one commentator, Mbembe’s text repeats and entrenches the paradigm of the victim (Segall). In Foucault’s account, the body as an expressive origin, as corporeal schema, symbolic capacity and, above all, as a historical agent, is erased in favour of the body as a meaty slab for writing on. In reading Mbembe’s text, we are reminded of Foucault’s famous words in “Nietzsche, genealogy, history”:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body. (83)

With these words in mind, Mbembe’s call in the introduction for *another form of writing* outside of dominance, ‘I have tried to “write Africa,” not as a fiction,

but in the harshness of its destiny, its power, and its eccentricities' (17) can now be seen as a writing chiefly concerned with detailing the manifold of coercive power structures, and the effects and responses these structures have at an existential level. If true, this focus on the inscriptions of negative power would again appear to be at odds with Mbembe's stated aim of thinking African lived experience beyond a purely negative interpretation. Mbembe's goals of non-linearity and productive forms of empowerment seem to disappear in the face of the work of describing and theorizing domination.

As we have seen already, what seems to be pushing Mbembe's thinking of power towards emphasising the negative and limitative aspect is a denial of the legitimacy of the categories of "hybridity", "agency", and "resistance". In the chapter "The Aesthetics of Vulgarity", Mbembe overtly distances his project from conventional modes of cultural critique:

The basic argument in this chapter is that, to account for both the mind-set and the effectiveness of postcolonial relations of power, we need to go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination, such as resistance vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony, totalization vs. detotalization. (103)

Again, Mbembe's argument appears at the same time to be both an implicit questioning of standard European critical concepts at the same time as an

echo of the deconstructive project of transcending binaristic structures of thought. This prompts the same unanswerable question about the modes of theoretical appropriation at work as that raised earlier. In addition, the problem with the deconstruction of the binary of domination and resistance is what should take their place as a third concept. We are given a clue at the start of the chapter, when Mbembe states that he wants to generalise Bakhtin's notions of the obscene and grotesque at work in non-official cultures across the field of domination itself. One of the key concepts motivating this move is his analysis of what he calls "conviviality". Mbembe cites as an example of conviviality public dance performances for the despotic leader or after an execution. For Mbembe, in an African context, there are simply no spaces of resistance available outside of domination (unofficial or otherwise). Instead, there are ambiguous moments of duplicity, complicity and playful collusion. Here, Mbembe's thought is reminiscent of Nietzsche's concept of "amor fati", that of willing one's fate – one aspect of the notion of the Eternal Return. Disruption of the forces of dominance does not take place through a "free space of agency", but rather through a mimetic repetition that introduces variation and complexity, in order to disturb any intended linear causation. This, arguably, is the central moment of Mbembe's thinking: that African lived experience is a messy intertwining of ruler and ruled, oppressed and oppressor, executed and executioner; a non-linear controlled chaos that resists Western Manichean modes of analysis, requiring a new form of writing to capture the imaginary at work. As with Foucault (and in a parallel fashion, Adorno, via negative dialectics), the order of things is reconfigured through internal disruption and the work of the negative, rather than any productive

agency. It is in this sense that we can understand Mbembe's refusal to countenance any notion of resistance, as a form of futile positivism. As we have seen, his call for a new form of writing echoes the Derridean critique of the "metaphysics of presence" in Western binarism, precisely in order to grapple with the complexities of African power relations. And, true to the criticism raised above that Mbembe tends to repeat the very "negative interpretation" he had sought to avoid, he summarises this power complex as an "economy of death": 'Above all, in the postcolony it is *an economy of death* – or, more precisely, it opens up a space for enjoyment at the very moment it makes room for death; hence the wild applause that, like the bullets, stifled the cries of the condemned' (115).

For Mbembe, power that works against the state is essentially masochistic; the only way to avoid the destructive codification of the state upon the body is to will one's pain and to accept it as a form of enjoyment. What is fascinating to observe in "The Aesthetics of Vulgarities" however is that Mbembe's desire to theorize from a fresh perspective (what we might think of as a "thanatographic perspective"), threatens at several key moments to fall back into the very binarism of resistance and domination he claims to reject. Mbembe tries to *conceal* what is effectively functioning as the concept of "resistance" in his text by the semantic substitution of terms. He introduces "homo ludens" and the concept of "play" without grounding either in any theoretical framework. He then develops this notion of ludic play in terms of what we can think of as a "subversive performativity". The new form of writing he seeks begins to occur when the post-colonial subject engages in bodily practices that subvert an

inscriptive framework, precisely by overdetermining it, by engaging in what he calls “baroque practices”. The corpulent and psychotic aesthetics of the vulgar that characterizes *commandement* is given redoubled affirmation, and in the process, invisibly turned against itself. At this point, it is worth citing two key passages in full:

Thus we may assert that, by dancing publicly for the benefit of power, the “postcolonized subject” is providing his or her loyalty, and by compromising with the corrupting control that state power tends to exercise at all levels of everyday life, the subject is reaffirming that this power is incontestable – *precisely the better to play with it and modify it whenever possible* [...]. What defines the postcolonized subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even where there are clear, written, and precise rules. (129)

The real inversion takes place when, in their desire for a certain majesty, the masses join in the madness and cloth themselves in cheap imitations of power to reproduce its epistemology, and when power, in its own violent quest for grandeur, makes vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence. (133)

It is at this point that we can clarify how an ambivalence over the ontological status of the sign is manifested in terms of an ambivalence over the status of resistance in Mbembe's text. The key issue is that of the power of the body to resist the limitative codes of "power over". The question to put Mbembe, against his overt rejection of domination vs. resistance, is to ask how "play" and "inversion" can have any value for "the masses", if not in terms of resistance to the domination of the power of the state? Play, in the above passage, cannot function without an underlying teleological form; the intention to "modify whenever possible" *must* have an intentional structure in order to support a framework of meaningful action. Put the other way, if play were denied an intentional structure framed in terms of resistance to domination, it would be very difficult to see the point of engaging in it. As in Nietzsche, we must be able to distinguish a "positive nihilism" that seeks to overcome (that is, it has an intentional structure) from a "negative nihilism" that remains mired in its own negation (that is, exists without a telos). This distinction can only be made if one can also distinguish between absolute and relative limitative power. In Mbembe's text, this distinction is never clearly made, which muddies his argument. For example, in the passage just quoted, how can "incontestable power" maintain its unchallengeable status, if it can at the same time be "modified" via affirmation? Logic dictates that either power is incontestable, and therefore unmodifiable, or it is not. Resistance is the name we must give to the force that modifies power. And an acknowledgement of the possibility of resistance requires also that power itself cannot be absolutely incontestable. The irony in the text above is that the very terms Mbembe rejected in polemical fashion in the introduction, "fluidity," "agency"

and other Foucauldian, Gramscian and post-structuralist concepts, he returns to *precisely* in order to articulate the power dynamics within African existential contexts at close range and at the same time maintain his refusal to engage with the discourse of resistance. More significantly still, Mbembe's "baroque practices" move underneath and subvert the "written and precise rules" of state power. A different form of writing could emerge through this very moment, generated on the basis of the body in movement as a power that relativizes the apparent absolute power of the state. Ambiguity and fluidity, the two ciphers for an unacknowledged theorization of resistance in Mbembe's text, are contrasted with the writing of power. The fluid bodily practices involved in affirming power in order to modify it are therefore the gateway to the "other form of writing" that Mbembe has sought all along. Instead of the post-structuralist economy of the sign, a text that can always be made visible and articulated, a structure that denigrates the body and materiality for the sake of the visible marker of the signifier, Mbembe introduces a writing of the body. Here, the body is not an object, violently inscribed by the state as in Foucault's account, but rather a capacity to play and subvert written codifications. The performative body is therefore the site of an undoing of the text itself, moving below the level of explicit legibility and juridical capture, towards an underworld of revolutionary possibilities.

The potential raised at this moment in Mbembe's text is therefore nothing less than a rupture in post-colonial theory, away from the textualist/inscriptivist paradigm it has been based on since its inception, and towards what we can think of as a more materialist and somatic paradigm of "texture" and the

“palimpsest”. The new post-colonial theory would be that of writing not from the point of view of clear and written rules – the Cartesian/Derridean economy of the sign, but from an incorporated perspective: the opaque perspective of the baroque practice. Here, instead of the ocular proof of the perfectly legible text, a palimpsest presents itself – that of writing within a material frame, implying a continuum between text and body, instead of scission.

Unfortunately, this key moment of possibility in Mbembe’s entire project gets submerged and dissipated as soon as it has been articulated. He does not explore further the rich potential of the notion of “baroque practice”, nor does he discuss or further explore the notion of play. It is interesting to ask what stunts this line of enquiry in his text. Perhaps the reason why Mbembe does not further theorize his notion of baroque practice is that his denial of the possibility of resistance would become increasingly untenable. Africa, as an “economy of death”, a site of near-infinite suffering, complicity and horror, cannot fit easily with Africa as a complex site of baroque practices that creatively subverts and mangles the overt codes of state power. What remains repressed in Mbembe’s text, despite his gestures towards a performative praxis in “The Aesthetics of the Vulgar”, is a stronger and more developed ontology of embodied being and an open acknowledgement of the necessity of resistance. Instead, in order to articulate complexity, Mbembe throws the teleological baby of explicit resistance out with the bathwater of binarism. What is elided in this move is an acceptance that power relations may, on an existential level, be complex and messy (or “convivial”) at the same time as underlying forces of resistance and domination *may still*

operate. Ambiguities in detecting any obvious direction of power - in terms of resistance from below or domination from above in any given situation – should not preclude a parallel analysis that privileges excavating the hidden dynamic within any given situation. It is precisely this move from the visible to the invisible that Mbembe is appealing to in the above passage in terms of practices that move below the explicit written codes of the state. The failure in Mbembe's thought is to follow this thinking of the invisible through with an understanding of how it nuances his own account of power. Instead of simply replacing the binarism of resistance vs. oppression with irreducible complicity and a retrenched victim paradigm as he does, what this thinking of the invisible would open up for articulation and further exploration is a more nuanced and subtle account of complicity itself. Instead of play and baroque practice thought of purely in terms of masochism and negative dialectics, we would therefore see masochism as but one option within a whole array of possible responses to domination. Once the lid of informal practice is lifted, an opaque complex of responses can be theorized, many of which need not involve either a thanatographic economy of death or masochism. Unfortunately, in *On The Postcolony*, this richly nuanced understanding of responses to power is refused. Again, we might question further what it is that pushes Mbembe to the brink of thinking play as creative resistance only in order to zigzag away from it.

As I see it, there are three reasons why Mbembe's theorization of African power ends up being negativist, thanatographic and rejects the possibility of resistance. Firstly, as I have indicated, his continued debt to post-structuralist

modes of analysis and the textual paradigm drive his thinking away from thinking of an alternative site for the genesis of meaning – that of embodied agency – at the very moment when he is on the cusp of articulating it. His notion of baroque practice ends up being a theoretical cul-de-sac in the text, precisely because it would call for further theorization of embodiment and its role in resisting inscriptive forms of power. Instead, what we witness is an opening towards the incorporative away from the inscriptive, only to fall back into semiotic closure. This failure to think the body prevents Mbembe from fully engaging with the relation between embodiment and power from an existential phenomenological point of view. Despite his avowed intention in the introduction to think concretely about African lived experience, there is no fleshing out of the kind of theory that would help him out. *On The Postcolony* ends with some reflections on the thought of Merleau-Ponty; had it started with an appropriation of the French phenomenologist's account of embodiment, the corporeal schema, intersubjectivity and perhaps even invisibility, a different development of baroque practice might have occurred. Thinking through the body's relation to formal and informal, positive and negative forms of power, in relation to agency and resistance would have bolstered Mbembe's attempts to move away from privileging a textual approach to power. Here again, we are reminded of the necessity to have a more nuanced account of what is problematic with binarism. Distinctions between resistance and agency, formal and informal, incorporative and inscriptive in fact have strong analytical power in the face of existential complexity. The key point is not to attempt to *reduce* any form of analysis to a set of pre-determined binaries, but rather to start with these distinctions in

order to understand the complexities of the situation at a deeper level. For example, with the categories of resistance and domination as guides, it is possible to develop an account of complicity that is neither wholly negative or wholly positive, but rather shows how, in each situation, the balance of power can be ambiguous, precisely because forces of resistance and domination are at work.

The second reason why Mbembe's text is driven back towards disembodied negativity is his over-reliance on a specific understanding of the intellectual and what constitutes conceptual contestation within the political sphere. Mbembe's interest is in locating theoretical and political engagement in the writerly sphere of academic, juridical and overtly political texts, not on the street or the ghetto or within the practices of everyday life. In unison with his stunted development of bodily resistance, his thought does not engage with demotic modes of resistance and the micropolitics of daily life. As Benetta Jules-Rosette writes,

While in the 1960s and 1970s African intellectuals played crucial roles across the continent in shaping independence struggles and new nation-states and in introducing such philosophies as Pan-Africanism, *negritude*, and African Humanism – all critiqued by Mbembe – the contemporary plight of bourgeois intellectuals as political and economic refugees has left a void in many African nation-states. In part, this void has been filled by grassroots intellectuals,

religious leaders, artists, and entrepreneurs. This development is not a product of proletarian nostalgia, as Mbembe suggests, but merely a fact of daily life. These organic leaders occupy an empty space of creativity where new ideologies and cultural strategies are shaped and deployed. It is in this milieu that the responses to the devastation of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid analysed by Mbembe must be traced. (604)

Mbembe refuses to engage with the space of everyday life, nor does he theorize grassroots resistance. This is an enormous problem for his project, for as Jules-Rosette rightly points out, it is precisely within the sphere of everyday culture in Africa that seemingly absolute modes of power are contested and modified. Moreover, it is only by sidestepping the demotic sphere that Mbembe can lend his dismissal of all previous forms of thought any semblance of credibility. As we have seen, even a passing attention to the condensed list of African thinkers and writers mentioned above would soon put paid to his tabula rasa approach. Beyond the writerly sphere however, non-linear Africa has already been “writing” itself into history, whether Mbembe’s text acknowledges it or not. Whether it is Set Setal graffiti art in Senegal, Mami Watta across West Africa, the sapeurs in Congo, Afrobeat or Fuji musical culture in Nigeria or an almost limitless supply of other cases, African cultural forms have continually sought to engage with and document the times. That many of these forms are not part of official culture or are not readily amenable to academic analysis is beside the point. What is

key is that Mbembe's claim that the complexities of African lived experience have yet to be fully theorized and articulated can only make sense if one assumes that the only form of theory acceptable is that of the institutionalised intellectual.⁷ Without a methodological acknowledgement of this, Mbembe's project of writing Africa from a fresh postcolonial perspective is surely doomed to failure, remaining empty and unsubstantiated. Without charting and coming to terms with creative strategies to overcome despotic tyranny, his text is bound to fall back on explicit modes of power and negation, resulting in the very thanatography he had hoped to avoid. Worse still, without acknowledging the ways in which the Western bias towards juridical analyses of power in various post-colonial contexts seek to re-enforce the victim paradigm, Mbembe's text itself falls prey to its own form of complicit conviviality. As Kimberly Segall writes,

To ignore the cultural invasion of legal forms and local adaptations to them – as exemplified in the operations of the postcolonial performative of victimization – thus courts the charge of a cultural blindness, an academic imperialism.
(617 – 618)

The final reason why Mbembe fails to fully open his thought to thinking resistance is because of an unconscious gender bias that pervades and structures his text. Mbembe is often explicitly scathing of feminism and African feminist analyses of power. For example, in an essay in *Public Culture*, he writes of African feminism, "the philosophical poverty of these

discourses is notorious, and several isolated attempts to correct this shortcoming have not succeeded” (631). Unfortunately, his assertion is backed by neither argument nor references, so it is impossible to match his claim with further argument. However, beyond his obvious distaste for explicit engagement with gender-based considerations, it is at a deeper, structural level that Mbembe’s relation to gender is most problematic. I suggest that the most fundamental reason why Mbembe’s text is driven by the death-drive of suffering, complicity and perversion is because of an unconscious rejection of the matrix of creativity itself. As a masculinist thinker, Mbembe falls into the all-too-common trap of unconsciously mapping an association between creative agency and the maternal or feminine. Ultimately, Mbembe fails to think the creative power of embodied agency and cultural resistance because he unconsciously associates both with feminine modes of being. As a thinker of death rather than birth, Mbembe places himself within a long tradition within phallogocentric Western thought. Rather than the subtleties of the nuanced response, where what appears to be a situation of domination is reversed by an agent who uses complicity to her own ends, Mbembe can only think complicity as willing-one’s own death. Instead of baroque practice being the overture to a sustained theorization of the birth of the new and of adaptive strategies of resistance, it falls back into death and destruction. The masculine mask of Thanatos rears its head yet again.

Because of all the failures I have charted above – theoretical, methodological, corporeal, historiographical and so on, Achille Mbembe’s project of opening up a new epoch of African writing beyond the colonial is, as it stands, doomed

to failure. It commits the double mistake of attempting to erase the past completely, as well as not providing any substantive ground for further development. *On The Postcolony* lacks body, in a literal sense. Mbembe condemns himself to the very “narrative of loss” he had sought to avoid. Across his work, a pattern has emerged, whereby he continually fails to attain the goals he sets himself. In *On The Postcolony*, we are left guessing as to what the new form of writing Africa would consist. Elsewhere, in his essay “African Modes of Self-Writing”, the proclaimed end-result of engaging with African “self-styling” is again not attained. His failure to see beyond de jure limitations, and his refusal to engage with everyday praxis and modes of creative resistance entail that his account is complicit with the very Western paradigm of the victim that he had sought to avoid.

And yet. Mbembe’s work does nonetheless suggest the way forward, for African thinking, and for post-colonial thought as a whole. As we have seen, his attempt to think how “power over” can be resisted took the form of a practice that undermines explicit modes of textuality – the written rules of State power. What remains potentially unfulfilled in Mbembe’s work is the project of thinking through the power of creative, embodied resistance at the level of everyday praxis. This project would counter-balance the paradigm of the victim wrought by the West in the media and through juridical discourse, with a paradigm that acknowledges the de facto modes of resistance that continually undermine this victimization. The project ahead for post-colonial thought is therefore to think through existential acts of bodily resistance, and to understand in more detail how complex power dynamics *can* be modified

through everyday performance. This project would therefore suspend the automatic centrality currently granted to the textual paradigm, thinking beyond a Cartesian understanding of the text, towards baroque practice. In this case, the new form of writing ahead recontextualises “text” as a quasi-material substance, as a hinge between the world of concepts and the world of bodily experience. Text therefore becomes *woven*, a texture, stitched into the fabric of the world. Text is put back into relation to its existential ground and becomes a palimpsest, the opaque surface upon which all forms of writing must be inscribed, rather than perpetually caught up in the self-referential delusional economy of the sign. Each new instance of writing, whether literary or otherwise, writes into a page that is already densely layered with precedents. The written codes of de jure power are finally put in relation to the de facto modes of resistance that undermine them. Via phenomenological or other methods of analysis, we could finally be led to the very space that Mbembe sought all along to uncover - a more complex account of power. From an African perspective (whether on the continent or not), this project would, above all, enable us at last to engage African existence in all its non-linear complexity. Exactly the opposite of the revolution in writing that Mbembe proposes, what is required is a work of retrieval and research into the myriad ways in which, on a daily basis, Africans resist codification by negative modes of power, writing their histories through the culturally expressive forms of the moment.

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NOTES

¹ Mbembe does indeed preface his essay “African Modes of Self-Writing” with a citation from Deleuze. For an insightful account of one possible route into thinking Deleuze’s relation to African philosophy, see Janz.

² Mbembe’s stated theoretical assemblage in *On The Postcolony* contrasts oddly with the view expressed in his essay “African Modes of Self-Writing”. Here, the desire seems to be for a more systematic approach. In comparison to “German philosophy” and “Jewish Messianism”, Mbembe complains that Africa “has not yielded any integrated philosophico-theological inquiry systematic enough to situate human misfortune and wrongdoing in a singular theoretical framework.”

³ In a response to Mbembe, Candace Vogler takes issue with the subjectivism implicit within the project of self-writing. She writes, “To note the need for a new African imaginary, and to suppose that philosophy might be of service in articulating it, do not require assuming that congeries of disturbed lives will have to be remade individually from the inside out in order to allow for more effective modes of collectivity.”

⁴ See Gilroy, Guyer and Jules-Rosette

⁵ We should note that Mbembe does in fact cite some of the writers listed. This further problematises Mbembe’s project of erasure through a new form of writing. Given this surfeit of non-categorisable (by Mbembe’s categorisation at least) African and diasporic writing, it becomes urgent to ask why Mbembe’s project should try to erase these voices. Beyond a modernistic impulse to embark on the “shock of the new”, we might speculate that an institutional directive at work; that of the attention-seeking polemical voice, spawning a minor-industry of scholarship in its wake. This ad hominem argument might seem a little unjust; however, perhaps the greater injustice is the refusal to accept that when one starts to write within any tradition, one stands on the shoulders of giants.

⁶ For an interesting discussion of this see Bogum

⁷ For examples of African sub-cultural analysis, see Hechte and Simone, and Friedman.

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