

## The contribution of Achille Mbembe to the multi-disciplinary study of Africa<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

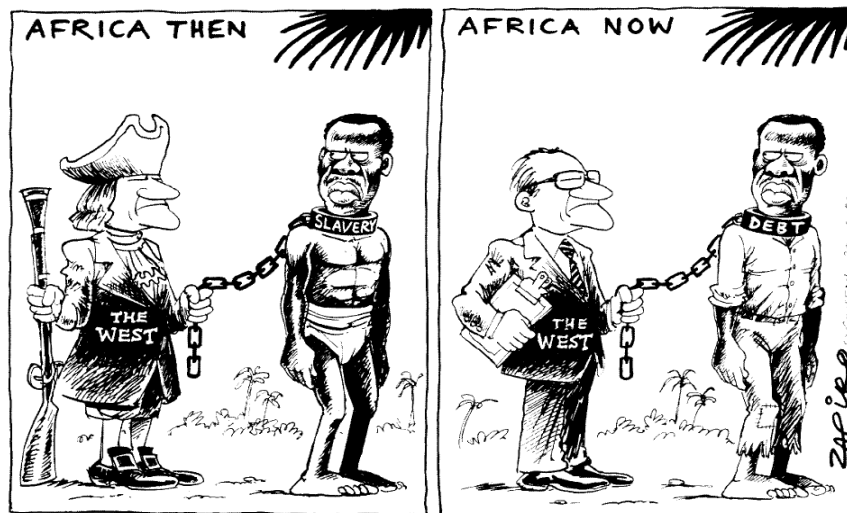
The Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town is the site from which I write. This is significant in that it is one of the few scholarly spaces at the University in which research of a multi-disciplinary nature is encouraged and supported. It is also of significance in the light of the core mission of the Centre, which espouses, both rhetorically and in its pedagogy, a commitment to the intellectual interrogation and critique of the “long-standing and continuing dominance of Western models and discourses.”<sup>2</sup> The subject of this essay, the contribution of Achille Mbembe to the multi-disciplinary study of Africa, is guided by the locus of one of the Centre’s postgraduate semester courses: *Problematizing the Study of Africa: Interrogating the Disciplines*. The particular emphasis, in this course, is on questions of paradigm and position, which are framed in the context of a set of meta-level discussions about the study of Africa – both historically and in its contemporary forms. In class discussions, that is, this problematic is expressed and contested through two central questions. First, within what metaphoric ‘boxes’ (taken to mean intellectual paradigms) has and, indeed, is the study of Africa located? And second, how, in the light of the first question, can researchers in and of Africa – granted that the (disciplinary) geometries of the existing boxes have been or are violent or inept in their representations and approaches to Africa – ‘cut’ the boxes open or build new boxes? The core “reasoning”<sup>3</sup> that I wish to articulate in this paper is that, in respect of critical multidisciplinary research in and of the African postcolony, an understanding of Achille Mbembe’s growing body of work is vital in ensuring that the paradigm of Africa’s victimhood is indeed dismantled and displaced, rather than its scaffolding upheld and its discursive structures replicated.

I understand two of Mbembe’s recent works *On the postcolony* (2001) and his essay “African Modes of Self-Writing” (2002) to be central works in thinking through Mbembe’s core theoretical and methodological contributions to the multi-disciplinary study of the Africa.<sup>4</sup> His approach to the hermeneutics of subjectivity and time thus constitutes the primary focus of this essay. In particular, I ask: what does it mean for students and scholars of African cultural, economic and political life, as Mbembe asserts, to interpret “subjectivity as time”?<sup>5</sup> How does Mbembe formulate and develop this idea, which acts effectively to challenge the student’s and scholar’s relation to Africa; importantly, across a range of disciplinary perspectives?

A number of critiques and commentaries of both works are of course vital in pointing out potential oversights and lapses in Mbembe’s theorisations and positions. I wish, therefore, in the latter part of the essay, to refer to some of these responses to his work in addition to my discussion and analyses of the two works in question. By way of an overall structure, the exegesis that proceeds immediately examines the nature of the intellectual paradigms that Mbembe theorises against in developing the particular methodological framework he employs in thinking through the problematics of contemporary postcolonial life in Africa. Following on directly from the first, the

second section is an attempt to map out the coordinates of Mbembe's methodological approach as this is articulated in both *On the postcolony* and "African Modes of Self-Writing."<sup>6</sup> The third section of this essay focuses on the responses to Mbembe's article "African Modes of Self-Writing" from within the journal *Public Culture* and from without; as well as Ato Quayson's thoughtful response to *On the postcolony*: "Breaches in the Commonplace."<sup>7</sup> The fourth and final section of the essay addresses the following question: what is the core theoretical and methodological contribution of Achille Mbembe to the multi-disciplinary study of Africa?

### Building the box



Consider the cartoon (above) sketched by South African cartoonist Zapiro that was first published in the *Sowetan* in 1998.<sup>8</sup> In this cartoon two almost identical scenarios are presented to its viewer. The first, 'Africa Then,' describes the nature of the relation between the imperialist and the slave, the master and the bondsman, in a time past. The second, 'Africa Now,' is located temporally in the present but appears to describe the same relationship of domination, albeit taking a different shape. 'Africa Then' is thus equated with 'Africa Now,' in this cartoon, as if nothing – except the metaphors of the shackle and the clothing and accessories of the antagonists – has altered. Africa, we come to conclude from a cursory glance, has remained unmoved in its relation to the West.

What interests me most in this illustration, however, is not its racial politics (as much as that may warrant a commentary in and of itself); nor the politics of neo-imperialism – slavery or Africa's financial debts to the West; but rather, the fact of the *blindness* of the West to Africa's physiognomy: his lips, his ears and his nose; his rudimentary, tattered clothing and ways in which they come to rest on his muscular body; his angry eyes and the lines which lie beneath them; and so on.<sup>9</sup> In both frames the West holds and controls the body of Africa, he negotiates and bargains with Africa's presence in the world, as if Africa were not able to do so himself, *as if Africa were not a human being at all*. Africa is, thus, not only reduced from the human being he is to the mere condition of an enchained, an enslaved animal: a beast.<sup>10</sup> He is reduced to a graver set of conditions, which, on the one hand, is the condition of a non-human being in his own eyes; and on the other hand, the condition of literal darkness and blackness – of "nothingness"<sup>11</sup> – in the eyes of the West. The future we imagine – if we think in

Zapiro's trajectory of a third frame entitled 'Africa's in 50 Years' – does not look particularly different, colourful, or bright.

Zapiro's 'Africa Then, Africa Now' cartoon is instructive for two reasons. First, because it speaks both cleverly and laconically – in the way that a well-humoured and provocative politico-historical cartoon ought to do – to the nature of the reality it undertakes to represent. And second, because it reflects critically on the complicated nature of a relationship – which is one of the, if not *the*, central relationship postcolonial theory (as a diverse body of ideas and statements, a discursive formation in itself) undertakes to deconstruct, denature, and de-design – which is the relationship between "the West and the Rest."<sup>12</sup> In these two ways Zapiro's cartoon is both intelligent and incisive in its reflections on the relationships between Africa and the West. However, Zapiro's image also sets up in visual terms (and perhaps therefore with more accuracy and precision) the nature of the intellectual paradigm Achille Mbembe undertakes to critique and to ultimately disassemble, as it is figured in the "discourse of our times."<sup>13</sup> In other words, by placing Africa and therefore Africans at the mere whims of the West, by writing Africans as the (angry) victims in the dual games of racial colonialism and global capitalism respectively, Zapiro denies Africans – as human beings first and foremost – their subjectivities, their desires and imaginations and, perhaps most importantly, their identities. To use an important and recurring trope deeply embedded in imagery of Mbembe's work, Zapiro writes African "history as sorcery."<sup>14</sup>

The obvious response to this critique of Zapiro is that Africa is indeed entangled in a web of relations of subjection to the West. As a result, it is problematical, if not impossible, to talk of such African agency and selfhood, not least in the light of the violence of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, and their systemic manifestations and vicissitudes that play out in the present. I would like to take up this critique later in this essay in my discussion of some of the responses to Mbembe's work. Suffice it to say that the question of *how* exactly to comprehend and tackle African 'problems' – poverty, war, environmental change, and the like – remains a blind spot in Mbembe's writing: a murky, politicised space into which he seems to prefer not to gesture too far or too deep. If we were to begin to build the box, however, the paradigm against which Mbembe begins to write Africa into the world, we might begin by connecting the sides with a "nativist"<sup>15</sup> conception of African history – of Africa and Africans "lamenting the loss of purity"<sup>16</sup> because of the West's invasion into its lands.

Faced with malaise resulting from the encounter between the West and the indigenous worlds, nativism proposes a return an ontological and mythical "Africanness" in which the African subject might once again say "I" and express him- or herself in his or her own name.<sup>17</sup>

The roof and the floor of the box, if we are to continue along this process of construction according to the architecture of Mbembe, would be constituted by an "Afro-radicalist"<sup>18</sup> view of Africa's history. Rooted in Marxist political economy, the philosophy of nationalism, and struggles for national autonomy, the Afro-radicals are those imaginary figures in Zapiro's cartoon whose purpose is to break the chains of Africa's subjection with the West's gun, or with the West's clipboard; in short, with the physical and intellectual tools of the West. The Afro-radicals are those figures whose "revolutionary politics"<sup>19</sup> speak the language of the West about Africa, but

whose discourse, in the very act of its utterances, replicate the West's domination. In present discourse, they are those whose reflections on Africa might indeed have originated from within or from outside of the continent itself, but which never-the-less falls into what Mbembe calls an "instrumentalist paradigm."<sup>20</sup> The instrumentalist paradigm, figured most prominently in the disciplines of economics and political science, is "too reductionist to throw intelligible light on fundamental problems touching on the nature of social reality in Africa."<sup>21</sup> The instrumentalist paradigm is increasingly characterised by and concerned with mathematical and statistical abstractions – growth percentages, GDP figures, and the Gini co-efficient, and then, the peculiar hypotheses and conclusions derived as a result – than it is about Africa in its lived realities.

Mbembe does indeed acknowledge his debt to Western social and critical theory. This, I think, is the starting point of a potential critique that may be elsewhere formulated against Mbembe's conceptualisation of the Afro-radicalist position in "African Modes of Self-Writing." For example, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarly", first published as "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony" in 1992, employs Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to explore issues of power, the body, and subjectivity in Cameroon.<sup>22</sup> However, as Mbembe argues, we cannot approach the historicity of African societies without taking account of Africa's profound connections to Europe, as initiated from the fifteenth century onwards.

[D]ealing with African societies' "historicity" requires more than simply giving an account of what occurs on the continent itself at the interface between the working of internal forces and the working of international actors. It also presupposes a critical delving into Western history and the theories that claim to interpret it.<sup>23</sup>

At this stage the box stands complete. The nature and shape of its four sides (nativism), its roof and bottom (Afro-radicalism), act in unison to fold neatly around its contents: the tumultuous African past and present. The question is: what of the African future?

In order to begin the box's dismantling, I understand the heart of Mbembe's intellectual project to be a search for a meta-narrative, other than those which structure present reflections on Africa (nativist, Afro-radicalist), from which Africa might begin to write itself into the world, from which Africa might begin to recover its pasts and therefore its futures. For Mbembe this meta-narrative would be analogous to a German transcendentalism, which, "from Luther to Heidegger" expressed "the will to transgress the boundary between the human and the divine."<sup>24</sup> Or, indeed, a "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>25</sup> The nativist and Afro-radicalist understandings of the African past and present, Mbembe asserts, have prevented the "full development of conceptions that might have explained the meaning of the African past and present by reference to the future."<sup>26</sup> They have lead reflections on Africa into a "dead end."<sup>27</sup> As such, Mbembe posits the idea of interpreting time as subjectivity *in the postcolony* and the notion of identity self-fashioning, as a means to explore the thematics of a new meta-narrative of

contemporary African postcolonial life, which would be able to come to terms with Africa's violence and suffering, which would be able to "situate human misfortune and wrongdoing in a singular theoretical framework."<sup>28</sup>

### **Time as subjectivity in the postcolony**

A pendulum-like motion is the action from which Mbembe compels us to understand and interpret the nature of time in the postcolony. In this conception of time the present is constantly in the process of becoming both the past and the future: it is dynamic; the present is 'moving'; it is swinging both forward and backward at the pace of time. For example, Mbembe writes of "time on the move," "emerging time," "*time of existence and experience*," "*this time that is appearing, this passing time*."<sup>29</sup> For Mbembe the new hermeneutics of time in the postcolony – "time of entanglement" – must discard "conventional views" of time because "these only perceive time as current that carries individuals and societies from a background to a foreground, with the future emerging necessarily from the past."<sup>30</sup> He writes:

Social theory has failed to account for *time as lived*, not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presences and absences, beyond the categories of permanence and change beloved of so many historians.<sup>31</sup>

Three ideas are important in further augmenting this idea of time as emerging. First, time in the postcolony is not only swinging. It is also entangled. (Time is now oddly shaped). It becomes problematic therefore to speak of time as series, since *times* intersect, mingle, and overlap. Time in the postcolony, Mbembe writes, is "an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures, that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures."<sup>32</sup> Second, time is bound to history and its actors. In the postcolony these categories of experience work as a complex "of disturbances, of a bundle of unforeseen events, of more or less regular fluctuations and oscillations,"<sup>33</sup> which are an indication that the postcolony is as rational as it is improvised (see "The Aesthetics of Vulgarities"). For Mbembe the vicissitudes of history in the postcolony, the ways in which the past plays out in the present, are not always signs that the postcolony is completely disordered, although they may be. Third, time in the postcolony is not the modular time so-called Western modernity. In all of its connections and disconnections to the West, it is its own time.

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.<sup>34</sup>

The link between time and the socio-historical reality of the postcolony – the age, the *durée*, the epoch within which the postcolony exists – gets figured in the relationship between what Mbembe terms *entanglement* and *displacement*. Entanglement relates directly to the notion of time as I have described it above. The condition of displacement refers to the position of the subject – the African – in postcolonial society and his or her experience of entangled time. Mbembe explains that in theorising this relationship he began by thinking of the way in which entanglement and displacement were, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

I started from the idea that there is a close philosophical relation between temporality and subjectivity – that, in some way, one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality. The intuition behind this idea was that, for each time and each age, there exists something distinctive and particular – or, to use the term, a “spirit” (*Zeitgeist*). These distinctive and particular things are constituted by set of material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions that, because they are available to the individuals’ imagination and intelligence and actually experienced, form what might be called “languages of life.”<sup>35</sup>

For Mbembe, the ways in which Africans write their experience of the postcolony through these languages of life are precisely the ways in which Africans create meaning for themselves in the world. In this distinctive sense Mbembe challenges nativist and Afro-radical models of African self-writing. This challenge is given substance when Mbembe asserts that “the African subject is like any other human being: he or she engages in *meaningful acts*.”<sup>36</sup> In this vein, Mbembe sees the creation of meaning as constituted through both the practice of language and through bodily practices; the latter, which include reflexive practices like “doing, seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and touching.”<sup>37</sup>

Methodologically-speaking, the importance of understanding and interpreting subjectivity as time in the postcolony is as follows. If we are to challenge the discourse of victimhood, the single episteme that, both historically and contemporaneously, seems to characterise Africa and Africans,<sup>38</sup> if we are to write Africa into the world on its own terms, as a “unit of analysis,”<sup>39</sup> then it is crucial that Africans are seen as human beings like other human beings, who experience subjecthood and personhood, and who are autonomous in their dealings with the world. This condition of a common humanity and freedom, then, is the starting point for thinking through the kinds of actions, gestures, movements, flows, and vibrations that constitute the African subject in local-global space-time; that is, the time of the postcolony. As Mbembe writes:

In Africa today the subject who *accomplishes the age* and validates it, who lives and espouses his/her contemporaneousness – 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.” She/he is a subject of experience and a validating subject, not only in the sense that she/he is a conscious existence or has a perceptive consciousness of things, but to the extent that his/her “living in the concrete world” involves, and is evaluated by, his/her eyes, ears, mouth – in short, his/her flesh, his/her body.<sup>40</sup>

The methodological ‘tool’ – that is, the word, the idea, the notion – Mbembe enacts to articulate the African subjects experience in and of the world he calls “self-styling.”<sup>41</sup> This can be explained as follows: in order to come to terms with the fluidity, the multiplicity, the simultaneity, of identities in Africa, its students and scholars need to examine the manners in which Africans fashion and refashion (write) their modes of self in relation to their life worlds. A nativist project to recover any essential African identity is “doomed” Mbembe writes, because “the time we live in is fundamentally fractured.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the instrumentalist paradigm “is too reductionist to throw intelligible light on fundamental problems touching on the nature of social reality in Africa.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, it is “[o]nly the disparate, and often intersecting, practices through

which Africans *stylize* their conduct and life can account for the thickness of which the African present is made.”<sup>44</sup>

### **An uncanny breach in the commonplaces of thought**<sup>45</sup>

The critiques of both “African Modes of Self-Writing” and *On the postcolony* are varied, complex, and originate and are developed from a range of perspectives. In terms of a potential line of investigation, therefore, I chose to read as thoughtfully and strategically as possible. That is, rather than read for those responses addressing, for example, the empirical, structural, or stylistic elements of the works, I searched for those responses which dealt directly with Mbembe’s paradigmatic position *and* methodological approach to the study of the African past and present. What follows, then, is an attempt to map out some of the critiques and commentaries of his work as they relate to the focus of this essay.

If Mbembe undertakes to point out the weaknesses inherent in the two meta-narratives that have led reflections about Africa into a “dead-end,” François Vergès’ “The Power of Words” argues that this very line of attack is a weakness in and of itself. What is needed, Vergès suggests, is a kind of genealogical investigation of precisely why nativism and Afro-radicalism have and continue to carry such explanatory weight as discursive formations in African analyses. According to Vergès, this genealogical approach might indeed be instructive in asking and answering a series of critical questions, such as:

When did they [nativism and Afro-radicalism] start to capture the African intellectual imagination? How do they differ from similar discourses in Asia and Latin America? Beyond their limits and weaknesses, what do they say about African imaginaries? Why has political economy such potency in Africa? What are the intimate connections between political economy and nativism in Africa?<sup>46</sup>

To an extent, Dirlik’s critique “Historical Colonialism in Contemporary Perspective” echoes Vergès, when he argues that in finding fault with the assumptions upon which the Afro-radicalist and nativist narratives are grounded, Mbembe “bypasses the question of historicity.”<sup>47</sup> That is, Mbembe does not necessarily account for “the circumstances...that rendered those assumptions plausible, and also made it possible to overlook their limitations and contradictions.”<sup>48</sup> In what appears to be a recurring critique, Ato Quayson’s “Obverse Denominations: Africa,” also takes up the question of the pervasiveness of interpretations of African history as sorcery, although Quayson makes the point in a slightly different way when he asks: “Why does this explanatory impulse persist in African modes of self-writing up to the present time? Are Africans somehow so compulsive in their dreams of a pure and nativist identity that they fail to conceptualize the issue in any other way? Why this obsession?”<sup>49</sup> Quayson offers his own polemical formulation – “*There are no blacks in Africa*” – to augment Mbembe’s assertion that, in order for the discourse of victimisation to be displaced, we need to embark on a project of discovering new and creative ways of thinking through the complexities of the African past and present.<sup>50</sup> He writes:

[W]e must be prepared in our own thought to contemplate the total negation of what *Africa* means – before we can put it to good use post-slavery, -colonialism, and -apartheid. And this negation has to be assimilated into our own thought,

not as an internalization of absolute victimhood, but as a productive means by which we simultaneously let go of and assert our identities.<sup>51</sup>

Although it was not a commentary published in the special edition of *Public Culture*, Godwin Murungu's "Mbembe's 'African Modes of Self-Writing' and the Critics in Public Culture" takes issue with Mbembe's easy dismissal of the Afro-radicalist and nativist positions. Writing from within the politics of intellectual leadership at CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa), Murungu ardently defends those whose research sets out to "change the world, to address the pressing issues of our times."<sup>52</sup> In this light, Murungu suggests that Mbembe's call for a new discourse on Africa as articulated in "African Modes of Self-Writing" is narcissistic and self-involved. I am, to an extent, skeptical of Murungu's response largely because it appears to direct a personal attack at Mbembe's leadership style and intellectual interests, rather than present a critique of the matters at hand in the essay under review. However, it appears that there is indeed a point of tension here. A tension which, on the one hand, speaks to the very real need to address the social malaise – the turmoil – that attacks Africa from a multiplicity of directions; and, on the other hand, which speaks to the need for developing a grounded philosophical mode of thought for Africa that does not work to further complicate the malaise, but rather seeks to render it solvable.

At an ethical level of analysis, Candice Vogler's "Social Imaginary, Ethics, and Methodological Individualism" is a cutting critique of "African Modes of Self-Writing," as Vogler undertakes to question the very philosophical formulation of subjectivity – an important notion Mbembe employs to describe and conceptualise new African imaginaries of the self. In particular Vogler ponders the assumptions Mbembe uses in his philosophy of subjectivity when she suggests that a rejection of Marxist collectivism in favour of a new African individualism will not necessarily entail a shift or an improvement in the collective African situation.<sup>53</sup> In a similar vein, Bogumil Jewsiewicki "The Subject in Africa: In Foucault's Footsteps" contests Mbembe's formulation of subjectivity as time by arguing that identity be differently conceptualised – that is, spatially and in relation to the Other – the latter, the Other, who is interpreted as "the one whom the subject shares the spaces of a village, a city, a diaspora."<sup>54</sup> Jewsiewicki writes:

Subjectivity must be conceived in terms of its relational and transverse enactment in the world among Others. This relationship to the Other is indispensable for theorizing the enunciation and experience of identity as a modality of being.<sup>55</sup>

By way of return to Vergès' response: what I perhaps find most compelling is the following comment regarding Mbembe's parting thoughts in "African Modes of Self-Writing".

In his conclusion, Mbembe proposes to turn to the "the disparate, and often intersecting, practices through which Africans *stylize* their conduct and life" in order to grasp something of the "African present." *Yes, and I may add that no practices of the self can be understood outside of the web of connections, debts, filiations, fantasies, practices, and politics of friendship, through which the self constructs his or her sense of existence.*<sup>56</sup>



Kimberly Wedeven Segall's "Postcolonial Performatives of Victimization" takes issue with Mbembe on the thematics of victimisation, which the latter is intent on distancing from interpretations of Africa but which, Segall argues, has not yet been exhausted.

What remains unexplained by Achille Mbembe's diagnostic of postcolonial victimization is the paradigm's reliance on a continuous dialectic of interpellation and resistance. How has the language of victimization continued to invade Africa? How has the meaning of the victim signifier changed with translation and adaptation? How have quotidian and artistic acts resisted this victim paradigm?<sup>57</sup>

To a degree sociologist Benedetta Jules-Rosette's take on "African Modes of Self-Writing" in "Afro-pessimism's Many Guises" shadows Segall's position. She contests Mbembe's easy dismissal of the Afro-radicalists and the nativists, as their theory and praxis manifested at grassroots level in such displays of resistance to colonialism and apartheid as in the *négritude* movement, in philosophies of Pan-Africanism, and in the anti-apartheid struggle. She also critiques Mbembe's apparent disinterestness in matters of gender, and the place of women in African society, as a "lacuna"<sup>58</sup> in his approach.

Finally, in his review of *On the postcolony* Ato Quayson views the work as a "landmark text"<sup>59</sup> in the field of African postcolonial studies. In this regard Quayson places *On the postcolony* in an emerging 'canon' of African scholarship, comprising authors like Manthia Diawara, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Valentin Mudimbe. For Quayson, *On the postcolony* is "an uncanny breach in the commonplaces of thought"<sup>60</sup> because, at its very heart, it proposes a negation of the very discourses that claim to interpret and represent the African "nightmare": in order to begin to displace them, in order to begin to "transcend the details of the nightmare."<sup>61</sup> Overall, the traces of the critiques and commentaries that I have presented in this section are, I think, indeed an indication that Mbembe's project is by no means complete but is, in fact, a project which is just beginning.<sup>62</sup>

### **Achille Mbembe and the multi-disciplinary study of Africa**

I would like to return briefly, in this final section, to the point of departure from which this essay began. The Centre for African Studies graduate course, Problematising the Study of Africa: Interrogating the Disciplines, introduced course participants to a secondary literature relating to three disciplines that have studied Africa: history, anthropology, and literature. Common to almost all of the writing discussed in relation to these disciplines was a particular emphasis on a meta-level critique of the disciplines' relation to Africa. One facet of Mahmood Mamdani's intellectual project in *Citizen and Subject* (1996), for example, is a challenge to the writing of African history as a history written by analogy to Europe. Clifford and Marcus's polemical *Writing Culture* (1986) introduced course participants to the problematics of anthropology and its central methodology, namely, ethnography.<sup>63</sup> For a discipline that has been central in defining the West's relation to Africa, the radical critique of anthropology initiated by *Writing Culture* is indeed an important and timely one. The contest between Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Pius Adesanmi around the place of the English language in ostensibly African literature, is also crucial in developing an

understanding of the complex and fraught nature of relationship between the so-called epistemologies and ontologies – the languages – of the West, and then, those complicated, hybridised, and creolised forms that we find in Africa.<sup>64</sup>

The work of Achille Mbembe, I think, may not always reflect on the particular issues at hand within each discipline, as each grapples with its disciplinary identity in a world which is increasingly inter-, trans-, or multi-disciplinary. Nor is his work especially instructive in bridging the divides between those disciplinary disputes which remain a ‘zero-sum game’ – for example, the wa Thiong’o and Adesanmi debate. These are important issues that remain to be contested by those who research and write from within the boundaries of a particular discipline. Where I understand Mbembe’s work to be crucial is in the very act of thinking through, at a philosophical level, the futures of African societies as they undertake to negotiate the ills which have befallen them, as they undertake to make and remake their identities in spite thereof. If what Quayson refers to as a “calcified process of thought”<sup>65</sup> continues to haunt the reflections on Africa’s present – taking specific form in what Mbembe calls a “cult of victimization”<sup>66</sup> – then it is surely imperative to begin to work creatively against it, “to free ourselves”<sup>67</sup> from the paradigmatics of this cult of victimisation. As I understand it this project of liberation is at the core of the intellectual project Mbembe propounds: for all disciplines, for all individuals that study Africa, for all Africans, and for all people.

### Conclusion

Suppose we were re-imagine a third frame in Zapiro’s ‘Africa Then’, ‘Africa Now’ cartoon entitled ‘Africa in 50 years’. What would be the relation of Africa to the West? What would Africa be wearing and how would his face appear? Would the West still hold Africa in his clutches? Or would Africa walk autonomously, neither in front of, neither behind, but alongside, the West? It would be utopian to think that Africa could achieve this equal status in such a short period of time. It would, of course, also be utopian to think that Africa might desire to be on an equal footing with the West, in light of their tenuous historical relationship. Perhaps it is enough for now to begin to think of how Africa might begin to dismantle the chains which binds him to the West, by some function of his own genius, by some act of magic or escapology.

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<sup>2</sup> Centre for African Studies online. See <http://www.africanstudies.uct.ac.za/>. Last accessed on 15 August 2007. I am privileged to have been a student in the Centre since 2005.

<sup>3</sup> I am especially grateful to Anthony Bogues for explicating this methodological tool to me during one of our conversations in the Centre for African Studies in 2006. The notion of a “reasoning” is taken from a Rastafarian tradition of Reasoning, in which members of the reasoning – regardless of their professional positions in society – are understood to be equal and thus speak from a position of equality in relation to others. In opposition to the debate, which pits speakers and their arguments up against each other, the reasoning allows for positions to be explicated on the basis of the speaking subject’s equality with all other speaking subjects. I understand this to be a methodological tool in so far as it

supports one of the fundamental precepts in the work of Mbembe – that of the equality of human beings in the world.

<sup>4</sup> See A. Mbembe, *On the postcolony* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001) and “African Modes of Self-Writing” in *Public Culture* 14(1) 2002: 239-273.

<sup>5</sup> Mbembe, “African Modes,” p. 242.

<sup>6</sup> The intellectual scope and depth with which Mbembe writes presents its own challenge any reader of his work. I therefore acknowledge any limitations in the interpretation of his ideas and of the ideas on which he draws, as my own.

<sup>7</sup> See A. Quayson, “Breaches in the Commonplace” in *African Studies Review* 44(2) 2001: 151-165.

<sup>8</sup> See S. Robins, *Limits to Liberation After Apartheid: Citizenship, Governance and Culture* (David Philip: Cape Town, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> In this instance I interpret Africa as a ‘him’ simply because of the nature of the cartoon under review. The gendered nature of the cartoon, however, is problematic and is acknowledged as such.

<sup>10</sup> Mbembe, *On the postcolony*, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>12</sup> S. Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power” in Hall, S. & Gieben, B. *Formations of Modernity; Understanding Modern Societies* (The Open University and Polity Press: Cambridge and Oxford, 1992), p. 276.

<sup>13</sup> Mbembe, *On the postcolony*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Mbembe, “African Modes,” p. 245.

<sup>15</sup> A. Mbembe, “On the Power of the False,” in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002, p. 629. See also Mbembe, “African Modes,” pp. 252-256.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Mbembe, “African Modes,” p. 240.

<sup>19</sup> Mbembe, “On the Power,” p. 629.

<sup>20</sup> Mbembe, *On the postcolony*, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> See A. Mbembe, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony,” in *Africa* 62(1) 1992: 3-34.

<sup>23</sup> Mbembe, *On the postcolony*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Mbembe, “African Modes,” p. 240.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>29</sup> Mbembe, *On the postcolony*, p. 16 (original emphasis).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Mbembe, *On the postcolony*, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6 (original emphasis).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> A. Mbembe, “On the Power of the False,” in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002, p. 630.

<sup>39</sup> M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (David Philip: Cape Town, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Mbembe, *On the postcolony*, p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Mbembe, “African Modes,” p. 242, 269.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>43</sup> Mbembe, *On the postcolony*, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Mbembe, “African Modes,” p. 273.

<sup>45</sup> The subtitle to this section is taken from Ato Quayson’s review of *On the postcolony*.

<sup>46</sup> F. Vergès, “The Power of Words,” in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002, p. 607.

<sup>47</sup> A. Dirlik, “Historical Colonialism in Contemporary Perspective,” in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002, p. 611.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> A. Quayson, “Obverse Denominations: Africa?” in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002, p. 585-6.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 586 (original emphasis).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 587.

<sup>52</sup> P. Zeleza, *Rethinking Africa's 'Globalization': The Intellectual Challenges Vol. 1* (Africa World Press: Trenton and Asmara, 2003), in G. R. Murungu, "Mbembe's 'African Modes of Self-Writing' and the Critics in Public Culture," in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, (1 & 2) 2004, p. 29.

<sup>53</sup> See C. Vogler, "Social Imaginary, Ethics and Methodological Individualism," in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002: 625-627.

<sup>54</sup> B. Jewsiewicki, "The Subject in Africa: In Foucault's Footsteps," in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002, p. 597.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 596.

<sup>56</sup> Verges, "The Power of Words," p. 609 (my emphasis).

<sup>57</sup> K. Wedeven-Segall, "Postcolonial Performatives of Victimisation," in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002, p. 617.

<sup>58</sup> B. Jules-Rosette, "Afro-Pessimism's Many Guises," in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002, p. 604.

<sup>59</sup> A. Quayson, "Breaches in the Commonplace," p. 151.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> As rapidly as Mbembe's repertoire of work grows and proliferates – and continues, as it does, to inspire a new generation of post-apartheid South African and African students to find new ways of theorising the African present – it remains none-the-less important to find ways of extending and critiquing Mbembe's theory in terms of the new kinds of social realities that multiply in postcolony.

<sup>63</sup> See J. Clifford & G. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1986).

<sup>64</sup> See N. Wa Thiong'o, "Europhonism, Universities, and the Magic Fountain: The Future of African Literature and Scholarship," in *Research in African Literatures* 31(1) 2000:1-11; and P. Adesanmi, "Europhonism, universities and other stories: How not to speak for the future of African literatures," Faculty of Arts Seminar presented at the National University of Lesotho, 2000. See also N. Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (James Currey: London, 1986).

<sup>65</sup> Quayson, "Obverse Denominations," p. 588.

<sup>66</sup> Mbembe, "African Modes," p. 243.

<sup>67</sup> Quayson, "Obverse Denominations," p. 588.