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## Obverse Denominations: Africa?

Ato Quayson

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## Obverse Denominations: Africa?

*Ato Quayson*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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