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# ‘Genealogical Misfortunes’: Achille Mbembe’s (Re-)Writing of Postcolonial Africa

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**Abstract:**

In his latest work, *Sortir de la grande nuit*, the Cameroonian social theorist Achille Mbembe nuances his description of the ontological status of the postcolonial African subject, which he had theorized extensively in his best-known text, *On the Postcolony*, and at the same time exploits the conceptual resources of a number of Jean-Luc Nancy’s lexical innovations. This recent text is also a reprise of an earlier autobiographical essay, and the gesture of this ‘reinscription’ is critical to our understanding of Mbembe’s status as a contemporary ‘postcolonial thinker’, and the way in which he positions himself in relation to a certain intellectual genealogy of postcolonial theory. Within this trajectory, I argue that we can read fruitfully his relationship to three influential figures: Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Ruben Um Nyobè.

**Keywords:** Mbembe, postcolonial Africa, dis-enclosure, Derrida, Nancy, Ruben, genealogy

My title is taken from an early essay published in 1993 by the celebrated Cameroonian social theorist, Achille Mbembe, ‘Écrire l’Afrique à partir d’une faille’ (Writing Africa From a Rupture), an expression which he borrows from Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History* (1975):

I do not need the pretext of ‘ex-patriation’ to ask myself—or others, like Mudimbe, or Appiah, or whoever else, depending on the circumstance, such as Mongo Beti or Ngugi wa Thiong’o—where I speak from, what I am writing, and where the authority comes from that allows me to do so. One should simply understand that from the outset, there is what Michel de Certeau called

a ‘genealogical misfortune’, the kind that means we are all born and grow up ‘somewhere’, and which inscribes us, whether we like it or not, within a lineage that it is impossible to choose, or indeed to justify, or separate ourselves from.<sup>1</sup>

Mbembe’s text recounts his childhood in the village of Malandè in the south of Cameroon, his gradual awakening to the violence and corruption of president Paul Biya’s political regime, his complex and explicitly sensualized engagement with Christianity, his first texts on the relationship between the Church and the State in Cameroon—*Afriques indociles* (Rebellious Africas)—and the books and people whose influence marked him decisively (a long list of distinguished Africanists, such as Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Peter Geschiere, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Mamadou Diouf, as well as a diverse array of intellectuals and writers: Gustavo Gutiérrez, Paulo Freire, Jean-Marc Éla, Frantz Fanon, Sony Labou Tansi, Ruben Um Nyobè, and then later during his time in Paris, Foucault, Castoriadis, Elias, de Certeau, Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Lévinas, Lacan). He narrates his disillusionment and constant quarrels with those in power, and his sudden departure for the United States, to the University of Pennsylvania, where he was teaching at the time he wrote this essay, with a mixture of intense nostalgia and bitterness, and as he explains, it is the tension of this ambivalence that marks his own ‘identity’ as an African. The rupture with the place in which his self is rooted is described as an *écart* (gap) and a *faïlle* (rupture). Yet, as he says, Cameroon had itself already prefigured this split identity, and enforced exile, since he is ‘originally from a “non-place” so to speak, a “non-country”, accidentally named Cameroon’ (WA, 88).

This originary dis-possession, or ‘non-belonging’ (*désappartenance*) becomes for him the key to what it means to ‘write Africa’, and the existential mode in which he will try to do so: ‘I try not to live my “genealogical misfortune” and my filiation to Africa in terms of a debt to be repaid, or of a “curse” to be rid of’ (WA, 89). Anticipating his diagnosis of the African postcolony in his later work, and making explicit reference to Heidegger’s famous meditation on Hölderlin’s question ‘What are Poets for in Times of Distress?’,<sup>2</sup> this essay is also repeatedly described as an attempt to write the ‘night-of-the-postcolonial-African-world’. As he says towards the end: ‘It is this “night-of-the-postcolonial-African-world” which agitates me, and causes to tremble what stands in provisionally for my “identity”’ (WA, 97).

In the opening chapter of his most recently published book, *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l’Afrique décolonisée* (2010) (Emerging from the

Dark Night: Essay on Decolonized Africa), Mbembe returns to this 1993 autobiographical text, revised and updated so as to take account of his subsequent work in both the United States and South Africa and his rise to prominence as one of the most important commentators of postcolonial Africa, as well as to make a decisive individual contribution to the debates surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the decolonization of much of the African continent.<sup>3</sup> The reappearance and revision of this text is interesting first of all because of Mbembe's decision to include it as his opening statement and point of departure, but equally because of what he leaves out of his earlier version. He retains the opening reference to Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin, but it is no longer as part of a poeticized thinking about the 'worldliness' of contemporary Africa. Instead, he shifts the emphasis, and warns Africa against the dangers of being seduced by the aesthetic (European) mythologizing of the world, and its complicity with the worst of European political history from the last century, a history in which he also implicates Heidegger's own political decisions, notably his relationship to Nazism (*EDN*, 32). Mbembe's tone is thus, from the outset, defiantly political, and he seems intent on situating himself firmly within the anti-colonial genealogy of thinkers and writers such as Ruben, Jean-Marc Éla and Fanon. Consequently, the reference to Ruben Um Nyobè now foregrounds genealogical (familial) ties—his aunt was the widow of one of Ruben's close associates in the Cameroonian Resistance movement, and was assassinated at the same time as Ruben—and by extension, his sense of belonging to the history that made him the writer and thinker he is now: 'I am thus (...) the product of the first age of postcolonialism—of its childhood and adolescence' (*EDN*, 36). In the rewritten version of his essay, Mbembe reduces the complex sensualization of his relationship to the 'body of Christ' to a brief statement about the importance of liberation theology. He excises the extensive list of influential French intellectuals, and accentuates his time in South Africa at the University of Witwatersrand, proposing post-apartheid South Africa as a testing ground for a new form of 'afropolitanism', which points the way towards an affirmative future and new dawn for Africa as a whole, as it emerges from the 'night' of the postcolonial African world.

What is at stake then in this rewriting of his early autobiographical essay, this 'reprise'? *Emerging from the Dark Night* contains a rather unforgiving critique of France's inability to engage with postcolonialism as an intellectual project, or historically to come to terms with its own colonial past (Mbembe's phrase is that France 'decolonized without decolonizing itself' (*EDN*, 47)). Certainly the

gesture of ‘writing Africa’, articulated initially as a (re-)writing of the nation which takes the form of a rather ambivalent attachment to the ‘non-country’ that is Cameroon, has now become far more transnational in its scope, reflecting Mbembe’s own trajectory, but also in its emphasis on migration flows between nations within Africa, and in terms of Africa’s response to the challenges of contemporary globalization. Yet at the same time, the more stridently political voice turns eventually to a reaffirmation of the place of the poetic and the mythological in this cluster of questions, and this reconceptualization appears to owe much to Jacques Derrida’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s thinking, particularly insofar as it relates to the meaning of globalization, decolonization and the world. We are thus certainly not dealing with a rather simplistic return to the political, and a dismissal of Heidegger or ‘French theory’, with its various debts to Heideggerian thinking. Mbembe talks, for example, of ‘the poetic productivity of memory and of the religious’ (*EDN*, 52), and in the following chapter, entitled ‘Dis-enclosure of the world and the rise in humanity’, the key term that comes to the fore is Nancy’s notion of ‘dis-enclosure’ (*la décloison*), which the latter articulates most extensively in his recent *The Deconstruction of Christianity*.<sup>4</sup> Mbembe thus nuances his description of the ontological status of the postcolonial African subject, which he had theorized extensively in his best-known text, *On the Postcolony*,<sup>5</sup> and at the same time exploits the resources of Nancy’s other lexical innovations. He reframes Nancy’s concepts in more explicitly political terms (notably his rethinking of the world in *The Creation of the World or Globalization*<sup>6</sup>), and also links them to Derrida’s own thinking about the question of a ‘democracy to come’.<sup>7</sup> How, then, should one take Mbembe’s earlier autobiographical essay, and the gesture of its ‘reinscription’ or ‘reprise’ in his recent work. What does it mean, in other words, to talk of Mbembe, today, as a ‘postcolonial thinker’? How does he locate himself in relation to a certain intellectual genealogy of postcolonial theory? And within this trajectory, how can we read most fruitfully his relationship to the two influential figures he privileges — influential in different ways, of course — Derrida and Ruben Um Nyobè?

### *Deconstruction As Auto-decolonization*

In thinking through Mbembe’s status as a postcolonial thinker, one quickly runs up against a strange paradox, which Mbembe himself

commented upon in an interview 'What is Postcolonial Thinking?' (December 2006), when discussing the relationship between so-called 'French theory' and postcolonialism, notably 'what postcolonial thought owes to the analyses of Foucault, Derrida, even Lacan. We are dealing then with a reflection that is, in several respects, very close to a certain current of French thought. The paradox is that because of its cultural insularity and narcissism, France has cut itself off from these new adventures in global thought.'<sup>8</sup> Leaving aside for the moment Mbembe's critique of the limits of postcolonial theory generally, to which he returns in *Emerging from the Dark Night*, as we shall see, the paradox he foregrounds here is that even though 'French theory' has been at the origin of many of the most influential developments in 'postcolonial thought'—and Mbembe prefers this term to 'theory', since as he points out, it is not in any sense a homogenous or fully constituted body of thought—France itself has remained notoriously resistant to reflecting self-critically on its colonial past.<sup>9</sup> Several commentators have consequently begun to trace genealogical lines of influence, and to make a strong case for the francophone African 'roots' of postcolonial theory, one in which the work of Derrida plays a perhaps surprisingly pivotal role.<sup>10</sup> This genealogical narrative deserves closer attention, particularly in light of Mbembe's own revived 'debt to deconstruction' in his latest book, and the question of debt and influence generally within the evolution of postcolonial theory (including, for example, Valentin Mudimbe's debt to Sartre and Foucault).

Robert Young was perhaps the first critic to link Derrida's work to postcolonial questions in his 1990 volume *White Mythologies*, where he claimed that Derrida had always challenged the founding assumptions of colonialist ideology, beginning with *Of Grammatology*, insofar as his meticulous analysis of the historical privileging of speech over writing in the Western metaphysical tradition took the form of a critique of *ethnocentrism*.<sup>11</sup> Young thus challenges a common materialist postcolonial view of deconstruction, and repositions Derrida's work within a more militant Francophone anti-colonial genealogy, placing him alongside other French writers and theorists who have, or had, close biographical or intellectual ties with Algeria (Hélène Cixous, François Lyotard, Pierre Bourdieu), a list he extends to include the more familiar figures of Sartre, Fanon, Albert Memmi and Abdelkebir Khatibi. Mbembe's own self-reinscription within this intellectual and political history at the beginning of *Emerging from the Dark Night* could perhaps be read in a similar vein. Pursuing this genealogy in

a later essay, 'Deconstruction and the Postcolonial', Young argues that once Derrida moved to metropolitan France from Algeria, his early experiences were translated into a permanent and continuous political subversiveness, and his ideas were subsequently taken up by minority, migrant and immigrant groups, and applied to their own political situations.<sup>12</sup> Young has been criticized for not giving sufficient weight to the historical fact of Derrida's lack of involvement in any actual struggle for independence, armed or otherwise, although one might argue, conversely, that Young's reading overplays (or perhaps overly literalizes) the autobiographical, and demonstrates the risk of reducing deconstruction to an essentially thematic set of programmatic statements. In his eagerness to prove materialist critics and their version of intellectual history wrong, Young is constructing an alternative grand narrative, which produces the sort of thematic coherence that might be the very object of critique of a deconstructive reading.<sup>13</sup>

Within the context of the broader questions about the history of postcolonial thought, even if we accept Young's genealogical narrative, we still seem to be caught epistemologically within a form of binaristic oppositional thinking, since whether deconstruction and postcolonial theory are seen as antagonistic modes of thinking and analysis, or as partner theories (where the claim is that this complicity has simply been misrecognized), both do so *on the basis of an assumption* of a shared heritage or interdependent history. In an attempt to move beyond this impasse, we have witnessed more recently a number of very productive alliances between postcolonial theory and theories of globalization, subaltern studies and transnational cultural studies. The problem then, however, is that any straightforward dialectical understanding of history becomes inherently problematic, since postcolonial theory (at least a postcolonial theory that takes seriously the epistemological destabilization foregrounded by deconstruction) puts into question the very structure of a 'genealogical narrative'.

Mbembe adopts a similar critical position early on with respect to African socialist experiments, and Africanist Marxism more generally, lamenting its 'positivist rigidity, its empiricist infertility, and its lack of anthropological density' (WA, 78). Mbembe's critique will inform the anti-positivist approach and sociologically rich analyses of contemporary African society we find in his later work, particularly *On the Postcolony*. The sense of being part of a politically radical African heritage continues to haunt him, nevertheless, and with this in mind, we might turn back to his own relationship to deconstructive thinking, which is also often caught within narratives of problematic genealogy

and debt, and here I am thinking most particularly of Derrida's debt to a certain 'spirit of Marxism' in *Specters of Marx*. In this text, Derrida deals with the problematic heritage of Marxist theory, and Marxism generally, but reads Marx in the context of a more fundamental argument that no inheritance or legacy can be understood according to a model of simple transparent transmission of information. Derrida talks of the 'radical and *necessary heterogeneity* of an inheritance' (my emphasis).<sup>14</sup> In the context of his reading of Marx, Derrida terms this uncertain status 'spectrality', that is, both the ghost or 'spirit' of Marx, and how we might thus conceive of the ontology of this spectral presence. As he puts it, whenever we deal with a legacy we are always confronted by an aporia: if such legacies were simple, and had univocal, transparent meaning, or were cleansed of the possibility of variable or contradictory interpretation, we would no longer be within a genealogical relationship, with all its problematic 'readability', and radical ambivalence. One could say that this aporetic logic also informs Mbembe's own writing.

### *Otherwise Responsible*

Mbembe is often equally critical of Marxism and indigenism, the two dominant political ideologies in postcolonial Africa, in all their various guises (he sometimes refers to these rather wryly as 'the red and the black'). Like Mudimbe, Mbembe points out that many Africanist discourses even today continue to be informed by an appeal to authenticity and tradition. This determines to a significant extent Mbembe's turn to postcolonial thought, and the conceptual resources of French theory more broadly, but as we saw earlier, he also insists on the need to extend and rethink postcolonial theory, saying that if it is to retain its relevance, it will need to respond with greater urgency to the shifting priorities of contemporary global politics, as well as the complexity of everyday life in the 'African postcolony'. His criticism is threefold: firstly, its tendency to privilege the single moment of colonization within the long history of formerly colonized societies; secondly, the conflation of resistance (anti-colonial or otherwise) with the very different problematic of subalternity; and finally, the overemphasis on the language of 'difference' and 'alterity', and the consequently closed and constraining nature of this discourse (*EDN*, 140).

Given Mbembe's sense of the limits of postcolonial theory, and his rejection of nativism, as well as Western, neo-liberalist or Marxist



political models, one might be led to ask what remains, or what sustains his own discourse. How, in other words, could we read Mbembe's 'debt' to deconstruction more productively, and particularly in light of the emphasis he accords it in his recent book, *Emerging from the Dark Night*?

Although barely a ghostly presence in Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*, Derrida nevertheless occupies a commanding position at the start of the chapter 'Of commandement', with a passing reference to Derrida's 'Force of Law'. Instead of taking Mbembe at his word that the reference is of minimal significance, it might be worth dwelling for a while on Derrida's text in relation to Mbembe's argument. In the section of 'Force of Law' that Mbembe is referring to, Derrida teases out the relationship between law, justice, power and violence, and focuses on the tautology of the founding moment of a law, that is, how the legality of this violence can only be, but also *has* to be, justified and 'naturalized' retrospectively by the juridical system it institutes. In fact, as Derrida reminds us, there is no such thing as 'natural' violence; an earthquake, for example, is not naturally violent, but we are using a figure of speech, or talking symbolically, when we describe it as such.<sup>15</sup> This naturalization of violence is unavoidable to the institution of a so-called 'natural' law, in which the ends then justify the means — as is the case most obviously with colonial conquest and rule — but this 'performative tautology', as Derrida terms it, is not limited to tyrannical regimes, since even more democratically self-conscious systems of justice are caught within the same logical aporia of the founding moment. What is interesting is that although Mbembe dismisses Derrida's text as 'dealing with a different issue', he goes on to describe the institutionalization of violence in Africa as unfolding in successive stages in *precisely* the way that Derrida does (echoing his conceptualizing of 'archi-violence' in his reading of Lévi-Strauss in *Of Grammatology*, for example). So for Mbembe the second violence is the process of legitimation of colonial rule, which provides the language to justify the first violence (as well as its necessity), and to arrogate to itself the authority of its universalizing mission. Mbembe then sees a third violence as the normalization and socialization of this authority as it gradually permeates all aspects of colonial life. Colonial rule thus produces the figure, and indeed an entire 'imaginary', of the native, and by extension the belief in its own dominion over nature, and its civilizing mission. According to Mbembe, this rationale, or colonial rationality, is re-appropriated by postcolonial regimes after Independence, and the relations of subjection are perpetuated by a

process of the indigenization of the State that colonialism had set in motion. This can be seen, for example, in the ways in which elements of ancestral tradition are appropriated and 'reinvented' by African potentates in order to consolidate their power. Governance and the exercise of violent power are thus indissociable, and a logical extension of the violent origins from which they have emerged. So, for Mbembe, both the potentate and the increasingly animalized African subject are defined by their mutual dependence on this systemic violence.

A similarly brief but telling allusion to Derrida surfaces in the earlier essay, 'Writing Africa'. Referring to the liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Mbembe says:

He also helped me to understand Christianity as a narrative that is critical of powers, of potentates, of authorities, a social poetics, a subversive dream and a partisan memory, the enactment of a language which, to borrow J. Derrida's terms in talking of something else, commits one to assuming a sort of responsibility that acquits one in advance of all other responsibility. (WA, 77)

Derrida's understanding of responsibility involves a commitment to a kind of redoubled responsibility to the constitutive impossibility of responsibility, in the traditional juridical sense of the term.<sup>16</sup> Mbembe's own relationship (and debt) to the particular African history and genealogy into which he inscribes himself could be read as a kind of 'deconstructive' responsibility, and his writing in this sense explicitly distances itself from both 'materialist' postcolonial theory (with its unquestioned assumptions about the representative function of language generally) as well as radical political discourse, despite the anti-colonial heritage in which it is rooted.

One might, in this regard, look briefly at Derrida's text *Monolingualism of the Other* as an interesting parallel to Mbembe's argument about 'colonial sovereignty', since it may allow us to bring into sharper focus certain underlying commonalities between the two respective projects. One of Derrida's lines of enquiry concerns the relationship between colonialism and the sense of one's ownership of the language one speaks, or of how language is used as a means of appropriation, of self as well as of other. As he says, 'originary violence' means that there is no such thing as property to begin with. Culture and colonialism are bound together in what Derrida terms an 'essential coloniality', by which he means that if colonialism is the process of appropriating the other as self, and reinscribing alterity as identity, then

all culture, to the extent that it is monocultural, is essentially colonial. As Derrida's argument unfolds, he makes a strong claim for the political effectiveness of deconstruction being precisely at this foundational level, and in terms of its ability to 'read' the diverse forms of symbolic appropriation. The rather ambivalent inclusion/exclusion of Derrida in Mbembe's texts suggests a degree of uncertainty about where he fits in relation to some of the other theoretical sources Mbembe cites, but by the time he writes *Emerging from the Dark Night*, the acknowledgement of intellectual debt is certainly much more overt, at the same time as his own text is more politically interventionist. It is at the level of strategic (foundational) intervention, I would argue, that we can best read the emphatically political re-appropriation of both Derrida and Nancy in *Emerging from the Dark Night*.

The privileged concept for Mbembe in his most recent text is Jean-Luc Nancy's term 'dis-enclosure' (*déclension*), which is a neologism used principally by Nancy to re-read Christian motifs in a number of thinkers and literary traditions. For Nancy, as Mbembe points out, this term indicates the act of opening up something that is not only closed, but also enclosed, such as an enclosure. It is thus a profoundly transformative action, that is at the same time a coming into being, or *éclosion* (literally: hatching). As Mbembe puts it: 'The idea of *déclension* includes that of *éclosion*, of an eruption, or advent of something new, of an opening out' (*EDN*, 68). The term *déclension* is thus adopted by Mbembe as a paronomastic link-word joining together *éclosion*, *déclension* and *décolonisation*, connecting Nancy's (post-)phenomenological rethinking of being and the world to the radically political anti-colonialism of Fanon and his successors, in that decolonization is essentially about reclaiming a world, and one's place within the world. This allows for the possibility of a return to the hidden and perhaps neglected creative political force of the *Négritude* philosophy of Léopold Sedar Senghor, whose vision for the future of Africa has, since Independence, been largely discredited as regressive or essentialist, certainly in relation to the more politically uncompromising voices of thinkers such as Césaire and Fanon. It is, however, precisely Senghor's reflection on universalism — that is, how we can think the specificity of Africa in relation to the question of universal humanism — which echoes closely Nancy's conceptualization of 'being-in-common', articulating the singularity of existence as a necessary relationship of sharing, of *partage*. This is how Mbembe brings Fanon and Senghor back together:

In his [Nancy's] eyes, this 'making common' (*mise en commun*) is the basis for the rebirth of the world, and the coming of a mixed universal community, governed by the principle of a sharing of both differences, and of what is unique, and in this respect, open to the whole. In the case of Fanon as in that of Senghor, we are heirs to the whole world. At the same time the world—and thus this legacy—still remain to be created. The world is in creation, as are we too. (*EDN*, 70–1)<sup>17</sup>

For Nancy, Christianity (and monotheistic religion more generally) plays a determining role in the universalist values which structure the ways in which the West conceptualizes 'the world', and the meaning of the world ('the sense of the world'), and this informs a certain commonly accepted understanding of the nature of contemporary globalization. Derrida pursues a similar line of argument in *Foi et savoir* (Faith and Knowledge), linking the monotheistic (Abrahamic) traditions of the West more specifically to language, and the Latinization of Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Derrida coins the term *mondialatinisation* to describe the inseparability of Western thinking about 'the world', and the spread of Romanized Christianity throughout the world.

Derrida is, for Mbembe, the one thinker (perhaps the only thinker in his eyes) who reads European imperial history in terms of the relationship between sovereign domination and animalization (of Europe's other), or 'the thematic of the wolf' (*EDN*, 75), and Derrida's analysis corresponds closely to Mbembe's own discussion of contemporary African political power in terms of animality.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say, however, that Mbembe simply adopts an anti-European position when he uses Derrida or Nancy in the service of his own postcolonial thinking. In the interview 'What is Postcolonial Thinking?' cited earlier, Mbembe had addressed this very point:

Postcolonial thought (...) is not an anti-European thought. On the contrary, it is the product of the encounter between Europe and the worlds it once made into its distant possessions. In showing how the colonial and imperial experience has been codified in representations, divisions between disciplines, their methodologies and their objects, it invites us to undertake an alternative reading of our common modernity (...), it calls upon Europe to live what it declares to be its origins, its future and its promise, and to live all that responsibly. If, as Europe has always claimed, this promise has truly as its object the future of humanity as a whole, then postcolonial thought calls upon Europe to open and continually relaunch that future in a singular fashion, responsible for itself, for the Other, and before the Other.

Towards the end of this interview, Mbembe sketches out the connection with Senghor, which he will develop more fully in *Emerging from the Dark Night*:

But postcolonial thought is also a dream: the dream of a new form of humanism, a critical humanism founded above all on the divisions that, this side of the absolutes, differentiate us. It is the dream of a polis that is universal because ethnically diverse. It is what, in his poetical writings, Senghor hoped for: the ‘rebirth of the world’.

### *Remember Ruben*

How, then, can we read Mbembe’s avowed debt to, and poeticized memory of, the Cameroonian anticolonial militant journalist Ruben, both in the early essay ‘Writing Africa from a Rupture’, and its rewriting in *Emerging from the Dark Night*, where the ‘deconstructive’ logic of his postcolonial thinking is foregrounded more openly? Ruben serves as the focus for a kind of double but contradictory imperative: inscribing his memory is both an act of commemoration, and a means of liberation from a past whose history always functions potentially as an enclosure, a means of containing identity. Writing is thus for Mbembe an act of honouring an essential attachment to Ruben, to the political tradition he represents, and to the past and the country that made him. At the same time he affirms the necessity of the dissolution, or *déclension*, of this bond. Indeed, Ruben could be said to figure the irretrievable ‘object’ that Africa became for Mbembe once he left Cameroon, but we can perhaps now better read the continuing presence of Ruben in his text and in his thinking as a ‘spectral’ object, in much the same way that Derrida talks of the radical undecidability of the ontology of ghostly presences in *Specters of Marx*. In ‘Writing Africa’, Ruben is described as a kind of ghost, neither present nor absent, neither here nor there, a trace of the ‘night-of-the-postcolonial-African-world’ who is at the very source of Mbembe’s writing, or of Mbembe as a writer. He is the gap in which, or from which Mbembe’s ‘writing Africa’ can emerge, a writing that can only begin once it has dispelled both the myths of authenticity and of the illusory promises of radical politics. ‘Writing Africa’ is thus a different (postcolonial) responsibility that goes beyond the responsibility of nationalist representation as the speaking ‘for’ one’s people, or one’s country, or one’s place of origin. In this sense, Mbembe’s Ruben points to the need for Africa to be other than itself, to look to the future and beyond itself—what Mbembe proposes towards the end of *Emerging from the Dark Night* as a determined, outward-facing

'afropolitanism' — and as Derrida reminds us in *Specters of Marx*, the undecidable temporality of ghosts always looks to both the future and the past. The 'poetics' of this 'writing Africa' is thus ultimately at the heart of a very strong political agenda:

Afropolitanism is thus not the same thing as Panafricanism or Negritude. Afropolitanism is a stylistics and a politics, an aesthetics and a certain poetics of the world. It is a way of being in the world which as a principle refuses any identity as victim (...). It also takes a political and cultural position with respect to the nation, to race, and to the question of difference in general. (*EDN*, 232)

Decolonization as *décolonisation* thus means Africa not only freeing itself from the continuing legacy of colonialism in all its forms, and staking a strong and active claim for its place within the contemporary world, but also honouring responsibly the ghosts of the past, those absent-present figures who continue to haunt Africa's not so distant history. If 'Writing Africa' otherwise, as Mbembe argues, means a certain provincialization of Europe, and the West, in contesting its marginalization in the contemporary global world, this is also a defiant and affirmative gesture of asking what the world can thereby learn *from* Africa.

## NOTES

- 1 Achille Mbembe, 'Écrire l'Afrique à partir d'une faille', *Politique Africaine*, 51 (1993), 87. My translation. Subsequent references will be included in the text, following the abbreviation WA. Mbembe is referring to Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
- 2 Martin Heidegger, 'What are Poets for?' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 1971), 89–139.
- 3 *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010). Subsequent references will be included in the text, following the abbreviation *EDN*. Translations are my own.
- 4 Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* [2005], translated by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
- 5 *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- 6 *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, translated by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (New York: SUNY Press, 2007).
- 7 See, for example, *La Démocratie à venir: autour de Jacques Derrida*, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 2004).

- 8 See 'What is Postcolonial Thinking?', interview with Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur and Jean-Louis Schlegel, translated by John Fletcher, online journal *Esprit* (2008), <http://www.eurozine.com/journals/esprit/issue/2006-12-15.html> (accessed 21 May 2012).
- 9 Interestingly, the split revealed by this paradox echoes the marked polarization of the field of postcolonial studies more generally, which tends to be divided between on the one hand critics inspired by the theories of what is loosely referred to as French poststructuralism, and on the other those who are sceptical about what they perceive as an a-political, textualist emphasis, and who advocate the necessity of attending to the material conditions of life in postcolonial cultures.
- 10 See, for example, Pal Ahluwalia, 'Out of Africa: Post-Structuralism's Colonial Roots', *Postcolonial Studies* 8.2 (2005), 137–54, and Jane Hiddleston, *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).
- 11 Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 12 Robert Young, 'Deconstruction and the Postcolonial,' in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, edited by Nicholas Royle (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2000), 187–210.
- 13 I have tried to tease out the conceptual tensions of Young's reading of Derrida in my *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial: At the Limits of Theory* (Liverpool and Chicago: Liverpool University Press, 2007).
- 14 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 16.
- 15 See Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: "The Mystical Foundation of Authority"', *Cardozo Law Review*, special issue *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* 11.5–6 (1990), 920–1045.
- 16 See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, translated by George Collins (London: Verso, 2006).
- 17 For an important and original re-reading of Senghor's 'political imagination' along these same lines, see Gary Wilder's excellent *The French Imperial Nation-State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).
- 18 Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone' in *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 40–101.
- 19 Derrida develops the thematic of the 'wolf' most extensively in his recently published seminars, translated by Geoffrey Bennington as *The Beast and the Sovereign* (reviewed by Marian Hobson in this issue of *Paragraph*). See also Mbembe's short essay, 'La République et sa Bête: À propos des émeutes dans les banlieues de France', *Africultures* 60 (Oct–Dec 2005), 176–81.