

EPILOGUE: THEORISING
AFRICANNESS

To be sure, there is no African identity that could be designated by a single term or that could be named by a single word or subsumed under a single category. African identity does not exist as a substance. It is constituted in varying forms, through a series of practices of the self. Neither the forms of this identity nor its idioms are always self-identical. Rather, these forms and idioms are mobile, reversible and unstable. Given this element of play, they cannot be reduced to a purely biological order based on blood, race, or geography. Nor can they be reduced to custom to the extent that the latter's meaning is itself constantly shifting.¹

What is Africanness contributes to the ongoing dialogue concerning an African identity which is at the intersection between race, culture and sexualities. Africanness presents itself in the form of a lifelong conversation without an end precisely because of the ever-evolving, unfinished, unfolding multiplicities of conjunctural African identifications at play in the grand drama of life: a life lived by Africans by being part of the continent and part of the universe. For these reasons it seems appropriate to end with an epilogue rather than a conclusion: a pause in a dialogue and not its end.

In chapter 1, I posed, as the main topic of the dialogue, the question: Who/what is African? From the outset the aim has not been to answer the question categorically, but to treat it as a discourse question. The discussion in the subsequent chapters sought to speak to the discourse question through interrogating over-determinations or reductionisms of Africanness, which I call *nativism*. The lengthy interrogation of nativism from without was because it is a necessary foundation – the *sine qua non* – for understanding nativism from within. Ultimately, my goal is to develop a discourse capable of addressing the ethics of how Africans name

1 JA Mbembe 'African modes of self-writing' (2002) 14 *Public Culture* 239 at 272 (footnote omitted).

themselves today and how they might do so in the future without succumbing to nativism.

In this final part my intention is not to summarise the arguments delineating my approach to a discursive inquiry about Africanness, but to add a few thoughts on self-naming that might serve as a self-interrogation of what I hope this book adds to the African archive. I briefly reflect on what I see as the gap in knowledge the book fills and what it adds, by way of its theoretical foundation, to thinking about African identity. Theory, especially critical social theory, is indispensable in suggesting responses which are an alternative to nativism. Critical social theory is a tool for interpreting and explaining societal arrangements, including naming practices, so that we do not regard them as pre-social or divinely ordained – as ‘all things bright and beautiful’.² Theory puts at our disposal a resource for self-reflection and a means to interrogate narratives of social identity in order to uncover how they treat everyone and whether in privileging some, they subordinate others.

In theorising identity we need to reflect on our expectations. At a minimum we should be able to deliver a plausible account of social identity. But what constitutes plausibility? Linda Alcoff addresses this question: she argues, if it is to be plausible, an account of social identity must be able to account for historical fluidity as well as differences within identities, at the same time as it accounts for the powerful, persistent salience of identities as self-descriptions and predictors of how one is treated.³ If we accept Alcoff’s argument, my point is that dominant narratives of African social identities in the post-colonial era have done sufficiently well at accounting for the powerful and persistent salience of African identity as raced identity, but manifestly less well in accounting for historical fluidity, differences and agency within African identity.

Much has been written by Africans about the generality of the African subject – its shared ‘public identity’.⁴ However, very little has been written about the African subject and its experience of radical uncertainty – its ‘lived subjectivity’, specificity, complexity and, above all, its plurality

2 The parenthesised phrase borrows from ‘All things bright and beautiful’, an Anglican hymn written in 1848 by Cecil Frances Alexander. The parts that speak to my point say: ‘All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small, All things wise and wonderful, The Lord God made them all. The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them, high or lowly, And order’d their estate.’ Of course, the hymn is a celebration of God’s creative power but I read the sanctioning of status subordination as legitimising the natural order of things.

3 LM Alcoff *Visible identities: Race, gender, and the self* (2006) 87-88.

4 Alcoff (n 3 above) 93-94.

which defies convergence towards a single trajectory.⁵ Moreover, little has been written about the commensurability of mutual recognition between different social identities. This book is about developing theory and method for closing this gap. It advances a theory of African social or cultural identity in ways that concomitantly account for rather than erase or gloss over historical agency and fluidity, multiplicities of cultural repertoires and the commensurability of differences within African identifications. Ultimately, it seeks to develop a theoretical archive of self-naming that enlarges the human freedoms of Africans.

Theory and method that account for historical fluidity and difference within African identity are where there is a conspicuous gap in contemporary articulations of African identity by Africans. More than any other writer, Achille Mbembe is in the vanguard of articulating this theoretical gap, especially its aetiology. He has implicated, as the main pathology, valorised and ahistorical, autochthonous, identitarian determinations of Africanness in the aftermath of slavery, colonialism and apartheid in ways that purport to be exhaustive and yet exclude other histories and provincialise Africanness.⁶ In an insightful essay, 'African modes of self-writing', Mbembe explicates the limits of dehistoricised or essentialised accounts of African identity, underlining that attempts to define African identity as a neat and tidy category outside of history are apt to fail.⁷ Perspicaciously, he cautions us against expending yet more intellectual energy in non-productive, repetitive efforts to define African identity in ways that are imprisoned by race, geography and dehistoricised abstractions of the African past.

Without the benefit of a theory to articulate Africanness, we are left only with uncritical dogma and its studied repetition. Dogma is incapable of constructing an inclusive, changing and unexpected Africanness, as it is restricted to the recitation, over and over, of an 'authentic', 'pre-constituted self' which is moulded from an emancipatory foundational alterity whose locus lies in an 'originary negation' of slavery, colonialism and apartheid and is not open to unfolding and proliferating subjectivities.⁸ Africanness, as pre-constituted social identity, relies unduly on an archive of negating the excess of colonial and Eurocentric canons of Africanness

5 As above; JA Mbembe 'On the power of the false' (2002) 14 *Public Culture* 629 at 631; SJ Ndlovu-Gatsheni *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa: Myths of decolonisation* (2013) 101.

6 Mbembe (n 1 above).

7 Mbembe (n 1 above) 271.

8 JA Mbembe (n 5 above) 635; SB Diagne 'Keeping Africanity open' (2002) 14 *Public Culture* 621-622; Ndlovu-Gatsheni (n 5 above) 99.

as lack. Paradoxically, it employs its own biopower to counter spoiled Africanness and to supplant it with its own 'obverse denominative' excess, as Ato Quayson puts it.⁹ Pre-constituted Africanness refuses to reckon with the worldliness of contemporary Africans – their actual being in the world. The social identity it delivers is an inversely nativised identity which is burdened with the metaphysics of difference.¹⁰ Nativism from without is distortive of African identity – but so is nativism from within.

Nativism from within distorts African identity when it refuses to recognise difference and to accommodate dissonance. Its dualism produces an Africanness which reposes in a Cartesian subject in ways that exclude multiple ancestries of identifications and shifting identities, as well as contingency and positionality. It seals identity and lacks the conceptual resources to account for the place of liminality, for in-between identifications – Homi Bhabha's Third Space.¹¹ It refuses to engage with questions about the newness of Africa. Ultimately, nativism from within finds refuge in an unassailable ontology of Africanness in which race as biology is immanent and identity is a monumentalised abstraction, complete with a lack of exit points or reflexivity: in other words, a quintessential hegemonic identity.

A monumentalised identity has its virtues and is not always harmful. Indeed, it is precisely the identity African peoples used as a strategic and productive resource for mobilising solidarity in the fight against colonial subjugation. However, identity as a monument no longer serves us: it denies our subjectivities and forecloses our futures. In the era of restoring community after the colonial moment, monumentalised identity has become vulnerable to chauvinism, authoritarianism and outright exclusionary tendencies. This is especially so when it is at the service of anti-colonial nationalism, but at a time when the territory is independent and no longer a colony.

Anti-colonial nationalistic adumbrations to reclaim, rename and re-inhabit the land come with margins of excess as well as political opportunism in the search for an authentic national identity.¹² The adumbrations are prone to indulge in *ressentiment*, rather than to be

9 A Quayson 'Obverse denominations: Africa?' (2002) 14 *Public Culture* 585 at 586.

10 Mbembe (n 1 above) 240.

11 HK Bhabha *The location of culture* (1994); F Kalua 'Homi Bhabha's Third Space and African identity' (2009) 21 *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 23.

12 EW Said *Culture and imperialism* (1993) 273.

seriously engaged in transformative efforts to substantively affirm human freedoms following the catastrophe of dehumanising colonial rule.¹³ Used opportunistically by ruling elites in the postcolonial era, the adumbrations facilitate pathologies of power. They have a tendency to seek refuge, as Edward Said observes, in demagogic assertions of a native past and a celebratory native identity which expediently is freed from worldly time.¹⁴

When a non-reflexive and regimented identity is appropriated by the state and its agents as part of reductive nationalistic articulations, the ground is laid for mobilising binary oppositions.¹⁵ African peoples are dislodged from history and quarantined from existential global affiliations.¹⁶ What emerges is an implausible account of African identity – an ontological and mythological Africanness – complete with essences which are amenable to moving from national identity to separatist normative corporate African identity in ways that leave little room for a heterogeneous human community or for affirming human liberation.¹⁷ Instead of an African self that is preoccupied with shedding the servitude and spoiled identity of Caliban, Said argues, it is better for Caliban to see his own history of subjugation as far from unique but as one that is shared by others.¹⁸ In this way Caliban has a better prospect of understanding the complexity of *his* own social and historical situation.¹⁹

When an ontological Africanness is imposed on us we are ushered into not only the zone of Fanonian petrification where African identity is frozen and closed to renewal, and where the ruling elites of the postcolonial era are beyond reproach.²⁰ We are also ushered into Bulterian precarity where identity is accompanied by the institutionalisation of chauvinism, authoritarianism and technologies for the governmentality and disciplining of transgressive African identifications.²¹ Nativist articulations of African identity require us to accept, without demur, a *theocratic* epistemology of African identity as our enduring identitarian lodestar which assuredly shepherds us towards a domain of primordial

13 Said (n 12 above) 276; Mbembe (n 1 above) 257-258; Diagne (n 8 above) 622.

14 Said (n 12 above) 275-277.

15 Said (n 12 above) xv.

16 As above.

17 Said (n 12 above) 49; Mbembe (n 5 above) 629.

18 Said (n 12 above) 258. I have preserved the masculine for Caliban for reasons of fidelity to the Shakespearean text and not to exclude female Calibans.

19 Said (n 12 above) 258.

20 F Fanon *The wretched of the earth* (1967) 87; D Ficek 'Reflections on Fanon and petrification' in N Gibson (ed) *Living Fanon* (2011) 75-84.

21 J Butler 'Performativity, precarity and sexual politics' (2009) 4 *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 1.

totality and celestial purity.²² African culture is cast as impermeable. African identity is normalised and imagined not as dynamic but as exceptionally unique in its naturalism and propensity towards sameness and unity, immobility, irreversibility and epidermal permanence. This singularity, reductionism and lack of movement in the imagination of African identity lie behind Mbembe's lament.

What is Africanness goes beyond problematising African identity. However incompletely, it addresses an existential gap in theory for explicating African social identity. It does not do so through offering a dogma of Africanness or a Stalinist grid of characteristics or typologies that should be met before one is eligible to claim Africanness.²³ Instead, building on the cultural work of Stuart Hall, it develops an interpretive method – a hermeneutics – for locating and deciphering African identifications in ways that are historically conscious and conjunctural, and look not just to the past but equally to the present and the future so that African identity remains invested with motility and the capacity to mutate radically and to make new and unexpected beginnings.

Hall's identifications are unfinished attachments which are steeped in temporality and entangled with the subjective play of desire and uncertainty.²⁴ They add to the African archive an epistemology of identity that is a conceptual resource for anticipating newness, managing dissonance and recognising our overlapping consensus. An implicit starting point in Hall's identifications is that plurality is the condition of human action. Such plurality is manifest in Arendt's 'space of appearance' where members of a political community reveal their subjectivities in relations of egalitarian reciprocity and solidarity.²⁵

In developing a hermeneutics of Africanness, this book takes up some of the challenges thrown down by Mbembe concerning the importance of

22 On a theocratic vision, see ch 1.

23 See Ali Mazrui's tripartite typology for ascertaining who is African: A Mazrui 'Preface: Comparative Africanity: Blood, soil and ancestry' in J Adibe *Who is an African? Identity, citizenship and the making of an Africa-nation* (2009) xi-xv, discussed in Ndlovu-Gatsheni (n 5 above) 115-117.

24 Here I am drawing in part on Mbembe's repeated emphasis on temporality as the main missing piece in discourses about Africa: JW Shipley, J Comaroff & A Mbembe 'Africa in theory: A conversation between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe' (2010) 83 *Anthropological Quarterly* 653 at 658.

25 See the discussion in ch 8 sec 5.

Africa developing a discourse and, necessarily, a theory *about Africa* for itself.²⁶ The hermeneutics of Africanness should be understood as asking Africans, not to renounce authenticity but rather, to reimagine it by moving away from a thick and dominant notion of African identity as archaeology so as to accommodate radical uncertainty and a plural universe. Put differently, *What is Africanness* requires reading the authenticity of African identity against the grain in ways that capture not just a *backward movement* in which the past informs the present and the future but, more importantly, a *forward movement* so that it is the present and the future which constantly and continuously reveal our subjectivities.²⁷

The hermeneutics of Africanness developed in this book serves as a theoretical roadmap for decoding African identity in an African sense as well as a global one after the epochal events of slavery, colonialism and apartheid but without succumbing to the allure of treating these historical events as deterministic. The hermeneutics acknowledges our *kronos* but ultimately emphasises our *kairos* – our lived time.²⁸ This temporal distinction is crucial if we are to affirm as authentic, the continuous unfolding of new African identifications and new African ethnicities.²⁹ The distinction is also necessary, however, so that we acknowledge, as Mbembe reminds us, that time is always on the move and that certain aspects of our African past have been radically transformed.³⁰ Recovering African dignity should not be conflated with recovering traditions and custom.³¹ Rather, it is recovery of the Arendtian ‘world we hold in common’ in ways that recapture the human condition and that are not enamoured of a Cartesian logic of identity which denies heterogeneity and lays waste to human life.³² Our ethical responsibility to Africanness is not to deny agency but instead to keep the door open for social reflexivity and ever-transforming Africanness.

26 JA Mbembe *On the postcolony* (2001) 3.

27 Diagne (n 8 above) 622.

28 S Benhabib *Situating the self* (1992) 1; T Ranger ‘The invention of tradition in colonial Africa’ in E Hobsbawm & T Ranger (eds) *The invention of tradition* (1983) 211 at 247-252.

29 Diagne (n 8 above) 621; S Hall ‘New ethnicities’ in D Morley & K Chen (eds) *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogue in cultural studies* (1996) 442-451.

30 Mbembe (n 26 above) ch 1; Benhabib (n 28 above) 1.

31 Benhabib (n 28 above) 1.

32 On the ‘world we have in common’, see the discussion in ch 8 sec 5.