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SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

Conceptualizing Africa

Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr, eds., Drew Burk, trans. ***To Write the Africa World***. Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2023. vii + 324 pp. Notes. Index. $28.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-5095-5107-1.

Taharka Ade. ***W.E.B. Du Bois' Africa: Scrambling for a New Africa***. New York: Anthem Press, 2023. xx + 157 pp. References. Index. $110. Hardback. ISBN: 9781839988493.

A gathering of African intellectuals in 2016—*Ateliers de la Pensée I* [Workshops of Thought]—aimed to be a "renewal of French-speaking Afro-diasporic critical thinking; it also served as an impetus for generating new perspectives concerning ... Africa's future" (2). Somewhat ironically, the participants—some of whose essays appear in *To Write the Africa World*—seem to have widely accepted one key idea as a significant part of their thinking: double consciousness. First clearly articulated more than a century before by W.E.B. Dubois, that awareness reverberates through many of their twenty-one collected articles. Yet only one among them, Hourya Bentouhami, actually mentions "DuBois's reflections" on the subject, describing them "as a strange and painful cognitive disjunction ... in the dialogue of the soul with itself"(125). Another contributor, Benaouda Lebdai, instead credits Sudanese born British writer Jamal Maljoub with integrating "his status of being double" as part of his authorial identity (53). Other writers of essays included in the book merely assume an understanding of the concept as fundamental to their thought and, perhaps more importantly, in conveying a concept of Africa to the wider world.

In *W.E.B. DuBois' Africa: Scrambling for a New Africa*, however, African American writer Taharka Ade contends "double consciousness introduces a schizophrenic existence between two opposing patterns of human culture that Du Bois is quite clearly attempting to abandon by the end of his life" (132). Such a contention leads Ade to center his analysis on just one of DuBois' many works, his 1946 book *The World and Africa*, although also considering a much broader swath of Du Bois' writings. Ade clearly believes Du Bois' earlier work an immature reflection of his thought, claiming "Du Bois certainly evolved to some degree by the time he published *The World and Africa*" (3). In focusing on this later work, Ade emphasizes "African agency as well as highlights the importance of African cultural cosmology" in an effort "to advance what I term the African world cultural

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project" (5). He insists "Du Bois failed to capitalize on the cultural argument regarding African people and instead focused more so on arguments which could valorize Africa to the Western world" (124).

Indeed, each of the twenty-two authors writing in these two books do have a common aim, not merely to understand Africa in the twenty-first century, but moreover to seek out ways of expressing what they have come to know. All share —at least as they appreciate it—a commitment to an Afrocentric perspective. Some of them understand the difficulty that presents, given the diversity of languages and cultures spread across a vast continent. Rather than addressing such barriers directly, most of these authors passively encompass such an understanding. However, the Cameroonian novelist, Léonora Miano, acknowledges that "Africa … the name that has been bestowed upon our soil, has its origins in the Berber" people despite "the fact that most North Africans reserve the name African to describe the populations found in the sub-Saharan part of the continent" (67). Moreover, she acknowledges that "the matrices of our Africanity" must be "defined as what is held in common among diverse populations" (72). Such a universal conception of Africa "must be a construction, a patient development performed on the basis of particular" evidence, argues Bado Ndoye. Only then, he insists, "would it no longer be the theoretical expression of the imperial domination of the West" (259). Others among these nearly two dozen writers seem to believe it a relatively simple task to construct a common Africanity from bits of that widely acknowledged diversity.

Such is the approach taken by Taharka Ade when writing about W.E.B. Du Bois actually *Scrambling for a New Africa.* Ade draws broadly on the ideas of Du Bois as well as numerous African intellectuals to shape his diasporan vision of Africa. Tellingly, however, none of the scholars he relies upon in doing so are among those whose essays appear in *To Write the Africa World*, albeit the English language edition of this collection appeared contemporaneously with his book. Nonetheless, most of them are established African intellectuals whose work is generally available (though much of it published in French). This piecemeal approach, of expropriating selected snippets to create a new African reality, is specifically rejected by one of the workshop organizers, Felwine Sarr. "The splitting up of reality into small bits, which we subsequently attempt to put back together," he contends, may work in quantum physics "but reveals its flaws as a method once we enter into questions of the human and social sciences." Instead he "calls for the renewal of the sources of imagination and thought," believing they are in abundant supply in the broadly conceived African community (261–62). Thus he implicitly endorses Miano's insistance that "creativity will be an imperative for renewing this Africanity, guiding it beyond and away from the postcolonial phase in which it is currently mired" (74).

Sarr is convinced this exercise of African ingenuity will make it possible "to explore and understand African cultures through their own specific categories" (263), a trajectory which, at first, seems to coincide with the thrust of Ade's efforts. As an African American he is "determined to find a way to bring the African world closer together on our own cultural terms" (136) by using a self-defined approach which he grandly terms the "African World Antecedent

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Methodology" (or AWAM). This involves his efforts "comparing the cultural-historical realities of African societies as ancient as Kemet (Ancient Egypt) with their contemporaries as well as with the overlapping cultural histories of societies that declined as each subsequent society began to rise" (xix). The result, he believes, will "mend the old mold-cavities of traditional Africa with the dynamic cultural variations now extant throughout the contemporary African world" which he sees as having a broad diasporic reach (137). In practice, though, seeking such a result merely sends Ade once again on a journey to stich "small bits" together, creating an entirely new—and presumably more acceptable—African and Africa-diasporian cloth.

Thus Ade's embrace of what he sees as an alternative vision for the continent—Du Bois' Pan-Africa—is necessarily removed from the Africa envisioned by these French-speaking scholars who call the continent home. In Ade's vision, however, it becomes "a DuBoisian theory that should be considered more significant than even double consciousness" (13) which, as Ade notes, is only laid out twice in Du Bois' entire corpus of work. "Pan-Africa is the missing link for Du Bois in his search for unity," Ade insists. "Instead of a focus on racial identity, this theory holds much more potential as a unifier under a paradigm of cultural identity" (132). And by utilizing his AWAM approach, Ade assures his readers that "mapping the cultural-historical matrix that exists throughout the African world solves many of the issues Du Bois faced trying to relate African Americans to African politics" (137) and at the same time removes any dependency upon externally imposed frames of reference. Such a self-examining and inward looking perspective is nonetheless doomed to difficulty. Achille Mbembe, looking back on the 2016 gathering of elite African scholars, is adamant that "any authority which claims to draw its legitimacy from the principle of indigeneity would quickly be confronted by its own limits" (266).

It is unsurprising, then, that Mbembe and Felwine Sarr, his fellow *To Write the Africa World* editor, are wise to also maintain—from the outset—that "the only Africa that exists is the one that will be created" (2). Thus, perhaps the best insight to be gained from reading both of these recent attempts to produce a guide for finding an Africa to embrace may be that the path to doing so is indeed personal. The import of that realization, laid bare by considering these twenty-two authors together, was actually expressed more eloquently over a half century ago by the late Sierra Leonean physician, diplomat, and poet, Davidson (Abioseh) Nicol, when he considered "The Meaning of Africa":

> You are not a country, Africa,
> You are a concept,
> Fashioned in our minds, each to each,
> To hide our separate fears,
> To dream our separate dreams.
> (in *African Heritage*, ed. Jacob Drachler [New York: Crowell-Collier, 1963], 122)

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Holding this insight dear will help us understand that not just Du Bois or Taharka Ade, nor even a cacophony of Afro-French intellectuals, but any of us might—perhaps even must—fashion a new Africa as we envision it from our own perspectives based on a genuine appreciation of the continent.

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