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INTRODUCTION

Rethinking Achille Mbembe's 'Provisional notes on the postcolony'

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Achille Mbembe's ground-breaking essay 'Provisional notes on the postcolony' (1992a) (hereafter 'Provisional notes')[1] is the most cited article published by the journal *Africa*. Three decades later, the article continues to influence the ways in which scholars account for the contradictions of socio-economic and political formations not only in Africa but in other postcolonial societies. In this part issue, we reconsider some of the vistas opened up by the essay in the analysis of different socio-political formations in Central, Southern and West Africa.

Rarely does a single essay attain such significant influence as to immediately command the attention and critical response of colleagues and peers, enough to redirect debates and scholarship in a discipline or subfield. And yet, this is what Achille Mbembe achieved with his article. Remarkably, according to the entry in the contributors' biographies in that issue of the journal, this was one of Mbembe's earliest scholarly publications in English. Mbembe had already published very important books and essays on Cameroon's history in leading French outlets, between the mid-1980s and 1991 (see Mbembe 1985a; 1985b; 1988; 1996). Furthermore, he had also been working for a few years as an academic at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania in the USA after his doctorate in history from the leading French university, the Sorbonne, in 1988. Yet, it was primarily 'Provisional notes'[2] that first introduced Mbembe to the

[1] The essay was also published in *Public Culture* with a different title, 'The banality of power and the aesthetics of vulgarity in the postcolony' (Mbembe 1992b).

[2] According to the biographical notes on the contributors in the issue of *Africa* in which the essay appeared, the article was submitted in French. It was translated from French mainly by Janet Roitman with assistance from Murray Last, then *Africa*'s editor, and from Mbembe himself. This probably marked Mbembe's first experience with translation as a difficult and delicate enterprise to enable the circulation of ideas from one language and context of expression to another, even as this mobility is possible only within the limits of 'translatability'. While Mbembe aims to enable a critical understanding of Africa's relation with itself as well as with the world, he recognizes that this task involves not only 'multiple intelligibilities' but also 'translation, conflict, and misunderstandings' (see Kodjo-Grandvaux 2013). He emphasizes this point in his *Critique of Black Reason*: 'When it comes to speaking the world in a language for everyone, however, there exist relations of power at the heart of these traditions,' including in their modes of translation and circulation (Mbembe 2017: 8).

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English-speaking audience with which he has now attained critical acclaim and global recognition. The essay has been described by Mikael Karlström (2003: 57) as 'a canonical contribution to the literature on postcolonial African politics', despite the fact that it 'proved difficult to digest and build upon'. Although Karlström's observation is correct, many scholars have attempted to build upon the innovative line of inquiry opened up by this remarkable essay. This is yet another of such efforts.

This part issue emerged from a panel at the 2018 biennial conference of the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom (ASAUK). The panel was inspired by the impact that 'Provisional notes' has had in the field of African studies (especially in Africanist anthropology and political studies) and beyond. To date, this article has been cited more than 1,000 times, according to the Google Scholar citation index. This makes it the most cited article published by *Africa* in its ninety years of existence and one of the most cited essays in African studies more generally, alongside Jean-François Bayart's notable essay on extraversion published in *African Affairs* (Bayart and Ellis 2000) – another tour de force on historicity and the interpretation of contemporary developments in African societies.

Working with colleagues in France in the 1980s, Mbembe benefited from and expanded the methodological commitment to go beyond a common tendency in African studies at the time to analyse state and society as opposing – even competing – social forces. Instead, specifically in his collaboration with Jean-François Bayart and Comi Toulabor, both based at the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (FNSP) and affiliated to the Instituts d'Études Politiques (IEPs) in Paris and Bordeaux respectively, Mbembe and his colleagues built on an intellectual movement in French African studies that had already emerged in the 1970s in which a research focus on '*la politique par le bas*' or 'politics from below' had become an important priority.[3]

In this new orientation to the study of African politics, rather than studying state and society as opposing forces in which domination and resistance were the central points of interest, the focus shifted towards the intimacies and complicities of power as well as to the variety and forms of discourses of power beyond those produced mainly by leaders and political authorities. In the end, this orientation tended to emphasize the 'ambiguities of the relation between the state and society' as evinced in the 'popular modes of political action' around and beyond the institutional contexts of state bureaucracies (Geschiere 1988: 36). Undoubtedly, Bayart and Mbembe became the most prominent figures of this intellectual shift in the 1990s, particularly among an anglophone readership. However, Comi Toulabor was no less a pioneering figure in terms of his early attempts to shift attention towards the modes of popular political culture in the elaboration of the carnivalesque and grotesque in the life of power in Africa (see, for example, Toulabor 1985; 1986; 1994). Achille Mbembe was partly inspired by Toulabor's early interest in the carnivalesque in African politics and he acknowledges this debt to Toulabor extensively in his 1992 essay (Mbembe 1992a: 5–6).

When our panel convened in Birmingham in 2018, we were marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Mbembe's essay. Speakers were invited to

[3] Mbembe and Bayart are well acquainted with each other's work as scholars on political developments in Cameroon. Moreover, they worked together with Comi Toulabor in the 1980s on the editorial committee for the French journal of African studies *Politique Africaine*, which has also now achieved a leading position in the field.

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engage with 'Provisional notes' as a ground-breaking essay that profoundly challenged extant approaches to the analysis of power and subjectivity in Africa. The essay later formed the basis of Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001), a book that also became one of the most influential theoretical reflections on postcolonial Africa.[4]

As a heuristic device that has become an analytical tradition for mapping and examining the problem of subjection and the (re)production of violence in societies which emerged from colonial relationships, the 'postcolony' is no longer 'provisional'. In fact, it has become one of the most critical, even if contested, ways of understanding the manifold challenges of the end of colonization in Africa, including the distinctive sets of cultural, social, economic and political (material and aesthetic) repertoires that defined, continue to (re)define, and have been (re)defined by the practices of past and current patterns of subjection. The article not only introduced the idea and concept of *postcolony* to the literature; along with the subsequent book, it also established the postcolony as an exploratory or experiential device for understanding and analysing 'a given historical trajectory' defined essentially by the 'banality of power' – which manifests (im)materially in contrapuntal chaos and coherence in the intertwined temporal and spatial continuum of state and society in Africa. Indeed, the concept of 'the banality of power' is a major idea in both Mbembe's essay and the book that followed from it. Mbembe deploys it to ground the peculiarity of the routines and grotesquery of power and subjection, as well as forms of complicity, if not also resistance, in the postcolony. While striking in their modes of expression in the African postcolony, Mbembe demonstrates that the *spectacularization* of terror and enjoyment is the very definition of power and sovereignty *tout court*.

But why do students of Africa still find the idea of the banality of power in the postcolony offered by Mbembe inspiring and engaging? And how do the premises, arguments, themes or even approaches first iterated by Mbembe on the postcolony still inform how Africanists think about and engage their own field sites and themes of inquiry three decades later? In this part issue, four Africanist anthropologists and sociologists working on and in different regions of Africa engage with Mbembe's perspectives in his seminal essay in analysing emergent realities in their own areas of scholarly interest. Our approach is to take Mbembe's manifold speculations about the postcolony as productive keys to open up reflections on the multiple registers in which the dramaturgy of power unfolds in our different sites or thematic interests.

Postcolonial proclivities

As already noted, 'Provisional notes' was first published in *Africa* in 1992 and then, in the same year, an abridged and slightly revised version was published in *Public Culture*. Although the article's publication in *Africa* resonated with many, judging by the citations that followed, it was in *Public Culture* that a set of responses were collected and published, again in 1992. These included comments from a number of leading scholars in African studies, history, anthropology, political studies and critical theory, such as

[4] In his most recent work, Mbembe disagrees with the classification of *On the Postcolony* as a work that belongs to the category of 'postcolonial studies', because the book 'attacks three golden calves of postcolonial orthodoxy' (see Mbembe 2021: 126).

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Valentin Mudimbe, Judith Butler, David William Cohen, Michael Taussig, Fernando Coronil, Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Tejumola Olaniyan, among others.

Besides concerns about his methodological and theoretical orientations, including the now familiar question about his use of Western theoretical resources to frame his inquiry, a main concern with Mbembe's argument about the postcolony was the 'extravagance' of his insights from Cameroon and Togo and the possibilities of their 'theoretical generalization' to other postcolonies in the manner in which he deployed these insights (e.g. Butler 1992; see also Coronil 1992). Another query related to whether Mbembe's claims about power and the grotesque, the vulgar and the obscene in the public space in the African postcolony, were not simply additional illustrations of 'African decomposition' that would be fodder for Afro-pessimists (e.g. Mudimbe 1992).

The latter is all the more important considering concerns about whether these obscene and grotesque realities are exclusive to Africa (see Adebanwi's contribution in this issue), an issue that was raised by more than one critic in the comments on the essay. In his response to these and several other queries, titled 'Prosaics of servitude and authoritarian civilities', Mbembe remarked that, rather than merely the expression of 'aesthetic or ethical prejudices', his use of the notions of vulgarity and obscenity 'was meant to allude to the cultural and political "work" [*travail*] by which state power "comes down to the level" of the greatest number of people [*se met á la portée des gens*], becomes "down-to-earth" [*terre à terre*]; spreads the knowledge of itself and its habits, rendering them accessible to a society' (1992c: 129).

It is not possible here to fully take stock of the vast array of responses to and queries on Mbembe's essay published in *Public Culture* (1992b).[5] Nor was this our ambition. Rather, the contributions assembled in this section try to respond to key aspects of Mbembe's riveting analysis of power and subjectivity in the postcolony. Notable points of interests for us are not only his innovative focus on the notions of vulgarity and obscenity for the banalization of power in the postcolony; they also include the sources of inspiration in Africa and Africanist archives for his ideas. Accordingly, each contributor has elected to foreground one or two central ideas or aspects of the essay.

In her critical contribution, Katrien Pype surveys popular cultural materials in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as the social and political analysis of Congolese society within Congo studies. Pype draws on these to offer a critical engagement with some of Mbembe's central ideas and arguments, including his critique of the *commandement* as the ultimate modality of postcolonial authority. Central to Pype's analysis are the multiple layers of conversation between Mbembe and Congo, underlining Mbembe's debt to both students of Congolese society and popular cultural production from the region. As Pype argues, these layers of conversation between Mbembe and the Congolese context call for a more critical attention to the historicity of Mbembe's ideas about the state, power and life in the African postcolony.

Rogers Orock reflects on how the African novel can work as an ethnographic interlocutor or as an ethnographic informant in the anthropological study of postcolonial

[5] Besides those responses published in *Public Culture*, many other comments and reactions followed after the publication of *On the Postcolony* in 2001 (see Adeeko 2002; Adesanmi 2004; Karlström 2003; Quayson 2001; Weate 2003a; 2003b; see also Mbembe 2003 for his responses to his critics).

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politics in Africa. Examining the role of the literary imagination on the continent in decolonizing anthropology, Orock engages with Mbembe's embrace of the literary archive[6] in understanding African politics. Focusing on elites and corruption – which are often regarded, not always correctly,[7] as synonyms in popular imagination in Africa and in the West – the author investigates how literary accounts mirror what Mbembe has described as the dominant's 'tendency [for] excess and a lack of proportion' (1992a: 3). However, Orock is interested not only in how the two lenses (the fictional and the ethnographic) for understanding the trajectory of power in early postcolonial Africa enrich each other, but also how fiction sometimes offers a useful corrective to ethnographic studies in the repertoire of political anthropology in the late colonial and early postcolonial moments. Based on an examination of Chinua Achebe's novels in the light of Mbembe's theorizing of 'societies recently emerging from the experience of colonisation and the violence which the colonial relationship, *par excellence*, involves' (1992a: 3), Orock concludes that African fiction, '[i]n both its ethnographic imagination and anthropological complexity ... defined, and in some measure prefigured, a theory of power in the postcolony as we have come to know it'.

Ebenezer Obadare examines the dramas of power in what he describes as 'the theologico-theatrical' within Nigerian Pentecostal churches. Obadare shows that an emergent form of complicity exists between the leaders of Nigerian Pentecostal churches and leading popular entertainers, particularly those of Yorùbá extraction. Congregations in Pentecostal churches harbour multiple desires. Just as important is their need for the spiritual promise of prosperity and success as a reward for their radical Pentecostal commitment to forego the pleasures of the 'carnal world'. Yet, their desire for prosperity and success must be negotiated and balanced against a desire for play, improvisation and release among the congregants. As Obadare shows, the 'collaboration' between church leaders and the popular artists invited to entertain and energize congregants during church services and other church-related events must be situated and understood within the dynamics of a 'saturated' and increasingly innovative religious marketplace. Although Pentecostalism is always defined by possible risks of disruption, Obadare draws inspiration from Mbembe's idea of 'the postcolonial dramaturgy' to argue that the constraints of this highly competitive form of Christian religiosity underline its multiple openings for creativity and the unique convergence of spirituality and entertainment as another hallmark of postcolonial improvisation.

In the final article of this part issue, Wale Adebanwi focuses on 'the carnality of power' in extending Mbembe's argument that obscenity and grotesquery constitute essential characteristics of postcolonial regimes of domination and subordination. Examining cases from Central, Southern and West Africa, Adebanwi reflects on the popular expectation that unites the dominant and the dominated: the necessity for the African man of power to display or exhibit his virility – particularly sexual

[6] Apart from his rich use of Sony Lab'ou Tansi's fiction, Mbembe has also engaged with the imaginative explorations of the African condition by other African writers, including Amos Tutuola (e.g. see Mbembe 2003). Tejumola Olaniyan has also compared the core insight in Mbembe's essay with that in Wole Soyinka's play *Opera Wonyosi*, arguing that reading the former is like 'sitting through a performance of the latter' (Olaniyan 1992: 47).

[7] For relevant critiques, see Werbner (2004), Adebanwi (2014) and Orock and Adebanwi (2021).

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virility. Following Mbembe, he shows that a ceaseless passion for transgressive sexuality as a condition of power has turned the African head of state from 'His Excellency' to 'His *Sex-cellency*', someone whose virility is constitutive of the operative logic of power.

While all the contributors recognize some of the challenges inherent in Mbembe's theorizing of the postcolony[8] – and point to a few of these in relation to the focus of each article – our major objective in this part issue is to draw on the strengths of the essay to broaden the analysis of postcolonial formations.

One last point. Since Mbembe *unleashed* the postcolony as a powerful heuristic term for a historical formation, the debris of which continues to *litter* the course of history in Africa, he has moved on to examine the location of this formation in wider contexts, particularly in global Africa. His thoughts on Africa are encapsulated in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) and *Necro-Politics* (2019), and his reflections on Africa's planetary entanglement and the formations of our collective humanity were recently published as *Out of the Dark Night* (2021). Taken together, these extend various strands of Mbembe's early interest in power and historical struggles for the '*in-common*' and the *will to life* (*ibid*.: 3) in the face of precarity, exclusion, violence, expendability and death. And so, despite this shift in the geography of his theoretical concerns, one of Mbembe's earliest insights (the banality of power) continues to have both theoretical and empirical purchase for the analysis of social formation in Africa.

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[8] Some of these were raised in Butler (1992), Trouillot (1992) Olaniyan (1992), Quayson (2001) and Weate (2003a; 2003b).

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