

## AFRICA IN THE WORLD: RIFFING OFF DAKAR

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‘[T]he colonial library negate[s] the possibility of a plural rationality and history’ Mudimbe 1988; 208

‘We own the library!’

Dakar 2013

*Drawing upon the conversations emerging from CODESRIA’s Africa N’Ko: Africa in the World: Debating the Colonial Library conference held in Dakar in January, Kelly Gillespie reports on how cultural production, and in particular art, seemed to hold possibilities for subverting and re-imagining the colonial archive.*

Valentin Mudimbe posed the problem of the ‘colonial library’ over twenty years ago in his 1988 treatise *The Invention of Africa*. Discourse about Africa, he argued, was mired in the colonial condition, could not overcome ‘the imperial power of Same’ (1988; 20) that consistently rendered African society, materials, thought, subject to domination by a resilient colonial register. The collection of terms and categories, styles and framings inherited from the European missionaries, explorers and ethnologists that emerged with the colonial project still formed, Mudimbe wrote, the central library for our description and measure of Africa. *The Invention of Africa* asked, in particular, for ways of reinventing the grand work of Sameness and Difference that plagued the colonial knowledge complex. Sameness was the incorporation of Africa under the sign of a



Nomusa Makhubu, *Omama Bencelisa (Mothers breastfeeding)*, 2007. Photo: Erdmann Contemporary

European-defined humanity. Difference was the externalisation of Africa as ‘not-Europe’, a kind of pseudo-difference that always collapsed into Eurocentrism. Both had the same function: to write Africa in terms of Europe, to disallow any properly Afrocentric tradition – modes of writing and thinking about Africa that could escape European categories and ways of knowing the world. Under the colonial condition, Sameness and Difference were bedfellows in the project of rule, constructing Africa’s difference from Europe – its lineages and histories, its languages, its modes of organisation and thought – not as a claim on the plurality

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of global knowledge, but as signs in the repertoire of European knowledge. If we cannot refuse their incursion into contemporary modes of thinking and writing the continent, wrote Mudimbe, we reiterate colonial knowledge.

Consolidating a long tradition of anti-colonial critique that sought to decenter colonialist accounts of Africa and other parts of the colonised world, Mudimbe’s account of the persistent, live weight of the library insisted that we had made little headway in finding new ways of writing Africa. Drawing heavily on Foucault and Levi-Strauss, Mudimbe asked for us to consider how we could be ‘epistemologically inventive’<sup>1</sup> in devising ways for Africa to escape out from under the discursive conditions of colonial knowledge, to find new ‘modes of self-writing’<sup>2</sup> appropriate to Afrocentric knowledge.

In January 2013 a conference was held in Dakar to revisit the question of the ‘colonial library’ in Africa. It was titled *Africa N’Ko: Africa in the World: Debating the Colonial Library*.<sup>3</sup> Hosted by CODESRIA and Point Sud, the event brought together a large group of scholars from the continent and its diaspora to consider the current state of the colonial library and to gauge the ‘epistemological inventiveness’ that marks contemporary scholarship on Africa. The event took place over four days, with twenty-one sessions, including roundtables and panels with many of Africa’s finest scholars, and a key-note address by V.Y. Mudimbe.

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knowledge, of knowledge about Africa? What has become of the weight of colonial category? What are our experiments in modes of writing the continent? Where are the places that are inventing new ways of shaping African knowledge? There are many older histories of the critique of imperial regimes of knowledge. Indeed, throughout the conference one could hear an incantation of ancestors: Senghor, Césaire, Glissant, Fanon, Du Bois, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Said, many people of great integrity and mind who have turned this idea around and around. Collectively, they ask how we can escape the forms of knowing and writing that have accompanied the condition of rule, of domination, and of its attendant exclusions. The task of the conference was to diagnose a contemporary relation to the library, to test the innovations in knowledge that are accompanying the current moment of the continent.

A conference agenda concerned with epistemological invention is always tricky. Scholarly practice is bent on working along the logic of historical association. We hear something that reminds us of other things, but those things are older, integrated ideas, already layered in the map of concepts and theories we carry around with us. Our canonical predilections. It is easy to too-quickly bury a new idea in the weight of history, to close down a possibility with a barrage of hostile questions masked as rigour. The corridors of universities can be intellectually boring, dull to the possibilities for thought presenting themselves all the time in an innovative world. Many of the most important ideas, certainly from Africa, have been created not by individual scholars, but by small groups of intellectuals in intense, ongoing, hot conversation, often between the university, the living room, the street, the bedroom. At the

very least with an enormous amount of solidarity, of friendship, of trust, where authorship becomes less significant than the ideas themselves. A place where the urgency of the context of intellectual production prevents detours from the very core questions. Where the generation of the right question is paramount. A place where the concern with the right questions prevents professionalisation: prevents the grotesque way in which form so often takes precedence over content in the labour of the academy.

Despite our scholarly forms and pretensions, there was the thread of a good conversation woven throughout the conference. The conversation was anchored in a central tension: there was a deep ambivalence in the conversation about how to treat the African colonial library. Two quite distinct trajectories emerged. One the one hand, speakers used the idea of the library to refer to Africa's injuries, to the detrimental way in which colonial tropes have continued to plague the continent, to entrench it in permanent state of epistemological inequity to the north/west. This claim often accompanied a call to retrieve a fundamentally African knowledge, one based on the grammar of African society and form. On the other hand, speakers were tired of the trope of colonial injury and were seeking out ways to move into a different kind of relationship with the library, a relationship that could help to write the continent's potential rather than its damage, its worldliness rather than its autochthony. This latter was the more interesting conversation, although I imagine that it was precisely the presence of the ambivalence that allowed for this proposition to emerge so strongly. Seeing our moment as a time to read ourselves out of and into the library in unexpected and extraordinary ways, speakers argued that we

must move beyond the method of working 'against the grain' or 'along the grain', beyond counterreading and misreading, and look rather to the ways in which the library stands as a sign of an already cosmopolitan continent, a continent that has for centuries been in and of the world.

In this light, we heard 'We own the library! We were always in it, it was always co-engendered, so let us own it, see it as ours'. We heard 'We are also, even if in/of Africa, in the World. We are creoles!' We heard 'Who cares about the colonial library?' 'We are beyond the library!' Throughout, there was an insistence that, even as we take the signs of Africa seriously, we must not be trapped by a parochial Africanness. Our place is in the world, and the library can be drawn on in such a way that reads this African cosmopolitanism as a thick archival seam for our experimental use. Central to this proposition was a recognition that, despite an ongoing condition of African structural marginalisation, we must proceed as if the world is ours, as if we have the right to appropriate the library because it has always belonged, even if unrecognized, to Africans.

This *as if* is very important. If not straightforwardly idealistic, then it is at least cheekily dialectical, claiming the space to write into history as if that writing produced new grounds for the continent. It lays claim to an optimistic method that draws on a sanguine reading of Africa's relationship to knowledge as a way to write Africa into a new relationship with the world. It argues, that if we are to wait until Africa is on equal footing politically and economically to the rest of the world to be able to speak, for the perfect material conditions for thought, we will simply rehearse the prose of inequality, of harm, of victimisation over and over again. We will get stuck

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in the prose of injury. This is, I think, where Dakar took issue with Spivak. The claim was 'let us speak in spite of it all', as if our experiments might trick a hostile history into a new fate. Or at least provide some trace for a future yet to come.

The most provocative suggestion that emerged from the conference about how to go about this audacious work of writing African cosmopolitanism, was to take inspiration from contemporary African artists. In many of the most interesting presentations of the conference, the African artist was posed as harbinger of this method. Artists, particularly young Africans who have contact with other parts of the world, are using the library for their own purposes, playing with its possibilities, deploying it as a terrain upon which new imaginations can take flight, unencumbered by its tragedy. Or at least with a degree of farce that renders the injury toothless. A colonial photograph of an African woman as the basis for contemporary print, or music video, or hairstyle. An early colonial film of Africans dancing as the seed for a contemporary choreography. The African folk song as a starting point for a protest poem. Here, it was argued, lies the capacity to develop a powerful imagination about how to move from what was in one session called the African fragment - the word, the image, the plant, the scene, the movement - as an important beginning point for finding new ways of writing the continent. For finding a provocative new style that escapes the logic of rule that has

accompanied the library even as it uses the library as resource.

Anti-colonial and postcolonial intellectuals have often experimented with art as a mode of self-writing. Césaire himself developed *Discourse on Colonialism* as a surrealist poem. Many of Africa's finest scholars are also novelists or film-makers. This claim on art has a history, with art forms being long understood as creating different audiences, different registers, enabling different orders of expression. The claim on art that speakers in Dakar were exploring was about method and attitude. Art practice works by means of juxtaposition, of play, loosening the work of the deictic to expand the scene of connotation. It appealed to African scholars because of its flexibility, its audacity, its freedom to experiment, the speed of its production, and the risks it can take. Whereas scholarship can move like molasses, can be overly-obliged to carefully-wrought histories of thought, to canons and classical critique, art practice is attractive because its immanence to the world seems better able to capture the play, the parodies, the commentaries of this Africa-in-the-World.

There has also been a history of the reach towards artists by scholars, particularly towards novelists, in the discovery of new categories and terms of writing the continent. Geertz's interpretive anthropology recognised this, Archie Mafeje insisted upon it. A recent work by Andrew Apter makes the same move.<sup>4</sup> It is as if, somewhere between the methods of classical scholarship and those of art there lies a zone of critical invention that can assist in the retelling of post-colonial society. The question posed to us is how to proceed with finding this zone, and mining its creativities for the kind of knowledge-production that can truly serve the continent's future.

## NOTES

1. Mudimbe, V.Y. 1998. *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, p.16.
2. Mbembe, A. 2002. 'African Modes of Self-Writing' *Public Culture*, 14: 239-273.
3. Part summary, part improvisation, this piece is entirely indebted to those who presented their work and engaged in conversation at the event, but particularly to Mamadou Diouf, Achille Mbembe, Salah Hassan, Françoise Vergès, Donna Jones, Jane Gordon, Salim Abdelmajid and Elsa Dorlin. <http://www.codesria.org/spip.php?article1730>
4. Apter, A. 2007. *Beyond Words: Discourse and Critical Agency in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.