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Writing the World from an African Metropolis

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Writing the World from an African Metropolis

Achille Mbembe

Sarah Nuttall

There is a manner about Johannesburg, it makes the impression of a metropolis.

This special issue of *Public Culture* is, and is not, about Africa. It is, and is not, about Johannesburg. It is an exercise in writing the worldliness—or the being-in-the-world—of contemporary African life forms. [End Page 347]

Life in Motion

To write, said Maurice Blanchot, is the same thing as to form. To a large extent, to write is to bring to the surface something that is not yet there or that is there only as latent, as potential. Following Jean-Luc Nancy, we take the world to be "the infinite resolution of sense into fact and fact into sense"—the ongoing negotiation, that is, between what is and what could be.¹ To write the world from Africa or to write Africa into the world, or as a fragment thereof, is a compelling and perplexing task. When we were asked to edit a special issue of *Public Culture* on Africa, it quickly became clear to us that producing such an issue without a profound reinterrogation of Africa as a sign in modern formations of knowledge would have little value, both for *Public Culture*'s readers and for us as editors.

Why? Because *Africa* as a name, as an idea, and as an object of academic and public discourse has been, and remains, fraught. It is fraught in ways that go beyond even the paradigm of orientalism first introduced by Edward Said to speak to the staging of the difference of the non-West from the West. Indeed, Africa is not only perpetually caught and imagined within a web of difference and absolute otherness.² More radically, the sign is fraught because Africa so often ends up epitomizing the intractable, the mute, the abject, or the other-worldly.³ So overdetermined is the nature of this sign that it sometimes seems almost impossible to crack, to throw it open to the full spectrum of meanings and implications that other places and other human experiences enjoy, provoke, and inhabit.⁴ The obstinacy with which scholars in particular (including African scholars) continue to describe Africa as an object *apart from the world*, or as a failed and incomplete example of something else, perpetually underplays the embeddedness in multiple elsewheres of which the continent actually speaks.

There are many explanations for the failure of contemporary scholarship to describe the novelty and originality of this continent in all its complexity, to pay sufficient attention to that which is unknown about it, or to find order in the apparent mess of its past and the chaos of its present. It suffices to mention a few. First is the fact that the ways in which societies compose and invent themselves in the present (the *creativity of practice*) is always ahead of the knowledge produced [End Page 348] about them. In addition, these compositional acts always move in multiple and unforeseen directions. What binds societies, made up of multiple assemblages and disjunctive syntheses, is some kind of artifice they come to believe in.⁵ They have, thus, the capacity to continually produce something new and singular, as yet unthought, which cannot always be accommodated within established conceptual systems and languages.

When it comes to scholarship on Africa, the encounter with what we cannot yet "determine" because it has not yet become or will never be definite—an encounter with indeterminacy, provisionality, and the contingent—assumes the proportions of an epistemological abyss. It is not simply that life changes rapidly and vast domains of human struggle and achievement are hardly the object of documentation, archiving, or empirical description—and even less so of satisfactory narrative or interpretive understanding. It is also that uncertainty and turbulence, instability and unpredictability, and rapid, chronic, and multidirectional shifts are the social forms taken, in many instances, by daily experience.⁶

Yet the conceptual categories with which to account for social...

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Sarah G. Millin, *The South Africans*

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Carol Breckenridge, the former editor of the journal, first suggested that *Public Culture* run a special issue on Africa. The current editor and executive editor, Beth Povinelli and Dilip Gaonkar, not only vigorously endorsed the project but also helped in shaping it intellectually. In particular, ongoing discussions with Beth Povinelli in Johannesburg and New York enriched the issue's rationale. These discussions also prompted a wider conversation about writing the world from the global South that extended beyond the ambit of this particular issue. *Public Culture*'s editorial committee provided challenging comments on, and constructive criticisms of, each of the essays. Kaylin Goldstein has been a superb interlocutor and manager of the production process. We have benefited greatly from James Rizzo's copyediting skills. The Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) has been an extraordinarily conducive environment from which to produce this issue. We owe a great intellectual debt to all of our colleagues, specifically Deborah Posei, Jon Hyslop, Liz Walker, Ivor Chipkin, Gweme Reid, Inna Duplessis, Tom Odhiambo, and Robert Muponde. We would also like to thank Aijun Appadurai, Carol Breckenridge, Paul Gilroy, Dominique Malaquais, Vyjayanthi Rao, and Vron Ware for their intellectual companionship during a semester spent at Yale University. Isabel Holmeyer, Jon Hyslop, and Lindsay Bremner all commented on the introduction. Funding for the images in this issue has come from a grant from AIRE-Développement, a French institute for research on development based in Paris.

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