

# TWO DISCOURSES AND AN EVENT

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*Cut loose from the colonial 'discourse of contingency', challenges Ainehi Edoro; and also from the communitarian cul-de-sac produced by the 'discourse of continuity' propagated by many post- and anti-colonial thinkers. The way to conceptualise a radically new and cosmopolitan African future is to mobilize Badiou's notion of the Event.*

In the essay, "The Novelist as Teacher", published in his collection *Hopes and Impediments* (1988), Chinua Achebe narrates the story of an African school boy who, when asked to write a poem, wrote about winter even though he meant to write about the Harmattan, a West African trade wind responsible for a dry and dusty season that begins almost simultaneously with winter in the northern temperate regions. When asked why, the boy said that writing about Harmattan would make his friends call him a bushman. This is Achebe's conclusion regarding the incident: "Now, you wouldn't have thought, would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do. How can this great blasphemy be purged? I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach that boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry."

What is this "great blasphemy" that needs to be purged? Speaking shamefully of one's weather

seems hardly to be the crucial object of concern. Or one could ask: what is so sacred about the African weather that bringing the European weather to its vicinity constitutes irreverence? But, clearly, the contention here is not about the weather, but about an act of irreverence that poses a threat so great that Achebe makes its purgation his artistic objective. I do not want to make too much of lexicology, yet a brief look at one of the grounds on which an act is called a blasphemy can help set the stage for analyzing the key assumption at play in Achebe's remark to the school boy. An act is termed blasphemous when, for example, it intrudes impiously on the sacred or on an entity of sovereign unity that, in itself, is ground enough for values and judgments. From this definition, we can surmise that one of Achebe's assumptions is that there used to be a time when the African world, validated by itself, was ground enough for judging everything from beauty to knowledge. However, at some point, things changed. As the school boy found out, the African world had lost its place as a foundational unity on which identity could be formed. Something else – call it modernity, call it colonial encounter, call it the European world – that came from the outside had to be added onto the African world to validate it. Is the "great blasphemy" then modernity? It is probably not modernity as such, for if it were, Achebe would not think to erase it. Far too much is at stake in modernity for its erasure to be desirable. Instead, the blasphemy is that of which modernity is the sign: the loss of Africa as a founding unity or as an irreducible first term.

During the decades of fervent anti-colonial efforts, this purging of blasphemies, falsifications, misrecognitions, and alienation was a major part of a much larger venture to establish the worldliness of

Africa. This broader project of asserting the continent's worldliness was driven by the impulse to orient Africa towards what, in his 2000 book *Between Camps*, Paul Gilroy calls, "the idea of a cosmopolitan future." It is a project that is very crucial and that is still ongoing. As Wole Soyinka notes in the preface of *Myth Literature and the African World*, it is a given that Africa is a member (based on its self-standing uniqueness) of a universal world of man, myth and history. That Africa "possesses ... in common with other cultures, the virtue of complementarity", is a truth that ought not to be open for debate. Soyinka, Achebe, and many other anti-colonial and post-nationalist thinkers sought to imagine an African future in which Africa addresses, and is addressed by, others. However, because of the way these intellectuals visualized this future, it remained largely imaginary and did not serve as an effective force for radical change. How is this the case? What were the limits of some of the tasks around which an African cosmopolitan future was imagined? How might it be that classic African discourse on modernity gestures more towards a communitarian imagination of Africa's future than a cosmopolitan one? If we choose to understand the future in the Blochian sense as that which holds the unexpectedly and radically new, how is it that the conventional narrative of African modernity falls short in envisioning a revolutionary future for Africa?

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A good way to begin is to return to Achebe's recommendation of purging. In rendering modernity in

terms of blasphemy, Achebe had already begun the process of purgation. But how so and in what sense does modernity blaspheme? Understood as the trump card of colonialism, as the living testament to European cultural creativity, as proof of the claimed contingency of the African world, modernity is perceived as blaspheming against an African world assumed to have once possessed an autonomous and founding unity. This understanding of modernity is clearly responding to the discourse colonialism. One of the ideologies of empire is the European prerogative over time such that the appearance and reality of other worlds as historical entities are perceived as contingent on an encounter with Europe. Perceived as the culture whose origin precedes, supersedes and is destined to assimilate all others, Europe resides at the center of a natural totality, governed by a fixed deterministic order of time. From that standpoint, the cosmopolitan entity called Africa can be assimilated into the stream of European history as a radically new invention of European cultural creativity, while modernity is held up as the incontestable proof of this view. This narrative of Africa's modernity constitutes a regime of discourse that I term the discourse of contingency.

Narratives of modernity are generally preoccupied with the past because at base they entail questions about origins. So in order to counter the discourse of contingency, African critical discourse sought to provide a different account of time through a discourse of continuity. This is where the preoccupation with history that characterises classic anti-colonial thought comes from. The need to reset the time of Africa's beginning cuts across the ideological divisions internal to anti-colonial and post-nationalist thought. The Romanticism of negritude, the

liberal humanism of Achebean realism, Soyinka's mythopoetics, and Cabral's Marxism can be seen as different ways of organizing political tasks around the counteraction of an African world contingent on the colonial encounter. Most importantly, where the colonial discourse of contingency fused the emergence of the African world with the gift of modernity, the African discourse of continuity wanted to pry the two apart. The aim was to prove that, even though modernity reconfigured the geographical, cultural, political and economic significance of the entity called Africa, the fact that an African world preceded the advent of colonialism and modernity is incontrovertible. This temporal readjustment forms the basis on which the anachronism inherent in the term "pre-colonial Africa" is politically significant.

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Modernity rather than the African world becomes the figure of the new for it not only comes after but also comes from outside. This equation will become significant in addressing the limitations that characterized the ways in which Africa's future was visualized in anti-colonial discourse. But first lets us briefly attend to the ways in which the blameworthiness of modernity was asserted, and why this assertion was paradoxically crucial to the business of absolving African modernity of its transgressive attachment to colonialism. As advertised on its back cover, one of the major accomplishments of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's recent book, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (2009), is that it, "traces the arc of Afri-

ca's fragmentation and restoration amidst the global history of colonialism and modernity". The image of modernity as fragmentation is an old and familiar figure for portraying the discontents of modernity in African literary criticism. In an earlier piece, an essay titled "The African Writer and His Past," Ngũgĩ uses an image of modernity as wreckage, which is more bodily, and therefore, more striking. In this essay, modern Africa, in its violated form, is a body stolen, battered, and then bartered for "thirty pieces of silver". Modernity as blasphemy, as fragmentation, as disfigurement, as post-apocalyptic wreckage: all these metaphors of discontent attempt not merely to point out the failures of modernity as imagined by western discourse, but to assert the necessity of looking elsewhere for grounds on which Africa can address its future. If the West did not invent Africa, and if its modernity has resulted in cultural and political disaster, how can its vision inspire a design for Africa's future? More importantly, continuity of Africa's own temporal order is established by inscribing modernity into a continuous movement of time organic to Africa. Despite their political uses, however, these representations of modernity portray Africa's present merely as a dismembered transfiguration or a spoiled copy of a lost unity.

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Disavowing modernity as the other against which the truth of Africa's self is identified is only partially helpful, since modernity continues to assert itself as an indispensable ground for Africa's worldliness. As Anthony Appiah points out his book *In My fa-*

*ther's House* (1992), how do you do away with the suspicion that African identity is partly the product of a gaze that comes from the outside? One way to solve this puzzle could be to set about disclosing all that is enduringly endogenous about modernity and adapting all that is left, which means all that is new, into this framework of the familiar. Wole Soyinka, in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, presents a compelling argument about what makes African theatre African. He claims that the bases on which one can legitimately speak of an African theatre, and by extension an African world, can be located within an African metaphysical and cosmological matrix. This argument is part of Soyinka's objective, as expressed in the preface of the book, to show that some of the so-called grand values of modernity, "are already contained in or can be elicited from the world-view and social structures of [the African] people." Soyinka is, here, appealing to what Achille Mbembe calls the "insider's discourse", that which is assumed should, "always be trusted to produce a better truth" of what Africa is to itself and to the Other.

Or consider the common assumption that the modern African writer is a transfiguration of the village, tales-by-moonlight story teller. Achebe contributed immensely to this invention of the storyteller as forerunner of the modern African writer. Drawing from Lionel Trilling's construction of the modern self that emerged in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Achebe levels a critique against the individual heroic performance of artistic identity that he ascribes to the west, calling instead for socially-oriented artistic practices. Achebe, however, is fully aware that the individualizing force of modernity he is critiquing also inscribes the very being of his own artistic practice in writing. In fact, the individual-

izing forces of modernity that fashions the village storyteller – the figure of Achebe's socially-embedded artist – into the modern African writer are the same productive forces that invest the writer with the social power that grants him involvement in the project of reconstructing modernity as authentically African. But by invoking the image of the storyteller as the figure of a different and more ethical artistic performance of power, Achebe shifts the ground on which writing is a productive cultural instrument. Achebe wants to argue, it seems, that the efficacy of writing as a technology for transacting cultural meaning is not specified by its modernity, but by the uses and performance of the social power it represents. Consequently, by replacing the image of the writer as a solitary hero with the socially-oriented storyteller, Achebe re-inscribes writing – the poster child of all that is new about modernity – into the discourse of continuity.

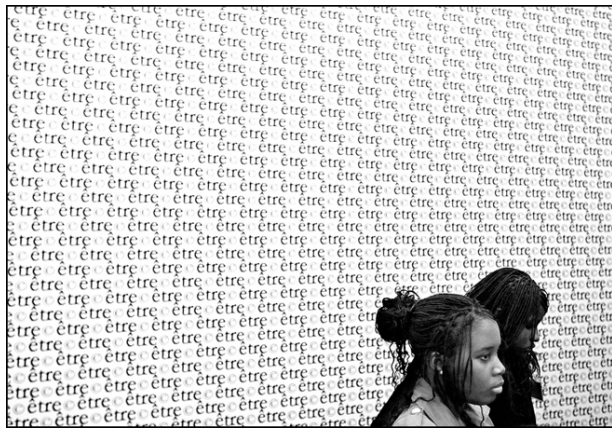
Viewed as a modern but miscarried re-invention of something superior, and as a bad copy of something that precedes it, African modernity is perceived as always signalling the presence of that which it can never restore to its founding unity. Reclaiming African modernity therefore revolved around the identification and interpretation of the signs and traces left by the world that once was, and still is, repressed under cultural fragmentation induced by colonialism. In the terms of Alain Badiou, as mentioned in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (2003), the discourse of continuity centers on the "requisition of signs" and on "testifying to transcendence by exposing the obscure to its deciphering". As a hermeneutics of memory, the discourse of continuity insists that the more we can show how much of the old world still inhabits the new, the more we can master

all that appears slippery, alien, transgressive, and lethal about the new. But as Paul Gilroy argues in *Between Camps* (2000), even though a "hermeneutics of memory" functions as an interpretive tool of cultural and political meaning in projects of racial retrieval, it is useful mostly for communitarian ends and is not viable for modes of addressing the future that aspires towards the cosmopolitan.

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Attempting to snatch modernity from the delegitimizing hands of colonialism is an immense project of subject construction. The superstructure of any revolutionary initiative is the construction of a new subject. And the philosophy of history that grounds a revolutionary discourse often provides clues to the nature of the desired subject. For example, the discourse of continuity relies on subjects who can traverse worlds separated by history, which is itself assumed to be instantaneously intelligible. Since the colonial encounter, despite its cataclysmic effects, left behind signs of the old dispensation and survivors able to interpret these signs, shuttling between both worlds is assumed to be possible through the mediation of interpretive processes.

This assumption is well illustrated in Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease* where he replicates in a modern setting the dreams and anxieties that propelled the drama of his earlier work *Things Fall Apart*. Olakunle George, in his recent book *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters* (2009), makes an interesting point about a particular charac-



être ou ne pas être...

Photo: Flickr / Alain Bachellier

ter that links both novels. Recall Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, who rebels against his father's wrong-headed parochialism so that he can embrace the worldliness of a Christian and British milieu. Sixty years after Achebe's *fin de siècle* drama of Africa's apocalyptic encounter with the West, Nwoye reappears as a modern version of Okonkwo: parochial and intransigent in his refusal to accept his own son's cosmopolitan impulse to marry a woman from a tabooed caste. In fact, there is a moment in the text when Nwoye recalls life before modernity in order to leverage his argument for preserving tradition. George argues that Nwoye's aspiration to secularize the tribal gods of his father, Okonkwo, through Christianity is not entirely interchangeable with Obi's cosmopolitan impulse to de-criminalize the taboo on his intended marriage. Whether we agree with George or not, it is clear enough that the underlying assumption made in likening all three characters in both novels is that both worlds are actuated by parallel anxieties and

dreams. The consequence of this assumption is that, despite the cataclysmic intervention of colonialism, Okonkwo, transfigured as Nwoye, can somehow still feel at home in modernity, traced through with the parallel anxiety of losing a hold on tribal culture, an anxiety tied to the parallel and errant dream of worldliness. Nwoye is the figure of continuity because he is the survivor who can not only remember, but can also use this memory to interpret, modernity. He is also the subject of continuity who, through memory, can reach into the depths of history while anticipating events far into the future.

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Nwoye, however, is serving as the link to something else. As the figure of continuity, Nwoye connects the worlds of Okonkwo and Obi, and as such it becomes possible to imagine that Okonkwo, in a sense, anticipated Obi – the figure of Achebe's own historical moment. The question I am posing here is: yes, Achebe imagined Okonkwo, but would Okonkwo have been able to imagine Achebe? The answer would be yes if there is any validity in the notion that Okonkwo's pre-colonial world and the Obi-Achebe modern world are mutually intelligible, or that Okonkwo can imagine Achebe's world the same way Achebe can imagine his. What though if we affirm otherwise? What is the consequence of imagining Okonkwo and Achebe as inexorably separated by an unbridgeable chasm of non-recognition?

Underneath all this preoccupation with the past is an attempt at visualizing Africa's future. In other words, in accounting for the present through the

past, the discourse of continuity is actually an argument for Africa's capacity to address its own future. As loss or as a lack, African modernity is constantly being projected towards a future of self-identification. One problem with this mode of imaging the future, however, is that even though it gestures towards what is yet to come, it is, in reality, merely oscillating between a present of lack that needs to be overcome because of a particular moment of loss in the past and a future that fulfills the desire for completeness. In making this point, I am relying on a rather fascinating distinction that Frederick Jameson makes between Jean Paul Sartre's and Ernst Bloch's conceptions of the present. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre sees the present as a permanent space of anxiety, tension, contingency, and emptiness. Bloch's present is similarly conceived as a space of insufficiency, incompleteness, hollowness, and blankness. What is different is the specific way in which the present actuates the future. For Sartre, the experience of loss that plagues the present and the dream of self-identity in the future are both valid only for the present so that, as Jameson notes, the future is thought of, not in terms of the radically new, but in terms of overcoming an intolerable present. Whereas, in Bloch's philosophy of the future, the insufficiency of the present does not require the future to be an overcoming of the present; instead, the insufficiency of the present undermines its capacity to specify or serve as ground for the future. This way, the absolute newness of the future is preserved.

This conception of the future is instructive first because it shows how, although well-intentioned, the impulse to purge modernity of its blameworthiness by assimilating the new into a discourse of

continuity devolves into a dream of self-recognition. Secondly, unable to imagine a future for Africa that is not weighed down by a present traced through by the past, the discourse of continuity cannot grant African modernity the Promethean image of the new as that which is radically revolutionary. In a sense, African modernity could never be innocent. It could never be encountered with complete affirmation. It is always having to justify itself against an accusing unity, the loss of which it is a sign of. Whatever is legitimately new is assimilated into the pre-established framework of continuity, whereas the radically new is cast out because it is redolent of colonialism and its errant modernity. The future, therefore, can only be apprehended from the stand point of vindication, redress, and self-recognition. This understanding of the future is limited because it is grounded on what Gilroy calls a “corrective or compensatory” understanding of modernity.

During a recent celebration at Duke University of the twentieth year since the publication of V.Y. Mudimbe’s *Invention of Africa*, Achille Mbembe posed the following set of questions in a lecture: “What constitutes the truth of Africa’s self; the truth Africa offers about herself; the truth by which Africa might be known and become recognizably human?... Is it possible to imagine ‘recognition’ not as the process by which Africa is able to return to what it was (a return to self), but as constitutive loss – a loss that forecloses upon the past in an irreversible way; a loss that makes any possibility of return to the past utterly impossible because from now on, the only way to account for ourselves is precisely through a mediation that takes place outside us, which does not mean that they are not of our own making?” In gathering together the different strands of my ar-

gument, I want to attempt a response to Mbembe’s provocation regarding ‘recognition’:

How can the truth of Africa’s self be articulated without the nostalgia or accusation of a lost unity? How can we formulate a different calculus of political tasks around recognition as a metaphor for imagining the future? And this is important: how can we essentially ‘forget’ the past without undermining the political uses of cultural memory, our pre-colonial past, and the violence of colonialism? Fundamentally, I am asking: how can we redefine the political language we use in articulating African modernity and its future?

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Alain Badiou’s concept of the event provides the grounds on which I argue that the question is not really about Africa’s past and the memory we have of it as such, but to what extent the past is allowed to decide what Africa means to itself and to the world. Seeing the emergence of an African world as an event could be a step towards imagining Africa as a radically new beginning. What is most staggeringly innovative about Badiou’s philosophy of the event, from my standpoint, is that it opens the possibility of apprehending newness by being indifferent to what came before. As an occurrence, the event is fleeting, contingent, and non-axiomatic. Because it cannot be guaranteed by any system of knowledge, viewed from within any totalizing standpoint, the event appears illegal and meaningless. An example of this would be the Greeks dismissing of Christ’s resurrection as a fable, or the Judaic authorities seeing the Christ-event as blasphemous. In its flickering and

non-verifiable appearance, the event’s only means of survival is in being named and circulated, first by subtracting it from any rigid discursive enclosures, and then declaring one’s fidelity to it. Indifference does not mean that one ceases to engage with the pre-evental world but that, because the meaning accrued from the event is not specified by what came before it, it is possible to perform a radical temporal shift: that is, to imagine the event as inaugurating a new beginning.

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In his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Badiou observes that Paul did not witness the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus firsthand, and that he refuses to submit Christ’s resurrection either to the scrutiny of Greek philosophy (which he dismisses as the foolish things of the world), or to the validation of the Mosaic Law. How, then, could Paul possibly have created the Christian subject and rendered Christianity universal having thus rejected the two major discursive fields out of which the Christ-event emerged? To rephrase the question within my own context of concern: how can we apprehend the worldliness of Africa, render the African subject universal, and orient it towards a cosmopolitan future without having recourse to a hermeneutics of memory? How might the spectre of an invented modernity, a lost unity, and a falsified image cease to be a source of anxiety and a compulsion towards a will-to-truth?

A radical assumption Badiou is making is that the meaning that accrues from an event is not dependent

on the cause of the event, neither is it affiliated to the site on which the event occurs. In other words, the event remains undecidable in relation to its context of occurrence. One of Badiou's favorite examples of an event is the French Revolution. As Gabriel Riera explains in his volume *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions* (2003), "Badiou wants to think about what makes the French Revolution 'French' even though France neither gave birth to it nor named the event-character a revolution." Likewise, to insist on a discourse of continuity is to refuse to see how the appearance of the African world and the construction of Africa as a universal idea could not have been decided or anticipated by either the pre-colonial "African" world or the colonial establishment. Rather, it is in putting the name of the event in circulation by declaring one's fidelity to it that the event is not only rendered to universal truth but also made effective in creating subjects. This is precisely why constructing African modernity as an event could be productive for imagining an African cosmopolitan future. As an event, the emergence of the African world is pulled out of the rigidity of a totalizing past, an act that loosens the communitarian hold on how African imagines itself and is apprehended by others. Also, as subject of the event, one does not have to bear witness to the founding unity of a pre-eventual African world, or possess empirical proof of a world that came before. The reason for this is simple. There is no subject of the event before the event. It is by naming and affirming fidelity to the event that the subject is created, not by establishing connection to the pre-eventual world that precedes the event.

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From this standpoint, we can see why Okonkwo – burdened with anxieties and dreams of modernity – is an anachronistic figure. It is probably not very helpful to go as far as saying that Okonkwo is not an African, or that his world is not Africa; yet it is important to acknowledge that the world Okonkwo inhabited could not have anticipated, or have decided, the terms on which a particular world came to be named Africa. Neither is the colonial discourse of contingency tenable on these grounds. Despite its function as some kind of cause, the colonial encounter did not decide or specify the manner in which Africa constitutes its identity. It is on these grounds that I am sympathetic to Soyinka's notion that the colonial factor is incidental to the creation of the African world.