

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Critical Interventions: For an Africanization of Thinking and Becomings

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**Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr (eds.), translated by Drew Burk. 2023. *To Write the Africa World*. Cambridge & Hoboken: Polity Press. 324 pp.**

**Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr (eds.), translated by Philip Gerard. 2023. *The Politics of Time: Imagining African Becomings*. Cambridge & Hoboken: Polity Press. 332 pp.**

Edited by two of Africa's leading academics, Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr, these companion volumes originally appeared in French as *Écrire l'Afrique-Monde* (2017) and *Politique des Temps* (2019). They are the result of an initiative called *Ateliers de la pensée* (Workshops of Thought) which took place in Dakar and Saint-Louis, Senegal in 2016 and 2017 respectively. During these sessions, African and diasporic intellectuals from diverse disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, came together to participate in a series of lively debates around issues pertinent to the African continent's past, present, and future. The contributions made from these encounters by established and emerging academics, philosophers, writers, and artists, have been translated into English and published by Polity Press as part of their "Critical South" series.

The first book, *To Write the Africa World*, brings together texts that reflect on the role Africa has in shaping the contemporary world and its global transformations and articulate diverse issues such as the universal, the personal, social utopias, and the question of decoloniality. As the editors explain in the introductory pages entitled "Thinking for a New Century," there is an urgency that unites the voices gathered in this volume: "what we are seeking here is a way to create a new form of construction. To accomplish this, we must first begin by not only opening up all the borders, but also by inventing a way to render the archive—every archive—as legible

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as possible” (p. 3). Inevitably, part of the process involves critically reflecting on how colonialism, slavery, and Western-centric othering systems of thinking and constructions have left their legacies. While acknowledging these histories, the authors have set out to challenge and change historically constituted misconceptions that have separated Africa from the rest of the world and to push the debate forward to give way to new constructions of thought which propose original approaches to interpreting the contemporary world. As Mbembe and Sarr argue: “There is no longer an African or diasporic question that is not at the same time a global question. Or, to put it another way: the Africanization of the global question will perhaps constitute, at the level of the philosophical and the aesthetic, the event par excellence of the twenty-first century” (p. 5).

The Africa-centred perspective on the global question remains a central theme in the sequel, *The Politics of Time: Imagining African Belongings*. Here, the authors reflected on the geopolitics of time and power and on apocalyptic thinking in the age of climate change and the Anthropocene. As the editors explain:

Repoliticizing time has long consisted in the attempt to seize the past as a transformative force. Creatively reinterpreted and retranslated, such a force was thought capable of opening up new spaces of possibility...Under such conditions, time would no longer be experienced as an uninterrupted succession of ruptures, constraints, and impossibilities. By reconnecting with the transformative kernel of its past, Africa could at last return to being a power—which is to say, something that contains its own capacity within itself (p. x).

There are echoes of history represented in these two volumes which are taken up and explored by the philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne in his essay “From Thinking Identity to Thinking African Belongings” (in *The Politics of Time*), and which in my view, are the modus operandi of the *Ateliers de la pensée* project. In his article, Diagne alludes to the aims of the organizers of the *Ateliers* which he suggests align closely with those set out by the Pan-African publishing house and journal *Présence Africaine* half a century earlier.

Organised by the Senegalese intellectual Alioune Diop, the First and Second Congresses of Black Writers and Artists, which were held at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1956 and the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente in Rome in 1959, brought together leading intellectuals from Africa and the diaspora (including the proponents of the movement of Négritude) in the wake of the looming independence from European colonial control. The delegates debated on colonialism, the process of decolonisation and on Pan-African ideas around an international black identity as well as the differences in the black diasporic experience. These momentous cultural events had political reverberations too. Indeed, some of the Congress delegates had already or would soon become the first presidents of the newly formed independent nations (such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal) and the

resolutions that came out of the Second Congress would shape the politics of many newly independent African nations. The multi-disciplinary articles published by *Présence Africaine* from the late 1940s and over the decades of independence (including the proceedings of the delegates of the two Congresses), would be important markers for affirming African cultural, political, intellectual, artistic, and historical presence in the Western-dominated world.

As Souleymane Bachir Diagne rightly points out, “one could argue that African thought has passed from yesterday’s thinking of identity, which was part of the struggle against colonialism, to today’s thinking of becomings” (p. 4). Diagne suggests that it is pertinent for today’s African intellectuals to adopt critical thinking tools to break from the pitfalls of the past in order to find new solutions. Diagne quotes the sadly missed Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji, with the following passage which he uses at the beginning of his article to reflect on issues of negation, cultural and religious pluralism, and the challenges of affirming an African presence in a world of cultural diversity:

[W]hat matters is not philosophy as such but critical thought. It is such thinking that we must develop today...to imagine the possible beyond the real, to make sure that the platitudes of the present do not become the measure of all things but are themselves measured, relativized, put in their proper place, ranked in order and made subordinate to other demands, that they are weighed against norms that push us forward and that free us from conformism and resignation (p. 3).

The historical links between the overall aims of *Ateliers de la pensée* and *Présence Africaine* brought me to question why the editors Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr did not choose to publish the collection of articles in a journal format rather than two book volumes. While the editors encourage the readers to read the articles in the books freely and not necessarily chronologically, navigating through the wide range of interventions representing such an array of disciplines and ideas, could lead the less versed reader to be a little overwhelmed. The journal medium would have provided the editors with the opportunity to carefully curate a series of issues with a selection of contributions, and to provide the readers with a more digestible volume, thereby expanding its readership in a similar way *Présence Africaine* became one of the leading journals for African and African Diaspora as well as many European writers in the post-independent decades.

While the political context of Africa and the diaspora has changed since the foundation of the publishing house and journal *Présence Africaine*, and the world is far more interconnected and globalized, there is still a lot of work to be done to align the southern and northern hemispheres together. It is thus hoped that *Ateliers de la pensée* will continue to publish new content, perhaps in a journal form, and become one of the leading platforms from which

scholars, artists, and thinkers alike can continue to work towards the Africanization of the world and to forge an archaeology of the contemporary for the future.