Mbembe at the Lekgotla of Foucault's Self-Styling and African Identity

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Abstract

Achille Mbembe's article "African Modes of Self-Writing" (2001), which is a precursor to his book *On the Postcolony* (2001), challenges essentialist conceptions of African identity and their theoretical and political poverty, and in turn offers a fluid conception of African subjectivities. Reviewing anti-colonial and postcolonial theories of African identity, Mbembe contends that dominant notions of African identity are tropes of Nativism and Afro-radicalism premised on historicist thinking, which lead to a dead-end. He utilises Michel Foucault's notion of self-styling and argues that, contrary to Nativist and Afro-radicalist notions of African identity—which deny African subjects spaces or sites of autonomous actions that constantly constitute their identities—African subjects in Mbembe's view are existential works of art forged through the practices of the self. Critique on Mbembe's "African Modes of Self-Writing" and *On the Postcolony* has been dominated by the polarities of essentialist and anti-essentialist views of African identity and their socio-political and material consequence. Except for Jewsiewicki (2002), none has interrogated Mbembe's appropriation of Foucault's notion of the practice of liberty or self-styling and its theoretical and political consequence on Mbembe's conception of the socio-political and cultural freedom of the African subjects. It is the aim of this essay to interrogate Mbembe's narrow appropriation of Foucault's conception of self-styling and its consequent problematic theorisation of African identity as enacted by practices of the self. By way of introduction, I will contextualise Mbembe's critique of African modes of imagining African identity, before I analyse his bounded appropriation of Foucault's notion of self-styling, and conclude by exposing his consequent problematic conception of African practices of freedom.

Keywords: Mbembe; self-styling; practice of liberty; African identity; socio-political freedom

African Modes of Imagining African Identity

In 2001, before publishing his book *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe published an article titled "African Modes of Self-Writing" (Mbembe 2002a [2001]) which can be read as a summary of *On the Postcolony* (Mbembe 2001). Both these works critically discuss dominant anti-colonial and postcolonial definitions of African identity by exposing their theoretical and political bankruptcy, and alternatively, Mbembe's attempts to theorise postcolonial African subjectivities. It is in "African Modes of Self-Writing" where Mbembe explicitly engages with the notion of African identity and utilises Foucault's notion of the practice of liberty or self-styling to articulate postcolonial African subjectivities as underscoring African socio-political and cultural freedom which define postcolonial African subjects.

To go about his intervention, Mbembe begins by positing that influential modes of thinking about African identity, although philosophically insubstantial, have prevented the development of better ways of understanding African situations. This has resulted in the failure of African reflections to yield an integrated philosophical-theological system comparable to that of German and Jewish philosophical traditions. According to Mbembe, numerous factors have stymied the full development of African ways of conceptualising the African past and present with reference to the future (Mbembe 2002a, 240). Fundamental among these factors, is historicism (Mbembe 2002a, 240). Efforts that have been made by African intellectuals to find conditions that should have allowed African people to attain full selfhood and be answerable to no one but themselves, have been colonised by what Mbembe has identified as historicist thinking.[1]

According to Mbembe, historicist thinking is based on a deterministic understanding of human agency. He argues that "in African history, it is though there is neither irony nor accident. We are told that African history is essentially governed by forces beyond Africans' control" (Mbembe 2002a, 251). Based on Marxist and African indigenous notions of history, the African is not conceptualised as an agent of free action, but rather, what happens in the African world is as a result of forces beyond the African's control. "The diversity and the disorder of the world, as well as the open character of historical possibilities, are reduced to a spasmodic, unchanging cycle, infinitely repeated in accord with a conspiracy always fomented by forces beyond Africa's reach" (Mbembe 2002a, 251–252). Hence, the figure of the African subject is that of a victim without the capacity to create his/her world, the African is "merely a castrated subject, the passive instrument of the Other's enjoyment" (Mbembe 2002a, 252).

Historicism has colonised African thought on African identity in two forms. The first form may be termed "Afro-radicalism"; "with its baggage of instrumentalism and political opportunism" (Mbembe 2002a, 240). The second form of historicism Mbembe identifies is inflected by the metaphysics of difference, what he calls "Nativism."

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1 Some commentators believe that Mbembe's critique that all African thought on African identity is historicist, is not correct. See Diagne (2002); Guyer (2002); Jules-Rosette (2002); and Weate (2003).

Afro-radicalism, Mbembe (2002a, 249) argues, originated from the abolitionist discourses of African liberation, which for the most part appropriated the Enlightenment conceptual paradigm. Mbembe (2002a, 243) argues that Afro-radicalism has been infiltrated by a contradiction between voluntarism and victimisation. On the one hand, African modes of writing the self claim to espouse African modes of being autonomous. On the other hand, these modes of conceptualising the African self always imagine the African-self as a victim that lacks agency.

Another characteristic of Afro-radicalism reveals a mechanical and regurgitated conception of history (Mbembe 2002a, 243). On this view, African modes of thinking about who Africans are and how they experience the world are always determined—a priori—by forces other than African subjects themselves. This mode of conceptualising African identity always sees the African subject as acted upon; as always subjugated by some Other. These forces that have always subjugated the African subject have thwarted the blooming of the uniqueness of African identity. Consequently, Africans are believed not to be responsible for the catastrophic conditions that they have historically found themselves in.

Unlike Afro-radicalism that emerged in nineteenth century, the imagining of Africa was later sustained by the use of Marxist and nationalist categories. Nativism developed from a discourse that emphasised the conditions of the native people of Africa by promoting a unique African cultural identity based on their membership to a people identified as black. While Afro-radicalism, as we have seen, is characterised by a tension between voluntarism and victimisation, Nativism, on the other hand, is permeated by a contradiction between "a universalising move that claims shared membership within the human condition (sameness) and an opposing, particularistic move" (Mbembe 2002a, 252). He argues that:

> This latter move emphasises difference and specificity by accenting, not originality as such, but the principle of repetition (tradition) and the values of autochthony. The point where these two political and cultural moves converge is race. (Mbembe 2002a, 253)

The particularistic line of thought holds that its specificity as a cultural identity is based on the "black race." This argument echoes Anthony Appiah's critique of nineteenth century Pan-Africanism as represented by the ideas of Alexander Crummell, Edward Blyden, and Du Bois (Appiah 1992). Although Mbembe (2002a) points the reader's attention to the historically constructed notion of race and how it shaped relations of power between people of European origin and people of African origin, he still contends that African intellectuals did not challenge the fiction of race.[2]

> The basic underpinnings of nineteenth-century anthropology, namely, the evolutionist prejudice and the belief in the idea of progress, remain intact; racialisation of the [black] nation and the nationalisation of the [black] race go hand in hand. Whether we look at negritude or the differing versions of Pan-Africanism, in these discourses the revolt is not

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2   Mbembe agrees with Kwame Appiah's *In My Father's House* (1992) that the Nativists do "not challenge the fiction of race." In fact, the notion of race becomes foundational to their conception of African identity.

against Africans' belonging to a distinct race, but against the prejudice that assigns this race an inferior status. (Mbembe 2002a, 254)

In their insistence on "a glorious past that testifies to [their] humanity," the Nativists return to the notion of race to justify the specificity of their traditions and customs. Tradition, Mbembe (2002a, 254) explains, takes a privileged place in Nativist thought. Converging race and tradition, Nativist thought claims that "Africans have an authentic culture that confers on them a peculiar self irreducible to that of any other group. The negation of this authenticity would thus constitute a mutilation" (Mbembe 2002a, 254). The group in question is a racial group, and avoiding mutilation to maintain authenticity means maintaining the group's racial difference.

Mbembe (2002a) contends that African ways of conceptualising African identity or human self-understanding and human agency are philosophically flawed because they deny agency to African subjects, and will not help Africans to realise multiple possibilities in which they can shake off the negative ravages of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. In turn, he offers a different mode of thinking about African identity which accounts for human self-understanding and human agency. In the following section, I will explain Mbembe's alternative to African modes of conceptualising African identity, which he articulates through Foucault's notion of self-styling.

Mbembe's African Self-Styling

Instead of propounding the metaphysics of difference (Nativism) and Afro-radicalism, Mbembe calls for an identification of realities that are currently being established by African agents. For Mbembe, in order to get to an accurate understanding of human agency and the existential conditions of postcolonial African subjects, he raises some questions on philosophical, anthropological and sociological levels that African intellectuals should have raised much earlier in order to effectively interrogate the realities that slavery, colonialism and apartheid had created. On a philosophical level, he argues that African intellectuals should have examined the historical models that initially led to their enslavement. This, on Mbembe's view, entails rejecting the historicist and racist paradigm from which Afro-radicalism and Nativism have been conceptualised. On an anthropological level, Mbembe argues, they should have given up their "obsession with uniqueness" and supported themes of sameness or universality (Mbembe 2002a [2001], 258).[3] The commitment to human sameness or universality, according to Mbembe, would have resulted in imagining actual free African agents like other human beings in the world. Sociologically, they would have given attention to everyday practices that ordinary Africans were preoccupied with to make sense of their world. Had they followed this route, the African subject would no longer be perceived as both subject to a predetermined African identity and on the receiving end of forces beyond the African's control. With these proposals, one can identify Mbembe's (2001,

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3 Mbembe here does not account how to re-imagine universality without the de-humanising effects it has had on non-European peoples.

15) theoretical approach to human subjectivity as espoused in *On the Postcolony,* where he writes:

> While willing to take up a philosophical perspective when needed, I started from the idea that there is a close relationship between subjectivity and temporality—that, in some way, one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality. The intuition behind this idea was that, for each time and each age, there exists something distinctive and particular—or, to use the term, a "spirit" [Zeitgeist]. These distinctive and specific things are constituted by a set of material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions that, because they are available to individuals' imagination and intelligence and actually experienced, form what might be called "languages of life" (Mbembe 2001, 15)

By emphasising the daily experiences of ordinary social actors, Mbembe propounds an existential phenomenological approach to conceptualising African realities.[4] To understand what it means to be African, for Mbembe, one has to be immersed in the realities of the subject's temporality and the subject's autonomous actions in response to her situatedness. Thus, to philosophically think about African identity means thinking about African subjects' temporalities. Thinking with time and in time is what Mbembe believes his adversaries should have done. Whether Mbembe's theoretical adversaries did or did not think with the everyday practices of ordinary people, is a question for another time. Mbembe takes his proposed perspective and proceeds to offer a new way of conceptualising African identity.

African realities are changing, Mbembe insists. He maintains that the discourse of anti-imperialism is exhausted, although this does not mean that the suffering inflicted by victimisation has been transcended. He further argues that themes of Pan-Africanism and Nativism are now merging to oppose globalisation, despite the fact that racial and blood relations on the continent are constantly shifting depending on contingent conditions. The new merging of Pan-Africanism and Nativism is a sign of the persistence of the pathos of victimisation.

To show that his adversaries are wrong to conceive of African identity as a substance or in an essentialist fashion and without human agency, Mbembe takes account of how contemporary African peoples create their identities. This does not only show that African identity is not a substance, but it also shows that the authentic past, which both Afro-radicals and Nativists long for, is unattainable, and African subjects are autonomous subjects.

Applying his new approach in the form of existential phenomenology, Mbembe looks at how people, categorised as black, fashion their identities amidst the present postcolonial conditions. He argues that global practices of symbolic exchange have affected African lives in different spheres, including individual African identity. The result is a complex matrix from which Africans fashion their identities; and the intersection of global flows and local practices is the site of African identity formation. Primarily, for Mbembe, among prevailing conditions from which Africans fashion their identities, is the state of war. Mbembe (2002a

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4   Jeremy Weate is of the view that "Mbembe's project, in terms of a critique of the textual paradigm, is that he occupies an interstitial space somewhere between poststructuralism and existential phenomenology" (Weate 2003, 27).

[2001], 267) argues that "the state of war in contemporary Africa should, in fact, be conceived of as a general cultural experience that shapes identities, just as the family, the school, and other social institutions do." He briefly explains the cruelty and lawlessness of the state of war. He describes the state of war as "a zone of indistinction" where "decisions about life and death become entirely arbitrary" (Mbembe 2002a [2001], 267). Amidst this state of war, and in the "the zone of indistinction," Mbembe (2002a [2001], 269) insists that native Africans still practise agency or freedom, as he puts it: "In the act that consists of putting to death innumerable sacrificial victims, the agent of the massacre also seeks to transcend and reinvent the self." He further elaborates that:

> Trembling with drunkenness, he or she becomes a sort of work of art shaped and sculpted by cruelty. It is in this sense that the state of war becomes part of the new African practices of the self. Through sacrifice, the African subject transforms his or her own subjectivity and produces something new—something that does not belong to the domain of a lost identity that must at all costs be found again, but rather something radically different, something open to change and whose theory and vocabulary remain to be invented. (Mbembe 2002a [2001], 269)

Another major factor that informs the matrix, from which African identities are fashioned today, is the state of religion. As the state of war, the site at which the state of religion conditions the formation of African identities is at the conjugation of cosmopolitan and local practices (Mbembe 2002a [2001], 269). He argues that there has been a significant growth of Pentecostal Christianity among the African urban elite. The expansion of Pentecostal Christianity has instituted "structures of meaning, each of which provides a means of psychic negotiation, self-styling and engagement with the world at large" (Mbembe 2002a [2001], 269). In this religious context, the subject's main source of meaning is shaped by the relationship to the divine sovereignty.

Mbembe is aware of his anti-essentialist position at this point; whence he argues that these structures, the state of war and state of religion, produce identities that are far from being homogeneous and stable. In the state of war, new lines are continually drawn. New friends and enemies are made, while old alliances are lost and forgotten as conditions change. A similar activity is identified for those found in the state of religion. Relations of those conditioned by Pentecostal Christianity always change, "new non-biological relationships among members of a family or even an ecumene are formed, at the same time as notions of divine sovereignty and patronage are transformed, and new dogmas emerge" (Mbembe 2002a [2001], 270). It is also important to note here that Mbembe recognises the entangled nature of knowledge with practices of the self. Dogmas, as he calls them, continually inform or conduct behaviour, and vice versa. At this point, we can see that Mbembe is aware that prevailing modes of thought govern both individual and socio-political practices, and at the same time, prevailing socio-political practices inform the production or formation of knowledge.

Mbembe concludes his work by commending that we should move away from thinking of African identity within a racist paradigm, that has constituted historicist thinking based on the

contradictions between voluntarism vs. victimisation, and particularism vs. cosmopolitanism. Instead, we should start theorising African identities from the existential conditions from which Africans find meaning for their daily lives. This entails realising that African people, like all other human beings, are agents of their actions. What happens to Africans today can no longer be solely attributed to the subjugating forces of the "Other" responsible for thwarting the blossoming of African uniqueness.

Mbembe before the Court of Foucault's Self-styling

The notions of self-styling and practices of the self which Mbembe utilises are Foucaultian terms. It is also evident in Mbembe's works that he is generally theoretically informed by a Foucaultian theoretical framework. Mbembe's appropriation of Foucault's notion of self-styling is, however, not thorough, together with his conception of African freedom. I argue that Mbembe's misappropriation of Foucault's notion of self-styling leads him to a misconception of the African quest for socio-political and cultural freedom through the notion of African identity.

The way in which Mbembe, at times, imagines and articulates the African subject is suggestive of a Cartesian subject of sorts. For instance, he argues that "the essential message here is that everyone can imagine and choose what makes him or her an African" (Mbembe 2002a [2001], 258). This claim approximates Rene Descartes's famous "Cogito ergo sum"—"I think therefore I am." If we can choose and imagine what makes us African, then the world is easier than we make it out to be. Mbembe's subject, in some instances, is a-historical. Statements like these suggest that he does not take sufficient account of the historical determinants impacting upon human subject-formation. Furthermore, it would appear that Mbembe's African subject does not understand him-/herself in relation to other people and things in his/her environment. Against this line of thought, Murunga (2004) comments that:

> Mbembe's analysis borrows from, and is part of, a culturalist perspective that is characterised by two main trends. One, it treats identity as a mere cultural repertoire unconnected to material and political realities. Borrowing largely from literary and cultural studies, this trend focuses on identity solely as a cultural issue and does not pay sufficient attention to broader issues of political economy. Consequently, it treats identity as an imagined category different from daily struggles and realities. (Murunga 2004)

Murunga's (2004) claim is justified if we take Mbembe to mean that we choose what makes us African without any political and historical stakes that come with such choices. Murunga (2004) goes on to assert that:

> By laying out a notion of identity as multiple, shifting, entangled and intersecting, it becomes possible to render a permissive idea of Africanity as a tabula rasa on which one can create an identity at will, devoid of any relation to historical and social reality. (Murunga 2004)

The freedom that Mbembe affords his subject to choose what makes him/her African may be feasible if the idea of Africanity, as Murunga (2004) rightly puts it, is perceived as a tabula rasa or experienced and articulated as a blank slate, not already over-determined by forces not

of his/her choosing.[5] Only if it was possible to isolate human self-understanding and self-identification from the forces of social experiences governed by economic and political realities, does Mbembe's Cartesian-self become plausible. But to be fair, Mbembe's existential phenomenology, which he uses both in "African Modes of Self-Writing" and *On the Postcolony* to explain the socio-political embeddedness of his African subject, saves him from the critique of historicism. His Cartesian-like subject can be properly understood if we interrogate his appropriation of Foucault's notion of self-styling.

On an attempted positive view, Jewsiewicki does not throw the baby of anti-essentialism out with Mbembe's a-historical bathwater. Jewsiewicki (2002, 593) argues that "Mbembe refuses to deal with the subject whose particular quality is that of being 'African.' That is a quality imposed upon the subject—sometimes self-imposed—either by virtue of his or her continent of 'origin' or by virtue of invention by the Other, who vis-à-vis the subject is then affirmed as anything but African." Whether self-imposed or imposed by the Other, invented or otherwise, the category of Africanity should not be an over-determining notion to imagine the African subject. Jewsiewicki (2002, 596–7) goes on to argue that:

> To the extent that Mbembe is opposed to the idea of a totalising Africanity, deconstructing the idea of any such identity that reduces the subject to its application, it becomes meaningless to define the Other in terms of non-Africanity. This is the provincialisation of the West, since it is no longer necessary as the subject's Other. The Other who really matters is the one with whom the subject shares the space of a village, a city, a diaspora. If identity is not an essence but a relation to the Other, as Emmanuel Lévinas (1981) maintains; if every human being possesses the quality of formulating and enunciating his or her identity as constructed in the relation to the Other, the one who elicits the enunciation of identity is the one who is closest.

What Mbembe is protesting against, in Jewsiewicki's (2002) view, is reducing the people categorised as African to the application of what is conceived and articulated as Africanity. However, Jewsiewicki's formulation evokes two concerns. Firstly, his use of Levinas's notion of the Other; and secondly, the risk that his conception of space can take us back to the problem of a-historicism. He is correct to argue that the deconstruction of the totalising notion of African identity will theoretically render Africanity's Other, which is the West, powerless in terms of Africa's self-understanding. The people recognised as African will not need an Other, which is the West, to imagine their selves. The Other that Jewsiewicki suggests should be of importance to the self-understanding of the people categorised as African, is the Other with whom one shares space, for instance, one's schoolmates, colleagues, and fellow villagers. In Levinas's ethics of the Other, one should relate with an individual human being in the so-called face-to-face encounter. This encounter should not be based on the assumption that one knows the Other, because the Other person as absolute alterity is fundamentally unknowable. The problem, however, is that Levinas's Other is abstract in the sense that s/he cannot be known or reduced to cultural qualities. This encounter is not an empirical encounter and the Other is not a socio-politically situated Other—always already overburdened by history.

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5 Mbembe's (2002b) response to his critics echoes the same arguments he posits on "African Modes of Self-Writing."

The socio-political Other, unlike Levinas's absolute Other, almost always comes already "known" due to preconceived ideas and connotations. Jewsiewicki misses this important point that leads him to propose a notion of a-historical space. He argues that "this relation to the Other that constitutes identity could be formulated in terms of co-presence rather than in terms of succession. Identity would then be organised according to the category of space rather than that of time" (Jewsiewicki 2002, 594). As much as I agree with Jewsiewicki that we should formulate what he calls "identity" relationally, i.e. in terms of co-presence rather than succession, he does not make explicit what co-presence might mean and what its implications might be. It seems not to occur to him that the past can be co-present (immanent) with the present and the future, for instance. Jewsiewicki also suggests that we should organise what he calls "identity" in terms of space. But Jewsiewicki does not further imagine that spaces have memories which may have an overwhelming determining influence on people's self-understanding and socio-political relations. Jewsiewicki (2002, 597) is correct to state (as quoted above) that "if every human being possesses the quality of formulating and enunciating his or her identity as constructed in relation to the Other, the one who elicits the enunciation of identity is the one who is closest." But Jewsiewicki's assertion, informed as it is by Levinas's notion of the Other, implies that the one closest is not a conscript of history. Jewsiewicki's notion of space does not attend to the possibility that space is almost always synchronised with time, as experience and memory are synchronised with expectation. And in most cases, time is experienced as a conflated troika of the present, past and future in space. Taking account of this burden of space can open up a productive avenue for interrogating undesirable subjectivities.

What Jewsiewicki attempts to do by presenting these arguments is to explicate Mbembe's conception of identity. Jewsiewicki's attempt to save Mbembe's main argument compels him to remind us that Mbembe's argument is based on the Foucaultian notion of self-styling. He argues that:

> To place his reflections in a philosophical context, the question should be raised of the path and the master. Beginning with the title, then, it is clear that marking out the route and accompanying Mbembe is the Foucault of the 1980s—"Writing the Self" was published in 1983—Foucault, that is, as the historian of the subject rather than the historian of power. The point of departure from which Mbembe conceives of the subject and of the enunciation of identity becomes clear in the context of Foucault's earlier publications. (Jewsiewicky 2002, 592)

Mbembe's notion of self-styling is clearly moulded on Foucault's practice of liberty. From here on, I will use "self-styling" to refer to Mbembe's notion, and "practice of liberty" to refer to Foucault's concept. The difference will be apparent later in the essay.

Mbembe, following Foucault (1982, 222), argues that "power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted 'above' society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of." The emphasis on social conditions as a matrix from which African "identities" are constructed is a crucial point that Mbembe makes in the paper,

and which informs his existential approach to his argument that the African subject—like all subjects—is the result of practices of the self. For both Foucault and Mbembe, individuals are subjects of the social nexus of power relations in which they find themselves immersed. "Subject" here should be understood in a double sense, as Foucault (1982, 212) rightly points out:

> There are two meanings of the word subject: Subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.

Both Mbembe and Foucault agree that self-styling and the practice of liberty take the latter meaning of subject; that is, subjecting oneself to particular forms of truth and knowledge. The notion of power through which the double sense of subject is realised is central to both Foucault and Mbembe. According to Foucault (1982, 221):

> By power, we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with the field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realised. Where determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when a man is in chains. [In this case, it is a question of physical relationship and constraint].

The similarities between Foucault and Mbembe, however, begin to diminish. For Mbembe, even postcolonial African victims of war and slaves[6] practise self-styling crafted by cruelty. Foucault, on the other hand, insists upon and distinguishes between liberation and the practice of liberty, the former being a necessary condition for the latter. Liberation has to do with the putting into place those socio-political conditions in which practice of liberty become possible. Inversely, the state of freedom attained by way of liberation struggles has to be continuously maintained by practice of liberty, since they remain vulnerable to succumb to domination. The practice of liberty is only possible under certain conditions; in the case of colonised people, liberation must come before the practice of liberty. Foucault (1987, 113–114) further qualifies this point, referring specifically to liberation from colonisation:

> I do not mean to say that liberation or such and such a form of liberation does not exist. When a colonial people try to free itself of its coloniser, that is truly an act of liberation, that in this extremely precise example, this act of liberation is not sufficient to establish the practice of liberty that later on will be necessary for this person, this society and these individuals to decide upon receivable and acceptable forms of their existence or political society. That is why I insist on the practice of freedom rather than on the processes which indeed have their place, but which by themselves, do not seem to me to be able to decide all the practical forms of liberty. (Foucault 1987, 113–114)

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6 In "Necropolitics" Mbembe (2003, 22) argues that slaves in America practised self-styling. He writes: "In spite of the terror and the symbolic sealing off of the slave, he or she maintains alternative perspectives toward time, work, and self. This is the second paradoxical element of the plantation world as a manifestation of the state of exception. Treated as if he or she no longer existed except as a mere tool and instrument of production, the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylise it. Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another."

A distinction that Foucault makes between struggles for liberation and practices of liberty is an instructive one. Liberation from domination is necessary, since domination signals a total loss of agency on the part of the subject and therefore also an absence of the mobile power relations necessary for action and reaction. Under these conditions, practices of liberty are impossible. For Foucault, the latter requires "acceptable forms [of] political society" (Foucault 1987, 114).

Consequently, when Foucault is asked, "do not the practices of liberty require a certain degree of liberation?" (Foucault 1987, 114), he gives the following response:

> Yes, absolutely. That is where the idea of domination must be introduced. The analysis I have been trying to make has to do essentially with the relationship of power … The relationships of power have an extremely wide extension in human relations. There is a whole network of relationships of power, which can operate between individuals, in the bosom of the family, in an education relationship, in the political body, etc. … When an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable, and to prevent all reversibility of movement—by means of instruments which can become economical as well as political or military—we are facing what can be called a state of domination. (Foucault 1987, 114)

From Foucault's argument, to care for the self (or the practice of liberty) does not happen in Mbembe's "state of war," where one is dominated from every side, and one must do whatever it takes to see another day. In the state of war, people are more concerned with safeguarding their lives than with fashioning their subject-identities. To my mind, the struggle for survival within a context of violence and domination cannot be equated to Foucault's notion of the practices of liberty. Even the colonial socio-political situation is not necessarily a sufficient condition for the practices of liberty, as Foucault intimated earlier.

Mbembe would counter that states of war are a spasmodic but enduring feature of the lives of many African subjects which affords them space—minimal as it may be—to style themselves. He argues that "in the act that consists of putting to death innumerable sacrificial victims, the agent of the massacre also seeks to transcend and reinvent the self" (Mbembe 2002, 269). But this self-craft accounts for the culprit of war, not its victim. For Foucault (1987), care of the self is expressly an ethical labour involving discipline and moderation as opposed to contexts of war that are necessarily characterised by violence and excess.

Even if we are to locate the notion of the practices of liberty in less cruel conditions, Mbembe's notion of self-styling still departs from Foucault's notion of the practice of liberty. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe (2001) successfully attempts to explain the fluidity of power relations in postcolonial Cameroon. He nevertheless fails to convincingly characterise the strategies of resistance employed by the subjugated in terms of the practice of liberty. Mbembe (2001, 128–129) argues that:

> Thus, we may assert that, by dancing publicly for the benefit of power, the "postcolonised subject" is providing his or her loyalty, and by compromising with the corrupting control that state power tends to exercise at all levels of everyday life, the subject is reaffirming that this power is incontestable—precisely the better to play with it and modify it whenever possible.

> In short, the public affirmation of the "postcolonised subject" is not necessarily found in acts of "opposition" or "resistance" to the commandment. What defines the postcolonised subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even where there are clear, written, and precise rules.

By publicly affirming the subjugating power and not publicly opposing it, the postcolonial subject hopes to resist the subjecting force of the subjugating power in the hope of modifying it. In this case, the public affirmation of the subjugating power is a strategy of resistance. To be sure, the postcolonial subject does not desire the subjecting force of the subjugating power, as indicated in the postcolonial subject's desire to modify the subjugating power. Though the baroque practices performed by the postcolonial subject are (as quoted above) "ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even when there are clear, written, and precise rules" (Mbembe 2001, 128–129) the desire which gives rise to these baroque practices is to resist, by modification, the subjugating power. Mbembe's refusal to recognise the baroque practices as modes of resistance may be critiqued on the grounds that the public affirmation of the subjugating power does not tell the whole story, that is, it is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. The end to which these non-resistance practices aim is "to modify it [subjugating power] whenever possible" (Mbembe 2001, 128–129). This modification offers the possibility to reject or resist the subjugating power.

The kind of resistance that we see in Mbembe's postcolonial power relations, including in the state of war, is a struggle for liberation, according to the distinction that Foucault (1987) makes between liberation and the practices of liberty. To be sure, liberation—like the practice of liberty—takes place within power relations which are "ambiguous, fluid and modifiable" (therefore not domination), but this fluidity does not necessarily mean that the struggle for liberation is the same as the practice of liberty, at least as defined by Foucault earlier.

To take Foucault's argument that the subject's mode of being, acting and reacting to events constitute the practice of liberty and transpose it to the unacceptable (unacceptable since Foucault [1987 114] expressly states that the practice of liberty is possible within "acceptable forms of … existence or political society") socio-political setting of war, is to misconstrue Foucault's notion of the practice of liberty. If indeed there is a distinction between the struggles for liberation (from colonialism) and the practices of liberty as Foucault earlier intimated, then Foucault's notion of the practices of liberty is not the same as Mbembe's notion of self-styling. Foucault's notion of self-styling is based on the ancient Greek practices of citizens, not slaves, colonised peoples, or victims of war. For instance, Foucault (1987, 117) argues that "I think in the measure that liberty signifies for the Greeks non-slavery—a definition which is quite different from ours—the problem is already entirely political." Mbembe (2002a, 267), on the contrary, defines the condition under which the African styles her-/himself as the state of war, which is a zone of indistinction where the decision between life and death is arbitrary. Characteristics of Mbembe's zone of indistinction are violence and cruelty. Put in Foucaultian terms, the zone of indistinction would be a domain in which power relations run the risk of congealing into a state of domination, and therefore hostile to the practices of liberty.

> The exercise of power allows for the possibility of counteraction, whereas violence consists in the direct application of coercion on the body of the Other which simultaneously minimises the possibility of independent conduct. Violence entails the general subjection of freedom to power, whereas the condition of possibility of power is potential refusal or resistance. (Hofmeyr 2006, 219)

It is within these conditions of violence—which minimise and diminish independent conduct—that Mbembe argues that the African practices self-styling through which s/he (can) become(s) a work of art. Foucault, on the other hand, argues that practices of the self come with ethical responsibility towards Others. Foucault (1987, 118) states that "care for the self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure where this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others." States of war with its technologies of violent struggle and killing cannot easily, if at all, be equated to any form of caring for others. We might wage war for the sake of keeping our loved ones safe, but what we become in the act of waging a war is an undeniably destructive force. Furthermore, Foucault (1987, 116) argues that:

> Naturally one cannot care for self without knowledge. Care for self is of course knowledge of self—that is the Socratic-Platonic aspect—but it is also the knowledge of a certain number of rules of conduct or of principles which are at the same time truths and regulations. To care for self is to fit one's self out with these truths.

To think of self-styling in Cartesian terms, as Jewsiewicki (2002, 594) argues when he states that "[i]dentity, being a political formulation of the self's relation to the Other, it is correct to follow Descartes in the assertion that every human being is capable of attaining the truth as well as his or her identity, as long as he or she applies the right method," stands in direct opposition to Foucault's conception of truth and the practices of liberty. Aristotle taught us that there is a difference between something existing in potentiality and actuality. The claim that "every human being is capable of attaining the truth as well as his or her identity" only exists in potentiality. Beyond potentiality, it demands a certain amount of freedom in a public space and subjective agency. Foucault's practice of liberty is practised within the limits of discourse, which is fluid and constantly changing, while the Cartesian discoverer thinks from the position of an already created subject. While the Cartesian self focuses on the correct method towards a personal discovery of truth, the Foucaultian method takes the truth as a construction subject to a complex flow of forces of relations governed by discourse. Foucault's practices of subjectivisation are subject to a number of disciplinary practices. Contra to this environment informed by discipline, Jewsiewicki (2002, 595–569) defines the claimed undisciplined nature of African societies in the following passage:

> But in Africa, where societies have been marked by the slave trade and by colonisation, indiscipline offers the subject its sole tactical recourse—a negative one, to boot. Indiscipline makes it possible to resist, to remove oneself from the actions of the Other, to act as if one has been converted—sometimes, indeed, to the point of believing it oneself. But by the same token, it does not allow one to impose one's own priorities.

African societies, purportedly characterised by indiscipline to the point that "it does not allow one to impose one's own priorities" seem to be incongruent with Mbembe's insistence upon

Foucaultian practices of the self. I would like to believe that "imposing one's own priorities" is key to the practices of liberty in Foucaultian terms. Of course, I understand that priorities are determined within the constrictions of discourse. If the Foucaultian subject practises liberty in a disciplined discourse, then to transplant the practice of liberty into undisciplined situations—which do not allow one to impose their priority without theoretical development—is simply unjustified. Neither Jewsiewicki (2002) nor Mbembe (2002a) explains the theoretical possibility of imagining a Foucaultian subject who practises liberty within a disciplined discourse, in an undisciplined situation; especially when discipline is a necessary condition for the practices of liberty. The argument that I am putting forward here is that, even though both Mbembe and Foucault may agree that subjection happens within a social matrix—subjection understood as being "subject to" in the double sense of the word—Mbembe's conception of the conditions under which one becomes a subject through the practice of the self, fundamentally differs from that of Foucault. Consequently, the very conception of self-styling by Mbembe becomes something other than what Foucault imagined.

The conditions under which one can identify Mbembe's self-styling as a Foucaultian practice of liberty is in Mbembe's state of religion. In the state of religion, there is discipline in the form of doctrine, and people are free to form relationships with the divine sovereignty. They engage with the doctrine to transform it (not necessarily to resist it), based on their experiences. Also, the doctrine transforms the subjects' conduct. There is no cruelty or force used, according to Mbembe, which makes it possible for subjects to negotiate through available truths in order to style themselves from the available choices. It should be remembered, however, that absolute subjection to Christian doctrine would not qualify as a practice of liberty for Foucault in its strictest application, because the "act of liberation [resistance] opens up new relations of power, which in turn bear the inherent danger of domination" (Hofmeyr 2005, 107). Christian dogma, especially in its fundamentalist form, requires absolute obedience. In other words, one is free to choose to subject oneself to Christian dogma, but once this choice has been made, one no longer retains the freedom to choose how to stylise your life entirely. Homosexuality, for instance, remains an option not sanctioned by many Christian dogmatic or fundamentalist discourses to this day. The discipline imposed by Greco-Roman practices, on the other hand, was prescriptive in form but not so much in content. In other words, it was not so much a question of which choice one exercised, but the extent to which one practised it or indulged in it. Moderation was not an absolute prohibition, as are many Christian dogmas, but rather an insistence on the dangers of excess.

It could be argued that because Mbembe's self-styling is ascribed also to forms of subjugation, it is therefore not Foucaultian. Mbembe's move to attribute the agency of self-styling to all peoples categorised as black in the past and present, slaves, colonial subjects, postcolonial victims of war, and those adherents to the Christian dogma of the divine sovereignty—regardless of the socio-political conditions—situates the notion of self-styling

not only in forms of power relations but also in forms that approximate domination.[7] And it is not surprising that even Jewsiewicki (2002) subscribes to this logic when he states that:

> [i]dentity being a political formulation of the self's relation to the Other, it is correct to follow Descartes in the assertion that every human being is capable of attaining the truth as well as his or her identity, as long as he or she applies the right method. (Jewsiewicki 2002, 594)

The question of the practice of liberty is no longer identified in specific political modalities as defined by Foucault, but in all power relations except for absolute domination. That is why self-styling is within the capacity of every human being, on condition that they use the right method, as Jewsiewicki (2002) argues. As argued by Mbembe, "the essential message here is that everyone can imagine and choose what makes him or her an African" (Mbembe 2002a, 258).

Conclusion

Mbembe's argument that African identity should be conceptualised as unstable and constantly changing, especially for postcolonial conceptions of human subjectivity, is valid. But his appropriation of Foucault's notion of the practice of liberty, I argue is not correct. The result of Mbembe's deviation from Foucault's conception of the practice of liberty to his pseudo Foucaultian self-styling is an impoverished critique of African modes of imagining African socio-political freedom. Mbembe succeeds to say that identity is fluid, which Mudimbe (1988) and Appiah (1992) convincingly argued before him. However, Mbembe does not account for the need for acceptable forms of socio-political intercourse, which is at the heart of many of the literature on African identity. A close interrogation of the African modes of imagining human agency (identity) that Mbembe defines as essentialist and based on fake philosophy, reveals that the gist of their arguments is necessarily aligned with the desire for socio-political modalities that will allow African subjects the kind of liberty that Foucault espouses.[8] Referring to Senghor and Cesaire, who are famously known to be the protagonists of an essentialist view of African identity, Wilder (2015, 2) shows that at the heart of their so-called essentialist view of African identity, is a necessary desire for acceptable forms of socio-political and cultural freedom: "… their interventions proceeded from the belief that colonial peoples cannot presume to know *a priori* which political arrangement would best allow them to pursue substantive freedom." It is substantive freedom which can be comparable to Foucault's practice of liberty that has been a central motivation of African modes of imagining identity. Mbembe's contemporary and adversary on the notion of African identity, Mafeje, explaining the necessity for utilising the notion of Africanity, writes that Africanity "is a call for a new Pan-Africanism that brooks neither external dependence nor internal authoritarianism and social deprivation" (Mafeje 2008 [2000], 113). Mafeje, like Senghor and many others have used the notion of African identity in search of acceptable forms of socio-political and cultural intercourse. Even though some African theorist may have theorised the notion of Africanity in incoherent fashions and from

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7   Weate's (2003) view may help us to understand Mbembe's oscillation between taking account of the socio-political contours impacting upon individual autonomy, and conceptualising autonomy regardless of the socio-political context.

8   Mafeje (2008 [2000]), Mamdani (1996), and Wamba-dia-Wamba (1991).

essentialist paradigms, that does not delegitimise their desires for acceptable forms of socio-political and cultural conjugation. If anything, the problem to which their incoherent and racist theories of African identity are given as solutions cannot be ignored when proposing alternative theories.

In Mbembe's view, interrogating the kinds of political modalities which may guarantee or at least render feasible the practice of liberty as defined by Foucault—and which has been at the heart of the discourse on African identity—is completely neglected by focusing on proving that identities change or power relations are fluid. Adverse political conditions, from Mbembe's logic of self-styling, cannot stop one from practising self-styling because it appears as if self-styling comes prior to forms of political life, which is at once un-Foucaultian and contra-African existential and literal history, which has been a quest for acceptable and humane modes of political practice. Consequently, Mbembe's self-styling in "African Modes of Self-Writing" is found guilty before the court of Foucault's practice of liberty and African modes of imagining socio-political and cultural freedom.

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