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# Globalization, *mondialisation* and the *immonde* in Contemporary Francophone African Literature

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**Abstract:**

Taking as its theoretical frame of reference Jean-Luc Nancy's distinction between globalization and *mondialisation*, this article explores the relationship between contemporary Africa, the 'world' and the 'literary'. The discussion centres on a number of present-day African novelists, and looks in particular at a controversial recent text by the Cameroonian writer and critic, Patrice Nganang, who is inspired by the work of the well-known theorist of postcolonial Africa, Achille Mbembe. For both writers 'Africa', as a generic point of reference, is seen in terms of a certain genealogy of Africanist thinking, from colonial times through to the contemporary postcolonial era, and the article reflects on what a radical challenge to this genealogy might entail. Using a more phenomenologically oriented reading of *monde* (world) and *immonde* (abject, literally un-world), this rupture could be conceived in terms of the kind of 'epistemological break' that thinkers like Althusser and Foucault introduced into common usage and theoretical currency in contemporary French thought back in the 1960s.

**Keywords:** globalization, *mondialisation*, *immonde*, postcolonial, literary, post-genocide, decolonization, dis-enclosure

What theory would be most fitting for contemporary Africa when considering its place in today's allegedly 'globalized' world? The question quickly becomes a very crowded one, with an almost infinite number of possible theories, whether anthropological (the work of an anthropologist of popular culture such as Johannes Fabian, or the urban ethnography of Paul Stoller, for example), economic (including sustained critiques of neoliberalism from various perspectives by thinkers such as Célestin Monga, James Ferguson, or Gayatri Spivak),

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theological (Jean-Marc Ela, John Mbiti, Fabian Eboussi-Boulaga), and one could go on: theorists of African sociology, politics, environmentalism, technology, history and philosophy, to name but a few, have all been concerned with questions of globalization over the last two decades. Within this purview, and given the economic, political and indeed natural crises which continue to beset Africa, literary theory would seem to be of marginal interest, and literature itself a non-essential indulgence that comes well down the list in any order of priorities. Within this article I would like to make the case and the counter-claim, however, that recent developments in contemporary African literature, and literary theory, are in fact crucial to any reflection upon the question of Africa in a contemporary global context. 'Literary', however, is to be understood here in a broader and more inclusive sense than one might immediately assume, and as we shall see, it is perhaps in itself a 'global' term that might encompass multiple forms of artistic or linguistic invention, and would thus be closer to the imaginative power, the sheer force of creation, that one associates with the poetic.<sup>1</sup> Taken in this broader perspective, 'the literary' as I am using it is less to do with the long history of debates about the respective value or status of the written as it comes to supplant or transform orality in Africa. Nor the more complex versions of this debate and its inherent tensions that tend to dominate and structure postcolonial studies, and which often pit 'textualist' approaches against 'materialist' (often broadly Marxist) theories.

My discussion will centre on a few contemporary writers, and look in particular at a controversial recent text by the Cameroonian novelist and critic, Patrice Nganang, and his adaptation of the ideas of the leading theorist of postcolonial Africa, Achille Mbembe. From his early publications such as *Afriques indociles*, and then most forcefully in his best-known text, *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe has challenged a certain received set of critical assumptions informing Africanist studies, and by implication the way in which 'Africa' as a name and a concept has served as a generic point of reference. I am interested in how we might think of the radical discursive rupture which Mbembe has articulated, and which has been given extensive literary-theoretical expression by Nganang, as a recent manifestation of the kind of the 'epistemological break' that thinkers like Althusser and Foucault first introduced into common usage and theoretical currency back in the 1960s.

One writer and thinker whose work has proved particularly fruitful in rethinking the question of globalization in relation to the literary is

the French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>2</sup> In his 2002 text *La création du monde, ou la mondialisation*,<sup>3</sup> Nancy makes a distinction between two ways in which one can understand the term ‘globalization’, within the context of a reading of Marx—specifically a Marxist theorization of what it might mean to ‘change the world’—and more broadly in relation to religious theories of worldly immanence and transcendence. His reflection turns on a reading of the difference between the English term globalization, and its not quite synonymous French equivalent, *mondialisation*. This difference, often translated rather uncritically, is crucial for Nancy: in his reading, globalization as represented by the globalized economy, exchange value and capitalist accumulation, is seen as a totalizing movement which conceives of the world according to a logic of ‘bad infinity’ (*CW*, 38). To this, Nancy opposes the world-forming logic of *mondialisation*—as he puts it, ‘the world has lost its capacity to “form a world” [*faire monde*]’ (*CW*, 34)—which he figures as a creation ‘*ex nihilo*’, and in this respect it is part of Nancy’s more wide-ranging ‘post-phenomenological’ philosophy. ‘Creating a world’ thus involves a kind of suspension of every previous representation of the world: ‘To create the world means: immediately, without delay, reopening each possible struggle for a world, that is, for what must form the opposite of a global injustice against a background of general equivalence’ (*CW*, 54). His version of immanence is in contrast both to onto-theological transcendence, and to the mistaken belief that a capitalist globalization operates independently of the transcendental metaphysics out of which it emerged. We might say that it is, in a similar vein to Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Heidegger, a mining of onto-theology from within. In many ways, this can be seen as a reformulation of an earlier opposition which Nancy developed in *The Inoperative Community*<sup>4</sup> between Myth (as a kind of totalizing representation of the world, which would be consonant with globalization understood as bad infinity), and Literature (whose interruptive force and meaning is described precisely as a kind of epistemological break, which undoes the synthetic totality of Myth, and is seen as a more fundamental creative act, the creation of a world). How, then, does this notion of interruption, rupture or brokenness manifest itself in recent contemporary African writing?

### *Broken Glass*

I will start out with a quotation from the opening of the novel from 2005, *Verre cassé* (*Broken Glass*) by the well-known Francophone

African writer from Congo-Brazzaville, Alain Mabanckou. Like its sequel, *Mémoires de porc-épic* (2006) (*Memoirs of a porcupine*), it is set in the local community bar, *Le Crédit a voyagé* (*Credit Gone West*), and the opening section immediately brings into play some of the questions about the place of the 'literary' in contemporary Francophone African writing, thereby setting the tone for the rest of the novel:

let's say the boss of the bar Credit Gone West gave me this notebook to fill, he's convinced that I—Broken Glass—can turn out a book, because one day, for a laugh, I told him about this famous writer who drank like a fish, and had to be picked up off the street when he got drunk, which shows you should never joke with the boss, he takes everything literally, when he gave me this notebook he said from the start it was only for him, no one else would read it, and when I asked why he was so set on this notebook, he said he didn't want Credit Gone West just to vanish one day, and added that people in this country have no sense of the importance of memory, that the day when grandmothers reminisced from their deathbeds was gone now, this is the age of the written word, that's all that is left, the spoken word's just black smoke, wild cat's piss, the boss of Credit Gone West doesn't like ready-made phrases like 'in Africa, whenever an old person dies, a library burns', every time he hears that worn-out cliché he gets mad, he'll say 'depends which old person, don't talk crap, I only trust what's written down'<sup>5</sup>

The 'customer' narrator who is asked to produce this book, which has the same title as the book we will subsequently read, writes about the life of the bar, and some of the down-and-outs who frequent it, with an irrepressible inventiveness and verve that is reminiscent of the great Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi's 1979 novel, *La Vie et demie* (*Life and a Half*, which is alluded to in *Verre cassé*, and is indeed a major point of reference for Achille Mbembe when he talks of the 'life after death' of the African postcolony). From the outset, *Verre cassé* clearly figures the 'shattered' subject of contemporary Africa, and as the narrator finally gets round to his own sorry tale, he reveals himself to be the most 'broken' of all the characters in the novel. The stories of the low-life subjects who populate this novel, though, are narrated in a style that is acutely aware of the place it occupies within a certain African literary history and tradition. The phrase 'whenever an old person dies, a library burns', is of course a reference to the famous saying by Ahmadou Hampâté Ba, expressing the continuing attachment to the indigenous culture and oral tradition from which much African ethnophilosophy takes its cue. Mabanckou's novel—like that of Patrice Nganang, as we shall see later on—is playfully critical of this tradition, and is in fact packed full of intertextual allusions to many classic French

and Francophone African texts. Indeed, a large part of his literary strategy is to challenge our notion of what we assume to be literary, to deliberately blur the lines separating the 'literary' and the 'oral' (his literary style is distinctly oral, but in a very contemporary mode), and at the same time to question the distinction between French and African, and the very notion of national ownership of a language and a literary tradition in a complex transnational, globalized world.

The question of the relationship of Francophone 'literature' to the 'world' was brought into sharp focus recently in what has become a landmark statement of intent, the 2007 *littérature-monde* manifesto, which made a series of bold claims to break with the enduring francocentrism of *francophonie*, and thereby to open the way for a radically decentred and transnational French-language literature, which might share the same globalized perspectives and concerns as Anglophone World Literature.<sup>6</sup> Around the same time, the Francophone Cameroonian novelist, Patrice Nganang, wrote an equally radical manifesto, *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine: Pour une écriture pré-emptive*, which stands in a contrapuntal negative relation to the affirmative, celebratory tone of the *littérature-monde* manifesto.<sup>7</sup> Nganang's manifesto is in effect a rather provocative indirect challenge to the latter's optimistic transnationalism, and a rallying cry for a new (as he terms it, 'pre-emptive') French-language African literature, in which he makes a claim to a certain worldliness: for him, the defining moment of recent African history, and West/Africa relations, was the Rwandan genocide. According to Nganang, this was the point at which a long tradition of African thinking effectively reached its limit, and the best hope for its rebirth is literature, but literature considered as essentially, profoundly, and necessarily *dissident*. Nganang accuses contemporary African writing and philosophy of not truly confronting the implications of what happened in Rwanda, with the notable exception of Achille Mbembe, whose work marks an explicit rupture with ideologies and prevalent African philosophies of subjectivity. Nganang thus sees within contemporary literature a differently conceived 'worldliness', and a radically new African subjectivity.

### *Writing in the Wake of Disaster*

Nganang's central thesis is that the Rwandan genocide has to be read as symptomatic of a wider *self-destruction* in the context of the

history of Francophone Africa. Rather than being a socio-political or historical analysis of the Rwandan genocide, the conditions which made it possible and its aftermath (analyses which many others have undertaken), Nganang implicates not only the West, but more importantly, *what had gone under the name of African philosophy* until that point. He begins with a critique of Africa's belated response to the genocide, which he calls 'a belated ritual that has its origins in the deep-seated guilt of African thinking, which fell asleep at the moment of the catastrophe' (M, 25). The most immediate consequence is that African thinking and writing now has to define itself 'as necessarily post-genocide' (27). However, the drama (and 'truth') of the genocide for Nganang lies precisely in the fact that it was not exceptional: not only was it the logical culmination of a series of earlier 'smaller' episodes of genocidal violence that scarred the history of Rwanda, and not only was it merely the latest in a long history of barbaric post-Independence political regimes in Africa—what he calls 'the time of the exception which has become the rule' (27)—but in global historical terms it pales by comparison with far larger-scale crimes against humanity (the systematic slaughter of American Indians, the Holocaust, Cambodia, and so on). Through a cruel irony, the Rwandan genocide, insofar as it becomes part of this broader history of world barbarism, marks the moment when Africa becomes, as Nganang puts it, 'fully human': 'the tragic paradox is that the genocide makes the African fully human' (30). The myth of Africa as different, extraordinary, other (whether positively or negatively conceived) no longer holds: instead the genocide is the moment of Africa's violent entry into 'simple, that is to say flawed, humanity' (30).

The Kantian or Hegelian subject around which most humanist discourses are constructed is thus replaced by the figure of the survivor (33), and this is paradoxically, according to Nganang, a new foundational moment for African philosophy. As he puts it: 'thinking negatively in order to survive is the new gesture which becomes an imperative for philosophy after the genocide, which founds a new humanity, a new subjectivity' (36). In this sense, Rwanda would effectively render obsolete the philosophy of a thinker like Valentin Mudimbe, whose patient archeological uncovering of the historically determined misrepresentations, or 'inventions' of Africa, would appear to have been leading African thinking up a blind alley all along. Naming him explicitly, Nganang implicates Mudimbe when he says: 'even the most patient of African philosophers fell asleep while the dead bodies were adorning his back yard' (40). For him, this underlines



‘the inability of [African philosophy] to have foreseen the catastrophe of the genocide, and the sudden appearance of the unthought at its very heart’ (40).<sup>8</sup> By contrast, however, Achille Mbembe is said to be the one writer and thinker who reads the ‘time’ of contemporary Africa not so much as ‘a time of the ritual of mourning, rather one of waking up after the genocide: of life after death’ (41), whereas for other writers, the genocide was considered to be an ‘epiphenomenon’, a kind of exceptional and uncharacteristic madness.

It is certainly true that Mbembe’s analysis takes this violence as inextricably bound up with the very ontology of the subject in contemporary Africa. In the chapter ‘Of Commandement’ in his best-known text, *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe traces the corruption and violence that is at the heart of many African postcolonial regimes back to the ‘founding violence’ of the act of imperial conquest. Under colonialism, and the humanism which gave it its moral justification and ideological underpinning, the native African was explicitly excluded from the realm of the human, and belonged to what Mbembe terms ‘the grammar of animality’.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the same dynamics that structured the African as a colonial ‘animal’ still determine the power relations of subjectivity and subjection in the African postcolony, since the African subject is considered ontologically as a ‘thing that is nothing’, and Mbembe goes on to ask the question: ‘What does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?’ (174).

These ontological questions take a more overtly political turn in Mbembe’s most recent text, *Sortir de la grande nuit*, written in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the decolonization of much of the African continent. The privileged concept for Mbembe is Jean-Luc Nancy’s term ‘dis-enclosure’ (*déclension*), which is a neologism used principally by Nancy to re-read Christian motifs in a number of thinkers and literary traditions. For Nancy, as Mbembe points out, this term indicates the act of opening up something that is not only closed, but also enclosed, such as an enclosure. It is thus a profoundly transformative act, that is at the same time a coming into being, or *éclosion* (literally: hatching). It might thus be seen as precisely analogous to the creative and transformative difference between globalization and *mondialisation* in *The Creation of the World*. As Mbembe puts it: ‘The idea of *déclension* includes that of *éclosion*, of an eruption, or advent of something new, of an opening out’ (SGN, 68). The term *déclension* is thus adopted by Mbembe as a paronomastic link-word joining together *éclosion*, *déclension*, and *décolonisation*, connecting Nancy’s (post-)phenomenological rethinking of being and the world



to the radical political anti-colonialism of Fanon and his successors, in that decolonization is essentially about reclaiming a world, and one's place within the world. This allows for the possibility of a return to the hidden and perhaps neglected creative political force of the *Négritude* philosophy of Léopold Sedar Senghor, whose vision for the future of Africa has, since Independence, been largely discredited as regressive or essentialist, certainly in relation to the more politically uncompromising voices of thinkers such as Césaire and Fanon. It is, however, precisely Senghor's reflection on universalism — that is, how we can think the specificity of Africa in relation to the question of universal humanism — which echoes closely Nancy's conceptualization of 'being-in-common', articulating the singularity of existence as a necessary relationship of sharing, of *partage*. This is how Mbembe brings Fanon and Senghor back together:

In his [Nancy's] eyes, this 'making common' [*mise en commun*] is the basis for the rebirth of the world, and the coming of a mixed universal community, governed by the principle of a sharing of both differences, and of what is unique, and in this respect, open to the whole. In the case of Fanon as in that of Senghor, we are heirs to the whole world. At the same time the world — and thus this legacy — still remain to be created. The world is in creation, as are we too. (SGN, 70–1)

The 'poetics' of 'writing Africa' are ultimately at the heart of a very strong political agenda for Mbembe, which he terms 'Afropolitanism':

Afropolitanism is not the same thing as Panafricanism or Négritude. Afropolitanism is a stylistics and a politics, an aesthetics and a certain poetics of the world. It is a way of being in the world which as a principle refuses any identity as victim (...). It also takes a political and cultural position with respect to the nation, to race, and to the question of difference in general. (SGN, 232)

*Décolonisation* is thus seen as a means of reactivating the lost energy of decolonization, a means of enabling Africa to free itself from the continuing legacy of colonialism in all its forms, and at the same time to stake a strong and active claim for its place within the contemporary globalized world. Nganang's thesis on 'post-genocide writing' is explicitly aligned with Mbembe's rejection of the two traditions which since *Négritude* have dominated African thinking, that is Marxism in its various guises, and Afrocentrist indigenism. From the perspective of radical political philosophy, Nganang sees the subject as perpetually stuck in a relationship of victimization, projecting everything negative on to colonialism, and seeing him/herself as Other, in Hegelian terms:

‘the external origins of a mass extermination predetermined by the dichotomies of Belgian colonialism, and the long genocidal hand of France’ (M, 45). For him, as for Mbembe, this effectively stymies the possibility of an unconditional responsibility for autonomy. Indigenism or nativism, on the other hand, can only be founded on essentialism, and as Nghanang rightly says, it was precisely this essentialist thinking, ‘identitarian thinking’ (45) which informed the racialism motivating the genocide. It revealed at the same time the profound historical and ideological complicity linking rationalism with racialism: ‘it was the very foundation of rationality that was shaken. Rwanda is without a doubt the graveyard of negritude, as well as of all of its conceptual corollaries’ (46). Mbembe’s unique status as a post-genocide writer comes precisely from his willingness to position himself specifically within the space left as a result of the wreckage of the two traditions of radicalism and nativism: ‘We can say then that Mbembe’s thought, by asking the question of the sovereignty of the subject in its chaos, discovers the wisdom of African philosophy in its lack, close by to danger, on the border with death, for sure, but also in the negation of both of these’ (M, 52).

#### *Literature and the im-monde*

As we saw earlier, this negative foundational moment is what provides Nghanang in his *Manifeste* with the impetus for a new (what he calls ‘pre-emptive’) African literature: a certain African philosophy died in Rwanda, and can only be reborn in literature, but a literature that is characterized by its essential dissidence (perpetual dissidence thus functions as a sort of insurance policy preventing it from falling back into the same old traps, or the same old structures and complicities). For him this renewed subjectivity is not to be found in the old discredited philosophies, but by venturing deep into the heart of contemporary urban Africa (for which his shorthand term is ‘la rue’ [the street]). This is not so much the expression of a commitment to write in a populist vein, or to place his finger on an authentically popular ‘pulse’, but he characterizes this literature as an incessant, urgent, anxious vigilance, informed by a knowing wisdom about what it means to live — most often to survive — in the African postcolony, but also in terms of a particular linguistic inventiveness: ‘we know how offhand, informal and inventive the language of the street is in Africa’ (M, 11). In the second half of his *Manifeste*, he sketches out an

aesthetics of contemporary African literature, distancing himself from more conventional textual analysis, or from discussions of literature in terms of its status as sociological or historical document (whether in its representational or allegorical mode), but elevates literature instead to a more philosophically pre-eminent position, giving it what one could call a metaphysical function, as the development of an *idea*: 'what we mean by idea is making "our own" street language the place where one begins to ask questions and to philosophize' (16). Nganang outlines some of the formal characteristics of this new 'philosophical' literature (literature is the expression of a 'pre-visionary' kind of truth; it is marked by chiasmic, ironic forms; and it is tragic in its dimensions), and then describes a number of broad categories (the literature of dictatorship, the literature of emigration, the literature of 'détritus'), but it is really this last category which is truly the place where Nganang sees the 'post-genocidal African subject' tentatively taking shape. It is within this context that he mentions the novels of Alain Mabanckou, and the opening sequence quoted above perhaps now comes into sharper focus. He also refers explicitly to his own fiction-writing, and I will turn briefly to one of his novels, perhaps the best known, *Temps de chien* (*Dog Days: An Animal Chronicle*).

Both Mabanckou and Nganang's novels are very much novels of 'la rue': the language is a rich, earthy, Africanized French (in the manner of Yambo Ouologuem, Ahmadou Kourouma, or Sony Labou Tansi), and the characters all seem to be part of the 'détritus' that characterizes the human-as-survivor, but they also explicitly pose the question of the subject as a kind of *post-human* subject, telling their stories from the point of view of two animal narrators. These narrators are both presented as wise, affectionate and forgiving observers of human nature, however, constantly thinking about the meaning of the human as such, and forever questioning the activities and behaviours of the many different characters they come into contact with in the course of the narrative. As with *Verre cassé*, the local community bar is the focal point for the gathering of a number of very colourful and entertaining regulars, who regale us with the stories of their abject lives. These narratives do not, however, work simply as somewhat naïve sociological or 'ethnological' recordings, but are acutely self-aware and self-reflexive, all the while being narrated from the point of view of a subject that is 'less than human' or 'other than human'. These figures could indeed be described as *immonde*, that is, not so much 'abject' in terms of a psychologized Kristevan dynamic of expulsion and return of subjective otherness,<sup>10</sup> as 'un-worldly' in the sense in

which Nancy describes it in *The Creation of the World*. While this term for Nancy is aligned with the ‘bad infinity’ of globalization which he critiques, for Mbembe, and the writers who take their cue from his theorization of postcolonial Africa, this becomes a kind of negative foundational moment, as Nganang has characterized it. So in the latter’s *Temps de chien*, the dog-narrator, Mboudjak, gets brutally mistreated by his master, Massa Yo, and is then hanged and left for dead by his son, Soumi. Mboudjak somehow survives, frees himself, and returns to Massa Yo and his son, who react at first with terror, but who eventually (if still grudgingly) take him back. He spends much of the rest of the novel sitting in a corner in Massa Yo’s bar, *Le Client est roi* (*The Customer is King*), a vantage-point from which he observes all the many daily conversations and goings-on. Like the porcupine in Mabanckou’s novel *Mémoires de porc-épic*, the dog narrator, Mboudjak is constantly hovering on the borderline between life and death, appears to die, and then to live on after death.

In one episode a mysterious, taciturn figure called Corbeau (Crow) shows up at the bar, and in a typically playful *mise-en-abîme*, we learn that Corbeau is a writer who is writing a novel called *Temps de chien*, in which he aims to record the lives and conversations of the characters in the bar. Once the purpose of his visits is discovered, his very presence generates deep suspicion and mistrust, even though he is the only one to intervene during a police raid one day, and to protest the unwarranted arrest of one of the regulars, *L’ingénieur* (*The Engineer*). This is Mboudjak’s very characteristic reflection on the mistreatment Corbeau receives from the regulars:

‘We should get this owl out of the neighbourhood’.

These were the most dreadful words ever uttered about the writer of our miserable lives. And I suddenly realised, in a stake of shock, the treatment that the engineer, the very person who had escaped with his life by curling up and hiding away in my master’s yard, would have given to me, who also spent all my time simply observing humans, if I had been human. Simply out of pure professional solidarity as a co-observer, I sympathized with the philosopher.<sup>11</sup>

Writing, and writers, are viewed with suspicion, even hostility by the local community, and Mboudjak the dog’s identification with the abject and rejected figure of the writer positions him figuratively as a kind of post-genocidal narrator. By association and extension, Nganang’s own literary practice works as a performative enactment which also occupies this space of ‘post-human’ philosophical (in the sense in which Nganang uses it) invention, or reinvention. This

is precisely the space of the African subject that Mbembe gestures towards in *On the Postcolony*, and indeed has articulated more forcefully in *Sortir de la grande nuit*, where he refers to literature's power as being a 'lieu de provocation' (SGN, 225) (site of provocation), which is perhaps a synonymous term for 'dissident literature'. Indeed, such figures of dissidence or subversion traverse Mbembe's work, from his early texts on underground political resistance in South Cameroon, and his study of Christian conversion in Africa, *Afriques indociles*, which radically challenged received wisdom about its seamless complicity with the colonial mission, and theorized 'indocility' as a subversively creative re-appropriation of selected elements of Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

Much contemporary African literature, of which the novels of Nganang and Mabanckou serve as resonant examples in a Francophone context, could be said to be situated very much within the realm of the *immonde*, beginning with Mudimbe's 1973 novel of the story of a prostitute's love affair with a government minister in the urban underworld of Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), *Le bel immonde*.<sup>13</sup> One could think of countless non-Francophone examples, from Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* to J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, to Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, itself an example of what might indeed be something of an entire sub-genre, the child-soldier novel. Literature, or what I am terming more broadly the 'literary', is thus both a privileged site for the expression of contemporary African abjection, where life and death dramas are played out in a tragic mode devoid of any grandeur, and at the same time the necessary negative moment through which the opening of 'dis-enclosure' becomes possible. As Mbembe reminds us in his foreword to the second French edition of *De la postcolonie*, this negativity is anything but the 'Afropessimism' of which he is often accused.<sup>14</sup>

A brief detour through Claire Denis's stark and disturbing vision of postcolonial Africa, her 2009 film *White Material*, illustrates how much broader a concept and process the 'literary' might be. Her film, taken at the level of its narrative alone, might simply be read as a political allegory of the continued colonial influence in Africa: Maria Vial as the white French coffee plantation owner, in the midst of a deepening civil war, refuses to 'let go' of her attachment to Africa, precisely because she considers herself as African as the native black Africans. The film, like much of Denis's work, operates at the same time on a far more disorienting, visceral, sensual level, not just in terms of its complex temporal narrative structure, but also through its foregrounding of

strong textures, its haunting and disturbing images, and its dissonant soundtrack. What it presents, of course, is a profoundly disjunctive relationship between Africa and the West, but it goes much further in artistic terms, since it is ultimately concerned with a rupture between, on the one hand, received understandings of the meaning of 'Africa', and its reality on the other, a disjunction between economic logic (growing and trading coffee on the world market) and lived reality (the impossibility of succeeding economically, given both local and global conditions). In aesthetic terms, this becomes a more radical rupture between sense and the senses, and indeed, to return to Nancy, one might reframe this as a distinction between globalization and *mondialisation*. The senses in fact, according to Nancy, seem innately to resist any attempt to bring them under the control of sense, and this uncontrollable profusion, or what he has termed 'anarchic exuberance' of the senses, is such that philosophical systems which attempt to give order and meaning to this anarchy do so only at the cost of negating the extraordinary sensual richness which Nancy locates at the very origin and heart of sense-making.<sup>15</sup> Nancy's work provides a conceptual framework for rethinking how we might approach the question of the senses and sensuality in contemporary Africa, as it has been conventionally understood and historically determined, as well as the nature of the 'world', and what it might mean for Africa to talk of its 'own' world.

### *The Literary and the Global*

At the heart of what I am terming broadly 'the literary' in contemporary Africa, then, are various figures or operations of rupture, dissonance or dissidence. At the most obvious thematic level, these could be said to represent the fragmented, even shattered subject of contemporary postcolonial Africa. If one takes such figures as symptomatic of a more deep-seated philosophical concern, and following Nganang's thesis about literature and the post-genocidal negative foundational moment, they reveal a necessary relationship of dissidence effecting an epistemological, even metaphysical break with a certain exhausted past and tradition. This entails a break with 'Africa' itself, or rather, with the manner in which it has hitherto represented itself. Mbembe has theorized this in terms of a break or rupture, a *faillie* (*DP*, xxxii), and as a question of 'indocility', or *déclousion*, to borrow Nancy's term, and it can be aligned with Nancy's distinction between

globalization and *mondialisation*. Indeed, this could well account for the turn that Mbembe and others have made recently towards the ideas of thinkers of difference, such as Derrida and Nancy, and the way in which they have theorized ‘the literary’.

Literature, or at least a particular mode of dissident literature that takes its theoretical cue from Mbembe’s analyses of postcolonial Africa, seems thus to have taken over from African philosophy, according to Nganang. It is no accident that Mbembe’s own writing both describes in extensive and painful detail the ‘life after death’ of the African postcolony, but at the same time enacts it as a kind of spectral self-inscription within a history and a tradition. Mbembe’s own ghostly, or spectral other is the figure of Ruben Um Nyobè, the Cameroonian political militant and journalist and founder of the nationalist, anti-colonial UPC, who was assassinated by the French in 1958, and who has been most famously commemorated by his compatriot Mongo Beti in his 1974 novel *Remember Ruben*, among others. Nganang is no doubt right to point to Mbembe as the most important commentator of the African postcolony, and one can now more readily understand Mbembe’s influence on him. This can be seen in terms of the critical position he adopts with respect to the two broad traditions of African philosophy—indigenist and Marxist-inspired—but also his emphasis on a radically new subjective space that he is attempting to clear the way for. The ‘worldliness’ this implies—more Heideggerian in its ontological commitment—is perhaps a world away from the more assertive optimism of the *littérature-monde* manifesto. Nganang’s characterization of ‘post-genocide’ literature is a controversial one, which has already been the subject of some fierce criticism, although its most significant gesture is perhaps in according literature—whether African, Francophone or global, however this is conceived—a far more central philosophical importance than it has traditionally been accorded. A number of questions remain, though, which I would like to explore briefly in conclusion, very much in the spirit of *déclousion*, hoping these might take us a few more steps along the paths that have been usefully opened up by Nganang.

I would suggest first of all, given the more all-embracing ‘global’ reach I am proposing for the ‘literary’, that while literature is privileged by Nganang and others as the site of a re-emergent philosophy, and specifically a philosophy of a differently conceived African subjectivity, I would suggest, along with Mbembe, that one ought to include other modes of cultural production (for example music, art, photography, film, sculpture, spirituality, and so on), whose artistic



forms without doubt offer us equivalent creatively dissident practices in contemporary Africa.

Secondly, although both Mbembe and Nganang are proposing a new form of responsibility and autonomous agency for Africa, and more specifically a reinvented African subjectivity, within our contemporary 'global age', it would be important to reflect on what it would mean actively to 'write out' the relationship to the West, and Africa's colonial history. One might need to assess the long-term epistemological price to pay in taking 'the West' out of the equation of events like the Rwandan genocide (reading it as a will to autonomy that involves taking historical responsibility for the genocide, and in making this a story that has to do essentially with Africa's self-destruction, the failure and collapse of African philosophy). There is a risk, in other words, that the move away from a syndrome of victimization might inadvertently exculpate the West.

As a corollary to this, and given the emphasis Mbembe and Nganang place on the *writing* of a new dissident literature as the site of a 'post-genocide' African subjectivity, along with the re-emergence of a new mode of philosophizing within this literature of dissidence, it would seem that we may need a comparable (dissident?) *reading* practice. That is, if we are indeed dealing with a radically new form of being in the world (nothing can ever be the same post-genocide), then we can no longer read as we once did. It seems important to determine what such a dissident, or disjunctive, mode of reading would consist of. Just as writing, and the literary, are being considered here as extending beyond the borders of what we might think of as contemporary literature, this new reading practice would in effect gesture towards a whole new aesthetic sensibility, or receptivity.

This is, of course, as we noted early on, very different in mood and intention from the celebratory gesture and aspiration of the *littérature-monde* manifesto, and it is important not to lose sight of the more sober context of Nganang's thesis, or Mbembe's stark analysis of the violent imaginary of the African postcolony. Alongside his literary analysis and foregrounding of writers such as Mabanckou, Nganang in his own manifesto text returns insistently to the question of one woman survivor of the genocide as a constant refrain, and a question to those who failed to respond to the genocide ('*Where were you?*'). In this regard, as well as fictional texts, and characters who 'live on' after death, one would need to consider—quite distinctly, and with equal attention—the written and spoken testimony of actual survivors of the genocide, and the specific temporal and narrative

complexities that inform such testimony. Indeed, the question ‘How does one live on?’, or survive, is of course far more than a philosophical question, or even the privileged question of philosophy as a new literary (or aesthetic) form, but it also has to do profoundly and fundamentally with questions of truth and reconciliation. How does one heal from such trauma? One cannot simply break with the past, especially not with a past as traumatic as a brutal genocide, and one might look here to the experience of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the way in which it was able (more or less successfully) to separate out the question of amnesty — as the political and juridical social mechanism by which the transition is made from the apartheid era — from the moral (and psychological) dimension of forgiveness (that is, although political amnesty is granted with full disclosure of crimes, victims are not obliged to forgive or forget).<sup>16</sup>

One might finally consider the particular form and style of dissident literature proposed by Nganang from the perspective of gender, and whether we are still within the rather less-than-global realm of phallogocry, given that Mbembe’s reading of the violent political imaginary in postcolonial Africa is explicitly masculinized, and given too that there is no escaping the fact that this is certainly the ‘world’ of the narratives of Sony Labou Tansi, Nganang and Mabanckou. Is this also ultimately another kind of phallogocry, and would this then become a *disabling* element in the claim to philosophical dissidence? In the previously mentioned foreword to the second French edition of *De la postcolonie*, Mbembe returns to this charge, which has been levelled most eloquently by Judith Butler in her insightful reading of an early version of Mbembe’s ‘Aesthetics of Vulgarity’ chapter from *On the Postcolony*.<sup>17</sup> Mbembe, in his rejoinder to such criticisms, points out that he is attempting to describe the very clear phallic nature of the potentate’s abusive exercise of power in postcolonial Africa, but that his theoretical intent is to foreground the sexualization of political power more broadly, and that while power is most often masculinized, his analysis covers a very wide and inclusive spectrum of sexual identities and sexual pleasures, both real and imaginary (*DP*, xxx).

We might then, of course, ask whether this pluralized sexual imaginary, in its inclusive relativism, undermines the singularly dissident force (the *im-monde* of globalization, so to speak) by which ‘the literary’ can stake out its counter-discursive claims. In other words, we might be led to conclude that Nganang’s diagnosis of the current state, and prognosis of the future ‘life after death’, of African literature

in French is ultimately one of many such examples of the polyphonic array which emerges out of the *littérature-monde* manifesto's breaking of the Francophone 'pact' with the nation, and it would thus appear to be entirely consistent with an approach to globalization which welcomes a heterogeneity of specific sites. I would argue, however, that what Nganang's text does, for all of the rather problematic implications around its edges, is to force us into a more sober, sustained, and philosophically serious engagement with each of the key terms in the *littérature-monde* debate—most notably the status of 'literature' and of the 'world', and the relation between the two in the context of contemporary Africa—and to make 'the literary' an unavoidable point of reference for any contemporary theory of globalization.

## NOTES

- 1 That is, in the etymological sense of making or creating, *poiesis*, and just as Heidegger in his philosophy drew out the deep connection linking poetic language and thinking, *dichten* and *denken*, it is perhaps no accident that African literature, most notably Francophone, has its potent origin in poetic form. The importance of the publication of the celebrated *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* in 1947, and Senghor's poetry more generally, has been rather occluded by the discredited essentialism of *Négritude* thought and writing. For an excellent account of the unacknowledged political power of Senghor's poetic imagination, see Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).
- 2 Indeed, Mbembe himself has explicitly invoked and applied Nancy's ideas in his most recent text *Sortir de la Grande Nuit* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010); henceforward abbreviated with page numbers to *SGN*. For a more detailed analysis of Mbembe's complex 'debt' to both Nancy and Derrida, see Michael Syrotinski, 'Genealogical Misfortunes: Achille Mbembe's (Re-)Writing of Postcolonial Africa', *Paragraph* 35:3 (November 2012), 407–20.
- 3 *La création du monde, ou la mondialisation* (Paris: Galilée, 2002). Subsequent references, abbreviated to *CW* with page numbers, are to the English translation by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).
- 4 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, edited by Peter Connor, translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney, with a Foreword by Christopher Fynsk (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

- 5 Alain Mabanckou, *Verre Cassé* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2005), 11–12; *Broken Glass*, translated by Helen Stevenson (London: Serpent's Tail, 2009), 1–2. Subsequent references, abbreviated to *VC* with page numbers, are to this English translation.
- 6 *Pour une littérature-monde*, edited by Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).
- 7 Patrice Nganang, *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine: pour une écriture pré-emptive* (Paris: Editions Homnisphères, 2007). Henceforward abbreviated to *M*, followed by page numbers.
- 8 In my view, Nganang's dismissal of Mudimbe is rather harsh, and needs to be at the very least nuanced. Like Mbembe, Mudimbe is also critical of both indigenism (or what he would describe as the derivative nature of Africanist discourse, including its theologians like Mbiti, its linguists like Alexis Kagamé, its ethnophiles such as Placide Tempels, and its historians like Cheikh Anta Diop and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, as well as of the 'philosopher kings' of the early independence years, such as Nkrumah, Nyerere, Cabral and so on), and of Marxism, which he sees as yet one more version of a universalizing 'will to truth'. Mudimbe notes that the limits of Marxist-inspired political radicalism were clearly seen in the African countries that adopted Socialist programmes following Independence, and he states bluntly: 'African socialisms were a mystification and everyone knows it' (V. Y. Mudimbe, 'Anthropology and Marxist Discourse' in *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 183).
- 9 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 236.
- 10 See Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 11 Patrice Nganang, *Temps de chien* (Paris: Le serpent à plumes, 2001), 157; my translation. English translation by Amy Reid, *Dog Days. An Animal Chronicle* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).
- 12 Achille Mbembe, *Afriques indociles. Christianisme, pouvoir et état en société postcoloniale* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1988).
- 13 V. Y. Mudimbe, *Le bel immonde* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976). English translation by Marjolijn de Jager, *Before the Birth of the Moon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989). The English translation of the title bypasses the way in which the polarized tensions of the story are captured so evocatively by the French title.
- 14 As Mbembe puts it towards the end of this foreword, after responding to the various critiques to which the English edition, *On the Postcolony*, has been subjected: 'What we need to do, then, is to question life and the political in a different way, using categories whose heuristic value derives from their philosophical, literary, artistic, aesthetic and stylistic surplus value.'

Ethnography, sociology, history or even political science have a role to play in this project. But this role is not a central one, and this is perhaps the price we have to pay to make Africa once more an enchanted place [*ré-enchanter l'Afrique*], and to bring it out of the ghetto in which “African studies” have imprisoned it’ (Achille Mbembe, ‘Avant-propos’ in *De la postcolonie: Essai sur l’imagination politique dans l’Afrique contemporaine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris: Editions Karthala, 2012), xxxii). Future references to this work will be abbreviated to *DP*, followed by page references.

- 15 ‘Extraordinary Sense’, Preface to Special Issue on ‘Jean-Luc Nancy: Sense, The Senses, and The World’, edited by Michael Syrotinski, *The Senses and Society* 8:3 (March 2013), 13.
- 16 For an insightful, philosophically informed discussion of this question, see Barbara Cassin, ‘“Removing the perpetuity of hatred”: On South Africa as a Model Example’, *International Review of the Red Cross* Vol. 88, No. 862 (June 2006), 235–44. For Cassin, the question of narrative truth is marked by an important shift away from a focus on disclosure as a ‘revelation’ of what was hidden, to a more finely tuned attentiveness to language as performative (reparative) act.
- 17 Judith Butler, ‘Mbembe’s Extravagant Power’, *Public Culture* 5:1 (1992), 62–74.