Whose Africa? Whose Culture? Reflections on agency, Travelling theory and cultural studies in Africa

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Abstract
Whose Africa?

One of the most prevalent theories about Africa in the wake of postmodernist scholarship is the idea of Africa as an invention of the West. One of the chief proponents of this thesis is Valentin Mudimbe, the Zairean philosopher and literary historian now teaching in the USA. In his widely acclaimed book, The Invention of Africa, Mudimbe (1988) argues that the idea of Africa is a product of the West and was conceived and conveyed through conflicting systems of knowledge. The idea of Africa is therefore tied to the colonial library or archives, which represents a body of knowledge constructed with the explicit purpose of faithfully translating and deciphering the African object. Mudimbe makes an even stronger case for the role of dominant systems of power and thought in the construction of a hybrid African and black diasporic identity. He asserts that Africa as a coherent ideological and political entity was, indeed, invented with the advent of European expansion and continuously reinvented by traditional African and diasporic intellectuals, not to mention metropolitan intellectuals and ideological apparatuses — educational institutions and their attendant disciplines, traveller accounts, popular media and so forth. In this accommodationist tendency, Mudimbe is supported by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) in their common belief that Africa’s embeddedness in the material and cultural terrain of the postcolonial and the postmodern is inescapable. As Kwaku Larbi Korang writes:

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**Whose Africa?**

One of the most prevalent theories about Africa in the wake of postmodernist scholarship is the idea of Africa as an invention of the West. One of the chief proponents of this thesis is Valentin Mudimbe, the Zairean philosopher and literary historian now teaching in the USA. In his widely acclaimed book, *The Invention of Africa*, Mudimbe (1988) argues that the idea of Africa is a product of the West and was conceived and conveyed through conflicting systems of knowledge. The idea of Africa is therefore tied to the colonial library or archives, which represents a body of knowledge constructed with the explicit purpose of faithfully translating and deciphering the African object. Mudimbe makes an even stronger case for the role of dominant systems of power and thought in the construction of a hybrid African and black diasporic identity. He asserts that Africa as a coherent ideological and political entity was, indeed, invented with the advent of European expansion and continuously reinvented by traditional African and diasporic intellectuals, not to mention metropolitan intellectuals and ideological apparatuses — educational institutions and their attendant disciplines, traveller accounts, popular media and so forth. In this accommodationist tendency, Mudimbe is supported by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) in their common belief that Africa’s embeddedness in the material and cultural terrain of the postcolonial and the postmodern is inescapable. As Kwaku Larbi Korang writes:

> Africa, in the view of this tendency has been economically absorbed and culturally assimilated by the Metropolitan West into an imperial colonial modernity. As a direct consequence, Africa today, is the colonial aftermath, is a part of — and nothing apart from — the internalized commodity exchanges and the ‘borderless’ transnational cultural and intellectual circuits marked in contemporary understanding by the admittedly disputed designations ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postmodern’. (445)

The ‘posts’, I hear Mudimbe and Appiah saying, reign supreme, whether as sites of ‘space-clearing’ as Appiah would have it, or simply as signs of the ‘West valorized as a knowable positivity and imitable totality’ (Korang 443).

Mudimbe and Appiah’s thesis is of course in response to a wave of movement among African politicians and scholars who, after Africa’s independence, moved to find a domain that could be defined as both unambiguously African and
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resistant to imperialism. One of the corner-stone strategies of this movement was to identify African survivals here in the continent and in the so called New World in order to make a stronger case for the resilience and power of black culture. As Sidney Lemelle and Robin Kelley have argued, this body of scholarship and political thinking, which flourished in professional academic circles in the 1960s and 1970s, ‘was an attempt to historicize the very movement that gave rise to the new historiography celebrating Africa’s past and presumed cultural unity — a movement that included Pan-Africanist political and cultural struggles in Africa and the diaspora’ (8). For these thinkers, Africa’s survival meant making a decisive break with modernity and rooting the continent in its own soil; its own cultural tradition that could be scratched and located beneath the surface of colonial legacy if only we had the will to scratch harder. Yet, for Mudimbe and Appiah, the position taken by the nationalist scholars amounts to intellectual hypocrisy because in framing their resistance in such purist terms, ‘they have either ignored or underplayed the Western cognitive and discursive hegemony in which their own nationalist/modernist rhetoric and critical cultural work are unavoidably implicated’ (Korang 447).

My aim in this essay is not to adjudicate with any finality between these two contradictory tendencies, although some form of judgment is inevitable. After all they both set out to restore some form of agency to the African subject, even if they end up undermining, in significant ways, the very aesthetics of agency of the African subject and its freedom. Instead, I want to use these debates to open up a neo-pragmatic understanding of agency in Africa that is both nationalist and post-nationalist because, as Kwaku Korang would argue, ‘an Africa that aspires to worldly intelligibility and, in that, to world recognition — is enjoined to be both nationalist and post-nationalist’ (454). By this I understand him to be saying that to realise a meaningful agency, the moment of enunciation, of self representation, implies that the margins cannot speak without grounding themselves in a known context. He is suggesting that, at the very least, Africa needs to develop some form of nationalitarian consciousness before it can engage with the world. He is pointing to the fact that the tension between the nationalist and post-nationalist Africa is a necessary concomitant for a realistic reconstruction of an emancipatory model of agency. In this respect the Nigerian scholar, Biodun Jeyifo, is right in part when he argues that ‘much of postcolonial African … critical thought’, has been largely confined to ‘the exploration of Africa’s place in the world’ (356). In his judgment the postcolonial argument which posits Africa-for-the world tends to overlook what he regards as the central issue of African cultural politics, which ‘is the relationship of Africa to itself, the encounter of African nations, societies, and peoples with one another’ (356). Africa’s internal dialogue with itself, and indeed Africa’s self-representation, is important before Africa could unfold her being on a world stage. Jeyifo’s dialogic proposition has a special historical and existential significance. Africa in the Western imagination has always been represented as
the ultimate other, the repository of emptiness and the domain of untranslatable cultures. It is nevertheless important to constantly challenge the nationalist agenda lest it becomes a death trap of cultural reification and political paralysis. This is what Stuart Hall has in mind when he writes that ‘When the movements of the margins are so profoundly threatened by the global forces of postmodernity, they can themselves retreat into their own exclusivist and defensive enclaves. And at that point, local ethnicities become as dangerous as national ones’ (1991 36). To escape this trap, nationalist Africa must always be in constant tension with post-nationalist Africa with the aim of engaging in subversive manoeuvres, even if within a tortured postcolonial and post-modern world, to engender a meaningful African presence in the world. This I think is a necessary tension that has been missing in the ideas of Africa elaborated by both the foundationalist and anti-foundationalist scholars.

Both Mudimbe’s notion of Africa as a Western invention and Africa’s foundational historians’ search for Africa’s survivals beneath the surface of colonialism seem to me problematic for other reasons too. It is true Mudimbe and like-minded scholars concede that the making of black culture and identity in general was as much a product of the West as it was indigenous to Africa. They also concede that the process that created the current Africa and the diaspora could not shape African culture(s) without Western culture itself being transformed. However, there is almost always some anxiety in their argument — the assumption that Africa has very little agency, if any, outside that created by colonialism and the West. This is the kind of anxiety I detect in the following statement by Mudimbe:

But truly for Africa to escape the West involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from it. It assumes that we are aware of the extent to which the West, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it implies knowledge, in that which permits us to think against the West, of that which remains Western. We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Occidentalism is possibly one of its tricks directed against us, at the end of which it stands, motionless, waiting for us. (11–2)

Here Mudimbe not only signals his awareness of Africa’s embeddedness in the West, but more significantly, a resignation to the fact that Africa’s influence was and continues to be on the terms set and imposed by colonialism/the West. This has tended to create a dilemma in which we express the desire to have a colonial subject or a former colonial subject that has a rich and complex consciousness, to exercise autonomous agency, and yet remain in the category of victim. Colonialism in the argument of these scholars remains resolutely colonial, despite the contradictions of its modernising projects and its insistence on policing all boundaries. This reading of colonial experience often ignores the fact that colonialism’s interventionist power was quite often shaped by the local actions of the colonised. And yet, the view of colonialism as an all-consuming phenomenon that destroys everything in its wake, the view of colonial discourse that could
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contain its challenges and tensions continues to persist. This view needs to be interrogated.

The earlier group of African scholars, although well meaning in their attempt to celebrate Africa’s past and its presumed cultural unity, often failed to take account of the complex conditions, even if similar, in which African people produced and transformed culture. For example, Lemelle and Kelley have argued, that under colonialism, ‘forced labour, European hegemony, and racial capitalism constituted a critical mix through which most Black Atlantic as well as African cultures were produced’ (8). It is therefore simplistic to imagine that African cultural practices could have remained unchanged under British imperialism. Similarly, it was not possible for these cultural practices to survive intact after the middle passage in the New World. And yet, the nationalist scholars are often tempted to underplay this critical matrix and to privilege what is evidently a romantic view of African culture. For them, African cultures are timeless and unchanging — hence the fixation with the search for authentic African values. The danger with this approach is that it has tended to fuel a static notion of Africa and served to obscure, as Lemelle and Kelly write, ‘the degree to which ‘traditional’ culture in any given historical moment is the product of bricolage, cutting, pasting and incorporating various cultural forms which, in modern times at least, become categorized in a racially/ethnically coded aesthetic order’ (9). This reality has escaped most nationalist interpreters of African and African American culture who have either ignored or played down its cultural syncretism in order to demonstrate the presence of some pure African essence untouched by colonial modernity and global currents.3

Yet how does one talk of a cultural synthesis where the encounter between two cultures is defined by their economic difference? How does one conceptualise a hybrid culture in a context where one culture possesses a more developed economic and even military basis? How does one talk of hybrid culture in societies where ‘Whiteness’ saturates the public space within which we live our daily lives? Indeed how does one talk, for example, about globalisation without registering its tendency to homogenise and delete differences within its larger overarching framework? On this I want to concur with Stuart Hall’s critical observation that ‘the most important characteristic of this form of global culture is its peculiar form of homogenization’, its ability ‘to recognize and absorb cultural differences within larger overarching framework which is essentially an American conception of the world’ (1991 28). Hence, for instance, the current world-wide predominance of neo-liberalism, and the new form of global mass culture which is essentially American, and one which dominates the entertainment and leisure industry, powered by its electronic images.

Similarly, in the past, before the USA emerged into the global scene, it was Britain that played the dominant role as the leading industrial and commercial world power. Indeed as Hall argues, the formation of the British society was intertwined
with the process of globalisation as the main agent of capitalist expansion. It is also not possible to understand the construction of the empire, without registering its manifestation as a global phenomenon, in which British cultural forms took the centre-stage. The English language syllabus, for example, was central to this hegemonic project. Hall has described the nature of such cultural identity as a ‘strongly centred, highly exclusive and exclusivist form of cultural identity’ (1991 20–21). The English had placed themselves at the centre of the world, reducing everybody else, not just the colonised, to the less powerful other. Ngugi wa Thiong’o has eloquently critiqued the exclusivist and hegemonic tendencies in Western imperial culture in his widely acclaimed text, *Moving the Centre* (1993). The thrust of Ngugi’s argument is that those countries that have been at the centre of the process of globalisation as leading powers have normally constructed their national identities as being central, predominant, with a mission, able to name all other cultures as peripheral and inferior. This too is Steven Feierman’s point when he writes in an excellent study of the ‘peasant intellectuals’ of Tanzania that:

If we define a people as different from us, then we have defined them as other, distant from us, not subject to the same historical forces or living in the same moral universe. This is unacceptable. But if we say that we are indeed coeval, living in the same era, subjects to the same historical forces, struggling with the same issues, then we lose the picture of cultural variation which is the heart of anthropology. (38)

How then does one resolve the tension between what is apparently an overwhelming influence of globalisation and an endangered localism? Indeed, how does one challenge the notion of globalisation as a non-contradictory, uncontested space in which everything is fully within the keeping of the institutions that can predict its destiny? The argument in this essay is that the acknowledgement of the tremendous effect of globalisation and the changes it has unleashed in the world need not translate into total fragmentation of the colonised subject and indeed a total loss of agency in which the former colonised subjects continue to have no voice. The idea of a centred subject and its presumed effects on the formation of cultural identities has been grossly distorted to argue against any form of unitary identities or even the possibilities of forging a radical and liberationist consciousness in Africa. It has also been used to question the possibility of any form of enunciation by the marginalised from a specific position — a context which would allow for self-representation. And yet, in order to respond to these complex questions we need to return to the issue of agency.

**The Relevance of Agency**

The perceived solution to the difficulty associated with globalisation and the way it tends to eclipse voices from the margins of its orbit has prompted, across the social sciences and humanities, a re-assertion of ‘agency’ on behalf of social actors and loud calls for (anti-)essentialism. ‘Agency’ connotes repudiation of ‘victimhood’ and a robust assertion of the social and cognitive capabilities of ordinary individuals. Anti-essentialism questions both the idea that identities are
naturally given and that people can have integral and unproblematic identities. By extension such arguments ‘challenge accounts of collective identities as based on some “essence” or set of core features shared by all members of the collectivity and no others’ (Calhoun 198). So in the field of African Studies more generally such arguments have provided some of the intellectual resources to proclaim a new world of ‘creolisation’ and ‘glocalisation’ (Hannerz 551). What this has meant is that the old myth of Africa of cultural authenticity or at the other extreme, Africa invented and sustained by European currents and discursive practices, gives way to Africa of bricolage and multiple modernities — Africa rooted in local cosmopolitanism. The manufacturing of local cosmopolitanism implies a re-imagination of the space of marginality as the space of voicing, as the space of power where the weak can begin to represent themselves. Indeed, this has been the nature of marginalised subjects: when they are faced by dominant regimes of authority, they struggle and acquire the means to speak for themselves. They recover their hidden histories, which are quite often forged from a social phenomenon which places emphasis on local initiative and agency, and relies on local resources sustained through popular memory or drawn from cultural survivals among ordinary people. And this was true of the movements of colonial nationalism as it is true of the movements of modern feminism.

Consequently a useful idea of Africa, I want to argue, will have to be negotiated between local imperatives and global demands; it is an Africa which simultaneously cries out for Africa-for-itself and a critical call of Africa-for-the-world. This is an Africa that is fully aware of its history with all its attendant contradictions, but one that is also willing to be judged by universal norms that hold humanity together. This I think is a healthy ambivalence. What this tension signals for scholars of African studies is that, ‘the subjectivity of the African intellectual, however ambivalent, ought to be a site of struggle and not compromise’ (Korang 453). And yet, too often we surrender too easily and opt for the path of compromise — Africa-for-the world. If you cannot beat them join them, we are told, like the Indian intellectuals have done in appropriating the ‘posts’, and successfully resituating them as ‘Indian’ formations. Yet, I think, this too is an oversimplification of Indian scholarship. The flowering of Indian scholarship has been marked in the first instance with a basic concern with local forms of micro-narratives and knowledges. It is this embeddedness in the local conditions and problems of the sub-continent, that has produced the Indian phenomenon in knowledge production — and here I am making specific reference to resident scholars and not the Indians producing knowledge for the global circuit. Indeed, a good number of the subaltern scholars, now part of the global circuit such as Chatterjee and Chakrabarty, started in India as part of the Delhi School of thought.

The most important area in which this pervasive and subordinating influence of globalisation is most pronounced is in the area of knowledge production. What
has become clear is that borrowed global theories travel with ease, in and out of Africa. How then does Africa manage to assert theoretical agency? One of the things that is of concern to me in this essay is the way Africa receives theory from the global world and how theory is inflected locally to speak to African realities and specific history. But how does one realise agency in the area of knowledge production without being consigned into oblivion in the so called globalising world? Put differently, how does one borrow theoretical protocols and still retain a voice? How does one use received theory in a manner that seeks to creatively transform it into an instrument of curving new knowledge rather than a vehicle for dependency? And on this I want to disagree with Foucault that theory is simply an implement for cutting knowledge. Theory actually frames the way we colonise meaning and spaces we inhabit. It supplies us with the grammar with which to name and decode the world of ideas.

This of course brings us to the vexed question of knowledge and its context of production. It foregrounds concerns with methodological politics and the need to register an awareness of how easily scholarly representations become entrenched. For example, a great deal of ‘Unselfconscious — and interested — misreadings of the Third World societies and their values, texts, and practices,’ Satya Mohanty has written,

    were … made possible not so much because of overt and explicitly stated racism (although there was a good dose of that in scholarly literature for anyone interested in looking), but primarily because of uncritical application and extension of the very ideas with which the west has defined its enlightenment and its modernity — Reason, Progress, Civilisation. (219)

Mohanty’s argument here is that, in their arrogance, the dominant conceptual frameworks from the West have often been used without basic respect for ‘the difference between the terms of the dominant framework and those absent or repressed might use for its self-representation’ (216). To do so calls upon us to radicalise the difference itself — to recognise that ‘the other is not us … and quite possibly is not even like us’ (218). This though is a big challenge because to conceive of the Other outside of our inherited value systems demands also that we do not produce patterns of repression and subjugation similar to those we are seeking to overturn.

In dealing with the above challenge, it is tempting to latch onto what is evidently a relativist thesis as a viable political weapon. The real challenge relates to how one also deals with the indiscriminate and insensitive use of imported theoretical models or simply interprets other cultures through received, but inflexible norms and categories of knowledge. The obvious relativists’ response would be that individual elements of a given culture must be interpreted primarily in terms of that culture — in accordance with its system of meaning and values. To be fair, there are clear methodological lessons that one can learn from relativism. For example, the danger of ethno-centrist explanations of other communities and
cultures; the fact that texts (or events or values) can be significantly misunderstood if they are not seen in relation to their particular contexts and more importantly, ‘that interpretation and understanding have historically been tied to political activities, and that “strong” and “meaningful” interpretations have often been acts of discursive domination’ (Mohanty 219). Relativism thus urges us to pay close attention to the specificities of context, and instead of pointing to shared spaces; it foregrounds the differences between and among us.

Although the political lessons of relativism have some persuasive force, they still suffer from what the philosopher, Ernest Gellner (1990), has called excessively charitable intellectual and political attitude underpinned by the complacent assumption that ‘insiderism’ or even cultural and political sympathy with the subject of study will necessarily translate into unassailable insights. What is often ignored by those who are easily persuaded by the relativist position ‘is the existence of institutionally sanctioned power relations between interpreter and the interpreted that determine the politics of meaning in the first instance’ (Gellner 222). What is often forgotten is that for a successful translation to take place, it will have to take into account how power enters into processes of cultural translation and these will include our ‘institutional contexts of interpretation, our “disciplines” and their regimes of truth and scientificity, and the organization of power relations within a global system’ (Gellner 223). This I believe is what Edward Said elaborates on his idea of borrowed theory — especially how theory is inflected by a range of institutional power structures when it travels across different spaces and histories.

In what follows I want to use Said’s ideas to shed light on the dangers of uncontrolled theoretical mobility, regardless of its place of origin, and to show how a certain level of theoretical smugness has tended to plague our reception of theories from the West. I want to use Said’s idea of travelling theory to try to explore what I consider to be the unmediated, almost rampant trafficking of global theoretical protocols. I am interested in the way theories from the dominant cultures of the global world travel into Africa as the sole and crude implements of cutting knowledge on the continent. I will end by drawing attention to how Walter Benjamin’s model of ‘the story teller’ can help us to develop a nuanced grasp of African modernities — a form of local cosmopolitanism.

Travelling Theory
Edward Said has argued that ideas and theories travel and that this is a fundamental necessity in the development of human society. He writes:

Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. (226)
And yet Said insists that the pattern of travel is neither linear nor without its contradictions and complications. He insists that the movement of theory ‘necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalisation different from those at the point of origin’, thereby complicating ‘any account of transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas’ (226). He argues that there is a discernible and recurrent pattern to the movement itself, three or four stages common to the way any theory or idea travels. These are: the point of origin; a passage through the pressure of various contexts as ideas traverse long distances in time and place; the moment of confrontation which makes it possible for the theory to be resisted and tolerated; and the actual transformation of the idea by its new users — assuming a new position in a new time and place (226–27).

In all these stages, Said would seem to suggest that whether we are looking at the emergence or circulation of a theory or idea, it is deeply contextual. It is for this reason that he argues that in ‘the writing and interpretation of texts — it is wise to raise the questions of theory and criticism in ways suitable to the situation in which we find ourselves. At the outset this means an historical approach’ (230). It means talking about theory in relation to location and time. Because theory arises out of specific historical circumstances, Said calls upon us to reflect on what is likely to happen when, in different circumstances and for new reasons, a given theory is used again and again — its limits, its possibilities, its inherent problems, will be thrown into the open.

Said’s point is that a scholar or critic who has ‘learned from someone’s theory should be able to see the theory’s limitations, especially the fact that a breakthrough can become a trap, if it is used uncritically, repetitively, limitlessly’ (239). In other words, the moment a given theory gains currency and becomes powerful during its travels, it tends to be codified and institutionalised, turning it into a dogmatic reduction of its original version — a sort of bad infinity (239). It can become overwhelmingly totalising in the manner that Marxist thought became in Africa or more recently, the way postcolonial and postmodern thinking and jargon have come to replace genuine search for knowledge.

The contradiction inherent in theory such as those I have alluded to, is that ‘like most theories developed in response to the need for movement and change, [they] run the risk of becoming a theoretical overstatement, a theoretical parody of a situation it was formulated originally to remedy or overcome’ (Said 239). I have in mind, for example, the way postcolonial theory has been received quite complacently in certain sites of the academy in Africa. The criticisms levelled against it are now too familiar and are not worth repeating here in their entirety. Ella Shohat (1993) has, for example, noted how little attention has been paid to its a-historical and universalising displacement; its political ambivalence that blurs clear distinctions between colonisers and colonised, hitherto associated with paradigms of ‘colonialism’, ‘neo-colonialism’ and third world which it aims to
supplant. But of great significance for me, is the way it dissolves politics of resistance because it posits no clear domination and calls for no clear opposition, and the way it collapses different histories, temporalities and racial formations into the same universalising category. My concern though is with the way it has led to what I call a demobilisation of intellectual and cultural insurgency and a deletion of the grammar of insurrection and subversive politics. And although I am aware that it can help us to subvert the colonised/coloniser binary, that is, the cultural effects of the transculturation, which characterised the colonising experience and has proved irreversible, its explanatory authority has tended to be exaggerated with a near religious zeal. Hall (1996) argues that postcolonialism like colonialism before it, is about different ways of ‘staging the encounters’ between colonising societies and their others — though not always in the same way or the same degree. It is therefore a descriptive rather than an evaluative term as we have tended to think.

Let us take again the example of Foucault’s reception on the continent, especially his view in *The History of Sexuality* that ‘power is everywhere’ which has gained so much purchase and currency. As Said argues, ‘Foucault’s eagerness not to fall into Marxist economism causes him to obliterate the role of classes, the role of economics, the role of insurgency and rebellion in societies he discusses’ (244). The correlative of this in African scholarship is the disturbing assertion by Achille Mbembe (1992) that the rulers and the ruled are in a ‘convivial tension’ then proceeding to extrapolate this to mean absolute complicity of the ruled in their oppression. To be sure, there is always compromise in the struggle of life and death between the ruler and the ruled, but it does not signal absolute complicity of the ruled with officialdom, less still equal power relations between the rulers and the ruled because hierarchical and vertical power remains one of the pillars of tyranny on the continent. Nicos Poulantzas has raised the important question: ‘Even if we accept for a moment the view that power is essentially rational, that it is not held by anyone but is strategic, dispositional, effective, that, as *Discipline and Punish* claims, it saturates all areas of society, is it correct to conclude, as Foucault does, that power has exhausted in its use?’ (148). It is precisely this approach that has troubled Foucault’s critics like Charles Taylor who has charged that, in Foucault’s account, ‘there can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime, unless it be that of another. So that liberation in the name of “truth” could only be the substitution of another system of power for this one’ (Taylor qtd in Rouse 104). In Taylor’s view, therefore, Foucault gives us no reason to think that ‘the succeeding system of power will be any better than the present one, and hence no justification for a struggle to change it’ (Taylor qtd in Rouse 104). This is a rather cynical view of the mechanics of power and one wonders where a country like South Africa would be if this kind of view held sway. Post-1994 South Africa may have its short-comings that could be traced to the new political regime, but it is certainly not anything close to the apartheid regime before it. This though is
a symptom of how overblown Foucault’s conception of power has become when it travels too far. The trouble is that Foucault’s theory has drawn a circle around itself, constituting a unique territory in which Foucault has imprisoned himself and others with him.

WALTER BENJAMIN: THE STORY TELLER

Finally, I want to use Walter Benjamin’s idea of the story teller to demonstrate that the development of cultural identities has always been a dialogic one — a project of intimate discourse between local and foreign currents. According to Walter Benjamin, every story teller relies on two major kinds of informers. First is the stay-at-home (autochthon) and second, the traveller (returnee). According to Benjamin, the end result of these primary sources is a dialogue which involves a deep interpenetration of the local and foreign, the micro-narratives rooted in the native lore and tradition on the one hand and foreign traditions (ethnographic blueprint) on the other.

What Benjamin’s metaphor of the story-teller does is to draw attention to the power of local popular cultural processes that resist capitalist rationalisation and therefore cannot be admitted into discourses of civilisation except on the basis of dialogue. These are cultural forms that in a Jamesonian language I prefer to call ‘cultural unconscious’, those cultural experiences that escape the logic of reification and commoditization. The significance of these cultural experiences lies in the fact that they signal to us that the colonial project was never as final and complete as we tend to think. However much dominant cultures, colonial or otherwise, try to repress these cultural forms because they remind it of its uncompleted project, they nevertheless come to eruption.

The second thing that the metaphor of Benjamin’s story-teller does is to force us to confront the utter power of local context, the autochthon, which opens up a whole range of possibilities at that moment of encounter with the foreign; that far from being subjugated or totally erased it enters into a conjugation of identities, often forcing modernity to be seen through the prism of the local. Let me illustrate this by using two of the most exemplary cultural and aesthetic categories inherited from colonialism — the guitar and the game of cricket.

When the acoustic-guitar first appeared among the Luo of Kenya in the late ’40s and ’50s, it was received with curiosity and admiration. But the challenge was to transform it into a useable and relevant instrument that would carry the weight of the dominant musical genres that were in currency at the time — bodi music that was closely associated with the Luo traditional instruments of Nyatiti and ohangla. It was to these two instruments that Olima Anditi, who is said to have been the first to ‘fuse bodi and guitar’ (Stapleton and May, 233), turned in this novel enterprise that was set to transform the Kenyan musical scene and the rest of East and Central Africa for generations. Their secret lay in the way they played the guitar, especially the young Charles Juma whose single innovative style of plucking the guitar rather than strumming it revolutionised what has now
come to be called benga music. Bosco recalls that ‘This was a new way of playing the guitar, and it resembled the way we pluck our own traditional instruments’ (cited in Stapleton and May 1989 233). D.O. Owino Misiani, the one man who popularised the benga music in East Africa, acknowledges that he learned to play the guitar in the way his parents plucked their traditional instruments, the basic rhythm being the ostinato motif, which he learned from his mother’s way of playing the nyatiti instrument. In this fascinating embrace of cultures born out of distant and different cultural contexts, a new musical sub-genre was born. By the 1980s, it had hit a free Zimbabwe where they decided to call it ‘Kanindo’ after the famous Kenyan producer of benga music, Oluoch Kanindo. The point I am trying to demonstrate through this simple example, is how cultures produced on the margins of a dominant discourse might actually have the authority of transforming its basic tenets through an active engagement, largely fuelled from below. This is the significance of Hall’s point referred to earlier on, that:

Face to face with a culture, an economy and a set of histories which seem to be written or inscribed elsewhere, and which are so immense, transmitted from one continent to another with such extra-ordinary speed, the subjects of the local, of the margin, can only come into representation by, as it were, recovering their own hidden histories. They have to try to retell the story from the bottom up, instead of from the top down. (34–35)

The second example I want to give is that of cricket. Cricket was, as most of us may be aware, ‘considered both in Victorian England and its colonies, to be the perfect expression of the values of bourgeois civility, Anglo-Saxon ethics, and public school morality’ (Gikandi 9). Its symbolic value rested on the fact that it was ‘an exclusively English creation unsullied by oriental or European influences’, further proof of the Victorians’ ‘moral and cultural supremacy’ (Sandiford qtd in Gikandi 9). When the Indians and the West Indies entered the game, it marked a moment of cultural profanity and political triumph. Profanity because the façade of moral and cultural supremacy had been removed, thereby exploding the affinity between cricket and Englishness, between the game and the idea of pure nationhood. It marked a moment of political triumph because as Simon Gikandi has reminded us, the ‘nationalists in India and the Caribbean were to posit their entry into the field of cricket as the mark of both their mastery of culture of Englishness and their transcendence of its exclusive politics’ (11). What is remarkable here is not so much the fact that the postcolonial subjects beat the English at their game, but as Gikandi observes, the ‘radical reinvention of the terms of play. In other words, cricket was no longer thought of as the game that signified the core values of Englishness; it was viewed as the mode of play and ritual that has been redefined by Indian and West Indian players well beyond its original configuration’ (11).

As I reflected on the history of the Caribbean entry into the game of cricket, I was reminded of the outcry that followed the entry of Nkaya Ntini and Paul
Adams9 into South Africa’s national cricket team, a sport that had become the last bastion of whiteness in South Africa. A typical fear of moral panic was in the airwaves and print media: ‘they are lowering the standards in the name of reverse affirmative action; keep politics out of sports’. But the national imperative prevailed and Ntini would soon become a national hero — receiving all forms of accolades. His inclusion, like that of Paul Adams, into the national cricket team was beginning to redefine South African cricket and with it a new future that this fragile nation was groping for. Had the nationalist intervention in sports taken the route of compromise, we would not be talking of transformation in cricket.

I use this example of Ntini to illustrate the need for a sustained struggle, even if nationalist, in trying to redefine what a useable Africa should be like for itself and for the world. This is the path that Mudimbe the nationalist signals. He writes:

I believe that the geography of African gnosis … points out the passion of a subject-object who refuses to vanish. He or she has gone from the situation in which he or she was perceived as a simple functional object to the freedom of thinking of himself or herself as the starting point of an absolute discourse. It has also become obvious, even for this subject, that the space interrogated by a series of explorations in African indigenous systems of thought is not a void. (200 [my emphasis])

As shown in the statement above, the nationalist Mudimbe is prepared to interrogate Afrocentrism, without renouncing it. He is aware that any form of enunciation is always positioned in a discourse and a context from where it must speak. But to avoid being trapped in the place from where one speaks one must also signal the desire to crossover — to the point at which the stay-at-home meets the traveller.

My conclusion is that, in order for knowledge production to flower in Africa, the critic’s or the scholar’s job is to provide resistances to theory, to ideas, especially dominant ones, to open them up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests. The scholar has to point out those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory. Or as Said concludes: ‘But unless theory is unanswerable, either through its successes or its failures, to the essential untidiness, the essential unmasterable presence that constitutes a large part of historical and social situation (and this applies equally to theory that derives from somewhere else or theory that is “original”), then theory becomes an ideological trap’ (241). This is the path African scholarship must avoid.

NOTES

I am using the term nationalitarian consciousness after Neil Lazarus to make the distinction between bourgeois nationalism that Frantz Fanon, in the *Wretched of the Earth*, rejected as counter-revolutionary in the decolonisation project and what Lazarus calls insurgent nationalism — a national consciousness that is liberationist and anti-imperialist, but one that also allows the nation to play its part on the stage of history. Certain discourses on nationalism in Africa and on Fanon have tended to conflate these two distinct terms. For further readings on this see Neil Lazarus 1992, ‘Disavowing Decolonization’ and his recent book, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011).


In supporting Nietzsche’s concept of ‘effective history’, Foucault argues that theory as a form of ‘knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting’. See Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, genealogy, history’, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 154.

A similar point has been made by Simon Gikandi (2001) in an essay entitled ‘Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality’, when he cautions contemporary scholars not to lose sight of the historical relationship between old and new forms of globalisation, especially the cultural and political significance of the once powerful idea of the Third World that radically undermined a Eurocentric narrative of development and social change. In his recent book, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Lazarus is even more stringent in drawing the link between the demise of insurgent nationalism to the new grammar of postcolonial theory that has eclipsed discourses on national liberation and the political meaning of the Third World. The Third World, in the view of Gikandi and Lazarus, is no longer the source of cultural and political energies.

See, for example, Achille Mbembe’s essay, ‘The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony’. My interest here is in the way Mbembe oversimplifies the workings of power in Africa by suggesting a narrow and linear complicity of the subaltern classes in their oppression. See a critical challenge to Mbembe’s thesis in Tejumola Olaniyan, ‘Narrativizing Postcoloniality: Responsibilities’. See also Jeremy Weate, ‘Achille Mbembe and the Postcolony: Going beyond the Text’.

See Fredrick Jameson’s chapter titled, ‘Modernism and Its Repressed; or, Robbe-Grillet as Anti-Colonialist’ in *The Ideologies of Theory Essays 1971 – 1981 Volume 1, Situations of Theory*.

Olima Anditi and Charles Juma are regarded in Kenya as the fathers of *benga* music, having fused the traditional Luo *bodi* and Western guitar, and transforming the playing of guitar from strumming to plucking after the Luo traditional style of playing the *Nyatiti* instrument. Both Anditi and Juma dominated the Kenyan music scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Nkaya Ntini (African) and Paul Adams (Indian) were the first blacks to play for the South African national team leading to major protestation from a section of white cricket supporters that cricket standards were being lowered because of the inclusion of these two black players in the national team.
WORKS CITED


