

GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Decolonizing the Virtual: Future Knowledges and the Extrahuman in Africa

Sasha Newell and Katrien Pype 

The world is like a mask dancing: if you want to see it well you do not stand in one place...Africans are like masks dancing: if you want to see them well you do not stand in one place. (Nyamnjoh 2020:13, drawing on Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*)

This essay serves as an introduction to the following set of articles that respond each in its own fashion to the Abiola lecture Achille Mbembe delivered at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association (ASA) in Washington, DC, in 2016. The reflections draw on two panels co-organized by Achille Mbembe and Katrien Pype at the same conference one year later, in Chicago 2017. This Forum collection, co-edited by Sasha Newell and Katrien Pype, brings together formal iterations of those responses, along with an introduction that tries to both tease out and push forward arguments within the original Abiola lecture, while mapping out crucial directions for future research.

The 2016 Abiola Lecture: "Future Knowledges"

Achille Mbembe's Abiola lecture asks us not only what posthumanism can bring to African Studies, but also what African Studies can bring to contemporary discussions on the posthuman. Mbembe uses this relationship to reframe contemporary calls to decolonize knowledge by thinking beyond

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the European cartesian delimitations around the concept of knowledge. This unpublished lecture can be understood as a kind of manifesto for African Studies, an invitation to focus attention on the digital in relationship to the reshaping of African subjectivities, socialities, polities, and economies, and to explore these emerging virtualities from a decolonized perspective on African knowledges.¹ The title “Future Knowledges” slyly suggests that knowledge in and of the future must be plural, and it is from this epistemological multiplicity that Africanist scholars can use existing and emergent African knowledges of the virtual to address the problems of digital cultures globally. Mbembe thus points the direction for an academic Afrofuturism, a pre-posthuman “Theory from the South” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012) that draws upon our historical knowledge of African knowledges to formulate a new planetary “animism” that can guide our relationship to the digital capitalocene (Haraway 2016).

Because the Abiola lecture has not been published as a written text (although there is a video of the lecture on the ASR’s YouTube channel), we provide a brief description of it here. The lecture is roughly structured in three parts: the first part begins with a reflection on the university protests in South African universities and the calls to “decolonize” the curriculum there. Indeed, in the last decade, calls for decolonization have spread globally, toppling monuments across Europe and pressuring kings and presidents to account for their countries’ past wrongdoings.² Mbembe historicizes these calls to “decolonize,” tracing them back to the 1960s, when concepts such as “Africanization,” “indigenization,” and “endogenization” were proposed. He draws on Jane Guyer’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1996), in which she describes the active epistemological curiosity and adaptability of African knowledge systems—open, constantly revised and reconfigured—to point out that “these societies would hardly care about questions such as ‘the decolonization’ of knowledge.” He is not arguing that decolonization should therefore be abandoned, but rather that it should be reconceived in terms that are themselves built on African knowledge rather than a mimesis of (already colonized) North American race relations. “The end goal,” so Mbembe argues,

is not to abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but to embrace such a notion via a ‘horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions.’ Within such a perspective, to decolonize the university is therefore to reform it with the aim of ‘creating a less provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism’—a task that involves the radical re-founding of our ways of thinking and a ‘transcendence of our disciplinary divisions.’ (2016)

Pluriversalism seems to be the key concept here: decolonization does not mean purifying African thought from its European influence, but rather it entails an insistence of putting local knowledge forms on a horizontal platform with the North Atlantic ones that are typically considered the basis of universal knowledge.

In the second part of the Abiola text, Mbembe argues that addressing the problem of decolonization cannot begin while the very basis of what is

knowledge and even what is human is undergoing global transformations. He dissects “new cognitive assemblages” and knowledge formations that result from technological transformations, as well as epistemic shifts that decolonial movements have brought and are bringing about. These challenges, Mbembe continues, can be understood as nothing less than “affecting the disciplines which constitute the foundations of modern knowledge,” carrying political, generational, pedagogical, institutional, and even epistemological consequences. Mbembe thus situates the social and epistemic transformations we are witnessing on the continent within a wider, global dynamic that jeopardizes received notions of “the truth,” “what can be known,” who “can know,” and where knowledge may be obtained and distributed. “There is no boundary for any knowledge today,” he argues. This is illustrated in: (a) the overturning of disciplinary boundaries, (b) the dissolution of the boundary between nature and culture produced by new neurological and biological research, and (c) the emergence of computational thinking, which caters to the market.

The third and final part of the Abiola lecture then tries to identify what “afro-computation” could mean. Here, Mbembe relates the “ongoing Afro-techno-revolution,” induced by the mobile phone (which transforms how people think of themselves, relate to others, and gather knowledge) to epistemic traditions found in the colonial archive on “precolonial” African cultures. Despite our reservations about the word “precolonial” (see Bahi’s and Bernal’s articles in this Forum), one of the aspects of Mbembe’s argument that we find most compelling is his reframing of human/non-human relationships in the techno-scientific age from the perspective of previous African cosmological engagements with the environment: “Things and objects, the animal and organic worlds were also repositories of energy, vitality, and virtuality, and as such, they constantly invited wonder and enchantment.” This then becomes the basis for thinking about contemporary posthuman experiences: “This convergence, and at times fusion, between the living human being and the objects, artefacts, or the technologies which supplement or augment us is at the source of the emergence of an entirely different kind of human being we have not seen before.”

This congruity or analogy between the “posthuman” and the “precolonial” contributes to a pluriversal understanding of life in a technologically saturated world. It also pushes us to reconsider the agency of non-human things, without falling into the trap of a narrow animism defined as a naïve belief system. Rather, like many who assign agency to “the internet” already, an openness to knowledge of and from things and objects—such as smartphones, but also animals, stones, fetishes, and spirits—expands our horizon of knowing and being not unlike the traditions of invention and innovation described by Guyer (1996) or acclaimed by the Yoruba trickster figure Esu, as Jane Guyer and Ato Quayson reminded us during her panel presentation in 2017. Mbembe points toward an important and increasingly interwoven resonance between widely dispersed and historically longstanding cosmological understandings of a second world with the more recent arrival of digital

social space, inverting the typical teleology by which African relationships with technology are always playing catch-up.

Engaging with “Future Knowledges”

While we are fascinated by the resonance between “posthumanism” and the “precolonial” remarked upon by Mbembe, we feel uncomfortable with the teleological implications of both these terms. Invoking the precolonial implicitly suggests an unsullied and isolated African culture prior to contact, at once essentializing a homogenous African identity and erasing the hundreds of years of contact between Africa and the world that helped shape the diversity (and invention) of African “traditions” (Hobsbawn & Ranger 1983; Piot 1999). Mbembe’s vision of such traditions is surely one of multiplicity, cultural contact, and cosmological openness, but the word “precolonial” works against his intentions.

Likewise, Mbembe’s argument allows us to see that African societies have *always* been “posthuman,” in that humans, objects, spirits, animals, and plants are and were conceptualized as so many overlapping assemblages. Thus, we prefer to employ the word *extrahuman*—outside the human—to refer to the webs of cognition, agency, animacy, and relatedness that extend into the actual and virtual realms of the social. As Peter Geschiere points out, African societies are not alone in producing such extrahuman philosophies, but Mbembe argues that Africa may be the only region of the globe that has not been wholly subsumed by the rule of capital, and therefore remains an especially rich source of pluriversal thinking. Thus, one direction the following commentaries pursue is to draw upon African cosmological concepts to rethink the new extrahuman tendencies currently affecting the globe. The virtual and its intersection with reality is often framed as the product of digital technology and as such is wrapped up in the North Atlantic’s self-representation as an ideal type of the modern. By reframing virtuality as something with longstanding heritage in the multiplicity of the African diaspora, we take a step toward the decolonization of the virtual by encouraging the recovery and amplification of its conceptualization in African societies.

The first sections of Mbembe’s talk concerning the politics of decolonizing knowledge are therefore crucial to understanding how to recuperate the plasticity of what Guyer called “Traditions of Invention” (1996) to rethink some of the great challenges of our times: the effects of artificial intelligence upon human cognition, social structures, and economies; the vital entanglement of humans with materiality and lifeforms of all kinds; and the “end of days” tenor of our efforts to stop climate change before it is too late.

What makes Mbembe’s paper inspiring for us to rethink the place of African studies within global knowledge forms is his insistence on the possibility of suturing African visions of the second world to the transformations of the internet driven by capitalism, cyborgian neural transformations caused by smartphone technology, and the increasingly chaotic effects of “knowledge”

in the age of viral information. That is, the second world of the occult shares many of the features of the digital virtual.

Our articles also raise some key points of criticism around the Abiola lecture. One common refrain was a note of caution around a too-positive appraisal of the affordances of new technologies for African knowledge production and connectivity. The warnings offered by Bernal and Bloom in this forum over the new ways in which African creativity and productive capacity will be harnessed and siphoned off into the Global North are important cautions against too Wakanda-esque a reading of what new extrahuman socialities may emerge in contemporary Africa. In these texts, we see there is a need for a much more literal decolonization of the virtual, a space already occupied by the settler capitalists of Silicon Valley, who are already buying, selling, and claiming proprietary rights over African souls, or at least their data-doubles in cyberspace.

However, we especially want to emphasize our agreement with Bahi's observations about the relative absence of African thinkers such as Mongo Beti (1986), Archie Mafeje (2011), Amina Mama (2007), Mahmood Mamdani (1996), Francis Nyamnjoh (2016, 2020), and Joseph Tonda (2012) in Mbembe's lecture, despite their substantial existent discussions on the decolonization of intellectual traditions.³ The same criticism holds for many of our own commentaries. We also recognize that many of our voices are less than ideal vehicles for a discussion on decolonizing knowledge. We delayed publication significantly in an effort to invite more Africa-based scholars to submit commentaries, but for a variety of reasons most of our queries were unsuccessful. However, decolonization should surely be a project of de-essentializing, and in adding our voices to the conversation we embrace Francis Nyamnjoh's (2016, 2020) concept of convivial scholarship and composite beings: we are all *amakwerekwere* (outsiders, recent arrivals).

The Virtual and the Occult

Dialoguing with Mbembe's efforts to bring the occult, digitality, and capitalism together, it is worth looking into the analytical purchase of the concept of "the virtual." Various layers of meaning are obscured in everyday understandings of "virtuality." The Oxford English dictionary assigns the following meanings to the entry "virtuality": (a) "force, power; something endowed with force or power"; (b) "essential nature or being, as opposed to embodiment, and external form"; (c) "a virtual, as opposed to an actual thing, quality, etc. Something which is unrealized, a potentiality, a possibility"; (d) "virtual reality, cyberspace." It seems significant that power, force, and opposition to the external are meanings that lie at the roots of virtuality, making the connection with Mbembe's discussions of animacy and the plasticity of African cosmologies even more relevant.⁴ However, the long-standing opposition between virtual or second worlds and the external form and embodiment gains nuance in the world of digital modernity. The impetus here is to discover what it might mean to use the archive of African

representations of virtual worlds and their interrelations with the actual to think through contemporary global transformations with digital virtuality.

Based on longstanding fieldwork among the Gawa community in Papua New Guinea, Nancy Munn (1992) argues that fame is a kind of virtual influence that circulates as an imagined third party witnessing each transaction. In this sense, *kula* objects are a material media producing a virtual (or imagined) community through which names circulate and augment in grandeur, transforming the actual fate of the particular Gawans who sent off their shells. Virtual worlds are spaces where one can fabricate symbolic selves (in the plural), play with alterity, and imagine what we could be (come). Most importantly, we can capitalize on the force of virtual reality as virtually circulating representations accumulate and translate into actual influence. In this sense, the stories that circulate in gossip of *radio trottoir* are a kind of avatar in the public imagination—a doubling of self with shape-shifting capacity and powers far beyond those of which one's physical body is capable.

In a pioneering study of virtual realities, in particular the digital culture of Second Life, Tom Boellstorff (2008:19) shows how a gap between the virtual and the *actual* is always necessary: "Were it to be filled in, there would be no virtual worlds, and in a sense no actual world either." The virtual, as a space of potentiality, exists "whenever there is a perceived gap between the experienced and '*the actual*'" (Boellstorff 2008). This experience of the gap, of a fracture, is a common trope in the Africanist literature, perhaps better known under the guise of "the broken mirror" (De Boeck & Plissart 2004).

One of the first scholars to engage critically with the disjuncture between lived realities and symbolic spaces in sub-Saharan Africa is Wim M.J. Van Binsbergen (1998). In a critical study of the affordances of "the virtual" for a deeper understanding of African societies, he demonstrates that the virtual as a kind of fourth dimension draws on medieval optics, when around 1700 the idea of the "virtual image" was defined: "the objects shown in a mirror image do not really exist, but are merely illusory representations, which we apparently observe at the end of the light beams connecting the object, the surface of the mirror, and our eye" (Van Binsbergen 1998:876). A similar language was reiterated by Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart (2004) in their intimate ethnography of Kinshasa's various universes, where engagements with colonial and the "modern" often produced refracted distortions through which the colonized glimpsed themselves. But the origins of virtuality are found not only in optics but in physics as well, where Aristotelian conceptions of latent potentiality can be transformed into actual effects (Van Binsbergen 1998:876).

For Van Binsbergen (1998:878) "virtuality, then, is about disconnectivity, broken reference, de-contextualization, yet with formal continuity shimmering through," making it an ideal concept through which to examine globalization. Using such an interpretation, postcolonial models, whether referring to a remote village or to an urban hub of the Global North, are de facto virtual. They are there, not here; they are the stuff of aspiration and

possibility, not of being. A key question, then, for future imagining: If Van Binsbergen gives us a roadmap for understanding globalization in Africa through a theory of virtuality, how might we invert this, using African models of virtuality to rethink the global?

Re-Composing Virtualities

Katrien Pype's Forum article argues how connections between virtual worlds are being produced, while recuperating symbols of various worlds: the rural (beads), Western capitalist modernity (Coca Cola), and even digital modernity (Google Maps). Artists as well engage with virtualities, attempting to produce new imaginaries which may indeed never be materialized, yet they gain economic, social, and spiritual value once these objects and artists get included in international artistic circuits. Through the manipulation of the virtual, these actors transform their own lifeworlds, which become something other than what they were before. The international artistic community ironically consumes African virtual worlds—just as they once did with masks, now international art trade centers are fascinated with new virtual representations that mimic and reconfigure sounds and images from worlds familiar to the art collectors, though referencing “virtual worlds” for the artists themselves. It seems that this distance—the fact that it remains a virtuality—is a condition *sine qua non* for the African artists' success. In Kinshasa, people call Europe “the graveyard for artists,” as most artists have to give up their artistic work in the scramble for the papers to secure “the good life,” or at least a “better life.”

The possibilities of the virtual should not be seen as exclusively positive. Munn (1992) made an explicit connection between magic, witchcraft, and virtuality, as Gawan witches were those who consumed the potentiality of others and collapsed their spatiotemporal extensions. In African societies and their diasporas, when the virtuality of the dream of Europe is actualized, European social space takes on the role of the witch, draining the force of the imagination and diminishing reputation of those who stay home. In the same vein, Sasha Newell argues that smartphones act much like witches, draining vitality, power, and wealth, though their power can also be harnessed to a decolonizing sorcery that enables scammers to seduce the North Atlantic out of its riches. Victoria Bernal and Peter Bloom both raise concerns about corporate algorithms and the power wielded by corporations such as Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon. This also plays out on the African continent, as Bernal reminds us, “African minerals are still extracted to serve and profit consumers and corporations of the global north as was done under colonialism.” She also makes important points regarding political society in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa; taking on Mbembe's notion of “necropolitics,” as developed in his earlier work, Bernal wonders about the continuation of rule by death and violence in this era of digitalization. She asks, “What happens when necropolitics are digitized?” This suggests that authoritarian rule finds new grounds for commandment in digital infrastructures (rather than

assuming that citizens find more opportunities for protection against abusive leadership).

For Geschiere, the virtual seems to be synonymous with the occult. In a description of how *ngangas* in Cameroon help victims of witchcraft and sorcery to recover, Geschiere describes how the healing can set in when the patient has acquired a “second pair of eyes” and is forced to see the sources of his own affliction.⁵ These hidden, occult(ed) worlds “can be compared also to the extra vistas provided by internet,” which, as Geschiere observes, has replaced direct conversation and exchange for so many. But as Geschiere’s earlier work on witchcraft demonstrates so well, the second world is as much a space for creative production as it is for destruction. For the Maka of Cameroon, without the *djambe* in one’s belly there is no way to persuade anyone or to build authority in one’s community, but that very *djambe* is a non-human parasitic being waiting for the opportunity to take control and devour one’s own kin (Geschiere 1997). The same extrahuman force (or technology) that allows people to get rich or gain political power also causes people to consume the vitalities of others.

As Bruce Kapferer has written, “Sorcery practices are more than a representation, they are exercises in the construction and destruction of the psychosocial realities that human beings live and share. Their potency as representations results from this” (1997:301–2). The same can be said for social interactions within new digital media. Harry West has drawn from this kind of phenomenological insight into the worlding of discourse to suggest that Muedan social life consists of visible and invisible domains that overlap through the causal effects that sorcerers produce upon the visible and familiar world; sorcerers “envisioned the world, and brought their visions to fruition” (2007:48). While sorcerers of destruction transcended the everyday by entering the second world where they could see all while remaining unseen, sorcerers of construction made themselves invisible to witches “wherein they monitored, controlled, and even unmade sorcery of ruin by inverting, overturning, reversing, negating, or annulling it” (all glossed by the Shimakonde verb *kupilikula*). The actions of both kinds of sorcerers are only known by the uninitiated in the actual world by the stories and representations that circulate, that is, in the realm of media. James Siegel writes, “The capacity of language to say something without regard to the actual state of the world to which it nonetheless refers is essential to magic...magic is fiction with power superior to that which language has in places where the institution of literature exists” (2006:47). That is, magic is fiction in the original sense of *factio* (making or fabrication)—the bringing forth of representation into social reality.

All in all, what we learn from these observations is that what is often called witchcraft, sorcery, or the occult in African studies is perhaps best framed as virtuality—a reflected, disrupted, fragmentary space that exists alongside the everyday and from which, despite its apparent illusory and evanescent qualities, stream powerful webs of causation that determine the fortune and health of the living. Kinosis artists (in Pype’s article), Abidjanese internet

scammers (in Newell's article), Eritrean nationalists of the diaspora (Bernal 2014), and Cameroonian healers (in Geschiere's article) all use the performative space of the virtual to reimagine the possible and reassemble their realities discursively, often transforming their actuality through the mediation of the imaginary. They mobilize Information and Communication Technologies as what Nyamnjoh (2019:283) calls *juju*, i.e., "a technology of self-activation and self-extension—something that enables us to rise beyond our ordinariness of being, by giving us potency to achieve things that we otherwise would fall short of achieving, were we to rely only on our natural capacities or strengths."

Afrofutures in context

A wave of excitement around Afrofuturism has followed Hollywood's representation of a secret and ancient African technofuture called Wakanda in *Black Panther* (2018). As Mbembe urges us to consider, "new" developments around digital technology are not necessarily so alien to people on the African continent. Indeed, almost all of the Forum responses to Mbembe consider the parallels and congruences between these modes of life in digital capitalized worlds with an understanding of second world forms of relating to otherness. Negotiating the domestication of capitalist modes of being in the world and one's positionality within an ever-changing and elusive universe have been part of locally produced worldviews within Africa for centuries of global contact (Piot 1999).

New genres are appearing in African popular culture that play with the flexible boundaries between the "real" and the "fake." However, we are also asking here: how new is this? When Congolese political activists in the diaspora contested President Kabila's leadership through digital insults, they mobilized a colonial genre that emerged among rival women in Léopoldville (Pype 2020). Furthermore, due to politicians' toying with mass media in Zaire/DR Congo, Congolese people have been familiar with "fake news" before the word became a global idiom. The Lingala word *lisapo* references various genres which in other languages gain different labels, depending on the facticity and the "truth" factor. *Lisapo*, so says a Lingala-French dictionary, references such things as stories, gossip, news, documentaries, and fiction. In Abidjan, the Garagistes sang critically of the titologues in 2000, news "experts" on the street who only read the inflammatory and often unsubstantiated frontpage headlines of the newspapers without buying them, and then circulate their gossip as news on the radio trottoir.

In a pioneering social study of makerspaces in sub-Saharan Africa, Ron Eglash and Ellen Foster (2017) have drawn attention to the socio-political parallels between these spaces of repair, recycling, invention, and innovation and local traditions of tool-making and knowledge production. They provide two parallels. First, "The fixer mentality is far more deeply entwined with the fabrication and making mentality on the African continent than in the United States or Europe" (Eglash & Foster 2017:128). The notion of *se débrouiller* (employed not only in Senegal but also in various other

francophone societies on the continent) pushes people to generate value of objects on a local scale, to work with what is at hand. This very often means to recycle and re-use “waste.” Second, they argue that makerspaces often employ a bottom-up approach, a sharing economy (such as in open access), and retain full control over the production; each are distinct elements comparable with African traditions of making, such as in blacksmith and pot-fabrication collectives. Indeed, the interlocutors of these makerspaces in Ghana (Eglash and Foster’s main field of study), often IT engineers themselves, are quite aware of this paradox, claiming that “the idea that a maker movement is coming from outside of Ghana and is aiming to transform its landscape is highly problematic” (Eglash & Foster 2017:133).

Perhaps surprisingly, Eglash and Foster (2017:119–21) make an explicit connection between innovation and tricksters. The trickster is not only a destabilizing influence, but is also creative, chaotic, and “fundamental to imagination and innovation.” During the ASA panel, Guyer asked whether Esu, the Yoruba god of confusion, still has followers. In response, Ato Quayson questioned whether Esu was not rather the god of mischief. Quayson’s reflection is in line with Eglash and Foster’s approach to makers as tricksters. While confusion is potentially destructive, mischief is conversely playful and productive. So, major questions to ask are: Who are the Esus in digital Africa? Who is playing with the technological possibilities? We can think of the “makers” and “fixers” operating in the makerspaces and hackathons, trying to “hack” poverty and capitalist exploitation in defiance of African states that often block rather than promote entrepreneurship. Yet, contemporary artists can be considered Esus as well (see below).

We should not forget that tricksters enter into the most intimate domains of one’s life, upset people’s certainties, and produce confusion, uncertainty, and bedazzlement. Could we think of viral agents as tricksters? Or, of the internet as a trickster infrastructure? Both the almost invisible and superfast speed of viralities allow digital content, dangerous, toxic ideas and infrastructures, to lure in and to overhaul worlds. Sasha Newell’s contribution considers Ivoirian internet scammers who exploit the intimate possibilities of digital media to build fortunes by asking for help from those who feel they know and love the objects of their internet romance. It is likely that these relationships are powerful precisely because the affective connection is mediated by the virtual. Ivoirians believe these scams can only work through sorcery that sacrifices corporeal vitality in exchange for virtual potentialities. But at another level, we can consider the witchcraft discourse of Ivoirians about the internet to be the product of an expert local knowledge of the possibilities and dangers of virtual sociality. Witchcraft and smartphones alike penetrate the body and drain its force, whether acting directly upon our bank accounts or by consuming the double and dooming the body to eventual death.

Newell also considers the case of #sciencemustfall, an episode in the #Rhodesmustfall movement that went viral and attracted condemnation and racist scorn to the Fallists. Mbembe’s thoughts on decolonization are inspired

by (and perhaps critical of) #Rhodesmustfall activism, and Newell seeks to plumb the issues of decolonizing academia through the ways in which a young African woman's impassioned call to "restart science" from a symmetrical perspective were misunderstood and crushed by a digital swarm of defenders of "western modernity" and the universality of science.

Digital virality, like the biological "virus" the metaphor is drawn upon, transgresses borders with a speed that seems to be autonomous, and consumes us from the inside out. Such transgressions upon the vitality of others have long been a concern in representations of African cosmologies, and the literature acknowledges local methods for protecting against the virality of others. Geschiere refers to the Maka technique for protection: "*bouima* which was always translated as *blinder*—a common word in Francophone Africa." *Blinder* does not mean "blinding," but rather "armouring," "protecting," or "rendering strong" by undergoing therapies led by *nganga*. These healers armor their clients against evil attacks—either via *midu* ("medicine"), by bathing their clients in special "concoctions," or by using herbs and similar concoctions. This "armoring" combines with the acquisition of a second set of eyes—in which patients confront their aggressors, or visualize the sources of their bad luck, ill-faith, or other affliction. As Geschiere cautions, such methods were never certain against the unknown and expansive powers of witchcraft, and neither have the digital securities and privacy buttons, nor even Europe's efforts to legislate our right to online transparency, provided real succor from the infiltration of digital tentacles into our deepest intimacies. But the African archives on the powers of the invisible world nevertheless provide us with a record for understanding the continuities in the ongoing struggle for a successful way to *blinder* against the oppression of the virtual.

Geschiere points out that the Abiola lecture invites some explicit engagements with the recent writing by Joseph Tonda, another major Africa-based social scientist. In *L'Impérialisme Postcolonial: Critique de la Société des Eblouissements* (Tonda 2015), Tonda tries to capture "postcolonial imperialism" in central Africa and elsewhere via the notion of "blinding" (*éblouissement*). Capital (money, dollars) dominates, dazzles, and incites various passions, while electronic devices and representations spread images of conspicuous wealth throughout the globe. Tonda argues that entanglements of machines, screens, and global capital disrupt clear vision, peruse perceptions, and produce new forms of sorcery. Even though Tonda defends an Afrodystopian image, he also reminds us that these images themselves may be inspired by "African forms" of sorcery. Thus, when Tonda draws a connection between the alluring images of music video clips from Nicki Minaj, one of the most seductive "sirens" of the U.S., and the voodoo divinity of Mami Wata, he goes beyond the trope of Africa as a space of passivity, emptiness, and receptivity.

As mentioned earlier, Bahi is critical of Mbembe for a virtual "black-out" of African authors in his essay. But he also argues with Mbembe's interpretation of the two principle African scholars of decolonization who make an appearance in *Future Knowledges*: Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1986) and Paulin Hountondji (1997), both of whom serve as foils for Mbembe by representing

decolonization as the removal of non-African knowledge. While Mbembe represents Hountondji as dismissive of all non-endogenous scholarship, Bahi cites the latter's explicit desire to "critically reappropriate endogenous knowledges and integrate such knowledges into the movement of living research." Turning to Thiongo, Bahi writes that he is making an argument along the lines of Sapir-Whorf about the relationship between thought and language, such that writing and thinking in local languages would allow for scholarship to pursue untapped conceptual terrain. Given that linguists are at last coming around to a new appreciation for Sapir and Whorf's perspectives on language and habits of thought, Thiongo should not be so easily dismissed, Bahi argues. In this interpretation, Thiongo's classic text could be convergent with Mbembe around the value of pluriversal knowledge drawing from multiple traditions of scholarship and conceptual regimes; Bahi argues that linguistic diversity would enable pluriversal logics. Inspired by Francis Nyamnjoh's writings about experiments "African universities" can take on by "embracing African traditions of knowing and knowledge production" (Nyamnjoh 2020), Bahi concludes that if cultural alienation is addressed in an appropriate way, these universities could even become spaces from which to rethink (perhaps even to decolonize) African society.

Digital Vitalities: The Capitalist/Animist Merger

The computational and the digital are alive, full of emergence, experimentation, and becoming. One of the major points of attention in Mbembe's Abiola lecture is that by reconnecting classic Africanist perspectives on extrahuman socialities to contemporary "turns" in other academic domains (new materialism, non-human cognition, vitalism, and posthumanism), African Studies can make crucial contributions to global pluriversal knowledge. While social sciences have already paid much attention to the material life of objects (Bennet 2010; Henare et al. 2007; Ingold & Hallam 2014; Miller 2005), Mbembe asks for more attention to the fact that objects can be animated, that they can possess living qualities beyond the sheer fact of being composed by materials that can transform, expand, shrink, and dissolve. Very much in line with the earlier and often overlooked work by Igor Kopytoff (1986) and Wyatt MacGaffey (1977), Mbembe argues that "The time of objects was not unlike the time of humans. Objects were not seen as static entities. Rather, they were like flexible living beings endowed with original and at times occult, magical, and even therapeutic properties" (2016).

Mbembe indeed pushes us to consider parallels between animated and animate universes. In her book *Sensational Movies*, Birgit Meyer brings in the notion of "animation," i.e., practices of "bringing to life" or "enlivening" (2015:249). Meyer shows how alternative modernities allow for living, animated, and enchanted objects; even in capitalist modernity, people get under the spell of things. When filming Ghanaian Pentecostalist video movies, when editing, and when marketing these films, various processes of animation are going on that—playing with the possibility of slippage—turn the artificial,

fictional world into “the actual thing.” Meyer’s study of moviemaking “teaches us important lessons about the practices by which spirits are enlivened by human acts and hence about the world-making potential of imaginaries and the imagination” (2015:251).

In the opening to the *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe describes the contemporary phase of “the vertiginous assemblage that is blackness and race” (2017:2) as one in which capitalism and animism have “finally merged” (2017:4) after long being kept actively apart. This is an unusual take on the meaning of neoliberalism, and requires further explication. Crucially, he places “Silicon Valley and digital technology” at the center of neoliberalism (2017:3), both allowing and indeed demanding that all aspects of life, experience, subjectivity, and historical events be convertible into numeric code. This concept claims to rationalize human experience by making it directly translatable into market value and at the same time reproducible through digital coding into its virtual form. As Bernal says, “If we are thinking of decolonizing knowledge, Google might be another good place to start.”

Furthermore, in this world where every material thing has a virtual double, Mbembe argues that images become “accelerant[s] creating energy and drive” (2017:4); they are “mass mobilized” not only for profit but also for expansive, even aggressive worlding (2017:5). At the same time, a further instantiation of animism is coming from the transformation of humans into “animate things made up of coded digital data,” and this will be a step toward the general dispossession of power, self-determination, and future possibility, extending to the world as a whole the very techniques of exploitation that targeted populations of African descent in the early capitalist phase (Mbembe 2017:5–6). In this sense, the smartphone’s data disenfranchisement of Africa is but a small piece of the global use of the phantasmagoria of the virtual to expropriate the productivity of the symbolic realm (now that material resources of the world are largely already harnessed to capitalist assemblages).

Peter Bloom warns us about the dangers of romanticizing the plasticity of African precolonial cultures, as doing so might prohibit us from seeing the financial and institutional infrastructures that are “metabolizing” digital media in African spaces. Like Bernal, he asks how to reframe new media in Africa in terms of Mbembe’s earlier work on necropolitics, concluding that contemporary sovereignty is being built around new media infrastructures and the accumulation of value captured in data flows, and that this constitutes a new form of biopolitics that is reshaping African society. His case study of Ghanaian-Malay television collaboration raises significant questions about the locus of surplus value in an information age: a partnership in which the Ghanaian state only owns 30 percent of a media company while the Malay state owns 70 percent begets questions regarding sovereignty in a world where the media not only transforms local economies, but also becomes its own source of value, a kind of currency even. Following Mbembe, insofar as these new technologies penetrate minds and bodies, media needs to be understood as a form of biopower. Bloom asks us to

consider the ways in which the spread of smartphones on the African continent is part of a continued disenfranchisement, this time in the form of the raw appropriation of African data, not to mention consumer capital, toward global centers of wealth and power.

Looking at the spaces of digital creativity on the continent, the so-called makerspaces, fablabs, and hackathons, we observe that these do not at all function outside of the capitalist scheme. Many African IT experts want to become millionaires like Zuckerberg and offer their inventions to the industry. There is a keen eagerness to become major entrepreneurs. The makerspaces might indeed be created from the bottom up, though often with the help from international foreign institutions, there are explicit attempts to offer their innovations on the market. How long will the objects of the makerspaces remain forms of “inalienable value”? This is already embedded with the close connection between makerspaces and start-ups, incubators and accelerators. Digital entrepreneurs turn digital worlds into spaces of moneymaking, literally capitalizing on the economic and social capital that digital currency (Kusimba 2018), cybergames, and digital expressive culture (films, videoclips, music, etc.) can generate.

For Bloom as well, negating the unreal state of digital media in the mediation of consciousness might be what we need to critically approach in the study of postcolonial imperialism. These “scientific machines of wonder and enchantment” need to be explored genealogically. However, they do not always rely on precolonial apparatuses, but rather on colonial interventions that also need to be acknowledged, such as the parallelism between the setting up of the Ghanaian and Malay film units during colonial times, which led to the postcolonial imperial infrastructures in which the Malay corporate world is powerful. Bernal makes a similar, though more abstract call for deep historical and societal investigation into the study of imperialism. Decolonization cannot happen without contextualization, she writes in her critique of a recent attempt to decolonize the Belgian “Royal Museum for Central Africa.” We need to be wary about “faux” attempts to decolonize, which are not only superficial, but, as she claims, also insincere.

Conclusion: Cybernetic Fetishes and the World Wide Web

Toward the end of the Abiola lecture, Mbembe argues that “software is becoming the engine of society and algorithmic reasoning a new form of thinking. To a large extent, software is remaking the human.” There is something peculiar about an understanding of software ruling our society. Insofar as “software” means “programs designed to enable a computer to perform a particular task or series of tasks,” it hints at the direction in which software produces society.⁶ The orientation toward tasks is significant here; if the major systems that are governing the future directions of societies depend on software, or are guided by software, which is already “task-oriented,” it means that the users agree with the tasks that the designers have intended for the software to do. A less dystopian image has been provided by the team work

on social media (Miller et al. 2016) in eight different locales around the world (none of which were in Africa). The title of the introductory volume to a series of ethnographies of social media in sites such as industrial China, urban Chile, and a village in the United Kingdom is “How the world changed social media,” and not its opposite, and this kind of grassroots approach to media remains as important to consider as the hegemonic reorganizations of capital it opposes.

If Mbembe argues (to the chagrin of some of us) that we must take on the neuro-turn and accept that we are all cyborgs now, this also presents an opportunity to employ African knowledges to rethink the human. Wyatt MacGaffey’s (1977) work on *nkisi* objects suggests that like kings, witches, and priests, so-called fetishes were portals into the virtuality of the second world, but like our contemporary commodity fetishized portal-devices, smartphones, they were not simply instruments, but they were also inhabited by spirits—agentive beings in their own right. If smartphones are literally rewiring our brains, if our biology is already re-assembled in relationship to non-human cognition, then we are inhabited by our *greniers* [storehouses, Mbembe’s characterization of the smartphone], whose algorithmic agency is built upon the accumulated code of our forebears. Indeed, the space of the virtual is increasingly filled with the traces of the dead; we can access Facebook pages and YouTube accounts of those who have passed but are kept alive by the visitations of the living, and these spectral traces are increasingly built into the longue-durée networked data algorithms used to determine the very “choices” we are presented with. That is, the cybernetic loops between our phones, the internet, our collective unconscious, and our individual subconscious are inhabited by the spirits of the second world.

While it is possible to interpret the 2016 Abiola lecture as an effort to bring African studies into conjunction with posthumanist philosophy, or a push to pay attention to the importance of technology on a continent most often defined in opposition to it, we think it is pointing toward something even larger. Mbembe’s lecture is an opening, inviting Africanist scholars to make use of the African archive to address the global future, to think through the *extrahuman* cosmologies and philosophies which draw from specific colonial and postcolonial African societies and histories, and to use them to understand the new global situation. Decolonizing African universities can only succeed through the decolonizing of knowledge writ large, to make possible pluriversities not only in Africa but everywhere, places where knowledge includes perspectives “moderns” have long sought to distance themselves from. Otherwise we remain stuck in “faux” attempts to decolonize, as Bernal so powerfully argues. If Africa constituted an Other so other that Hegel wrote it out of the universal history of the spirit, let African knowledge guide us into an extrahuman future.

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Notes

1. A video of the original lecture can be watched at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6p8pUU_VH0 (last accessed on August 17, 2020). A written version that has some overlap but which is significantly different circulates online (Mbembe 2015). In this introduction to the ASR Forum, however, we only engage with the Abiola talk.
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53232105> (last accessed on August 17, 2020).
3. To name a few key figures – many more are mentioned in Bahi's text.
4. This topic has already been the subject of philosophical inquiry in Mbembe's well-known essay *The Thing and its Double in Cameroonian Cartoons* (1997). Here, cartoons published in newspapers express the virtual, occulted.
5. There has been debate around the proper terminology for occult practices since at least Turner (1964), and we note that Mbembe only employs the words "occult" and "magical" in his text. However, "witchcraft" is widely used in anglophone contexts in Africa, as is "*sorcellerie*" in the francophone regions, especially within urban popular culture where these languages are often spoken, capturing broader shared cosmologies that glosses of local terminologies cannot capture. Like Geschiere, we have chosen to reproduce these terms to gloss some of the wide diversity of occult practices related to the second world in a way that connects with anthropological literature and matches Mbembe's pan-African scope. We recognize these as imperfect and colonially marked terms of analysis, but these concepts developed locally through a colonial history and are marked in local thought by colonial contact.
6. Second meaning for the entry "software" in the Oxford English Dictionary (online version, 2010).