

African

Studies Review

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Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism

A SPECIAL ISSUE

Achille Mbembe

GUEST EDITOR

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REVIEW ESSAYS

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From the Editors

When we began editing the *African Studies Review* back in 1997, we were struck by the paucity of publishable manuscripts the *ASR* received from colleagues who live, teach, and conduct research on the African continent. To be sure, there are structural reasons for this: the extraordinarily heavy teaching responsibilities of professors at African institutions of higher education, the lack of access to literature published in Europe and the Americas, and unreliable communication infrastructures. The latter problem has been ameliorated to a degree with the advent of more or less readily available e-mail in most of Africa. However, the number of manuscripts submitted to the *ASR* from Africa has not increased appreciably in the past five years, and of these, most were highly localized in focus. We know from our own individual experiences with African colleagues and institutions that African scholars, despite this structured inequality, are producing intellectually exciting and often provocative scholarship. The question then became—how can we encourage African scholars to send their manuscripts to the *ASR*?

The answer to this question has become urgent for us, but not because we believe that there is anything inherently or essentially more African or more authentic about this work. Broadly speaking we have two primary objectives for soliciting manuscripts from Africa. First, we believe it is an obligation of the international network of Africanists and the African Studies Association itself to provide a forum for scholars writing in Africa for whom access to publication in international journals is more difficult than for those of us living in Europe or in the Americas. As Achille Mbembe puts it, "... it is a matter of giving a voice to those who have remained there." Second, and just as critically, while there is no single lens nor any one way those who have remained in Africa view and interpret the world, as Mbembe points out in his excellent introduction, there is a "relatively distinct sensitivity" and way of "writing Africa" found in the work of many African scholars, a sensitivity that at least partially derives from living the complex realities of African daily life. All the authors in this issue resist and reject Procrustean categories of analysis that create (false) binary oppositions between the social/cultural and material worlds in ways that reduce African actualities to bounded and often static entities bearing little resemblance to the rich, complex, fluid, and often contradictory realities that characterize the tapestry of twenty-first century life there. All are involved instead in imagining and creating curvilinear categories and emerging structures that capture the mobility and shifting shape(s) of the relationships

that constitute Africa and in mapping the labyrinthine networks which are both the product and the mode of reproducing these in the world today.

With the supposition that publishing outstanding scholarship from Africa might encourage further submissions from Africa for publication, we turned to our African colleagues for help. Achille Mbembe rose to the challenge. Mbembe's own scholarly work, always excellent, often provocative, and at times visionary, has helped change the ways in which we all see and write about postcolonial Africa. Achille Mbembe has been one of the critical voices in a new Africanist discourse that aims to explode the static, bounded, and frequently imaginary categories that have all too often been used to analyze—or even describe—African worlds. Perhaps most crucially for this project, Achille has an extensive and brilliant network of colleagues at various African institutions, colleagues who were also eager and excited to put together their recent work for the *ASR*.

Achille Mbembe's elegant and challenging introduction speaks for itself; it gives us enormous pleasure to bring this project to fruition and to see our colleagues in Africa lay claim to the *African Studies Review* as their journal. We hope more such issues will follow in the future.

Ralph Faulkingham
Mitzi Goheen
Amherst, Massachusetts
July 2001

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