Decolonizing Science, Digitizing the Occult: Theory from the Virtual South

Sasha Newell

Abstract: In this article Newell uses two case studies to explore one of the central threads of Mbembe's Abiola lecture, the idea that there is a relationship between the plasticity of digital technology and African cosmologies of the *deuxième monde*. One case concerns the viral YouTube video #sciencemustfall, in which students at the University of Cape Town criticize "Western" science and demand that African forms of knowledge such as witchcraft be incorporated into the meaning of science. The second case considers fieldwork among the *brouteurs* of Côte d'Ivoire, internet scammers who build intimate relationships on false premises using social media. They acquire shocking amounts of wealth in this way which they display on their own social media accounts. However, they are said to use occult means to seduce and persuade their virtual lovers, trapping their prey in the sticky allure of the world wide web. Newell uses both examples to highlight the overlaps between the transformational efficacies embedded in both occult ontologies and digital worldings, calling for the possibility of using African cosmologies of the second world to produce a 'theory from the south' of virtual sociality.

Résumé: Dans cet article Newell utilise deux études de cas pour explorer l'un des fils conducteurs de la conférence Abiola de Mbembe, l'idée qu'il existe une relation entre la plasticité de la technologie numérique et les cosmologies africaines du *deuxième monde*. Un cas concerne la vidéo virale de Youtube #sciencemustfall, dans laquelle des étudiants de l'Université de Cape Town critiquent la science « occiden-tale » et exigent que les formes africaines de la connaissance telle que la sorcellerie soient incorporées dans le sens de la science. Le second cas concerne le travail sur le terrain parmi les *brouteurs* de Côte d'Ivoire ; escrocs d'Internet qui construisent des relations intimes sur de fausses prémisses en utilisant les médias sociaux. Ils acquièr-ent ainsi des quantités choquantes de richesse qu'ils affichent sur leurs propres comptes de médias sociaux. Cependant, on dit qu'ils utilisent des moyens occultes pour séduire et persuader leurs amants virtuels, piégeant leurs proies dans l'attrait

visqueux de la toile mondiale. Newell utilise ces deux exemples pour mettre en évidence les chevauchements entre les efficacités transformationnelles intégrées à la fois dans les ontologies occultes et les agents des mondes numériques, appelant la possibilité d'utiliser les cosmologies africaines du deuxième monde pour produire une « théorie du sud » de la socialité virtuelle.

Resumo: Neste artigo, Newell recorre a dois estudos de caso para analisar um dos argumentos centrais da lição que Achille Mbembe proferiu em Abiola: a ideia de que existe uma relação entre a plasticidade da tecnologia digital e as cosmologias africanas do *segundo mundo*. Um dos estudos de caso diz respeito ao vídeo #sciencemustfall, que se tornou viral no YouTube, no qual estudantes da Universidade da Cidade do Cabo criticam a ciência do «Ocidente» e exigem que as formas africanas de conhecimento, nomeadamente a feitiçaria, sejam incorporadas no conceito de ciência. O segundo estudo refere-se ao trabalho de campo realizado entre os *brouteurs* da Costa do Marfim, burlões da internet que constroem relações íntima com base em falsas premissas através das redes sociais. Estes burlões obtêm assim quantias avultadas, e exibem a sua riqueza nas contas pessoais das redes sociais. No entanto, diz-se que recorrem a métodos ocultos para seduzir e persuadir os/as seus/suas amantes virtuais, armando ciladas às suas vítimas através dos encantos da world wide web. Newell recorre a ambos os exemplos para sublinhar as sobreposições entre as fórmulas eficazes de transformação presentes tanto nas ontologias ocultas como nos mundos digitais, chamando a atenção para a possibilidade de utilizar as cosmologias africanas do *segundo mundo* para criar uma "teoria do sul" da sociabilização virtual.

My reaction to Achille Mbembe's 2016 Abiola lecture was strongly influenced by two ethnographic stories, which I will use here as filters with which to tease out the themes that I found most interesting in his discussion. The first is a YouTube video entitled #sciencemustfall, which was brought to my attention by my students at North Carolina State University concerning a University of Cape Town student-run meeting about decolonizing science during the heat of the #Rhodesmustfall movement and the viral "cancel culture" aftermath that followed. In this video, western science was challenged to explain the existence of witchcraft. The second filter emerges from some fieldwork I did in Abidjan in 2015 about the *brouteurs*, Ivoirian internet scammers who are reputed to use a new form of witchcraft in order to persuade their interlocuters to send them vast sums of money. Though located in vastly different venues in Africa, concerning actors with different levels of cultural capital, and employing differing cultural constructions of race and differing cosmologies of the occult, these examples both illustrate the folding of multiple realities that takes place between technology, knowledge systems, virtual worlds (occult and digital), and the everyday. My goal in these examples is to show how Mbembe points the way toward a "theory from the south"

(Comaroff & Comaroff 2012) of what contemporary critical discourse calls posthuman relationships with technology. In other words, I believe African cosmological models of the second world (a double of this world where witches and spirits roam) and contemporary enmeshments between technological virtual space and occult virtual space may provide insight into some of the larger social problems of our brave new world.

"Life behind screens is fast becoming a fact of daily existence," Mbembe said of Africa during his Abiola lecture in 2016, calling upon Africanist scholars to focus upon the effects of quotidian contact with digital worlds; "People are exposed to, are producing and are absorbing more images than they ever had" (2016). Mbembe described a resonance between the plasticity of precolonial African cultures and new technologies, arguing that the saturation of African society with digital media has "instituted a relationship between humans and other living or vital things African traditions had long anticipated" (2016). At the core of his discussion was the concern that the human species is experiencing "a technologically enhanced rewiring of the brain." Mbembe draws upon Katherine Hayles (2016a) and her concept of non-conscious cognition. This broader understanding of cognition allows for a "breaking down of the relationship between symbolic and pre-symbolic"—the invisible contact zone between inarticulable affective transmissions and the collectively constructed symbols and categories through which conscious communication and world-building takes place.

Hayles (2016b) emphasizes in particular the role of devices in extending the cognitive possibilities of the mind and building cognitive networks with algorithmic machines upon which we increasingly depend for basic "mental" functions such as navigation and memory, such that neither knowledge nor consciousness is limited to human brains. Mbembe thus points us toward a terrain quite similar to philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers's (1998) extended mind hypothesis. Clark and Chalmers argue that anything that we use for cognitive operations should count as a part of the mind, whether a pad of paper, a computer, a GPS device, or even the memory work outsourced to our social relations (as when I ask my partner, you know, that guy, what's his name?) Once brains are coupled with devices (artificial forms of non-conscious cognition) and come to depend on them for basic tasks such as navigation, the neural patterns of the brain adapt to this situation, literally transforming the infrastructure of our thoughts. But the effects are not only to be found within the casings of our skulls but also upon the structures of social interaction and collective cultural forms which find their expressions and materializations mediated by digital technologies (and the profit-seeking companies that own them). If then, on a planetary scale the meaning of human is changing and "we are all cyborgs" (Haraway 1991), is there an African specificity to these emerging human-computer meshworks?

Mbembe seems to suggest there is, on two accounts:

1) He argues that the African continent is the only geographical sector not yet fully integrated by capitalist relations. The digital revolution currently taking place in Africa is thus simultaneous with capitalism's final conquest of "the last frontier." So the emergence of neoliberal subjectivities in Africa coincides with their being digitally tuned or "rewired," implying that there may be particular sociocultural effects from this historical process of adoption.

2) Alternatively, digital virtual space responds rather seamlessly to the plasticity, interconnectedness, and multiplicity of African cosmologies, as discussed in the introduction to this forum. This involves a longstanding and widespread creative quest for knowledge, especially of the invisible second world, a form of virtuality within which anthropologists have often encountered the hidden architecture of social hierarchies, personal potencies, and causal connections. This longstanding relationship to virtuality in many contemporary African cultures (there is no reason to think it was ever severed) thus resonates with and frames the arrival of digital virtuality in specific ways, allowing for a certain Africanity to Mbembe's posthuman interpretation of the internet.

This second argument is in equal parts risky and inspiring. As explained in the forum's introduction, the idea of precolonial African culture works against Mbembe's larger argument by implying a monolithic and timeless African character, whereas the content of his argument depicts African cultures as undergoing continuous and active self-transformation, philosophical openness, and the integration of multiple ontological positions. Furthermore, this relationship to knowledge of the world meant that societies on the continent were extremely porous, not only along the frontiers, but far into the interior, where scholars have found evidence of the presence of foreign trade goods and cosmological concepts dating from long before European explorers made direct contact. There is therefore no question of a "before contact" period of any relevance; rather, we should interpret Mbembe's discussion to describe patterns or tendencies of orientation that find diverse, particular, and ever-changing expressions across many African cultural forms and historical periods, ongoing into the present (here my interpretation differs from Bahi's, in this issue). Mbembe's point is that this widespread quality of epistemological transformativity is not the product of colonial contact but rather something already present. Indeed, I was drawn to participate in this forum because Mbembe's argument related so strongly to the conclusions I was drawing in my own work about an overlap between internet dynamics and witchcraft.

I will now turn to an unfortunate episode in the history of #Rhodesmustfall in 2016, a movement that prefigured and indeed helped inspire the global reactions to the death of George Floyd in 2020. This story provides a window into the relevance of a pluriversal conception of knowledge in both a local university context as well as a global political context. It also highlights the importance of screens in South African social space and the uncontrollable viral nature of their global interconnectivity.

#ScienceMustFall

During the effervescent expansion of the #Rhodesmustfall movement into #feesmustfall into "everything must fall," South African university students sharpened their collective critical voice amid heightened revolutionary spirit and took on the decolonization of knowledge itself.[1] #Rhodesmustfall, itself a movement based on a hashtag and a sign of the potency of the smartphone for the production of affective publics in contemporary African societies, began with a symbolic attack against institutional symbolic violence in the form of a prominently placed sculpture of Cecil Rhodes. A UCT student named Chumani Maxwele, accompanied by a group of demonstrators, threw a bucket of human feces on the sculpture. Twenty-one years after the end of apartheid, twenty-one years in which black students had been told to be patient because change doesn't happen overnight, Maxwele's action ignited a student movement that eventually brought down the sculpture, fought the rise in school fees, and eventually challenged the hegemonic influences shaping knowledge itself (Nyamnjoh 2016).

About a year after Maxwele's act of protest, University of Cape Town students and faculty convened to discuss the decolonization of science, coordinated by Fallist activists, a meeting which was recorded on someone's smartphone. A video clipped from this recording, covering only four minutes of a meeting that lasted over an hour, was uploaded on October 13, 2016, on YouTube by someone calling themselves "UCT Scientist," labeling it #ScienceMustFall.[2] The video quickly went viral, reaching half a million hits within a few days and well over a million views total since it was uploaded, and spawning numerous memes and response videos. While the meeting was intended to be a conversation that opened up the possibilities for more open forms of pursuing knowledge in its multiplicity, the effect of its virtual circulation in a four minute clip is a perfect illustration of the viral vigilante mobs through which the internet produces moral enforcement and ad hoc justice. Collective "knowledge" of what happened is communicated through affective channels where verifiability is less important than plausibility, and decontextualized sound bites, images, and memes are put together into politically charged digital ensembles. The nearly instantaneous consolidation of moral resonance around an event made possible by social media has thankfully helped bring down such previously untouchable figures as Harvey Weinstein and galvanized #BlackLivesMatter in the wake of George Floyd's death, but the same technological form has also allowed for the growth and open expression of white supremacy. Unfortunately, #sciencemustfall has been used politically by the alt-right as an exemplar of problems with "political correctness," "social justice warriors," and the poor educational state of African students, and was taken by many viewers to discredit the claims behind the #Rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall movement as a whole. It remains quite difficult to find any text that defends or even considers these issues in a balanced way, while vitriolic posts are added daily even years later.[3]

During the meeting, one young South African woman made a heartfelt and plaintive defense of the idea of decolonizing science, arguing in response to a faculty member's question of how it could be possible to decolonize science that "if I personally were committed to enforcing decolonization, science as a whole is a product of western modernity, and the whole thing should be scratched off." The room, largely filled with a mix of UCT science faculty and student activists, laughed, perhaps partly in shock at the statement, but some clearly in sympathy. Indeed, having now watched through most of the meeting in a longer video available to download from the same YouTube post, a significant number of speakers from the audience spoke in support of this general idea—she was not speaking alone.

While there are some traces of this woman's identity online, I have chosen to leave her anonymous, as she has already been the subject of sustained attack and vilification.[4] While the idea of "scratching off" science and starting over is implausible to most, and cause for immediate dismissal for many readers, it is worth recognizing that her overall goal seems to be focused on how science is taught rather than on the destruction of scientific knowledge per se. Mbembe points out that scholars do not yet have a theory of knowledge that allows us to understand what it would mean to decolonize knowledge itself. In fact, he argues that in light of the social and neurological transformations taking place due to new technologies, it is less clear than ever what knowledge is. The way forward, he suggests, seems to lie in an embrace of multiplicity. Drawing upon Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2008, 2014), Mbembe writes that the end goal is not to abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but to arrive at it through a "horizontal strategy of openness" to epistemic diversity—that is, rather than assuming that western knowledge is the teleological endpoint of science and the only legitimate methodological source for evaluating what counts, we should combine the strengths of knowledge streams from all corners of the globe in building a truly universal archive. It is from this angle that I read the events of #sciencemustfall.

The young woman continued fervently:

> So if you want a practical solution to how to decolonize science, we'd have to restart science from, I don't know, an African perspective, from our perspective of how we've experienced science. For instance, I have a question for all the science people. There's a place in KZN called Umhlab'uyalingana and they believe that through the magic, the black magic, you've heard of black magic—they call it witchcraft, others—that you are able to send lightning to strike someone. So, can you explain that scientifically? Because it is something that happens…

Regardless of one's feelings about the existence of magic and witchcraft, one must acknowledge that "witchcraft" cosmologies are a part of everyday realities in the majority of the continent (and many other places besides).[5] This is not to make the ridiculous claim that everyone in Africa believes in

witchcraft—whatever "Africa," "belief," or "witchcraft" may signify—but rather that encounters with witchcraft in popular discourse are ubiquitous and quotidian. Indeed, the occult has been one of the most significant themes in locally produced video media made possible by handheld video recording devices since the late 1990s (Pype 2012; Meyer 2015; Haynes 2016).

One of the classics of Nollywood film, the 2001 *Magun* [Thunderbolt], takes up precisely this theme of the overlap between science and witchcraft.[5] One of the heroes of the story is a young medical doctor who attends a conference on gynecology and obstetrics with his colleagues in a scene quite irrelevant to the overall plot. To the shock and outrage of these scientists, an elderly doctor makes the following pronouncement during his lecture:

> We are speaking here of a different culture. A different people who possess a different order of knowledge, scientific knowledge, which your so-called scientific precision tools have not yet been able to analyze… Ladies and gentlemen, the existence of some yet unexplained forces, causes, and effects in African cultural practices can no longer be denied, and the purpose of my paper is encourage a more humble, a more academic, a more research-oriented approach to the study of African medical practice.

Thus, in a film within Nigerian popular culture one finds a relatively clear statement of just the kind of pluriversal approach to knowledge forms Mbembe advocates. In the dramatic culmination of the film, these same young medically-trained skeptics agree to collaborate with the witch doctors to try to save a young woman who has been cursed by her husband with *magun*, described in the film as a diabolical "African AIDS" triggered by the sexual act. The doctor (who had long nurtured a crush on the protagonist) is required to have sex with her in the presence of the witch doctors to end the curse, at risk to his own life. It is the witch doctors whose combined efforts save the doctor's life when the spell takes effect. The film highlights the ethnic variation in perspectives on the occult as well as the impossibility of predicting someone's openness to the possibility of magic based on their level of education or class. Several prominent characters, including the principal of the secondary school, the landlady, and in the end the young doctors, all recognize the existence of occult forces, although the Igbo heroine refuses to believe in this Yoruba magic until its power is demonstrated directly. Adam Ashforth has documented just this kind of fluid leaping between ontological frames on a daily basis in urban South Africa in his biographical ethnographic masterpiece *Madumo* (2005). There should thus be nothing surprising or shameful about a graduate student asking scientists to explain the capacity of experts within a particular village to control lightning. Nevertheless, to stand up in front of a group of scientists and ask them to consider witchcraft as a possible reality took a great deal of courage.

The reactions to her diatribe were rampant, brutal, and above all racist, pointing out that the electric lights, air conditioning, cellphones, and tablets in the room (including the smartphone she could be seen using in the video) were the product of "western modernity" as well, and she and her friends

should go back to living in mud huts if they don't like science. As Aragorn Eloff puts it in his thoughtful web essay, "Later in the day, stupidity vanquished, the middle class commentariat returns to retweeting Ivo Vegter, booking flights to New Zealand and sharing pictures of the wild eyed student terrorists of Braamfontein, resplendent in their Pumas as they wave their *pangas* at the police while dancing on the rooftops of burning buses, summoning lighting from the sky. And science is left in an even worse state" (2016).

For some, including individuals who were in the audience that day, the very idea of decolonizing science is illogical, because science, being ideally about the accumulation of rational, objective, tested knowledge, is race blind. As one commenter named "Askover" wrote in early 2020 in response to the #sciencemustfall video:

> "Lol even if we restart science we will just inevitably come back to where we were right now. Knowledge from the west doesn't exist. It's a part of understanding that all people, whether you are white, black, asian, male, female, etc. can understand. That's how knowledge works. That's inevitably why the world switched to a skeptical mindset instead of a religious one. Understanding comes from questioning, which can be accomplished by all."

> Another correspondent posted: "Western science is precisely an attempt to remove local, in Newton's case white, perspective and generate knowledge that is valid to other cultures. It is not essentially western at all."

Such a position places scientific knowledge in the position of the universal, which is of course the very goal that the scientific method is designed to guarantee and a claim that popular culture largely accepts—it is Gramscian "common sense." However, as amply demonstrated by science studies, all knowledge is socially produced and exists within a social context that affects its claims and its interpretation; even for Durkheim, science and religion both originate in the same acts of collective categorization. Because science is claimed to be the product of modernity, itself implicitly associated with the unmarked universal position of whiteness, it is never actually race neutral. Everyone is in theory included under the rubric of scientific knowledge. But when a public speaker's embodied form is marked as different from the implicit whiteness (and maleness) of the unmarked universal subject position, the audience is far more likely to regard the speaker's rationality and scientific capacity with suspicion. Thus, many of the comments to the video exhibited more direct forms of racial commentary as the location of the meeting in Africa was understood by viewers as linked to their capacity for science.

| Wearesupreme:	oh right because Africa is the leading frontier in the world of science ahahahahahahahahaaaaa
G M:	This is exactly the reason why Africa is still miles behind everywhere else on Earth, just archaic superstitions from the

dark ages being peddled as truths because of cultural ego-
tism. How laughable that she sits there with all the comforts
that science brought here while decrying it.

The great bulk of the comments (over ten thousand in July 2020) are of this
tenor, many of them far more caustic.

One of the most ridiculed statements in the #ScienceMustFall video
was the student's critique of Newton as the originator of the theory of gravity:
"Western knowledge is totalizing. It is saying that it is Newton and only
Newton who knew or saw of an apple falling, and then out of nowhere
decided that gravity existed and created an equation and that is it! The thing
is the only way to explain gravity is through Newton who sat under a tree and
saw an apple fall." This statement, combined with her identity as a Fallist
activist, is at the origin of the #sciencemustfall hashtag. In the comments to
the video, the student was repeatedly enjoined to jump off a building if she
was so certain gravity was only a theory (see Figure 1).

However, another possible interpretation might be that, drawing upon
established arguments from postcolonial scholarship, she was actually trying
to critique the way North Atlantic education tends to represent all factual
knowledge as a product of white civilization. As Mbembe wrote in an earlier
version of his arguments in the Abiola lecture, "Yet the Western archive is

Figure 1. An example of a meme produced to discredit the Fallist movement and make fun of the idea of decolonizing knowledge.
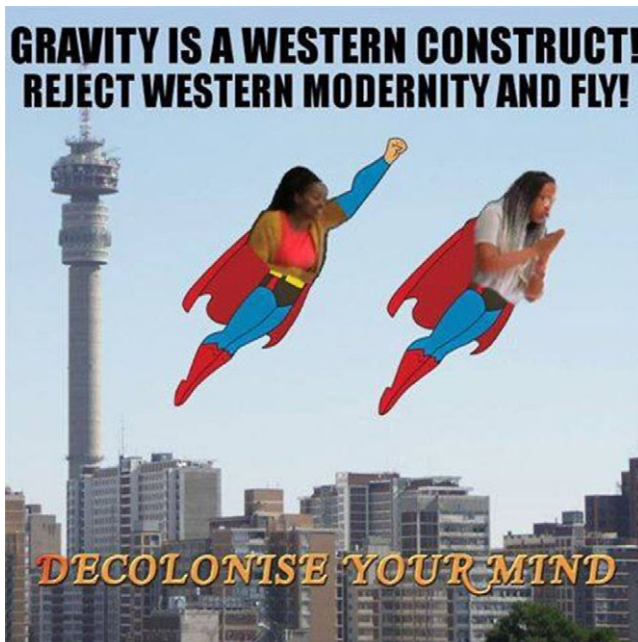
singularly complex. It contains within itself the resources of its own refutation. It is neither monolithic, nor the exclusive property of the West. Africa and its diaspora decisively contributed to its making and should legitimately make foundational claims on it" (2015). This dynamic of appropriation is similar to that described in Peter Bloom's article in this issue of the surrealists' unacknowledged debt to African aesthetics, one he warns us may continue to be repeated in the digital era (Bloom 2021).

Science is not a-cultural, and in fact many key claims do circulate through a kind of mythological discourse. The story of Newton sitting under a tree and watching the apple fall is an origination myth and is not in itself scientific, and yet the repeated story of Newton in the context of populations marked as non-white in effect racializes the concept of gravity as having been invented by a white man. Whether or not Newton was the first to conceptualize "why things fall" is not the point, though one would not be surprised to find he was inspired by his forebears. The point is that scientific knowledge is framed in culturally specific ways that include cultural and racial judgments, excluding the claims of some while valorizing those of others. This is not an argument to cease teaching about Newton, but rather simply to point out that it is worthwhile thinking about how race sneaks into scientific teaching and how that might be opened up more by examining historically the cross-cultural flows of knowledge that were concentrated by the imperialist mission of Europe (and which continue to sustain that hegemonic position even now). As the anthropology of globalization tells us, the development of the concept of science emerged in consonance with the age of discovery and the purification of Europe, both of which became key materializations of the racial self/other divide at the root of the concept of modernity (Trouillot 2004). The concept of race itself was honed and "crafted" by scientists so successfully that no amount of scientific proof in its inexistence seems capable of eliminating collective belief, and as Karen E. Fields and Barbara Fields argue, witchcraft and 'racecraft' share this resistance to empirical invalidation in surprisingly similar ways (2012).

Indeed, Francis Nyamnjoh has made extensive arguments documenting the racially charged nature of education in Africa, arguing that it often amounts to a kind of "whitening":

> The result has been education through schools and other formal institutions of learning in Africa largely as a process of making infinite concessions to the outside—mainly the Western world. Such education has tended to emphasize mimicry over creativity, and the idea that little worth learning about, even by Africans, can come from Africa. (Nyamnjoh 2012:130)

Nyamnjoh also describes how schemas of racial evaluation work within the university itself, and especially in the interactions between African institutions and the global academic scene, where the African scholars associated with the whitest African universities are regularly those taken most seriously on the international arena. Nyamnjoh describes how African scholars are

constantly evaluated in terms of their proximity to the North Atlantic, in terms of the origin of their degree, where they have given guest lectures, and where their articles or books are published. As cited by Rohann Deb Roy (2018), Nelius Boshoff (2009) has demonstrated that 80 percent of research papers produced in central African countries were written with scientific collaborators from outside Africa, collaborators who most often originated from the country of the African scholars' former colonizers. Roy also describes how collaboration most often takes the form of extraction, in which the European scholars use fieldwork data gathered by African participants to generate publications for which the former take more credit. The point is that educational institutions, degrees, and the content of knowledge taught within such places cannot be culturally neutral when the entire knowledge system is associated with and modelled directly upon the educational system of the colonizers.

In sum, this story is important on two levels, first of all because the original critique offered by this UCT student points us in precisely the same directions as that of Mbembe, and second because the collective reaction to her video was a powerful example of the social modality of viral information —unstructured, affective, and crowd-driven—that drives both digital media realities and those of witchcraft discourse. Perhaps it is the crowd's reaction that is ultimately most significant, for it is an illustration of the way in which knowledge is already no longer what we imagine it to be. There is nothing scientific about the rejection of Fallist intellectual queries about decolonizing knowledge; it stems from a place of assumed, unquestioned *idées recus* [received ideas], passing through the same kinds of collective channels as conspiracy theories and gossip, where resonance with others who share one's perspective produces the assurance of "truth."

Witchcraft on the Internet/ The Internet as Witchcraft

This second example investigates how local understandings of witchcraft can act as the source of models and theories for understanding broader social worlds, especially when we focus on models of the overlap between the virtuality of the internet and the virtuality of the occult. (I have written about this account in more detail in a separate article [n.d.] and can only summarize my points here, but accounts of this activity can be found in Burrell [2012], Koenig [2014], and Warner [2011].) In other words, whereas in the first case the statements of a South African student about witchcraft and science were misunderstood by the Global North on YouTube, in the following section I reflect on how Ivoirian witchcraft discourse offers critical insight into the hidden hierarchical accumulations of digital connectivity. Both cases exemplify Mbembe's arguments about how the decolonization of knowledge must be a pluriversal mode of combining seemingly incommensurable epistemologies. *Brouteurs* and their critics offer a knowledge that cannot be accounted for by science and yet which still provides a fresh perspective on both the efficacy and the dangers of new media.

In 2015, I returned to Côte d'Ivoire to reconnect with my old contacts and to get a sense of how things had changed since the ethnography I performed for *The Modernity Bluff* (Newell 2012). While cellphones had already been a key symbol of success in 2001, I was stunned by the pervasiveness of smartphones in the daily texture of life, now in visible use everywhere. People were browsing videos and social media even on the *gbaka*—the cheap informal vans crammed with people who can't afford more comfortable modes of transportation. As Mbembe declared, the arrival of the "mobile phone has also been a major *aesthetic and affect-laden event*," one that is "increasingly in the interest of the urban poor" to connect with as well. Unlike cellphones, which in 2000 served primarily as status symbols and whose function was less important than their outward aesthetic, the fascination of the smartphone extended to the images it displayed upon its screen and the new forms of connectivity it provided. In addition to the all-too-familiar complaints about its capacity to absorb people's attention and turn a group of friends at a table into solitary individuals staring at their screens, Abidjanais people expressed a great deal of anxiety about the phone's capacity for connectivity. I was warned that I should never give anyone my number because they could use it to control me, or that people could connect with my phone simply by being near me in the bar, and then they could send me a message and if I were to read it I would be hooked and under their sway. I was immediately struck by the resonance between these kinds of stories and those of hackers whose capacity to penetrate digital devices and take control of them remotely has long driven stories of fascination and fear in the North Atlantic.

I soon realized that these ideas about the dangers of digital connectivity were also linked to a new economic activity that had completely transformed the streets of Abidjan in my absence. With the Ivoirian discovery of social media and the ability to build relationships with people all over the world using digital platforms, street crime moved online in the persons of les brouteurs [the grazers]. Brouteurs are often confused with Nigerian 419 schemes—by which they were undoubtedly inspired—but they have a quite different technique. While the 419 scams relied upon African stereotypes of oil riches, civil wars, and corrupt politicians to open the purses of their victims and found their marks through barrages of mass emails (Apter 2005; Smith 2008), the brouteurs gradually develop social relationships with their targets, building them over time, investing in intimacy, until they are capable of earning incredible sums of money when they asked their paramours for help with an invented economic difficulty or emergency. Millions of dollars are estimated to enter Côte d'Ivoire this way every year. There is much to say about the technical mechanisms and most common tricks behind the success of these scams, as well as the brouteurs' theatrical acts of self-presentation and exorbitant public distributions of cash to strangers, but for the purposes of emphasizing the relationship between this phenomenon and Mbembe's Abiola lecture, I am going to limit my discussion in this forum to two aspects:

1) the production of intimacy across cultural and spatial distance, often involving cross-gender performance and racial and/or cultural passing
2) the association between the brouteurs and new forms of sorcery that work through the internet.

Ivoirians marvel at the technical skills acquired by brouteurs, who often apprentice under a more established brouteur to learn the *métier*, including bodily habitus such as the ability to type and text without looking as well as more advanced software solutions that allow them to capture and exploit the photo and video streams of others whose visual personas they steal. In addition to this "professional" formation, they must successfully perform and pass as someone from another culture, another race, even another gender for months of emails, text messages, social media posts, and occasional live chats. To do this they had to invent personalities around the found imagery of other people's social media profiles and then perform the associated cultural identity (often European, middle class, or even wealthy, often female). In a sense, these performances constitute a form of Fanonian "white masks," as they digitally migrate and temporarily shed their Africanity. But unlike Fanon's critique of performed whiteness and the attraction of diasporic social capital to Europe, here the performance inverts the flow of value, siphoning wealth from the Global North into African pockets and "repaying the colonial debt." As Basile Ndjio argues (2012), this is a kind of Africanization of global capitalism—not simply an effect of neoliberal policies and state corruption on African economies, but an expansion of "the spirit of *sagacité*" [the magical arts of deception] to the capitals of the North Atlantic.

The kinds of haptic relationships to screens suggested by Mbembe help us to understand how this intimacy, which must be in some sense authentic in order to function, can be produced so effectively. The marks of these ruses must trust and even love the glowing images of a person they believe exists and cares for them. The fact that social relationships everywhere are increasingly mediated by screens, and that screen interactions are known to produce chemical reactions in the brain is part of the explanation, but the romantic nature of these scams also works so well because intimacy must be suggested rather than made explicit, allowing for condensed forms of symbolic exchanges that indicate rather than communicate. In a way, this exploitation of the unsaid is akin to the efficacy of the unseen in occult practices, where the ambiguity of what is out of sight allows for the expansion of the imaginary (Newell 2018).

Indeed, this relationship between the affective resonance of screens and magicality is recognized by Ivoirians, in that a new form of digital witchcraft has emerged called *zamou*. In zamou, closely related to *sakawa* in neighboring Ghana (Warner 2011), a client pays a *marabout* [occult specialist] to give them the power to influence others over the internet. They must make a sacrifice to give the spell efficacy, and some sacrifice years from their own future life, or the ability to sleep, or the ability to save any of the money they are making (See

also Ndjio 2012). However, many of the rumors and newspaper reports on this type of magic focus upon stories of blood sacrifice, in which children or babies are killed in order to attain the promised wealth through internet scams. The tropes of taking the life of innocents in order to accumulate individual wealth are very old in this region (and exist in witchcraft stories across the globe), but the fact that this magic can extend through the internet itself is what is new. It is the "mimetic resonance" (Mazzarella 2017) between the transformative efficacy of internet imagery and the preexistent cosmologies of magic that provides ethnographic verification of Mbembe's point. While Peter Geschiere indicated the connections between modernity and witchcraft long ago, in the connection between the digital virtual and the virtuality of the second world we have another order of relation: one that verges on identity (see Figure 2).

The fit between the modes of sociality afforded by the internet and the efficacies of which sorcerers and witches have long been capable is often eerie. Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of witches is their ability to inhabit the form of one's beloved for evil purposes, much like a Facebook page taken over from the inside to ask for financial help from a person's entire list of contacts. The virtual world of technology shares with the second world of the Ivoirian occult the possibility of mimesis unleashed. Technically perfect copies are instantly reproducible, including digital doppelgangers of real people. And then there is the shapeshifting ability to transform one's own appearance, or the appearance of others, almost without limit. Space collapses, allowing for instant communication across great distances. A group originating from very different places can meet, see one another, and hear one another without leaving their bedrooms. Nefarious individuals have the

Figure 2. A Gbich! illustration of the morbid connection between the internet and witchcraft.
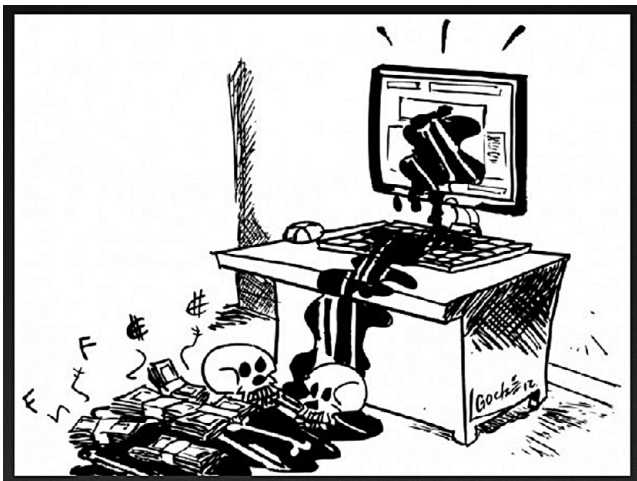
ability to drain someone's resources invisibly, without detection. The layered obscurity of the dark web—the part not mapped by Google where things like the "silk road" proliferate—is nothing if not occult (in the etymological sense of hidden, obscured). These are the kind of category-twisting plasticities that Mbembe suggests both digital virtual worlds and African cosmologies of the second world allow.

Mbembe writes that "it is as if the Internet was speaking unmediated to this archaic unconscious or to these societies' deepest and hidden brain," a phrase with which I am uncomfortable, but which does indicate the way in which digital technology operates on non-conscious levels akin to bewitchment or possession. This is especially the case in the physical form of the smartphone, which becomes an extension of the body with access to the owner's most intimate and private moments, or when that technology is designed with cognitive efficacies rather than mechanical ones in mind. Digital technologies involve forms of mimetic reproduction and indexical causality that affectively hook the human brain into networks of dependence and distributed agency, reaching into and manipulating individual thought, perception, and will. When you think of what the cellphone is really doing in your pocket—constantly sucking information and small percentages of every financial transaction from you and feeding it to a corporate vampiric panopticon that grows ever larger and ever more powerful—what is this if not the stuff of sorcery? Especially considering that, even armed with this knowledge, users of smartphones can no longer give them up, because the phones are internally entangled in the intimacy of our personal cognitive operations and externally in the phatic infrastructure of our social connectivity.

Conclusion

While alarmist discussions of new digital technologies are nothing new, what makes Mbembe's Africanist insertion into the discussion remarkable is that he suggests that there are long-existent epistemological and ontological tools rooted in African cultures that prefigure some of these changes. If *pace* Hayles, Mbembe asserts unequivocally that smartphones are transforming neural structures and cognitive capacities, meshing our minds with new forms of non-human cognition, these are presented as mere ontological facts rather than as moral catastrophes. Rather, from the perspective of

> old African traditions, human beings were never satisfied of simply being human beings. They were constantly in search of a supplement to their humanhood. Often, they added to their humanhood various attributes or properties taken from the worlds of animals, plants, and various objects. (Mbembe 2016)

In this sense, Mbembe points us towards a specifically African posthuman understanding of the social relationship to technology, one in which human

volition is not always the primary agentive force, but where personhood has been merged with other forces and forms.

However, the magicality of the internet is especially fascinating when we consider the enhanced powers of circulation and rumor to transform and modulate reality. Indeed, it is precisely through this kind of viral groundswell of knowledge that we experience both the revolutionary and reactionary potentials of pluriversality which become visible in the politics of the virtual "crowd" (Mazzarella 2017). Just as the imaginary of the second world is a collective product forged through entwining pathways of the *radio trottoir* [gossip], and witchcraft accusations initiate in the slipstream of gossip, the viral potential of the internet to remake the social truths, to build and destroy worlds, to write fiction with social efficacy, is quite precisely the kind of power sorcerers claim to possess. As in the U.S. electoral dalliance with fake news, there is a self-confirming recursivity to representation on the web that works very much like the closed loop of witchcraft cosmology analyzed by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Fields & Fields 2012). This spontaneous moral force exemplifies Émile Durkheim's analysis of the justice produced by mechanical solidarity, an affective reaction to all that threatens collective representation. It is this form of instantaneous collective reaction through new media that has increasingly shaped political movements across the globe, from the Arab Spring to #BlackLivesMatter to #MakeAmerica-GreatAgain. This is exactly the social force that turned a few South African activist students experimenting with the ontological turn among themselves into a viral proclamation of white superiority in the Global North.

Witchcraft "conveys warning that the seeds of destruction are hidden inside social relations as such, even though these are vital for any human undertaking" (Geschiere 2013). The stories circulating in Ivoirian popular culture about the power of sorcery within digital media point to the incredible wealth that can be accrued nearly instantaneously and the potentiality for limitless self-transformation, but also towards the hidden seeds of destruction lurking within virtual sociality. Mbembe encourages us to think of knowledge differently, not rejecting "universal knowledge" as such nor emphasizing cultural difference, but rather drawing upon the wealth of critical insight stemming from multiple epistemic and ontological traditions to build multilateral understanding of our shared existence. Anthropologists in Africa have often basked in exotic stories of the occult, interpreting witchcraft and sorcery as functionalist pressure regulators, as idioms for the negotiation of socioeconomic hierarchies, or as other secondary effects of *the real*. Here, by contrast, I argue that cosmologies of the occult can serve as theory, as a guide to the virtual to explore the affordances of digital technology as well as its entanglements with minds, bodies, and societies, not only in Côte d'Ivoire, but everywhere. This is what pluriversal knowledge should be about—an openness to applying and alternating between various cosmological or ontological forms in order to interpret and critique our shared world of multiplicity.

Acknowledgments

References

Apter, Andrew. 2005. *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ashforth, Adam. 2005. *Madumo, a Man Bewitched.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bloom, Peter. 2021. "The Biopolitics of Media Currency: Transforming the Ghana Film Unit into TV3." *African Studies Review* 64 (1): XX–XX

Boshoff, Nelius. 2009. "Neo-Colonialism and Research Collaboration in Central Africa." *Scientometrics* 81 (2): 413.

Burrell, Jenna. 2012. *Invisible Users: Youth in Internet Cafés of Urban Ghana.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Clark, Andy, and David Chalmers. 1998. "The Extended Mind." *Analysis* 58 (1): 7–19.

Comaroff, Jean, and John L. Comaroff. 2012. *Theory from the South: Or How Euro-America Is Evolving Towards African.* London: Routledge.

Eloff, Aragorn. 2016. "#sciencemustfall: Our Bad Science and Our Bad Faith." *Medium.* October 17, 2016. https://medium.com/@aragorneloff/sciencemustfall-our-bad-science-and-our-bad-faith-a61ddc045f84.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fields, Karen E., and Barbara Fields. 2012. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life.* New York: Verso.

Geschiere, Peter. 2013. *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hayles, N. Katherine. 2016a. "Cognitive Assemblages: Technical Agency and Human Interactions." *Critical Inquiry* 43 (1): 32–55.

———. 2016b. "The Cognitive Nonconscious: Enlarging the Mind of the Humanities." *Critical Inquiry* 42 (4): 783–808.

Haraway, Donna. 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, edited by Donna Haraway, 149–81. New York: Routledge.

Haynes, Jonathan. 2016. *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Koenig, Boris. 2014. "Les Économies Occultes du 'Broutage' des Jeunes Abidjanais: Une Dialectique Culturelle du Changement Générationnel." *Autrepart* 71(3): 195–215.

Mashishi, Naledi Refilwe. 2016. "Why #ScienceMustFall critics are missing the point." *Black Plastic Girl: Musings of a Born-Free, middle class, black South African feminist.* October 16.

Mazzarella, William. 2017. *The Mana of Mass Society.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mbembe, Achille. 2015. "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive." In 29. Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research. https://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf.

———. 2016. "Future Knowledges." Abiola Lecture, presented at the African Studies Association Annual Meetings in Washington, DC, December 1–3.

Meyer, Birgit. 2015. *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ndjio, Basile. 2012. *Magie et enrichissement illicite. La feymania au Cameroun.* Paris: Karthala.

Newell, Sasha. 2012. *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 2018. "The Affectiveness of Symbols: Materiality, Magicality, and the Limits of the Anti-Semiotic Turn." *Current Anthropology* 59 (1):1–22.

———. n.d. "Hackers of the Heart: Virtual Intimacy and Digital Sorcery in Côte d'Ivoire." Laboratoire d'Anthropologie des Mondes Contemporains, Université Libre de Bruxelles.

Nyamnjoh, Francis. 2012. "Potted Plants in Greenhouses: A Critical Reflection on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47 (2): 129–54.

———. 2016. *#RhodesMustFall. Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa.* Mankon, Bamenda: African Books Collective.

Pype, Katrien. 2012. *The Making of the Pentecostal Melodrama: Religion, Media and Gender in Kinshasa.* New York: Berghahn Books.

Roy, Rohan Deb. 2018. "Decolonise Science—Time to End Another Imperial Era." *The Conversation,* April 5, 2018. http://theconversation.com/decolonise-science-time-to-end-another-imperial-era-89189" http://theconversation.com/decolonise-science-time-to-end-another-imperial-era-89189.

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2008. *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies.* London: Verso.

———. 2014. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide.* London: Routledge.

Smith, Daniel Jordan. 2008. *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Trouillot, M. 2004. *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Warner, Jason. 2011. "Understanding Cyber-Crime in Ghana: A View from Below." *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 5 (1):736–49.

Notes

1. "Everything must fall" is the title of an Al Jazeera documentary about the history of the "Fees must fall" protests. Last accessed 05/24/2019.

2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9SiRNibD14 (last accessed on July 9, 2020). At the time it had 1,365, 615 views. All comments cited in the article associated with this video were accessed at that time.

3. There have been several online essays that make an effort to defend her, or at least her position, and which have helped inspire my interpretation here, including: Rohan Deb Roy (2018), "Decolonizing Science: Time to End Another Imperial Era"; Naledi Refilwe Mashishi (2016), "Why #ScienceMustFall critics are missing the point"; and Aragorn Eloff (2016), "#sciencemustfall: our bad science and our bad faith."

4. She apparently identified herself through her twitter account as the speaker in the video. However, I have not been able to verify her identity with certainty.

5. As discussed in the introduction to this forum, I recognize that witchcraft is an anthropological concept produced in the context of colonialism which often does not adequately reflect the local terminologies or conceptualizations of occult knowledge, belief, or practices. But because societies around the world have adapted the colonial taxonomies into their everyday speech, and in some cases former colonial languages are the first language of local speakers, it would be equally wrong to ignore witchcraft as a local concept, which is, after all, how it was used here.