Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the "New World Society"

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In August of 1998, two dead boys were found in the landing gear of a plane landing in Brussels. Identity documents showed that the boys were Guineans and that their names were Yaguine Koita (age 14) and Fodé Tounkara (age 15). With the bodies was found the following letter:[1]

Conakry, 29/7/98

Your Excellencies, members, and officials of Europe,[2]

It is a distinctive honor and privilege to write this letter to talk to you about the aim of our trip and our suffering—we the children and the youth of Africa. We put our trust in you.

First of all, we bring you our greetings—the sweetest, the most adorable and respectful greetings of life. To this end, please be our support and help, we the people of Africa. Otherwise whom shall we turn to for help?

We beseech you, come to our rescue. Think of your love for your beautiful continent, your people, your family, above all the love of your children that you love so dearly like life. Moreover, think of the love and kindness of the creator, "God," the Almighty, who has given you the good experiences, wealth, and power to construct and organize your continent so well that it has become the most beautiful and admirable of them all. [?][3]

Members and officials of Europe, we are appealing to your graciousness and solidarity to come to our rescue. Please, help us. We are suffering enormously in Africa. Help us, we have problems, and those problems include the lack of children's rights.

The problems we have are: war, disease, malnutrition, etc. As for children's rights, in Africa, and especially in Guinea, we have plenty of schools but a great lack of education and teaching. Only in the private schools can one get good education and good teaching, but it requires quite a lot of money and our parents are poor, they must feed us [?]. Therefore, we do not have sports facilities such as soccer, basketball, tennis [?], etc.

Therefore, we Africans, especially we, the African children and youth, are asking you to set up a great, effective organization for Africa so that it might make progress.

And if you find that we have sacrificed our lives, it is because we suffer too much in Africa. We need your help to struggle against poverty and to put an end to war

in Africa. Our greatest wish, though, is to study, and we ask that you help us to study to become like you in Africa.

Finally, we beseech you to forgive us for daring to write such a letter to you important people whom we truly respect. Do not forget that it is to you that we must plead [?] the weakness of our strength in Africa.

<div align="right">Written by two Guinean children,
Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara</div>

There is a specific sort of embarrassment, as well as a stark horror, in reading this letter. It is the embarrassment of encountering Africans—in this ostensibly postcolonial era—who humbly beg Europeans to come to their aid and who bluntly ask for help "to become like you." It is an embarrassment that many anthropological fieldworkers in Africa encounter today when they are confronted (as they often are) with informants who oppose the anthropologist's well-schooled anticolonial convictions with their own nostalgic reminiscences of colonial days or passionate appeals for salvation from Africa's problems via some imagined "return" of whites who might "help us to become like you" (Piot 1999:43–44; Worby 1992).

But our embarrassment also recalls a much older sort of anthropological squirming that is associated with the old question of how to analyze the cultural dynamics of African cities. The pioneering urban studies carried out by the anthropologists associated with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) in Northern Rhodesia, for instance, reported a very strong interest on the part of urban Africans in acquiring both the material goods and the social manners of the European colonizers. As early as 1941, Godfrey Wilson documented in the mining town of Broken Hill a widespread fascination with the acquisition and display of fine, European-style clothes, often in the form of elaborate formal wear, tuxedos, and so on. A key focus of social life were dance clubs, in which couples eagerly competed in ballroom-style dancing in full evening dress, often before European judges (Wilson 1941). Clyde Mitchell and A. L. Epstein would later extend the analysis, linking the emulation of white cultural forms to a status hierarchy within black society, in which whites formed a "reference group" against which black status was measured (Mitchell 1956; Mitchell and Epstein 1959). But the Rhodes-Livingstone anthropologists were shocked to find themselves bitterly criticized a few years later by Bernard Magubane (1969, 1971), who found the focus on black imitation of whites to be insulting and suggested that the RLI ethnographers were in fact practicing a form of colonial racism. Blacks were not imitating whites, Magubane suggested, but simply doing what they had to do to survive in a repressive colonial regime. If some blacks did eagerly seek to imitate white ways, he argued, they were the victims of a pathological colonial psychology, not examples of successful urban cultural "adaptation." Magubane's critique on this point recalled Franz Fanon's (1986, 1991) by-then influential critique of the mentally colonized African whose internalized self-hatred was manifested in a perverse attraction for the culture of the colonial master.

The anthropologists were embarrassed. They certainly did not conceive of themselves as colonial racists. But how were they to respond to objections like Magubane's? By adopting a Fanonist line, which would leave them in the awkward role of either condemning or pitying their informants? By restricting their studies to isolated rural villages and seeking to ignore the problem of the "Westernized African" altogether? How does one deal with an object of alterity who refuses to be other and who deliberately aims to spoil his or her own "authenticity"? What does one do with the cultural other who wants "to become like you"?

The Anthropology of Imitation

As Homi Bhabha (1994) has insightfully shown, mimicry was an ambiguous presence in the cultural politics of colonialism. At one level, colonial rulers explicitly aimed to "civilize" their subjects and mold them in the image of Europeans; natives who imitated the colonizer were in this sense part of the colonial plan. But colonial imitation always threatened to become excessive and uncontrolled and thereby to unsettle the boundaries and relations of authority between settler and native that the colonial order depended on. The uncanny presence of the "civilized native" destabilized colonial identities and presented a specter that haunted the colonial subject. What happened when natives became *too* "civilized?" or "half-civilized?" And what if their mimicry were really parody? When did respectful imitation give way to "cheeky" backtalk? And how could the "not white/not quite" be accommodated within the binary model of power and identity that colonial institutions and colonial subjectivities alike relied on?

But mimicry raised a problem for anthropologists that was in some ways quite different from those it raised for the colonial administrator or settler. For one thing, anthropologists generally kept their distance from the "civilizing" project of colonial governments and missionaries, finding their distinctive professional mission in studying (and often "respecting") forms of social and cultural difference that the "civilizers" were necessarily determined to destroy. For another, many anthropologists—at least in southern Africa—took political stances against the social segregation of the colonial order that colonial officials and settlers were so concerned to maintain and police. Indeed, as we moved into the latter part of the 20th century, social anthropologists in southern Africa increasingly occupied an explicitly anti-imperialist and nationalist political position. Under such circumstances, mimicry became scandalous for reasons different from those suggested by Bhabha. The scandal of Africans who "want to be like the whites"—first for African cultural nationalists and later for anti-imperialist anthropologists—was not that they blurred or destabilized colonial race categories but that they threatened, by their very conduct, to confirm the claim of the racist colonizer: that "African" ways were inferior to "European" ones. For the late-20th-century anthropologist, the native who wanted "to become like you" had become not menacing, but embarrassing.

The dominant anthropological solution to the embarrassment of African mimicry, I suggest, has been to interpret colonial- and postcolonial-era imitations of Europeans as some combination of parody and appropriation and to insist that such "mimesis" is therefore in fact a gesture of resistance to colonialism. Perhaps the central ethnographic text in the elaboration of this solution has been Jean Rouch's remarkable film *Les Maîtres Fous*. The film records a ritual of possession that took place in Ghana in 1953 in the context of a cultural movement known as Hauka. The Hauka movement originated in Niger in the late 1920s, when Songhay people began to dance and become possessed by the spirits of French colonial administrators. Their rituals of possession, which later formed the subject of Rouch's film, involved a performative mimicry of the white officials, along with other signs of possession such as frothing at the mouth, bulging of the eyes, contorted movements, and the breaking of dietary taboos. The movement was suppressed by colonial officials, first in Niger and later in the British territories, such as Ghana, to which it had spread via Songhay migration.

Anthropological interpretations of the Hauka movement have seen it as an exemplary instance of cultural resistance through parody and appropriation. By mocking Europeans, Hauka members denaturalized and contested their authority; by seizing on white cultural forms and ritually stealing their powers, they appropriated colonial power within the terms of their own cultural system. Against the conservative ideological view of colonialism that saw Africans as being "civilized" by being taught superior European cultural forms, the anthropologists seized on Hauka as an illustration of the defiance and autonomy that may be present even in the very act of imitation (see Kramer 1993; Stoller 1984, 1989, 1992, 1995; Taussig 1993; *Visual Anthropology Review* 1989; cf. Fabian 1998).

A similar approach to mimicry has been developed by Jonathan Friedman in relation to certain urban cultural practices in Brazzaville, Congo. Friedman reports (in an account that is substantially derived from Gandoulou 1989) that young men in Brazzaville aggressively sought out "Western" status items, especially fashionable Parisian clothes, and sought to display them competitively in a performance called "La Sape." They also sought to acquire the appearance of Europeans, deploying in this project certain skin-lightening creams. But, Friedman tells us, these men were not in fact doing anything that might be described as "Western"—on the contrary, they were working within an indigenous cosmology in which "life force" can be extracted from powerful others by a kind of sympathetic magic. Really, only the cultural materials here were drawn from the West—the cultural project (appearances to the contrary) was in fact "entirely African" (Friedman 1995:29; see also Friedman 1990, 1992, 1994; cf. Ferguson 1999:280, 290). Again, anthropological otherness is salvaged, as what appears to be a practice of cultural assimilation is reclaimed as an appropriation of Western goods and signs within the terms of an "indigenous" cultural logic. The young men in their Paris fashions superficially appear to be

acting Western—but at a deeper level, the cultural analyst unearths a logic that is "authentic" and "entirely African."[4]

As I have noted, such ingenious analyses have helped anthropologists of Africa to contain the otherwise scandalous implications of imitation and to recuperate imitation as a practice that is both culturally authentic and politically resistant. But I suggest that it would be difficult to fit the letter from the two young men found dead on the plane into this scheme of interpretation. Their gesture is neither a parody of the West nor an attempt to appropriate its goods or "magic" for use in a non-Western cultural world. In their desperate voyage, the boys were attempting a literal, bodily crossing of the deadly gulf dividing the West and Africa—to puncture the very boundary that is upheld in cultural analyses such as Friedman's. And whatever they may have meant when they appealed to Europeans to "help us to become like you," they were certainly neither joking nor mocking.

This was also the case, I would suggest, with a great deal of colonial-era mimicry—most of which does not fit the paradigm of *Les Maîtres Fous* very well at all. There is much that might be said about why urban Africans in the Northern Rhodesia of the late 1930s should have been so interested in ballroom dancing and formal evening wear. But the Rhodes-Livingstone anthropologists were right about at least one thing: when urban Africans seized so eagerly on European cultural forms, they were neither enacting ancient African tradition nor engaging in a parody of the whites. Rather—as Wilson recognized—they were asserting rights to the city (cf. Caldeira 2001; Holston 1999) and pressing, by their conduct, claims to the political and social rights of full membership in a wider society.

As Wilson noted, the acquisition and display of European clothes and other goods was the only domain available in colonial society in which Africans could assert their claims to "a civilized status, comparable to that of the Europeans." Urban Africans did not want to be regarded as "decorative barbarians" but as "civilized men." They wanted, that is, to be full and equal citizens of a modern urban society. If they enthusiastically adopted elaborate forms of European dress and manners, it was to press their claim "to be respected by the Europeans and by one another as civilized, if humble, men, *members of the new world society*" (Wilson 1941:19–20, emphasis added).

This crucial claim to membership is denied by interpretations like Friedman's, which suggest that such urban Africans were performing modernity only to appropriate its magic for use within an indigenous cultural order. But the most vital political question raised by practices of colonial emulation did not concern the incorporation of Western symbolic materials into African local cultural systems. Rather, it concerned the place Africans were to occupy in a *global* sociocultural order—their status in a new "world society"—a point that both Wilson and his informants seem to have understood very well. With that in mind, let us now return to anthropology's favorite film on colonial mimicry, Jean Rouch's *Les Maîtres Fous.*

Les Maîtres Fous

There is no doubt that such a complex and vivid film as *Les Maîtres Fous* can be interpreted in many different ways. But, for many anthropologists, it seems the central meaning of the film—and its great virtue—is that (like *Trobriand Cricket*, that other great anthropological favorite) it takes the scandal of mimicry ("we want to be like you") and reinterprets it as an ironic cultural practice that is both culturally defiant (and thus resistant and subversive) and authentically other (since it mimes Western forms only to appropriate them into a fundamentally non-Western cultural order). "They appear to want to become like you," the film seems to tell us, "but (thank goodness) they really don't. In fact, just the opposite!"

Anthropological accounts of the Hauka movement emphasize the way that the imitation by entranced African dancers of European authority figures embodied themes of mockery, parody, laughter, and anticolonial resistance. Far from being a symbolic capitulation or attempt at assimilation, the mimicry of Hauka is interpreted as an active and ingenious form of resistance through which an indigenous culture sought to resist the culture of the West and protect its own autonomy. As Paul Stoller concluded, "The European will remain in the Republic of Niger, and so will the Hauka, forever resisting through mockery the influences of foreigners and forever protecting those values which are central to the cultural identity of the Songhay" (1984:185).[5]

Michael Taussig's influential account of Hauka (1993) follows Stoller's analysis closely. Once again, the celebration of cultural resistance is explicit. The "mimesis" of the Hauka movement, Taussig assures us, was a powerful form of resistance, a veritable subversion of the colonial order. He quotes Stoller's characterization of the movement as "an intolerable affront to French authority," as well as Finn Fugelstad's description of it as "open dissidence" and a "total refusal of the system put in place by the French" (1993:240). Rouch's cinematic reproduction of this practice of subversive mimicry was, in Taussig's analysis, doubly subversive—and so threatening to colonial authority that the film was banned by the British government. "The Hauka were jailed in 1935 for mimicking the white man who possessed their very bodies, and Rouch's film was banned in the 1950s for mimicking that mimicking" (1993:243).

Taussig's reflections on the uses of mimesis are undoubtedly illuminating. But his account of the reception of Rouch's film departs in telling ways from other published sources. Taussig follows Rouch in claiming that the film was considered so dangerous that it had to be banned because of the threat it posed to colonial authority—specifically, it was "the insult to the Queen and her authority" (1993:243) that is identified as the cause of the banning.[6] Other published accounts of the banning tell a rather different story. Fritz Kramer's account reads as follows: "The film . . . shocked African students and such anthropologists as Marcel Griaule at its premiere in the Musée de l'Homme; they condemned the film as 'racist' and demanded it be destroyed. The film was banned in the British colonies" (Kramer 1993:137). According to the film

critic Mick Eaton, when the film was shown in Paris in 1954 it was widely criticized. "Black students in the audience accused Rouch of reinforcing stereotypes of 'savagery,' and the film was banned throughout Britain's African colonies because of its 'inflammatory' content" (Eaton 1979:6). Stoller is a great admirer of the film, but his frank account of the controversy (1993: 151–153) makes clear that it was strongly praised from the start by white critics but widely condemned and deplored by African scholars, students, and directors, who argued that the film perpetuated "a racist exoticism" (1993:153).

What all of these accounts show is what Taussig's account conspicuously sidesteps: that the film was banned not because it was bravely subversive of the colonial order but because it was regarded by Africans as racist. Why did African students find the film racist? And what are we to make of the fact that the film that is today the paradigmatic exemplar for anthropological understanding of mimicry was in its time regarded by educated Africans as so deeply offensive that it should be destroyed?

African students said the film represented them as savages, who only "aped" European cultural forms for their own "tribal" reasons. What they feared, we may suppose, was that Rouch's representation of the Hauka could, by implication, style *all* African performances of modernity as mere savage aping—superficially modern but in fact in the service of deeper levels of "primitive," "tribal," or magical thinking. As in Wilson's day, educated Africans were very attentive to the dangers of being cast as "decorative savages," whose essential "Africanness" was only superficially covered with the trappings of the civilized.[7] How did a representation such as Rouch's (of "tribal" Africans seeking magical results by playacting as Europeans) position these Parisian students, whose own claims to membership in a modern world hinged on a real, and not pretended, mastery of modern social and cultural forms? The African students, I suggest, saw—as Wilson had a generation earlier—that within the cultural politics of the colonial order, imitation was less about sympathetic magic and accommodating white power within indigenous cultural orders than about claims to membership within modern society and negotiations of the rights proper to such membership.

The point here is not that Rouch's (or Stoller's) interpretation of the Hauka was incorrect or that mimicry does not often involve themes of parody, appropriation, and resistance. Surely it does. Indeed, the chief lesson of recent scholarship on the topic would seem to be that mimesis may trouble cultural and racial boundaries in complex, subtle, and sometimes counterintuitive ways (cf. Bhabha 1994; Schwartz 1996; Siegel 1997); clearly mimicry can mean many things. But the determination of some anthropologists to find cultural difference lurking even under what most appears to be "the same" has led them to force practices of apparent imitation or assimilation into a Hauka-like scheme of cultural difference and appropriation. The danger is precisely the one the African students so swiftly identified: by taking the extraordinary figure of the Hauka as a paradigm for understanding African gestures of similitude with "Europeans," we risk misreading (as magical appropriations and resistances by

a localized "African" cultural system) practices that are better understood in the context of the politics of membership in the "world society" of which Wilson spoke. The consequences of such a misunderstanding, I suggest in the next section, are perhaps even more consequential today than they were at the time of Rouch's film.

Mimicry, Membership, and Postcoloniality

The topic of cultural mimicry has been deeply bound up with discussions of the social dynamics of the colonial era. But how does an approach to mimicry as "cultural resistance," as a parody or appropriation by the colonized of the colonizer, come to terms with the cultural politics of the postcolonial world? The separate cultural worlds and simple colonial binaries that such interpretations depend on are harder and harder to locate in an age of global cultural flows and transnational organizational forms. What becomes of mimicry in a transnational, postcolonial age?

The most developed answer to this question comes in the final pages of Taussig's book on mimesis and alterity. Cultural reproduction technologies and transnational cultural flows, he writes, have in recent years fundamentally reconfigured the binary that gave form to colonial mimesis. "From the midpoint of the twentieth century with the final dissolution of colonial controls there emerged a sort of reversal of contact, a 'second contact,' with the birth of a radically different border between the West and the rest, between civilization and its Others" (1993). Today, this border has been "punctured porous by the global market and multinational corporations, together with desperate emigration from the south" (1993:251). Under such circumstances, the border becomes "increasingly unreal, micromental, and elusive" (1993:252). With the global free flow of images and the new forms of copying unleashed by communications technologies, mimicry is unhitched from its old colonial binary, and a new human capacity, "potentiated by postcoloniality," emerges. It is "to live subjunctively as neither subject nor object of history but as both, at one and the same time." "Mimetic excess" is thus set loose on the world to work its uncanny magic and to undermine the naturalness of all of our social and cultural arrangements (1993:255).

Taussig is surely right that at least some sorts of cultural products and images today travel the globe with unprecedented ease. In this (cultural) sense, North–South borders have indeed become remarkably porous, as contemporary anthropological fieldworkers often note when they arrive in their far-flung destinations only to find informants wearing Hard Rock Cafe T-shirts or asking knowledgeable questions about Michael Jordan. But, in other respects, the border that Taussig refers to between the First and Third Worlds is harder to describe as porous or ephemeral. Consider, for instance, labor markets. How is it that, in a world where borders have been "punctured porous," the most poorly paid workers in America earn at least fifty times the hourly wage earned by a worker in Zambia? How is it that the "desperate emigration" to the rich countries that Taussig invokes as evidence of the unreal and phantasmatic nature

of the border is in fact sharply checked by a host of very real institutional and economic barriers (from border police and passports to the—for most Africans, prohibitive—costs of air travel)? These facts do not appear in his account.

It is perhaps significant that while Taussig's analysis ends by invoking migrant crossings that "puncture porous" and render "unreal" the borders that guard the First World, my account begins with a *failed* crossing that dramatizes their deadly solidity. The border that the two boys on the plane encountered, and against which they directed their final testament, was anything but "unreal" or "elusive." The accelerated cultural connections and globalized flows of images and goods described by Taussig are indeed important, but they are only a part of the story. For what is most striking in the recent history of much of Africa is not the breakdown of boundaries. Rather, it is the process in which economic decline and political violence have produced new political and economic exclusions that distance Africa from the rest of the world and destroy the sense of connection with, and membership in, the imagined world community that so many Africans experienced during the early years of independence. The combination of an acute awareness of a privileged "first-class" world, together with an increasing social and economic disconnection from it, is a contemporary African predicament that I have elsewhere described as "abjection" (Ferguson 1999).

To speak of the political and economic borders of a postcolonial world that is often characterized by its cultural free-flows is to reintroduce the question of institutionalized forms of social and economic *membership* into our discussions of contemporary global modernity. The question of membership was explicit in Wilson's day: The color bar made the racialized exclusions of the modern social order explicit—and obviously political. But in an era of political independence, where explicit racial hierarchies are illegitimate and inequality is naturalized by being culturalized and spatialized, an anthropological insistence on interpreting gestures of similitude in terms of parody and magic has the effect of obscuring the continuing claims of Africans and others to full membership rights in a world society.

A similar danger is introduced by treating the question of modernity in exclusively cultural terms and thus too easily including within an analytical "modernity" people who are quite distinctly *excluded* from the political and economic conditions of life that are normally characterized as "modern." One can well understand the urge to deprovincialize the notions of modernity at work in the various Eurocentric versions of modernization theory that have dominated social theory through most of the late 20th century. And there is certainly a good deal to be gained by contemplating the "alternative modernities" that may contest dominant Eurocentric cultural practices in the name, not of tradition, but of different configurations of the modern (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996). But what is lost in the overly easy extension of an ideal equality to "modernities" in the plural are the all too real inequalities that leave most Africans today excluded and abjected from the economic and institutional conditions that they themselves regard as modern.

When Charles Piot, for instance, concludes his insightful recent book (1999) by insisting that the marginalized people of Kabre, Togo, are "part of the modern world" and that their rural villages are "a site . . . of the modern, one that is as privileged as any other" (1999:178), we contemporary anthropologists may respectfully nod our heads: Who are we to say that they—in their distinctive mode of engaging the modern world—are any less "modern" than we are? Surely Piot is right to historicize local cultural practices that are too often understood as timeless and to show their connection to a modern history of slavery, colonialism, capitalism, and state formation (all of which he does very effectively). Describing African societies as "modern" in this sense is to work against generations of exoticizing and primitivizing constructions of an essential and "traditional" Africa. But to say that people live lives that are structured by a modern capitalist world-system or that they inhabit a social landscape shaped by modernist projects does not imply that they enjoy conditions of life that they themselves would recognize as modern. Indeed, if we consider modernity, as many Africans do, not simply as a shared historical present but as a social status implying certain institutional and economic conditions of life, it becomes immediately evident that the Kabre do *not* inhabit a site that is "as privileged as any other."[8] Where the anthropologist extends the label "modern" to the impoverished African as a gesture of respect and an acknowledgement of coeval temporality, African urbanites who believe their lives will not be "modern" until they have running water and a good hospital may find the gesture an empty one.[9]

With such considerations in mind, let us return to the letter with which I began. Let me be clear from the start that I take this letter as an *event,* an occasion for reflection on a broad set of issues, rather than as ethnographic *evidence* in the traditional sense. I will not try to contextualize the letter in a traditional anthropological style by seeking to reconstruct the lives and social backgrounds of the authors and to understand the local circumstances out of which their extraordinary appeal emerged.[10] Such an approach would certainly be possible and no doubt useful in some ways. But surely what is most striking in this letter is precisely its determination to refuse the sort of localization that anthropologists habitually force on their subjects and to speak, not for this or that local person in this or that circumstance, but for "Africa" as a whole. "We Africans," they say, and "We, the African children and youth." Let us read these two young men as they meant to be read: unknown authors of a message in a bottle, an urgent message (delivered at some cost) whose finders might learn something not about the authors but about the needs of "Africa" and its youth and the responsibilities of the "members and officials of Europe." Let us read this letter, in short, *not* as an ethnographic text but precisely *as a letter*—a letter that demands not a sociological analysis of its authors but a response.

Read in this spirit, what are we to make of the final plea of these the two young men? What are they asking for? Let us read carefully here. When they speak of wanting "to become like you," they are referring to the overcoming of specific "problems," which they identify as war, sickness, malnutrition, lack of

education, lack of sports facilities, and lack of children's rights. The "help" they request is thus a commitment to address a set of specific institutional and economic needs. It is neither cultural nor racial resemblance that they are seeking but help "to struggle against poverty and to put an end to war" and thereby to converge institutionally and economically with a "well-constructed and -organized" First World. "We want to study," they say. We want health care. We want well-nourished children. It is in these (quite specific) respects that they seek "to become like you." And by phrasing their demand for new political and economic conditions as a wish "to become like you," they simultaneously appeal for what they call "solidarity" and attempt to invoke a principle of responsibility via moral and political connection.[11] Their desperate communicative gesture seeks to create neither magic nor parody but solidarity.

It is also significant that they address the "members and officials *[membres et responsables]* of Europe" in a language that seems to insist on the responsibilities they understand to go with a higher status. Given the combination of abject pleading and the assertion of responsibility, it is hardly surprising that the two address, explicitly as children, the "members of Europe." Not only does this evoke parental responsibility (and with it, all the well-worn clichés of colonial paternalism), it also suggests the romanticized ideal international community that is often evoked through images of "children" and "the youth of the world" (Malkki 1994, n.d.). The idea of an international bond through youth might also account for the otherwise anomalous references, in a letter that speaks of such grave matters as war, disease, and malnutrition, to such things as soccer, basketball, and tennis—all conspicuously "international" sports through which even the least well off Africans can (if basic facilities are provided) imagine themselves as part of a wider world.[12]

We are now in a position to read this letter alongside another one—an open "Letter to America" by an anonymous Zambian journalist published in July 1999 in an Internet magazine.[13] The following is an abridged version:

Dear America,

I know you've heard it many times by now: your policy in dealing with international crises is very selective. Europe is more important than Africa, Bosnia is more important than Rwanda, Kosovo than Sierra Leone. What you have not been told yet is what we, the Africans living in Africa, think about not only your actions, but your motives and the underlying principles of your heart.

Your selectivity reveals four realities about the Western world to us: global racism exists and it determines international policy, capitalism is above compassion, the African debt is a deliberate strategy, and finally, democracy is not practised by its preachers.

Racism, the greatest killer of the human race since time immemorial, is still the strongest force.

The irony of the Kosovo crisis is that it was caused by racism (at the ethnic level) and it was saved by racism (at the international level). NATO has shown that it has a colour, it is not as colourless as it presents itself to the world. It has a face and its face is pigmented: it is white. It has shown that the fact that whites rule America

and other NATO countries is a significant fact and it does determine what happens
to nonwhite "nations" in times of crisis.

America and her partners practice a racism/tribalism that is worse than that of
Serbians against ethnic Albanians, or Tutsis against Hutus. She does not use guns
and machetes, she uses the greatest weapon of mass destruction ever invented: the
international credit (debt) system. She wields this weapon against all the people
that it hates. And the ones at the top of the list, apparently, are Africans.

America, World Bank, NATO, or whatever name you choose to disguise yourself
in, it is clear that you do not care about Africa. If you admit this it will be easier
for us. At least Milosevic has admitted his hatred for "the lower class" and Hitler
never pretended about his anti-Semitic feelings. These evil men will at least be
respected for their honesty. It is better to be killed by a man who calls himself your
enemy than by one who pretends to be your friend.

After we finish counting the mass graves caused by Milosevic, let us count the
graves caused by the USA and the other super-rich nations of the world. Milosevic
will seem like a saint when we count the victims of the latter. The graves caused
by the gruesome effects of the debt held against Africa are all around us: children
die every day of easily curable diseases simply because there is no money in African
nations. It has to go to servicing the debt we owe our masters.

Debt reduction is not enough for Africa. Neither is debt cancellation enough. We
must fight for compensation. They are the ones who owe us money.

The amount of money they owe us has to be calculated and all African nations
must receive the average amount. They owe us for taking some of the strongest
men among us to go and work in their plantations. How much has that affected our
productive output up to this day?

They owe us for the unfair dealings they did with our unsuspecting chiefs (a gun
for miles of land). They owe us for taking the rich minerals out of our land with
no permission and with no tariffs. They owe us for brainwashing us to their stupid
religions that taught us that poverty was a way of pleasing God and that there is
another world after death where things would be better for us, thus taking from us
our will to fight for the things they were stealing from us (after all, we'll find better
things in the other world!)

So, should they reduce our debt? Should they cancel our debt? No. There is
nothing to reduce or cancel here. We owe them nothing; they owe us big time. They
are the ones who should be begging for debt reduction from us. They owe each
African nation hundreds of billions of dollars. This is not a joke. I propose to
African professors that they should sit down and calculate the exact figure so we
could present it to them officially. I estimate they owe Zambia in particular about
600 billion dollars (with interest), but we should calculate the exact figure, to four
decimal places.

Finally, the present crisis has revealed that there is no democracy in the devel-
oped world, or it means something other than what they tell us. Democracy is when
the people rule. When the voices of the majority rule. Well, the earth consists of
more people in Third World countries than in developed ones and they have
unanimously decided that the debt against them should be cancelled. That should
be done immediately if the people rule the world, or is democracy just an American
idea, to be practised only within the confines of their borders? And even then, their
own people believe that they should cancel our debt and that they should intervene
fairly in global issues everywhere. They don't listen to them either. Is that democ-
racy?

But let me not allow these closing sentiments to cloud the real call of my article:
we want our money back. We need compensation for what has been stolen from
us. If we do not fight for it we will be betraying the people that have died because
of it. We will be betraying the African slaves, the freedom fighters, the men, women

and children that have died from disease and poverty, and the millions who will die today. It's a debt we can not forgive.

At first glance this letter is as different from the first as it could be. In Fanonist terms, the difference is total. One affirms African pride and mounts an attack on the latter-day oppressor; the other defers and shuffles in a humiliating appeal to a superior. One places the blame for African poverty and suffering squarely on the neocolonial exploiter; the other praises "Europe" and appeals pathetically for paternalistic neocolonial benevolence. One rouses us, in our accustomed anthropological anti-imperialism; the other makes us squirm.

Certainly, the *mood* of the "Letter to America" is almost the opposite of that of the letter of the two young men who died on the plane to Brussels—angry rather than beseeching, militant rather than supplicant, proud rather than humble. Evident, too, is a sharp difference in the idiom in which its demands are couched. While the letter from the Guinean boys suggests a relation with "Europe" that is familial and hierarchical and appeals to the responsibilities of a paternalistically conceived superior, the "Letter to America" is frankly confrontational and almost litigious. Its language is one not of familial responsibility but of tort and reparation.

Yet the appeal to which the "Letter to America" gives voice is in other ways remarkably similar to that of the letter found on the plane. Both are letters self-consciously addressed to "the West,"[14] and both insist on a continuing connection and an ongoing moral responsibility on the part of an imagined set of responsible "members" there who might receive the letters. Both letters seem to say (albeit in very different rhetorics): "Pay attention! Our problems are not ours alone. You have responsibilities here that you must not ignore." Both are responses, in different keys, to a condition of perceived expulsion and rejection from an imagined "world" that I have termed "abjection" (Ferguson 1999).

The author of the "Letter to America," let us note—for all the militancy of his rhetoric—is not calling, in the old nationalist style, for kicking out the whites or for foreign corporations to keep their hands off of Africa. Indeed, a central grievance is not the presence of white intervention but its absence— why are NATO troops in Kosovo but not Rwanda? The letter demands neither an end to exploitation nor an expulsion of white settlers but an acknowledgement of a debt. It is a right to be connected, noticed, and attended to that is claimed, not a right to autonomy or independence. And although the letter denounces in the strongest terms the burden imposed on Africa by debt, its solution is not to repudiate the debt or to appeal for its cancellation but to recognize its true nature. "Should they cancel our debt? No!" To cancel the debt would be to declare the accounts settled and walk away; but accounts are not settled so easily. "They owe us big time."

In this connection, it is worth noting that the first letter also appeals not for the cancellation of debt but for the creation of a new level of engagement with Africa. Those who discussed the letter in Europe in the days following its

discovery tended to assimilate it to the issue of debt relief; indeed, the letter
was cited in this connection by actors as diverse as the radical Jubilee 2000
campaign for Third World debt cancellation and IMF president Michael Cam-
dessus himself (who reportedly read the letter aloud to the IMF and World
Bank Assembly on the occasion of announcing the Cologne Initiative for the
reduction of debt to the poorest countries).[15] But Koita and Tounkara's letter
makes no mention of debt and does not ask for forgiveness; instead, it calls for
the creation of a "great effective organization" that would allow Africa to "pro-
gress" toward the same condition and status as the "members of Europe." In
this, it is much like the "Letter to America" (which IMF officials have so far
not, to my knowledge, ventured to read aloud at any meetings).

With respect to the question of membership, then, the two letters are not
so different. Both make implicit claims to the rights of a common membership
in a global society (a society in which Zambia and Rwanda should enjoy no
lesser rights than Bosnia or Kosovo). And both refuse the idea of a separate Af-
rica with its own separate problems. In their different ways, both make the
same paired claim to global status and recognition that Koita and Tounkara's
expatriate countryman, cultural critic Manthia Diawara, recently voiced in ex-
plaining "our [Africans'] desire to be modernized": "We . . . want access to
education and material wealth; and we are tired of being ignored by the world"
(Diawara 1998:58).

Both letters also share a widespread contemporary recognition of the limi-
tations of the nation-state as the object of appeal or redress. Neither letter ad-
dresses itself to a national government—an implicit recognition of the global
roots of the economic crisis they lament. The Fanonist remedy for the problem
of colonial inequality, after all, was national independence, but the authors of
these letters, like so many others in Africa today, seem to have lost faith in any
redemption at the national level. Instead, they "jump scales" (Smith 1992) and
seek to appeal to, or perhaps even to conjure into being, a global entity or
authority ("members and officials of Europe"; "America, World Bank, NATO,
or whatever name you choose to disguise yourself in") that might be able to ad-
dress global inequality directly (cf. Ferguson and Gupta in press). Their ap-
peals are perhaps motivated by an awareness of emergent "global" institutions
and ideologies that address the question of rights, but they go far beyond any
such empirical referent to imagine a global authority endowed with both an
ability to grant rights and a global sense of responsibility or conscience toward
which a moral appeal might be directed.

In invoking, however wishfully, such a supranational moral order, the
authors of these letters make a challenging claim: that a meaningful solution to
the African crisis requires a recognition of a kind of global, supranational be-
longing, the sort of moral and political recognition of Africans as "members of
the new world society" that Wilson had already anticipated in 1941. Such
membership is understood to entail a set of claims to social and economic
rights that go far beyond those associated with decolonization and national-
level political democracy. The young men who died on the plane were quite

specific about what was required: education, health care, peace, food, children's rights. Wanting Europeans "to help us to become like you"—today, as in Wilson's day—is neither a mocking parody nor a pathetically colonized aping but a haunting claim for equal rights of membership in a spectacularly unequal global society. Like the angry "Letter to America," the gentle last words of these two young men make a moral claim to something like global citizenship. In so doing, they appeal poignantly, desperately, for a "graciousness and solidarity" that are, in the West as presently constituted, chillingly absent.

Notes

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1. The letter was written in a stilted, elaborately polite French; it combined a very formal style with some grammatical errors and a few unclear passages. Transcriptions of the letter in French, as well as translations into English, have appeared in various newspapers and on web sites, often substantially edited as well as "cleaned up" of ungrammatical or unclear usages. The version that appears to be closest to the original handwritten letter is that found in the archives of Radio Belche, which can be accessed via the internet (http://radiobelche.cediti.be/archives/1999/Conakry.html). Of the English translations I have found, the most complete (though far from literal) is provided on the web site of the Jubilee 2000 organization (http://www.jubilee2000uk.org/news/guinea2408 .html). I have followed this translation where possible, though I have corrected a number of passages that differ in important ways from the Radio Belche transcription. Where there is real uncertainty about the meaning, I have inserted a question mark. I first encountered the letter in a rather creatively edited English translation that appeared in the November 1999 issue of Harper's Magazine (no. 1794:22).

2. The original French salutation here was "Excellences, Messieurs les membres et responsables d'Europe." Jubilee 2000 and most other English translations have rendered *members* as "citizens." In fact, the French word *member* has a meaning very close to the English word "member" and quite distinct from "citizen" *(citoyen).* Given my argument that follows, the distinction is a significant one.

3. Here, I have corrected the Jubilee 2000 translation, which gives the second half of this sentence as "the good experiences, riches, and power to build and organize our continent so that it may become the most beautiful and admirable friend of all." This differs from most other published versions I have seen; compare the Radio Belche transcription: "toutes les bonnes experiences, richesse [*sic*] et pouvoirs de bien construire et bien organise [*sic*] votre continent à devenir le plus beau et admirable parmis les autres."

4. Compare Meyer and Geschiere's (1999:8) brief but trenchant critical comment on Friedman's writings on Africa.

5. Stoller's more extensive 1995 treatment of Hauka goes beyond his 1984 article to incorporate sections of Michael Taussig's 1993 argument (discussed below). Like

Taussig, Stoller maintains that mimesis constitutes not only resistance but also an "electroshocking appropriation of European power" (1995:133). Also, like Taussig, he combines this formula with the key theme of localist cultural resistance, since such magical acts "tap into" white power only "so that it might be recirculated for local uses" (1995:195–196).

6. Here, Taussig is quoting from Rouch's 1977 interview with John Marshall and John W. Adams (Rouch 1978:1009). But in the same interview, Rouch also noted that African students who saw the film "said it was an affront to their dignity"—a detail that does not appear in Taussig's discussion.

7. Stoller (1992) cites an account in which the late Senegalese director, Blaise Senghor, described coming out of a Paris theatre where the film was being shown, only to find the spectators staring at him, saying to each other, "Here's another one who is going to eat a dog" (1992:151). (The reference is to a famous—or notorious—scene in the film in which the possessed Hauka sacrifice a dog, drink the blood as it flows from its throat, and then cook and eat it.)

8. Piot, of course, recognizes well the absence of economic and political "privilege" here, and he does much to analyze its roots and implications; if for Piot, the Kabre site is "as privileged as any other," it is only in a theoretical or epistemological sense. But just as there are other connotations of the word *privileged* that are here passed over, so are there other connotations of the word *modern* that are elided in the assertion that Africa is "as modern as any other" place. In both cases, what such happily balanced assertions tend to leave to one side are the unhappily imbalanced relations of political and economic power that are often at the core of African aspirations to "modernity." I discuss this issue at greater length in a yet-to-be-published essay (Ferguson n.d.).

9. It is true, of course, that the blessings of education, health, peace, and prosperity that the letter's authors seem to associate with "Europe" are not as widely distributed as ideological representations would suggest; actually existing "Europe" is no doubt less well "constructed and organized" than might be imagined from afar, and African immigrants there often find very difficult conditions of life, and not the paradise that some of them may have expected (see Lambert 1999). But the contrast that the young men draw is not an entirely fanciful one, either. One need only compare a few crude indicators to see that their perception that many fundamental conditions of life are indeed radically better in "the West" than in most of Africa is well grounded in reality. (For Guinea, for instance, GDP per capita is some $530, while life expectancy is only 46.5 years [UNCTAD 2001]). The letter does not seem to suggest that "Europe" is a fantastic utopia, but only a place where one might escape poverty and hunger, avoid the ravages of warfare, and benefit from functioning education and health systems. It is perhaps the very extremity of the African situation, in political–economic terms, that makes it such a challenge for the "alternative modernities" discussion.

10. If one were to pursue such a reading, one could begin with a long feature article written about the two boys in the August 1999 issue of *Paris Match*. There, we learn a good deal about the boys' lives and circumstances, including that they came from the poor slum neighborhood of Yimbaya, which is adjacent to the airport in Conakry, that they were devoted to education and successful at school, even as they attended terribly inadequate schools, and that Yaguine Koita's mother had already emigrated to France (where the boys hoped to surprise her), while he also had one uncle in Germany and another in the United States. The case of Koita and Tounkara is also discussed and related to the similarly tragic case of a Senegalese teenager named Bouna Wade, in Michael Lambert's poignant short article "The Middle Passage, 1999" (Lambert 1999).

11. Homi Bhabha (2001) has recently developed a notion of "semblant solidarity," which captures precisely the way that ideas of equality and solidarity may be bound up with the question of resemblance in a political space that is not utopian but "aspirational."

12. Compare Malkki's discussion (1994) of a young Burundian in a Tanzanian refugee camp who drafted (and then laboriously copied by hand for international distribution) the rules of a new game that he had inverted "for the youth of the world."

13. The letter is posted on the *Zamzine* site (http://www.zambia.co.zm/zamzine/ 1999/july/america.htm), which I accessed on March 3, 2000. The letter is signed simply "By a Zamzine writer."

14. That the first letter addresses "Europe" and the second "America" is perhaps due to the continuing significance of "anglophone" and "francophone" spheres of influence in Africa. But it is significant that the letter to the "members and officials of Europe" reads as if it were addressed to all the citizens of the "First World" and not only to Europeans; meanwhile, the "Letter to America" denounces a category ("they," "the USA and the other super-rich nations of the world") that explicitly merges "America" with Britain and the other colonizing nations who owe debts from the colonial past. It is also interesting that although the "Letter to America" begins by addressing "America" as "you," it soon shifts voice to "they," perhaps reflecting an acknowledgment that "America" is not really listening at all and that the likely reader will be Zambian, not American. Like the colonial Indonesian story of "Njai Dasima," the letter seems to be "an attempt at generating a message so highly charged that someone who is not listening will start to listen" (Siegel 1997:65).

15. This is according to a news report on an internet news service (http://www.users. skynet.be/cadtm/angokin2.html), accessed January 23, 2001.

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