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The Thing Itself: Quantifying Violence in Subjective Excess

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to solidify the connections between the power of rhetorical language and its potential for subjective use by situating Agamben's ideas about language inside Mbembe's situational problematics.

Mbembe explains that part of the rule of law that makes postcolonial violence practicable comes from an excess of rhetoric that is espoused by the postcolonial dictator. That rhetoric shares commonalities with the structure of the thing itself in that it exposes language as Nothingness; it alludes to the unspeakable essence that Agamben cites as the thing of language. When the postcolonial potentate delivers speeches, his language "is the nullification and deferral of itself, and the signifier is nothing other than the irreducible cipher of this ungroundedness."¹ In other words, the rhetorical devices, repetition, and lists that Mbembe's Minister employs combine to reference that which can only be referenced through its exclusion from language—the thing itself—in the postcolonial case, the structure of violence, the commandment.² The rhetorical cipher that ensues from these speeches, this pomp, serves to implicate the unnamable but never directly addresses it. Thus, the dictator himself is a *Vorstellung* of the thing in history. His manifestation of the thing of violence stems from trauma and tradition, an irreducible amalgam of blood and dirt.

¹Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 44.

² Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001).

BIOGRAPHY

George Hoagland is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature and instructor in Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Her work centers on using tropes of postcolonial narrativity to read revolutionary subjectivity in contemporary U.S. literature. She currently maintains a website on Minority Studies and is teaching a course on how to read literature.

THE THING ITSELF: QUANTIFYING VIOLENCE IN SUBJECTIVE EXCESS

The thing itself therefore has its essential place in language, even if language is certainly not adequate to it, on account, Plato says, of what is weak in language. One could say, with an apparent paradox, that the thing itself, while in some way transcending language, is nevertheless possible only in language and by virtue of language: precisely the thing of language

If the essence of the thing is necessarily ungraspable but must be postulated for social cohesion, then what, exactly, is the thing? Is it a meta-order in which ideas are attached to things only superficially as in Logos or Telos? Is it some kind of transcendental signifier to which we all plug in so that we can participate in consciousness? Or is it something more tangible, something more forceful? It helps me to analyze the thing in a more material form, as the configuration of particular social processes by which citizens abide. Consider this example from the Cameroonian *Standard* in 1990 (quoted in Mbembe):

A woman from Busia was recently exposed to an agonizing experience as she helplessly watched the police beat her husband with their batons. As she wept and pleaded with the police to spare her husband, the police ordered the couple to take off their shoes. According to the police, the man was punished for failing to stand to attention while the national flag was being lowered.

The incident took place last Thursday at a road block on the Kisumu-Busia road. The couple explained they did not know that it was necessary to stand to attention. The woman and her husband were sitting on the side of the road, waiting for transport to take them back to Busia.ⁱⁱ

The woman and her husband are held responsible for a law they cannot know because they do not live in the region where the law exists. Ignorance, however, is not justification for avoiding punishment. The arbitrariness with which this incident occurs seems to invoke the thing of crisis because it is the fact of crisis that illuminates and makes possible the conditions under which the punishing violence takes place. The couple is being held to a standard that preexists the dilemma in which they find themselves because the structure of crisis governs the possibility of what can happen while they innocently sit on the side of the road. Their ignorance of the thing does not dismiss it; rather, their involvement, terrifying as it may have been, is necessary for their existence as subjects, as bodies under the law, as citizens. Not a tautological or even a causal relationship, the parties involved are intimately caught up in a violent language game. In the reportage, for example, the quote is set up so as to assign the agony of the violent experience to the woman—never mind the man who suffers the beating—signaling that his involvement in the incident is, and should be read as, less horrifying than hers, that his position, through his role as the beaten man, is less than hers as witness, that she, not he, is the crucial anomaly. Part of the distinction of this example involves these differing roles of the husband and wife. With violence organizing the structure of the events, the only possible factor that is newsworthy is that, in addition to what was normal—a man being punished for breaking a law—a woman also suffered from having to view the events; therefore, the woman's perspective is newsworthy. Violence, in itself, is the unspoken rule. Only through acknowledging the unspoken place of violence in the news item can one begin to understand the society in which it is reported. For me, this example of the thing as violence activates Agamben's model of the thing of language. In the following pages, I'll attempt to explain how this activation makes Agamben's postulation practical, diligent, and effective for explaining how postcolonial subjectivity manifests the thing itself.

The idea of "being-for-itself" has always bothered me because it seems to assert the divorce of reality from subjection. Reality is only available *qua* subjection; that is, reality as we understand it is based on our perception of it. Therefore, *Dasein*, Heidegger's phenomenological determination of being-in-the-world, seems, to me, to clearly represent how subjects come to perceive the contexts in which they exist. The crux of *Dasein* rests on the possibility of something to exist, and this possibility is what is lacking from my understanding of being-for-itself. The difference between the two, I think, is parallel to that of *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung*, where the first concerns something existing *there*, as it is, unmediated, and the latter is a representation of something, an idea that *stands for* something. My problem is that I see being-for-itself as akin to *Darstellung*, something that is unmediated by human subjectivity. Is *Darstellung* then a representation of the thing itself? A manifestation of the thing itself in language? As Agamben points out, the thing itself, the thing being-for-itself, is only possible to comprehend through the nihilistic structure of language. In naming it, in postulating it, it escapes, forever out of our reach, though we must presuppose it in order to speak in the first place.

This "rational irrationality," where we assume that we can both name and be something at the same time—as in the construction of the speaking subject and the subject of enunciation

—is fundamental to understand how the schema of sovereignty operates.ⁱⁱ Sovereign is the subject who names and is named contemporaneously, who speaks the “I” of subjectivity while inhabiting the place that the “I” names. The king, for example, must be double-bodied, must be a man and an immortal simultaneously in order to rule and be accepted as law,ⁱⁱⁱ hence the “royal we” that is singular in its plurality. But for me, something remains problematic.

THE SITUATION IN THE POSTCOLONY

The concern for rank, the quest for distinction, and the insistence of the Minister on due pomp are expressed through such rhetorical devices as repetition and lists, contrasts between words and things, frequent antitheses, a tendency to exaggerate and indulge systematically in superlatives that go beyond reality, and preference for imprecise propositions and vague generalizations, complete with constant references to the future. To be effective, this verbal trance state must reach a point where all that matters is the harmony of the sounds produced—because, by and large, it is the particular arrangements of sound that brings on a state of “possession” and triggers the mind’s voyaging; the space it creates through violence, though, is, in the postcolony, totally colonized by the *commandement*.^{iv}

Mbembe explains that the postcolony, that milieu of failed institutions that governs after settlers depart, is ruled by the paradigm of the *commandement*, which functions by a regime of exception, privileges and immunities, and a lack of distinction between ruling and civilizing.^v The *commandement* is itself irreducible to its entangled constituent parts that stem from tradition, history, and heritage. It relies upon an imaginary sovereign state that enforces itself through a kind of magic that is invited by the trauma of colonial experience. The sense of the imaginary that is referred to here is that same sense that Lacan invokes when he speaks of the three psychosemiotic realms: the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary, wherein the symbolic is the mediating linguistic realm between the real and the imaginary.^{vi} Where the real is that which always returns to the same place, the imaginary is that which is forever elsewhere. For the postcolony, the imaginary surrounds the cultural environment. It is everywhere and nowhere, dissolving the gap between past and future. The *commandement* is the *Vorstellung* of the *Darstellung* that is the thing itself. Accordingly, the *commandement* functions as the mediating factor between reality and unreality in the postcolony because it justifies experience—not that it makes it morally sound, but that it makes it quantifiable as experience—as *Darstellung*, as something that can become representable through the language of power that the postcolony utilizes to organize itself. For postcolonial society, the *commandement* organizes all being in history, all of what Heidegger would call *Mitsein*—that “altogetherness” that is the basis of community. The *commandement* is the unsayable thing which speaks power to truth. It is an example of the thing itself, as it manifests only through language, but cannot be contained within it.

The *commandement* designates the violence that governs the postcolony. It marks out a space for violence to occur on its own terms. For postcolonial subjects, this means that their frame of reference for acknowledging experience comes from this paradigm of privilege and exception. In the opening example of the woman from Busia (a district of 160,000 people on the Uganda-Kenya border), her pleas to the soldiers are not for justice or for them to do what is morally right, but, as the story describes, for them to simply let her and her husband continue to do what they were doing—waiting. Thus, the *commandement* conditions the possible outcomes for the woman and her husband, either mercy or torture, nothing in between. All of the players on this scene of violence are aware of this, and their language reflects its validity. Not only do the soldiers attack the man for not standing to attention while their (not his) flag is being lowered, they also make the couple take off their shoes in what appears to be a random act of humiliation. The excessiveness levied against the couple illustrates the same subjective excess that gives rise to the possibility of the *commandement* in the first place. In this society, a person cannot be punished, because mere punishment recognizes the capability of the individual to choose between right and wrong. The hapless criminal, therefore, must be educated, civilized, so that he will understand his place in the order of things. The standards for arrest, in this case, are arbitrary at best and submit only to a greater authority that makes them practicable.

Part of the rule of law that makes such standards practicable comes from an excess of rhetoric that is espoused by the postcolonial dictator. That rhetoric shares commonalities with the structure of the thing in that it exposes language as Nothingness; it alludes to the unspeakable essence that Agamben cites as the thing of language. When the postcolonial potentate delivers speeches, his language ‘is the nullification and deferral of itself, and the signifier is nothing other than the irreducible cipher of this ungroundedness.’^{vii} In other words, the rhetorical devices, repetition, and lists that the Mbembe’s Minister employs combine to reference that which can only be referenced through its exclusion from language—the thing itself—in the postcolonial case, the structure of

violence, the *commandement*. The rhetorical cipher that ensues from these speeches, this pomp, serves to implicate the unnamable but never addresses it. Thus, the dictator himself is a *Vorstellung* of the thing in history. His manifestation of the thing of violence stems from trauma and tradition, an irreducible amalgam of blood and dirt.

Additionally, the contrasts between words and things that exemplify the dictator's power to mis-name suggest that the connections between signifier and signified are not truly arbitrary, but historically constructed within this same framework of violence. The dictator's contradictions are therefore prefigured in linguistic signification. Since he, himself, is only a representation, only a thing signified, then he only produces more signifieds. There is no originary place from where he can speak, so all that he says must out itself, must return to the empty signifier that marks his place as power. Consequently, he speaks power to truth, brute force to tradition. As Agamben notes, 'The effacement of the thing itself is the sole foundation on which it is possible for something like a tradition to be constituted.'^{viii} In the imaginary realm from which the *commandement* arises, the thing itself must be denied in order for the potentate to acquire and retain any power. He must deny the failure of his own language by refusing to acknowledge any possibility that is not of his own creation. It does not matter then *what* he says, but that he says it in the realm of the *commandement*. When the Minister's expressions go beyond reality, the place to which they intend is the realm of the *commandement*, its conditions of possibility. The Minister says that all things are possible through the *commandement*, and the *commandement* is all things possible. Therefore, the verbal trance brought on by the Minister's speech is one of innate harmony, as it brings together the creation of possibility and its delineation. Within this realm, the soldiers and the couple are destined to meet.

THE POSTCOLONY AS CRISIS

Our study is thus concerned with the specific activity that 'the activity of working with signs' and 'graphic marks' has become in the postcolony. The context in which this activity takes place is the immediate present. The distinguishing feature of this immediate present is what is called the crisis. In addition to its political determinations and its visible and material manifestations, which are plain to see, this crisis must be understood as the persistence of a central excess, of a form of opaque violence and degree of terror that flow from a particular failure: that of the postcolonial subject to exercise freely such possibilities as he or she has, to give him/herself and the environment in which he/she lives a form of reason that would make everyday existence readable, if not give it actual meaning.'^{ix}

The thing of crisis comes from the condensation of essence, *Dasein*, and language—that which is expelled from subjectivity as it moves through violent time and space. Because the postcolonial subject is forever in the present, its spinning in place generates a surplus of energy that is absorbed back into the *commandement*. This postulation works because the residue of the presupposed thing of crisis is palpable in the postcolony, created by generations of subjects living, so to speak, under the gun. The crisis governs the actions of the sovereign dictator and the subjects, evident in all that they do, but undefinable as an entity unto itself. The crisis is pure form, contentless. Therefore, Mbembe's designation of the thing as crisis is a workable initiative because it gives the thing qualities that spring from subjective excess, not just qualities found inherent in the thing itself for itself. He explains:

Figurative expression in contemporary Cameroon reflects this prolixity, notably in commenting on the potentate—on, that is, that form of exercise of domination that combines brutal fantasy, convulsive and noisy laughter, and endless exchange of pain and pleasure between agents and victims—in short, orgiastic enjoyment of power. Such expression proceeds by excess, juxtaposing the components of the real world and of language to make them vanish, thus creating ugliness and a sensory condensation that draws strongly on touch, taste, hearing, and smell.^x

Though arbitrary, the thing as violence does not exist for itself. It is a strategy of subjection and domination that precludes the design of the postcolony; therefore, manipulating language for certain ends is a primary occupation in the postcolony. Because the signs themselves are only meaningful in the context of the *commandement*, they must be managed in such a way as to ensure the state of exception in which they exist. When Saussure claims that the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary but relational,^{xi} language in the postcolony shows how such a relationship plays itself out. Images specifically denote a lifestyle that connotes violence because the structure of the language organizes that lifestyle. Mbembe's postulation that the business of working with signs and graphic marks—his implication of marks on human bodies is not missed here—alludes to the all-powerful realm of the *commandement*. The only work in the postcolony is language-work. This work is the dialectical exchange of pain and pleasure, an orgiastic enjoyment of power engaged in by

both the powerful and the powerless. This fact proves that language's potential, that is, the potential of language to write itself inside its parameters from without, is one of utmost urgency in postcolonial societies.

The question of urgency is also one of situation. That the postcolony operates through crisis is a recognition of a revelation of nothingness. Agamben explains that, 'What revelation allows us to know must, therefore, be something not only that we could not know without revelation but also that conditions the very possibility of knowledge in general.'^{xii} When the *commandement* conditions the possibility of knowledge, it also conceals its conditioning. It is not that the *commandement* makes possible what *is*, it is that the *commandement* makes possible what *can be* through a suspension of time and space, like that which is exhibited by the Minister's speech. In that suspension, everything is immediate. There is no past, no future, only the pain of right now, only the knowledge of existence, not its potential for change. This persistence of bare existence generates a surplus of subjectivity and that surplus overflows into postcolonial culture. Because the postcolonial subject cannot see the *commandement* from where it is positioned, past the state of exception in which it exists, it layers meaning on its signs, engenders palimpsests of scars and words. Since today's violence is always already the same, it can only signify more ways to signify violence; that is, the postcolonial subject, through its inability to progress, eternally returns to violence in an effort to make meaning. This return can be seen, on the one hand, as a fruitless enterprise, predetermined stasis. On the other hand, however, it generates energy like a turbine, energy that can be harnessed to power other things. Mbembe suggests that this energy can be used to make life readable for the postcolonial subject, that instead of remaining in the stasis of the *commandement*, the subject can find potential that is not harnessed to the *commandement* and make real meaning for a livelihood that is aware of the violence surrounding it, but not affected by it to an extent that it becomes powerless to act on its own accord.

Mbembe uses examples of cartoons to help explain how subjective excess becomes palpable in the postcolony, and how resistance to dictatorial authority can be meted out. Out of context, these cartoons are difficult to fathom, but the point that Mbembe makes is clear. The excess as seen in language stretches beyond itself. More than a matter of reading between the lines in the cartoons or in the example of the woman from Busia, this language is heaped with signals. The task for the postcolonial subject, as Mbembe has drawn it, is to investigate the potential hidden in the surplus. Because the crisis provides a suspension of time and space, there is, in a sense, nothing but time for the subject to make itself something other than witness, to turn from being a bearer of language to a creator of meaning.

THE WORLD OF THE LIVING AND THE WORLD OF SPIRITS

What was important was the capacity of the thing represented to mirror resemblances and, through the interplay of bewitchment and enchantment—and, if need be, extravagance and excess—to make the signs speak...In so doing, one was not creating a mere illusion of existence, an unreal space against which speech constantly broke and dispersed. By summoning up the world of shade in a context where there was no forced correspondence between what was seen, heard, and said—or between what was and what was not, what was apparent and what partook of the spectre and the phantom—one was appealing to a particular ontology of violence and the marvelous. One was bringing to life not simply 'something other' but 'another side of things,' which, in its ceaseless dispersal, abolished—and thus more emphatically confirmed—the distinction between being and appearance, the world of the living and the world of spirits.'^{xiii}

Part of the problem of working in the postcolony is that the problem of language is a personal one. It is everywhere in the environment, always reifying the crisis through manipulation in a way that seems magical. The goal for the dictator, and for the bureaucratic society that he maintains, is to make the signifieds that he issues as dictates, values, statutes, seem like they are actual signs, signals to action. In this way, the empty signifier to which all the signifieds return is filled with meaning; that is, the signs which reign in the postcolony seem meaningful, even when all that they actually signify is violence. In order to do this, the dictator must manipulate tradition, make the signs speak tradition. Agamben warns that:

There can be no true human community on the basis of a presupposition—be it a nation, a language, or even the a priori of communication of which hermeneutics speaks. What unites human beings among themselves is not a nature, a voice, or a common imprisonment in signifying language; it is the vision of language itself and, therefore, the experience of language's limits, its end. A true community can only be a community that is not presupposed.^{xiv}

Because postcolonial language is personal, because it is always already embodied in violence, it cannot engender the kind of community that would make postcolonial subjects meaningful for themselves. Therefore, through the dictator's manipulation, in accordance with the state of exception in which the postcolony operates, the time suspended evokes a kind of limbo in which postcolonial subjects must remain. This magical state in which the dead and the living mingle in sublimity calls upon the marvelous to designate signals for postcolonial

society, omens that appear to rise from a world of spirits, but that originate soundly in the realm of the living. Thus, the bodies trapped in this particular ontology of violence, those subjects chained to the thing of violence, the *commandement*, look to these signals for self-knowledge in an endless cycle of pain and pleasure. With this postulation, Mbembe clearly outlines the ontological situation in the postcolony and with this outline, he illustrates the process of signification that Agamben uses to suggest the potentiality bidden in and hidden by language.

I understand that what exists in language can only do so *qua* language, that what we perceive we only do so through language, never estimating the actual thing which we wish to perceive, having access to the thing only through language. Emanating from Platonic forms, where the metaphysical Idea sprouts copies of itself, leaving mimesis as the penultimate manner through which man may perceive god, the notion that the essence of things lies outside human reach is one that harkens back to Edenic guilt, original sin. This makes sense to me, but it leaves the actuality of the thing in an essentially theological realm of perfect essences—souls, if you will.

Mbembe postulates the thing itself as a structure of violence, one that constitutes and is constituted by the idea of crisis borne of subjective excess; that is, it is formed through the negative dialectics of the postcolonial subject. When the subject conjuncts with social formations, it moves in an aura of negativity. It sees itself as a reflection of authoritative processes at work on its very body. This crisis, then, is always present, always immediate. It presupposes existence in the postcolony. For Agamben, the thing itself ‘while in some way transcending language, is nevertheless possible only in language and by virtue of language: precisely the thing of language.’ This notion of the thing as the element which makes language possible concurs to some degree with Mbembe’s thesis. The thing as potentiality is evident in the thing as threat of violence. What seems to differ, however, is the spatiotemporal location of the thing. For Mbembe, the thing is always present, always immediate. For Agamben, the thing is presupposed, always already. Can the two expressions of the thing reconcile?

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 31.
- ⁱⁱ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 109.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lacan writes in *Book XI* of his Seminar (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) on page 20 that ‘The important thing, for us, is that we are seeking here—before any formation of the subject, of a subject who thinks, who situates himself in it—the level at which there is counting, things are counted, and in this counting he who counts is already included. It is only later that the subject has to recognize himself as such, recognize himself as he who counts. Remember the naïve failure of the simpleton’s delighted attempt to grasp the little fellow who declares—*I have three brothers, Paul, Ernest and me*. But it is quite natural—first the three brothers, Paul, Ernest and I are counted, and then there is I at the level at which I am to reflect the first I, that is to say, the I who counts.’
- ^{iv} Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
- ^v Mbembe, 118.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, 29-31.
- ^{vii} Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1994).
- ^{viii} Agamben, 44.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, 35.
- ^x Mbembe, 142-143.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 148-9.
- ^{xii} Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1983).
- ^{xiii} Agamben, 39.
- ^{xiv} Mbembe, 145.
- ^{xv} Agamben, 47.