

*THE*  
**AFRICAN  
RENAISSANCE**  
*AND THE*  
**AFRO-ARAB  
SPRING**



A SEASON OF REBIRTH?

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## The Potential of an African Assertion—Once More, in the Name of a Renaissance

ERIK DOXTADER

It is difficult to hear. The sounding call of a renaissance echoes, again and again, but does not fully resonate. It remains in the air in a way that never quite reaches the ear, or never quite provokes a desire to lend an ear. The call slips away, all too quickly, into an imperative to act—every other gesture is idle if not a distraction or a luxury—whose cost is nothing less than aural blindness, an inability and unwillingness to see what appears in the midst of the word's expression. Without time to listen, the call's question, a calling to a question, goes unheard. And this call is a question, a defining question that may not have a definitive answer.

Set out in the name of Africa (whence this name?), the call of a renaissance is a question of discovering words that open a way to beginning again—in words. It is a question of recalling an expression whose inexplicable origin opens space to ask after the originating power of language, a creative power that may define the human condition and defy human control. Such inquiry is not a theological wager, although it has proven rather easy to forget that the currency of a renaissance is a promise of being born again. Nor is it impractical, despite all the protestations to the contrary. Unspeakable violence. So many voices silenced. So much expression distorted, deterred, and denied. In confronting the damage wrought by colonial exploitation, it is astonishing to hear a widely expressed and deep lament over the loss of language being used as a pretense for action that discounts and evades the question of (its) language. Thus a renaissance founders, unable to offer a hearing to that which holds and expresses the potential for becoming new.

## Ambivalent Inspirations

The only ailment that has no cure is the spawn of a curse.

THABO MBEKI

African—Renaissance. These two terms touch, tentatively, as if they have yet to form a concept, let alone the conception that portends rebirth. They touch in ways that provoke an image of capture—again—and which capture the imagination—again. Surely, there is no viable claim here, no ethical assertion, as to how Africa’s future rests on one of Europe’s decisive turns, a moment in which a young humanism turned its light on “dark ages” in a way that laid a foundation for the colonialism that excluded the African from the fold and fortune of history. And yet, this tentative and incongruous constellation may equally assert Africa’s capacity to recall that which has for so long functioned as a curse and to do so in a way that recollects the deeper promise of a renaissance, a spirit of discovery that renders the human condition anew. As these terms begin to touch in the name of a beginning, African—Renaissance requires a light touch. The idea cannot be forced into the form of an ideal or rendered subservient to the demands of practical policy. To do so is to forget the tensions that sit beneath its inspiration to make history.

The African Renaissance has inspired much talk. Much of what has been articulated in its name has been said before. Looking across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the idea has been cast variously and repeatedly as a unifying symbol, development model, policy initiative, critical diagnosis, hopeful prediction, disingenuous ruse, and call to struggle.<sup>1</sup> What provokes all of these diverse and divergent assertions? What gathers and then sets them under the banner of an African Renaissance? As they are said again and again, what prevents them from being heard as little more than disingenuous and distracting chatter, naïve to the possibility that there might be a limit to the number of times Africa can be reborn? Individually and together, these are questions of inspiration. Asking after the grounds that inspire all the words that have been dedicated to the African Renaissance, they recall a very old expression that speaks to its cause, an idea that sheds light on the roots of its development and the aim it serves.

*Semper aliquid novi Africam adferre*—Africa always brings forth something new.<sup>2</sup> These words have inspired—for better and for worse. To more than a few, including former South African president Thabo Mbeki, these ancient words deserve to be spoken in the name of an African Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> Attributed to Pliny the Elder, the expression contains an implicit reference to Aristotle’s earlier claim in *The History of Animals* that “Libya always produces something new.” Read in context, Aristotle’s was a zoological speculation about crossbreeding among large cats (lions, panthers, etc.). The new was the emergence of an unprecedented animal, a unique beast. Soon enough, however, Aristotle’s wonder was taken as a sign of Africa’s capacity to produce the strange, the dangerous, or the monstrous.

Whether by design or typographical error—the Greek words for “new” and “evil” bear a close resemblance—Aristotle’s dictum was recast by Zenobius as “Africa always brings some new strange evil.” In rather short order, as Italo Ronca puts it, Aristotle’s position was turned “from an African ethology to anti-African ethics.”<sup>4</sup>

*Africa always brings forth something new.* Perhaps the history of this dictum does not have the *last* word. Perhaps the discourse that has grown around and from it amounts ultimately to dicta, a pronouncement that lacks the power to dictate the fate of its object and to strip its subject of the potential to become otherwise. If so, the appeal of Pliny’s words may be less that they sound a timeless promise than that their recollection and utterance performs something of the rebirth that defines and enacts a renaissance. How? What can happen when this ancient phrase is spoken in the name of an African Renaissance?

While it featured diverse and uneven forms of development, the European Renaissance is widely thought to have hinged on a turn back to the ancients. It took form, as Paul Johnson puts it, with the “rediscovery and utilization of ancient virtues, skills, knowledge and culture, which had been lost in the barbarous centuries following the Roman Empire in the West, usually dated from the fifth century AD.”<sup>5</sup> Much more and much less than an attempt to overcome a “dark age” by way of a golden age, the work of renaissance began in a confrontation with barbarism, a form of violence that attacks speech, that endeavors to deny human beings the standing and capacity for meaningful expression. Against such dehumanization, a silence that it may well have caused and then reproduced in a different form, renaissance culture aimed to discover lost words in the name of inventing modes of interaction and forms of exchange that could redefine and reweave the political, economic, and ethical threads of culture.

Embodied in its call to set the liberal arts above the dry strictures of Scholasticism and pursued by figures such as Petrarch, Valla, and Agricola, the Renaissance (re)turned to original words in the name of making a definitive turn with(in) language, a turn that requires not the mimicry of what has been said but a recollection of the fundamental relationship between saying and creating, the ways in which *logos* constitutes action that makes a difference.<sup>6</sup> Seen this way, the invocation of Pliny in the name of an African Renaissance is a speech act that endeavors to remake the ground of sense and meaning. In the (re)turn to old words, to original words that speak to the possibility of origination, there is a calling to the question of the word itself, a question of how to discover and create (within) the power of language that has been severed from experience and lost in history’s labyrinth. Put differently, it is a short step from the invocation of Pliny to Dani Nabudere’s claim that an African Renaissance will unfold only within a recognition of how “the predominance of orality and verballity in the African world-view presents humanity with the possibility of tracing back the origin of concepts of things and world-views.”<sup>7</sup>

Soon enough it will be important to ask how the recollection of language opens into the question of “the origin of concepts.” For the moment, however, the more pressing idea is that there are old words which inspire talk of rebirth. As Pliny’s legacy demonstrates, these words are not free. They hold and express a history of violence, an impulse to colonial conquest that may be perpetuated by their very utterance. So too, Pliny’s dictum is ultimately only an example, an instance that represents the larger question of how to find and recall those words that afford inspiration. Only in a politics of authenticity does the ancient word arrive pure and unscarred, which is precisely why the recurring invocation of Pliny is important. To utter Pliny’s words in the name of a renaissance is to undertake and perform a definitive element of the work that defines a renaissance, a recollection of those words that are not one’s own and whose utterance opens a space in which to begin again in one’s own terms.

## Reclaiming Potential

Is language a possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession?  
Possessed or possessing in exclusive possession, like a piece of personal  
property? What of this being-at-home in language toward which we  
never cease returning?

JACQUES DERRIDA

A return to a definitive old word inspires and underwrites the call for a defining turn, a moment of rebirth. It is an appealing logic, evidenced not least by the way in which the African Union declared 2013 to be the year of “Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance” by invoking Kwame Nkrumah’s claim at the 1963 Conference of African Independent States: “Africa must unite or perish.”<sup>8</sup> Are these the words that inspire a renaissance? Are they the right words? How many have perished in the name of unity since 1963? Since 1994?

The old words come loaded. When mobilized in the name of a renaissance, Pliny’s adage does not readily disclose how it served a colonial impulse any more than Nkrumah’s explains the ways in which unity can coalesce into horrific violence. The defining turn back to old words comes loaded with a problem of how to define the form of its content and the content of its form. On the one hand, this is a question of how to define the occasion, elements, and value of a renaissance that may *be* a renaissance only insofar as it upsets its own ground, troubles its own properties, and refuses the values with which it is justified. On the other, it is a question of whether there can or will *be* a renaissance if its generative operations and aims are simply left to float, to become whatever and however they might become. If prefigured necessity and abstract possibility inspire little more than myth, the power of old words may turn on how they hold the potential to define a renaissance—as a potential.

The African Renaissance has been defined in myriad ways. Looking broadly, it has been set out as an expression of democratization's third wave; the mobilization of an identity politics; a campaign to alter the local, national, and global principles of political governance, social interchange, and economic exchange; a defense of humanism; an appeal to reimagine education; and a rallying cry to develop indigenous thought, public culture, and new forms of (post)national political discourse.<sup>9</sup> While it is important to consider what, if anything, gathers these interpretations, it is equally important to resist the distraction that comes with piling idea upon idea and consider what can be gleaned within just a few select accounts of what the African Renaissance *is*:

Malegapuru Makgoba:

The African Renaissance is a unique opportunity for Africans to define ourselves and our agenda according to our own realities and taking into account the realities of the world around us. It is about Africans being agents of our own history and masters of our own destiny.<sup>10</sup>

Ademola Araoye:

The African Renaissance, a black-centered counterpoise to the dominant structure of ideas and the norms and institutions that govern relations in the global system, seeks a radical repudiation of the structure of relationship between these powerful forces. Its Africanist worldview contrasts sharply with established negative understandings and interpretations of the African cosmology by the African who has been redesigned by the travails of history to repudiate self and his own. The African Renaissance therefore seeks to retrench the principal euro-centric and other external ideational structures that constitute the foundations of the dominant order that has always defined the peripheral locus and irrelevance of the black world in the universe.<sup>11</sup>

Pitika Ntuli:

The African Renaissance, as a counter-hegemonic vehicle growing out of our awareness of the need for meaningful change, offers us an opportunity to reinvent ourselves in line with our new insights as we pass through a transition period in which our perceptions and values, the way we look at our new society and our relationship with each other, must be restructured to meet new realities.<sup>12</sup>

Thaninga Shope:

The renaissance of our Africanness is not about rediscovering, but about reiterating who we are and what we as Africans are all about.<sup>13</sup>

Offered over a range of fifteen years, these definitions blur the lines between diagnosis, aspiration, and valuation. Each asserts the importance of the real, a

reality in which the experience of subjection calls for an interplay of reflection and action. Both ongoing and yet to come, this movement involves moments of opposition, appropriation, differentiation, and expression, all of which are deemed to underwrite the work of individual and collective self-definition. In slightly different ways, each of these definitions is thus a claim about the nature and value of definition, the way the act of definition is imposed, refused, and returned. The new abides in the power to name an experience of historical subjugation, the terms of principled resistance, and the meaning of living in (self) relation.

It is difficult to define a renaissance, let alone proclaim one.<sup>14</sup> Returning to a broad view and looking across the variety of its definitions, the African Renaissance appears as an ontological question, an epistemic project, a political agenda, and an ethical commitment. Where does one begin? Does a renaissance emerge from the recollection and institutionalization of that which has already been accomplished, or does it turn on a struggle for creativity whereby it is possible to remember that institutions take power only by forgetting the contingency of their foundation? This question is fundamental, a problem of what is to be made of “Africa”—the very subject and object of a renaissance—and what “Africa” can say about itself in light of its history.<sup>15</sup> Save for those who have little time for ontological puzzles, the policy prophets who come armed with “practical” arguments about what Africa *must* do, most commentators recognize that the appeals to history, experience, and culture which drive many accounts of the renaissance are themselves open theoretical questions, each of which demands reflection on the precise operation and the constitutive action through which a renaissance unfolds.<sup>16</sup>

Such reflection amounts to difficult work, all the more so when it is short-circuited by a tempting terminological play that turns reflection on the creative quality of a renaissance into a game of bait and switch. Evident in more than a few accounts, the problem looks something like this: in the name of a “rebirth,” an emerging or already unfolding renaissance is cast as a moment of “renewal” or “reform” or “discovery” that “restores” or “transforms” or “reappropriates” in ways that “regenerate” or “revive” or “reawaken” or “rehumanize.”<sup>17</sup>

The permutations are nearly endless—as the meaning of one term is called into question, it is simply explained by the substitution of another, and so on. The result is a near babble, one that admittedly exposes the expansive depth and breadth of the problems to which renaissance is called, but in a way that equivocates a number of different operators, all of which have very different implications for the generative conditions, movements, and ends of a renaissance. The conflation of “revival” and “rebirth,” for instance, makes it difficult to discern whether a renaissance simply lends energy to already existing goods or if its promise rests on the appearance of something new. Going a bit deeper, the confusion of “creativity” and “reform” obscures the question of whether renaissance is a promise of emergence *ex nihilo*, an event with identifiable grounds, or a moment that

inevitably blurs the difference between what it presupposes and what it is called to instantiate. Deeper still, the difference between “discovery” and “restoration,” two terms that anchor many accounts of renaissance, is a theoretical question if not *the* question that founds theory itself—what are the conditions under which one is willing and able to take leave of the city in the name of an encounter that exceeds experience, discloses the limits of self-certainty, and alters the norms that guide human interaction?<sup>18</sup>

There is a thin divide between those forms of ambiguity that provoke theoretical action and those that sow confusion in the name of deterring change.<sup>19</sup> With respect to the African Renaissance, the hodge-podge deployment of an increasing host of concepts both hampers and deters inquiry into the affinities and differences between the creativity of a renaissance, the generative quality of revolution, and the incremental change brokered by political and cultural institutions. And while theory does not promise a conclusive answer, the practical cost of the terminological-conceptual jig in many accounts of the African Renaissance is a consideration of whether the work of renaissance is conditioned by Africa or if renaissance is a condition for the emergence of the African. It also obscures the ways in which the characteristic qualities of a renaissance are inextricably linked to questions of violence and death. How does the human desire to create appear in the face of mortality? What forms and magnitudes of destruction create the need for rebirth—as opposed to restoration? Who must consent to the act of (re)conception? What violence does it perform? What sacrifice is justified in the name of making the new?<sup>20</sup>

Nativity, as Hannah Arendt well understood, is not only complicated but Janus-faced. It is both an engine of history and its compensation, a claim of uniqueness that defines the human condition and a redress of the violence that comes with the act of inserting ourselves into the world and making history. To grasp for one without the other may be a very good working definition of tragedy. If so, if the moment of a renaissance has arrived, if Africa is poised for a turn, the likes of which underwrote the European voyages of discovery that inaugurated colonialism, the question that follows is how to discern and define the conditions of (its) emergence in relation to the risk of its assertion. For many, however, this is not an appealing question. At a moment not long beyond the colonial, it is far more attractive to define and justify the African Renaissance as the last phase of the struggle for independence and recognition. But, an independence for whom? A standing in relation to whom? A standing on what?

These definitional questions haunt, a reminder that making history is a double-sided problem. In the name of an *African* Renaissance and an African *Renaissance*, the issue is far less whether colonialism was a crime against humanity—it was—than how to assess the extent and methods of its destructive power and the ways in which it dehumanized those caught in its net. Yesterday and tomorrow are

other countries. Today, the question is not only what remains, what can be recollected and remembered out of colonial domination. It is also the deeply discomfiting question of *how* it remains and *how* it can be brought forward. In the name of renaissance, the valence of appeals to culture, tradition, experience, and knowledge changes depending on whether these grounds were misrepresented, distorted, deformed, or negated by the forces of colonialism. The latter imply a need for reincarnation—or mourning—while the former suggest an untouched reserve, an available thread with which to stitch past and future into a meaningful present. In between, as Biko put it, the colonial falsification of tradition and its ripping of consciousness requires walking a fine line, an authoritative assertion of normality that neither devolves to the endlessly therapeutic nor replicates the logic of colonial sovereignty.<sup>21</sup>

It is a fine line, so fine that the question of how to define an African Renaissance appears undecidable. Think first on the level of inspiration. To appeal to Pliny is to herald an abstract possibility, a promise of the new that may arrive at some point in future. To invoke Nkrumah is to announce a course of necessity, an imperative grounded solely in the threat of death. Moving forward, the difficulty is not simply that these gestures prefigure and then underwrite various definitions of the African Renaissance such that its rebirth is either a (re)production that demands infinite patience or a totalizing struggle dedicated to preventing the negation of conception. It is also that definitional claims about the generative work of the African Renaissance tack between various formulations of these renderings such that it is difficult to see how each may unravel the other. This is to say that the claimed *necessity* of a renaissance sits in a deep tension with its announced *possibility*; the possible presupposes the existence and integrity of interests, capacities, and resources, all of which are thought to be co-opted, stolen, or destroyed in the case from necessity.<sup>22</sup>

The fine line blurs further. And yet it may prove to be a false distinction. There may remain something between raw possibility and necessity. Think back to the various definitions of the African Renaissance. In a way that is easy to overlook, these renderings are linked by a concern for opportunity, a *kairos*, a moment and an opening given to the work of becoming. As it appears and runs between its possibility and necessity, this opportunity suggests that the African Renaissance may be a potential. It hints that there may be a potential for an African Renaissance. It speaks to how the African Renaissance may be that which expresses potential.

This may say a lot, although not in a definitive way—to say that the renaissance is a mode of potentiality is also to say that it is an impotentiality. As an (in)capacity for becoming new, this means, first and foremost, that the work of renaissance is (*un*)*necessary*. The promise of rebirth is an opening more than a pre-given form of development, an opening in which it is necessary to ask after and redefine the grounds, meaning, and force of necessity. What must become must come without

being pre-given, without a model that forecloses the question of how to read and interpret history's force. If so, a renaissance arrives through a series of *(in)direct* movements, a deliberate departure without destination, a taking leave in a way that moves within and without the given word, that takes the preconceived words of conception handed down by culture, politics, and law and asks after the basis of their power. In other words and for other words, a renaissance is thus *(ex)claimed*. With greater or less urgency, it is an event that shuttles between the intransitive claim of a call and the transitive call of a claim. In one moment, the potential for a renaissance appears in a cry, a unique and involuntary exclamation of surprise, rage, joy, or pain that interrupts the logic and flow of normal conversation—*What?!*—and does so in a way that demonstrates how voice remains in the face of something—we cannot readily say *what* it is for sure—which demands response even as it has rendered being at a loss for words. In another moment, the potential of a renaissance cries for speech, a timely word, a claim that asserts a movement, a way to move from here in the light of what has been and what might become. These spontaneous and deliberate gestures are linked if not indissociable. In the midst of potential, there is no time for given words without which there would be no hope of reconceiving the times.<sup>23</sup>

## Becoming Words

What does it mean that the voiceless are suddenly given voice, that the invisible suddenly take form, voice, and numbers but above all seek to reintegrate themselves into certain values, a recourse of which they remain uncertain, beyond the fact that the world has systematically denied, degraded, or suppressed those values.

WOLE SOYINKA

Potential flickers. On again, off again. Back and forth, an unsteady and moving light, a beacon that discloses the landscape without delineating the path, that illuminates a way without revealing which way is forward and which way is back. It's awkward, standing in an uncertain light, endeavoring to discern where one is in relation to what has been and what might be, turning round and round in an attempt to discern which is which and thus what direction marks the way to becoming new. There is something unbecoming about it all—one hopes that no one is watching. While the African Renaissance may be wrapped in the pathos of celebration, this cover does not hide the humiliation that may attend the appearance of its potential, the concession that there is a need to be born again.

The potential of an African Renaissance speaks to the difficult conditions of its beginning, a rebirth that cannot be induced by fate, derived through a method, or carried out solely in deliberation. Between possibility and necessity, this potential is an extended moment and contingent movement of becoming, the gathering of

a capacity to come into being that retains its incapacity, a capacity not to be. It is a defining event, a definitional event that questions the ground of definition on which becoming depends. The beginning held in a potential is thus neither an emergence *ex nihilo* nor the mobilization of fixed topoi. It is a beginning that begins with a question of (its) origin—the *question* of origin: How is the possibility of a renaissance (ex)claimed as an opportunity, an (un)necessary opening in which to ask after the (in)direction of a discourse that conceives the subject and object of a renaissance at the same time that it holds open the question of how it recollects, articulates, and performs principles of (its) conception?<sup>24</sup>

It is more than interesting to find precisely this question at the very start of an essay on the African Renaissance that is widely held up as a seminal expression of its potential. Beneath an altogether underappreciated title—“When Can We Talk of an African Renaissance?”—Cheikh Anta Diop began in 1948 by recognizing that the dilemma of defining an African Renaissance cannot be severed from the question of origination:

A close look at the African reality reveals that there is on the one hand, a part of tradition that has remained intact and continues to survive despite the modern influence and on the other hand, a tradition that has been altered by contamination from Europe. Is it possible in the two cases to talk of a renaissance? Certainly not in the first case. As for the second, let us examine the situation closely in order to see if one can legitimately use the term renaissance for it. This second case is often merely a form of literary imitation, often bordering on lyricism.<sup>25</sup>

Today, this argument does not have much truck. Ironically, Diop receives credit for raising the question of the African Renaissance but not for grasping the implications of his question: “The development of our indigenous languages is the prerequisite for a real African renaissance.”<sup>26</sup> Here, the meaning of invoking Pliny becomes clear. The defining and generative ground of an African Renaissance rests on the recollection and cultivation of original words, the languages with which Africa began.

Diop builds the case with evident care. Lamenting what he sees as the tragic evacuation of “African literature,” a flight to foreign tongues in which African authors are motivated by all the wrong reasons and perhaps at the cost of reason itself, he reflects on how the inside has been turned outside (itself). The desire to write in a European language and for a European public sets the African author in a profound double bind: The hope of recognition from foreign audiences requires entering into a form of expression that abandons the experience and knowledge that flows from and through one’s own language such that the praise garnered for a work is little more than a feint, a thinly veiled accusation of hypocrisy—the “African” writer can be read but not trusted to the degree that her work appeals in a way that “proves” that she is no longer really African. An author’s repudiation of her own tongue forecloses the possibility of an equal exchange. It is also

self-defeating. The turn from one's own language divests authorship of genius, the breath of spirit that abides in language, at the same time that it folds the author into the "insatiable zeal for action" that defines modernism, a logic in which there is no permissible time to think about how ideas are created and why creative reflection matters.<sup>27</sup>

For Diop, this form of colonization requires turning back and asking how the inside might yet appear and then resist the outside that purports to speak for it. In his terms, the breath that enlivens culture, the breath that heralds birth and gives full voice to experience, appears in the forms of "oral tradition" that hold space to *ask* the question of language: "The study of our languages is even of greater historical importance for us who, to date, have no ancient writings. By studying how this language gave birth to another and how this happened, we would succeed in building a sort of linguistic chain going from the earliest to the latest and thus get to know about a very important period of our history."<sup>28</sup> Diop is clear in saying that the configuration of this linguistic chain does not rest in a desire for linguistic unity—either literally across cultures or across time. The chain is a question, an opening of the open question of origin. Without seeking to locate and explain genesis, the definitive moment of first existence, it asks after the movements of becoming, the ways in which a language gathers form in a way that gives way to another, a chain of becoming and becoming otherwise.

Looking across literature, music, architecture, and the arts, Diop (ex)claims that the defining question of the African Renaissance is a call to the (un)necessary and (in)direct assumption of language, the myriad ways in which African culture came to develop and deploy its words. In one way, this is precisely what is at stake in Diop's oft-repeated call for Africans to recollect "the black origin of Pharaonic Egyptian civilization in order to determine from there the Black man's contributions to human progress."<sup>29</sup> Without the force of fate, this (re)turn to origins is a pivot, a movement that both sets "the sordid beliefs that have been methodically dished out" to Africa into relief and begins a "period of confused searchings," a protracted moment in which "Africa rediscovers herself" in a language that does not "impede her ability to attain her full potential."<sup>30</sup>

Diop's call to the question of language has not been entirely forgotten. Indeed, one hears its echo in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's recent claim that while the African Renaissance "means, first and foremost, the economic and political recovery of the continent's power," this turn "can be brought about effectively only through a collective self-confidence enabled by the resurrection of African memory, which in turn calls for a fundamental change in attitude towards African languages on the part of the African bourgeoisie, the African governments, and the African intellectual community."<sup>31</sup> The question of language is bedrock. Before they are set in stone and held out as the key to change, norms of political (inter)action and economic (ex)change are proposed, debated, negotiated, and articulated. Such rhetorical work—in the actual sense of the term, where speech is a mode of

theoretical and practical action—is easily and often discounted. Sensing this tendency, Ngũgĩ sounds his keynote, a call to “re-member” language such that it is possible to both recall the colonial dismemberment of the word and discover its abiding potential: “Acting as if their native means of memory were dead, or at least unavailable, the continental African chose to use the languages that buried theirs so as to connect with their own memory—a choice that has hobbled their re-membering literary visions and practices.”<sup>32</sup> In the wake of the devastation wrought by “colonial education factories,” the machines that starved the very body of language and left it immobile, the continent’s diverse languages and vernaculars must be nourished and recuperated.<sup>33</sup>

This may not be enough. Both Diop and Ngũgĩ advocate for the recollection and repossession of *particular* languages, the mother tongues that colonial powers compromised, abandoned, and distorted. Beyond this, there is also a multifaceted problem of language as such. If it means anything, a renaissance asks language—it *asks* language—to expose and overcome a colonial discourse that secured something of its power by attributing barbarism to its subjects, a dehumanizing attribution of incomprehensibility that, according to Ngũgĩ, created a desire to go “hiding in another language” and produced a perverse “death wish for African languages by African intellectuals.”<sup>34</sup> As an internalized desire to escape *into* the cage, this dynamic is not easily overcome, let alone reversed. It requires picking up (a) language in pieces and creating incentives to relinquish forms of expression that are valued as conduits for recognition. And if such incentives appear, the work at hand still requires using the language at hand to reveal its limits in a way that recalls not just a forsaken language but one’s sense of place within it. Thus, there are two things at stake when Ngũgĩ invokes Walter Benjamin to claim that language functions as “medium of memory”—the recovery of a language through which to remember the terms of experience, tradition, and culture *and* the recollection of a relationship to language itself that does not simply replicate the logic of colonial discourse.<sup>35</sup> Having a language of one’s own is crucial, but it is only a part of the struggle. The other part is how to *have* language in a manner that does not reduce it to an instrument, a possessed and taken-for-granted tool that conforms fully to the wishes of its operator. The value of having the original cannot overwrite the value of what it means to grasp a sense of its fragile origination.

The potential of an African Renaissance does flicker. Deeply felt even at a distance, this potential appears on the horizon of language, a threshold on which to recollect a power that defies possession. While perhaps a source of frustration, its appearance is not intangible. The work of language underwrites the associations that coalesce into politics and the agreements that enable economics. It thus lacks political capital and provokes disinterest precisely because its unquestioned stability is taken to be a necessary condition for doing “real” things and making “actual” change. This same attribution of stability also indemnifies our sense of self—having words is basic to the conception of what it means to be human. Yet,

when Diop asks, “When can we talk of an African renaissance?” he is both conceding that talk occurs—there is language at work in the world—and claiming that language has been lost, distorted, and abandoned. The former is heard as obvious and not particularly interesting. The latter, if it is heard at all, appears incoherent or even hypocritical—on what grounds can one *say* that language is broken to the point that there remains only self-confounding chatter or dehumanizing silence? Very few care to hear that they are expressing themselves poorly or that they lack the capacity to do so. And yet, this is precisely the legacy of colonialism, the attribution and internalization of an inability to speak with meaning, let alone to speak in ways that enact “proper” forms of reason and “legitimate” modes of power. For Diop and Ngũgĩ, the African Renaissance begins here. It begins with a call to discover, a call to discover the potential for creativity that appears when the necessity of language is interrupted by a recollection of its origin, an origin that is not a blueprint but a question of how to create a relationship with *and* within that which makes *and* remakes the relationships that hold the potential to give birth.

## Beginning Language

One epoch with its historic tasks has come to an end. Surely another  
must commence with its own challenges. Africa cries out for a new  
birth. Carthage awaits the restoration of its glory.

NELSON MANDELA, 1994

The beginning begins with an assertion of potential, a claim that recalls, announces, and enacts the fragile power of an original and originating language. Has such an assertion actually appeared? In June 1994, weeks after delivering his inaugural address on the steps of the Union Buildings in Pretoria and in the very midst of the Rwandan genocide, Nelson Mandela hesitated in his address to the OAU heads of state gathered in Tunis: “We must, in action, say that there is no obstacle big enough to stop us from bringing about a new African renaissance.”<sup>36</sup> With Carthage yet in ruins, the renaissance remained an event to anticipate. Twenty-three months later, the times appeared to turn as Thabo Mbeki stood before South Africa’s Constitutional Assembly and delivered an address that is now widely known as the “I Am an African” speech.<sup>37</sup>

Very subtly and in a very important way, the first three lines of this address offer more than a clue about the opening turn of the African Renaissance:

On an occasion such as this, we should, perhaps start from the beginning.  
So, let me begin.  
I am an African.

These lines have provoked. In the preface to their groundbreaking collection on the African Renaissance, Makgoba, Shope, and Mazwai collectively observe how “very few of us understood the foresight, the richness, the depth, the challenges encapsulated in these four words”—I am an African—and they then contend that the words amount to a world-changing formulation.<sup>38</sup> Eddie Maloka maintains that Mbeki’s address marked the moment when the idea of an African Renaissance “entered the public discourse,” this despite the fact that the concept does not appear as such in the speech.<sup>39</sup> Nabudere cites, with approval, Chris Landsberg and Francis Kornegay’s claim that the speech should “be considered as the intellectual foundation for the articulation of the African Renaissance,” a view that is echoed by Rok Ajulu’s claim that the speech initiated a discourse of renaissance.<sup>40</sup>

Read together, this praise hints that Mbeki’s address is best understood as an idiosyncratic preface. Typically written upon the completion of that which it introduces, a preface “announces the path and the semantic production of a concept” and does so in a way that the larger work itself cannot.<sup>41</sup> Addressed to that which is yet to come, it expresses what cannot be said within the lines that it opens, delays, and complicates. Mbeki’s speech does all of this, except that it was composed *before* he opened his explicit and well-known campaign to define and promote an African Renaissance. The influential terms of this effort, some of which have been documented, only underscore the significance of his 1996 address.<sup>42</sup> More than just a referent for current debates—although it is certainly that—Mbeki’s speech is nothing less than iconic; it is an assertion that both represents and performs its unspoken object: the beginning of the African Renaissance.

What is the secret of this beginning, the secret that always shrouds the moment of birth? Mbeki’s position is frequently cast as a more or less problematic argument about the formation, deformation, and reformation of identity. On this reading, the first two lines of the address are taken to be far less important than the third—“I am an African.” With this declaration, Mbeki is heard to undertake a lengthy and complex reflection on what it means to be an African, a case that moves from the continent’s soil to the warmth of its sun to the dignity of its animal life to the diversity of its peoples—lost, scattered, and still very much present. Across the continent and across history, Mbeki asserts that these peoples have “seen concrete expression of the denial of the dignity of a human being emanating from the conscious, systemic and systematic oppressive and repressive activities of other human beings.” In the terms of colonial power, they have been cast as barbaric and have seen “the corruption of minds and souls as a result of the ignoble effort to perpetrate a veritable crime against humanity.” And yet, as Mbeki puts it, this crime testifies to what it means to be “born of a people who would not tolerate oppression.” It testifies to a struggle against those who would “defend the indefensible,” a struggle in which Africans have demonstrated that, “whatever the circumstances they have lived through and because of that experience, they are determined to define for themselves who they are and who they should be.”

There is perhaps—perhaps—no tragedy here, not in the proper sense. The wounds of the past are not self-inflicted, self-negating, or self-defining. For Mbeki, to say “I am an African” is to make “an assertion that none dare contest” precisely because it asserts a unity in difference, an identity that gathers itself beyond itself.<sup>43</sup> From the midst of imposed division and fragmentation and with a pan-African, national, communal, and individual perspective, it gathers the part into the whole and whole into the part. Identity is less the product or outcome of this movement than the movement itself, a mode of expression that opens the opportunity to decide what it means to say “I am an African.” It is crucial to see (and hear) how Mbeki derives this moment of choice:

We are assembled here today to mark their [“the great masses who are our mother and father”] victory in acquiring and exercising their right to formulate their own definition of what it means to be African.

The constitution whose adoption we celebrate constitutes an unequivocal statement that we refuse to accept that our Africanness shall be defined by our race, colour, gender or historical origins. . . .

Our sense of elevation at this moment also derives from the fact that this magnificent product is the unique creation of African hands and African minds.

But it also constitutes a tribute to our loss of vanity that we could, despite the temptation to treat ourselves as an exceptional fragment of humanity, draw on the accumulated experience and wisdom of all humankind, to define for ourselves what we want to be.

Several things are happening here, each a kind of demonstration. Standing before the Constitutional Assembly, the architects of South Africa’s full and first democratic constitution, Mbeki is refusing the last word, the defining word. The question of what it means to say “I am an African” is not his to answer. This seems curious in light of all that has been said in the run-up to this moment in the speech. In fact, the larger speech risks confirming the popular perception that Mbeki is conceited: *I am an African . . . this way and that way, and through this over there and through those over there . . . I am an African . . . I am African.*

If it seems too much, the risk is well worth it, precisely because the repetition of the claim serves to gather and present an interlocking set of conceits, a set of metaphors whose transpositions, equivocations, and assertions of resemblance all serve to demonstrate the contingent work of metaphor and raise the question of the conditions under which a metaphor actually works—that is, whether and how it defines one thing through another. Then, in a crucial twist, these conceits coalesce into hyperbole, a form of expression that over-throws (with) words, that sets the word to move along an arc that misses its mark. Moving between and gathering the land and the sky and the animals and the peoples and the cultures and the struggles of a continent, Mbeki’s conceits demonstrate the ways in which

he is an African in a manner that overwhelms far more than it exaggerates. They push metaphor to its limit and then overthrow it.

This, then, is the genius of Mbeki's speech. It names the qualities that define what it means to be an African at the same time that it stages a remarkably fine-tuned indictment of metaphor, an account of how Africans have long been defined by way of something or someone else. This indictment does not negate metaphor's power but hands its potential back to those who have been subjugated by its work. It overwhelms the range and capacity for metaphor and then throws identity over it, into an open question, a space in which to begin, to take up the question and then the work of individual and collective self-constitution. Now, in this light, recall the first two lines of Mbeki's speech:

On an occasion such as this, we should, perhaps start from the beginning.  
So, let me begin.

These brief lines matter a great deal. The constitution's words both enact *and* call for words that begin from a beginning and begin a beginning, all in the name of gathering the contingent power of self-definition. And in this moment, it is contingent—perhaps more than at any other time, the appearance of the constitution is understood to be a function of struggle and not the result of fate. And so too Mbeki's speech, as it echoes—so precisely—the constitution to which it is addressed.<sup>44</sup> To move between the two, listening back and forth, is to hear how each asserts words that create the potential for words which call forth the question of self-assertion, the potential for self-definition that is enabled by and yet never fully controlled by the moment of constitution—or the moment of conception, the moment of (re)birth.<sup>45</sup> As beginning and origin thus begin to blur, the secret of Mbeki's speech appears. The African Renaissance begins as the work of hyperbole yields allegory. An overthrow reveals undermeaning, where the latter is not a foundation but a demonstration that invites the recollection of the ways in which definitive words remain open to question, an inquiry that expresses the movement of creativity, an (in)direct and (un)necessary movement whereby and wherein Mbeki can (ex)claim that in the name of a beginning, “nothing can stop us now!”

In light of the arc thrown by Mbeki's speech, where are we now? If there is no doubt that the African Renaissance is now an important commonplace, it is equally certain that this topos has generated heated controversy over precisely how it fits and what it starts. This is understandable and good—a renaissance likely fails as it takes on the quality of a machine. Yet it is also the case that policy debates have worked to ghettoize the question of language that sits at the very heart of Mbeki's position. While few are willing to overtly deny the significance of language in the renaissance project, its question is frequently reduced to (1) an instrumental means of policymaking, (2) a matter of deciding which particular

languages should be taught in schools and which languages should be used as the medium of instruction, and (3) a concern for ministers of culture whose portfolios are often predicated on the need to keep the intelligentsia and civil society both happy and out of shouting distance from government.

Individually and together, these tendencies inscribe and enforce a disinterest in language as such. As language is collapsed to a utility function, a distribution-allocation scheme, and an object of institutionally supported aesthetics, there are fewer and fewer incentives to ask how language is (not a) given. There is less and less room to step back from the problem of how humans use language to form relationships with one another and ask how being human comes with a responsibility, a response-ability, to reflect on how one relates to language itself. What is my relation with the language that I take to be mine? Is language a gift? Is it mine to take? How might its power exceed my control in ways that call me to recognize it, to concede my dependence on it such that it comes to entail far less an object to appropriate than an opening in which to extend hospitality?

Are we hospitable to language? Do we hold open the door for *its* creativity? The question may seem curious, perhaps even threatening. It is the very question on which the renaissance may turn. The potential to conceive the new rests not simply on grasping the fundamentally rhetorical grounds of policy—and how these might be reconceived—but also on an attentiveness to the ways in which human beings are constituted through and in the word, the ways in which the work of constitution discloses the potential of a rebirth in the question of *how* humans assume *and* relinquish the power of definition. This potential surely comes with risk, not least when it functions as a call to wait (endlessly) for change and when it is used to defer reflection about the stakes of renaissance itself—as it conceives, misconceives, and fails to conceive. And beneath this, there is more than a little risk in the question of language itself. The passivity that seems to follow from giving away control of the word in the name of reconceiving its defining gift may count as an undue sacrifice, a relinquishment that must be balanced with the self-defeating costs of perpetual, self-certain action, what Diop saw as a dogmatic commitment to the practical that remains blind to its theoretical debts.

In the balance may hang the question of ethical life—the problem of coming to the terms of becoming, the response-ability that inheres in that conception given to the (re)creation of one's relations with self and others, the generative assertion that recollects the fragility of language and struggles to recall the constitutive conditions of its expression. The work of African—Renaissance is not a game, not a language game. It is the assertion of a beginning made in the name of a continent whose origins appear in the shimmer of its becoming words, a potential for expression's renewal and a renewing expression.

## Notes

1. On one register, such critical mass can be measured by the voluminous and growing literature dedicated to the possibility of an African Renaissance. Among others, see Makgoba, *African Renaissance*; Fantu Cheru, *African Renaissance*; Udogu, *African Renaissance in the Millennium*. Although a bit dated, a very useful bibliography on the African Renaissance can be found online in the 2001 issue of *Quest: A Journal of African Philosophy*.

2. Ronca, “*Ex Africa*.” Ronca provides a useful survey of the various ways in which Pliny’s words have been translated over the course of the centuries. In his estimation, there are some eight different versions of the expression, with the most popular being *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*.

3. In fact, Mbeki’s widely recognized campaign for the African Renaissance includes a detailed reflection on the importance of this expression. See Mbeki, “Thabo Mbeki at the European Parliament.”

4. Ronca, “*Ex Africa*,” 574. There is work to be done on whether these particular texts pronounce an indictment of character or if they go a step further and make an explicitly racist claim against those who emerge from Africa.

5. Johnson, *Renaissance*, 4. Also see Nauert, *Humanism and the Cultural Renaissance of Europe*.

6. See Nauert, *Humanism and the Cultural Renaissance*, 14–25; Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*, 109–28.

7. Nabudere, “Toward an Afrokology of Knowledge Production and African Regeneration,” 22.

8. See African Union, “Celebrating Pan-Africanism and African Resistance.”

9. The list can be carried on. See Bongmba, “Reflections on Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance”; and Vale and Maseko, “South Africa and the African Renaissance.”

10. Makgoba, *African Renaissance*, xii.

11. Araoye, “African Peer Review Mechanism in the Context of the African Renaissance,” 27.

12. Pitika Ntuli, quoted in Dunton, “Pixley Kaisaka Seme and the African Renaissance Debate,” 556.

13. Thaninga Shope, quoted in Makgoba, *African Renaissance*, xii.

14. Vale and Maseko thus aver the African Renaissance is an “empty policy vehicle” (277). For one of the first iterations of the contemporary call for an African Renaissance, one that prefigured Mbeki’s position, see Mavimbela, “African Renaissance.” More recently, see the African Union’s 2006 “Charter for African Cultural Renaissance.”

15. A substantial amount of the literature on the African Renaissance starts by asking “What is Africa?” and “Who are the Africans?” For instance, see Prah, “African Renaissance or Warlordism?”

16. See Mamdani, “There Can Be No African Renaissance without an Africa-Focused Intellectsia,” 125–34.

17. To this, one can add the shifting conditions and stakes of a renaissance, including critique, belonging, revolt, struggle, redistribution, development, and independence. And to this one can add attempts to differentiate the process and product of renaissance, a distinction that may well be a remnant of rather unproductive debates about the nature of reconciliation.

18. Of course, this raises the questions of whether and how a Western account of theory may load the dice and how a reflective apparatus that levels the playing field could be developed.

19. But perhaps the demand to discern the conditions and plot the arc of a renaissance are completely unreasonable or, worse, a less-than-subtle attempt to foreclose an open-ended and unpredictable invention with the vestiges of colonial reason. Or perhaps the demand marks an attempt to stall or hijack change, an effort to drain the energy of renaissance with a thousand procedural paper cuts, all of which are rationalized as a way of eliminating ambiguity and minimizing risk. On the other side of the coin, it is troubling when theory is confused with method and then reduced to a set of pragmatic strictures in which theory is evacuated from the “real” terms of “everyday life” (consider what’s involved in bartering with a storekeeper or flirting in a bar) and then sanctioned as specious, exclusive, and an impediment to action.

20. Two points follow, each a concern that merits consideration beyond what’s possible here. First, the renaissance promise of rebirth readily opens to questions of resurrection and what it means to be born again—rather quickly, the work of renaissance can be removed from the hands of those that inhabit this world. Second, the promise of (re)conception ties the renaissance to the problem of rape and raises broader questions about the degree to which feminism has played in tangible role in the contemporary debates over the African Renaissance.

21. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 49.

22. The dynamic runs in both directions or as a feedback loop. As policy-based definitions of the African Renaissance announce an obligation to overcome colonial domination, the question of whether such violence undermines the feasibility of the proposed initiative can be covered with abstract appeals to tradition and history, the alleged well-springs of value that are then deemed productive only insofar as they are bound into the form of policy. At the same time and from other quarters, experience and memory are presented as the ground of a renaissance, a basis for so-called authentic expression that fends off the question of how the work of renaissance may sweep away the terms of such expression with claims about how the illegitimacy of political decision making warrants the institutionalization of culture.

23. The failure to grasp the fundamental importance of this impropriety, the interruption of the exclamation, well explains the accusation that the African Renaissance is merely and dangerously rhetorical. The charge appears with some regularity. See inter alia Bongmba, “Reflections on Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance,” 303; Jonas, “Quest to Achieve African Renaissance,” 95; Vale and Maseko, “South Africa and the African Renaissance,” 277. For a useful compensatory reply, see Dunton, “Pixley Kaisaka Seme and the African Renaissance Debate.”

24. To be clear, the issue here is not existence, the alleged and likely unknowable moment of genesis. It is rather, as Walter Benjamin put it, a question of the emergence of becoming, the appearance of a claim to necessity that recognizes its own provisionality at the same time that it asserts a way forward. See Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 45. Also see Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*.

25. Diop, “When Can We Talk of an African Renaissance?,” 33. First published in French, in a 1948 issue of *Le Musée Vivant*, it ripples across and informs the contemporary literature on the African Renaissance, not least for the way in which it is credited as being a first formulation, a guiding precedent for current debates. Whether accurate or not, this formulation is a precise indication of how little appreciation is given to Diop’s explicit concern for the question of language and its potential.

26. Diop, “When Can We Talk,” 35. Perhaps the widespread neglect of this claim owes to a presumption that such development has already occurred. Among others, Neville Alexander’s important work suggests the contrary, that the political economy of language remains bound to a European idiom. See Alexander, *Ordinary Country*.

27. Diop, “Alarm in the Tropics,” 81.

28. Diop, "When Can We Talk," 36.
29. Diop, "Cultural Contributions and Perspectives for Africa," 111.
30. Diop, "When Can We Talk," 44–45.
31. Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New*, 89–90.
32. *Ibid.*, 41.
33. *Ibid.*, 27.
34. *Ibid.*, 62–63.
35. *Ibid.*, 40. For an important reflection on this problem, see Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," 239–73. What Ngũgĩ has perhaps not fully taken into account is the fuller if not double meaning of Benjamin's claim in his theses on history: "There is no document of culture which not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 392).
36. Mandela, "Statement by President Nelson Mandela at the OAU Meeting of Heads of State and Government."
37. Here, I am using the ANC's transcript of the speech. Among other places, the speech can also be found in Mbeki, *Africa: The Time Has Come*, 31–36.
38. Makgoba, *African Renaissance*, iv.
39. Maloka, "South African 'African Renaissance' Debate," 2.
40. Nabudere, "African Renaissance in the Age of Globalization," 16. There is a bit of ambiguity here given that Nabudere's attribution to Landsberg and Kornegay cannot be readily confirmed. Nabudere cites an essay by Landsberg and Kornegay in which the quotation does not appear: Landsberg and Kornegay, "African Renaissance." This noted, Kronegay and Landsberg do observe how Mbeki's campaign has left him with the aura of a "true African prophet" (17). Ajulu, "Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance in a Globalising World Economy," 33. Among many others, see Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New*, 120; Vale and Maseko, "South Africa," 271; Bongmba, "Reflections," 291–96; and Jonas, "Quest," 86.
41. See Derrida, *Dissemination*, 15.
42. Although the idea of an African Renaissance appears explicitly in at least one of Mbeki's 1995 speeches, the larger campaign begins in a 1997 address given in the United States. See Mbeki, "Address by Executive President Thabo Mbeki to Corporate Council of Africa's 'Attracting Capital to Africa' Summit." The need for a second essay thus presents itself, one that traces the announced terms of Mbeki's position and how the defined arc of his vision changes over time.
43. In the South African context, this is altogether evident when Mbeki claims in the opening moments of the speech that "I am the grandchild who lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves at St. Helena and the Bahamas, who sees in the mind's eye and suffers the suffering of a simple peasant folk, death, concentration camps, destroyed homesteads, a dream in ruins."
44. If so, it might then be asked whether the constitution itself depends on any sort hyperbolic expression. The doubt vanishes when one considers its preamble, a text adapted from the 1993 interim constitution's postamble and the latter's contention that the constitution itself rests on reconciliation, an event that discovers words that turn violence toward productive opposition. I have developed this argument elsewhere. See Doxtader, *With Faith in the Works of Words*.
45. This would be one way of grasping why constitutions are understood as living documents. For a larger account of how a constitution opens a language project that exceeds its own terms, see Habermas, "Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Combination of Contradictory Principles."

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