

# On the Need to Consume: An interview with Manthia Diawara

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*by Jessica Levin Martinez and Michael Tymkiw*

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Manthia Diawara is Professor of Comparative Literature, Film and Africana Studies at New York University, where he also serves as Director of the Institute of African American Affairs. He has written extensively on literature and visual culture, and some of his best-known books include *We Won't Budge: An African Exile in the World* (2003), *In Search of Africa* (1998), and *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (1992). Diawara is also an acclaimed documentary filmmaker whose credits include *Who is Afraid of Ngugi?* (2006), *Conakry Kas* (2004), *Bamako Sigi Kan* (2002), *Diaspora Conversation* (2000), and *Rouch in Reverse* (1995).

Michael Tymkiw: The first question I wanted to ask was about the notion of consumerism as a weapon. In your book *In Search of Africa*,<sup>[1]</sup> you seem to make a very strong argument for consumerism. For example, you articulate your opposition to those who position consumer culture as an alienating force corrupting African authenticity; you also suggest that West Africa is based less on an innate cultural identity and more on similarities in patterns of consumption and historically grounded political and cultural dispositions. Would you mind elaborating on the particular goal you envision for consumption as a sociopolitical weapon?

Manthia Diawara: Let me try philosophically to explain myself first. I'll begin with [Leopold] Senghor from Senegal. In 1937 he wrote an essay called "Vues sur l'Afrique noire, ou assimiler, non etre assimiles,"<sup>[2]</sup> And he is trying to defend himself against a charge of alienation. He says there are French people who accuse us of being either too assimilated or not assimilated enough. In that sense, they have not consumed enough French culture, or they have consumed too much French culture, to lose themselves, basically. Senghor's response was: We really don't want to answer this kind of question. We believe that the solution is a solution of ambivalence and ambiguity. And these are his words. Then he went on and said: We are asking for an active assimilation. And by active assimilation, [he means that] Africans appropriate, Africans consume, Africans bring in all the European weapons, especially the educational systems, the know-how, and the methodology, in order to become uncolonizable. These words look like today's words, but Senghor used them in 1937. He quotes Aime Cesaire's famous expression, *les armes miraculeuses*.<sup>[3]</sup> He went on in a very brilliant way, which I am paraphrasing [now] in my own words, to say that any country that closes itself is doomed to die. Then he began to look at all the decadence in Africa, the misery, and all these things, and said that they need to open themselves to the world, take from the world, and let the world take from them. That is the kind of assimilation he was trying to define. But what stuck through my own generation, when you talk about Senghor is the term *assimiler*. By that I mean, the first *assimiler* was a verb, to assimilate. The second *assimile* [means] to be assimilated [*etre assimile*]. To Senghor it was very important to make this distinction. When you are assimilated you are

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only assimilated, then you are alienated, you only consume other people's objects without any recourse to your own identity, your own culture. Senghor was very sure of African cultures' capacity to consume European ideas, European modernity, and still stand on their cultural base and renew themselves. So consumption was about that, creating your identity,; a new identity through ambivalence, through the retooling of yourself, reinvigoration of yourself. This is where many of us are at when we use words in the African context... In Africa when we use the word "individual," when we use the word "consumption," when we use the word "borrowing," people suddenly see flashing words: "Oh, they are alienated, oh, they have lost their identities, oh they are not really African." Yet in reality, we would not be African if we did not do these things. We would not be African if we did not open ourselves to the world and begin to realize there are some African cultures that need to be transformed, especially the negative parts of African culture. Senghor was saying this in 1937 and it's a shame that there are things in African culture that we need to get rid of. So that's more or less what I mean by consumption being revolutionary. But literally, in African culture, we are deprived of consumer objects, so that the consumer objects we get are the used ones, the rejected ones, the toys and things like that. By the time we get them we also have no choice but to consume them, because we are at a level where we can no longer resist. We no longer have the miraculous weapons that Cesaire was talking about, we no longer have an active way of assimilating like Senghor was talking about.

MT: Let's talk about the art you saw on your recent trip to Africa. Tell us a little bit about the artists, how you met them, how the art was distributed and consumed, and some of the challenges of getting those objects to a public and creating a discourse for them.

MD: I have been recently traveling in Sudan, Senegal, Mali, Nigeria, and Ghana. Let's take Senegal, which artistically is on the map in the U.S. because of the Dakar school, because of the Biennale, also because of Senghor. I was there in 2004 at the second-to-last Biennale with David Hammons, and we went to the Ecole des Beaux Arts. They were doing drawing, they were doing painting. But they were also very angry because they felt that all art now is installation art, that all art now is video art, and that they did not have the resources to do video art, that they cannot afford it. They did not have teachers who are teaching video art. The government has withdrawn its funding [from] the school, so only French professors who want to come to Africa and offer their services through the French government come. And they usually are not, unfortunately, the best professors... [Students there] complained that the Biennale does not select their work because they are not doing installation, and that the Biennale does not select their work because they are not communicating with London, New York, and Paris. [While I was there] Hammons and Gloria Orlando (a very good Western installation artist) basically showed these students in a day how to do an installation. Just changing people's way of looking at something. Pull a curtain, you do this. I saw the students' eyes light up. [Hammons and Orlando] said: "You don't need a video to do installation art." You just change the environment, use your own resources, and do something.

MT: Could you elaborate on the notion of invention advocated by Senghor and how you envision this in relation to contemporary art production?

MD: Yes, the notion of invention was an expectation Senghor had [of all artwork]. [Jean-Michel] Basquiat, for example, had that. He was standing against the grain, against tradition, but his work had some magic that could only come from art, from invention.

Same thing with maybe Hammons. When he finishes attacking the art world, you see that he's doing it with the energy of an artist. Senghor would call this energy "vital force," or the

power, the "animism" that flows through the object and gives it its artistic meaning. Senghor's notions of power had some resemblance to the Deleuzian conception of power. But there were important differences between them. For example, Senghor, as an African and an animist, believed that power was an energy that was distributed to all the species and objects in nature. Thus, unlike poststructuralists such as [Gilles] Deleuze and [Michel] Foucault, who located power in language, knowledge, and discourse, for Senghor power was an energy flowing between us and our vis-à-vis, be it a man, an object of art, a spirit, air, water, trees, or animals. In our confrontation with our vis-à-vis, we acquire more energy from it, or lose some to it. This is the reason why Senghor talks about identification as bodily sensation, emotion, and feeling, as opposed to an optical or specular relation to the object that we see in Western art from the Renaissance to the present. The gaze in the West otherizes the vis-à-vis. Forgive me for using this ugly word but what I mean is that in the West, we have a subject/object relation, the "I" and the "other". In contrast, for Senghor, the Africans' identification process takes place by empathy, in the sense that when you look at the object, you begin to see part of yourself in it. And this is really interesting with respect to the work of artists, such as Yinka Shonibare, who construct ambivalence and ambiguity: the subject-object relations are blurred and the identity shifts from European to African and vice versa. So Senghor's definition of identification helps us to understand these new diasporic artists better. It is no longer a mirror sending something back at you, as in the theory of reflection. The other is no longer an other, because part of you is in the other, and the other has part of itself in you. It is the vital force that passes through both of you. It is art that becomes the vessel of this power, basically. So your mastery of technology and your mastery of different things make this power increase or decrease [as it] passes through you to the object. As I have said, we can find some of the same ideas in Deleuze's *Anti-Oedipus*,<sup>[4]</sup> because Senghor was of the same generation of the French structuralists and poststructuralists. They all read the same texts (Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, et al.). But Senghor was different in that he also believed in African traditions, civilizations, and religions which his French contemporaries considered "primitive" and barbarian. Invention for Senghor was the artist's ability to move away from discourse and to bring this energy in his or her work; the power to make the ancestors, the past, and the future speak through his or her work.

MT: Could you please speak about how your identity as an African-born, French- and U.S.-educated scholar has complicated the reception of your work?

MD: I was on a panel with [the South African Kendell Geers] recently, where I made a presentation on David Hammons. We were in the Canary Islands, at the Biennale there. [Geers] took issue with me and said: "This is all interesting, exotic. But we need African critics to write about African artists. We don't need them to write about black American artists." I'm making his argument more complex. One of the things he's saying is that we are not doing our job. And maybe I'd go along with him on that. Another thing he's saying is that African Americans have nothing to do with Africa because they are Americans, not Africans. And then a third position he's staking out is that an American is Bush in Iraq. So African Americans, as Americans, are as imperialist as Bush. Therefore he says: "Why are you writing about [the African American] David Hammons?" ...I was very challenged. I said to him: "Look, I understand your position about the need to write about African artists. But Senghor is an African artist, and Senghor was influenced by African Americans, the Harlem Renaissance." Even the word *negritude* comes from the Harlem Renaissance. And so Senghor would use [terms] like *negre nouveau* or *afro-francais* because [W.E.B.]

Dubois had used "Afro-American." And then he [Senghor] would use negro-africain. Now all of these expressions were seen as controversial in France at that time. People did not mark their identities as African-French, or Gay-French, or Arab-French. They were French

tout court, and everybody was equal in the Republique. You know the deal: Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite. So Senghor and the other Negritude colleagues were courting trouble by referring to themselves as negro-francais or afro-francais, as the Harlem Renaissance people did in America. There was a cross-influence between the European modernist, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Negritude movement. First the European artists were interested in African art. The Harlem Renaissance discovered Africa through the Euro-modernists; and the Negritude artists discovered their identities through the writings of the Harlem Renaissance. Later on, Senghor became a translator of Langston Hughes in French. I'll say then that African Americans made African poets in Paris discover Africa; we always tend to forget about this. My Africa is Islamic-modernist Africa or Franco-modernist Africa, which in both cases taught me to be against African traditions, tribalism, and animism; to be a really clean, well-behaved Muslim boy, or a well-behaved French modernist. This is what independence taught us also. Before independence, modernity was either Islamic modernism or European modernism. But the Africa with animism, with soul (like James Brown would say), the Africa with the feeling, this is what black America made us discover. Now someone like Wole Soyinka would take big issue with this, because the Yoruba had their own pantheon and their own cultural frame of reference. But Soyinka was also from Nigeria, a former British colony with a...relation to the colonial empires [different from that of] French colonies. With their indirect colonial rule system, the British did not interfere with native cultures in their colonies. The French and the Muslims, on the other hand, wanted to produce French or Muslim men out of their natives. For us in the Francophone countries, the move toward embracing our African cultures came from Europe and Black America. This is why, in my argument, authenticity is already problematized, because I know that my authenticity is more of an existentialist quest; it is more like a way to create myself, to invent myself. That's where I get my authenticity, instead of some kind of authentic Africa lying there that I can just go in and pick up. This is, by the way, [related to] my criticism of Senghor. When Senghor finally discovered his Africa from the African Americans and the European anthropologists, he thought the African had better access to it than the outsiders. So his idea of authenticity is different from my notion of authenticity. I grant the South African artist Kendell [Geers] that much, but he was unfair and dishonest with me, because he came and made a presentation as an Afrikaner. Why as Afrikaner? He said: "I don't even know if I'm an African. I live in Brussels, and I'm from South Africa, so I have this multiple identity" which I accepted right away. And then he showed an installation comprised of photos of his daughter and artist friends, and then he was attacking the immigration policies [directed] against Africans in Europe; it was a very good presentation. So I said to him: "I never challenged your position, because I thought what you were saying was great, and true for me too." And then, in this ambivalent, multiple-identity situation, I come and talk about David Hammons and how close I am to him and to Senghor; and now Geers is pulling out the "authentic African" card on me, saying that I don't have the right to write on David Hammons. So I responded: "Yes, I agree with you, we need to write more about Africa, and I have tried to do that. But the idea that my study is exotic, simply because I write about black Americans, simply because black Americans are Americans and America is imperialist, is not a strong argument." I realize that these are the challenges that intellectuals like myself face today for living in America, instead of Africa. I take these questions seriously, because they remind me of the students at the Dakar Ecole des Beaux Arts; they say: "You guys are in New York. How are you deciding what Africa is? When someone like Okwui [Enwezor] comes to see our stuff, he does the whole thing in two minutes. Then he passes through it,

and he has seen it. We are in Africa, and yet you are doing African art in our name for people in Paris.” Of course it’s not all true, because art historians and critics such as Salah [Hassan] and Okwui [Enwezor] travel to Africa and bring artists from Africa who would not have been seen otherwise. But their critics would always point to their privileged position in Europe and America. I get criticized, and even dismissed for the same reasons.

Jessica Levin Martinez: It seems as if there is a continuing interest in the biography of the African artist. Why do you think this is so?

MD: I think it really has to do with multiculturalism in the U.S., which determines the way we look at the art world... [By] telling the viewer that the art you are looking at is from this other place, he [the artist or curator] asks you to suspend all the prior judgment that you may have, because this is art from Mali, it’s not art from France, it’d not art from New York. So there is that problem. And then he turns that problem into a solution; it’s also [telling] the viewer, you need more research about Malian history, Malian culture, to understand these artists. So, there is this fetishism, the fetishization of the origin of the artist in that sense. And then, if you put all of those against multiculturalism, put them in collusion, I don’t know what would happen to the equation finally. Let me give you one answer that many people, including [Frantz] Fanon, took from Jean-Paul Sartre - this notion of anti-racist racism. So we have an exclusion of certain artists from African art because they are not from Africa. On the other hand, there is an uncritical inclusion of artists of every African country, celebrating them, and forcing them onto the audiences. These forms of exclusion and inclusion are both racist. This was Sartre’s point. And Sartre argued also that Africans would reach a point where Negritude would no longer be necessary, when they would join the working classes of the world, the proletariat of the world. The question we should ask is: Is that point trapped by American multiculturalism? Sartre was speaking from a base that is very different from the United States. We couldn’t have had an Okwui in France... there’s no way. Now they’re asking him to be at Documenta, Barcelona, and all these places, but it’s because America had invented him first. Similarly, there is no way you could have had someone like myself at the Sorbonne in France. In this sense I am an American invention. Europe is too traditional to have men like myself, Salah Hassan, or Okwui Enwezor. So the problem we are faced with is the way ideas and theories travel from country to country and [from] language to language. When ideas and concepts such as Negritude and anti-racist racism travel from France to America, they suddenly become positive interventions in culture. In America, everything is based on communitarianism. Everything’s based on group identities and group rights. People fight at the ballot[-box] or at the universities to become visible, and the only visible thing is identity. And so I say in *In Search of Africa* that I’m so tired of identity, because I have to walk everywhere [and say] “I’m black, I’m black, I’m black.” My blackness in America does not enable me to talk about my other identities as Francophone black or African. Somebody who hears me now might say: “Oh, this is one of the alienated Africans,” but [he doesn’t] know where I’m coming from really. The idea of biography comes to art shows at the time when we have already overused the concepts of the death of the author by [Roland] Barthes and Foucault. It’s fascinating in a way! It’s fascinating because I know exactly what you mean by biography: What are we going to do with it? I don’t think we’re going to do much with it. Because American museums would want just that; it is also something that the market requires.

MT: I’d like to return to the idea of authenticity for a moment. One of the notions you raised in your 2001 essay, “The 1960s in Bamako: Malick Sidibe and James Brown” was that Sidibe was someone who “copied the copiers.”[5] That is, the youths photographed by Sidibe dressed up like the rock stars on 1960s album covers, then Sidibe reproduces or

copies those youths when taking their picture. You also say that by transforming the copies into originals, Sidibe “internalize[s] the history of photography without knowing it.”[6] Could you describe in greater detail this notion of “copying the copier” and how it sheds light on our understanding of Sidibe’s work?

MD: [Pierre] Bourdieu once said there’s no such thing as l’oeil vert (“the green eye”). I think in the art world we call that the “naïve eye,” the eye that has not been exposed to anything. He said that artists are not sui generis. In the case of French artists, for example, who are seeing the whole of Renaissance art, who are seeing the art of antiquity, you have already internalized all of that history in living rooms, in everyday conversation, so there is no such thing as the “green eye” that comes fresh and bursts onto the scene. When you look at Malick Sidibe, he didn’t go to art school, he probably had no more than six years of formal education, he was working in the studio of a French artist... and then began to do photography. But I think he did not really become a photographer until the euphoria or ethos of Malian or African independence arrived, when young people began to look for identity, they began to seek new identities: I want to be this, I want to do [that], and so on. And he began to take photos of those young people. In a sense, my argument is that, first of all, his photography is determined by those young people. And those young people wanted to be the way young people were in London, Paris, New York, Chicago, everywhere [as mediated through the] history of popular culture – through radio, albums, LPs, the covers. Every once and a while we also had access to Life magazine [and] to a magazine from France called Salut les copains, and in these you had hit parades of actors, rock musicians, and so on... Automatically you could go to tailors in Mali and get a piece of cloth and have them sew it just like a shirt of John Lennon and everybody else. This was our generation. You see it in a magazine, the Beatles, and the “Yellow Submarine,” they all dressed in certain ways, you go to your tailor, and he dresses you like that. So the tailor is getting style and education through that. Then you go to Malick Sidibe and you say “Take my photograph” and you have already internalized, like Bourdieu said, the history of Western culture by looking at the cover of an album. So your body disposition says “Ringo Starr stood like this,” or “Jimi Hendrix [stood] like this,” and you take that pose and tell Sidibe to take you exactly like that. You freeze that moment, and by doing that you’ve really eliminated the distance or difference between you and the Ringos and the Mick Jagers and Johnny Halldays, and so on. Then Malick too began to reproduce the photography of [Richard] Avedon, you know, the people who had taken these photographs and put them on the album covers or in the magazines... This is what I was talking about, this circulation of ideas, the imitation of the imitation.

MT: One of the things you discuss in *In Search of Africa* was this notion of copying in which the African who copies from Westerners becomes inauthentic whereas the Western artist who appropriates from Africa might be glorified, as [Pablo] Picasso was. Do you mind elaborating on this.

MD: It might seem as if I’m obsessed with Senghor today, because I’m giving a lecture shortly on him. But Senghor said the following: African art is a communal art, which is an art that absorbs everything in the community. And Europeans came to Africa; this is before Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House*.<sup>[7]</sup> They come to Africa, they come with guns, they come with these long hats, and African traditional art (we’re not even talking about modernism yet) right away absorbed it. If you look at African masks you see right away guns, and in Marcel Griaule’s documents on the people of Guinea he wrote about gun shots, and “Gunshot”<sup>[8]</sup> was an article exactly about this issue, hoe you have European weapons that have become the new totems in Africa, European outfits that have become new fads in Africa. African art has this need to absorb everything in the

community. And he exhorted young African modernists to absorb European art in the same way. So when people are saying this is not authentic, they are basically talking about the art market that they want to control. But they are definitely not talking about what is African, because the Africans have always been absorbing influences from outside. And

you can see that in traditional art, even in the masks in the museum: you suddenly see masks that have elements that are new.

JLM: What would you say the difference is between assimilation and appropriation?

MD: I don't think there is a difference. When I tried to translate Senghor's use of assimilation into English, it wasn't easy. So I went from assimilation to appropriation, because assimilation is not easily translatable into English. And then I'm writing at a time when we use appropriation but are reading Jean Baudrillard, we're reading the Marxists and their notions of the fetish and alienation, and how especially in Marxist literature consumption is bad. So that's why I'm holding onto consumption, to be up-to date with current literature. But for me there is no difference between assimilation and appropriation. Of course you update it; in our time, most Marxists would translate assimilation as a negative mode of consumption, a kind of alienation from a revolutionary act. I am thinking of Marxist thinkers all the way down to Frederic Jameson and his notion of nostalgia as a-historic. So consumption is a way of turning your back to history and basically being alienated and being a slave of the profit you're consuming. There's not much difference for me between Senghor's notion of assimilation [active assimilation] and our contemporary terms appropriation and consumption. It's just that I've read [the writings of] people that Senghor did not get a chance to read.

MT: In thinking about this difference between appropriation and assimilation, I sense there is a degree of criticality that might be used to differentiate the terms. In the case of Sidibe's photographs, there seems to be an almost uncritical embrace of the album covers, yet this is used to very critical ends – as both a reaction to and articulation of independence. This critical edge is also visible in the strategy of “stereotyping the stereotype,” which you describe at work in David Levinthal's Blackface photographs.[9] Could you clarify what's at stake for you in this strategy?

MD: I'm working in a context which is black America, which actually has a rhetorical move [that] consists of insisting on the black thing you don't understand. It is very energizing, too, because you want your material to include all kinds of imitations – from Malcolm X to rappers. But this is, in fact, a rhetorical move. In reality, when you look at black and white America, they're so mixed, so intertwined. I don't need to cite Ralph Ellison or James Baldwin to convince anybody of that. But this has prepared people or created a situation where people will be opposed to anything not in line with the argument that the stereotype is completely bad. And for those of us who work in literature and art, we know you can't do anything without stereotypes... The stereotype for me is something that you can't get away from, that can only be engaged in a reflexive manner. That is, you must think about the stereotype in a stereotypical way; you don't think about stereotypes in an attempt to wipe them out. Historically in the U.S. there is a debate about black images – and I'm participating in these debates myself – or the use of the word “nigger” from [Quentin] Tarantino to Norman Mailer, the novelist of *The White Negro*. [10] The stereotype has been with us and has always pitted cultures and people against each other. But for me, you must address the stereotype in a meta-critical manner, in a reflexive manner, appropriating the stereotype again so you don't become colonized by the stereotype, laughing at it so it does not harm: becoming one with it so as to appear to control it. That's what I see the

youth doing with the stereotype. Now many people see some danger and some complication in this approach. For example, let's look at Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), which is a very important film but one whose significance I must confess eluded me, because I come from Africa and black Americans have a particularly existential relation to the film. When I first saw the film, I rejected it right away. But every black American friend –

people who trace their roots to the South, to America, to Chicago, etc. – disagreed with me. They said this was a very, very important film, while I said it was such a tiring film. Regardless, they said this was a very important film, and they began to find contemporary examples in it. My problem with the film is that Spike Lee used stereotypes, but he ended up making the stereotype beautiful, allowing it to reveal the opposite of what he had intended. Some of the stereotypes in the film – I am thinking of Savion Glover and his genius as a tap dancer – were cute. I became tired of the film when Spike Lee decided in the narrative to kill all the characters he considered as traitors to the race, those who were stereotyping the black people, those that he considered not black enough. In other words, his stereotype is acceptable, and their stereotype is so bad that we have to go kill them. And many people agree with Spike Lee on that. And I thought this was completely irresponsible in the sense that nobody's blacker than anybody else... Who's blacker than whom? Spike Lee answers that question right away in *Bamboozled*, and I don't think that question can be answered. I think that question is forever more and more complex, and I think we begin to appreciate that question by looking at the stereotype. When you look at the stereotype, then you really engage blackness. Because you know blackness is something very complex. You know slavery is based on making some people inferior and you say, therefore, it's OK to make them slaves. And then you decide to humanize them, because they look like us, they're not exactly like us, but they're human beings and you humanize them, so the stereotype is working. And then black people themselves recuperate that in the Harlem Renaissance with "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud." So you have this positive blackness, this negative blackness, but what you're getting really is people still working with this stereotype and not finding the solution; and we're attracted to people like Baldwin because they can handle [stereotypes] more than somebody like Spike Lee. So to me, we need to do more work on stereotypes, more reflexive work on stereotypes, to really understand what is happening, as opposed to banning it, or killing people who stereotype other people.

JLM: After seeing your [2006] film *Who's Afraid of Ngugi?* The other day, I was thinking about the image of Africa that comes through in some of your films, and wondering if you feel as a scholar and filmmaker that you have to present things in a certain way because there are so many negative ideas about African cities like Nairobi, yet there's also this reality. How do you deal with that?

MD: That comes back to the stereotype again. I don't believe we should always show the ideal image of Africa, because Africa is everything but ideal. You have all these horrible things that take place, I'm not fascinated by Afro-pessimism either, like my colleague Achille Mbembe, I don't think that Afro-pessimism is a necessary source of aesthetics, of philosophy, or a way of defining people like Mbembe does in his very interesting books, *On the Postcolony*...[11] I don't think it's the way to go. I believe that now every African has seen this city, I believe they have a lot of cosmopolitans in Africa, so that African identity has shifted a lot from the time of Africa when people were looking for the Masai (who positioned themselves for tourist consumption) [or] the Dogons in Mali (who also positioned themselves for tourist consumption), but they have all been to Nairobi, Bamako, different places. So there are new identities being formed. When I make my films, I want to give my camera to those urban Africans, those cosmopolitan Africans, and let them talk.

And then whatever they say I'm going to edit and put in my films. It's that new Africa that I want to alert people to, because if you go to Africa in an effort to show a positive Africa or a negative Africa, it's not fighting the stereotype. In many ways those who use [Mikhail] Bakhtin and [Francois] Rabelais to talk about Africa are really falling into that trap. It's Afro-pessimism basically, and it's talking more about Bakhtin's theory or Rabelais' theory than about Africa. Mbembe positions so-called European models – civil society, the state and

democracy – and debunks their construction in Africa. As you can see in my work, I do not believe in authentic models, or the Heart of Darkness kind of constructions of Africa and Africans. Once you take the camera and put it in front of Africans, that's what the authentic Africa is to me. It's not something you can go and recover. It's not a disease you can go and find. But at the same time it's not something glorious that you can go and find, which the Afro-centrists tried to do. It's something in the making of the everyday. And I like to go to Africans, the musicians, the artists, the politicians, and the regular people... They talk to my camera, and it's that Africa I'm interested in. The film on Ngugi was about Ngugi's return home, so that took a whole chunk of the film; but normally the intellectuals who were interviewed and the people in the streets are... typical of my filmmaking.

JLM: You just referred to cosmopolitans living in [African] cities, and certainly you've been involved in thinking about cosmopolitanism since Appiah's recent book [Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers].[12] Who can be cosmopolitan? Do you have to have choices, and to have these choices, [don't] you have to have resources, etc.?

MD: This is a very important philosophical point. If you define cosmopolitanism as it has been defined by looking at the image [a la] Walter Benjamin [of] Vienna, Paris, Prague, or Naples, or if you look at cosmopolitanism as defined by Western public spheres of individuals who are tolerant, who have access to different things, who are bohemians, who are political conspirators for secular spaces around the world, a leftist critique would be: But what about the people who do not have access to all of that? So are you saying they're not cosmopolitan? In my writing, I deliberately look at the cosmopolitanism of somebody like Malcolm X, someone who's absorbed all of Western culture and wants to consume, yet whose access to this consumption is being barred. Hence, I've made hyperbolic statements about consumption like "If you don't consume, you'll die." And Africans literally need to consume. The fights people engage in to create civil societies either to fight dictatorships in their countries or to open doors to communicate with the world, these are the spaces where one finds African cosmopolitanism... These are the people who interest me in Africa, and I think the more we talk about these people, the more we demystify Africa. It's not about a positive image, corruption, hidden structural adjustment: it's about being on the side of these regular people we're not seeing in writings and films about Africa. We only talk about what interests the West – HIV/AIDS, Afro-pessimism, corrupt dictators. I have difficult moments with the Ngugi film. I show it in the Midwest, at all-American universities, like the University of Western Illinois Macomb, and people there were terribly honest; they're so honest, and they mean so well. And then they say: "Well, I'm white, I'm a student here. I want to help Africa. What can I do?" The African professors, many of us are really failing the world in that sense. Senghor and V.Y. Mudimbe think we should be ambassadors, that we have some kind of role. We owe something to Africa in a way. I didn't come here with an African scholarship, I went to high school in France as a homeboy cosmopolitan. I came to school here, paid for my studies, never had a scholarship; but still I owe something to Africa. So when [the student] asked me that, and I was living in Ghana around that time, I said: "The best way to help Africa is not necessarily by going to Africa, it's not necessarily, like Bill Gates, by giving all these billions to Africa to help fight this or that disease. It's not necessarily Bono's 'Band Aid'..."

Since the beginning of Islam and Christianity, people have been trying to help Africa by going to Africa, and the only thing that happens is that [things] get worse. They go there and they create a situation, and then when they're finished, and they're tired, they leave, that situation stays with Africa and that becomes a new disease and so on. So as much as I appreciate and admire Bill Gates and all those people, I don't think they're helping Africa. I think the best way for me to help Africa is to work like we are working, to influence Western policy toward Africa, to ban the sale of weapons to Africa; and to pay a fair price

for the raw material coming from Africa... The point is to figure out a way to control the way the West goes into Africa. Until we do this, it will be very difficult to help Africa really.

### **Notes.**

[1] Manthia Diawara, *In Search of Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998)

[2] This essay (the title of which translates as "Views on Black Africa; or To Assimilate, Not to Be Assimilated") was reprinted in Leopold Senghor, *Liberte 1: Negritude et humanisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964).

[3] Translation: miraculous weapons.

[4] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

[5] This essay is reprinted in Harry J. Elam Jr., and Kennell Jackson, eds., *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 242-265.

[6] *Ibid.*, 262

[7] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[8] Marcel Griaule, "Gunshot," trans. Dominic Faccini, *October* 60 (Spring 1992): 41-42. [9] David Levinthal, *Blackface* (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 1999).

[10] Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1957).

[11] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[12] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).