For some time now, Achille Mbembe has warned African social scientists against the ghetto to which Marxism and nationalism has consigned them. This admonition is rooted in a personal belief that Africa lacks refreshing, internationally relevant and philosophically grounded scholarship. According to him, African scholarship is steeped in a self-imposed ghetto that has produced stultifying *nativist* and *Afro-radicalist* narratives. The narratives have, in turn, driven African scholarship to “a dead end,” one that repeatedly laments the effects of the West’s contamination of a pure “Africanness” and calls for a return to the self’s mythical ontological purity. In reclaiming this lost purity, Mbembe adds, African scholarship draws its fundamental categories from Marxism and nationalism to argue for a revolutionary politics that would free the continent from imperialism and dependence. He identifies *suffering* and *victimization* as the main *episteme* in these narratives. These two, he argues, position Africa as always being acted upon by forces outside its control but never acting for itself. He therefore proposes African modes of self-writing that neutralize the power relations between Africa and its colonizers and restores “agency to Africans. Unfortunately, this restoration ends up alleging that Africans are as much responsible for their suffering and trauma as those others that they accuse whether one is considering slavery, colonization or apartheid.  

Mbembe’s analysis borrows from, and is part of, a culturalist perspective that is characterized by two main trends. One, it treats identity as a mere cultural construct, disconnected from material and political realities. Borrowing largely from literary and cultural studies, this trend focuses on identity solely as a cultural issue and does not pay sufficient attention to broader issues of political economy. Consequently, it treats identity as an imagined category different from daily struggles and realities. No wonder, this perspective has an essentially polemical relationship to studies of a Marxist and nationalist orientation irrespective of their merits and strengths. These culturalist perspectives are reductionist and dismiss key texts from leading authors like Samir Amin or Walter Rodney that disprove the earlier nationalist works of Cesaere and Senghor, which were indeed often affirmations and celebrations of an African particularity. Luzar, for example, defends the contributions of Amin, Fanon, and James against the misunderstanding found in Bhabha and Miller. Like Bernabe and Glissant, Luzar celebrates these earlier nationalists for making possible the present affirmation and celebration of the creole and combative character of African identities. It was these earlier nationalist works that critiqued the closed and essentialist Eurocentric discourse that equated the Universal with the European. It was these assertions of the existence and fertility of ancestries other than the European that created possibilities for the postmodern assertion and celebration of multiple ancestries. The attention to history that these works portray makes their analyses less polemical and more insightful than Appiah’s or Mbembe’s harsh dismissal of all so-called nativistic narratives.

Three, there is a dubious reason for restoring agency to Africans. This culturalist perspective ‘restores’ agency to Africans so as to accuse them of originating or complicity in slavery, colonialism and apartheid. The restoration is suspiciously double edged. It criticizes African scholars of Afro-radicalism only because it seeks to absolve Europeans of the crimes of colonialism and colonialism of its ravages on the continent. Thus, the postcolonial tag is convenient for sanitizing imperialism. The new Africanists adopt ‘postcolonial’ as a euphemistic placeholder for ‘neo-colonial’ because the term is imperially pliant and it empties slavery, colonialism and apartheid off their invidious content. Consequently, it makes the reality of neo-colonialism in Africa less visible and constructs it as a hard target for the resilient revolutionary voices on the continent. The term conceptualizes all societies as postcolonial and dupes all into ignoring the repressive reality of neo-imperialism and its ominous effects. As often as possible, this smoothening is accompanied by equally deceitful slogans of a peaceful globalisation or an accommodating multiculturalism in which African identities are allegedly equally paired with other identities globally.  

The ideological orientation of the culturalists, as often revealed in their citations, is an equally relevant aspect of identity politics and imperialism. Apart from contriving affirmations, the theorists of choice for this culturalist perspective fit into the overall objective of ignoring imperialism as a theme or renovating it to appear palatable. Regarding contrived allegations, it is noteworthy that the new Africanists carefully select those African authors that serve their ends. Often the focus is on those perceived to belong to the “dreaded” political economy approach. But such dismissals are cavalier in many senses. For instance, Mbembe fails to make a close reading of the texts he dismisses while Appiah is decidedly one-sided in his gaze at racism. Thus, Mbembe’s “genealogical critique of African discourse appears in places to be too quick and allusive and this leads him into battling arguments that nobody actually ever really upheld.” Furthermore, the dismissal relies on writers who have not made any worthwhile contribution to key issues on African identity. Their works refer to Foucault, Bakhitin, Barthes, Benjamin, Bourdieu, Derrida, Heidegger, Lacan, Lyotard and Deleuze though “none of the names cited above ever exhibited the slightest intellectual curiosity of the issue of European colonialism and the corresponding culturalist repressions.” Does this mean that colonialism and nationalism did not contribute anything to contemporary African identity? Or does ignoring Marxism make resilient revolutionary voices disappear? Haven’t African cultural identities been forged in the process of struggle against slavery, imperialism and apartheid? The combination of Africanist writings and postmodernist lamentations has misled new Africanists into a notion of ‘multiple ancestries’ that is conceived as a synthesis of the polar opposites of a unique Africanity and a universal sameness. Mbembe argues that African discourses on identity “are inscribed within a form of history based on a territorialized identity and a racialized geography.” He concludes that the sin of nativism is its inability to conceive of an Africanity that is not Black or to conceive of the existence of African authors they wish to attack. Mbembe conveniently overlooks the point, forcefully made by the historian Roediger that whiteness involves “a terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn’t and on whom one can hold back.” This is not just the case in the US where poles of racial difference “have remained relatively constant” but also in Africa where white prejudice remains strong. Contrast this with the accumulating evidence that “the African voter is capable of prejudice free choice” and the falsity of Mbembe’s assertion is stark clear. Locals have extended a forgiving hand to a minority white population in Africa that reciprocates by receding into exclusive white domains as the case is in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe. It is nevertheless obvious that the culturalists are eager to make race a
central issue in African discourses and the notion of “multiple ancestries” serves as an appropriate premise. It shows that the array of scholars used to make African identity problem include Appiah, Gilroy, and Sarah Nuttall. The Black Atlantic or South African dimension is an extensively theorized area. The problem is that the racial discourse is imported and generalized for Africa from particular diaspora or continental experiences. This is definitely a flawed way of approaching African cultural identity issues. Multiple ancestries make immediate sense to those few who are compelled by their own self-identification with “a white triumphalist vision” to write a “social justication” of their mixed parentage or to white South Africans eager to reframe their multicultural credentials. These are also the few who can identify with the “world as a network of points of affinity.” But are there that many Africans who enjoy this status as to elevate “multiple ancestry” as the foundation of a general African identity? Even if there were, can we escape the reality that the resulting network of affinity has some consignatures living off the “sweet and labours of others”?

These issues must be confronted with the idea of multiple ancestries to be relevant. Finally, how valid is the view that African discourse has reduced Africannity into a black identity? We could contrast this view with that of “Africa as an open question” and show, how contrary to the culturalist view, African scholars have always been open to a broad understanding of cultural identity. Soulleymane Bachir Diagne uses the notion of evaluation and appropriation to provide a new rationality and ability to assess its tradition and appropriate aspects it deems worth integrating while ignoring irrelevant improvisations. Using the Senegambia region as a reference point, he argues against the need for a cultural charter to prevent the erosion of Africa’s cultural identities. After all, the long years of Senegambian contact with western mercantilism has not obliterated local cultural values. This testifies to local propensity for self- possession and a sense of the hoary imagination of traditional culture as always opposed to a modern one. He postulates an understanding of tradition that is dynamic and renders useless the polarity between tradition and modern identities. He cautions against approaches that postulate an “immanent tension between identity, on the one hand, and ‘the forces of cultural alienation’ on the other.” These approaches present the “inhabitant of a homeland” as “inherently hostile to change” and the modern as constantly seeking to obliterate the former. Mbembe’s, and by extension, Appiah’s work resonate with the hoary formulation in so far as their multiple ancestries sound like charters for coexistence pronounced by a book professor with no inkling of how life is lived beyond the ivory tower. Mbembe’s and Mudimbe’s Africannity is continuously created through the very process of writing. But more damning for Mbembe is his refusal to factor in the local capacity for evaluation and appropriation, something that is obvious and is encapsulated in, among others, Mafiej’s idea of Africannity as “embattled ontology.”

Thus, if the postcolonialists/culturalists intended to substitute the combative aspect of Africannity with existence, Diagne, as for Mafiej, undermines local capacity for choice, resilience, resistance and self- preservation. Their ideas on resilience/ resistance differ but the baseline point is a consistent search for alternatives to the dominant line. In analysing Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s “performing Africannity,” Diagne emphasises language as a vehicle for developing solidarity, revealing the possibilities open to action and mounting resistance against the forces of the continent. Thus, Africannity develops Africannity as “a historically-determined rebellion against domination by others” in which the underlying sentiency of Africannity is self-liberation and its focus is white racism as “a pernicious social construct.” As a combative ontology, Africannity differentiates colour or race from the pernicious acts committed under their guise. Resistance to these acts cannot therefore be confused with resistance to change. In sum, there is no doubt that African cultural identities have multiple ancestries. But to emphasize race at the expense of other equally important identities like ethnicity, religion, and language, is to ignore the fact that the African context is multi-layered. Conceived widely, the idea of multiple ancestries can be fruitfully applied to the key challenges of religion, ethnicity and culture that plague many African societies like Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Sudan. But the notion needs to be sufficiently historicized to avoid the traps and dangers of the “all- Africa catastrophe” studies.

With regard to self-writing, there can be no doubt that the pernicious effects of racism, their connection to capitalism and empire have influenced African cultural identities and generated specific modes of self-writing. The context requires that we give precedence to these forces over more scholarly elegance. Many African scholars are suspicious of elegant studies of sexuality, orifices, the body, and race because beneath their elegance lie attempts to sanitize empire under the guise of a modernity that is at large. The new globalization that these studies trumpet benefits some far more than others. Furthermore, not all of us have the capital to explore those cosmopolitan links that are proclaimed. In a nutshell, any notion of African cultural identity that disengages culture from its material context, treats culture as an artefact suspended above daily realities and refuses to heed the facts of history within which identity becomes intelligible is superficial and inconclusive.