

“Africa, define yourself!” commands Thabo Mbeki,¹ the South African president who styles himself as the architect of an “African Renaissance”, a “pan-Africanism” by political fiat, arguably for economic ends. Given this context where the future of the continent is defined and enacted by a political elite rather than the masses who authorise their power, Mikoma wa Ngig’s *Conversing with Africa* represents an important and timely intervention. Both a philosophical treatise and a political manifesto, it – in crude summation – crafts two useful analytics: one diagnostic, the other prescriptive, for the contemporary malaise of Africa. In each of these analytics are bold claims, none more so than its conclusion – a call for a revolutionary Pan-Africanism. I argue that the political aspirations of *Conversing* are worthy of discussion; at the same time, I attempt to complicate the theoretical analysis that makes the claim possible.

In diagnosing the current and continued “haemorrhaging” (p. 8) of Africa (as *Conversing* so poetically renders it), there is a unique effort to theorise the intersections of the material and cultural, internal and external, elements in the making of the current state of African disorder. Correctly resisting efforts to see the African crisis as made exclusively by external impositions, *Conversing* recognises, on the one hand, the external forces of capitalism in its various phases, together with its political twin, imperialism. On the other, it refuses to relegate internal betrayals, of governance and the politics of race/class/, gender, from their role in the active making of the African crisis. At the same time, there is a valiant effort to theorise mutually constitutive relationships between the material desires of capital and class, and the cultural processes of race, identity, and ideology, in the making and near-unmaking of Africa.

The prescription for Africa is equally artful. Shunning contemporary intellectual fashions that denigrate the possibilities of theorising emancipation, and of politicising utopian visions, *Conversing* boldly suggests not only the possibility, but the necessity, of politically activating theories of emancipatory change. It presents a biting critique of the intellectual movement of Negritude and of Africanist intellectuals, as exemplars of the anti-revolutionary intellectual resources fuelling Africa’s continued crisis, rather than resolving it. And, it offers an equally fiery critique of political movements of nationalism, arguing that their failure as the basis for meaningful change lies in their antagonism to an authentic revolutionary consciousness and committed revolutionary theory. In this, there is a resuscitation of the voices of Fanon, Biko, Cabral, and others, rather than the invention of a new paradigm for theorising the politics of change. But *Conversing* adds itself to these voices with distinction.

In this conversation over the past and future of Africa, Mikoma wa Ngig betrays his imagination as a poet, and his politics as a radical. As a result, *Conversing* offers honest and provocative insights that suggest the dialectical relationship between political consciousness and political change. The essay begins with an important call for a historicized intellectualism informed by a conscio -usness towards change as the starting point of the diagnosis and prescription for Africa’s condition. In this, *Conversing* daringly asserts that “Africanist” scholars² “will never prescribe revolutionary action for they will never allow their consciousness of Africa to blossom to a revolutionary consciousness” (p.11).

Conversing with “Pan-Africanism”

Shireen Ally

Conversing with Africa: Politics of Change

by Mikoma wa Ngig

Kimaathi Publishing House, 2003, 210pp.+ xxiii,
ISBN 0797425616

“Since the Africanist views history,” *Conversing* continues, “passively, from a tourist glass window, from a passing vehicle and is awed by the slave ships, is fascinated by the cocoa and tea plantations,” the only possibility produced by this surface-level understanding of history is that “at the end of the day they subvert consciousness towards change” (p. 11). This is offered as the basis for suggesting a re-theorization of history, a re-historicization of the present, an important theoretical move that recognises, for an essay so centrally concerned with change, the importance of producing a theory of time and the connections between the past, the present and the future.

Conversing then applies the logic of interrogating the binary of past/present to the binary of oppressor/oppressed, to disentangle our contradictions as Africans. In an application of Fanon’s psychology of the oppressed, *Conversing* updates the processes of psychic oppression that keep the oppressed, both materially and symbolically, in global and local contexts, tied to the oppressor; and of the complicity of local political processes and leaders in maintaining the cycle through which the oppressed are maintained as such. But, *Conversing*, in its philosophical ruminations on the processes of marginalization and subordination never descends into political inertia. “The oppressed will live to the extent that they struggle,” it declares (p. 69). And, it locates such struggle in the political theory of Black Consciousness, connecting as it did exploitation to oppression, and recognising the importance of asserting value as a material and politico-practical as much as a cultural and theoretical project. As opposed to Negritude, asserts *Conversing*, which “caught in a racialist straight jacket could not create revolutionaries” (p. 81), “could react to racism but could not answer to oppression” (p. 80), and in this focused instead on producing an “African personality” as the antidote to colonial racism “that only succeeded in denying Africans their humanity” (p. 80).

Having laid out the problematic, *Conversing* declares: “Enough Talk! Enough running around. Let us dialogue” (p. 93).

It seeks a way forward politically by interrogating the political movements we have relied on for our emancipation as Africans, and makes an impassioned call for the resuscitation of the movement argued to hold possibilities for the emancipation of Africans: pan-Africanism. First, *Conversing* suggests the failures and limitations of nationalism as the basis for both the initial betrayal of the struggle for independence, and as the “cloak” (p. 94) which shielded its continued betrayal through neo-colonial devices. Second, in this, it specifies its task as being to “take Pan-Africanism, the word that has become synonymous with nationalism, and set it back on its historical rail” (p. 94), to suggest the conditions of non-possibility of a true pan-Africanism of liberation, and to call

forth the conditions that may connect the word to a revolutionary consciousness, to a revolutionary theory, and in so doing, to the birth of a revolutionary movement.

To Mikoma wa Ngig, Pan-Africanism is, in some respects, a semantic exercise. It is about renaming, and through the act of renaming, engaging in a semiotic politics. Attaching a different referent to the same signifier, inserting a different content – a revolutionary theory – into the same word, allows for a reclaiming of the movement for radical revolutionary ends. In Mikoma’s phraseology, Pan-Africanism is a name he re-co-opts as a descriptive for an activity, an action, that defines a particular kind of revolutionary work towards change:

A name does not stand by itself...Pan-Africanism therefore has to be contextualized in order to have meaning, its ramifications drawn out and held against its service or disservice to the people...It has to be held accountable to history, oppression and resistance and service to humanity. At the end of it all, it has to be of service to the African. It cannot be benign, a name that points without demanding, that identifies without responsibility. It has to work towards liberating Africa. (p. 88)

At the center of *Conversing*’s manifesto for Pan-Africanism, therefore, is a semantic project:

To name a word, to name a thing is to contextualize it, to give it its truth – to return it to its history. And so we shall take Pan-Africanism, a word previously contextualized in a racial blackness, racialism, anti-thesis to whiteness, African Unity, African communalism, African socialism, African nationalism, African theology and spiritualism and set it back on the rails of living history...We hope to use Pan-Africanism as the name for change in Africa. (p. 93)

In this, I argue, are the hopes and limits of *Conversing*’s efforts to theorise a politics of change for Africa. The call to Pan-Africanism as the basis for change is the defining prescriptive of the essay, and will generate much useful dialogue. But, in claiming a politics based on semantic repositionings, *Conversing*’s most serious limitation is the failure to turn the same semantic project back onto itself and engage the most important naming process of the essay: its conjuring of “Africa”. There are efforts to de-territorialize Africa: for example, in the efforts to define African identity and Pan-Africanism by a commitment to the end of exploitation and oppression. And, there are similarly efforts to recognise the fluidity of the sign: “Africa is fluid, not homogeneous, with as distinct peoples as its different landscapes” (p. 84). Yet, in both the diagnostic and prescriptive analytic

employed in the essay, there is a deference to the singularity of the sign, an erasure of its polysemy, and the coercion of the continent’s diverse and varied histories into a singular meta-narrative marked by the duality of exploitation and oppression.

That different histories have been scripted for Africa’s diverse contexts, in ways that have shaped and framed its differential subjection to the forces of exploitation and oppression are not interrogated. That these differential subjections to the external and internal logics of despotism and control suggest different forms of resistance are presumably accommodated in a “Pan-Africanism” conceived broadly enough as to be only the name that mobilises these different struggles under a single banner. But to claim a “Pan-Africanism” for strategic political purposes must be under one of two conditions. Either, as Anthony Appiah does, the strategic use of the signifier “Africa” must be accompanied by a recognition that it is devoid of stable, defined content,³ or, there must be mobilisation of the sign in ways that deliver it with content. *Conversing*’s prescriptive analytic claims the former, but its diagnostic analytic suggests the latter. In the very act of “*Conversing with Africa*”, a dialogical partner is assumed, or constructed⁴.

Conversing’s diagnosis of Africa’s contemporary predicament presumes the stability of the signifier, the existence of Africa as a singular entity subjected to the similarly singular logics of capitalist penetration and racial domination. Examples from all corners of the continent, indeed even from other parts of the so-called ‘post’-colonial world, are drafted to serve a singular narrative of the dispossession of Africa and Africans. That there are differences between Kenya’s entry into and negotiation of imperial imperatives, compared with South Africa’s, making their literal and figurative co-existence in a sentence increasingly tenuous, is not fully interrogated. Indeed, at the moment, with South Africa’s increased positioning of itself as, arguably, an imperial power on the continent, the use of “Africa” as a coherent diagnostic category requires more justification than *Conversing* provides. While the essay’s use of the signifier as a basis for a prescriptive manifesto is intriguing, provocative, and offers an invitation to discussion, the analytic machinery mobilised towards that conclusion presumes the existence, indeed constructs the existence, of the object Africa in ways not fully justified. In the same breath as denying the absoluteness of Africa (p. 84), as *Conversing* does, there is the very act of naming Africa. The political utility of this is defended in the essay, but the analytical utility, arguably, demands the same.

In the same way, two of the analytic constructs most forcefully mobilised in the service of the political aims of the essay are the nebulous concepts; “exploitation” and “oppression”, often used interchangeably, one often used to imply the other. In the invoking of Black Consciousness’ dualism of oppressor/oppressed, there is an assumption that these are neat categories, in ways that radical Black feminists have called into question. While *Conversing* acknowledges inspiration from Angela Davis, her reading of the dualism was inflected by a more complicated understanding of what Patricia Hill Collins calls, the “matrix of domination”⁵. These theoretical resources extended to *Conversing* raises key questions: Who are the oppressors? Who are the oppressed? And, do these categories neatly map onto the exploiters versus the ex-

exploited? In what ways might oppression and exploitation be regarded as collapsible, or as distinct modes of domination? This is not to object, as the preface suggests, to the “archaicness” of these terms (p.xx). Rather, it is to emphasise the continuation of the processes of subordination which they name, and the importance of using these concepts in ways that allow us a more sophisticated political vocabulary in which to rid the world of that which these words signify. While *Conversing* makes an effort to combine material and cultural analysis, a neo-Marxist, Gramscian understanding would have produced a more nuanced analysis of the fluidity of categories of op-

pressor/oppressed and coercion/consent in the making of social and political orders, and a more disaggregated narrative of the modes of domination.

Finally, *Conversing*'s most intriguing moment – the call for a Pan-Africanist politics – remains underspecified. The specific content and organisation of this Pan-Africanism, apart from the injection of revolutionary theory, is unclear. In its boldest, most hopeful claim, Mikoma wa Ngig's treatise offers the basis for a reconstructed politics, but leaves the work of completing that reconstruction to the reader. Perhaps this is the intent. Overall, in a period of history where intellectuals are reticent about eman-

atory projects, and where the political conditions for enacting utopian visions seem increasingly constrained, *Conversing*'s contribution is in offering a bold political vision, one premised on revolutionary consciousness and theory. It is not an academic book, nor does it pretend to be so. It is, as it claims, nothing more and nothing less than a conversation by one mind to wrestle with the intractable. In its boldness and its honesty, it has opened that conversation in ways that will hopefully inspire others to continue the dialogue.

Notes

- 1 T. Mbeki, *Africa, Define Yourself*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2002.
- 2 Defined as those who call themselves Africanist, signalling more often than not their location outside the continent, for, argues *Conversing*, those who are intellectuals in Africa rarely claim they are “Africanist”, choosing instead to identify themselves as “political scientist or anthropologist”
- 3 A. Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, London, Methuen, 1992.
- 4 Interestingly, constructed as feminine.
- 5 P.H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York, Routledge, 1991.

