

**Jean-Paul Martinon, “The Equivocal Concept: The Work of Bourahima Ouattara” in *The Journal of French and Francophone Studies* 18, no. 2-3 (July, 2015), © Intellect Ltd, 2015.**

## **Introduction**

Fifty years ago, in a lecture given on the 19 March 1965 at the Goethe Institute in Kinshasa, then called Leopoldville, the Belgian logician, Franz Crahay, made a suggestion, that, in insight, was at once both remarkable and eminently problematic: he said that, in order to do philosophy, Africans needed a conceptual take-off.

There will be no Bantu philosophy without an undertaking such as a *conceptual take-off* [...] the purposeful entry into an age of mature, critical, autocritical, and constructive thought. (Crahay 1965: 67)

With this suggestion, Crahay made a controversial two-time call: on the one hand, he defended the fact that Africans have a vision of the world that indeed needed to be conceptualized and promoted and on the other, he coerced African thinkers to align themselves to the hegemony of the concept imposed by the colonizer. This double-bind has plagued all African thinkers ever since<sup>1</sup>: should African thought maintain its intuitive or immediate nature or should it align itself with a globalizing trend started in Greece, for which, philosophical language is not a language of experience but a language *about* experience.

In addition to this two-time call, Crahay made an even more problematic move: he prevented Africans from claiming any right to difference.

Another prejudicial temptation is to give importance to originality, or rather, to the cult of African difference [...] Basically, an Africanization that would motivate above all the desire to differentiate oneself at any price would be a wrong road because it would lead back to the rejection of the benefits of ‘reflectors’. (Crahay, 1965: 76)

With this incredibly patronizing suggestion, Crahay deliberately limited the scope of all future African philosophy: The only way African philosophy would be able to take off is if it abandoned all desire to affirm originality or proclaim a right to a future that would express their vision of the world. By putting the breaks on the cult of difference, Africans will then, 'with the help of universalizing procedures,' be able to contribute to the world's philosophical progress as dictated by the West. In other words, abide to the universalization of the Western concept or remain silent for your cultural endeavors and systems of thought are simply peripheral to the world's progress.

Nearly forty years later, the philosopher Bourahima Ouattara returned to the problem of this supposed conceptual take off, asking instead a much more pertinent and dangerous set of questions: what if, by its very structure, African thought was in fact allergic to the violence of the concept? What if sub-Saharan Africa structured itself *not* in a-conceptuality, that is, in a system of irrational or illogical beliefs totally alien to the process of rationalization imposed by the West, but in *the other* of conceptualization itself? With these risky questions, Ouattara not only goes against Crahay's calls for an African conceptual take off, he also makes an unprecedented shift in thought: Africans should neither claim their right to difference nor abide to the universalizing process of the global concept, but highlight instead their inherent *différance*, that is, their facticity, one which continually defers and differs the very possibility of the western concept. For Ouattara, sub-Saharan Africa, with its extraordinary history of alienation, stands in fact for the destabilization of rationality itself, and thus for the very subversion of the supposed 'progress' of the world.

But how can Ouattara make such an extraordinary call and how does he justify this unprecedented non-conceptual move in a world awash with concepts and ratiocinations? Before looking at the way he does this, a word on Ouattara.

**Bourahima Ouattara**

Bourahima Ouattara was born in Côte d'Ivoire and is currently based in Switzerland. He is a lecturer at the University of Basel where he teaches a course on 'la religion dans le roman négro-africain francophone'. His main area of specialization is modern and contemporary continental philosophy, with a particular interest in the work of Adorno and Heidegger as well as francophone literature. He also has a very specific take on (mainly) Francophone African philosophy, which I hope to expose succinctly in this essay. Although he has received little recognition amongst his peers,<sup>2</sup> he continues to be an incredibly prolific writer. His books in philosophy and critical theory include, starting from his published PhD:

*Adorno et Heidegger : une controverse philosophique*, 1999

*Adorno: Philosophie et Ethique*, 1999

*Ontologie de la pauvreté chez Heidegger, Divinatio*, 2001

*Penser l'Afrique suivi de l'Afrique « fragmentée »*, 2001

*Adorno, une éthique de la souffrance*, 2004

*Senghor, lecteur de Barrès*, 2014

*Patrice Lumumba, une iconographie politique* (forthcoming)

*Figures de la haine de soi dans le roman négro-africain francophone*  
(forthcoming)

His writing is exceptional in its complexity and richness: sentences are often incredibly condensed, crammed with many thoughts; the discourse is often poetic and evocative, but never affected or gratuitous; and the vocabulary is strikingly diverse and productive, often recalling the richness of language of a philosopher like Heidegger. Reading Ouattara is an experience that is as fulfilling as that provided by the most eloquent of philosophies.

He is also a novelist. His first novel, *Le Cimetière sénégalais*, published by L'Harmattan in 2006 tells the story of Djibril, an immigrant from a generic African state who not only encounters the prejudices of a provincial French town; he also goes back to his roots with the discovery, on the outskirts of town, of an abandoned cemetery of Senegalese soldiers who lost their lives

during the second world war. Ouattara's aim with this first novel is to reveal through the character of Djibril not only the position of someone who is considered of no consequence, but also of a world that has been exempt from official history. Djibril and the exploited country of his origins expose the undertow of the world, the left-aside in the hegemonic games of domination and power. The novel is written in a quasi-poetic prose with occasional side-glances in the direction of philosophical argumentation with the use of dialogue between the protagonists.

Not unlike the two main thinkers who have influenced his thought (Adorno and Heidegger), Ouattara is a non-conformist with regards to the grand narratives of the western world. In a revealing commentary on Adorno's work, he writes,

Within the context of the vast movement of globalization (which also comes across as a process of universalization), one which suppresses alterities and singularities, the idea of participating in economic development goes hand in hand with a blind conformism and an inherently unquestioning reproduction of western paradigms, even if they have already exposed their limits. Adorno is without doubt a dissident of the western world, its pseudo-humanism, its instrumental rationality, its technological might, and the conceit it calls progress. (Ouattara 1999b: 69)<sup>3</sup>

Ouattara's work very much follows in Adorno's footsteps. His attitude of suspicion towards what supposedly makes Western rationality so powerful, exposes a type of thought that is unique in as much as it is perpetually in a state of questioning, never leaving a stone unturned, always in a state of alert against a complacent thinking. As such, his thought incarnates, as I will attempt to show, the non-concept he puts forward.

Another crucial aspect of Ouattara's thought is that his work always appears to start at the juncture between philosophy and ethnography. However, as we will see, this is not a call for a return to ethnophilosophy or even a request to engage with the debates surrounding its death. Ouattara attempts instead to think *at* this crossroad of practices, right where philosophy ends and

ethnography takes over and vice versa. This juncture or crossroad no longer concerns disciplines with rigid institutional discourses and it no longer concerns either abstracted epistemic games or the study of the other as if an objectified given. It concerns the way thought exposes itself: always situated within a specific ethnographic context and yet also always in flight from such context. As he says:

What I call the ethnological figures of the thought of Being corresponds to the end of philosophy as the site of a new beginning. As such, what concerns me, is the thought of the Other as it reveals itself for itself.  
(Ouattara 2000: 81)

This thought is, as we will see, eminently political because it is free from institutionalization and, as such, focuses on the actual conditions that make it happen, i.e. the socio-cultural site of its emergence.

### **West/East and Africa as Punch-Bag**

So how does Bourahima Ouattara take up Franz Crahay's question and how does he manage to put forward the idea that sub-Saharan Africa is *the other* of conceptualization itself? In order to introduce the issue, I would like first to emphasize the key influences that have led him to this provocative thought. Two authors dominate this thinking.

Firstly, Adorno. In an analysis of the advent of scientific reason in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Ouattara highlights that it is Adorno who first decides to shy away from the concept because it is the cornerstone of all scientific enquiries as defined by the enlightenment. He writes in *Adorno: Philosophie et Ethique*:

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century [...] stand for a time of concept-ion, of world-making and disintegration, of constructions and dislocations; a time where the ground under Hegel's foot caves in under pressure. Adorno is aware of all this when he decides to shun the West's most elevated idea: the

concept, this totalitarian machinery that supports and justifies dominations of all kind. (Ouattara, 1999b: 81)

Although as a philosopher aware that his task is the invention of concepts, Ouattara nonetheless follows in Adorno's footsteps, devising in the process a body of work that adheres to the same philosophical determination, one for which negative dialectics takes precedence over any positive systematization of thought.

In his analysis of Heidegger's work, Ouattara also highlights that the author of *Being and Time* has essentially devoted all his work to debunk philosophy from the concept and to offer a body of thought in which Being is no longer riveted to a concept.

In his long engagement with the discipline of metaphysics, Heidegger managed to hollow out all of the conceptual and theoretical structure that underpinned it, weakening its pedestal of sense and signification. The concept becomes thus negated, prevented from taking off [...] In doing so, Heidegger inaugurates the end of Western philosophy. (Ouattara 2000: 79)

It is precisely on the ruins left behind by Heidegger that Ouattara begins his work and specifically his reflection on African thought. Instead of departing from the position of mastery that the (Western) subject has assumed thus far, Ouattara begins his investigations from the indetermination of Being, one that refuses all conceptuality. 'Being is precisely that which invalidates the concept: it is ante-conceptual; what precisely operates before any predication' (Ouattara 2000: 79).

From this starting point—a point that suffers no origin *per se*—, Ouattara inaugurates a new path in post-philosophy, one for which the ante-conceptuality of being, as we will see, allows him to approach the issue of African philosophy from a radically new angle, one that allows for a new political stance against all forms of hegemonies.<sup>4</sup>

Liberated from the fetishism of the concept and strong of his close reading of these authors, Ouattara starts his analyses on Africa from the following premise:

The world is dominated by a two-faceted historical narrative: Same/Other, Greek/Jew, Occident/Orient, West/East.<sup>5</sup> The two poles of this narrative complement each other in that they have given the world its most distinctive feature: writing (the Dispilio Tablet, for example) and the Book (the three-fold narrative provided by the Abrahamic religions, to take one example amongst others). As Ouattara says, 'the bipolar historical narrative of the world gratify themselves in having given humanity its most distinctive features: Writing and the Book' (Ouattara 2000: 126). With this singular advent, the dialogue thus becomes closed-off, there can be no other mode of operating and no other thought than that provided by the founding fathers of Western and Eastern civilizations, with its distinctive emphasis on concepts, subjects and objects. Highlighting this two-faceted historical narrative is not an attempt to denigrate the global significance of its achievements or to grossly ignore the particularities of its varied manifestations (Indian Modernism, for example<sup>6</sup>), only to underline what ultimately is omitted in this advent, what evades both writing and the Book, that is, what remains without name, and therefore without concept in the world.

It doesn't take much to see what remains without name and thereby without concept in the long history of alienation and oppression that stemmed from this advent. In contrast to the Western and Eastern contributions to world history, Africa is indeed the absent one. As Ouattara says, 'Africa comes third in this encounter made of arrogance, superiority and domination'(Ouattara 2001b: 126). The position of being-third is crucial for it is at once the position of conscience and what remains silent in the dialogue Same/Other, Greek/Jew, Occident/Orient, West/East. The third is the silent witness and inevitably, the site of in-justice. In front of the infinite hermeneutic of concepts that stem from writing and from the Book, 'Africa is only an actor, the punch-bag for those who have it' (Ouattara 2001b: 45). It is crucial here to understand that Ouattara is not simply highlighting a historical event; his aim

is to expose a unique condition that precisely escapes all forms of scientific scrutiny. He is interested in revealing the other of philosophy, that is, the other of what escapes writing understood in a broad sense.<sup>7</sup> Africa is third, not as we will see, in the sense of third-*world*, but in the sense of what escapes the dialectical relationship West-East. Africa is effectively the other of the pair same/other.

In order to palliate this absence and lack of significance, science, and specifically, anthropology and ethnology have therefore desperately attempted to re-instate Africa to the hegemonic narrative of world history, thus absolving forever the famous Hegelian condemnation of 1830 that relinquished Africa to 'immobile' cultures 'without history'. The aim of these scientific inquiries is always the same: writing where there is no writing; creating systems where there is a resistance to all forms of systematization.<sup>8</sup> By reinstating Africa within history, the call of these scientific inquiries has therefore been to force it to adopt a concept, to make it enter into the world of writing. All this can be said from another perspective: the imposition of the Book as the only concept available. Without wanting to generalize or to reduce the idea of the Book as concept to one example, it is difficult not to mention here the work of missionaries (and specifically of White Fathers) during the colonial period, and to some extent, the work of American evangelicalism today: they all emphasize the authority of this one book, the Bible. This work has been and continues to be that of coercing Africa in learning and repeating the Book, thus reinforcing the idea that Africa is in need of concept or in need of religion and through it, of salvation and atonement.

By highlighting the absence of Africa in the play West-East and its hegemonic world domination, Ouattara doesn't reinforce, once again, the stereotype that Africa is insignificant or is in need of signification. As he says,

Our attempt is not to adopt the position of the one who has no history, but to take on the place left *aside* in this history. In other words, the task

consists in thinking from the premise of what escapes the violence of the concept put forward by writing and the Book. (Ouattara 2001b: 126)

In doing so, his aim is not to reveal Africa as the concept absence or as the society of the non-concept, for example. If this were the case, then Ouattara would simply reinforce once again hegemonic colonial and global narratives. Instead, Ouattara tries to think Africa not as the site of yet another philosophy, but, more radically, as *the other* of philosophy itself, that is, as the Other of the concept. Africa is effectively the expression of what escapes the domination of the concept, including a-conceptuality itself.

### **To Unhinge, Being-Third, Authenticity, Anticipatory Inertia**

In order to justify such an extraordinary claim, Ouattara *adjusts* four existing key concepts. These four adjustments are not the only ones Ouattara makes in his rich and complex oeuvre, but they are probably the most distinctive ones in what concerns us here.

The *first adjustment* directly refers back to Franz Crahay's admonition that in order to belong to the world and, thereby, more specifically, to the global discourse of philosophy, Africa needs to 'take off' (*décoller*) conceptually. Against this idea borrowed from aeronautics, Ouattara puts forward in *Penser l'Afrique* the idea that Africa needs to *unhinge* (*décrocher*) itself from all conceptuality instead. He borrows this expression from Habermas: *Entkoppelung* (Habermas 1989: 170). With the verb 'to unhinge' Ouattara is not suggesting that Africa should refuse all conceptuality. He is not suggesting a logical inversion to writing, the Book, or the concept. With every unhinging, necessarily comes a legitimate hinging (*Rückkoppelung*), a valid attachment to what has been 'unhinged' so to speak. With the verb 'to unhinge' instead of 'to take-off,' Ouattara is thereby highlighting the need to escape all ratiocinations in order to begin philosophizing anew, to restart philosophy from a perspective that precisely evades conceptuality. To unhinge is to open up a new space for philosophy, to emphasize the condition of possibility of what has not yet been thought. The difference is slight but immensely significant

because with 'unhinging' Ouattara is no longer emphasizing an absence or a lack, but a possibility, a promise pointing in a direction outside of already established discourses.

Furthermore, the move from 'take off' to 'unhinge' is intended to evade what Ouattara, in the lineage of Adorno, calls the coldness of the concept. The West-East 'conceptual order is cold. Its sovereign coldness results in its indifference to the particular or the singular. Coldness signifies indifference *ad litteram*' (Ouattara 1999b: 48). To emphasize the coldness of the concept is thereby to point to the violence of the process that comes with the invention and imposition of concepts: indifference with regards to the other and its suffering, detachment with regards to the injustice done to humanity, etc. Cold, haughty, and disinterested, the cognitive process of the hegemonic concept resembles exactly the process of colonization. The particular or singular is instrumentalized, used, abused, and above all homogenized so as to render it not so much docile, but ignored in the great march of the world's progress. Once again, with this remark, Ouattara is not suggesting a reversed position: the warmth of intuition or immediacy against the coldness of the concept. He suggests instead the temperature at which the concept becomes dangerous. To realize its coldness is to highlight the limits of the concept and thereby to open up to the other, the particular or singular and to invite thinking anew.

Ouattara's *second adjustment* is to pervert and rethink the disused expression 'third-world'. As is well known, the expression 'third-world' was first coined by Alfred Sauvy, a French demographer, anthropologist and historian, in an article published in the French magazine *L'Observateur* on 14 August 1952 in order to refer to countries that were unaligned with either the Communist Soviet bloc or the Capitalist NATO bloc during the Cold War. His usage was a reference to the Third Estate, the 'proletarian' class of France who, before and during the French Revolution, opposed the nobles (First Estate) and clergy (Second Estate). Sauvy wrote, 'This third world ignored, exploited, despised like the third estate also wants to be something' (Sauvy 1952: 14). Ouattara makes no specific reference to this history and only scant mention of its socio-

economic and political context. His interest lies instead in thinking what and who is 'third' and left outside of all conceptuality. Sub-Saharan Africa is the being-third of the world [*'L'Afrique est l'être-en-tiers du monde'*] (Ouattara 2001b : 24); it is what does not count in the relation Same/Other, Jew/Greek, Occident/Orient, West/East.

What is most interesting in this adjustment is that it is not exclusively philosophical; it is also necessarily economic because there can be no concept without an economy of the concept. In this way, Africa, as being-third, is what falls outside of all forms of economic negotiation, not only the pair West/East, but also North/South. The third is the left over, or what is left aside from world affairs. Ouattara's aim is not to reassert what everyone already knows or to repeat a well-worn cliché about poor countries and their lack of power in the world. His aim is to rethink the position of being-third in order to expose, beyond philosophy, its untapped economic potential. Because it is the other of conceptuality and therefore economy, being-third is effectively what structures the non-economic exchange between humans; it is what gives the possibility for the Same and the Other to take place. In this way, being-third does not reference a 'periphery' in relation to a world system dominated by some 'core' countries. As such, it cannot reference a geographical 'world,' but a position, what allows *and* challenges economic rationality and/or irrationality to unfold.

This is where Ouattara makes perhaps the most surprising move. In order to justify this shift from third-world to being-third, he suggests that being-third operates under a specific type of economy. If the third-world spends its time catching up with the economic decisions and modes of operations of the first and second worlds, being-third operates instead 'an informal economy' (Ouattara 2001b: 82) that is, a type of economy that evades all forms of trade agreement. This does not refer a kind of black market or a type of economy that evades tax, government regulations and leaves workers without legal protection and social benefits such as pensions, sick pay and health insurance. Ouattara's informal economy is on the contrary akin to Georges Bataille's general economy.<sup>9</sup> Although Ouattara does not mention it

specifically, the similarities are striking. Ouattara's informal economy is, like Bataille's general economy, what does not generate further production or profit while at the same time giving the possibility for economy-as-exchange to operate (See Bataille 1993). With this surprising move, Ouattara effectively calls for a radical rethinking of the tropes of emancipation and progress, for these are no longer situated in economic development, but in a type of authentic opening onto the future free from all expectancies of returns.

This move from third-world to being-third and to an informal economy understood as non-production is without doubt daring. So the question can only be asked: Is this move really possible? In order to perhaps make sense of this, it is necessary here to explore a *third adjustment*. This third move is Ouattara's concerted effort to think being-third as a form of authenticity against the inauthenticity of the world. The classic reference point here is of course Heidegger's insistence on radically separating ontology from the ontic sciences. In doing so, Heidegger is able—or at least, aspires—to lay the foundations of an *authentic* science (ontology) that will inform all subsequent *inauthentic* ontic determinations (Heidegger 1962). History, economy, anthropology, psychology, etc. are therefore only concerned with inauthentic specifications such as, for example, an 'I,' a self-governing 'subject,' an 'ego,' a 'community,' a 'nation,' *the* 'world,' etc. Even African culture is basically inauthentic, because however it is formulated, it always falls short of the authenticity of facticity itself. The only authentic determination is therefore ontology, namely, here *Dasein*.

Ouattara picks up this distinction and applies it to Africa. As being-third, Africa stands for the authentic mode of being in comparison to all the Same/Other, Greek/Jew, Occident/Orient, West/East inauthentic determinations. Africa embodies 'being-there, *Dasein*' (Ouattara 2001b: 103), that is, being-third against the great swarm of inauthentic concepts put forward by the world—including all colonial and post-colonial visions of 'Africa'. As such, Africa, as *being-third*, is effectively what escapes reason, discourses, disciplines, institutional narratives, and therefore, as we have seen, all forms of tradable economies. In this way, like *Dasein*, Africa or being-third is what is never

taken in consideration; what is always already forgotten. It would be wrong to imagine this extraordinary equation (Africa = being-third = *Dasein*) as if to indicate some hierarchy of values between a supposedly authentic Africa and an inauthentic world. The crucial move here is that Africa, being resistant to the concept, can only 'let be' of the concept. This 'letting be'—another crucial non-concept borrowed from Heidegger—indicates not the act of ruthlessly transforming the other into a concept or an object of knowledge and thereby making them the victim of our objectifying reason, but the act of thinking the other as other, to think them not like 'us,' but as 'other'. The lesson of Africa to the world is a mode of being that 'lets be' of the concept, opens up to the other and in doing so, remains authentic; an authenticity that crucially suffers absolutely *no* cultural con-figuration.

This leads me to Ouattara's *fourth crucial adjustment*. In order to justify the way Africa operates and in order to make 'it' stand out as a comprehensible ontological determination that 'lets-be' of all concepts, Ouattara needs to come up with a way of qualifying this opening onto the other, this 'letting-be' of the concept without re-absorbing it again in a conceptual category. He calls the mode of operation that distinguishes Africa from the rest of the world, an 'anticipatory inertia' (Ouattara 2001b: 45). This expression could give the impression that Ouattara is yet again reinforcing the clichés: an inertia could be seen as a typical intellectual lethargy, a weakness of spirit, an aversion towards reason, or, even worse, an incapacity to think, the hallmark of inferior societies. Nothing is further from what Ouattara is trying to do. For him, the crucial thing is not to confuse this being-third with an object of study, but to think it as it happens, as an event irreducible to any form of category. An anticipatory inertia is therefore what opens itself to a future *not* already conceived and calculated, predetermined and programmable. Africa as being-third is what does not project, plan, or attack. It is what awaits no predictive confirmation of the concept, that is, no more return to and of the same. Africa is structured by an inertia because it is the other of all accountability, what precisely undermines the techno-centric modernity that marks our world's destiny.

There is a moving passage in Ouattara's novel *Le Cimetière sénégalais*, that illustrates this anticipatory inertia. After realizing the lack of importance France assigns to Senegalese men who died fighting Nazism in Europe, the hero, Djibril, suddenly exclaims that he and his fellow countrymen belong in fact to a history of anomalies, to a chronicle of failures that accounts for nothing.

Ouattara then writes:

He then realized that he himself was a mistake, a failure incapable of either experiencing defeat or proving that he had been, was still, and will always remain a victim. The cemetery was the amphitheater of his lament, without hope or salvation. Of this sad soliloquy, he retained the idea that both defeat and victory imply or presuppose a conceptual structure and a cast of mind that weren't his. (Ouattara 2006: 115)

This is not an ordinary lament; this is the realization that war reveals what it means to 'be-third': it can be neither victorious nor defeated because these are the hallmarks of a world ruled by concepts. Djibril, and by extension Africa, can only remain without hope or salvation, an anticipatory inertia that cannot project onto the future because it has no past, no concept to inherit, fight for, and pass along.

Once again, this does not imply that Ouattara thinks Africa has no culture or heritage or that the world does not recognize Africa's place in history. Ouattara's aim is to expose the crucial political role that Africa can take if it realizes its 'being-thirdness'. An anticipatory inertia is not a passive waiting for the world to take place. Ouattara does not advocate, 'to hang around' and wait until something happens. With expressions such as 'without hope or salvation,' the idea is for being-third to elude all projections, anticipated victories and defeats. The aim for Africa is thereby not to imitate, parody, or parrot the West/East in its frantic race for better profit-margins, bigger victories or crashing defeats, but to refrain from being '*in need of development*' (Ouattara 2001b: 107-8) in order to invent itself otherwise. Development is precisely the hallmark of inauthenticity, the playground for the concept, the 'structure and cast of mind' that predicts, projects, and calculates

in the hope of a glorious future, the ultimate achievement of the concept. By stressing the importance of this 'anticipatory inertia,' Ouattara points the way to a new future for Africa, one finally free of the shackles of the concept and its accountability.

### **Proposals: Noise, Fragments, Ethno-Thought**

Now that we have exposed Ouattara's four adjustments, what is he proposing to do with them? After all, it is one thing to conceive a new and unexpected non-conceptual structure for Sub-Saharan Africa; it is another to envisage it as a political strategy, especially one that has the ambition of evading all economic and political conceptuality. Amongst the wealth of ideas, thoughts, and images contained in his work, Ouattara appears to put forward three key proposals: noise, fragment, ethno-thought.

The first proposal refers to 'noise' and, although Ouattara only mentions it briefly in *Penser l'Afrique*, it is a crucial reference because it allows for a better grasp of what this being-third could actually *do* in this world awash with concepts, calculations, projections, and programmatic returns. We already noted that being-third operates away from writing, the Book, its corollary, the concept, and the dialectic model Same/Other, Greek/Jew, Occident/Orient, West/East and that such an operation exposes the world not as antagonistic or agonistic, but as essentially and always already triadic. This means that the dialectic model necessarily operates against a third-party (being-third) that serves as the backdrop to the battle of concepts. Aware of this, the aim of the play Same/Other is thereby to eliminate this background, to erase what resists the concept, this unbearable noise that distorts and spoils the confident march of progress. To write, for example, is to eliminate noise, to turn cacophony into a symphony of meaning (from *sumphōnos* 'harmonious,' from *sun-* 'together' + *phōnē* 'sound'). Instead of simply being a loud and confused set of sounds, noise has therefore a crucial role to play. How does Ouattara use it to explicate the noisy 'doing' of this being-third?

Ouattara refers to the sociologist Niklas Luhmann and to his interpretation of the notion of noise (Luhmann 1996, 83).<sup>10</sup> Instead of seeing noise as a disturbance to the good conduct of rational discourse, Luhmann sees it instead as what precisely stops the hegemony of the Same/Other. Noise disturbs the dialogical system, increases the uncertainty of what is being stated, announced, projected, and planned. Putting together an issue on Francophone African Philosophy, for example, is a way of reducing the noise of conflicting information of a large section of an entire continent in order to channel them into a set of cohesive discourses, examples of order, the triumph of the concept. Noise therefore stands for the accidental or the undesirable amongst the planned order of a project. The difficulty with this thought is to never conceive noise as a necessary component of any concept, but to retain it for its disruptive qualities. Noise, for Luhmann, must retain its essential potential: the possibility of scrambling codes so as to set them in motion along new evolutionary lines of flight. As such, noise is an essential political gesture that, significantly, always comes up during street demonstrations.

With this Luhmannian reference, Ouattara transforms his being-third into a political tool. Africa then ceases to be simply resistant to the concept, refusing to take off, remaining stubbornly ante-conceptual, frustratingly ontological and authentic to become thanks to its anticipatory inertia, *the* political disruption of the world. Africa as being-third stands for the kind of noise that never becomes a 'voice,' that is, an agency by which a particular point of view is expressed or represented. Africa's informal economy is symptomatic of this noise: anyone can gain entry or exit it; no skills are necessary to operate within it; no accounting and no reporting takes place, and above all, no submission to governing bodies is called for. This noise is not a temporary phenomenon in the inevitable march towards formal economic systems. What is at stake here is the expression of a heterogeneity that refuses to be absorbed; that resists any form of homogenization. In this way, far from seeing an informal economy as a problem in a world forever hungry for repressive systems of representations and control, Africa's noise is a force

against political, economic, and cultural hegemonies. It is the other of a dissenting voice; it is what disarms opinions and attitudes.

The second proposal is formal and complements noise: it concerns the formalization of the idea of being-third. One objection against Ouattara could be that he does nothing else but oppose one concept against another: being-third as opposed to being one/two, the authentic against the inauthentic, the ante-conceptual against both the conceptual and the a-conceptual, and an anticipatory inertia against future-orientated economies of return. In the end, Being-Third is basically yet another western inauthentic concept, borrowed from Greek philosophy, and thereby totally alien to Africa. This means that, ultimately, Ouattara's thesis remains just that, a thesis with a central concept. His book, *Penser l'Afrique* remains yet another book, another extension of the Book as inherited by the pair Greek/Jew or West/East. In this way, Ouattara's work only operates within an economic system called western academia, for which new concepts always need to be invented, discussed, traded, and ultimately discarded. And to make matters worse, Ouattara doesn't unhinge Africa; he simply repeats Crahay's admonition that Africa indeed needs to 'take-off'.

This problem is particularly salient if one considers the fact that, as Ouattara himself says, 'Black Africa is contemporary with western modernity' (Ouattara 2001: 72). This basically implies that Sub-Saharan Africa as an overall entity, and thereby, to follow his vocabulary, as being-third, only really appeared *with* colonization, that is, once European countries began to *conceive* the second-half of the continent as a single autonomous entity in need of a concept, in need of writing. In other words, there would have been no being-third if the pairs West/East, Occident/Orient had not attained the stage of being ruled by the concept and of wanting to impose it onto the rest of the world. Such simultaneity can only thereby reabsorb being-third as yet another western concept, yet another conceptualization of Africa that is utterly alien to the people and customs that inhabit it. Ultimately, with being-third, Ouattara does nothing else but reinforce both the cliché image of Africa as a site of chaos

without future and, more problematically, the very ideology he is trying to avoid.

Ouattara is eminently aware of this problem and in order to palliate it, he articulates his idea in a way that prevents him from being caught up in yet another philosophical conundrum. In *Penser l'Afrique*, his articulation takes the shape of both a thesis *and* a series of fragments added as appendix to the thesis. The fragments are twenty-seven in number and are made up of either one sentence or an entire paragraph. To justify this double output, he writes:

Being-third's nearly obsessive [...] resistance to systems and thereby to Hegel's rationalization of the real, calls for another type of writing—hence this second part. Alien to systematization, this being-third can be conceived as fragment [...] The fragment originates in the system not unlike freedom in relation to slavery or autonomy in relation to heterogeneity. Fragmentary writing is thereby necessary for this type of contestation. (Ouattara 2001b: 143)

In this way, in order to be truthful to its very advent, this being-third can only express itself in a manner that evades thesis and grand narratives with one central concept and becomes thereby utterly resilient to all ontical discourses. There is something eminently clever about this double-move (thesis/fragments) because it prevents the idea of seeing this being-third short-circuiting itself, thus reinforcing its resistance to both philosophical and political analysis.

However, it is difficult not to link Ouattara's fragmentary writing with African orality, this compendium of sayings, parables, fables, and above all proverbs, many of which are now, significantly transcribed into writing and analyzed in detail.<sup>11</sup> Ouattara neither recalls nor references this orality, preferring instead to reference Nietzsche, Musil, and, of course, the German Romantics. The question here is therefore this: while there is no doubt that a fragmentary writing can provoke a new departure in thought, how does it produce a political strategy that aims to destabilize the hegemony of the western

concept? Weren't the Schlegel brothers, Schelling, and Novalis eminently aware that fragments and ruins aren't enough to counteract the systematic march of the Enlightenment? This set of questions is not intended as a criticism of Ouattara's effort, only to highlight the difficulty of what he is trying to do with this being-third: attempting to *express* an authenticity that is utterly resistant to any form of conceptual totalization—including that of 'authenticity' itself. Arguably, such authentic resistance was already at work with orality. Unfortunately, as is well known, the tyranny of colonization and now globalization eradicated it for being too alien and ill-suited to conceptualization and systematization. So the question remains: Can Ouattara's being-third succeed after the defeat of the Jena poets against the rationality of the Enlightenment *and* after orality's gradual retreat in front of writing, the concept, and the Book?

Perhaps one way to evaluate the success of Ouattara's attempt is to think through his third proposal: the creation of an ethno-thought in lieu of an ethno-philosophy. The shift between philosophy and thought is clear enough: philosophy is the creation of concept; thought, by contrast, occurs prior to conceptualization, in the co-incidence of authentic being. In order to expose this type of thought, Ouattara focuses on the way space and time are articulated in both pre-colonial times and—extraordinarily—in Heidegger's late work (especially his conception of the fourfold).<sup>12</sup> For both pre-colonial Africa and the late Heidegger, space and time can be apprehended neither from a set of measurements nor from a monad or now-point at its origin. Space and time are apprehended and articulated as clearing, that is, from the way being-third proceeds by spatial and temporal self-determinations, clearing its own space and time as space and time. Since being-third and thought occurs in the same non-coincidence, then thought and clearing cannot be distinguished from one another. And since thought is not concept, but noise and fragmentation, then these can only be the expression of a being-third who both inhabits and makes space and time; the expression of someone who is free from any 'metric ordination of place or measurement' (Ouattara 2000: 89-90). Such a daring juxtaposition (pre-colonial times/late Heidegger), allows him to devise a type of thought that is both truthful to authentic being and free

of (measured) concepts, thus signing the ends of both Greek and ethno-philosophy.

But what is one to make of the idea of retaining an 'ethno'? When the expression ethno-philosophy was first coined, the idea referred to a type of philosophy based on data collected through ethnographical and linguistic inquiry. As is well known, the works of Tempels and Kagame are often cited as archetypal of this philosophical method. Two of the countless criticisms levelled against this type of philosophy are that it falls for the myth that Africa always had a philosophy (in the Greek sense of the term) and that it pretends to bring together all the members of a community in one universal language. Can the same be said of Ouattara's ethno-thought? The shift from ethno-philosophy to ethno-thought allows Ouattara to evade both criticisms: On the one hand, the co-occurrence of thought and authentic being cannot reference any geographical or historical delimitation such as Africa. Paradoxically, this does not make it less African because only a being-third can express it. An ethno-thought is indeed the expression of the disenfranchised, of the one allergic to or alienated from the concept. On the other hand, the co-occurrence of thought and authentic being cannot generate a universal language simply because such a thought can only stem from a particularity or singularity. If space and time are apprehended authentically, that is, from the particularity or singularity of someone's *ethnos*—i.e. not someone's family, tribe, nation, or racial affiliation, but the community that together articulates its very own epochal clearing—then its expression (noise/fragment) can become neither universal nor global (see Ouattara 2000: 89-90).

The move from ethno-philosophy to ethno-thought clearly gives a new impetus not only to African thought, but also to any kind of thought that finds itself on the margins of the concept, that is, at odds with the frenzied and unruly march of rationalization imposed by the pairs Greek/Jew or West/East. Ultimately, an ethno-thought is an attempt to think how someone can produce themselves authentically as work-subject. The noise/fragmentary rebellion against the autonomy of the concept is thereby an exigency of authentic auto-production, that is, of invention of the self as *organon* free of any totalization

or completion and therefore free of the enslavement imposed by global homogenized concepts. With Ouattara, philosophy becomes singular *auto-poiesis*, self-production, self-engendering. There is nothing hyperbolic or romantic and idealistic about this. The noise/fragmentary exigency marshaled by being-third is eminently concrete and political: it calls for a dramatic shift in thought, the marshaling of a radically different kind of economy, the production of a thoroughly new type of subjectivity, finally free from all ontical determinations, that is, free from all historical and socio-cultural imposition.

### **Auto-Poiesis, Unworking, and Equivocity**

Can ethno-thought have a future? If one expands a little the problematic, then the potential of these proposals suddenly reveal themselves. Slavery, for example, was no doubt abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833 and in the US in 1865, but slavery to the structures that led to its foundations remains firmly in place. We still abide to fixed structures of subjectivity and identity and their trade; we still observe strict social stratifications, markers, this time, not of heritage, but of merit and progress; we still have faith in objective measures of social class and position, their points of entry and exclusion, and finally, but most importantly, we respect historical lineages and geographical attachments and the right to exclude anyone who does not belong to these delimitations. Overall, we still abide to all the structures that help identify hierarchies of power, however much we claim for equality and freedom. Ouattara simply, but most forcefully, asks us to unchain ourselves from them, not in an anarchic way, calling for the end of all orders, for example, but in a way that fundamentally shakes all the structures and codes we comply with. A daring move, but also the most challenging of calls.

And yet, it is difficult not to foresee a few problems with such a formidable challenge. The first one can be stated simply: can an authentic being-third really express itself in noise and fragments without at the same time reinscribing him or herself as the same, with a specific socio-cultural and political identity? In other words, can authenticity really take place without the violence and the inauthenticity of the concept? As Jean-Luc Nancy and

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe have amply demonstrated the '*Witz* continually errs and even operates between system and chaos, between the two poles of the *organon*' (Lacoue-Labarthe 1988: 122). As such, there cannot be a pure, authentic, and singular *auto-poiesis* without system, without rationalization, one which invariably reinforces the same with the same and in the process, the consolidation of the sovereign subject, ready to dominate and enslave the other, the poor, the marginal. If this is indeed the case, then Africa cannot do without the hegemony of the pairs Greek/Jew or West/East and its stockpile of concepts, ratiocinations, and economic deals. Africa can only continue, like the rest of the world, to *err* between chaos and system, noise and dis/harmony, fragments and thesis, in other words, between authenticity and inauthenticity. The question is not whether ethno-thought can 'let-be' of the concept, but whether Greek-philosophy *and* ethno-thought work together in the making not of Africa, but of a global self. Are we not all being-thirds as well as egos and subjects?

The second problem is more delicate. If there can indeed be an Africa that turns its own alienation into a political gesture aiming at destabilizing the concept and in the process the hegemonies of postcolonialism and globalization, how should it then manifest itself? An unhinged authentic being or being-third that only expresses itself in noise and fragments, that operates exclusively with a type of informal economy, cannot call 'whatever it produces,' a work, an oeuvre, or a contribution to humanity. If it is true to its form, noise can only remain noise, fragments can never unite to form a cohesive discourse. If this is true, then the only work or oeuvre that a being-third can undertake is, as Maurice Blanchot rightly remarked, one of 'unworking' [*désœuvrement*] (Blanchot 1993: 357). Unworking is not just undoing; it is effectively nothing: the unhinging of the concept, the interruption of the system, the disruption of the code, the suspension of discourse. To go back to a vocabulary used earlier, isn't 'letting-be' precisely the act of avoiding imposing onto others our own projections of them and isn't such avoidance precisely doing nothing? In other words, can one think the other as other, i.e. not like 'us,' but *really* as 'other,' not thinking at all? Wasn't this precisely the point of the *Witz*, something inconsequential that produces nothing more than

its own absence? Can Africa, this being-third really claim, let alone take on this unworking? And more importantly, can the world really pause for a moment (or forever) the frenzied marshaling of concepts and systems? What would this unworking really bring us?

So my original question remains: Can Ouattara's being-third really succeed after Jena and the slow death of orality? Perhaps it is no longer a question of success or failure. The efforts to stop the concept and everything that comes in its wake (slavery, colonialism, postcolonialism, globalization, etc) have been numerous. To reiterate this effort by recalling the idea that we are authentic as well as inauthentic, that our being-third is also a potentiality that not only resists all forms of domination and hegemony, but also offers new ways of thinking about ourselves and our position in the world can only be a good thing. Over and beyond all the demands that are imposed onto us, we remain an auto-production or more precisely, an auto-manifestation that unworks itself as it manifest itself. This is not something that philosophy or any other ontic science (from the West or the East) can confer meaning to, let alone conceptualize. Only noise, fragment, or orality can indeed formalize it. If sub-Saharan Africa is indeed the site that reminds us of this, then Ouattara's work has achieved its goal. It allows us to think of ourselves and of others not only at the closure of Greek philosophy and ethno-thought, but also at the end of *both systems and chaoses*.

At this juncture, the future for both Africa and the world needs to be worked out. What it will look like is difficult to say, but it will resemble neither a thesis nor a fragment, neither a discourse nor an oral transmission, neither an informal economy nor a trade agreement, but something in between, something necessarily equivocal. An equivocity that always manages to renew an inextinguishable faith not only in *words* and in forms, but also and above all in some confused and obscure magic of the *verb*. Words and forms (or writing and Books) are what help us to consolidate our thinking knowing that such consolidations are only made up of mere inauthentic predicates and concepts that have *no* value, but their passing away and that such an odd valence can infer no real hegemonic power and this however much we abide

to them. Similarly, the confused and obscure magic of the verb are what helps us designate without concepts what precisely escapes all concepts (i.e. being-third) and that such an odd designation has not 'a' value, but an absolute value that has no purchase on words and forms and this, however much science and philosophy in particular wish it otherwise. Ouattara is pointing in the direction of this equivocal future and if we want to survive, we really ought to hear him.

## **Coda**

There is one final aspect of Ouattara's work to date that is perhaps worth considering as a conclusion. In order to indirectly refer to Africa as being-third or as authentic *Dasein* in his novel *Le Cimetière sénégalais*, Ouattara distinguishes between Africa (inauthentic) and a generic (authentic) unidentified region south of the Sahara. Referring to the astronomer and geographer, Claudius Ptolemy, he calls this region, 'Agisymba' (Ouattara 2006: 15). A few reasons force us to pay attention to this unusual denomination. Firstly, the fact that Ouattara mentions Ptolemy is indicative of the kind of reference at stake here since Ptolemy was Egyptian and therefore African and yet he wrote in Greek. Not unlike Ouattara, Ptolemy straddles not just two continents, but also and above all, two approaches to the world. If Ptolemy is a Hellenized Egyptian, then Ouattara is, like Ptolemy, a Hellenized African. This does not automatically classify him in the category of North-bound gazing African philosophers. This, on the contrary, encapsulates the problematic at stake here: to be Hellenized is to adhere to writing and the Book and yet to be of African origin or descent necessarily perverts this adherence, preventing it from turning its necessarily unbound subjectivity into an authorial and thereby an authoritative determination. In this way, like Ptolemy, Ouattara remains faithfully being-third in the sense we've uncovered, that is, equivocally.

Secondly, Ptolemy was one of the first geographers to attribute names to what was then referred to as 'terra incognita'. Ptolemy's *Geography* tells the unfinished story that according to Marinus of Tyre, the trader Iulius Maternus

together with the king of the Garamantes set off from Garama in today's Southern Libya and, after four months and 14 days, reached a land called Agisymba, where they saw a great number of rhinoceros (Desanges 1985). With this incomplete story and a scientific approach (calculating latitudes and longitudes), Ptolemy effectively took the measure of an unknown world, figured it, and provided it with an ideological slant: the other beyond the Sahara. To reference such denomination is not to offer yet another alternative concept to the denomination 'Africa' or to recall some imaginary or mythical pre-colonial past. Ptolemy's confirmation that this land is called Agisymba is both a scientific conceptualization *and* the remnant of a story: a fragment, the ruin of a story. Such equivocation is precisely what makes Ouattara's reference in *Le Cimetière sénégalais* so significant: instead of a clear geographical and therefore historical reference, the hero comes from an equivocal land: at once mark and ruin, concept and fragment.

At a time when the geographical borders drawn by European powers during the 1884-85 Berlin Conference and in the subsequent Scramble for Africa are still being disputed, one could question Ouattara's intentions for referring to sub-Saharan Africa as Agisymba. There is no doubt that Ouattara is not nostalgic of pre-colonial Africa; his intentions are in fact to give us, and Africans specifically, the possibility of thinking another future. With a reference lost in some immemorial time, Ouattara effectively points to what needs to be invented, what is still to be imagined. The immemorial provided by the combination concept/fragment here folds itself onto the incalculable, the unprogrammable, what is beyond all forms of projection or prediction. In this way, Agisymba is not just a literary conceit, it offers the possibility of thinking a future for Africa that is tainted neither by a long history of violent oppression, brutal rulings, and ruthless exploitation by the concept nor by a mythical past, an imaginary history, or an intuitive a-conceptuality, but something both new and very old, something equivocal, uncertain, open to repetition and interpretation, orality and textuality. Unhinged and without direction, that is, without occident or orient, Ouattara gives humanity, with Agisymba, 'an anomaly,' which is nothing else but a new destiny for Africa.

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### Contributor details

**Jean-Paul Martinon** is a writer based in London. He was the co-founder and curator of Rear Window ([www.rear-window.org.uk](http://www.rear-window.org.uk)) an independent arts trust that staged a series of exhibitions and conferences in temporary sites across London. He is currently Reader in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He has written monographs on a Victorian workhouse (*Swelling Grounds*, Rear Window, 1995), the idea of the future in the work of Derrida, Malabou and Nancy (*On Futurity*, Palgrave, 2007), the temporal dimension of masculinity (*The End of Man*, Punctum, 2013), and the concept of peace after the Rwandan genocide (*After "Rwanda,"* Rodopi, 2013). He is also the editor of *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (Bloomsbury, 2014). [www.jeanpaulmartinon.net](http://www.jeanpaulmartinon.net)

Contact : Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths, University of London,  
London

SE14 6NW, UK.

Email: [j.martinon@gold.ac.uk](mailto:j.martinon@gold.ac.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> On this topic, see V.Y. Mudimbe 1988: 155-57.

<sup>2</sup> A mention of his work can be found in two anthologies on African Philosophy, that of Grégoire Biyogo and Hubert Mono Ndjana. See Bibliography.

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<sup>3</sup> This and all subsequent translations of Ouattara's work are mine.

<sup>4</sup> Ouattara is not the only one juxtaposing African thought and Heidegger's work. I'm thinking specifically here of the work of Antoine-Dover Osongo-Lukadi, especially his work published in 2001 and 2002. I can only leave here for another time, the task of comparing both their work.

<sup>5</sup> There is no space here to explore these well-known pairings. See, for example, amongst others, John Llewlyn 1988: 237-88 and Miriam Leonard 2010: 17-42.

<sup>6</sup> On this topic, see Geeta Kapur 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Although Ouattara reference only rarely the work of Jacques Derrida, it is worth noting here that the other of writing is not the other of arch-writing or *écriture*. Writing, for Ouattara seems to be confined to the marking of signs and not to significant phenomena. If the latter had been the case, then the syntagm 'Other/Concept' would have necessitated a completely different set of analyses involving, amongst others, the only author who bravely withstood Heidegger's enclosed ontology and that curiously, but revealingly, Ouattara frequently dismisses, Emmanuel Levinas. On the topic, see Jacques Derrida, 2001: 97-196.

<sup>8</sup> For a revealing example of such writing and systematization, see Danielle de Lame 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Georges Bataille's notion of General Economy is mainly developed in two texts, 'The Notion of Expenditure' and, of course, *The Accursed Share* (specifically Vol. 2). In a nutshell, this notion of economy is intended to challenge the belief (held by both Capitalism and Communism) in the primacy of economy as the sphere of meaning, production, and exchange. For Bataille, economy is not just what seeks to make society a controllable and controlled phenomenon: the realm of work, religion, utility, politics, laws, taboos, reproductive sex, truth, and knowledge. Economy is also the unruly realms of eroticism, festivals, transgression, drunkenness, laughter, the dissolution of truth, and art. General Economy is therefore not the opposite of economy; it is what contains together economy as utility and economy as excess. An awareness of both moderates the western economic system of production and accumulation.

<sup>10</sup> For a remarkable analysis of this notion, see William Rasch 1992: 61-76.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent analysis of orality in African culture, see Mamoussé Diagne 2005.

<sup>12</sup> There is unfortunately no space here to examine in detail this aspect of Heidegger's work, let alone compare it with pre-colonial Africa. For the most succinct and accurate interpretation of the fourfold, see Reiner Schürmann 1990: pp. 209-225, fn. 158, p. 348. See also more specifically in relation to space and time, Jean-Paul Martinon 2015. For an example of an account of the perception of space and time in pre-colonial Africa, contrast, for example, Alexis Kagame 1975 with John S. Mbiti 1990: especially 199-22 and 209.