

**Jean-Paul Martinon, “Valentin Mudimbe or the Work of Invention,”  
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In 2001, Kai Kresse summarized the African philosopher Valentin Mudimbe’s work in the following way:

“Mudimbe is asking us to be sensitive firstly to ourselves and to our own place in society and in the academy, and also be sensitive to the place and the voices of those whose histories and cultures we study. It is only by mediating the conflicting and contradictory pulls of these two elements that we can begin to invent a discursive space that can be true to both.”<sup>i</sup>

What does it mean to mediate such a conflicting and contradictory pull? Is this invention of a discursive sphere what Jacques Derrida calls an invention as such<sup>ii</sup>: “the adventure or the event of the entirely other [*l’aventure ou l’événement du tout autre*]”<sup>iii</sup>? And if one did as Mudimbe is asking us to do, what would then be the consequences? What “other” would come out of such mediation and invention?

In this short essay I would like to expand on the above quotation and to emphasize this work of mediation that Mudimbe is offering us. This emphasis will take here, as the above makes clear, a specific Derridean turn. This does not mean that I will force Mudimbe into a Derridean framework, but to do precisely what Mudimbe is asking us to do: to mediate the conflict between my longstanding interest in Derrida’s work<sup>iv</sup> and at the same time to be sensitive to the one person I am reading right now: Mudimbe. In other words, I am not claiming that Mudimbe is Derridean or that his work can easily be subjugated to the theories of a European Jewish philosopher, albeit of Algerian origin.<sup>v</sup> By negotiating the contradictory pull between “I” as “Derridean” and “Mudimbe,” the aim is to come up with something which (or maybe someone who) will be totally alien to both: a subject or a topic that is neither mine nor someone else’s, but remains to be (re)invented.

In doing so, the hope is to reiterate once again (can one reiterate this enough times?) the importance of getting away from any form of meta-narrative that reinforces the binary models “me”/“him,” “us”/“them,” or that reasserts more generic centres of powers such as the Same and the Other. This hope can be understood at two levels:

The first implies discarding the binary model (the West versus Africa) inherited by colonisation. This does not mean ignoring the tragedy of the colonial heritage; this simply means *continuing* to question the binary certainties (developed / not developed, for example) implied by the colonial project and this without ever assuming in reverse an underlining universal principle applicable to all (a shared sense of being or a sense of right, for example).<sup>vi</sup> The second level implies refusing to think subjectivity from the standpoint of a common genus. In this old model, the other is always addressed as a formal and reciprocal exchange as part of the great swarm of the human genus: Each being the other of another, but everyone remaining one being. The hope here is therefore to always remain on alert in front of the enigma of the other, this *unique* alterity who is external to and transcending all genus.<sup>vii</sup>

Thus freed from binary models that rest on ontological and ontical predicates, the hope is therefore to show that Mudimbe’s work of mediation and invention, if one is serious about it, can radically change the way one works with others and, in this specific case, one reads African scholars with all the sensitivity that Mudimbe requires of us. How is this possible?

Let me start again with Kresse’s statement. Mudimbe’s project is indeed an attempt to mediate the conflicting and contradictory pull between his perception of his own subjectivity and the subjectivity that history and here specifically the colonial library imposed onto him. Here is an example of such a contradictory pull:

“[In *Parables and Fables*] I thought of using my own education as a framework in which I could, thanks to some methodological lessons from Sartre’s phenomenology and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism, rewrite my personal

readings of some beautiful African fables and parables. Concretely, I was caught between Sartre's existentialist philosophy and historical perspective (which claim that we are completely free, fully responsible, and universal lawmakers) and Lévi-Strauss' masterful a-historical demonstration that seems to negate such a position and, in any case, question the tension between the 'savage' and the 'scientific' mind. It became important to position myself vis-à-vis the Cartesian *cogito* and reconcile the impossible dialogue about the *cogito* which simultaneously separates and unites Lévi-Strauss and Sartre."<sup>viii</sup>

In other words, Mudimbe's attempt is to mediate between his perception of himself as a free, fully-responsible, and universal lawmaker (which is Sartre's assumption of the *cogito*<sup>x</sup>) and the evidence that anthropology exposes: that it is impossible to make this lawmaking subject *acceptable*, unified, and one (thus destroying altogether the very idea of the *cogito*<sup>x</sup>). Through such mediation, the task is effectively not only to question himself *outside* of any essentialist discourse in philosophy or ethnography, but also to question himself *inside* his own narrative (the framework of his education) in order to challenge the stereotypes imposed onto him by the colonial library.

The crucial aspect of Mudimbe's attempt is to operate this type of mediation through an unexpected type of work: to re-write his own reading. This is the aim of the book from which the above quotation is taken (*Fables and Parables*): not to interpret African fables as such, but to re-interpret *his reading* of these fables. This should not be understood as a type of exegetic reiteration, but as a way of writing under erasure, that is, in a manner in which a previous reading is used at the same time that it is cancelled out, rendering their meaning undecidable.<sup>xi</sup> In doing so, Mudimbe's aim is really to catch himself in order to identify whether "it" is "he," Mudimbe who reads these fables or whether it is a distortion imposed by Colonial heritage and if "the person who reads" is neither, then who is he? In other words, Mudimbe's re-writing of his own reading is an attempt to come up with something strange and previously unheard off: *another* Mudimbe, a new Mudimbe, the Mudimbe he himself does not expect.<sup>xii</sup>

What is curious about Mudimbe's approach is the fact that this focus on mediation is not, contrary to what one might think, directed towards overcoming Sartre's *pour soi* and/or Lévi-Strauss' refusal to identify oneself with oneself. Mudimbe is not claiming that in the process he will gain a self-governing subjectivity, unique in its *genus*: the "who?" might *not* be answered. This is not identity politics, but an attempt to think himself and therefore any relation with the other as this difficult mediation, as part of a structure of inter-subjectivity in which the poles of referent are no longer quite what they seem. In this way, through his double reading, Mudimbe effectively truncates both Sartre and Lévi-Strauss: the aim is neither to create a self-affirming *cogito* taking hold of his freedom and brandishing a particular kind of identity nor a total negation of the *cogito*, a kind of anthropological anxiety pushed to the extreme.<sup>xiii</sup> His aim is really to expose the irreducible game of inter-subjectivity at play *in inventing Mudimbe*. In other words, the task is not to focus on subjectivity (whether as affirmation or negation), but on the negotiation at play between subjectivities: a much more difficult task because it questions at once the very idea of subjectivity and the entire apparatus of the various discourses on subjectivity (philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and of course colonial and post-colonial).

Inevitably, such a focus on inter-subjectivity and such a tactic can only take place through speech. Now speech is not here the opposite of writing (or the re-writing implied earlier). In a Derridean framework, as is well known, speech is not the spoken word, but what comes to us as phenomena involved in the incalculable possibilities of the performative, in what takes us by surprise and "teaches us what [we] think."<sup>xiv</sup> Speech is therefore here what constitutes Mudimbe: the speech of his Luba origins, his catholic upbringing, his Marxist influences, and of all those that form and continue to form who he is. The crucial thing here is that the speech that his mediation puts forward is neither that of reflexivity nor self-reflexivity: "I speak only to reflect back my own projection or that of the other," for example. Mudimbe is not intent on remaining within the narrow confines of his own self-reflection or that imposed by the other. His aim is to expose the way speech works *in* an inter-subjective mode, all in order to not only disrupt the certainty of any fixed pole of referent, but also to open up the possibility of something utterly unpredictable. As he says, quoting Merleau-Ponty:

“Speaking to, conversing with, the other, ‘I make the other in my own image,’ and yet, in this mysterious and polysemic exchange, the other and I ‘realize the impossible agreement between two rival totalities not because speech forces us back upon ourselves to discover some unique spirit in which we participate but because speech concerns us, catches us indirectly, seduces us..., transforms us into the other and him into us, abolishes the limit between mine and non-mine, and ends the alternative between what has sense for me and what is non-sense for me, between me as subject and the other as object.”<sup>xv</sup>

The important thing here is *not* the mirroring game of a polysemic exchange (or what could easily be seen by others as the abyss of deconstruction), but the fact that speech abolishes the assumed limits between two subjectivities engaged in a conversation and that this taking down of the limits is what gets us out of the conventional narrative of the Same and the Other, the West and Africa, the free and the enslaved, the coloniser and the colonised, without forgetting the savage and the scientific. But this should not be understood as something in fact very banal: speech abolishes difference and is therefore the opposite of war, for example. In the subtle double question at stake here, speech also concerns Mudimbe and his relation with himself. As Mudimbe concludes: “Am I one or two? Am I the other, and if so, who am I? ... In this sharing of speech, I clearly bring the other to life and thus produce myself.”<sup>xvi</sup> The questioning (or mediation) here not only, never lets go, but also, never affords a way out. It is that which precisely allows for the production of this “Mudimbe” who is neither the free African subject nor a European projection, but the result of speech’s cunning victory over the same and the other, a victory that is also paradoxically that of Mudimbe alone.<sup>xvii</sup>

But how can Mudimbe be asking us to do this? If one were to take this seriously, would it not then contravene with every positing of subjectivity, every affirmation of identity and thus with every call for struggle and emancipation? And would this (perhaps Derridean?) undecidability not be an insult to the very idea of being an independent African free of colonial ties? What can come out of this mediation that gives itself over to the power of speech and refuses at once self-affirmation

and total negation? In order to make sense of this, it is necessary to turn to Mudimbe's own reading of Lévi-Strauss.

Mudimbe takes on Lévi-Strauss classic argument that in order to make sense of the other (in an anthropological project, for example) one needs to begin by making sense of oneself. However, this making sense of oneself is never an epiphany: the sudden realisation that one "is," for example. This making sense of oneself necessarily takes the shape not so much of a negation as intimated earlier, but, more precisely, of a self-rejection: "the refusal of identifying oneself with oneself, that is, a rejection of whatever can make the 'I' acceptable."<sup>xviii</sup> This refusal or rejection does not express a lack of will or power or an abdication to extraneous forces. This refusal expresses the fact that subjectivity and identity are acquired not by assertion or assimilation, but through a double game of inference and reference. As he says:

"What unveils the most intimate and profound experience is not an I but a thinking 'he' or 'she' in me, who is so clear and explicit that I should doubt whether or not it is me who is thinking. ... In other words, my existence can be defined only as an inference from and a reference to another."<sup>xix</sup>

And the result—if there is one as such—can only frustrate all our clichés about subjectivity: it is not something that can be either affirmed or denied. In the relentless game of inter-subjectivity, in the warring play of speech, the question of existence effectively always remains: If his existence is at once an inference *and* a reference, then, *once again*, who is Mudimbe? The issue here is not to fall prey to any controlling power (that of the Same or the Other) but to remain always already in the process of mediation *between* inference and reference and therefore of invention, of the invention of the impossible as Derrida would say. If this can be generalised, then one could say that one is oneself only in as much as one negotiates the contradictory pull between what is inferred and referred, that is, between what is inherited and therefore *unacceptable* and what appears on all accounts about to be formed and therefore equally *unacceptable*. This is not a type of negative theology applied to a search for identity; this is Mudimbe's implacable reading of Lévi-Strauss, one that permits neither complete denial nor

total self-affirmation; a double strategy that reinforces, as we intimated earlier, the *enigma* of a unique alterity, external to and transcending all genus.

The interesting aspect of this ambivalent and restless openness to what remains to be invented is that Mudimbe's (inter-)subjectivity can only fall at once in *and* out of any known mode of representation. Hence his use of the only possible mode of expression that would evade all forms of fixed representation: the (perhaps also Derridean?) mode of writing that is the confessional.<sup>xx</sup> To admit, to acknowledge, and to say "yes" (even in a situation where one is re-writing one's own reading) is not a way of postulating oneself as this or that (being Luba, African, being a professor, but also being guilty or innocent, for example), but of provoking the process of (re)invention. The confession is essentially the springboard that allows for Mudimbe's mediation: Mediation needs confession and vice versa because both are, unlike most philosophy, exclusively structured by the future: I confess not only in order to pin myself down, but also because in doing so I can become someone else. However this confession is not a type of writing that, however much the word is tarnished with Christian connotations, seeks redemption or an eschatological absolution, that is, an imaginary relief-post or end-post projected onto the future. This work of mediation/confession is a life-long performance that aspires or works towards achieving the impossible, not as an absolute, but as *what always already remains to be made significant*. Hence his admiration for Lévi-Strauss:

*"Triste Tropicque* can be read in at least two ways: as an anthropologist's saga and as a spiritual journey. The text's strategy offers them in complementarity. There is no doubt, however, that the intellectual complexity of the saga and its achievements do not make sense without the postulations of a confession and its significance."<sup>xxi</sup>

A saga and a spiritual journey, a confession and a signification: the process of mediating between oneself and the other and between oneself and oneself (Mudimbe confessional re-writing his own reading) takes on here a rather unusual character, one that slips between gift and economy. Let us take these two aspects one at a time: Gift, in as much as a confession is a giving to oneself

(and) to the other. Gift, in as much as a spiritual journey is a giving to oneself (and) to God. In either case, the gift is always understood outside of exchange, commerce, and economic re-appropriation (even if it published, even if sainthood is achieved). As Derrida says, the gift is this “excess that overflows language at every instant and yet requires it, sets it incessantly into motion at the very moment of expressing it.”<sup>xxii</sup> Mudimbe’s mediation is this gift (confession) that translates the tremor of being (for) the other/Other. And yet at the same time, Mudimbe’s (self-)mediation is also, paradoxically, an economy. Economy, in as much as an anthropologist’s saga always hopes to win the trophy of meaning.<sup>xxiii</sup> Economy, in as much as a philosopher (like Mudimbe) always strives to beat others in the game of articulating the world. In either case, there is nothing altruistic or generous about it, something is to be gained—even if it is simply a vague sense that he has articulated himself in the world. Any attempt to bridge the gap between this gift without return and this economic exchange, like any attempt to unify inter-subjectivity, would be both artificial and futile. It would be as if one would try to impose a seamlessness where there can only be irregularity and fragmentation, hesitations, swerves, changes of speed, and u-turns.

The problem of course is what or who *provokes* such an odd two-tier mediation? What *sparks* such a two-fold confessional strategy that evades at all cost concepts such as identity, sameness, otherness, salvation, or redemption? If it is an inner longing for “presence” that drives Mudimbe, then is he not the victim of what Derrida would call a metaphysical trap? If it is the other who calls upon him to challenge the Colonial Library, then is he not (again) the victim of what is generally called a North-bound gaze<sup>xxiv</sup> (this latter criticism being here particularly salient with his references to both Sartre and Lévi-Strauss)? The provocation that fuels Mudimbe’s mediation/confession is a crucial issue that cannot be underestimated because otherwise it would lose not only its credibility but also its potential *against* a generic understanding of subjectivity that, as he says, predominates African studies. If Mudimbe really falls for a metaphysical trap then his work would ultimately stand for a rather worrying attempt at imposing the grandeur of his “I think” over that of his African compatriots. If Mudimbe falls for a political trap, then we would simply be witnessing a return to ethnophilosophy and a writing essentially alien to Africa. What provokes then Mudimbe’s odd

subjectivity? What springs it into life, a life that is neither that of a theoretically free and self-governing subject nor a formula invented by the other (both of which would be utterly unacceptable), but a confessional mediation that always already remains to be invented?

Surprisingly, he relies on Simone de Beauvoir in his effort to attribute an origin to his mediation. He writes:

“It is from the least phenomenological of existentialists, who happens to be also the most tolerant of existentialists, Simone de Beauvoir, that I draw the frame within which Sartre and Levi-Strauss can fit with their irreconcilable differences and their complementary ambiguities. In the *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1980), de Beauvoir demonstrates that one’s being should be grounded within freedom of choice as the means of constructing one’s own existence vis-à-vis the other who is always a mirror of one’s significance. Her perspective seems close to Sartre’s. But there is a major difference, for de Beauvoir emphasizes freedom as that which is objectified by the other, rather than the complex and contradictory self-perception of the for-itself.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Freedom is here not understood as freewill or as a possession to be cherished, but as the ethical dimension at play in inter-subjective relations, a dimension, that let us not forget, also implies Mudimbe’s own self-relation. In other words, against Sartre’s free man constituted by others versus Levi-Strauss’s the other makes me who I am, Mudimbe turns to de Beauvoir who allows him to walk the treacherous path of inference and reference, that is of re-writing his own reading, a confessional path that can only be ethical: in order for me to be able to invent myself I need to make sure that everyone is able to do the same. As de Beauvoir says in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*:

“The individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

For Mudimbe then, the *confessional* (gift) and the *signifying* (anthropology/philosophy) intertwine themselves in order to accomplish this invention of the impossible. The crucial aspect of the spark or motivation behind Mudimbe's mediation is that it cannot take place without an ethical dimension: freeing oneself from the restraints of identity politics while helping others to free themselves from the constraining devices imposed against their (perceived or enforced) identities. The confessional and the signifying, gift and economy, spiritual journey and anthropological saga cannot take place without this ethical dimension that advocates neither norms nor codes (hoping it would secure everyone's freedom), but a kind of proximity that eschews all forms of assumptions. It is the kind of ethics that cannot be expressed or translated into the type of words that would seek to make it more familiar, for it is always in need to be invented. With such an ethical dimension, Mudimbe can then happily assume that his self or that of the other, Africa or the West can never be perceived or surmised by words such as: "this is Mudimbe," "this is African thought," "this is colonial legacy," "this is the same as Sartre," etc. To focus on the enigma (of the self or the other)—this enigma that sustains the proximity he is seeking through a confessional (re)writing—is to work towards achieving freedom for all.

The consequence of such a view of (inter-)subjectivity is that it prevents once and for all the vain idea of thinking oneself the proud owner of a political identity, the arrogance of thinking oneself altruistic, the vanity of thinking oneself detached from the world and therefore from the burden of history, and the conceitedness of the priest's self-righteousness. The path drawn by Mudimbe's meditation, a path that takes on here, as I hope I have shown, unexpected Derridean connotations, is indeed a treacherous one, for it allows neither the vainglory of thinking oneself the possessor of a freedom (in our supposedly post-colonial and globalised world) nor the gratification—however much it is still necessary—of repeating the victim's cry in front of the other's imposing freedom. Mediation, like deconstruction never stops. Freedom, like democracy, is always already to be achieved or to come—and this whatever its state of ideality. As such, in the same way that there can be no redemption, there can also be no victory or defeat and no one, and above all no juridical body, can judge Mudimbe's success or failure

to either free himself or the other. The only thing that can seriously judge Mudimbe's mediation is perhaps death, here understood not as the grim reaper, but as the radically Other. Only death can judge whether his autobiographical invention, his deconstructive confession succeeds in freeing both himself and his fellow Africans. Hence Mudimbe's reference to Lucretius *De Natura Rerum* (*Of The Nature of Things*): "And Nature holds this like a mirror up / Of time-to-be when we are dead and gone."<sup>xxvii</sup>

The last question, of course, is this: Is the discursive sphere put forward above true to both Mudimbe and "I" as Derridean? Yes, providing, of course, we understand this truth, however paradoxical this may sound, as a form of betrayal.<sup>xxviii</sup> Truth here is indeed not understood as accuracy, exactitude, or conformity, but as an invitation to participate in the act of inventing the impossible. This implies neither disloyalty nor a treacherous behaviour. On the contrary, it implies something much more difficult to achieve: the task of being truthful to the juxtaposition of thought and existence, a type of juxtaposition that affords no poised self-reflection (Descartes) or utter denial (Lévi-Strauss). Once this act of betrayal is assumed, the sphere of discourse remains then true to both Mudimbe and "I"; a truthfulness that exposes us to the utterly translational character of all thinking. This is the kind of *aporia* that any re-writing of one's own reading undergoes; a strange kind of *aporia* that is not *one* strictly speaking because it is also paradoxically a *poros*: the invitation to continue on a path in a situation where there is no path.

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<sup>i</sup> Kai Kresse, “Reading Mudimbe,” *The Journal of African Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (June 2005): 1.

<sup>ii</sup> There is no space here to rehearse Derrida’s well-known interpretation of invention. Suffice to say that for Derrida, it is always necessary to distinguish between any invention whatsoever and the invention of the impossible. The latter—i.e. what interests Derrida most—is really at once and paradoxically: the invention of what is happening (my death, for example) and the invention of an adventure (the death of the other, this event that gives me the possibility of saying “my death,” for example). Derrida’s focus is really on a type of invention that knows no foundational thematic. On this topic, see Jacques Derrida, “Psyche: Inventions of the Other,” trans. C. Porter, *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. L. Waters and W. Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

<sup>iii</sup> Derrida, “Psyche: Inventions of the Other,” in *Reading de Man Reading*, p. 61.

<sup>iv</sup> See Jean-Paul Martinon, *On Futurity: Malabou, Nancy, and Derrida* (London: Palgrave, 2007) and the forthcoming *After “Rwanda”* (2012), see: [www.jeanpaulmartinon.net](http://www.jeanpaulmartinon.net).

<sup>v</sup> For the importance of Derrida’s African origins, see Christopher Wise, *Derrida, Africa, and the Middle East* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>vi</sup> For a remarkable example of this type of questioning—i.e. here specifically a putting into question of the West’s claims to rationality that neither admonishes nor universalizes—, see Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *On Reason: Rationality for a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>vii</sup> I am following here Levinas’s thought, a thought that as Derrida says, one can only agree with. For the importance of evading the burdensome issues of individuality (and therefore the self-enclosed games of identity politics), see Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, trans. M. B. Smith and B. Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), especially pp. 209-14.

<sup>viii</sup> Valentin Y Mudimbe, “Preface,” in *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. xi.

<sup>ix</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. B. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 485.

<sup>x</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Structural Analysis in Linguistics and Anthropology,” in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. M. Layton, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 31-54.

<sup>xi</sup> For this well known term, see Spivak’s introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. lviii.

<sup>xii</sup> Without forcing the point too much, one could say that this is most simply exemplary of the work of deconstruction. For example, as Catherine Malabou says: “Deconstruction refashions the shape occasioned by the withdrawal of presence in a text. In other words, to refashion the shape left by its own deconstruction.” See Catherine Malabou, *La plasticité au soir de l’écriture: Dialectique, destruction, deconstruction* (Paris: Editions Léo Scheer, 2005), p. 99, my translation.

<sup>xiii</sup> For an example of this type of anxiety, albeit taken here from the field of sociology, see: Pierre Bourdieu, “Jonquil Street,” in *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. P. Parkhurst Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: Polity Press 1999), pp. 6-22.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jacques Derrida *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 11. See also: Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. D. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1979).

<sup>xv</sup> Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>xvi</sup> Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, p. xiv.

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<sup>xvii</sup> Lyotard is perhaps the one who speaks most eloquently about the fact that speech is always victorious. As he says: “we are oriented by phrases.” See Jean-François Lyotard, “That Which Resists, After All.” *Philosophy Today* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 402-17.

<sup>xviii</sup> Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, p. xiv.

<sup>xix</sup> Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>xx</sup> For the most salient example of the way Derrida uses this method, see: Jacques Derrida, “Living On / Border Lines,” trans. J. Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. H. Bloom (New York: Continuum, 1979).

<sup>xxi</sup> Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, p. xv.

<sup>xxii</sup> Jacques Derrida, “At This Very Moment in This Work, Here I Am,” trans. by R. Berezdivin, in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas* (London: The Athlone Press, 1991), p. 15, translation modified.

<sup>xxiii</sup> To recall a famous myth one could say that for the anthropologist, the other is always already a Sphinx who poses a riddle to Oedipus (i.e., the anthropologist) and, once the riddle is supposedly solved, She can only commit suicide. This victory of the anthropologist would be here the symbol itself of this economic achievement. The analogy Sphinx/Oedipus – Other/Antropologist was originally made by Claudine Vidal. I give here her exact words: “The sphinx always devoured travellers who were left speechless when asked to resolve one of her riddles, but committed suicide the day Oedipus found a way to resolve them. Although she was a bad player, she was honest; she could easily have cheated and killed Oedipus. No witness, no case. The problem is that the Sphinx could never ask unsolvable riddles. Their end forced her to return to the oblivion from which she was born. What an edifying story: the unveiling of meaning cannot take place without violence. The anthropologist’s project always reminds me of the exchange between Oedipus and the Sphinx. As is well known, anthropology is a conversation between humans weighed down by symbols and signs. Conversation perhaps, but a conversation that is always already prescribed. The saying of the other has value because they raise questions; they matter because they provoke. Enigmas never let go, but Oedipus always wins: have we ever heard of an anthropologist who admits defeat? Starting from the impenetrability of social relations and their languages, the anthropologist always ends up with lucidity and in the process always ends up winning ‘the trophy of meaning, acquired at the last minute, as in a good thriller,’ as Barthes would say.” Claudine Vidal, “Les anthropologues ne pensent pas tout seuls,” *L’Homme* 13, no. 3-4 (July-December 1978): 111, my translation.

<sup>xxiv</sup> On this expression, see: Mogobe B. Ramose, “African renaissance: A Northbound Gaze,” in *Philosophy from Africa*, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 600-610.

<sup>xxv</sup> Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, p. xx. In this quotation, I have replaced Mudimbe’s word “liberty” with “freedom.” The reason for doing so is to remain faithful to de Beauvoir’s French as translated by Bernard Frechtman in the original translation of her work.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. B. Frechtman (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1948), p. 156.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, p. xx.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Is it not Sarah Kofman who rightly says that, “to accomplish a philosophical gesture is to accomplish the gesture of betrayal par excellence.” Sarah Kofman, *Comment s’en sortir?* (Paris Galilée, 1983), p. 18, my translation.