

At the edge of the world: Boundaries,  
territoriality, and sovereignty in Africa.

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## At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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At the Edge of the World:  
Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa

From a philosophical point of view, globalization might be compared with what Heidegger called "the gigantic" (*das Riesige*). For among the characteristics of the gigantic as he understood it were both the elimination of great distances and the representation--producible at any time--of daily life in unfamiliar and distant worlds. But the gigantic was for him above all that through which the quantitative became an essential quality. From this point of view, the time of the gigantic was that in which "the world posits itself in a space beyond representation, thus allocating to the incalculable its own determination and unique historical character."<sup>1</sup>

If at the center of the discussion on globalization we place the three problems of spatiality, calculability, and temporality in their relations with representation, we find ourselves brought back to two points usually ignored in contemporary discourses, even though Fernand Braudel had called attention to them. The first of these has to do with temporal pluralities, and, we might add, with the subjectivity that makes these temporalities possible and meaningful. Braudel drew a distinction between "temporalities of long and very long duration, slowly evolving and less slowly evolving situations, rapid and virtually instantaneous deviations, **[End Page 259]** the quickest being the easiest to detect."<sup>2</sup> He went on to emphasize--and this was the second point--the exceptional character of what he called world time (*le temps du monde*). For him, time experienced in the dimensions of the world had an exceptional character insofar as it governed, depending on the period and the location, certain spaces and certain realities. But other realities and other spaces escaped it and remained alien to it.<sup>3</sup>

The following notes, although they adopt the notion of long duration and relativize the airtightness of the distinctions mentioned above, nonetheless differ in several respects from Braudel's theses. They are based on a twofold hypothesis. First, they assume that temporalities overlap and interlace. In fact, Braudel's postulate of the plurality of temporalities does not by itself suffice to account for contemporary changes. In the case of Africa, long-term developments, more or less rapid deviations, and long-term temporalities are not necessarily either separate or merely juxtaposed. Fitted within one another, they relay each other; sometimes they cancel each other out, and sometimes their effects are multiplied. Contrary to Braudel's conviction, it is not clear that there are any zones on which world history would have no repercussions. What really differ are the many modalities in which world time is domesticated. These modalities depend on histories and local cultures, on the interplay of interests whose determinants do not all lead in the same direction.

The central thesis of this study is that in several regions considered--wrongly--to be on the margins of the world, the domestication of world time henceforth takes place by dominating space and putting it to different uses. When resources are put into circulation, the consequence is a disconnection between people and things that is more marked than it was in the past, the value of things generally surpassing that of people. That is one of the reasons why the resulting forms of violence have as their chief goal the physical destruction of people (massacres of civilians, genocides, various kinds of killing) and the primary exploitation of things. These forms of violence (of which war is only one aspect) contribute to the establishment of sovereignty outside the state, and are based on a confusion between power and fact, between public affairs and private government.<sup>4</sup> **[End Page 260]**

In this study, we are interested in a specific form of domestication and mobilization of space and resources: the form that consists in producing boundaries, whether by moving already existing ones or by doing away with them, fragmenting them, decentering or differentiating them. In dealing with these questions, we will draw a distinction between Africa as a...

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*Achille Mbembe*

*Translated by Steven Rendall*

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1. Martin Heidegger, *Chomtes qui ne mènent nulle part*, trans. W. Brockmeier (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 124–25.

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