

CRITIQUE OF
BLACK
REASON
ACHILLE
MBEMBE

Translated and with an introduction by

LAURENT DUBOIS

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—*Am Magazine*

CRITIQUE OF BLACK REASON

A JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN CENTER BOOK

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BLACK
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ACHILLE
MBEMBE

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LAURENT DUBOIS

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

If a language is a kind of cartography, then to translate is to transform one map into another. It is a process of finding the right symbols, those that will allow new readers to navigate through a landscape. What Mbembe offers us here is a cartography in two senses: a map of a terrain sedimented by centuries of history, and an invitation to find ourselves within this terrain so that we might choose a path through it—and perhaps even beyond it.

What is “Black reason”? Mbembe’s sinuous, resonant answer to that question is that it is what constitutes reason as we know it—the reason of state, the reason of capital, the reason of history. To understand the category of Blackness, one must understand the history of the modern world, its forms of conquest and exploitation, the manifold responses to its systems of oppression, the forms of resistance and voicing, the totality and its fragments. But the only way to make sense of that broader history is to begin from the category itself, from its power to condense and crystallize these broader processes. The critique offered here is one of remarkable historical and philosophical breadth. But it is also always attentive to the labyrinths and multiplicities of individual experience as shaped by social and conceptual worlds. “‘Black’ is first of all a word,” Mbembe writes. “But the word has its own weight, its own density.” “There are words that wound,” he notes, notably this “name that was given to me by someone else.” “To be Black is to be stuck at the foot of a wall with no doors, thinking nonetheless that everything will open up in the end” (pp. 151, 152).

With a voice that is conceptually percussive and often deeply poetic, Mbembe offers an account that is also always a theorization, sometimes

puncturing what seems solid, at other times offering us vistas, openings, through a poetic evocation of possibilities unfulfilled. His voice and perspective are unique for the way he brings together African-American and Caribbean history, European imperial history, and multiple histories of Africa, notably South Africa. This is a painful story but also one that pulses with energy—the energy of the actors and thinkers that have guided Mbembe through this cartography, whose ideas in turn take on new meaning as they are assembled and analyzed here through his unique vision.

This book offers a powerful and at times beautifully sardonic critique of existing discourses about Blacks and Africa. “Still today,” Mbembe writes, “as soon as the subject of Blacks and Africa is raised, words do not necessarily represent things,” and “the true and the false become inextricable” (p. 13). He explores the historical process through which Blackness and Africa became a concatenation of symbols and narratives, with the African continent coming to serve as “the mask as well as the hollow sun.” “When Africa comes up,” he notes, “correspondence between words, images, and the thing itself matters very little. It is not necessary for the name to correspond to the thing, or for the thing to respond to its name.” There has always been a remarkable freedom surrounding talk about Africa and Blackness, a “total abdication of responsibility” that allows people, again and again, to conveniently end up “with a tale with which we are already familiar” (pp. 49, 51–52).

How are we to navigate through this landscape constituted largely out of deeply consequential fantasizing? Partly, as Mbembe does here, by both analyzing and puncturing the genealogy, by mapping it out but also by seeking to look at the map it has constituted for itself. Race, he writes, is “image, form, surface, figure, and—especially—a structure of the imagination.” And racism, a “site of a rupture, of effervescence and effusion,” is a way of “substituting what *is* with something else, with another reality” (p. 32). And it is, as Mbembe insists throughout the work, a force that infuses and haunts global thought, practice, and possibility in ways we must fully confront and understand if we are to move beyond.

His book seeks to lucidly account for the historical foundations for this haunting, to provide categories through which to simultaneously apprehend and unravel it. “The Black Man is in effect the ghost of modernity,” he writes (p. 129). That modern history is “the product of a process that transforms people of African origin into living *ore* from which *metal* is ex-

tracted" (p. 40). The history of the Atlantic slave trade, of the fundamental links between the creation of the plantation complex of the Americas and the constitution of modern Europe, is retold here as the foundation for the global order, and the order of thought itself. But Mbembe's chronology is never a stable one, for the present is shot through with the past, and the structures of labor, migration, surveillance, and capital in our contemporary world are presented here as deeply connected with and alarmingly close to older slaving and colonial orders. And they are sustained, too, by the continuing deployment of the form of thought Mbembe seeks to analyze historically and confront philosophically and analytically.

The history of slavery and colonialism constituted the term "Black" as the name "of the slave: *man-of-metal*, *man-merchandise*, *man-of-money*" (p. 47). The word "designated not human beings *like all others* but rather a *distinct* humanity—one whose very humanity was (and still is) in question." Blackness came to "represent *difference in its raw manifestation*—somatic, affective, aesthetic, imaginary." Symbiotically, Whiteness "became the mark of a certain mode of Western presence in the world, a certain figure of brutality and cruelty, a singular form of predation with an unequaled capacity for the subjection and exploitation of foreign peoples" (pp. 45, 46). Mbembe explores the structural drivers and consequences for this process but also its affective and psychological dimensions, the ways it constituted subjects the world over. To be Black, he writes, was to become "the prototype of a poisoned, burnt subject" and "a being whose life is made of ashes" (p. 40).

The creation of these categories was central to the "process of accumulation that spanned the globe" in the era of plantation slavery and the slave trade (p. 47). The Middle Passage; the creation of brutal, thriving colonies in the Caribbean; and the long history of colonialism in Africa are recounted here but not so much through a traditional chronology as through a narrative that connects various periods, showing how different pasts—and the present—are shot through with one another. For the legacies of this giant process of destruction are everywhere: "Racial capitalism is the equivalent of a giant necropolis. It rests on the traffic of the dead and human bones" (pp. 136–137). This history has created race and given it the power to shape meaning, experience, the past, and the future. Race, "at once image, body, and enigmatic mirror," writes Mbembe, is "the expression of resistance to multiplicity" and "an act of imagination as much as an act of misunderstanding" (pp. 110, 112).

Our contemporary confrontation with the legacies of this history must nourish itself from, find illumination and inspiration in, the work of many who have come before—those who resisted enslavement, those who crafted dreams of alternative worlds, the poets and activists whose presence is as old as the configuration of plantation slavery, the slave trade, and colonialism itself. The enslaved, he writes, were “fertilizers of history and subjects beyond subjection.” Always sustaining the “possibilities for radical insurgency,” they represented a “kind of silt of the earth, a silt deposited at the confluence of half-worlds produced by the dual violence of race and capital” (pp. 36–37), because, always, there was creation in the midst of destruction, as those subjected to these barbarous systems “produced ways of thinking and languages that were truly their own. They invented their own literatures, music, and ways of celebrating the divine” (p. 48). The worlds of meaning and possibility they created through religious and political practice as well as through literature and art are taken up throughout the work and infuse it with the sense of alternative histories and futures. Mbembe shows here how categories can be challenged and remade, sometimes from within. In the hands of those who resisted, Blackness could be transformed “into a symbol of beauty and pride” and “a sign of radical defiance, a call to revolt, desertion, or insurrection” (p. 47). The category itself could even become “an island of repose in the midst of racial oppression and objective dehumanization” (p. 48).

From the eighteenth century to the present day, this process was partly about the reconstitution of history, the “foundation of an archive,” a project in which Mbembe’s work participates. The goal has been “to create community, one forged out of debris from the four corners of the world,” while grappling with a history that meant that this was “a community whose blood stains the entire surface of modernity.” Mbembe crystallizes the work of generations of writers and historians who have struggled to write the past in a way that can open up a different future. As he notes, their work has always been challenging, for the “historical experiences of Blacks did not necessarily leave traces,” and therefore the history can be “written only from fragments brought together to give an account of an experience that itself was fragmented.” But this act of historical reconstruction was and remains, at its core, a necessary act of “moral imagination” (pp. 28–29).

In dialogue with the work of Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, Mbembe reflects luminously on the way in which both Christianity and Islam were en-

countered, absorbed, transformed, and reconfigured in Africa, as people used them as an “immense field of signs” through which to interpret and act within the world. The history of these religious reconfigurations, he writes, highlights the “heretical genius” out of which “flows the capacity of Africans to inhabit several worlds at once and situate themselves simultaneously on both sides of an image” (p. 102). All of these worlds of religious practice, of art, are central in the project to “awaken slumbering powers” in the pursuit of new worlds, allowing for an experience of a “plenitude of time” and serving as “the metaphor for a future to come” (pp. 174, 175).

Mbembe’s book is rooted in and engages with the writings of a wide range of other thinkers. He writes of Marcus Garvey’s search for an Africa that was “the name of a promise—the promise of a reversal of history,” and of the “volcanic thought” of Aimé Césaire (p. 156). He delves into the work of African novelists Amos Tutuola and Sony Labou Tansi and shows how they offer powerful readings of slavery and political oppression. He writes inspiringly of Nelson Mandela, “a man constantly on the lookout, a sentinel at the point of departure,” who “lived intensely—as if everything were to begin again, and as if every moment was his last” (pp. 170, 171). And he writes of Édouard Glissant and his search for a new world to be born from the “under-side of our history,” from the silt that has been “deposited along the banks of rivers, in the midst of archipelagos, in the depths of oceans” (p. 181).

But the greatest guide throughout is Frantz Fanon, whose writings Mbembe has engaged with throughout much of his work. Fanon’s “*situated thinking*, born of a lived experience that was always in progress, unstable, and changing,” provides a model of “critical thought” that was “aimed at smashing, puncturing, and transforming” colonialism and racism. His was always a “*metamorphic thought*,” and as such an ever-present and ever-relevant guide through the ruins of the present (pp. 161, 162).

All of these thinkers were the products of a “polyglot internationalism” through which writings, practices, and ideas “circulated within a vast global network, producing the modern Black imaginary.” Following Paul Gilroy, he argues that their work offers “the foundation for an alternative genealogy of human rights” (p. 30). Mbembe’s own book is also meant to offer an alternative genealogy—of a category, “Black,” that has been made by the world and made the world—in order to find what Glissant calls the “*reservoirs of life*” (p. 181). “The path is clear: on the basis of a critique of the past, we must create a future that is inseparable from

the notions of justice, dignity, and the *in-common*.” This book is for those “to whom the right to have rights is refused, those who are told not to move,” and “those who are turned away, deported, expelled”—the “new ‘wretched of the earth’” (p. 177).

Mbembe’s book is at once a global history, a philosophical intervention, and a call for the creation of new futures. Because the book’s language here often serves as a conceptual and historical cartography, my task has been to create a new map in a new language. The problem has been that the existing cartography of terms, particularly those dealing with race, is quite different in French and English. The same symbols can mean different things in the two languages, resonating with vastly different histories of interpretation and sensibility.¹

Perhaps the most difficult challenge in the translation was a question raised from the title page forward: how should I translate the French word *Nègre*? It is a particularly capacious and shifting term in French, layered with uses and counteruses, shot through in a sense with centuries of struggle over its very meaning. I knew the title had to be *Critique of Black Reason*, which inspired my first attempt, in which I translated directly from “le Nègre” to “the Black,” which had the benefit of seeming accuracy but the disadvantage that it sounded weird to most readers. Using “the Negro,” following a tradition of twentieth-century African-American thought, worked for some parts but not others: and calling the book *Critique of Negro Reason* just didn’t quite work.

It was, ultimately, a particular spiral of illuminated conversation that led to a solution that, once found, seemed perfectly clear and obvious. It is a strategy with pleasingly theological resonances. Here, the unity of “le Nègre” becomes a trinity of words: sometimes “Blacks,” sometimes “Blackness,” and at others “the Black Man.” This allowed me to map, in particular, correspondences that moved from the multiplicity of meanings in the French term to words that pointed and flowed well in English. Something is lost, of course, and perhaps things are added too: the limiting masculinism of the term “the Black Man” worried me, but in fact most of the passages where I translated using this term are articulated in a gendered way, often as a result of that tendency in the works of the thinkers (like Fanon) who so deeply guide much of the text.

In fact, *Critique of Black Reason* itself is, from one perspective, one winding, layered, and detailed definition of the term “Nègre,” an illustration of precisely how complex the term is, and how central it is to the very constitution of modern thought, politics, ideology, and social life. Once embarked in the text, readers will understand that the term—or, in the translation, the trinity of terms—is always insufficient, always just a bit to the side, approaching but not arriving. And this is, in a sense, precisely the point. Mbembe here offers nothing less than a map of the world as it has been constituted through colonialism and racial thinking, an archive of entrapment that also serves, perhaps, as a guide for escape—or at least the beginnings of a reparation through recognition, the first hint of the constitution of a beyond.

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This work of translation is what it is partly because it is the result of a friendship: I have taught and collaborated closely with Achille Mbembe for several years, and also co-led the Francophone Postcolonial Studies Playgroup with him, during which visits to museums, ice cream parlors, and playgrounds have served as the backdrop for ongoing conversations. Aniel, Anton, and Lea, the other participants in this group, are perhaps those who deserve the greatest acknowledgment, among many who have helped create this translation. Perhaps I can attribute to them the sense of freedom that I brought to this project, in which the goal was to somehow transmit the poetic nature of Mbembe's prose into the right pacing, imagery, and openness in English.

There are, of course, many others who made this project possible. Ken Wissoker of Duke University Press had the idea of having me translate the work. Eliza Dandridge, a doctoral student at Duke University, expertly re-read and critiqued a full draft of the translation. And the Franklin Humanities Center funded a translation manuscript workshop, which allowed us to gather a remarkable array of colleagues to discuss an early draft of a few translated chapters, providing guidance and inspiration: Srinivas Aravamudan, Sandie Blaise, J. Kameron Carter, Roberto Dainotto, Ainehi Edoro, Michael Hardt, Azeen Khan, Ranjana Khana, Adriane Lentz-Smith, Anne-Maria B. Makhulu, Emma Monroy, Mark Anthony Neal, Sarah Nutall, Charlie Piot, Rachel Rothendler, and Anne-Gaëlle Salot. Finally, two anonymous reviewers for Duke University Press provided encouragement and thoughtful critique that made the final version of this what it is.

INTRODUCTION

THE BECOMING BLACK OF THE WORLD

These heads of men, these collections of ears, these burned houses, these Gothic invasions, this steaming blood, these cities that evaporate at the edge of the sword, are not to be so easily disposed of.

—AIMÉ CÉSAIRE, *Discourse on Colonialism*

I envision this book as a river with many tributaries, since history and all things flow toward us now. Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world. This is the significant event, the fundamental experience, of our era. And we are only just now beginning the work of measuring its implications and weighing its consequences.¹ Whether such a revelation is an occasion for joy or cause for surprise or worry, one thing remains certain: the demotion of Europe opens up possibilities—and presents dangers—for critical thought. That is, in part, what this essay seeks to examine.

To capture the precise contours of these dangers and possibilities, we need first to remember that, throughout its history, European thought has tended to conceive of identity less in terms of mutual belonging (cobelonging) to a common world than in terms of a relation between similar beings—of being itself emerging and manifesting itself in its own state, or its own mirror.² But it is also crucial for us to understand that as the direct consequence of the logic of self-fictionalization and self-contemplation, indeed of closure, Blackness and race have played multiple roles in the imaginaries of European societies.³ Primary, loaded, burdensome, and unhinged, symbols of raw intensity and repulsion, the two have always occupied a central place—simultaneously, or at least in parallel—within modern knowledge and discourse about man (and therefore about

humanism and humanity). Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, Blackness and race have constituted the (unacknowledged and often denied) foundation, what we might call the nuclear power plant, from which the modern project of knowledge—and of governance—has been deployed.⁴ Blackness and race, the one and the other, represent twin figures of the delirium produced by modernity (chapters 1 and 2).

What are the reasons for the delirium, and what are its most basic manifestations? It results, first, from the fact that the Black Man is the one (or the thing) that one sees when one sees nothing, when one understands nothing, and, above all, when one wishes to understand nothing. Everywhere he appears, the Black Man unleashes impassioned dynamics and provokes an irrational exuberance that always tests the limits of the very system of reason. But delirium is also caused by the fact that no one—not those who invented him, not those who named him thus—would want to be a Black Man or to be treated as one. As Gilles Deleuze observed, “there is always a Black person, a Jew, a Chinese, a Grand Mogol, an Aryan in the midst of delirium,” since what drives delirium is, among other things, race.⁵ By reducing the body and the living being to matters of appearance, skin, and color, by granting skin and color the status of fiction based on biology, the Euro-American world in particular has made Blackness and race two sides of a single coin, two sides of a codified madness.⁶ Race, operating over the past centuries as a foundational category that is at once material and phantasmic, has been at the root of catastrophe, the cause of extraordinary psychic devastation and of innumerable crimes and massacres.⁷

Vertiginous Assemblage

There are three critical moments in the biography of the vertiginous assemblage that is Blackness and race. The first arrived with the organized despoliation of the Atlantic slave trade (from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century), through which men and women from Africa were transformed into human-objects, human-commodities, human-money.⁸ Imprisoned in the dungeon of appearance, they came to belong to others who hated them. They were deprived of their own names and their own languages. Their lives and their work were from then on controlled by the others with whom they were condemned to live, and who denied them recognition as cohumans. And yet they nevertheless remained active sub-

jects.⁹ The second moment corresponded with the birth of writing near the end of the eighteenth century, when Blacks, as beings-taken-by-others, began leaving traces in a language all of their own and at the same time demanded the status of full subjects in the world of the living.¹⁰ The moment was punctuated by innumerable slave revolts and the independence of Haiti in 1804, by the battle for the abolition of the slave trade, by African decolonization, and by the struggle for civil rights in the United States. The second era culminated in the dismantling of apartheid during the last decades of the twentieth century. The third moment—the early twenty-first century—is one marked by the globalization of markets, the privatization of the world under the aegis of neoliberalism, and the increasing imbrication of the financial markets, the postimperial military complex, and electronic and digital technologies.

By “neoliberalism” I mean a phase in the history of humanity dominated by the industries of the Silicon Valley and digital technology. In the era of neoliberalism, time passes quickly and is converted into the production of the money-form. Capital, having reached its maximal capability for flight, sets off a process of escalation. The vision that defines the neoliberal moment is one according to which “all events and situations in the world of life can be assigned a market value.”¹¹ The process is also characterized by the production of indifference; the frenzied codification of social life according to norms, categories, and numbers; and various operations of abstraction that claim to rationalize the world on the basis of corporate logic.¹² Capital, notably finance capital, is haunted by a baneful double and defines itself as unlimited in terms of both ends and means. It does more than just dictate its own temporal regime. Having taken as its responsibility the “fabrication of all relations of filiation,” it seeks to reproduce itself “on its own” in an infinite series of structurally insolvent debts.¹³

There are no more workers as such. There are only laboring nomads. If yesterday’s drama of the subject was exploitation by capital, the tragedy of the multitude today is that they are unable to be exploited at all. They are abandoned subjects, relegated to the role of a “superfluous humanity.” Capital hardly needs them anymore to function. A new form of psychic life is emerging, one based on artificial and digital memory and on cognitive models drawn from the neurosciences and neuroeconomics. With little distinction remaining between psychic reflexes and technological reflexes, the human subject becomes fictionalized as “an entrepreneur of the

self.” This subject is plastic and perpetually called on to reconfigure itself in relation to the artifacts of the age.¹⁴

This new man, subject to the market and to debt, views himself as the simple product of natural luck. He is a kind of “ready-made abstract form,” characteristic of the civilization of the image and of the new relationships that it establishes between fact and fiction, and capable of absorbing any content.¹⁵ He is now just one animal among others, lacking an essence of his own to protect or safeguard. There are no longer any limits placed on the modification of his genetic, biological structure.¹⁶ The new subject differs in many ways from the tragic and alienated figure of early industrialization. First and foremost, he is a prisoner of desire. His pleasure depends almost entirely on his capacity to reconstruct his private life publicly, to turn it into viable merchandise and put it up for sale. He is a neuroeconomic subject absorbed by a double concern stemming from his animal nature (as subject to the biological reproduction of life) and his thingness (as subject to others’ enjoyment of the things of this world). As a *human-thing*, *human-machine*, *human-code*, and *human-in-flux*, he seeks above all to regulate his behavior according to the norms of the market. He eagerly instrumentalizes himself and others to optimize his own pleasure. Condemned to lifelong apprenticeship, to flexibility, to the reign of the short term, he must embrace his condition as a soluble, fungible subject to be able to respond to what is constantly demanded of him: to become another.

Moreover, in the era of neoliberalism, capitalism and animism—long and painstakingly kept apart from each other—have finally tended to merge. The cycle of capital moves from image to image, with the image now serving as an accelerant, creating energy and drive. The potential fusion of capitalism and animism carries with it a number of implications for our future understanding of race and racism. First, the systematic risks experienced specifically by Black slaves during early capitalism have now become the norm for, or at least the lot of, all of subaltern humanity. The emergence of new imperial practices is then tied to the tendency to universalize the Black condition. Such practices borrow as much from the slaving logic of capture and predation as from the colonial logic of occupation and extraction, as well as from the civil wars and raiding of earlier epochs.¹⁷ Wars of occupation and counterinsurgency aim not only to track and eliminate the enemy but also to create a partition in time and an atomization of space. In the future, part of the task of empire will consist in transforming the real

into fiction, and fiction into the real. The mobilization of airpower and the destruction of infrastructure, the strikes and wounds caused by military action, are now combined with the mass mobilization of images, a key part of the deployment of a violence that seeks purity.¹⁸

Capture, predation, extraction, and asymmetrical warfare converge with the rebalkanization of the world and intensifying practices of zoning, all of which point to a new collusion between the economic and the biological. Such collusion translates in concrete terms into the militarization of borders, the fragmentation and partitioning of territories, and the creation of more or less autonomous spaces within the borders of existing states. In some cases such spaces are subtracted from all forms of national sovereignty, operating instead under the informal laws of a multitude of fragmented authorities and private armed forces. In other cases they remain under the control of foreign armies or of international organizations operating under the pretext of, or on behalf of, humanitarianism.¹⁹ Zoning practices are linked in general to transnational networks of repression whose tools and methods include the imposition of ideological grids on populations, the hiring of mercenaries to fight local guerrillas, the formation of “hunt commandos,” and the systematic use of mass imprisonment, torture, and extrajudicial execution.²⁰ This “imperialism of disorganization,” which feeds on anarchy, leverages practices of zoning to manufacture disasters and multiply states of exception nearly everywhere.

Foreign corporations, powerful nations, and local dominant classes all in turn present themselves as helping with reconstruction or use the pretext of fighting insecurity and disorder in order to help themselves to the riches and raw materials of countries thrown into chaos through zoning practices. The age has seen the massive transfer of wealth to private interests, increasing dispossession of the riches wrested from capital during previous struggles, and indefinite payments of massive debt. Even Europe, struck by the violence of capital, has witnessed the emergence of a new class of structurally indebted people.²¹

The potential fusion of capitalism and animism presents a further implication: the very distinct possibility that human beings will be transformed into animate things made up of coded digital data. Across early capitalism, the term “Black” referred only to the condition imposed on peoples of African origin (different forms of depredation, dispossession of all power of self-determination, and, most of all, dispossession of the future and of

time, the two matrices of the possible). Now, for the first time in human history, the term “Black” has been generalized. This new fungibility, this solubility, institutionalized as a new norm of existence and expanded to the entire planet, is what I call the *Becoming Black of the world*.

Race in the Future Tense

Although this fact has always been denied, Euro-American discourse on man depends on the two central figures of Blackness and race. Does the demotion of Europe to the rank of a mere world province signal the extinction of racism? Or must we instead understand that as humanity becomes fungible, racism will simply reconstitute itself in the interstices of a new language on “species,” inserting itself as a kind of sand, molecular and in fragments? In posing the question in these terms, we uphold the idea that neither Blackness nor race has ever been fixed (chapter 1). They have, on the contrary, always belonged to a chain of open-ended signifiers. The fundamental meanings of Blackness and race have always been existential. For ages, the term “Black” in particular flowed with incredible energy, at times connoting inferior instincts and chaotic powers, at others serving as the luminous sign of the possibility that the world might be redeemed and transfigured (chapters 2 and 5). In addition to designating a heterogeneous, multiple, and fragmented world—ever new fragments of fragments—the term “Black” signaled a series of devastating historical experiences, the reality of a vacant life, the fear felt by the millions trapped in the ruts of racial domination, the anguish at seeing their bodies and minds controlled from the outside, at being transformed into spectators watching something that was, but also was not, their true existence.²²

This is not all. The term “Black” was the product of a social and technological machine tightly linked to the emergence and globalization of capitalism. It was invented to signify exclusion, brutalization, and degradation, to point to a limit constantly conjured and abhorred. The Black Man, despised and profoundly dishonored, is the only human in the modern order whose skin has been transformed into the form and spirit of merchandise—the living crypt of capital. But there is also a manifest dualism to Blackness. In a spectacular reversal, it becomes the symbol of a conscious desire for life, a force springing forth, buoyant and plastic, fully engaged in the act of creation and capable of living in the midst of several

times and several histories at once. Its capacity for sorcery, and its ability to incite hallucination, multiplies tenfold. Some saw in the Black Man the salt of the earth, the vein of life through which the dream of a humanity reconciled with nature, and even with the totality of existence, would find its new face, voice, and movement.²³

Europe's twilight has arrived, and the Euro-American world has not yet figured out what it wants to know about, or do with, the Black Man. "Racism without races" is now surfacing in many countries.²⁴ To practice racism today even as it is rendered conceptually unthinkable, "culture" and "religion" have replaced "biology." Republican universalism is presented as blind to race, even as non-Whites are locked in their supposed origins. Racialized categories abound, most of them feeding into everyday practices of Islamophobia. But who among us can doubt that the moment has finally arrived for us to begin-from-ourselves? While Europe goes astray, overtaken by the malaise of not knowing where it is within and with the world, is it not time to lay the foundation for something absolutely new? To do so, will we have to forget Blackness? Or perhaps, on the contrary, must we hold on to its false power, its luminous, fluid, and crystalline character—that strange subject, slippery, serial, and plastic, always masked, firmly camped on both sides of the mirror, constantly skirting the edge of the frame? And if, by chance, in the midst of this torment, Blackness survives those who invented it, and if all of subaltern humanity becomes Black in a reversal to which only history knows the secret, what risks would a Becoming-Black-of-the-World pose to the promise of liberty and universal equality for which the term "Black" has stood throughout the modern period (chapter 6)?

The fierce colonial desire to divide and classify, to create hierarchies and produce difference, leaves behind wounds and scars. Worse, it created a fault line that lives on. Is it possible today to craft a relationship with the Black Man that is something other than that between a master and his valet? Does the Black Man not insist, still, on seeing himself through and within difference? Is he not convinced that he is inhabited by a double, a foreign entity that prevents him from knowing himself? Does he not live in a world shaped by loss and separation, cultivating a dream of returning to an identity founded on pure essentialism and therefore, often, on alterity? At what point does the project of a radical uprising in search of autonomy in the name of difference turn into a simple mimetic inversion of what was previously showered with malediction?

These are some of the questions I ask in this book. It is neither a history of ideas nor an exercise in sociological history, but it uses history to propose a style of critical reflection on our contemporary world. By privileging a sort of reminiscence, half solar and half lunar, half day and half night, I have in mind a single question: how can we think through difference and life, the similar and the dissimilar, the surplus and the *in-common*? This kind of questioning is familiar to the Black experience, which knows so well how to occupy the place of a fleeing limit within contemporary consciousness, serving as a kind of mirror in perpetual motion. But we must wonder why the mirror never stops turning. What prevents it from stopping? What explains the infinite refraction of divisions, each more sterile than the last?

—Johannesburg, 2 August 2013

This essay was written during my long stay at the Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Witwatersrand (in Johannesburg, South Africa). It is part of a cycle of reflections first opened up in *On the Postcolony* (2000), then pursued in *Sortir de la grande nuit* (2010), and concluded by my teaching in a course on Afropolitanism.

During this cycle we sought to inhabit several worlds at the same time, not in an easy gesture of fragmentation, but in one of coming and going, able to authorize the articulation, from Africa, of a *thinking of circulation and crossings*. Along this path it was not useful to seek to “provincialize” European traditions of thought. They are, of course, not at all foreign to us. When it comes to speaking the world in a language for everyone, however, there exist relations of power at the heart of these traditions, and part of the work consisted in weighing in on these internal frictions, inviting them to a decentering, not in order to deepen the distance between Africa and the world, but rather to make possible the emergence, relatively lucidly, of the new demands of a possible universalism.

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For reasons there is no reason to repeat here, this book is dedicated to Sarah, Léa, and Aniel, as well as Jolyon and Jean.

NOTES

Translator's Introduction

- 1 When material quoted by Mbembe in the work is originally in English, I have found and incorporated the relevant passages from the original works. I have also tracked down existing English translations of material in French or other languages, and used the relevant passages from those translations. In these cases, the notes in this translation refer to these English versions rather than those referenced in the original work. In all other cases, I have translated the quoted material from French to English myself.

Introduction

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One The Subject of Race

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