

## 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 unequalled 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 “underside 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.