



## Critique of Black Reason

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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...

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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....

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The pages that follow deal with "Black reason." By this ambiguous and polemical term I mean to identify several things at once: forms of knowledge; a model of extraction and deprecation; a paradigm of subjection, including the modalities governing its eradication; and, finally, a psycho-oneyric complex. Like a kind of giant cage, Black reason is in truth a complicated network of doubling, uncertainty, and equivocation, built with race as its chassis.

We can speak of race (or racism) only in a fatally imperfect language, gray and inadequate. Let it suffice to say, for now, that race is a form of...

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"Africa" and "Blackness": these two notions took shape together. To speak of one is to invoke the other. Each consecrates the other's value. As we have noted, not all Africans are Blacks. But if Africa has a body, and if it is a body, a *thing*, it gets it from the Black Man—no matter where he finds himself in the world. And if the term "Black" is a nickname, if it is *that thing*, it is because of Africa. Both of these—the *thing* and *that thing*—refer to the purest and most radical difference and the law of...

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Whether in literature, philosophy, the arts, or politics, Black discourse has been dominated by three events: slavery, colonization, and apartheid. Still today, they imprison the ways in which Black discourse expresses itself. These events have acquired certain canonical meanings, three of which are worth highlighting. First, as we have suggested in the previous chapters, there is *separation from oneself*. Separation leads to a loss of familiarity with the self to the point that the subject, estranged, is relegated to an alienated, almost lifeless identity. In place of the being-connected-to-itself (another name for tradition) that might have shaped experience, one is...

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This chapter diverges, in several ways, from the preoccupations that usually surround debates on memory, history, and forgetting. My concern is not to specify the status of memory within historiography or within processes of knowledge more generally, much less to untangle the relations between collective memory and individual memory, or between living memory and dead memory. The differences (but also the similarities) between memory as a sociocultural phenomenon and history as epistemology are clearly complex, and the interferences between historical discourse and the discourse of memory are obvious. The goal here is rather to say a few words about how...

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In the previous chapters we saw how, throughout the modern period, the two notions of Africa and Blackness were brought in the process of the fabrication of racial subjects. Their major signature was degradation, and their role was to belong to a humanity pushed to the side, held in contempt as the waste of mankind. Still, as mythic resources, Africa and Blackness were also meant to sustain an untenable limit—both the shattering of meaning and joyous hysteria.

Even at the zenith of the logic of race, these two categories were always marked by ambivalence—the ambivalence of repulsion, of...

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Everything, then, starts with an act of identification: "I am Black." The act of identification is based on a question that we ask of ourselves: "Who, then, am I?" Or else it is a response to a question asked of us, a summons: "Who are you?" In both cases identity is unveiled and made public. But to unveil one's identity is also to recognize oneself. It is a form of self-recognition. It is to know who you are and to speak it or, better, to proclaim it—to say it to oneself. The act of identification is also an affirmation...

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The birth of the racial subject—and therefore of Blackness—is linked to the history of capitalism. Capitalism emerged as a double impulse toward, on the one hand, the unlimited violation of all forms of prohibition and, on the other, the abolition of any distinction between ends and means. The Black slave, in his dark splendor, was the first racial subject: the product of the two impulses, the most visible symbol of the possibility of violence without limits and of vulnerability without a safety net.

Capitalism is the power of capture, influence, and polarization, and it has always depended on...

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