

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?

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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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