

NECRO— POLITICS

**ACHILLE
MBEMBE**

Praise for **ACHILLE MBEMBE**

Winner of the Gerda Henkel Prize

Winner of the Ernst Bloch Prize

Praise for **NECROPOLITICS**

“Mbembe refreshes the debate in a Europe consumed by the ‘desire of apartheid.’ This is a man who is not afraid to throw national history, identities, and borders out the window. French universalism? ‘Conceited,’ asserts Mbembe. . . . In the style of Édouard Glissant . . . he doesn’t limit his geography to the level of the nation but expands it to the ‘Whole-World.’ He dreams of writing a common history of humanity that would deflate all the flashy national heroism and redraw new relations between the self and the other. In a France and a Europe that are even afraid of their own shadows, one can clearly see the subversive potential of Mbembe’s thought. His latest book, *Necropolitics*, draws the unpleasant portrait of a continent eaten up by the desire of ‘apartheid,’ moved by the obsessive search for an enemy, and with war as its favorite game.” —Cécile Daumas, *Libération*

“[Mbembe’s] new book . . . is a precious tool to understand what occurs in the North as well as in the South. The analyses of this faithful reader of Frantz Fanon are irrevocable: war has become not an exception but a permanent state, ‘the sacrament of our era.’ . . . One of the biggest challenges we have to face, Mbembe warns us, is to defend our democracies while including this ‘other’ whom we don’t want if we are to build our common future.”

—Séverine Kodjo-Grandvaux and Michael Pauron, *Jeune Afrique*

Praise for **CRITIQUE OF BLACK REASON**

Winner of the 2015 Geschwister-Scholl-Preis

Winner of the Le Prix FETKANN! de la Mémoire 2013

“Achille Mbembe speaks authoritatively for black life, addressing the whole world in an increasingly distinctive tone of voice. This long-anticipated

book resounds with the embattled, southern predicament from which its precious shards of wisdom originate. . . . Mbembe sketches the entangled genealogies of racism and black thought on their worldly travels from the barracoons and the slave ships, through countless insurgencies, into the vexed mechanisms of decolonization and then beyond them, into our own bleak and desperate circumstances.”

— Paul Gilroy

“Achille Mbembe has placed the discourse of ‘Africa’ squarely in the center of both postmodernism and continental philosophy. Every page of this signifying riff on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is a delight to read. African philosophy is currently enjoying a renaissance, and Mbembe is to its continental pole what Kwame Anthony Appiah is to its analytical pole. Every student of postmodernist theory should read this book.”

— Henry Louis Gates Jr.

“With *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe reaffirms his position as one of the most original and significant thinkers of our time. . . . His voyages in this book through a painstakingly assembled archive of empire, race, slavery, blackness, and liberation . . . produce profound moments of reflection on the origin and nature of modernity and its mutations in the contemporary phase of global capital. A tour de force that will renew debates on capital, race, and freedom in today’s world.”

— Dipesh Chakrabarty

“*Critique of Black Reason* constitutes an important move in bringing together francophone and anglophone postcolonial thought and is a timely demonstration of the reinvigorating potential of both critical thought and translation.”

— Hannah Grayson, *Postcolonial Text*

“We are familiar with the experiences of slavery, colonialism and apartheid, and the historical narrative through which each has unfolded. What Mbembe has done is to tie them all together in a bundle, under the rubric of black reason, that now serves as the genealogy of much of contemporary black experience and the history that has shaped black people’s view of themselves.”

— Gabriel O. Apata, *Theory, Culture, and Society*

“Incontrovertible reading on the complex dynamic between race and belonging in twenty-first-century societies. . . . Brilliant and pioneering. . . .”

— Dominic Thomas, *Europe Now*

NECROPOLITICS

THEORY IN FORMS

A series edited by Nancy Rose Hunt and Achille Mbembe

NECRO- POLITICS ACHILLE MBEMBE

Translated by

STEVEN CORCORAN

Duke University Press
Durham and London

2019

Politiques de l'inimitié © 2016 Editions La Découverte
English translation © 2019 Duke University Press
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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ©
Cover designed by Matthew Tauch
Typeset in Arno Pro by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mbembe, Achille, [date] author. |
Corcoran, Steve, translator.
Title: Necropolitics / Achille Mbembe ;
translated by Steven Corcoran
Other titles: *Politiques de l'inimitié*. English
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2019. |
Series: Theory in forms | Includes bibliographical
references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019009527 (print)
LCCN 2019016270 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478007227 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478005858 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN 9781478006510 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Fanon, Frantz, 1925–1961. | Political
violence. | Decolonization—History—20th century. |
Democracy. | Postcolonialism.
Classification: LCC JC328.6 (ebook) | LCC JC328.6 .M3913
2019 (print) | DDC 320.01—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019009527>

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay was written during a lengthy stay at the Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, South Africa). Throughout my years there, I benefited enormously from continual exchanges with my colleagues Sarah Nuttall, Keith Breckenridge, Pamila Gupta, Sarah Duff, Jonathan Klaaren, Cath Burns, and, more recently, Hlonipha Mokoena and Shireen Hassim. Adam Habib, Tawana Kupe, Zeblon Vilakazi, Ruksana Osman, and Isabel Hofmeyr never ceased to bestow all manner of encouragement on me. The postdoctoral seminar that I ran with my colleague Sue van Zyl at WISER, and to which Charne Lavery, Claudia Gastrow, Joshua Walker, Sarah Duff, Kirk Sides, and Timothy Wright regularly contributed, proved an invaluable space of inquiry and creativity.

Paul Gilroy, David Theo Goldberg, Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, Françoise Vergès, Éric Fassin, Laurent Dubois, Srinivas Aravamudan, Charles Piot, Elsa Dorlin, Grégoire Chamayou, Charles Piot, Ackbar Abbas, Dilip Gaonkar, Beth Povinelli, my late friend T. K. Biaya, Nadia Yala Kisukidi, Eyal Weizman, Judith Butler, Ghassan Hage, Ato Quayson, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Adi Ophir, Célestin Monga, Siba Grovogui, Susan van Zyl, Henry Louis Gates, and Felwine Sarr have all been fertile sources of inspiration and, often unbeknownst to them, absolutely first-rate interlocutors.

I thank my colleagues from the (now decommissioned) Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism, Leigh-Ann Naidoo, Zen Marie, and Kelly Gillespie, as well as Najibha Deshmukh and Adila Deshmukh for their profound friendship.

My publisher Hugues Jallon and his team, Pascale Iltis, Thomas Del-
tombe, and Delphine Ribouchon, have all, as usual, been unfailing in their
support. This essay is dedicated to a man beyond names, Fabien Éboussi
Boulaga, and to two steadfast friends, Jean-François Bayart and Peter L.
Geschiere.

INTRODUCTION

THE ORDEAL OF THE WORLD

If you want to make use of a book, simply picking it up will not suffice. My original aim was to write a book that not a hint of mystery shrouded. In the end, I found myself with a short essay of sketched hachures, of parallel chapters, of more or less discontinuous lines, of raw and rapid gestures, and even slight movements of withdrawal followed by abrupt reversals.

It is true that the roughness of the topic did not afford a violin note. It was enough to suggest the presence of bone, a skull, or a skeleton inside the element. This bone, this skull, and this skeleton all have names: repopulation of the Earth, exit from democracy, society of enmity, relation without desire, voice of blood, and terror and counterterror as our time's medication and poison (chapters 1 and 2). The best way to access these different skeletons was to produce a form, not a spineless one but a tense and energy-charged one. In any case, this text is one on whose surface the reader can glide freely, without control points or visas, sojourning as long as desired, moving about at will, returning and leaving at any moment and through any door. The reader may set off in any direction and maintain—in relation to each of its words and to each of its affirmations—an equal critical distance and, if need be, a hint of skepticism.

Every gesture of writing is intended to engage a force, or even a *dif-férend*—what I here call an element. In the present case, we are dealing with a raw element and a dense force. This is a force of separation rather than one that is bond-intensifying—a force of scission and real isolation that is exclusively turned upon itself and that, while pretending to ensure the world's government, seeks exemption from it. What follows is a reflection on today's planetary-scale renewal of the relation of enmity and its

multiple reconfigurations. Its pivotal point is the Platonic concept of *pharmakon*—the idea of a medication that acts at once as remedy and as poison. Frantz Fanon's political and psychiatric work forms part of the basis for my showing how, in the wake of decolonization, war (in the figure of conquest and occupation, of terror and counterinsurgency) has become the sacrament of our times, at this, the turn of the twenty-first century.

This transformation has liberated movements of passion that are increasingly pushing liberal democracies to don the garb of the exception, to perform unconditioned acts in faraway places, and to seek to exercise dictatorship over themselves and against their enemies. Among other things, I ponder the consequences of this inversion and the novel terms within which the question of the relations between violence and law, norm and exception, the state of war, the state of security, and the state of freedom are now posed. Backdropped by the world's narrowing and the Earth's repopulation, as well as new cycles of population movements, this essay endeavors not merely to open new paths for a critique of atavistic nationalisms. Indirectly it also reflects on the possible foundations of a mutually shared genealogy and thus of a politics of the living beyond humanism.

This book indeed deals with the sort of arrangement with the world—or even of its use—that, at this beginning of the century, consists in counting whatever is not oneself for nothing. This process has a genealogy and a name—the race for separation and *de-linking*, a race being run against the backdrop of a simple anxiety of annihilation. Nowadays a good many individuals are beset with dread, afraid of having been invaded and being on the verge of disappearing. Entire peoples labor under the apprehension that the resources for continuing to assume their identities are spent. They maintain that an outside no longer exists such that to protect themselves against threats and danger the enclosures must be multiplied. Wanting not to remember anything any longer, least of all their own crimes and misdeeds, they dream up bad objects that return to haunt them and that they then seek violently to rid themselves of.

Constantly contriving the evil genies by which they are possessed and that, in a spectacular turnaround, now surround them, they have begun to raise questions. These questions are similar to those that non-Western societies were asking only recently, caught as they were in the snare of the far more destructive forces of colonization and imperialism.¹ Questions such as: Can the Other, in light of all that is happening, still be regarded

as my fellow creature? When the extremes are broached, as is the case for us here and now, precisely what does my and the other's humanity consist in? The Other's burden having become too overwhelming, would it not be better for my life to stop being linked to its presence, as much as its to mine? Why must I, despite all opposition, nonetheless look after the other, stand as close as possible to his life if, in return, his only aim is my ruin? If, ultimately, humanity exists only through being in and of the world, can we found a relation with others based on the reciprocal recognition of our common vulnerability and finitude?

Today, manifestly little interest is shown in making the circle more inclusive. Rather, the idea is to make borders as the primitive form of keeping at bay enemies, intruders, and strangers—all those who are not one of us. In a world characterized more than ever by an unequal redistribution of capacities for mobility, and in which the only chance of survival, for many, is to move and to keep on moving, the brutality of borders is now a fundamental given of our time. Borders are no longer sites to be crossed but lines that separate. Within these more or less miniaturized and militarized spaces, everything is supposed to remain still. Many are those who, encountering them, now meet their ends or, when not simple victims of shipwrecks or electrocution, are deported.

Today we see the principle of equality being undone by the laws of autochthony and common origin, as well as by divisions within citizenship, which is to say the latter's declension into "pure" citizenship (that of the native born) and borrowed citizenship (one that, less secure from the start, is now not safe from forfeiture). Confronted with the perilous situations so characteristic of the age, the question, at least in appearance, is no longer to know how to reconcile the exercise of life and freedom with the knowledge of truth and solicitude for those different from oneself. From now on, it is to know how, in a sort of primitive outpouring, to actualize the will to power by means that are half-cruel, half-virtuous.

Consequently, war is determined as end and necessity not only in democracy but also in politics and in culture. War has become both remedy and poison—our *pharmakon*. Its transformation into the *pharmakon* of our time has, in turn, let loose gruesome passions that are increasingly pushing our societies to exit democracy and, as was the case under colonization, to transform into societies of enmity. Under contemporary conditions, the societies of the North are not left unscathed by this

planetary renewal of colonial relations and their multiple reconfigurations, all of which is only amplified through the war on terror and the global-scale creation of a “state of exception.”

Now who today could really discuss war as the *pharmakon* of our time without calling on Frantz Fanon, in whose shadow this essay has been written? Colonial war — since this is essentially what Fanon speaks about — is ultimately, if not the matrix of the *nomos* of the Earth in the last instance, then at least a privileged means of its institutionalization. As wars of conquest and occupation, and, in many aspects, of extermination, colonial wars were simultaneously wars of siege as much as foreign wars and racial wars. But how can we forget all the aspects they also shared in common with civil wars, wars of defense, and did not even wars of liberation demand so-called counterinsurgency wars? In truth, this interlocking of wars, as causes and consequences of one another, is why they give rise to so much terror and atrocity. It is also why, among those who have suffered them or participated in them, they sometimes provoke a belief in an illusory all-powerfulness, or sometimes even a terror and the vanishing, pure and simple, of the feeling of existing.

Similar to the majority of contemporary wars — including the war on terror and diverse forms of occupation — colonial wars were wars of extraction and predation. On the sides of the winners and the losers alike, they invariably led to the ruin of something unfigurable, almost nameless, entirely difficult to pronounce — how can one recognize in the enemy’s face that one seeks to blow away, but whose wounds one could equally treat, another face that renders them in their full humanity, and thus as similar to oneself (chapter 3)? The forces of passion these wars released have increased tenfold humans’ faculty to divide themselves. They compelled some people to confess more openly than in the past their most repressed desires and to communicate more directly than before with their most obscure myths. In others, they opened the chance to exit their abyssal sleep and experience — perhaps for the first and only time — the power of being of surrounding worlds and, incidentally, the chance to suffer their own vulnerability and incompleteness. In others still, they afforded the experience of being touched and affected by this brutal exposure to the unknown suffering of others as well as a chance to abruptly exit the circle of indifference in which they had once walled themselves off and to answer the call of these innumerable bodies of pain.

Confronted with colonial power and war, Fanon understood that the only subject is a living one (chapter 3). As living, the subject is immediately open onto the world. Fanon grasped his own life only by understanding the life of other living and nonliving beings, for only then did he himself exist as a living form, and only then could he rectify the asymmetry of relations and introduce into them a dimension of reciprocity and care for humanity. On the other hand, Fanon regarded the gesture of care as a practice of re-symbolization, the stake of which is the possibility of reciprocity and mutuality (an authentic encounter with others). His advice to colonized persons who refused castration was to turn their backs on Europe; in other words, he suggested that one begin with oneself and stand tall outside the categories that brought one to bow and scrape. The difficulty involved not only one's being assigned a race but one's internalizing of the terms of this assignation, that is, one's coming to the point of desiring and becoming the accomplice of castration. For everything, or nearly everything, encouraged colonized peoples to inhabit as their skin and their truth the fiction that the Other had produced in their regard.

To oppressed individuals who sought to rid themselves of race's burden, Fanon thus proposed a long course of therapy. This therapy began in and through language and perception, via the knowledge of the fundamental reality according to which becoming a human being in the world means accepting one's being exposed to the other. It continued with a colossal working on oneself, with new experiences of the body, of movement, of being-together—and even of communion, as the shared commonality that is most alive and vulnerable in humanity—and, possibly also, new experiences of the practice of violence. This violence was to be directed against the colonial system. This system's particularity lay in its manufacturing a panoply of suffering that, in response, solicited neither the accepting of responsibility nor solicitude nor sympathy and, often, not even pity. To the contrary, it did everything to deaden people's capacity to suffer because the natives were suffering, everything to dull their ability to be affected by this suffering. Further still, colonial violence worked to capture the force of desire of the subjugated and channel it into unproductive investments. By claiming to be acting on behalf of the interests of the natives, and thus in their stead, the colonial machinery sought not merely to block their desire to live. It aimed to affect and diminish their capacities to consider themselves moral agents.

Fanon's clinical and political practice stood resolutely opposed to this colonial order. Better than others, he put his finger on one of the great contradictions inherited from the modern era, one that his time struggled to resolve. The vast movement of repopulation of the world inaugurated at the edge of modern times ended in a massive "taking of lands" (colonization) on a scale and using technologies never before seen in the history of humanity. Far from leading to democracy's spread across the planet, the race for new lands opened onto a new law (*nomos*) of the Earth, the main characteristic of which was to establish war and race as history's two privileged sacraments. The sacramentalization of war and race in the blast furnace of colonialism made it at once modernity's antidote and poison, its twofold pharmakon.

In these conditions, thought Fanon, decolonization as a *constituting* political event could hardly forgo the use of violence. In any case, as a primitive active force, violence preexisted the advent of decolonization, which consisted in setting in motion an animated body able to completely and unreservedly deal with that which, being anterior and external to it, prevented it from arriving at its concept. But pure and unlimited violence, however creative it was set on being, could never be safeguarded from potential blindness. If caught in a sterile repetition, it could degenerate at any moment and its energy be placed in the service of destruction for destruction's sake.

For its part, the primary function of the medical gesture was not the absolute eradication of illness or the suppression of death and the advent of immortality. The ill human was the human with no family, no love, no human relations, and no communion with a community. It was the person deprived of the possibility of an authentic encounter with other humans, others with whom there were a priori no shared bonds of descent or of origin (chapter 3). This *world of people without bonds* (or of people who aspire only to take their leave of others) is still with us, albeit in ever shifting configurations. It inhabits the twists and turns of renewed Judeophobia and its mimetic counterpart, Islamophobia. It inhabits the desire for apartheid and endogamy that harry our epoch and engulf us in the hallucinatory dream of a "community without strangers."

Almost everywhere the law of blood, the law of the talion, and the duty to one's race—the two supplements of atavistic nationalism—are resurfacing. The hitherto more or less hidden violence of democracies is rising

to the surface, producing a lethal circle that grips the imagination and is increasingly difficult to escape. Nearly everywhere the political order is re-constituting itself as a form of organization for death. Little by little, a terror that is molecular in essence and allegedly defensive is seeking legitimation by blurring the relations between violence, murder, and the law, faith, commandment, and obedience, the norm and the exception, and even freedom, tracking, and security. No longer is the concern to eliminate, via the law and justice, murder from the books of life in common. Every occasion is now one in which the supreme stake is to be risked. Neither the *human-of-terror* nor the terrorized human — both of them new substitutes for the citizen — foreswear murder. On the contrary, when they do not purely and simply believe in death (given or received), they take it as the ultimate guarantee of a history tempered in iron and steel — the history of Being.

Fanon's concerns from start to finish, in his thinking as well as in his practice, bore on the irreducibility of the human link, the inseparability of humans and other living creatures, as well as the vulnerability of humankind and especially of the ill-human-of-war, and further, the care required to write the living into time. The chapters that follow deal with these interrogations, diagonally and through altering figures. As Fanon evinced a particular solicitude toward Africa and permanently linked his fate to the continent's own, the African world has naturally come to occupy the forefront of the reflection herein (chapters 5 and 6).

There are most certainly names that refer little to things but instead pass above or alongside them. Their function is one of disfiguration and distortion. This is why *the* thing, in its truth, tends to resist both the name and all translation. This is not because the thing sports a mask but because its force of proliferation renders every qualifier superfluous forthwith. For Fanon, such was the case for Africa and its mask, the Negro. Did the thing "Africa" simply operate as a catchall entity, woolly and devoid of historical weight or depth, on the subject of which anyone could say almost anything without its leading to any consequence? Or did it have its own force, and thus constitute a project able, by virtue of its own reserves of life, to reach its own concept and write itself into this new planetary age?

Fanon attended closely to people's experience of surfaces and depths, of lights and reflections, and of shadows. He endeavored to report on the worlds of living beings, without foundering in repetition. As regard final meanings, he knew that they were to be sought in the structural as much

as in the obscure side of life. Whence the extraordinary attention that he gave to language, speech, music, theater, dance, ceremonials, settings, and all sorts of technical objects and psychic structures. That said, this essay is not at all about singing back the dead but rather aims to evoke in fragmentary fashion a great thinker of *transfiguration*.

In so doing, I found nothing more appropriate than a figural style of writing that oscillates between the vertiginous, dissolution, and dispersal. This style is one composed of crisscrossed loops, the edges and lines of which meet back up with their vanishing point each time. The reader will have understood—language's function in such writing is to return to life what had been abandoned to the powers of death. It is to reopen access to the deposits of the future, beginning with the future of those in whom, not so long ago, it was hard to say which part pertained to the human and which to the animal, object, thing, or commodity (chapter 6).

ONE

EXIT FROM DEMOCRACY

This book aims to contribute—from Africa, where I live and work (but also from the rest of the world, which I have not stopped surveying)—to a critique of our time. This time is one of the repopulation and the planetarization of the world under the aegis of militarism and capital and, in ultimate consequence, a time of exit from democracy (or of its inversion). To carry this project through, I take a transversal approach, attentive to the three motifs of opening, crossing, and circulation. This sort of approach is fruitful only if it makes room for a *reverse reading* of our present.

The approach sets out from the presupposition according to which a genuine deconstruction of the world of our time begins with the full recognition of the perforce provincial status of our discourses and the necessarily regional character of our concepts—and therefore with a critique of every form of abstract universalism. This doing, it endeavors to break with the spirit of the times, which, we know, is about closure and demarcations of all sorts, and in which borders between here and there, the near and the distant, the inside and the outside, serve as a Maginot Line for a major part of what passes as “global thinking” today. Now, global thinking can only ever be that which, turning its back on theoretical segregation, rests on the archives of what Édouard Glissant called the “All-world” (*Tout-monde*).

Reversal, Inversion, and Acceleration

For the needs of the reflection that I sketch herein, there are four characteristic features of our times worth emphasizing. The first is the narrowing of the world and the repopulation of the Earth in view of the demographic

transition now under way thanks to the worlds of the South. Our coming to modernity involved decisive events such as the geographical and cultural uprooting of entire populations, as well as their voluntary relocation or forced settlement, across the vast territories once inhabited by indigenous peoples.¹ On the Atlantic side of the planet, two significant moments, both tied to the expansion of industrial capitalism, gave rhythm to this process of the redistribution of populations across the planet.

These are the moments of colonization (from its inception in the early sixteenth century with the conquest of the Americas) and the Negro slave trade. The slave trade and colonization alike broadly coincided with the formation of mercantilist thought in the West, if they were not purely and simply at its origins.² The slave trade thrived on its hemorrhaging and draining of the most useful arms and most vital energies of the slave-providing societies.

In the Americas, slave labor of African origin was put to work as part of a vast project to subordinate the environment in view of its rational and profitable development. In several respects, the plantation regime was essentially about cutting down, burning, and routinely razing forests and trees; about replacing the natural vegetation with cotton and sugar cane; about remodeling ancient landscapes; about destroying the existing vegetal formations; and about replacing an ecosystem with an agrosystem.³ However, the plantation was not merely an economic measure. For the slaves transplanted into the New World, it was also the scene on which another beginning played out. Here, life came to be shaped according to an essentially racial principle. But, thus understood, race, far from being a simple biological signifier, referred to a worldless and soilless body, a body of combustible energy, a sort of double of nature that could, through work, be transformed into an available reserve or stock.⁴

As for colonization, it thrived by excreting those who were, in several regards, deemed superfluous, a surfeit within the colonizing nations. This was the case, in particular, of the poor viewed as scrounging off society and the vagabonds and delinquents seen as harmful to the nation. Colonization was a technology for regulating migratory movements. At the time many people considered that this form of migration would ultimately be of advantage to the country of departure. "Not only will a large number of men who live in idleness here, and represent a weight, a burden and do not relate to this kingdom, thus be put to work, but also their children between

twelve and fourteen years or less will be removed from idleness, tasked with doing thousands of futile things, and perhaps producing good merchandise for this country,” wrote, for example, Antoine de Montchrestien in his *Traité d’économie politique* at the start of the seventeenth century. And further still he added, “Our idle women . . . will be employed to pull out, dye and separate feathers, to pull, beat and work hemp, and to gather cotton, and diverse things for dyeing.” The men will be able, for their part, “to be given employment working in the mines and ploughing, and even hunting whale . . . as well as fishing for cod, salmon, herring, and felling trees,” he concluded.⁵

From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, these two modalities of repopulating the planet through human predation, natural wealth extraction, and setting subaltern groups to work constituted the major economic, political, and, in many respects, philosophical stakes of the period.⁶ Economic theory and the theory of democracy alike were built partly on the defense or critique of one or other of these two forms of spatial redistribution of populations.⁷ These two forms were, in turn, at the origin of numerous conflicts and wars of partition or monopolization. Resulting from this planetary-scale movement, a new partition of the Earth emerged with, at its center, Western powers and, in the margins, the peripheries, that is, domains of excessive struggle that were destined for occupation and pillage.

It is also necessary to consider the generally conventional distinction between commercial colonialism—or even trading-post colonialism—and settler colonialism properly speaking. Certainly, in both cases, the colony’s—every colony’s—enrichment made sense only if it contributed to enriching the metropole. The difference between them, however, resides in the fact that settler colonies were conceived as an extension of the nation, whereas trading-post or exploitation colonies were only a way to grow the metropole’s wealth by means of asymmetrical, inequitable trade relations, almost entirely lacking in heavy local investment.

In addition, the stranglehold exerted over trading-post colonies was in principle preordained to end, so the settling of Europeans in these places was entirely provisional. In the case of settler colonies, however, migration policy aimed to maintain in the nation’s bosom people who would have been lost to it had they stayed. The colony served as a pressure relief valve for all the undesirables, for the categories of the population “whose crimes and debaucheries” could have been “rapidly destructive” or whose needs

would have driven them toward prison or forced them to beg, while rendering them useless for the country. This scission of humanity into “useful” and “useless” — “excess” and “superfluidity” — has remained the rule, with utility being essentially measured against the capacity to deploy a labor force.

The repeopling of the Earth at the beginning of the modern era did not only pass through colonization. Religious factors also go toward explaining the migrations and mobilities. Upon the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, from 1685 to 1730 between 170,000 and 180,000 Huguenots fled France. Religious emigration affected many other communities. International movements of different types were intertwined with one another, such as the Portuguese Jews whose trade networks wove together around the great European ports of Hamburg, Amsterdam, London, and Bordeaux; the Italians who invested in the world of finance, in trade, or in highly specialized professions in glass and luxury goods; or even soldiers, mercenaries, and engineers who, due to the manifold conflicts of the time, passed blithely from one market of violence to another.⁸

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Earth’s repeopling is no longer carried out through slave trafficking and the colonization of remote regions of the globe. Work, in its traditional sense, is no longer perforce the privileged means of value creation. The moment is nevertheless about shake-ups, large and small dislocations and transfers, in short, new figures of exodus.⁹ The new circulatory dynamics and creation of diasporas pass in large part via trade and commerce, wars, ecological disasters and environmental catastrophes, including cultural transfers of all sorts.

From this viewpoint, the accelerated aging of human groupings in the world’s wealthy nations represents an event of considerable impact. It is the opposite of the aforementioned demographic surpluses typical of the nineteenth century. Geographical distance as such no longer represents an obstacle to mobility. The major migration pathways are diversifying, and increasingly sophisticated measures for bypassing borders are being put in place. As a result, if, being centripetal, migratory flows are moving in several directions simultaneously, Europe and the United States nonetheless remain the major points of fixation for the multitudes in movement — in particular those from the planet’s centers of poverty. Here new agglomerations are rising up and new polynational cities are, in spite of everything, being built. The ordeal of these new international movements is yielding —