

# ‘The Reason of Unreason’: Achille Mbembe and David Theo Goldberg in conversation about *Critique of Black Reason*

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## Abstract

David Theo Goldberg engages Achille Mbembe in a wide-ranging conversation on the key lines of analysis of Mbembe's book, *The Critique of Black Reason*. The discussion ranges across a broad swath of key themes: the constitutive feature of racisms in the making of modernity and modern capitalism as conceived through the global black experience; the African and French archives in constituting, resisting, and refashioning 'black reason' and its multiple registers; the centrality of slavery to this constitution and resistance; thinghood and humanity; liberalism as the basis for racial pessimism. The discussion closes with Mbembe's plea for a shared being and an exchange about repair and reparation.

## Keywords

Afro-pessimism, archives, reason, slavery, unreason, violence

*DTG:* I am sitting here with Achille Mbembe to talk about *The Critique of Black Reason*<sup>1</sup> and to engage in a conversation about its driving themes. Thanks, Achille, for doing this. A really complex book, filled with insight, and I thought we might begin by thinking a bit about the line of argument you lay out concerning the history of modernity as the history of black reason. And there are obvious overlaps and intersections with other accounts of the histories, both of modernity and of blackness. There are also important divergences. So I'd be interested to hear you speak a bit more about what you set out to transform in our

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comprehension of the constitutive formation of modernity through and in what you're characterizing as black reason.

*AM:* I should start by making it clear that an important part of the book is an attempt at engaging with the African American archive, or to be more specific, fragments of this complex and at times contradictory archive. African-American thinkers and scholars have written about the continent since the 19th century. There's a tradition to that effect. But the reverse has not been true to a large extent. John Chilembwe, Kwame Nkrumah, and countless others had a firsthand experience of black life in America, but 'the black condition' in America hardly ever became an explicit subject of their meditations. The book is partly an attempt at confronting the fact of African-American history and archive from a continental perspective. The project here is to deliberately twist this archive, to read it or fragments thereof, *from a different place*, from a place other than African America itself. The intellectual gesture attempted in this book is to interrogate this archive indirectly, from the other side of the Atlantic, to put it in relation to other bodies, other fissures and other intensities, and to do this in a manner which allows it to speak out of its presumed ground.

At the heart of this archive – and that of modernity at large – is slavery or, to put it differently, the question of unfreedom, of captivity, of the longing for redemption.

As a matter of fact, to speak about modernity is to confront the fact of capitalism. And there is hardly any way in which we can think about capitalism without having to account for racial slavery and its aftermath. I wanted to explore this genealogy of modernity that places racial capitalism at its heart as the cauldron in which the idea of black, of blackness, was produced. I wanted to take seriously the idea that black, or blackness, is not so much a matter of ontology as it is a matter of historicity or even contingency. I also wanted to contest those lineages of blackness that use memories of trauma to develop discourses of blackness as ontology.

A proper exploration of the concept of black, or blackness, inevitably leads any historian who has paid attention to this concept to an encounter with capitalism. When we look at capitalism from the vantage point of continental African and African-American history, we realize that capitalism evokes a number of things. It is, of course, an economic system, an apparatus of capture, a regime of signs. But it must also be understood as a certain kind of *compulsion*, that is, a certain mode of organization and redistribution of power: the compulsion to put things in order as a precondition for extracting their inner value. It is the compulsion to categorize, to separate, to measure and to name, to classify and to establish equivalences between things and between things and persons,

persons and animals, animals and the so-called natural, mineral, and organic world.

It goes without saying that whenever an order is manufactured and value is extracted, whether one likes it or not, that which is deemed valueless is made redundant. It is forced to lose its face, that which gives substance to the signifier, and to wear a mask. This does not simply apply to objects. This applies to people as well. This is what ordering is all about under slavery and under capitalism. It is about separating what is useful from waste, from the detritus. As a result, any genealogy of freedom in the context of black life in America must take as its point of departure not so much what some have called social death as this matter of waste, of how to retrieve the human from a history of waste – or, to put it differently, a history of desiccation.

Second, African-American history is not so much about social death as it is about the permanent generation, re-creation and re-signification of life flows in the face of the forces of capture and desiccation. Of course, the two poles of re-creation and desiccation are inseparable. The body that is supposed to work is the same body that is continually under attack or made redundant. Ropes are drawn tight. Ribs are shattered. Victims are mercilessly sodomized. In the process, various organs are sucked dry or destroyed. It becomes impossible to breathe with one's lungs. At the same time, the endless labour of restoring that which has been destroyed goes on. Many have been defeated in this peculiar struggle. But sewing up the holes, preventing the destroyed body from being completely torn apart, reconnecting the tissues, unblocking the points of blockage, getting out of the hole, breaking through the wall – this has been a key part of the dialectics, the line of writing that historically prevented many from drowning in the ocean of pessimism, despair and nihilism.

Underlying all of this is, of course, the question of unreason and unfreedom. For those who, for centuries, were condemned to live their lives in a cage or in a monstrous hood, reason often took the face of an inhuman head and the form of wolves' jaws, a machine geared towards the elimination of certain classes of human beings located at the interface of the human and the nonhuman, or the human, the commodity and the object...

*DTG*: ...or the thing...

*AM*: ...or the thing, the black thing, the black as a thing, the burning fossil that fuelled capitalism during its primitive era. But this is not all. It is also a history of attempts to reassemble some form of the social and of community, and as such, of attending to matters of care and matters of repair.

*DTG*: In the book, you see black reason as itself constituted ambiguously, partly from the outside, partly self-constituting. The first couple of chapters of the book focus on the imposition of racist history on and in the creation of a reasoning about the constitution of blackness itself. The next two chapters are a response to that, how black folk around the world, particularly in and from Africa, respond. And then in the final chapter, the creation of blacks' own voice: a black reason that is the reason from blackness itself. So there is a sort of doubling that is taking place.

There are, then, different genres of black reason. Two in particular stand out: (1) the reasoning *about* blacks and (2) the reasoning *of* blacks in response to the reasoning about blacks. This second reasoning is not simply reactive. It also evidences a sort of creative impulse.

*AM*: The book is trying to push a line of argument that goes something like this: black reason is constitutive of the history of modernity. The history of modernity is not so much about the progress of reason as it is about *the history of reason's unreason*. There are also important divergences. What I set out to do is transform our comprehension of the constitutive formation of modernity through and in what I characterize as black reason.

*DTG*: There's another sense in which I read the book as interestingly shifting from the African-American archive as the dominant archive through which to think about blackness, or the only archive through which to think about blackness, and if not centring, certainly taking seriously in its full capacitating – for want of a better way of putting it – of the Francophone and French archives. So all the material you draw on offers a way of providing an engagement with the constitution of black reason in all its complexity, using the French archive around blackness to make more complex the African-American archive itself. And, of course, there is a history of that relation too, of African Americans in Paris and so on.

*AM*: Yes, as you point out, there is a geography, an archaeology, a triangulation between continental Africa, America, and France, in particular. It is true that the first chapters pay attention to the historical processes by which 'blackness' was invented as a presumably 'ontological' category, in any case as a legal category, as a social status, and more importantly as the hole into which the distinction between the human and the non-human vanishes. Various technologies and dispositifs were mobilized in turning these acts of imagination into facts and events, an event for discourse in the deepest sense of the term; but an event, too, for a mode of rule over those deemed both useful and superfluous. And then there is a set of chapters that pay attention to the

discourse of refutation, a kind of apologetics that is produced by black thinkers themselves in the attempt at making sense of this name not at all of their own making, with which they nevertheless have to contend, whether they like it or not.

*DTG:* And in a sense to make it their own, to spell it out in their own voice and accent, in the face of the imposition upon them.

*AM:* That's precisely the exercise. I then move somewhat away from the Middle Passage paradigm which has dominated the discourse on blackness almost globally. I shift positions and I try to harness different, other archives, the French-speaking archive, the more continental African archive too, especially in the chapter called 'Requiem for the Slave'. This is part of an attempt at giving fuel to the African-American archive, to offer it additional symbolic resources, those kinds of resources the Middle Passage paradigm cannot produce on its own. That chapter, 'Requiem for the Slave', is a re-reading of Amos Tutuola's work, a work which can be described as a treatise on flight and on excess, a treatise on how to attend to the permanent labour of repairing, to that which has been broken, to what it means to permanently wear – and live with – all kinds of prostheses. To some extent, the prosthetic subject in Tutuola's dramatic text is not a 'black' subject. He or she is the human subject to come, a human *with* all kinds of supplements. This futuristic dimension of the presumably black sign is the antithesis of the kind of being we find in various instantiations of the 'social death' paradigm. The Tutuolan subject skirts with death, but he or she is not dead; or even when he or she is actually dead, he or she retains a kind of agency that is far from posthumous, so embedded is it in the actuality of life itself. So, part of the work the book does is to show the extent to which the continental African archive in particular allows us to distance ourselves from the imposed name and its meaninglessness.

*DTG:* There's both a generality to the African-American condition and a unique specificity to it. This goes back to the point that we were discussing about the role of the French archive and the African archive in the Francophone tradition. They cultivate a kind of intellectual counterweight to the dominance of the African-American archive in scholarship and historiography, even in the counter-political imaginaries to the racial, in a way about which Gilroy, of course, has spoken so compellingly as well.

*AM:* In the French and to some extent the so-called Francophone archive, there is an operative but also philosophical uneasiness in relation to concepts such as 'race' or even 'black' or 'blackness'. Such terms are used, of course. But from a philosophical point of view, they are very

often deployed as linguistic grenades and devices in what is essentially a polemic. We can trace this uneasiness in the texts of the likes of Fanon, Glissant or even Césaire. Until his death, Césaire embraced the idea of ‘le Negre’, but his ‘Negre’ was always a placeholder for a history he hoped would fuse the dialectical, the poetic and the insurrectionary. ‘Le Negre’ was never the end of it all. It was always that which was destined to be superseded or, as in the case of Fanon, opened to an infinite and reparative horizon.

In truth, the kind of absolutization of blackness one finds in some variants of Afro-pessimism is foreign to that archive. An inquisitive and interrogative stance saturates that archive. This interrogative stance allows us then to read the African-American experience in the kind of sympathetic and yet critical manner Paul Gilroy, for instance, has almost perfected.

But the other thing that strikes me – we were talking early on about the history of modernity as connected in a structural way to the history of slavery, of capitalism, to histories of ordering and wasting – when I read that long history, a striking thing is capitalism’s impulse to abolish limits. From a capitalist’s standpoint, there are simply no limits. In regard to almost anything and everything, limitlessness is the law. Another striking thing is that capitalism aims to abolish some of the key dualisms without which the very idea of society as we understand it would have been unimaginable. To some extent, capitalism is the only *religion without taboos* humans have ever invented.

One such taboo capitalism fundamentally disregards is the idea that a human being is not a thing, personhood is the antithesis of thinghood. As we know, this idea is pretty much central to the modern project of emancipation, or central to our understanding of what alienation is all about. Countless historical struggles have been conducted whose aim was to make sure that human beings were not turned into mere objects. Capitalism’s impulse is to erase all those limits, to break all taboos in order to then be able to usher in the disappearance of all kinds of species and/or their transformation into myriad other object species. I believe that, at its core, capitalism is fundamentally anti-human or, at the very least, *anthropophobic*. Its final aim is to replace the human species with another, which would combine the attributes of various natural, mineral, organic, machinic, and nowadays digital entities. In fact, it might be entirely possible that the transformation of blacks into commodities or into ‘object-humans’ or *humans-with-prostheses* – which happened in that early stage of American, Atlantic capitalism – is a process that could be universalized. It could be extended to more than just blacks. That’s what, in the book, I call the *becoming-black-of-the-world*, a distinct possibility particularly in this contemporary phase of our lives.

*DTG*: Central to the dynamic of capital is also the shaping, making, and remaking of desire. This goes along with the obvious commodification that takes place in relation to demand. Its voraciousness, on one hand, and its particularity, on the other hand. Its particularity has to do with the relation to local cultures, local contexts, local histories even, as you're indicating, to ways of being in the world that are specific to time and place, and the transforming relation to that specificity in particular ways. That then translates into what amounts to what you indicate are genres of black reason: of the reasoning *about* blacks and the reasoning *of* blacks in response to the reasoning about blacks. In its self-making as well, such reasoning is not simply reactive. There's also a creative impulse. So even when focusing on the subjection to slavery, one tends to be overwhelmed by the horrors and the vicious impositions of slavery at the expense of paying less attention – not no attention but much less attention – to the creative resourcefulness that it takes to survive that viciousness under extended conditions.

*AM*: On our side of the Atlantic, a key revolution capitalism introduces has to do with the almost complete overhaul of the precolonial structures of desire. This is part of what the Atlantic slave system does. From this point of view, slavery is not only about capturing, selling and shipping human cargoes across the Atlantic. It is also about remodelling the structures of *jouissance*, reconfiguring the psychic world of the matter, unleashing new forms of voracity and greed.

*DTG*: Indeed. What you begin to do is draw on the archive that speaks to these structures of desire and the creative practices of survival, parsing them out and opening them up, from a uniquely African perspective.

*AM*: There is still a lot of work to be done on the African side of the Atlantic to elicit the total historical structures of enslavement. Here I refer in particular to works such as Joe Miller's *Way of Death*, which was published in the late 1980s. It's a study of the dynamics of the slave trade in what is today Angola, and parts of the Congo. This region of the continent was a major source of slaves who went to the Caribbean and the rest of the New World. Many former soldiers captured during the 'wars of enslavement' in Africa ended up in Haiti, where they were at the forefront of the Haitian revolution.

So you're absolutely right! At the heart of these historical dynamics were structures of desire, an economy of desire, a materialist affect we have not sufficiently paid attention to. This affect found actual expression in the acquisition of modern goods and objects, and their reconversion into the process of wealth-making and domination. African merchants and rulers used prestige objects most notably to increase their power and their capacity to accumulate clients. It seems to me, then, that there is a



resourcefulness not only on the side of the slaves on the other side of the Atlantic who were subjected to the horrific conditions we know of, but also on this side in terms of Africans' own agency in structuring, to some extent, the trading system as such. I speak a little bit about this in one of the chapters.

But your question also points to new work on slavery and capitalism. There are big debates going on around the question of commodification: Were the enslaved really turned into objects, or things, or commodities simply because they were bought and sold? Did the fact of being enslaved erase the slaves' capacity to aspire, to desire...

*DTG*: ...to desire freedom?

*AM*: ...freedom in particular. So the argument about the turning of human beings into things or about social death has its limits. Wherever African slaves happened to be settled, no death of social life actually occurred. The work of producing symbols and rituals, language, memory and meaning – and therefore the substance necessary to sustain life – never stopped. Nor did the interminable labour of caring for and repairing that which had been broken, including the infrastructures of survival. Throughout their captivity, African slaves never stopped desiring freedom. This Sisyphus-like effort to resist being turned into waste partly explains why plantation slavery differs from other forms of genocidal colonialism. In fact, inherent to 'the human' is something that can never be turned into an object, something ineradicable, and this is the desire to be free.

But let me come back to the creative practices of survival you were referring to a moment ago. In the regime of capture that historically characterizes the black experience in America, the capacity to develop multiple modalities of agency and different figures of personhood is crucial. The much-used concept of fugitivity hardly exhausts the repertoires of practices survival actually requires. For once, to get out of the hole and to break through the wall, the captured subject must actively engage in a relation of multiple doubles and multiple selves. He or she must develop an extraordinary capacity to become imperceptible and unassignable, to continually shift from one self to its alternate, to inhabit the tiniest of cracks and fissures.

He or she must know how and when to become like everybody else, how and when to be nobody, when to be alone, when to hide and when to no longer have anything to hide, when to become unfindable and when to rush to the other side in order to meet one's double. These micro-movements and micro-postures are essential because survival depends on being able to inhabit multiple selves, often at the same time. Agency is therefore not so much a matter of fugitivity, flight or escape as one of knowing when and how to cross over, to become somebody else



(self-separation) in the face of what Deleuze and Guattari once called ‘an overcoding machine’. Obviously, there are risks attached to this dizzy state of endless crossing and becoming whose end is simply to stay alive.

*DTG*: This speaks to the mania, the interminable madness of the venture itself: both of enslavement as the enslavement of another person and also as a system – an economic system, a social system – that is predicated on that set of conditions. At one and the same time, there is a deep suspicion of every move by slavers of the enslaved, but also the necessity of a dimension of trust. If suspicion went all the way down, the system would not be capable of sustaining itself. So there has to be, as Laurence Thomas indicated in *Vessels of Evil*, his book about slavery and the Holocaust, a trust in people cooking in the slaver’s kitchen, that the food wouldn’t be poisoned, the children looked after, and the like. And so, that mania animates the possibility of thinking by slavers that they can pull it off without resistance, without rebellion, without being told to go to hell and so on and so forth. This mania is at the heart of black reason as a ‘reason’, the shifting rationalizations about blacks. And there is a kind of manicness as a response, a sort of perceived madness that is perceived as mad precisely because it’s outside the dominant modality. It is perceived by the dominant as unreason at work because it’s not bounded by the very reason of dominating black reason. That doubling again . . .

*AM*: This is a very good definition of the term ‘black reason’. I think you’ve provided the right definition of ‘black reason’.

*DTG*: Madness and civilization. And it’s not quite clear who’s more mad and who is more civilized.

*AM*: It’s the kind of reason that breaks down at the moment of its appearance.

*DTG*: The reason of unreason.

*AM*: Yes, that’s what it is, yes.

*DTG*: Its very contradiction.

*AM*: That is what black reason is all about – the reason of unreason. The chapter called ‘Requiem for a Slave’, through a way of writing that is unbridled, chaotic even, completely free and unrestrained, can in this regard be taken as the kind of textual strategy capable of overturning reason when it becomes unreasonable.

*DTG*: This does speak to the way in which, at different points in the book – the writing of the first two chapters, for instance, which are about that particular archive of reasoning about blackness, the reasoning about blackness by the dominant as a construction of the phenomenon – is quite different from the writing in the chapter, say, on ‘Requiem for the Slave’. The voice shifts in relation to both the object and the subject of analysis. The two things come together. So can you speak a bit more about that animation, the animation of your voice in that set of exercises? Is it the spirit taking control of you, so to speak? [Chuckling] Is it a stepping back and saying how what I write – this subject matter – requires a different voice than the subject matter of the archive?

*AM*: The subject matter requires a different voice. The archive one is dealing with is, to a large extent, an incomplete archive. I guess every archive is by definition incomplete. In any case, I was trying to deal with this question of incompleteness, of how to embrace the fact of incompleteness and yet at the same time open up the possibilities for its speaking with a voice as fully as possible. For an incomplete, partial and fragmented archive to speak with the fullness of a voice, a supplement is necessary. It has to be created, not out of nothing but out of the debris of information, on the very site of the ruins, the remains and traces left behind by those who passed away. So the voice shifts because it must now confront something not so much unique as soiled. It must shift because it is dealing with wasted lives, the lives of people constrained to do things they might not have chosen to do themselves, under conditions not of their own choice once again; but they have to produce meaning, something that can eventually sustain some kind of life out of the brutalizing and life negating conditions in which they find themselves.

The challenge therefore is how we can retrieve such lives from a broken existence and give them some kind of, provide them with some kind of ‘home’ or ‘place’ where they might be at peace, if you want. So that is what the style of writing is trying to achieve. Indeed, to write is to try to repair something that has been broken, to again weave ties between entities that have been separated so that the subject might have, might find a possibility to recreate meaning where meaninglessness prevails. That’s the philosophy of writing that is behind this textual project. If one believes that’s what writing has to achieve, then the economy of words, of sentences, the kinds of images one conjures up, the networks of meaning and the poetics, the rhetorical strategies – all of this must be properly attended to. So that is the work I set myself to do. As necessary as it is, a mere historical account is not enough. Description for the sake of description is not enough either. We have to speak to reason but also to affect, to the senses, all the senses. That’s why this chapter is called –

DTG: ... Requiem ...

AM: ... yeah. I really believe that the act of writing, that is what its function is. To mourn what is lost in a way that does not dwell in the trauma, to escape the curse of repetition, to put together once again the debris and the fragments of that which has been broken and try somewhat to provide them with a space of rest, to return to life the harvest of bones that have been subjected to the forces of desiccation, to render the world habitable for all, again. That's why I write in the way I do.

DTG: So it's a collage in the best sense?

AM: It *is* a mosaic and a position, it's a play on differences and contradictions. It's the putting together of things we don't usually put together to produce an effect, to produce surprise, an *eclat*. And where necessary, to enlist adherence. An active process which calls for participation, meditation and, eventually, joy and celebration. It is a praxis and an aesthetics.

DTG: In this context repair becomes both imperative and much more capacious in its reach than what has become the African-American archive, or self-understanding, of reparation. Reparation in the American archive has come to be understood, on both, on all sides of the tug-of-war around these things, largely in reductively material terms.

AM: In African precolonial systems of thought, matter alone is never enough. What strikes me travelling in the continent quite a lot, in every single major urban centre in the continent, when you land, the most striking thing is the number of people busy repairing something – whether a car, whether ... anything ...

DTG: ... a tire, a house ...

AM: ... a tire, a house, a pair of shoes, a piece of dress, every single little thing. Or people start building a house, run out of money, then live for years in an unfinished structure, take a long time to save again and then they pick it up where they left off ...

DTG: ... and it becomes something else ...

AM: And they keep moving and it becomes something entirely different, which might never be completely done in their lifetime, and they will leave it behind, a legacy to those who will come after them. Something significant must be going on in these practices of the everyday, the meaning of which we still have to elicit. To repair is to be alive. So that's the

first sense of reparation – to be alive and to take care of something that matters because that thing is a very condition of my survival with others, my being with others, my moving on with others, my leaving something behind for others, something through which they might remember me. Reparation is the opposite of destruction. It is about building a liberating memory, not dwelling in a traumatic memory, the kind of toxic memory that opens up the door to envy, revenge and nihilism.

*DTG:* There's a contrast too, when one thinks about it, in the sort of prevailing conception – and this will bring us to the question about identity politics, about which at least, in passing, you make critical reference – of the trajectory through multiculturalism and into a more contemporary relation of the post-multicultural moment. The notion of recognition becomes at least in part imperative. And if you think about, if not the contrast or the relation or the tension between caring and recognition, the distinct both psychic and social condition to which they speak – there's an interesting shift. It is a shift from a politics of recognition to a politics – I mean it used to be in a feminist tradition an ethics of care – but also now a politics of care. This serves as a kind of underpinning of this more capacious, more expanded, more vibrant notion of repair as self-address. It is a self-address, however, made possible only through its relation to others – all others – and their world.

*AM:* All others include my contemporaries, those who came before me as well as those who will come after me. This inter- and transgenerational dimension is constitutive of what you call an ethics of care. So too is my relation with the environment I live in, the objects I make in my everyday life, in short, the world I inhabit. This is really, at least in the African context, in the continental African archive, what we mean by repair, the becoming other of the living, be it matter or human; the care for not only the living but also other apparently inert entities. Indeed, the entanglement that keeps the universe tied together is so deep that it's being broken at any point of time opens the door to serious disorder, political and social disorders, disorders of the mind. So in this sense I think there is a possibility of stretching the idea of repair in a way which goes beyond a mere politics of recognition.

The difficulty with a politics of recognition is that I might recognize you, but I don't really believe that we owe anything to each other. In this sense, recognition is limited to the mere recording of the fact that you are here, but your being in my midst entails no obligation whatsoever, neither on your part nor on mine. I have no obligation to speak to you or to listen when you address me. In the project of repair, there's the admission of a kind of debt that is not expropriatory; a debt that is in fact necessary for the very constitution of either the social or the community. Indeed,

there is no community as such without, at its foundation, some idea of a debt. And this has nothing to do with an expropriatory type of debt...

*DTG*: ...it's in the anthropological tradition of debt and the gift...

*AM*: At least there is an embrace of, for instance, the fact that I am not my own creator. It is other people who made decisions, that's why I am here. Or the fact that what really characterizes all of us – which is basic – is that at some point we have to exit, we have to exit the door. And that everything in fact pushes us towards the door. And in that sense we are just like passers-by. But [that] doesn't mean that we have no duties or responsibilities that come from the fact of us passing by.

*DTG*: So, it requires a sense of psychic and social and cultural investment that is not reducible simply, narrowly, to the economic.

*AM*: It has to be an investment that is premised on some concept of mutuality or reciprocity. So questions of redistributive justice are important, but we can supplement the very concept of justice by drawing on that anthropology in which matters of the common, the *in-common*, the mutual and the reciprocal go beyond the individual. The in-common is not about communalism. It's a third-space between communalism and individualism, and there's a type of – a concept of – justice that it calls for that is not simply redistributive. It is also reparative, regenerative, transformational.

*DTG*: Yeah, redistributive justice on its own in the traditional sense of the term must necessarily fail in what it claims to achieve if that's all there is. There's remediation both in a giving back and in a resignifying of the sense of relation that is taking place. In this twofold condition – the one never reducible to the other but also always in play with the other...

*AM*: ...and that's part of what I try to articulate in the conclusion...

*DTG*: ...the sense of there being only one world...

*AM*: ...There is only one world. We are all entitled to it by the fact of our very existence. The only way in which to ensure its sustainability or its duration is to share it as equitably as possible.

And when I say we must share it, I do not simply have humans in mind; we must share it with every other existent, and in so doing, reinvent democracy. Democracy has basically been democracy for the humans. We must extend its meaning so democracy can include more than just us. Or more than just the citizens. Hopefully, the conclusion gestures towards further research, further reflections on the kind of

responsibilities we ought to bear in relation to a history that has been torturous and brutal. It argues for a different ethics, one of remembrance that would neither be akin to the performance of trauma nor lead to revenge or nihilism...

*DTG*: ...or reductionism...

*AM*: ...so that's the purpose. To recall past horrors does not need to necessarily end with, as the only alternative, a politics of impossibility. I say this in the full knowledge of the fact that we live in an age when everything works towards the elimination of any temporal distance between the present and the past. Everything invites us to become ignorant. There is an incredible demand for ignorance, for apocalypticism. When blissful ignorance and apocalypticism are coupled with uncritical self-belief, they create a sense of innocence and blamelessness which is at the foundation of the most extreme forms of violence in this age of ours. How we get out of this dilemma might well determine the fate of democracy and our sense of justice in our times.

*DTG*: So, I am thinking in the wake of our conversation yesterday about the role of race in relation to liberalism, about which you obviously have considerable things to say, and especially the way in which liberalism – as you put it – gives way to a kind of racial pessimism. This, of course, speaks to what we were talking about earlier, concerning the African-American archive and some more contemporary African-American theorizing around issues having to do with pessimism, fugitivity, and the like. I wonder if you can talk about pessimism in relation to liberalism both as product and outcome. How do you see liberalism generating what you call racial pessimism, both historically and more contemporarily? What forms of pessimism does this racial pessimism take or express itself in terms of? And why pessimism rather than, say, anger or frustration or fear or resentment, none of which are mutually exclusive from each other? Why is it that pessimism gets taken up as a driving self-conception in a certain self-understanding of the effect and affect of liberalism? And what sorts of accommodations and what sorts of refusals get enacted in the name of this kind of pessimism? What kind of theorizing does pessimism produce?

*AM*: Very interesting question. The section of the book where I talk about liberalism and racial pessimism is in fact a re-reading of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. In his Volume 2, especially the last chapters of Volume 2, he examines race relations in the context of American democracy. He basically concludes that there is no future for an American democracy that would accommodate in particular blacks and the other so-called races.

He provides a whole set of justifications for this impossibility and basically argues for one form or another of repatriation of the Negroes to Africa. You will have noticed that repatriation is not exactly the same as reparation. Deportation and repatriation are always animated by a genocidal unconscious. They have to do with an unrealized genocidal pathos. Tocqueville is not thinking about a democracy of connections between different parts or segments. His concept of democracy is about how to extricate different species from each other – disentanglement. It is underpinned not by creative potentialities but by a line of purity which, almost inevitably, will morph into a line of death and a line of pure destruction.

This does not only confirm what we already knew, that in fact democracy – liberal democracy in this instance – and racism are compatible, but also that, historically, liberal democracy has always needed for its own self-legitimation a constitutive other who is and is not at the same time part of the polis. And that, historically, this is a mode of organization of the common that is exclusionary in its very principle. How does all of this manifest itself in contemporary life? I think you have done the best work on this and, basically, I could simply read your own reflections on the futures of racism... I don't think there is any work better than yours in terms of articulating the contemporary manifestations of this inner bifurcation at the very heart of the liberal democratic order.

*DTG:* Thank you for these kind words, Achille. How do you see pessimism emerging out of this? You know, as an organizing condition...

*AM:*... We recognize pessimism wherever the language of impossibility saturates speech or becomes the final word in any utterance. With Tocqueville, pessimism is articulated in the language of indivisibility and the impossibility of sharing. For him, the freedom of the 'white race' is both absolute and indivisible. It cannot be shared with any non-white entity. If necessary, it will be secured by murderous and suicidal organizations. It's the deep belief and conviction of white America, he suggests, that the freedom of whites, of the white race, is not simply indivisible, it can only prosper at the expense of the life of non-whites, even if this prospect might ultimately lead to its disappearance in a catastrophe.

*DTG:* The other as constitutively necessary for the possibility...

*AM:*... for white freedom to exist as such. And yet, that other, I mean, we need that other. We depend on that other. And yet we cannot, there is not much to share with that other. There's a deep dilemma there...



*DTG*: ... So the pessimism is a function of the impossibility of any other way of being in the world?

*AM*: Right ... It is the belief that for white America to exist, it must produce 'niggers'. 'Niggers' are not only the condition of possibility of America, they are also a class of people America can't live with, people America doesn't want to share anything with, although without them America means nothing. There is no America without Jews or without 'niggers'. America, in this sense, means the impossibility of sharing freedom, which is constitutive of what it means to be white. Tocqueville's treatise reveals as much. Its object is democracy, the extent to which America has been able to depart from the old Western trajectory. America has supposedly invented a model of life-in-common that Tocqueville considers in his writing as the most advanced and, in fact, as the final way in which we can imagine what it is to live in common. And yet, underlying this apology for the liberal democratic order, underlying it and embedded in it is this virulent racist pathos which I have just talked about. It seems to me that contemporary liberal democracies in the West in any case have not departed from this constitutive pessimism on racial coexistence and co-implication. In this sense, pessimism has to do with the profound belief in the existence of a body that must remain closed, a body that must not be opened to connections. Pessimism stems from a fantasy of a special kind, the fantasy of an enemy, an enemy of a very particular kind, an enemy in the body and of the body.

*DTG*: And so the politics that this pessimism produces, can only produce, is a politics that's doubled? On the one hand it's a politics of an absolutely racially circumscribed commons, and then on the other an absolutized sense of exclusion of that which is taken not properly to belong.

*AM*: Absolutely; that's exactly the case. A politics which disavows passages, bridges, a conjunction of intensities. And that's why it's very interesting to contrast the racial pessimism of Alexis de Tocqueville and certain strands of Afro-pessimism. Afro-pessimism is also premised on the idea of a categorical antagonism that cannot be transcended. Or that can only be transcended through a war that is and is not a mere civil war; a war that would be waged against the very concept of humanity since this concept is indeed the Trojan horse which trapped us in a permanent state of death ...

*DTG*: ... that's deeply destructive, in that sense of a conception of humanity that takes itself as impossible to be a part of.

*AM:* As a matter of fact, there is a mimetic relationship between two forms of asymmetrical racism, a hegemonic racism and a subaltern racism, both of which speak the same language but with different accents. True, they do not operate on the same plane but they do share the same fantasy of a freedom that is only freedom for oneself, indivisible and absolute in the face of an absolute Outside. This kind of metapolitics privileges shock and destruction. It calls for the burning of memory in the belief that what might emerge from the ashes can never be worse than what we already endure.

*DTG:* And so what follows from this is a question about violence. You have lots of things to say about violence. There's obviously the violence that is destructive; there's a violence, however, that is a kind of liberating violence. The latter is a violence that, on the one hand, is a break with the past, a violence that is an opening, a renting that then opens up the possibility of another way of seeing and being in the world. A violence that is, in that opening, maybe even constructive rather than simply destructive, even if the two obviously always go together. But at its basis a sense of clearing a space for the production of another way of being.

*AM:* And here – at least in the book – the main interlocutor, in that sense, is obviously Fanon, whose relationship with violence has been, or let's say maybe lends itself most of the time to caricature. Because first of all, Fanon talks about many different forms of violence. There's a kind of violence that precedes the awakening of the subaltern to self-consciousness. It's a violence that Fanon characterizes mostly as inflicted upon oneself. Or when it is not inflicted upon oneself, it is of a fratricidal nature. It's violence against the fellow subaltern. This kind of violence has no liberatory potential, he suggests. And he has extraordinary ways of describing it, the way it finds expression in the life of the muscles, the contortions, the way in which it is almost reptilian. It is both bodily and nervous, and it expresses itself in pantomime and all kinds of rituals of possession during which liberation is experienced as a fantasmatic event. So you have that form of violence in Fanon's anthropology.

Then you have a second form of violence, the aim of which is, first of all, to disrupt and eventually to interrupt the colonial order of things. Interruption and disruption, all with the goal of opening up an entirely new possibility of being, of being together, of being in common, of 'companionship'. So it's a future-oriented violence, the function of which is to make it possible to reinvent the human, to activate those potentialities that were crippled but which, through precisely this possibility of reactivation, might hopefully lend itself to the emergence of a 'new species of man'. This is what he means by liberatory violence.

But it seems to me that we have to read his critique of violence in relation to his practice of caring and healing. This is absolutely clear if we read together his political texts and his psychiatric texts. But still, to complicate matters further, Fanon believes that under certain circumstances, the very act of caring, of trying to heal, to console, to attend to the diseased mind and destroyed body, might not be devoid of violence. Violence for Fanon is both a weapon and a medicine. But as we know very well, a medicine is not simply that which cures. It is also that which can kill. The paradoxical nature of Fanonian violence is something I think we should hold on to. Fanon is aware of the fact that it is in the nature of violence to open up to that which we cannot entirely control. Even when our intentions are morally just, the actual unfolding of violent processes is something very difficult to predict, let alone to control.

It would be interesting to examine, for instance, at what point, and under what conditions, for what reasons particular historical social movements choose to follow a nonviolent path. In the case of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, it is clear that such a choice involved the resolution of deep ethical dilemmas such as whether it is enough to have a just cause to resort to violence. Can a just cause be fought by aleatory or unjust means? How do we share the cost that comes with the practice of violence? There are all kinds of ethical questions such movements have to contend with.

*DTG:* When you talk of violence, there are different ways in which violence gets expressed. There's the obvious visceral, physical violence that you would characterize as often destructive and a lashing out, a frustration. This produces a kind of whooping or an excrescence of acts of that kind. But you also speak of violence as an exercise of freedom, as a taking charge, of a self-naming, where one's naming in the face of being named – it's a break with a condition, a springing into life, a violence as a transformation of symbols, of characterization. And in that sense, one could characterize violence as not passivity. Insofar as it's not or never passivity, there's a violence also in these terms of non-violence, not in the physical sense. It is not a physicalist or a materialist sort of nonviolence. The violence in the case of non-violence is symbolic. This has to do with those elements of the metaphysics of violence that are a break with the imposed conditions of self-determination. We would have to attend as much to this violence in the history of nonviolent movements as we do to the more, you know, throwing of bombs or Molotov cocktails, or whatever.

*AM:* No, definitely. There are forms of violence that are not simply physical or immediately material or bodily because indeed in the kind of context Fanon describes, in the kind of landscape of violence he finds himself, it is the entirety of the human that is targeted; it is the

environment in which such a human subject is supposed to operate that is made inhabitable. Forms of mental, psychic violence, symbolic violence, aim at crippling the totality of the capacities one needs to nurture in order to become a human again. So the responses to all these modalities of violence are, by definition, themselves plural. But as you are saying, even nonviolence in this case doesn't mean inaction. It doesn't mean at all passivity. It gestures toward the recapture and redeployment of means and materials that might help to reopen the future. This question of reopening a future, of redistributing the scarce resource the future is, this question, it seems to me, is absolutely crucial to any past and contemporary critique of violence.

*DTG:* Absolutely. When one thinks in terms of reconceiving blackness in terms of self-determination as contrasted with imposed determination by others from the outside, there's a sense of violence as a break with the past as well in the terms of a reworking of memory, as you indicate. Here there are the terms of reconceiving and remaking dispositions and tastes; there's an aesthetic component to it. And in inventing a new interiority there is a shedding of that old interiority of the repressive, of the imposed, of the destructive, of the bowing-to the determination of another. Here there is a recreating in terms of a self-defining. The latter must always be in relation to, in conversation, interacting with those who are other than one. Otherwise it is again a set of closures.

*AM:* You describe it very, very well. And there are many instances where, in the book, I try to deal with this. There is, most notably, one section on Mandela in his cell. Not on Mandela's life at large but just what happens when he finds himself in a cell, which is what a cell is: that tiny empty space where you're reduced to the bare minimum, nakedness, the essential. Under conditions of captivity, you hardly belong to yourself. You belong to your captor, which in Mandela's case is the racist state. And yet, in the midst of all of this, Mandela is able to redesign the landscapes of his inner self, to slowly shed parts of his old self, to recover traces of his past and to refigure them, to undergo a profound metamorphosis, even a transfiguration. This is spoken about in detail in his book, *Conversations with Myself*. So self-determination involves here a practice of the self which is absolutely necessary for the effectuation of self-determination and freedom. It offers a precondition for engaging with larger historical structures of power; an engagement which of course requires traditional mobilization of political resources, an organization, discipline, and so forth. But it seems to me very difficult to engage in a real politics of self-determination without a remodelling of one's interiority.

*DTG:* That's a very important point, that relation between social arrangement which often comes with a sense of – at least partial –

imposed determinations, on one hand, and an interiority that is not reducible to an exteriority made by others. It is an interiority that is self-directed, self-produced, at least to a degree, in interaction and conversation with a sort of outside but is not an empty cipher formed by that outside, that exteriority, in a way that enables the subject to have a kind of self-determination.

*AM:* Historical figures who were involved in long-term struggles for liberation – figures who gave up a lot and who risked their own lives, the risk of the death sentence, or at the risk of long-term imprisonment – such people placed a huge importance on that question of interiority in their reflection on what it really meant to be free. They were worried that in the aftermath of freedom, repetition rather than difference would set in...

*DTG:* But it seems compelling because that notion of interiority provides a set of sustained commitments that we would often characterize as having integrity, or acting on the basis of sustained principles providing a consistency – not simply a predictability but a consistency – on the basis of which one is standing on principle for the sake of producing a set of outcomes to which many if not all can aspire. So it becomes both a grounding as a model, both a being in the world, and an aspiration.

*AM:* Combining both. That's precisely what political interiority stands for – and a kind of method, discipline, and pedagogy, all of that together, and all of that involves serious, demanding work on oneself. Oneself not only as a political subject but also oneself as a beautiful human being...

*DTG:* ...as a being in the world...

*AM:* ...a being in the world. And Mandela has extraordinary but very simple words about this. And Sisulu too.

*DTG:* That's in such contrast, when you think of it, from the likes of 'we should destroy the world and out of the destroyed world will emerge hopefully a new man'. It's as though you blow everything up and out of the destruction something will magically materialize.

*AM:* No, it never happens like that. What happens is that you destroy everything and you produce, at least in the first instance, a lot of ruins. Now the issue is, okay, how do I live in the midst of ruins? Is there any way in which I can build from the ruins?

*DTG:* A compelling question, in the wake of Aleppo and...

*AM*: ... Aleppo, and we see it all over the place, Mosul, other towns, other wars ... There have hardly been so many people living for so long in the midst of so many ruins. The destruction of entire cities, entire ecologies. Entire worlds made uninhabitable and so many people thrown on the roads of countless Exoduses.

*DTG*: A final round of questions. So, we've been talking, in a way, about the malleability, the plasticity of subjectivity, of making and self-making, the way the human is plastic in the sense of metamorphizing and the capacity to make something of themselves. This also requires being open to the world. And so I want to end by asking, really, about your final reflections in the book, which are also final reflections in that they close your book but are an opening up to perhaps a longer term set of reflections around world-thinking. What does a world-thinking in your understanding amount to: a thinking of the world, a thinking from the world, thinking with and through the world? What does it open up? Where do you see it leading? Thinking in circulation, thinking in crossings? And linked, in a kind of negative dialectic, I'd say, to a notion of fugitivity but not reducible to fugitivity either, right? In thinking of and with and about the world, one is not fleeing the world as such, or even a set of worlds. One is trying to take it up in its own sense but also in one's own sense, and to negotiate the conditions of possibility ...

*AM*: Here again, one of the main interlocutors is Amos Tutuola. Tutuola's world is, first of all, a world of multiplicity and heterogeneity, a world of doubles, of sudden reversals and discontinuity – structural, not just an incident. Multiplicity and proliferation are its flesh. Always having to start anew, too. It's a dangerous and threatening world which can and must be navigated carefully. One can navigate it successfully provided one is capable of mobilizing, orchestrating, the entirety of the resources it makes available. It is also a world in which the most efficient logic of action is not flight and escape or fugitivity as, I would say, clearing the pathways of composition. This is not about fugitivity; it is about the capacity to assemble and to compose, including things that at first do not appear to be compatible. For instance, in Tutuola's novel, you can be given the head of somebody else and you have to live with it. Or you can borrow a leg from another, for a time. Its compositional logic is much more important than anything else, precisely because of the proliferating multiplicity that structures such a world.

It's also a world where mobility is a scarce resource but a fundamental one. Actual, physical mobility of people. People are on the move constantly, the main struggles are around the capacity to be able to go from one point to another, and to be able to cross boundaries. When faced with crossroads, one needs to know what path to follow. So what I am

trying to say is that we have, here, conceptual resources that allow us to imagine a geography of our times, of life, which is not at all linear, which is not about fugitivity. It is about the compositional nature of the human. All of that is really in line with recent discoveries, in biology, in science, and in technology. And from debates concerning the Anthropocene. So those are the conceptual resources of my imagination of the world in the last chapter of the book. In that sense it's not really – I keep coming back to this concept of fugitivity – it is not the African-American naturalizing paradigm, it's something else.

*DTG*: It's not a fleeing from ...

*AM*: ... not at all. It is a different way of inhabitation of the world. It's not a matter of running away to form some separate space of seclusion, it's not about marronage, as in the Caribbean text. It is not that the world is a prison we need to escape from in order to start all over again on an entirely new planet or galaxy as in the Afro-futurist text. Freedom consists in the full inhabitation of the world, an embrace of its contradictions. And the best way to do it is through the principle of compositional logics.

*DTG*: And the compositional has multi-dimensionality.

*AM*: Yes, it does have multi – ... many, many different dimensions. And it's not exactly what some call plasticity, although plasticity is involved in it. But it's really a kind of radical openness to all kinds of knowledges and the disposition towards the encounter with the unknown. The determination to go in search of the unknown. That's what it is; that's what the African continental archive brings to these discussions.

*DTG*: That's a wonderful place to end because you've provided us with a sense of thinking from movement, from mobility and mobilization; of thinking what the resources are for resourcing; for thinking from an archive not all that often within the corpus of critical theory and certainly not from race theory, in relation with and from which one tends to think. And so it provides a very rich tapestry of possibilities to think the world anew and to think ourselves anew within thinking that world. Thank you, Achille, for a conversation as rich as the book.

## Note

This set of conversations took place in Achille's office at WISER, and the following day at his home in Johannesburg, 27 July 2017. We are grateful to Anirban Gupta-Nigam, University of California Humanities Research Institute, for his transcription.



1. Achille Mbembe's *The Critique of Black Reason* was published by Duke University Press in 2016.

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