



*To Write the  
Africa World*

EDITED BY ACHILLE MBEMBE  
AND FELWINE SARR

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Edited by  
Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr  
Translated by Drew Burk

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# **Thinking for a New Century**

## **Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr**

The new century that confronts us opens up to a horizon comprising two historical displacements. Europe is no longer understood or viewed as the center of the world even though it is still a vibrant and relatively important and decisive actor on the global stage. For its part, Africa - and the Global South in general - has seen its status continue to rise in importance as one of the principal theaters where, in some distant point in time, the future of the planet will more than likely play out.

For those who, for a long time, have grown accustomed to being snared in the conquering gaze of the other, the moment has come once again to launch a new project of critical thought that will not merely be content with just a series of lamentations and taunts. Confident in its own manner of speaking and at ease wading through the archives of all humanity, this thought is capable of anticipating, of truly creating, and, in so doing, of opening up new paths able to face up to the challenges of our current era. In order for such a project to run for the long term, it seemed to us appropriate to invent a new, open platform in favor of a form of speech and discussion that would necessarily be understood as plural, both confident in its own potentials and powers of speech, and allowing for the unpredictable if necessary - in any case, a platform open to the vast horizon in front of us.

And it's with such a platform of thought in mind that we held the inaugural event, the Ateliers de la pensée (Workshops of Thought), between October 28 and 31 in Dakar and Saint-Louis-du-Senegal. About thirty

intellectuals and artists were invited from across the African continent and the diasporas to reflect on the present and the possible future of an Africa that finds itself in the midst of contemporary global transformations. Not only was this workshop a way to get a better overall idea of the ongoing renewal of French-speaking Afro-diasporic critical thinking; it also served as an impetus for generating new perspectives concerning the contribution from Afro-diasporic discourse to debates on the contemporary world. For those intellectuals and artists who had the privilege of participating, this unique and unforgettable gathering was a momentous occasion for renewed reflection – Africa’s time is inseparable from the time of the world, and the creative task that confronts us is seeking to enable Africa’s future to come into being.

If there is a general optics to be found in the essays gathered together in this volume, it is certainly in the notion of “the event to come,” and it is in this “call to creation” that one will be able to find it. The only Africa that exists is the one that will be created. And for us, then, the fundamental task before us is to make believable, or to believe in, this creation. In order to do this, we must take as our starting point the interconnection between the future fate of both Africa and the world and finally reflect on how to end the misconception that there is a vast separation between them, which has often been taken as a given between the sign that Africa constitutes and the time of the world. And it’s precisely this conception and rather archaic notion, which we will also reflect upon, that, over several centuries, has attempted to claim and make a general population believe that Africa constituted a *world apart, un hors-monde* – an outside world.

At the dawn of this new century, in seeking to restore a kinship identity between Africa and the world, one recognizes that there exists a variety of ways of being-in-

the-world, of being a world, of composing the world one wants to shed light on. How can we bring together all these diverse ways of being and composing, of deciphering and expressing, of articulating what such a call responds to? Such will be the object of our reflection. Each time we attempt to employ such a thought of a world, it will serve as a way of conceiving the possibility of a surprise. From such a perspective, then, this book is not so much a manifesto - in the sense that it would somehow serve to reveal or traverse a threshold into some newfound light of day, unearthing some hidden truths from the preceding generations - and yet it will nevertheless present several vital analyses.

First and foremost, this volume will deal with the notion of *urgency*. Given that, for Africa, time is now both of the essence and favorable, there is no reason to wait. We are our own witnesses. We must absolutely unite if we are to take back this essential task that we can't simply delegate to others - namely: reading, writing, deciphering, decrypting, sketching, and calling into question our age, creating a blockade around those languages (our own as well as others) in which we speak in phrases that no longer ring true, which have become mute. We must rehabilitate, in the very act of thought, a form of errancy, of wandering, which serves as a condition for surprise.

Second, thinking for oneself is an exercise that is inseparable from action, since, in Africa, as in the rest of the world, one doesn't act without thinking, in the same way that one doesn't think without acting, except when, in both cases, one wants simply to yield to a path of catastrophe. In the end, what we are seeking here is a way to create a new form of construction. To accomplish this, we must first begin by not only opening up all the borders, but also by inventing a way to render the archive - every archive - as legible as possible.

This book is therefore a general call, as pressing as it is intense, to take up the old battles that have never quite been completed and to engage in others that this new century calls on us to address, which inevitably calls for scrambling and erasing many demarcation lines so as to be able trace and sketch out new ones.

The workshops in Dakar, as well as the ones in Saint-Louis-du-Senegal, constitute our response to an amalgam of reconfigurations dealing with the overall conditions for the construction of contemporary thought. On the one hand, the hegemony exerted by Western discourse concerning almost every construct of human knowledge and culture – be it in literature, art, philosophy, or, more broadly, the humanities or social sciences – either is now in retreat or, at the very least, is being strongly contested. There is no doubt that academic institutions in the Global North continue to be powerful. But over the last quarter of the twentieth century, we began to bear witness to the emergence of new trends in many disciplines that called into question this Western-centric worldview of cultural production. And thanks to the arrival of such new interdisciplinary approaches, we are also furnished with new ways of interpreting world history.

This movement in favor of a decentering of thought and the humanities in general is nothing new. However, it is accelerating. Today, pretty much everywhere around the world, new territories of life are taking hold and seeing the light of day. Informal policy practices call into question and overthrow what had, up until now, been considered common sense. Democracy itself is in the throes of reinventing itself, starting in the most common areas of ordinary life. We are all now living with migrants and other peoples who, perhaps at first glance, don't seem to belong to our community; yet today, we recognize that we are, in fact, all in the same boat. Computational techniques not

only transform knowledge into information; they have multiplied our ability to produce knowledge outside the current institutional models as we have come to understand them.

In spite of all the attempts to create enclosures, borders are increasingly becoming elastic, and all sorts of basic dichotomies have begun to collapse. Deterritorialization and reterritorialization go hand in hand. Far from being oppositional, subject and object now form one and the same foundational framework. The conceptions of *here* and *elsewhere* have become entangled. Nature is found in culture, and vice versa. Human beings and other living creatures have begun to partake in relations of co-constitution. There is no history that does not simultaneously encompass human persons; technological ensembles; objects; mineral, vegetal, and geoclimatic materials; and even spirits. Given these new conditions, *to decenter thought* is, above all, to return to a certain conception of the Whole, or *Tout*.<sup>1</sup> Or, to use Édouard Glissant's term, we must return to a conception of the *Tout-Monde*. And in this case, we must recall and understand the *Tout-Monde* not as something that is complete, but rather as something that forces us to reflect and think about how to make life habitable for all.

We therefore find ourselves at a propitious moment to relaunch a project of critical thought – what we call a practice of creation – that will draw its forces and originality through an encounter between the humanities, the disciplines of the imagination, and what we can refer to in a general manner as the arts of the living. For, as far as we are concerned, critical thought is not merely limited to the production of philosophical texts. Far from it. It comprises both a literary and a non-discursive corpus (be it graphic or pictorial). It includes a multiplicity of gestures, fields, and styles, which include music and dance,



architecture and photography, as well as cinema, among others. It gathers together all practices of writing, of creation, interpretation, and imagination. Such a thought comprises and makes use of all threads of the imagination. From time to time, both here and elsewhere, this thought is also of a purely performative nature.

The imperative to decentralize thought and the humanities is not a task confined simply to those regions that have, up until now, been found at the margins of the West. Such a project began to take shape in the very heart of the citadel itself, nourished as it is by feminist critique, race critique, a return to conceptions of deep history, and a number of other epistemological currents. On the African continent and in its diasporas, over the past decade, we have also started to notice an upswing in intellectual and artistic creativity, a rekindled vitality in the principal themes, and a fervent desire to renew the forms, the frameworks of thought, and the attempts to grasp the real in the process of being created.

So, we see here that there is something worth exploring and creatively playing with, a new toolbox that we can make use of in order to construct something else with our creative energies. We once again have at our disposal a new generation of critics, intellectuals, researchers, writers, and artists who are working on the African continent as well as in a great many establishments of higher learning throughout the rest of the world. For a number of years now, this generation has been proposing renewed approaches and innovative concepts that, today, serve as new cartographies for reading the world and for interpreting the time period in which we live, while at the same time recording the African and diasporic predicate in a larger framework, one that could truly be understood as global. From now on, it's clear that, in order to move forward, the world at large can no longer ignore the

oeuvres from Africa or its diaspora, whether in the arts, critique, forms of knowledge, literature, or other domains of creativity and imagination.

To be more precise: there is no longer an African or diasporic question that is not at the same time a global question.

Or, to put it another way: the Africanization of the global question will perhaps constitute, at the level of the philosophical and the aesthetic, the event par excellence of the twenty-first century. If there is no African question that is not also a global one, and if, perhaps, the future of the planet largely plays itself out on the African continent, then there exists a variety of challenges that are truly and wholly new for African and diasporic thought, as well as for creativity, and writing. In order to accept the task of confronting these challenges, we can no longer afford not to think together, not to reflect and move forward on common ground. We must therefore compose a body – a body that is entirely open, flexible, and made up of a network, an impactful body whose multiplication of forces will generate and contribute to a much vaster conception of the world itself.

The principal task of these workshops was to take up a theoretical initiative and to focus our diverse gaze on the realities of the African continent and the futures to which it will give rise, starting from a conception of place: Africa. But equally, our task was also to propose renewed frameworks of analysis, of the production of significations and meaning, and the innovative and fertile dynamics at work across the entire continent.

The questions put forward were multiple, and the colleagues invited were first asked to come together to reflect in the workshops themselves, to debate, discuss, to test out their respective propositions, and attempt to open

up, by thinking together, a reflection that would be enriched by the contributions of each and every one of them, in a space for debate whose sights were set on such an end goal. Subsequently, further engagements and gatherings with the general public were organized where an even more open dialogue allowed participants to not only truly identify their preoccupations or concerns, but also to give way to a larger demand for a social and collective intelligence emanating from the public itself.

The texts presented in this volume consist of the contributions written by participants in the Workshops of Thought. They are thus the fruit of the distinct perspective of each of the authors, enriched, without doubt, by the exchanges in both Dakar and Saint-Louis-du-Senegal. They deal with questions of decoloniality, the elaboration of social utopias, the global condition of the African question, the articulation of the universal and the singular, the reconstruction of self-esteem, and the practice of thinking-in-common. From these contributions, what can be seen posited is a constant concern for the production of new forms of intelligibility concerning the different realities and future of Africa. The authors, from a broad range of disciplines, have chosen to join forces in order to shed new light on the challenges faced by an Africa World in full mutation, and open to a universe of plurality and myriad horizons.

Dakar-Johannesburg, March 2017

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In English, *Tout* can refer both to the notion of the Whole, or the All, a conception of Totality, and also, simply, to the primordial All or wholeness, or, as in this case, to a reference in the work of Édouard Glissant and

his conception of the *Tout-Monde*, whereby everything can be understood as resonating within a Whole or a conception of all. [T.N.]

# Part I

# **(European?) Universalism Put to the Test by Indigenous Histories**

## **Mamadou Diouf**

*Mamadou Diouf holds the Leitner Family Chair in African Studies and History at Columbia University in New York City, where he is also director of the Institute of African Studies. From 1982 to 1991, he taught in the history department at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, where he also directed the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). His large number of publications include Tolerance, Democracy, and the Sufis in Senegal (Columbia University Press, 2013); Les Arts de la citoyenneté au Sénégal. Espaces contestés et civilités urbaines (Karthala, 2013); The Arts of Citizenship in Africa. Spaces of Belonging (co-edited with Rosalind Fredericks; Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic: Rituals and Remembrances (co-edited with Ifeoma Nwankwo; University of Michigan Press, 2010); New Perspectives on Islam in Senegal: Conversion, Migration, Wealth, Power, and Femininity (co-edited with Mara Leichtman; Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). He is on the editorial committees of several journals, including African Studies Review, Social Dynamics, and Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (CSSAAME). He is president of the council of directors for the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the scientific council of the Réseau français des instituts d'études avancées (RFIEA).*

But education is something to make you fine!

No, education is planned to make a sharp, snooty, rooting hog. A Negro getting it is an anachronism. We ought to get something new, we Negroes. But we get our education - like our houses. When the Whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff. Dead stuff that this age has no use for.

Claude McKay<sup>1</sup>

The following reflection focuses on a specific moment in the intellectual history of an African and Black community, whose history, pain, and suffering, and social, political, and religious interrogations are etched in the Atlantic space. A territory that is the product of a vast structure of networks connecting worlds, European, African, and American, under the impetus and drive of an expanding Europe. However, this essay does not fail, in its ambition, to incorporate the world-system of the Indian Ocean. Its ambition is to open up, rather than simply pursue, a discussion whose principal object is to appreciate the formulas put in circulation so as to determine one or more African modernities capable of taking charge, or reassessing, the various distinct non-European cultures, in order to reconsider what we understand as a universal history;<sup>2</sup> to recivilize a humanity that was decivilized by colonial barbarism,<sup>3</sup> and to contribute to the emergence of a civilization of the universal.<sup>4</sup>

The universal enterprises in question have their sights set on a dual objective: to dismantle the imperialist maneuver of expropriating non-Western societies from the field of history that has been defined as that of political affairs and to firmly establish a historicity set to other rhythms than that of "Western reason," namely, to establish something of an everyday history.<sup>5</sup>

To a certain extent, this process is one where philosophy (Plato's *Republic*), political economy (Karl Marx's *Capital*), and sociology (Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as well as his *Economy and Society*)<sup>6</sup> will be replaced by poetry, the only practice capable of narrating, in a creative manner, the daily affairs under way in contrast to the history taught in academia, which is often focused exclusively on that of the nation-state and public affairs. What we are speaking of here is an invitation – already offered up to us by Rabindranath Tagore – vigorously taken up so poetically, and subsequently moved forward, by Guha.<sup>7</sup>

The experience of daily life in the imperialist metropolises, during the interwar years, laid bare the contradiction between universalist ideas and discriminatory practices, and also exposed the evil that still resided in certain Western “civilizing missions.” It puts into context the questions of the first generations of Black intellectuals, from Africa as well as the diaspora, relating to modernity, modernization, and their meanings. Indeed, they constitute the very core of universalism. And it calls into question the event and arrival of modernity. Why did modernity occur? Is there some sort of meaning and significance that connects its diverse resources into a unique and intelligible narrative? What are the distinctive elements that make it so that modernity is such a singular event? Is it truly possible to account for modernity in a human history considered as a totality and not simply as a series of fragments? Is it possible to reconcile – *pace* Weber – magic and reason, the kingdom of childhood (Senghor), and world history (Hegel)? Should reason (perhaps) recoil, withdraw, and give way to faith and/or traditions? Is it possible and productive to negotiate the spirit of modernity (the sciences, arts, and politics) and the rules of the concept of a generation and the genre of the African tradition? Such



questions are as important as they are urgent. Do they not affect the very debates concerning democratic traditions? In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville refers to a twofold transition: that of authoritarian political systems toward democratic political systems and that of traditional societies to modern and open societies. In the case of the *Ancien Régime* in France, he refers to aristocratic rule.<sup>8</sup> What rules should we do away with in order to better promote open societies?

The context in which such a discussion is led is characterized by several propositions. Nativist propositions are interested in the exhumation of African traditions and reconnection with an African past. The Marxist theory of history in its diverse variants, of which the main ones – revisionist, Trotskyist, and Maoist – celebrate the heroic achievements of the bourgeoisie as the collective agent of global change, before the arrival of the proletariat and the realization of its historical mission, thanks to the modernization of the world by capitalism. This theory considers that the dissolution of the last vestiges of feudalism, the suppression of local customs and traditions, and the growth of industrial production, leading to a reduction of social categories into two antagonistic classes that engage in a fight to the death, announce the end of capitalism and history itself. An indigenous modernization/modernity in the Western margins and in the imperial peripheries of capitalism is, according to the Marxist schema, impossible. Marx himself, in *The Communist Manifesto*, asserts that all nations should submit, under penalty of extinction, to the bourgeois forces of modernity. As a result, the end of the precapitalist and precolonial era is the very *sine qua non* condition for the beginning of scientific, technical, and social progress in non-Western societies. This position is affirmed with force through the correlation it establishes between the

introduction of the steam engine and the dissolution of the “village system.”<sup>9</sup> Weber’s ambition and that of his theory of modernity is to identify and analyze the forces that contributed to the arrival of modernity as the only rational civilization. His point of departure: the structure of authority from which he lists three forms – traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. Weber notes that the legal-rational form is the most dominant in the Western world and constitutes the reason why “Western civilization” has a “universal meaning and validity.” The ongoing progress of rational procedures serves as the very foundation for the production of the institutions of the ideals of Western modernity. The price to pay for the extraordinary gains produced by reason is the departure from religious territory. And some of the lasting effects of this departure are the following: a disconnection from cosmic and religious structures, the imposition of bureaucratic rules, the market economy, and the progress of science and forms of knowledge.

The highest price to be paid is disenchantment of the world, and its most unfortunate consequence is the arrival of “anti-humanism.”<sup>10</sup> Against this, theoreticians of negritude oppose a militant commitment whose primary preoccupation is the reconstruction of a humanism that has been led in the wrong direction by colonialism. The humanism found in negritude is a response to a certain “disenchantment” of the world. It is on a quest to uncover another kind of rationality that emerges out of a refusal to abandon intuition and spirituality. A spirituality that is expressed in a pagan grammar. This transactional commitment collides with and responds to another commitment of the proponent of negritude and African presence, Richard Wright. Wright’s paradox can be summarized in the following way: an ardent defense of Enlightenment philosophers and the modernization of Asia

and Africa; the celebration of secularism and reason – rationality and industrialization considered as antidotes to non-Western spiritual traditions and economies; the impossible capacity of African and Asian societies to imprint themselves in world time, threatened by the erasure of their traditions and the denial of their spiritual or religious beliefs and cultural aesthetics, as well as the economic and social practices of humanity. Wright asserts forcefully that the realities of the political order of the postwar period require the imposition of a modern subjectivity along with various institutions associated with it, secular democracy, the rule of law/nation-states, industrial and technological progress, bureaucratic order and rational organization of the public space – physical and institutional – and a rigorous defense of the “spirit of the Enlightenment, of the Reformation, which made Europe great, [and which] now has a chance to be extended to all mankind!”<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, Henry L. Gates considers that Wright’s total adherence to the Enlightenment protocols leads him to concede the superiority of Western rationality. Let’s quickly summarize Wright’s argument: “Colonization was the best thing that could have happened to the African continent” and, in spite of its destructive rage, it was, in the end, beneficial to the non-Western world. Colonization led to the liberation of the masses in Asia and Africa, freeing them from the smothering tyranny of their old traditions and religious beliefs.<sup>12</sup> They should thank “the White man” for having freed them from their rotten traditions and customs marked with a seal of irrationality.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Manthia Diawara maintains that Wright’s approach is inscribed in a reinterpretation of the secularism of industrialization and the Enlightenment: two universal paradigms that were betrayed by the West, initially meant to serve as a means of granting true independence to third world nations. In light

of this, Diawara considers that Wright is by no means an advocate of mimicry; on the contrary, he proposes postcolonial versions of modernity.<sup>14</sup>

Under these circumstances, how should we configure an African modernity that corresponds to a specific historicity in the more general historical landscape of modernity? Should we simply erase or reconfigure political formations, as well as the social, economic, and intellectual structures based on ethnicity, which has become the accursed part of African societies? How then, under these conditions, can they be reconstructed, taking into account the contradictory trajectories of geographies, sources, and resources of power, authority, and representation? So many questions that encourage us to look again and reflect on paganism with a critical eye, understanding it as a “tribal encyclopedia”<sup>15</sup> that nourishes the pluralism of African societies, to re-read Marc Augé’s *Génie du paganisme*, and translate his conception of religious anthropology into a political anthropology. Augé’s ambition is to restore to paganism its sociological and religious meaning, distinguishing it from Christianity. In the preface to his book, he affirms that paganism “can be radically distinguished, in its diverse modalities, from Christianity and its diverse versions,” at least concerning three points:

Paganism is never dualist and never attempts to contrast the body with the spirit (mind), nor faith with knowledge. It does not constitute some sort of morality that is, in principal, external to power relations and meaning [*rappports de force*] that are translated through the various currents of individual and social life. It postulates a continuity between the biological and the social orders that, on the one hand, relativizes the opposition between individual life and that of the collective in which it is situated. On the other hand, paganism also tends to make of every individual or social problem a question of reading: it postulates that all events comprise signs and that all signs make sense. Salvation, transcendence, and mystery are essentially foreign to paganism. As a result, paganism welcomes novelty with interest and in a spirit of tolerance, always ready to expand the list of deities in an ever-growing list, and always open to addition and change, but not to synthesis.<sup>16</sup> Such, doubtless, is the reason for the most profound misconceptions and confluences of paganism with Christian proselytism: for paganism has never included, as part of its practice, any form of missionary work.<sup>17</sup>

A world where everything is visible and where there is no reliance on any principle of exteriority to legitimize its order and history, opening itself up to constant negotiation and transactions that are likely to be called into question. Augé uncovers an indigenous anthropology that inserts the individual along a relational path in which everyone recognizes their dependence on each other, dramatizing and highlighting their differences in rites and rituals that are meticulously orchestrated.

The exercise at the heart of this examination of Augé's proposition is to test and attest to the consistency of African spiritual, communitarian, cultural, and economic

boundaries and to establish the structural rules of the genre and generation so as to administer pluralism and diversity. Either, following Wright's reflections, we must resolve to bring Africa into the time of the world, burying its traditions as deeply as possible so as to be reborn in the history of others; or Africa should become accustomed to a permanent crisis caused by the impossible reconciliation between the two very different public spheres identified by Peter Ekeh: "the primordial public" and the "civic public."<sup>18</sup> This claim made by the Nigerian sociologist has been corroborated by historical studies. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch is well aware of such an issue when she proclaims:

Power, in sub-Saharan Africa, is the result of a long-term process that inextricably mixes elements inherited from successive and largely contradictory political systems, schematically speaking: precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial; hence the emergence, even dominance, of phenomena that it would be completely erroneous to analyze today in a static fashion, that is, without referring, in depth, to diachrony. But it is also necessary to escape the ethnographic temptation, which was often a tendency to insist on, beyond any sort of proper means of measure, a heritage derived exclusively from a precolonial past: the colonial episode, although brief in the wider history of the continent, was nevertheless profoundly traumatizing since it led to an indelible transformation of previous structures.<sup>19</sup>

She identifies, in a very precise manner, the dilemma in which African intellectuals find themselves trapped, since the very early days of nationalist struggles, a forced second-hand modernization (to use Al Schwartz's highly effective expression<sup>20</sup>), which yields to a rather outrageous form of "Westernization" - the condition of their claim to a