

**ily cere-
cahier**

**the earthly community
achille mbembe**

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a part of:

the earthly community

reflections on the last utopia

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translated by Steven Corcoran

conclusion

In the history of life, humanity has been a constant, sometimes blind force. It thought that it had only to conquer the power of water, wind, metals, fuels or radioactive materials to realize, once and for all, its project of universal domination. Salvation on Earth would come through the machine.

Under the leadership of the world's North, we have tirelessly sought to free ourselves from natural and organic environments instead of consciously making room for them. The West, having long ago decided to stamp a Dionysian course on its history and to drag the rest of the world along with it, is now struggling to understand the difference between the beginning and the end, the artificial, the synthetic, and the living. As a result, the world is being dragged into a vast process of cleaving (*dilaceration*) whose consequences no one can predict.

Besides the great scientific and technological conquests, pandemics, plagues, disasters and calamities have often been the most important factors in the shifting of worlds. In this sense, it must be recognized that a fundamental part of the history of the living escapes the human will. Indeed, there is not only a random part of history, but also a part of the unexpected and unforeseen that the modern consciousness finds it hard to admit. This is especially the case in this computational age.

There may not be an electronic apocalypse. But the computational world in which we are now fully absorbed, and which has the fundamental characteristic of being planetary, will not eliminate either chance events, or risks, or calamities. It will produce all kinds of them. Some will come straight from the Earth's bowels, or from beneath the seas and oceans, the beds of which are constantly being drilled, cracked, and weakened. Others will be the direct consequence of our ecocidal relationships with other species, es-

pecially the animal and organic world. Whatever the case, these calamities will each time put at stake, and, each in its own way, our existence on the planet. Some will be local, but most will have a universal expansion coefficient. In this sense, they will know no borders. The paradox, however, is that the less able borders are to protect us from plagues, the more irrepressible the desire for borders will be.

Apart from this, there is a belief today that humanity, or a part of it, will survive if it moves to another stage of its biological evolution and acquires an artificial nervous system, or if it expatriates to some exo-planet. The myth of cosmic transplantation is thus back. A part of the power politics of the great nations now bases itself on the dream of an automated organization of the world thanks to the fabrication of a new subject that would be simultaneously a physiological assembly, a synthetic and electronic assembly, and a neuro-biological assembly. Let's call it techno-libertarianism. It is not unique to the West. China has also embraced it, vertiginously, with less democracy in action.

At the same time, another paradigm of government is gradually being put in place, which can be called *government by capture*—government by the continuous capture of flows of existence. This form of government is the work of *mutant powers*. The paradigm of government by capture, in the light of which history and speech almost no longer exist, comes up against the reality of bodies of flesh and bone, of microbes, viruses, bacteria and liquids of all kinds, including blood. It comes up against the reality of a history that, today, can only be read and interpreted on the scale of mineral, climatological and geological time, of pan-cosmic time, that of the universe.

The eldest daughter of humanity and one of the oldest residents of the Earth, Africa is both a *power in reserve* and a *reserve of power*. By power, we do not mean a relationship of force, and even less the incessant movement of destruction of beings and things, but a vital force, a potential of originality, a flow of energy, and a singular capacity of resonance, resilience, and creativity. In Africa's ancient archives, in fact, dispensing power and knowing how to make an alliance with the other vital forces is the surest way to participate in the realization of the Cosmos, that is to say, in the construction of a dwelling place open to all, that *makes room* for everyone, and in which

everyone is called to become potential ancestors, segments in an uninterrupted chain of links.

Power, in this configuration, is above all a disposition. It consists in *making room* for Others, in freeing links. In this, it is a paradoxical figure of disappropriation. Weaving links requires that one renounce violence; that it be suspended, because violence is a form of inert production that condemns being to exhaustion, whereas disappropriation opens the way to regeneration. The system of becoming is based on this requirement of resonance with all of the living. It saturates human existence, giving it meaning and direction.

This requirement is based on the axiom that there is no limit to the flows of life. Life is constructed and reconstructed from the links that are constantly established between all the figures of being. What counts is that a place is made for all and that no one is excluded. It is our common participation in energies and forces with which alliances are forged, but which exceed each of us taken separately. The relationship between humans and the rest of the living world is therefore not based on a thirst for conquest and appropriation, but on the contrary on an ethic of *disappropriation*. Its fundamental aim is the multiplication of the reserves of life, the sharing of the primordial breath that unites and animates the community insofar as it is composed of the dead, the living and ancestors, of beings and things, of animals, plants, objects and spirits.

In this context, at the heart of the precariousness of life and the ever-present imminence of death, to give birth, to assemble, and to combine in a variable way different lineages and different states that are themselves translated into multiple flows and segments, is to open a horizon, to grow not from oneself but from others, and to exist as a relation. In this conception of life and the Earth, humanity does not occupy a general view from above. Life, as we saw with Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, consists of a dynamic of positive and often risky exposure to the unknown and the unpredictable. Finally, these archives give a central place to the principle of *animation* and the sharing of vital breath. They differ from other traditions, which, as far as they are concerned, are convinced that there is a fundamental difference between the human subject and the world around it,

between the human universe and the universe of nature and objects; or that nothing is inviolable, inalienable, or imprescriptible. Everything is an effect of power, and there is no worse event than a disarmed power.

In the Anthropocene and the era of techno-libertarianism, another existence is sought, other vital structures and other paradigms of *liberation of the living* are more needed than ever. This double moment coincides with the rise of paranoid and over-armed powers. These powers claim to abolish risk and minimize uncertainty and indeterminacy by protecting their people from all hazards and dangers. They propose a mode of existence dominated by fear, anxiety, the concern for security, and the quest for rest. Behind this quest for a stable life is actually the refusal of a mobile world and a will to preserve life, to stay alive and be biologically safe at any cost. The body that these powers seek to manufacture is a body haunted by the ever-imminent possibility of being no more. One of the properties of such a body is to refuse its imminent death, and permanently disavow its precariousness and its essential fragility.¹

At the same time, it is a body that ceaselessly seizes the matter of the living for its sole benefit. It seeks to place itself above everything and at the center of everything, to keep the object as far away as possible from the subject, and to subdue and dominate nature through technology and machines. This body has the Earth at its entire disposal and its seek to do with the Earth what it wants. But the question today is how we are to imagine other ways of inhabiting the Earth, sharing it, repairing it, and taking care of it. It is here that African metaphysics of the link are particularly useful. It is often forgotten that ancient African societies were societies in movement, open and plural. They developed a lively awareness of the diversity of forms of the living in equal measure to the large place they made for the diversity of behaviors and the theme of singularity.

If we examine the arts and technologies of ancient African societies, we are struck by the importance that the theme of the *remaking of the world* as a permanent activity held. The quality of exchanges with the environment was one of the conditions for growth, reproduction, and fertility. The latter was not only a question of birth, but of metabolism in the most general sense of the term, that is, a thwarting of the forces of entropy and degener-

ation. The debt of life demanded an extended participation of living beings, of artifacts in action on matter and on bodies. As in the Amerindian world, there were multiple ways of being a human being or a thing in the living world or of the living.²

In this world, all living beings and all living forms would cease living at some point. This was held to be one of their fundamental characteristics. At the same time, all such forms were liable to harbor *animist* substances in their bosom. These substances are more or less temporarily housed there, such that life consists in their activation, distribution, and circulation within an eco-technical configuration. As for technical objects, their function is to act and interact with living beings. But they could also have a thanatogenic dimension. If one could make live, one could also make die. Diverse forces influenced the vital processes, but the latter always presented an irreducible dimension of otherness and uncertainty.

Is what is happening to us not, at least in part, the consequence of the work done over the last few centuries to untie humanity from all connections with the living world? As the human being's darkest passions are unlocked, and its bestial and viral parts are unleashed, is history not being reduced, before our very eyes, to a game of biological forces, and is the human race not being narrowed to the zoological and pathogenic part of its nature?

In these conditions, the last utopia consists in coming back to the Earth, the last name of a *we* that would include human beings as well as objects, viruses, plants, animals, oceans, machines—all the forces and energies with which we must now learn to live in *bio-symbiosis*. The greatest obstacle to the idea of a “we” is, however, racism, the ultimate neurosis of separation. As a singular form of the war of the species, racism is indeed the exact opposite of any consciousness of the common.

It must be added that in order to be truly universal, the fight against the various forms of racism must not be put at the service of the power politics of states. It must be put at the service of truth, justice, and reconciliation between all the species of the living. It is precisely in these terms of mutuality, of solidarity, of recognition of our common vulnerability that I imagine the new *we*, or what has been called the *in-common*.

1. See Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
2. See Fernando Santos-Granero, "From Baby Slings to Feather Bibles and from Start Utensils to Jaguar Stones: The Multiple Ways of Being a 'Thing' in the Yanesha Lived World" in *The Occult Life of Things: Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood*, ed. Santos-Granero (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 105–27.

colophon

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notes:

ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

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