

Bodies as borders

Achille Mbembe

WISER – University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

ABSTRACT

In this intervention Achille Mbembe reflects on the modalities of planetary living, interlacing what he calls three mega processes: early 21st-century corporate sovereignty, the computational speed regime, and the dialectics of entanglement and separation. In contrast to a certain fluidity of our contemporary age, Mbembe sees a logic of contraction, containment, incarceration and enclosure, whose result is the worldwide erection of all kinds of walls and fortifications, gates and enclaves as a way to manage risk, grant security, and safeguard 'identity'. Such practices of partitioning of space, of offshoring and fencing off wealth, of splintering territories, of fragmenting spaces, are 'borderizing' bodies. As a result, borders are no longer merely lines of demarcation separating distinct sovereign entities. Increasingly, they are the name we should use to describe the organised violence that underpins both contemporary capitalism and our world order in general. The border is no longer just a particular point in space, but both a technology and the moving body of undesired masses of population. Africa and Europe urgently need to confront each other over the issue of human mobility, a key dimension of the planetary shifts that are under way.

Keywords

corporate sovereignty, computational, mobility, security, bodies, technology, borders

My intervention is a set of urgent, fragmentary, and unfinished reflections on our global present. When I say 'our global present', what I truly have in mind is the sustainability and durability of our planet. As a matter of fact, this is an almost existential preoccupation, which is increasingly expressed in many different voices and shared by various people all over the world.

Indeed, many are wondering how we should *inhabit anew and share* as equitably as possible a planet whose life-support system has been so severely damaged by human activities and that is in dire need of repair. In view of the deep state of fragmentation the planet finds itself in, they are asking: how should we *re-member* it, that is, put back together its different parts, reassemble it and reconstitute it as an integrated system in which humans and non-humans, physical, chemical and biological components, oceans, atmosphere and land-surface are all interlinked in a grand gesture of mutuality?

These questions of inhabitation and interconnection, of mutuality, sustainability and durability, of the interlacing of human history and Earth's history are far from abstract concerns. In fact, the ongoing long-term planetary environmental changes have only further dramatized

them, and there is little doubt that they will be at the centre of any debate on the future of life and the future of reason in this century. To properly attend to them forces us to refocus our attention on three mega processes that have an almost overwhelming bearing on what humanity and the planet we live on (the only one, so far, where life is known to exist) might become.

Early 21st-century corporate sovereignty

The first mega process is the unprecedented consolidation of power and knowledge (political, financial, and technological) in the hands of private high-tech corporate entities whose sphere of action is not one country or one region, but the globe. ‘Corporate sovereignty’ has taken various forms throughout history. Take, for instance, the English East India Company and its political dominance in some parts of the Indian subcontinent in the 18th century. A composite, diffuse and hybrid entity, it exercised powers customarily associated with formal state institutions. It could acquire territories and exercise authority over people. It could engage in wide ranging operations such as tax collection and war making. In competition with the monarchical and national state, it was a key part of the different institutional and constitutional forms that shaped imperial expansion (see Stein 2011).

The conditions that have enabled the expansion of privatized government in the first half of the 21st century are well known. Many of these have to do with the various legal frameworks behind international trade agreements, foreign investment treaties and other mechanisms that have turned markets into the single most undisputed forces of our times. Others have to do with the computational transformations of financial markets and the possibilities afforded by media technologies (see Beverungen and Lange 2018). Furthermore, whether the old distinction between the economic power of corporations and the political sovereignty of states still holds is more and more open to debate (read Barkan 2013). Most global corporations aspire to secede from everybody else while exercising surveillance on everybody else. Their big dream is to be exempt from taxes and to be free from accountability; in short, to enjoy the kind of immunity and state of exceptionality we used to recognize only to truly sovereign powers.

In a recent book about what she terms “surveillance capitalism,” Shohana Zuboff argues that a global architecture of behaviour modification is under way. Driven by powerful states, high-tech corporations and military apparatuses, surveillance capitalism threatens what she calls “human nature” in the 21st century, just as industrial capitalism disfigured the natural world in the 20th. She shows the extent to which vast wealth is accumulated in what she terms new “behavioural futures markets,” that is, markets where predictions about our behaviour are bought and sold, and the production of goods and services is subordinated to new means of behavioural modification. Indeed, capital, especially finance capital, has become our *shared infrastructure*, our nervous system, the transcendental maw that nowadays maps out our world and its psycho-physical limits (Zuboff 2018). Around us, it looks as if nothing escapes its con-

trol. Affects, emotions and feelings, manifestations of desire, dreams or thoughts – no sphere of contemporary life has been left untouched by the spread of capital. Capital now extends its grasp deep into the underbelly of the world. In its wake, it leaves vast fields of debris and toxins, waste heaps of humans ravaged by sores and boils. Now that everything is a potential source of capitalization, it has made a world of itself: a hallucinatory phenomenon of planetary dimensions.

Early 21st-century corporate sovereignty is therefore an unprecedented form of power, whose main aspiration is to free itself from democratic oversight. As a result, we might no longer live in an epoch when sovereignty was exercised by the *demos*. The *demos* properly understood might no longer be the sovereign. Finance capital in the guise of a ubiquitous digital architecture might have definitely become the new Leviathan. We are witnessing the historical bifurcation between liberal democracy and finance capitalism, and the emergence of a new form of sovereignty – corporate sovereignty – which claims for itself the law of immunity and the powers of exception.

The computational speed regime

The second mega process I would like to invoke is technological escalation and the ways in which it has totally redefined the nature of speed, unshackled markets and the economy, and the way it constantly monitors our behaviour in an attempt at revealing how it could be modified and optimized. As a matter of fact, some of the fastest expanding markets in the world today are ‘markets for future behaviour’. They rely on better understanding incipient future intent. This “could be future voting intentions, the intent to commit fraud, the intent to buy life insurance, or the intent to stream a specific video,” argues Louise Amoore (2019, 4). These markets also rely on the extraction and mining of new forms of raw material, mostly consisting of information and details about individuals’ behaviour taken, as Zuboff writes, from the distant corners of our unconscious. It is raw material “plumbed from intimate patterns of the self” – “our personality, our moods, our emotions, our lies, our vulnerabilities, every level of our intimacy” (2018, 201). The purpose is not only to heighten the predictability of our behaviour. It is also to make life itself amenable to ‘datafication’.

A key feature of our times is therefore the extent to which all societies are organized according to the same principle – *the computational*. We are surrounded with ubiquitous computing, technologies that weave themselves into the fabric of our everyday lives, devices, sensors, things we interact with and which have become part of our presence in the world all the time. How the boundary between us and these devices is enacted is a matter of open debate (Matzner 2019).

But, what is the computational? The computational is generally understood as a technical system whose function is to capture, extract, and automatically process data that must be identified, selected, sorted, classified, recombined, codified and activated. Yet we shouldn’t

forget that the computational is also a force and energy of a special kind, a *speed regime* with its own qualities and infrastructures. It is a force and energy that produces and serializes subjects, objects, phenomena; that splits reason from consciousness and memory, codes and stores data that can be used to manufacture new types of services and devices sold for profit. Whether operating on bodies, nerves, material, blood, cellular tissues, the brain or energy, the aim is the same, *i.e.* the conversion of all substances into *quantities*; the conversion of organic and vital ends into technical means; the capture of forces and possibilities and their annexation by the language of a machine-brain transformed into an autonomous and automated system.

But the computational is also the institution through which a common world, a new common sense and new configurations of power, of perception and of reality are nowadays brought into being. The globalization of corporate sovereignty, the extension of capital into every sphere of life and technological escalation in the form of the computational are all part of one and the same process.

The dialectics of entanglement and separation

The third mega process is what we should call the dialectics of entanglement and separation. All over the world, the combination of fossil capital, soft-power warfare, and the saturation of the everyday by digital and computational technologies has led to the acceleration of speed and the intensification of connections, creating a new redistribution of the Earth and of population movements. To be alive, or to remain alive, is increasingly tantamount to being able to move speedily.

In the process, the human race has come up against terrestrial limits. Such limits are not only the consequence of the sphericity of the planet. They are also limitations on the expansion of life as such. As the planet increasingly seems bound to burn, it is not only the individual bodies that are imperilled. It is earthly existence, the fate of everything on earth, the fluidity of life which is at stake (Pyne 1997; Parisi and Terranova 2000).

Meanwhile, we are, more than ever before at any other time in human history, not only in close proximity to each other but also exposed to each other. This close proximity and exposure is experienced less and less as opportunity and possibility and, more and more, as heightened risk. But entanglement and exposure to each other are not all that characterize the now. Wherever we look, the drive is simultaneously and decisively towards contraction, towards containment, towards enclosure and various forms of encampment, detention, and incarceration.

Typical of this logic of contraction, containment, incarceration and enclosure is the worldwide erection of all kinds of walls and fortifications, gates and enclaves. In other words, various practices of partitioning space, of offshoring and fencing off wealth, of splintering territories, of fragmenting spaces, saddling them with various kinds of borders whose function is to decelerate movement, to stop it in some instances, for certain classes of populations, in order to man-

age risks. Various reasons are mobilized to account for this renewed infatuation with borders taken as the best way to manage risks. Security and the preservation of one's identity are some of these reasons. And as it happens, physical and virtual barriers of separation, digitalisation of databases, filing systems, the development of new tracking devices, sensors, drones, satellites and sentinel robots, infrared detectors and various other cameras, biometric controls, and new microchips containing personal details – everything is put in place to transform the very nature of the border in the name of security. Borders are increasingly turned into mobile, portable, omnipresent and ubiquitous realities. The goal is to better control movement and speed, accelerating it here, decelerating it there and, in the process, sorting, recategorizing, reclassifying people with the goal of better selecting anew who is whom, who should be where and who shouldn't, in the name of security.

As a result, borders are no longer merely lines of demarcation separating distinct sovereign entities. Increasingly, they are the name we should use to describe the organised violence that underpins both contemporary capitalism and our world order in general. But perhaps, to be exact, we should not speak of borders in general but, instead, of 'borderization', that is, the process by which certain spaces are transformed into uncrossable places for certain classes of populations, who thereby undergo a process of racialization; places where speed must be disabled and the lives of a multitude of people judged to be undesirable are meant to be immobilized if not shattered. Whatever the case, the technological transformation of borders is in full swing. In a sense, one of the major consequences of the acceleration of technological innovations has been the creation of a segmented planet of multiple speed regimes.

A key development, of late, is the extent to which border security practices have taken a keen interest in the connection between the human body and identity, as a means to achieve detailed control over movement and speed. This being the case, the question we must ask is the following: what precisely is at stake in the extension of the biometric border into multiple realms of social life and, in particular, the human body? In other words, what explains the migration from the border understood as a particular point in space to the border as the moving body of the undesired masses of populations? The answer is a new global partitioning between potentially risky bodies vs. bodies that are not.

It is in the nature of risk to be hidden from view. That which is hidden from view is generally unknown. For it to be known, it must be visualized. The screening of bodies at border checkpoints aims at making visible "that which is hidden from view, opening up new visualizations of the unknown, potentially risky body" (Amoore and Hall 2009, 444). In such a context, biometric technologies are supposed to fragment the human body in order to recompose it for the purpose of securitization, of elimination and neutralization of the risk. This happens because the human body is seen as an indisputable anchor from which data can be safely harnessed or extracted. As a result, we are witnessing a gradually extending intertwining of individual physical characteristics with information systems – a process that has served to

deepen faith in data as a means of risk management and faith in the body as a source of absolute identification. In this sense, biometric technologies should perhaps be best understood as techniques that govern both the mobility and enclosure of bodies (see van der Ploeg 2003). They are perceived as infallible and unchallengeable verifiers of the truth about a person – the ultimate guarantors of identity. They are supposed to produce the identification of a person beyond question, and lend authenticity and credibility to all of the data that are connected to that identity. According to this logic, the world would be safer if only ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty could be controlled. These technologies are assumed to provide a complete picture of who someone is, to fix and secure identity as a basis for prediction and prevention, leaving people to dispute their own identity.

The three mega processes I have briefly sketched are driving the movement towards what I have called ‘planetary entanglement’, as well as its opposite, that is, enclosure, contraction, containment, encampment, and incarceration. Once again, they are shaped by the alliance between military power, the industries that surround it (contractors), and tech giants. They are also driven by corporate elites increasingly detached from their countries of origin and who store most of their capital in tax heavens (see Davis 2019). These elites can no longer be ‘forced to account’ through traditional means such as elections or protests. They defeat citizens’ scrutiny via complexity and secrecy, often under the pretext of national security or via an economic rationale that puts capital first, before people. This movement is erratic, uneven. But everywhere it heightens uncertainty and insecurity. Everywhere it institutionalizes the risks inherent in the misfortunes of reality.

Life and mobility

Part of what we are witnessing as a result is a novel imbrication, a symbiotic merging of life and mobility. To be alive, or to survive, is more and more co-terminus with the capacity to move. Just as living, movement, in turn, involves continual doublings, the incessant crossing of multiple lines and thresholds, multiple transitions across layers. Life itself is more and more taken as something that can be calculated and recombined rather than merely represented. Furthermore, we are witnessing a bifurcation between life on the one hand and bodies on the other hand. Nowadays, not every body is thought of as containing life. *Discounted bodies* are believed to contain no life as such. They are, strictly speaking, bodies at the limits of life, trapped in uninhabitable worlds and inhospitable places. The kind of life they bear or contain is not insured or is *uninsurable*, folded as it is in extreme and thin envelopes.

Such bodies on the precipice are the most exposed to droughts, storms and famines, toxic waste and various experiences of effacement. Their livelihoods made impossible, they are the most likely to sustain the most crippling wounds and injuries. Trapped human subjects often without escape, they bear the brunt of terrestrial life on a damaged planet (Tsing et al. 2017). At the same time, they exceed all attempts to contain them. These bodies are not simply

in motion. Interactive and generative, they are *movements and events*. The inside of such bodies is not separated from their outward environments. From the perspective of discounted bodies, to be alive is always and already to breach boundaries or to be exposed to the risk of the outside entering the inside (read Litvintseva 2019).

This disentanglement of life from discounted bodies, this redistribution of life on differential scales of insurability and non-insurability, is a key dimension of contemporary migration regimes. The latter aim either at slowing down the dynamics of people's interactions, at creating distance or at shattering the chains of relations between them, so as to institute new patterns of separation. Contemporary movement restrictions are not limited to national boundaries. They are at work on a global scale. They are deepening the space and time asymmetries between different categories of humanity while leading to the progressive ghettoization of entire regions of the world. To a large extent, this is akin to a universalization of the Israeli model. In this model, the restriction of movement does not necessarily aim "to confine unwanted people territorially or to dissociate their movements from those of citizens, but to inscribe them into temporalities and spatialities that are disjointed to the point of giving these populations the illusion of being territorially separated" (Parizot 2018, 38).

Furthermore, at a time when the material components and biological organization of the body can be reengineered and redesigned, the latter are more than ever based on the ideas of repressive selection, reproduction and the rejuvenation of species. Only what can potentially generate value counts as life. In this context, borders are meant to concretize the principle of dissimilarity rather than that of affinity. They are not only obstacles to free movement. They are boundaries between species and varieties of the human. As such, they play a crucial role in contemporary modes of production of human difference and relatedness. Human bodies are increasingly divided between those that matter and those that do not, those who can move and those who cannot or should not, or should only move under very strict conditions. Bodies that should not move are those that are uninsured. They must be tracked, captured, and dispensed of. Such bodies are kept shifting between invisibility, waiting and effacement. They are trapped in fragmented spaces, stretched time and indefinite waiting (Peteet 2018). As for the dream of perfect security, it requires not only complete systematic surveillance, but also a cleansing policy. This dream is symptomatic of the structural tensions that, for decades, have accompanied our transition into a new technical system of increased automation – one that is increasingly complex yet also increasingly abstract.

One of the major contradictions of the liberal order has always been the tension between freedom and security. Today, this question seems to have been cut in two. Security now matters more than freedom. A society of security is not necessarily a society of freedom. A society of security is a society dominated by the irrepressible need for adhesion to a collection of certainties. It is one fearful of the type of interrogation that delves into the unknown, unearthing the risks that must surely be contained within. This is why in a society of security, the priority

is, at all cost, to identify what lurks behind each new arrival – who is who, who lives where, with whom and since when, who does what, who comes from where, who is going where, when, how, why, and so on and so forth. Moreover, who plans to carry out which acts, either consciously or unconsciously. The aim of a society of security is not to affirm freedom, but to control and govern the modes of arrival.

The current myth claims that technology constitutes the best tool for governing these arrivals; that technology alone allows for the resolution of this problem – a problem of order, but also of awareness, of identifiers, of anticipation and predictions. It is feared that the dream of a humanity transparent to herself, stripped of mystery, might prove to be a catastrophic illusion. For the time being, migrants and refugees are bearing the brunt of it. In the long run, it is by no means certain that they will be the only ones.

The mega processes highlighted above leave us with foundational questions that will haunt us for most of this century. The first foundational question is related to what I called ‘borderization’, or the logics of containment, enclosure, and contraction. Perhaps more than at any other moment in our recent past, we are increasingly faced with the question of what to do with those whose very existence does not seem to be necessary for our reproduction; those whose mere existence or proximity is deemed to represent a physical or biological threat to our own life. Throughout history, and in response to this foundational question, various paradigms of rules have been designed for human bodies deemed either in excess, unwanted, illegal, dispensable, or superfluous. One historical response has consisted in putting in place spatial exclusionary arrangements. Such was, for instance, the case during the early phases of modern settler or genocidal colonialism in relation to Native American reservations in the United States, island prisons, penal colonies such as Australia, camps and Bantustans in South Africa. A late modern example is Gaza, and Gaza might well prefigure what is yet to come. Here, control of vulnerable, unwanted, surplus or racialized people is exercised through a combination of tactics, chief among which is ‘modulated blockade’. A blockade prohibits, obstructs, and limits who and what can enter and leave the Strip. The goal might not be to cut the Strip off entirely from supply lines, infrastructural grids or trade routes. It is nevertheless relatively sealed off in a way that effectively turns it into an imprisoned territory. Comprehensive or relative closure is accompanied by periodic military escalations and the generalized use of extra-judicial assassinations. Spatial violence, humanitarian strategies, and a peculiar biopolitics of punishment all combine to produce, in turn, a peculiar detention space in which people deemed surplus, unwanted, or illegal are governed through abdication of any responsibility for their lives and their welfare.

But there is another, early 21st-century example, which consists in waging new forms of wars, which can be called wars on speed and mobility. Wars on mobility are wars whose aim is to *turn into dust* the means of existence and survival of vulnerable people taken as enemies. These kinds of wars of attrition, methodically calculated and programmed, and implemented

with new methods, are wars against the very ideas of mobility, circulation, and speed, whilst the age we live in is precisely one of velocity, acceleration, and increasing abstraction and algorithms. Moreover, the targets of this kind of warfare are not by any means singular bodies, but rather great swathes of humanity judged worthless and superfluous.

All of the above belongs to the current practice of remote borderization, carried out from afar, in the name of freedom and security. This battle, waged against certain undesirables and reducing them to mounds of human flesh, is rolled out on a global scale. It is on the verge of defining the times in which we live. Wars on mobility are peculiar wars on bodies. They have to do with two broad questions that confront us today and will haunt us for most of this century: on the one hand *the question of life futures*, that is, of the self-organization of being and matter; on the other hand, that of the *future of reason*.

The future of life and the future of reason

For a long time, the human race has been concerned with how life emerges and the conditions of its evolution. The key question today is how it can be reproduced, sustained, made durable, preserved and universally shared, and under what conditions it ends. Overall, these debates about how life on Earth can be reproduced and sustained, and under what conditions it ends, are forced upon us by the epoch itself, characterized as it is by the impending ecological catastrophe and by technological escalation.

It is a fact that, today, unprecedented numbers of human beings are embedded in increasingly complex technostructures. The latter are increasingly intervening in the dynamics of the Earth system on a planetary scale. This has led to the transgression of planetary boundaries such as those related to anthropogenic climate change, degenerative land-use change, accelerated biodiversity loss, perturbation of the global biogeochemical cycles of nitrogen and phosphorus, and the creation and release of novel entities such as nanoparticles and genetically engineered organisms (see Donges et al.).

Furthermore, both metabolically (for example in terms of their energy needs) and reproductively, technologies are becoming more and more tied in complex networks of extraction and predation, manufacturing and innovation. An example is recent developments in the domain of genes and molecules. As Margarida Mendes shows, the heyday of DNA study has allowed the cracking and public dissemination of the genetic codes of humans, plants, and animals. This, in turn, has given way to an exponential rise of biological patents, as currently nearly 20% of the human genome is now privately owned, in a context of a market logic that addresses *life as a commodity* to be manipulated and replicated under the volatility of market consumption. Studies after studies have shown for instance that corporations are intervening directly in the natural cycles of life and ecosystems through the widespread genetic modification of key elements in the food chain (see Mendes 2017). As patented GMO genes are absorbed into our bodies in a proprietary relationship of biological subjugation, *the body itself*

becomes an expanded, multiple infrastructure, where intervention can happen at many different scales. It is therefore correct to argue that there is a shifting distribution of powers between the human and the technological, in the sense that technologies are moving towards ‘general intelligence’ and self-replication. They are being granted the powers of reproduction and independent teleonomic purpose rather than having them taken away.

Over the last decades, we have witnessed the development of algorithmic forms of intelligence. They have been growing in parallel with genetic research, and often in its alliance. The integration of algorithms and big data analysis in the biological sphere does not only bring with it an increasingly greater belief in techno-positivism and modes of statistical thought. It also paves the way for regimes of assessment of the natural world, and modes of prediction and analysis that treat *life itself as a computable object*. Concomitantly, algorithms inspired by the natural world, and ideas of natural selection and evolution are on the rise. Such is the case with genetic algorithms – a subset of evolutionary algorithms that mimic actions inspired in biological operators, such as cells, seeking to optimize the responses to the problems of their environments by self-generating, and encompassing processes of mutation and natural selection. The latter are designed to evolve and further adapt to the environment, in a process of self-generation. The belief today is that everything is *potentially computable and predictable*. In the process, what is rejected is the fact that life itself is an open system, non-linear, and exponentially chaotic.

These are also times when many are gradually coming to the realization that *reason may well have reached its limits*. Or, in any case, it is a time when reason is on trial – we are, in other words, in a sort of Dark Enlightenment. Reason is a faculty we used to recognize in humans and in humans alone. In the Western tradition we have all, willingly or not, become the inheritors of reason, always seen as the highest of all human faculties, the one that opened the doors to knowledge, wisdom, virtue and, most importantly, freedom. Although unequally redistributed among them, it was the prerogative of humans alone. It distinguished the latter from other living species. Thanks to their superior capacity to exercise this faculty, humans could claim to be exceptional.

Today, reason is on trial in two ways. First, reason is increasingly replaced and subsumed by instrumental rationality, when it is not simply reduced to procedural or algorithmic processing of information. In other words, the logic of reason is morphing from within machines and computers and algorithms. The human brain is no longer the privileged location of reason. The human brain is being “downloaded” into nano-machines. An inordinate amount of power is gradually being ceded to abstractions of all kinds. Old modes of reasoning are being challenged by new ones that originate through and within technology in general and digital technologies in particular, as well as through the top-down models of artificial intelligence. As a result, *techne* is becoming the quintessential language of reason.

Furthermore, instrumental reason, or reason in the guise of *techne* is increasingly

weaponized. Time itself is becoming enveloped in the doing of machines. Machines themselves do not simply execute instructions or programs. They start generating complex behaviour. The computational reproduction of reason has made it such that reason is no longer, or is a bit more than, just the domain of human species. We now share it with various other agents. Reality itself is increasingly construed via statistics, metadata, modelling, mathematics. Second, many are turning their back to reason in favour of other faculties and other modes of expression and cognition. They are calling for a rehabilitation of affect and emotions for instance. In many of the ongoing political struggles of our times, passion is clearly trumping reason. Confronted with complex issues, feeling and acting with one's guts, viscerally rather than reasoning, is fast becoming the new norm.

Africa in the global regime of mobility

We see this in relation to African migrations to Europe in particular, and I will end with comments on this issue. It is an issue that is clouded in myths and phantasms, some of which are of a racist nature. In fact, as far as the question of borders and migration is concerned, facts unfortunately no longer seem to matter. And yet facts exist.

I am worried about Europe's anti-immigration policies because their ultimate goal is to turn Africa into a huge Bantustan. It is true that of all the regions of the world, Africa is one that has not entirely completed its demographic transition. There are objective reasons for this, and they are known by any serious historical demographers. We lost millions of people during the centuries of the Atlantic and Arab slave trades. Colonialism, its endless wars, its political economy and its epidemiological and ecological consequences killed many. By the end of the twenty-first century, Africa will have finally compensated for what it lost during those early centuries. It will have more young people than any other region of the planet. Not all of them will be running away to Europe. I believe we urgently need to open the continent to itself and engineer a new historical cycle of re-peopling it. The colossal landmass of 30 million square kilometres that is Africa can still house more people. In fact, it is arguably the last portion of the Earth that can sustain huge human migrations. Most migrants in Africa do not dream about going to Europe. They are moving from one African country to another African country, and the same happens with refugees, those fleeing wars, disasters, and catastrophes. We should stop peddling the myth according to which Europe is besieged by refugees and migrants.

Europe is fast becoming the biggest reservoir of older people on Earth. Many right wing and white supremacist forces in the world are seized by the fear of what they call "the great replacement," a conspiracy theory that might trigger racist and anti-immigration policies at a planetary scale. But such policies are simply not sustainable. Because even if Europe wanted to hermetically close its doors, it is simply too late to do so. Maybe this should have been done long ago and yet, as we know, Europe then was busy colonizing other lands and one cannot really close one's doors while forcefully plundering other people's lands.

Whatever the case, were Europe genuinely determined to close itself off from the rest of the world or from Africa, the consequences would be colossal, of almost a genocidal proportion. Europe would have to implement deadly policies, which by the way are already experimented with in those laboratories that the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahara Desert have become. According to various figures, something like 34,000 people have already lost their lives over the last few years trying to cross the Mediterranean; this without counting those who have met their end in the Sahara Desert, or those who are the subject of new forms of enslavement and capture in lawless places such as Libya, where Europe is funding militias and encouraging them to capture would-be African migrants to detain them in makeshift camps or to sell them into slavery.

The choice is therefore clear. It is between cynically embracing the full consequences of a creeping para-genocide, or imagining together different ways of reorganizing the world and redistributing the planet among all its inhabitants, humans and non-humans. As stated above, a key issue of the 21st century will be the management of human mobility. The concept of human mobility is a bit more than what has been dubbed in Europe as the migration crisis, “the migrant-refugee crisis.” Human mobility is a key dimension of the big, planetary shifts that are under way. They include migrancy of course, but they are also related to many other factors propelled by the technological acceleration, the speed with which our world is moving, the unleashing of all kinds of predatory forces, the rise of bio- and high-tech racism, the deteriorating conditions of life on Earth, and environmental change.

We cannot speak about migration without addressing the presence and actions of the West in the rest of the world. Europe and North America cannot possibly go about destroying other people’s living environments, extracting their oil, gas, timber, diamonds and gold, shipping it all home, leaving nothing behind, turning their cities into rubble, bringing to an end the possibilities of life in faraway places, and expect those affected by such upheavals to survive in the midst of the ruins.

Europe’s and America’s violence abroad is a key reason why people are forced to run away from places where they were born and raised, but which have become uninhabitable. And I doubt building walls around one’s nation-state is the most intelligent way of resolving the many crises we have contributed to fomenting around the world. Instead of marketing fictions and inflaming dark passions and hysteria, we should take seriously the question of the future, reactivate our critical faculties and rehabilitate reason, because if we do not rehabilitate reason, we will not be able to repair the world or learn how to share the planet.

We cannot confuse the debate on African futures with European fears of a great exodus. As far as Africa is concerned, we do not have to attend to anyone’s fears. We have to take care of ourselves, and we cannot embrace the “too many people” logic. If, to start with, we believe that there are too many people, what this implies is that there are some people who should not be there in the first instance. If this is the case, then what should we do with “surplus

people,” make them “superfluous”? We have to be mindful of the dreadful and necropolitical implications of the discourse about “too many people.”

This having been said, there are real questions of uplift from poverty, of wealth creation and redistribution. To address them efficiently, we need to open Africa to herself. Africa is a colossal continent. There is room in it for all, for every single one of her many sons and daughters, including those in the diaspora. We cannot turn this portion of the Earth into a double prison, where people cannot move outside and they cannot move from within. We have to turn Africa into a vast space of circulation for her own people.

If Europe is really keen to contribute positively to resolving the great issue of our century, which is the question of human mobility, the key is not for Europe to spend money building camps and prisons in Libya and in its own midst. Europe should put money into, for instance, the harmonisation of identity registers in the continent, the gradual dismantling of thousands of internal borders in the continent, the rational intensification of movements within the continent, massive investments in upgrading roads, building transcontinental railways and highways, consolidating water and river navigation. That is how the future will be brought back, and no African will want to leave or end up in a place, Europe, where they know nobody, where nobody is waiting for them and where they are not welcome.

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Achille Mbembe is a philosopher, postcolonial critical theorist, political scientist, and public intellectual from Cameroon. He is currently a member of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. His most famous works, translated into many languages, are *On the Postcolony* (2001), "Necropolitics" (2003), *Sortir de la grande nuit. Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* (2010), *Critique of the Black Reason* (2013) and *Politiques de l'inimitié* (2016). He has won numerous awards, including the Geschwister-Scholl Award (2015) and the Ernst-Bloch Award (2018).