Chapter 1

The Colony: Its Guilty Secret and Its Accursed Share

Achille Mbembe

The following essay distances itself, in many respects, from the preoccupations generally invoked in debates on memory, history, and forgetting (including colonial history). My concern is not to pinpoint the status of memory in historiographic operations and processes of knowledge in general, and I am even less concerned with unraveling relations between collective and individual memory. It has become evident that the distances (but also the connections) between memory as a socio-cultural phenomenon and history as epistemology are complex, and the intersections between historical and mnemonic discourses are manifest. By contrast, the concern here is to reflect upon ways of considering how the colony inscribes itself into the contemporary African imagination. This manner of defining the subject has obvious limits. African forms of mobilizing the memory of the colony vary according to the period, the stakes involved, and the precise situations evoked. As for the modes of representing the colonial experience itself, these range from active commemoration to forgetting, passing via nostalgia, fiction, and reappropriation, all diverse forms through which the past becomes instrumental in current social struggles – or, a more serious consequence, becomes used as a means to destroy the political connection altogether.

Contrary to such instrumentalist readings of the colonial past, however, I will demonstrate that memory (just like recollections, nostalgia,
or forgetting) is fundamentally composed of psychic images. This is the manner all these elements take, as they resurface in the representative field. These images are composed of absent objects, of formative, original experiences that occurred in the past – the image enabling the presence of absence. Therefore, what is important in memory, recollections, and forgetting, is not so much “truth,” but rather gaps, “lies,” erasures, and blackouts, things which cannot easily be articulated, slips and the failure to recall simple acts, all of which may be summed up as the reluctance to confess. As powerful representational complexes, memory, recollection, and forgetting are, strictly speaking, symptomatic acts. They only glean meaning through their relation to a secret. They thus emerge as the product of psychic work and the critique of time – which are two fundamental processes of the cure from the past.

I am, then, particularly interested in those aspects of the African remembrance of the colony which render the latter a place of loss. In canonical African texts (literature, philosophy, political essays, art, music, and cinema), the colony appears first and foremost as a place of loss, which, in turn, makes it possible to establish a debt between the ex-colonized subject and the ex-colonizer. Indeed, all this is not unrelated to the very nature of the colonial potentate and the manner in which he operated two levers which were, on the one hand, the functions of terror (the colony’s accursed share) and on the other, the functions of fantasy (its guilty secret). Then again, representing the memory of the colony does not only require an engagement with psychic work and its losses; it also requires a critique of time and artifacts that claim to be the last substitutes for the very substance of time (statues, monuments, effigies). I will consider literature as an example of this African critique of time, one of the instances (alongside dance, music, celebrations, trance, and possession) when memory, imagination, and forgetting become entwined to such an extent that distinctions between the symbolic and the real, the individual and the collective, are abolished. Finally, I will examine the connections between skulls (in statues, effigies, and colonial monuments which are found in many public squares in Africa today) and the question of the proper name (auto-recognition), which, as we know, occupies such a central place in modes of African self-writing.

**Remembering the Potentate**

In African self-writing, the colony is depicted as an original scene which does not merely occupy a space of remembrance, as if reflected in
a mirror. It is also represented as one of the significant matrices of language, operating on the past and the present, identity and death. It is pictured as an original body giving flesh and weight to subjectivity, and is not just remembered, but continues to inflect lived experience, visceraally, long after its formal disappearance. In doing so, Africans grant it the attributes of an inaugural power, with its own psyché, the double of the living body, “a likeness which is taken to be the real body, which has its exact same appearance, the same clothing, gestures and voice,” although it all the while participates in a shadow whose essence is effervescence – which only strengthens its morphogenous power.

If then, through their literature, music, religions, and cultural artifacts, Africans have developed a phenomenology of the colony which recalls, in many respects, what psychoanalysis terms “the mirror experience,” is this not a direct result of the fact that this scene appears to play out both the confrontation between the colonized subject and his mirror image and the relation of imprisonment which binds his descendants to the horrific image and the demon of the alter ego in the mirror, his totem? More radically, in canonical African texts, the colony always appears as the scene where the ego was stripped of its tenor and replaced by a voice which has the peculiarity of being embodied through a sign which negates, revokes, inhibits, suspends, and removes any impulse of authenticity. In African discourse, this is the reason why remembering the colony almost always involves remembering a primordial decentering between ego and subject.

This original diffraction generally leads to the deduction that the authentic ego appears to have been altered. An unknown ego has assumed the place of the real ego, thus making the African, in spite of himself, the carrier of secret significations, obscure intentions, and something uncanny that unbeknown to him directs his existence, conferring a demonic aspect upon certain features of his psychic and political life. The West, it is then alleged, is entirely guilty for this internal fracture. The process of the psychoanalytic cure, from this point onwards, will aim to put an end to this psychic lesion. However, to escape from that (the colony as a figure of haunting and discordance) would demand that an original symbolic matrix be reinstated in the subject, capable of preventing the parceling out of the African body. Once this had been achieved, the former colonized subject could be born into a world that was his own in every respect, and the madness to which the mirror experience led, would, at last, be exorcised.

It can hardly be surprising that such a central place has been accorded to the colony in discourses on the construction of the African
“ego,” or even that the colony has been selected as such a crucial experience in the accession to subjectivity. This can in part be attributed to the nature of the colonial potentate and also to the manner in which Africans undertake the critique of time. The case of the colonial potentate merits further consideration. In his lifetime, Frantz Fanon demonstrated that the colony should be considered as a power formation endowed with its own relatively specific sensorial life. In order to function, this power formation had to be connected to a fantasmatic device—without this, any repeat attempts at the original colonial act would have been doomed to failure. This archaic act—the accursed share of the colony—had its origins in sacrificial reason. In other words, the deep roots of the colony can be sought in the totalizing experience of death, even at the expense of life, which we recognize as being a major trait of European history, its social operations of production and accumulation, its composition into states, its wars, its religious and artistic productions.9

Fanon also emphasized that the life of the colony is not only made up of pulsations and tensions—a vigorous life, in a quasi-permanent state of erection—but also that the colonial potentate maintained power through two contradicting processes of logic, which, when placed together, had the effect of utterly canceling out any possibility of the emergence of an autonomous subject under colonial conditions. The first consisted of not accepting difference, in spite of appearances, and the second, of refusing similarities. In this respect, the colonial potentate was a narcissist.10 Simultaneously desiring that the colonized subject resemble him, and at the same time forbidding this resemblance, the potentate rendered the colony the quintessential “anti-community,” an “outside-place” [hors-lieu] where, paradoxically, division and separation represented the only manner of “living-together” [être-avec], and where the principal form of communication between colonial subjects and their masters (that is to say, violence) would without fail reiterate the sacrificial bonds in place and ratify the generalized exchange of death briefly alluded to above.11

If there is one domain in which all these paradoxes can most clearly be observed, it is, according to Fanon, in the link between medicine (caring) and colonialism (wounding).12 The body which, at times, is enclosed, “stripped, shackled, forced to toil, beaten, deported, put to death” is the same which, at other times, is “cared for, educated, clothed, fed and paid.”13 In the colony, the subject receiving such care is the same who, elsewhere, is subjected to disfiguration.14 Yet, within the processes of the cure, he is allocated the role of human detritus,
mere scrap and residue, a deprived subject relentlessly wounded, be-
cause (or so the thinking goes) in the past he was literally dishonored, 
in the manner of the slave under the plantation regime.15 The figure 
par excellence of vulnerability and stripped dignity, captured from time 
to time in snatched phrases describing a disparate and derisory 
humanity, he now only answers to abjection and to the same forms 
of misery to which he has been reduced.16 As a consequence, instead 
of inspiring empathy, his suffering and his cries provoke nothing more 
than disgust. In this balance between caring and wounding there 
appears, in all its violence, the paradox of the “commandment,” a grot-
esque and brutal power which aims to draw together the attributes 
of logic (reason), fantasy (arbitrary), and cruelty.17 Whether it concerns 
acts of destruction (such as wars, massacres, and even genocides) or 
acts of self-preservation, the wrath directed at indigenous peoples 
or manifestations of power against them using objects and machines 
recall purely sexual activities, including sadistic forms (such as torture18), 
and the thrusting propulsions of the “commandment” are inseparable 
from the way in which the colonial potentate regards himself as a racial 
potentate, at war with other “races,” as Hannah Arendt amongst 
others has described.19

The colonial potentate reproduces himself by constantly attacking 
the humanity of the colonial subject, multiplying the wounds on the 
colonized body and also assaulting his brain: “because it is a sys-
tematic negation of the other, a concerted effort to deny the other 
the slightest attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the cornered, 
dominated population to constantly ask themselves: ‘what is my true 
nature?’ ” It is enough, says Fanon, “to study, to appreciate the num-
ber and the depth of the wounds inflicted upon a colonized subject 
during just one day spent under the colonial regime” to understand 
the magnitude of pathological tendencies this oppression produces.20 
Yet the colonized subject does not suffer from these “pathological 
tendencies” alone: the colonizer cannot escape them either. For one 
as for the other, the symbol henceforth contains “all the efficiency 
and the significance of the symbolized.”21 Moreover, “commanding” 
requires, above all, the ability to impose silence upon the indigenous 
people. His body, as Fanon so clearly recognized, must become his tomb. 
The “commandment” does not merely seek to cause prejudice in the 
name of “civilization.” The commandment must go hand in hand with 
the will to humiliate the indigenous inhabitant, to insult him, to make 
him suffer, whilst gaining a certain satisfaction from this suffering and 
the pity or the disgust it will eventually cause. And if, in the end, it
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is necessary to take his life, his death must occur as deep down in the
dirt as is possible.22

Yet, over and above this, too, the colonial potentate attempts to
create an unsullied new world upon the debris of the one he first
found there. He seeks to make the world he has found conform to a
logic of his liking. Engaging in this task requires an enormous amount
of affect and energy.23 Whether the aim is to modify agricultural
systems, to deal with concepts of money and value, to transform domes-
tic structures, to clothe the colonized subject, or to care for the indigen-
ous people, it may be summed up as the desire to transform the subject
into a new “moral subject”; the colony finds no shame in its fantasies,
and hardly seeks to conceal them.24 And this is why the act of
colonizing bears the traces of Dionysius. The heady combination
of voluptuousness, frenzy and cruelty, intoxication and dreams which
accompanies colonial deeds and gestures can only be understood
in relation to that kind of enchantment which is, at the same time,
agitation and tumult. Is it not also composed of the majority of those
characteristics which Nietzsche believes he discerns in Greek tragedy?:
“that phenomenon by which pleasure is stirred from pain itself, and
jubilation draws forth the gasps of the torture victim,” whilst “at the
crescendo of joy, the cry of horror rings out, or a plea is made, con-
sumed by desire, for an irreparable loss.”25 This “irreparable loss” is
the feeling experienced by the colonized subject of a disempowerment
of the self – the loss of the proper name which will in future accom-
pany any recollection of this event. It is the motif of loss that, in African
self-writing, is used to justify the inscription of the colony and its mem-
ory under the political sign of debt.

Parallel to this accursed share, whose origins lie in terror, the
colony is a prodigious machine generating desires and fantasies.
Seduction and terror are the resources skillfully managed and ad-
ministered by the potentate. The administration of terror and the
management of seduction are both carried out through a certain
modulation of truth and lies, a certain rationing of emoluments and
rewards, and the production of objects which are alternately moving
or stupefying but always spectacular and ceremonial, which the
stupefied colonized subject will struggle to forget.26 In this respect,
colonial domination requires an enormous investment of emotional
expenditure. This emotional economy must inform everything that
bears the stamp of life and death, abundance and plenitude, in short,
wealth. The desire for wealth must worm its way entirely into the body
of the colonized subject and take up residence in every nook and cranny
of his psyche. Thus the potentate tries to force the indigenous subject to renounce the objects and desires to which he is attached, and to substitute new idols in their place, the law of new merchandise, the price of new values, a new order of truth.

However, he creates this new order in such a way that it glistens with the possibility of abundant material wealth. The touchstone of the potentate’s fantasmatic lever is the idea that there is no limit to riches and propriety, and thus no limit to desire. This notion of an imaginary with no symbolic is the “guilty secret” of the colony and explains the power of the colonial potentate. It is also not inconceivable that the success of this “imaginary with no symbolic” may be explained by the fact that it has profound echoes with, and is anchored in, autochthonous symbolic categories. This applies to instances of excess and doubling, or to the existence of monstrous figures and ambivalent creatures, which, having assimilated the role of the fetish, transform into fearsome masters of the forces of dark and night, capable, for this very reason, of the Archimedean feat of raising the world. This also applies to the case of the tribal chiefs who go from drinking beer from the skulls of one of their predecessors one day, to being symbolically put to death through the intermediary of a substitute human victim the next, when, delivered of any tribal ties, they feel no need to affirm their sexual potency by having sexual relations with a sister or to marry a young niece from their own matrilineal family.

The fact that there is hardly any limit to desire can also be explained by the distribution of diverse categories of spirits, each corresponding to the logic of juxtaposition, permutation, and multiplicity. It is imperative, says Luc de Heusch, “to unite all of these fully or partially developed characteristics in the same symbolic structure, case by case: royal incest, anthropology, the assimilation of the king to a witch doctor, the interdicts which surround him, and even regicide,” all aspects which “define a formidable magic power which undoes the border between culture – from which the chief becomes separated at the moment of his sacralization – and his vested power in nature as sovereign.”27 The same goes for the enchanted objects which are said to hold dangerous powers and which therefore function in the same way as the accursed share of royalty, because their secret is to participate in the “resurrection of things.” Just like the Atlantic slave trade, colonization heralds the arrival of Africans in a new era characterized by the frenetic pace of desire and pleasure – irresponsible desire and mindless pleasure.28 The colonized subject, like the slave trader before him, is fascinated and entranced by the idol which lurks behind the
mirror, the vision of the mirror image of fabrics and loincloths, rum, guns and ironmongery, roads, monuments, railways, and hospitals. But to acquire these new goods, he must adopt a posture of unwavering servitude toward the potentate.

He must take up his place in a relation of debt – the debt of utter dependency upon his master. He must also force himself to adopt a pedagogic system intended to inculcate him with the passions of venality, vanity, and cupidity. As much pulses of inclination as they are deliberately cultivated pulses, vanity, venality, and cupidity constitute the three privileged manifestations of this position of servitude toward the master, and the cult of the potentate. A long detour will always be necessary, then, before these new material goods or even the promise of citizenship may be enjoyed, and the possibility of the fulfillment of new desires is always, without fail, postponed. This is the reason why the colony always contains a neurotic dimension as well as a ludic one, occasioned by unpredictable circumstances, a radical ambivalence whose importance has been underestimated by scores of analysts. Does it not cause the colonized subject to inhabit a world of dreams which, overnight, may be transformed into a nightmare? This dialectic of the dream that, at any moment, may veer into a nightmare is one of the driving forces of the potentate, but it is also his Achilles heel. In many respects, African nationalisms are the product of the conflict between these dreams and the frustration borne out of the impossibility of actually satisfying them.

If the colony does have a guilty secret, it is without doubt the subjugation of the native by his own desire. On the colonial stage, it is this subjugation by desire which, finally, renders the colonized subject “out of himself” [hors de soi], lured by the empty illusion of the image and witchcraft. In allowing himself to be led in this manner, he penetrates another being, and from then on he experiences his work, language, and life as so many processes of sorcery and willful disguise. It is precisely because of this experience of sorcery and estrangement that a profusion of fantasies originated from the colonial encounter. It stirred up desires which both the colonized and the colonizers had to conceal from themselves, and which, consequentially, for this very reason, were repressed and pushed into the unconscious.

Following on from this discussion, the memory of the colony in African literature inscribes it into a mythology of debt by emphasizing the losses Africa is believed to have suffered during the detour of this oppressive encounter. This debt has two supposed levels of operation, primarily as a debt of procreation (development; work not
done), and secondly, as a debt of hospitality (immigration; relations not undertaken). In both cases, discourses on loss and debt aim to induce the effects of guilt. The African world that emerges from the colony is said to be a world of loss – a loss caused by murder. The culprit of this murder should be, then, not only wracked by guilt, but also indebted to those whose natural rights he has violated.

The colony’s memory, then, assumes the allure of a psychic work, whose final objective is the cure. The cure consists, generally speaking, of bringing two types of secrets evoked by Freud in his Inquiétude étrangé to a conscious level: those of which we are aware, but try to hide, and those of which we are not aware, because they do not reveal themselves directly to our consciousness. In the African (con)text, these two types of secret actually fuse into one. Beyond violence and cruelty, the colony’s guilty secret is that, in the indigenous imaginary, the colony acts as a locus of enchantment. The African text refuses to admit that the enigma of a loss rooted in desire is the principal cause of the loss of the proper name. It is this enigma which explains the “gaping void” (Lacan) with which African self-writing is so concerned. It is this enigma which also notifies and ratifies loss. In these conditions, an authentic practice of the cure for Africans would consist of liberating them of this guilty secret, by recognizing “the other within” once and for all, and by considering this “detour of alterity” as the foundation stones of a new kind of self-knowledge – a knowledge which must be divided, a knowledge of distanciation and its representation. The fact that a considerable psychic burden continues to be attributed to the colony in processes of self-construction is, strictly speaking, a consequence of a reluctance to confess: both to the subjugation by desire of African peoples and to the fact that they have allowed themselves to be duped, seduced, and deceived by the “transparent manipulator of the imaginary mechanism,”²⁹ the colony.

The Critique of Time and the Aesthetics of Recollection

I have just observed that Africans recall the colonial potentate as a cause of original distress, yet at the same time, they refuse to confess the role of unconscious investments in the colony as a machine which generates desire. All this may probably be explained by the manner in which they draw on the critique of time. Indeed, what is time, and what should be understood by this category? In the penultimate
chapter of his *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty speaks of it as what we encounter, inevitably, on the path which leads to subjectivity.\(^3\) He further comments that time is “the most general character of psychic processes” – by this, we may understand two things: that on the one hand, an intimate connection exists between time and subjectivity, composed of a series of psychic events; and that on the other, time and the subject communicate from within – and that, therefore, to analyze time is to have access to the concrete and intimate structure of subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty’s comments on time could be easily extended to memory, and even to recollections, all the more so because memory and recollections are fundamental manifestations of the past (its traces, its remains and fragments) in the consciousness, whether the latter be rational consciousness or a dreamlike, oneiric consciousness. The following remarks are concerned with demonstrating how, by considering evidence beginning with the literary archive, it is possible to explain why the refusal to confess (as identified above) occurs. The discussion aims to identify the cognitive and expressive parameters with which the African critique of time is put in place and develops, in a general manner, the memory of the colony and by extension, of the potentate.

The fact that, in Africa, the languages of recollection largely rely on the critique of time is amply illustrated by the literary text. Everything in the African novel seems to indicate that, here, time is not a process that could simply be recorded in the form of a “succession of the now,” for example. In other words, there is no time in itself. Time is born of a connection which is contingent, ambiguous, and contradictory and is established with objects, the world and even the body and anything identical to it (the double). Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty indicates, time (and the same goes for memory) is born of a certain way in which we view ourselves, others, the world, and all that is invisible. It is formed from a certain presence, which bonds each of these realities together.

The African novel also clearly demonstrates that time always has a connection with its doubles, illustrated by the fact that to participate in time is always, in part, to no longer know the drives of one’s own ego. It entails the “doubling of the ego, the division of the self, the permutation of the ego.”\(^3\) In the writings of Amos Tutuola, Sony Labou Tansi, as well as Dambudzo Marechera, Yvonne Vera or even Yambo Ouologuem, time is experienced through attention to the senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste). Memory and recollections actually trigger
a whole organ structure, a whole nervous system, a whole economy of emotions at whose center the body, and all that which excites it, must be placed. These novels also demonstrate how recollections may be accessed through dance and music, or even through a game of masks, trance, and possession.\textsuperscript{32} There is, therefore, no memory that, at a given moment, cannot find expression through the universe of sense, imagination, and multiplicity. So it is that in several African countries confronted by the drama of war, the memory of death is directly inscribed upon the wounded or mutilated body of the survivor, and it is from these bodies and their infirmities that the event is recalled and remembered. Through this coupling of imagination, memory, and the body, the understanding of time proceeds both semantically and pragmatically.

That said, the critique of time as it is presented in contemporary African fiction also teaches us that time is always uncertain and provisional. It changes permanently and its forms are constantly varying. It therefore always represents a heterogeneous, irregular, and fragmented region of human experience. This being the case, the relationship of the subject to time is a relationship which, if not aiming to evade both the past and the future, at the very least aims to liberate and subsume them.\textsuperscript{33} This is not to imply, however, that the distinction between before and after, past and future, does not exist. The present, being the present, pulls in two directions, the past and the future — or, more radically, attempts to abolish both. This explains the literary predilection for a time which might be called paradoxical, because a true present tense can only be achieved through a total severance from both past and future.\textsuperscript{34} It is a temporal state of differential durations, governed by two laws: time lag and simultaneity (co-occurrence). Consequently, the African novel always talks of time and its flux in the plural. Literary writing is therefore preoccupied with describing the transmutational processes of time, the very way in which time forms in layers.\textsuperscript{35}

Yet memory and recollections only gain meaning in relation to the idea that time is actually a sort of anti-chamber to reality.\textsuperscript{36} In this anti-chamber lie things which are unseen, unexpected, or, even more radically, “hidden possibilities,” all kinds of potentialities which are both creative and destructive, an invisible and hidden world, which constitutes the true face of reality and without which this same reality may find no redemption.\textsuperscript{37} This surface becomes the interface for the journey from reality to fantasy, from the wrong side to the right side,\textsuperscript{38} for the conversion of one way of being into another.\textsuperscript{39} In
these conditions, remembering primarily becomes a means of distributing difference and bringing about a *doubling*, precisely because there is always an essential *time lag* between the connections of the various temporal unities to the event.\textsuperscript{40}

However, the event does not simply happen. Once again, it is necessary to be able to decode and express it – whence the importance of divinatory procedures.\textsuperscript{41} But how may an “event” be expressed, without recourse to a general association of words and images, certain words serving as empty forms which are filled with images, and others only owing their existence to being vehicles for signs – to which, however, they must not merely be reduced? The recollection, therefore, exists solely as an intersection between an event, words, signs, and images. This intersection can then lead to rituals. The nigh impossibility of disassociating words, signs, and images not only allows the event to be expressed, but, more radically, allows it to be revealed, as an epiphany.\textsuperscript{42} When invoking these processes of recollection, the psychoanalytic cure allows images to vary and be substituted and interchanged. Following this method, an extremely complex relation is established between the meaning/the significance and the designation, or rather what I would term the manifestation.

As for the subject who remembers, they inevitably become a contested subject. This contestation arises from an inaugural event: the loss of the proper name. This loss is rendered all the more traumatic because it is accompanied by a profound destabilizing of knowledge, a destruction of common meaning, and a radical uncertainty concerning the ego, time, the world, and language. This state of radical uncertainty – unpredictability – forms the objective structure of the very event, but also informs its narration and the way it is related. It renders any attempts to establish a fixed identity impossible. In African novels, it partially explains the very close relationship between the loss of the proper name (the destruction of a measure) and the descent into madness, the trigger for a life plagued by convulsions, or even resulting in suicide.\textsuperscript{43}

In this context, remembering always requires an operation that transcends the limits of core linguistic capabilities.\textsuperscript{44} So we see that authors adopt many simultaneous languages of time, even of the body, in that, as is the case in Tutuola, each body always penetrates another and coexists with it, if not in its entirety, at least in its essential regions.\textsuperscript{45} Yet this mode of remembering is actually little more than a stutter, when what is needed is a discourse – a discourse on identity or the events of the past. The same type of process occurs when attempting
to recall the postcolonial potentate, that resplendent manifestation of
a time with neither past nor future, or even of a failed time, whose
meaning, despite constant resuscitative attempts, only emerges through
psychic cracks and dispelled fears.46

An example taken from the first chapter of La Polka by Kossi Efoui
illustrates this point. The novel opens with the seated narrator de-
scribing his view of a quiet road. Before we are even aware of the
narrator’s name, his senses are invoked: in this precise example, it is
sight which is privileged. But what is it that is seen, apart from a pile
of ruins, “sections of collapsed walls, their doors and windows
stripped bare by fire” (p. 9)? From these objects emerges the theme
of ruin – the temporality of ruin and destruction. Time reveals itself
through its capacity to leave traces of a primordial event – a destruc-
tive event, whose major signifier is fire. Time is then experienced and
seen and read in the landscape. Before memories are formed, there is
sight. To remember is literally to see the physical traces left upon a
place’s body by the events of the past.

However, no place’s body is completely unconnected to the human
body. Life itself must be “embodied” in order to be recognized as real-
ity. The novelist pays particular attention to the face and form of the
human body, emphasizing that they have been redrawn “by a cer-
tain brutality introduced into their gaze.” He is careful to mention the
bodies and faces of women, men, and animals in the same sentence,
all rendered identical in their immobility, caused by one event whose
irruption was signified by brutality. The distinction between species
and genders thus becomes blurred. This shared appearance, this re-
semblance, will henceforth link them together. The face itself closely
resembles the mask: “men and animals alike share the same dazed mask”
(p. 9).

I have already outlined how sight may precede naming. In fact, sight
and naming respond to each other through echo. The act of naming
revives the gaze, and vice versa. One cannot exist without the other,
and both link back to the voice, the gesture, and finally to life itself.
Subsequently, the time of ruin is, according to the novelist, the
moment when the “gestures of life are no longer followed by the gaze”
(p. 10). This is when bodies stiffen and the voice, its timbre and rhythm,
becomes ever changing. It goes from quivering, to harsh and rasping.
At times, it is even “asthmatic.” It can then be observed that “after a
time, each word [emitted by the voice] is a false emission,” as from
now on, the voice is “without meaning,” severed in two (p. 11). As
speech no longer knows “how to catch up with, or seize hold of, the
current moment” – in other words, time is no longer tangible – time must take refuge “in the troubled movement between before, after and return.” Time resides “beyond the words of life” (p. 12). It might be added that the event itself is constructed of time placed beyond the words of life.

In the novel *La Polka*, the body is a site of memory par excellence. At times, the body appears not to belong to anyone in particular. It belongs to what we might call the *many*. This is a common scene in bars after dark, when men seek the anonymous debauchery of alcohol and girls: “The whores come and go, flirtatiously twirling around each man in turn – how much for this ass?” (p. 38). Amongst the heat of bodies and the stifling air “there are those who grope . . . those who pinch . . . the sailors who suggestively slap and then those who are just there to watch” (p. 38). And, reigning supreme, there is the female body: “the girls know how to channel their energy to each part of the body as required. First a smile, then they jiggle their breasts . . . Then they start again, smiling, catching an interested eye – how much for this ass? The gaze, as soon as it is caught, wanders towards the buttocks. The girl extinguishes her smile and it is her legs that now do the work” (p. 38). It is as though everything inevitably comes down to generalized copulation (pp. 54, 111).

In *La Polka*, the body is predisposed to disguise and display. This is how it gains much of its beauty: floral headdresses, long gloves laced with ribbons, all kinds of decorations – pearls strung around the girls’ bare necks, golden bells wrapped around the dancing musicians’ ankles. Yet such ceremony is never far removed from death. On top of a hearse of woven palm ribs stands one of “the living-dead, dressed all in white, motionless.” It is the carnival mascot (p. 58). But a constant risk hangs over the body of the crowd. It is the risk of being reduced to nothing more than bodies which are “emaciated and stumbling, which no garment will ever again flatter” (p. 58). Even more dangerously, they are condemned to move outside time and even outside themselves:

the night was spent fighting against the stricken impulses of our internal organs inside our bodies: stomachs overcome, now feeling nothing where once they had known pangs of hunger and thirst, tongues lolled back towards the glottis, arms hanging limp at our sides, shoulders sloping and fearful eyes in the back of our heads. Suddenly, mouths are flung open, wide open, not to utter a cry but in anticipation of a burp, a stream of vomited intestines or a brutal ejection, bone after bone, as the entire carpentry of the body is wrenched out. Bone after bone, long
bones, short bones, flat bones, bones that seem deceptively round or knobbly, all are flung through this gaping mouth in a rosary of vertebrae, until the flaccid skin caves in, turns inside out and falls slack. The body is in suspense, in free-fall, on epilepsy alert. (p. 59)

In *La Polka*, this gigantesque corporeal shudder is not unrelated to dying or even bereavement. The problem, according to the novelist, is that memories do not necessarily arise from death: “how can these impressions of death around us help us to generate memories? Each death reduces the memory of names, as if all those lives were classified cases” (p. 64). From now on, “the dazed mask is donned whenever everything fades away, until all that is left is the hint of an ultimate image which searches for a place somewhere between before and after” (p. 65). Time may also rebel, refusing to run out and conspiring to catch us in its trap.

**Process of the Cure; Question of the Proper Noun**

Statues, effigies, and colonial monuments all play on this very function – the trap. In spite of their differences, they are all linked back to three names. And strictly speaking, they are all objects. They are constructed of any number of materials: marble, granite, bronze, steel and so on. Considered as objects, they are inert blocks, looming down on a fixed point, apparently mute. On the whole, these objects depict the form of a human body or beast (such as a horse carrying a conqueror). They represent the dead. Through them, death becomes an object, a skilled work. Finally, these dead were, at a given moment in their lives, subjects, and it is this element that the statues seek to convey. There are hardly any statues that fail to demonstrate this fusion of objectality, subjectivity, and mortality. What is more, there are hardly any statues that do not seek to turn back time. Colonial statues and effigies testify, almost without exception, to this mute genealogy, through which the subject is projected beyond death, which, in turn, is projected beyond the object intended to both occupy the place of the subject, and the place of death, at the same time.

Alongside these designated statues are other objects, monuments, and infrastructures: railway stations, colonial governors’ palaces, bridges, military camps, and fortresses. In the French colonial empire, most of these works date from the twentieth century, that is to say,
from the postwar period. In purely aesthetic terms, this was a time when, beyond the emergence of secularization, art’s mission was still conceived in a para-religious mode. Art must be used to heal the West of its unhappy memories and its new fears, or so the belief ran. It thus participates in a heroic narrative. It must call upon dormant powers whilst simultaneously reintroducing, in its own way, a type of celebration and showiness. In the colonies, this celebration took a savage turn. These creations and other infrastructures (palaces, museums, bridges, monuments, and so forth) are not only new kinds of fetishes. Often, their creation required the profanation of sepulchers. The skulls of deceased kings had to be displayed, their coffins dismantled. All treasures which accompanied the bodies were removed from the sepulchers (jewels, piasters, chains, and so on) before the pillaged funereal objects could be displayed in museums. This turning of the dead, or ransacking, was intended to induce a trance-like state in the colonized subjects, obliging them, from then on, to celebrate a “Godless sacrifice.” The symbolic economy of the colony then becomes, in this context, a grand economy of giving without receiving. A kind of exchange takes place around these works and these infrastructures which arises from sumptuary loss. Objects considered as non-exchangeable (bridges, museums, palaces, infrastructures) are yielded to the indigenous peoples by a brutal authority, during a process of savage celebration where body and substance become entwined.

It is therefore vital to connect these multiple significations of colonial statues and monuments – which are still the centerpieces of African public squares, long after declarations of independence have been made – with structures of power and domination. The remains of the potentate, they are signs of the physical and symbolic struggle which the colonial power was forced to lead against the colonized subject. It is known that a long-lasting domination must not only inscribe itself onto the bodies of its subjects, but must also leave its marks upon the space they inhabit, as well as leaving indelible traces in their imaginary. This domination must envelop the subjugated people and hold them in a more or less permanent state of trance, intoxication, and convulsion – incapable of thinking for themselves with any perspicacity. This is the kind of domination that it took to bring them to think, act, and behave as though they were perpetually caught in an unbreakable spell. It follows, then, that subjugation must be written into the very fabric of everyday life, as well as into the structures of the unconscious. The potentate must inhabit the subject, to the extent that the latter can never truly exercise his powers of sight, hearing, feeling, touch,
movement, speech, travel, imagination; he cannot even dream unless it is in reference to the master signifier who forever looms over him, forcing him to stutter and stagger.49

The colonial potentate will not deviate from this rule. At every stage of his everyday life, the colonized subject was constrained by a series of submissive rituals, each more prosaic than the last. For example, he could be ordered to quake, to cry, and to tremble, to prostrate himself, shivering, in the dust, to go from place to place, singing, dancing, and experiencing his domination as a providential necessity. This was indeed the case during the inauguration of various monuments, the unveiling of commemorative plaques, during anniversaries and other celebrations which united colonizers and colonized.50 This negative consciousness (of not being anything without the master, of owing everything to the master, who sometimes assumed a parental role) must exercise its influence upon every moment of his life, liberating it of any trace of free will.51 It is evident, then, that in this context, colonial statues and monuments were not meant to be aesthetic artifacts designed to embellish towns or the everyday condition in general. The whole undertaking was designed, from start to finish, to provide manifestations of despotic absolutism, whose basis was already discernible in the way in which colonial wars, wars of “pacification,” were waged, or even in the way in which armed kidnappings were countered.52 These powers of transvestism were the sculptural extension of a form of racial terror.53 At the same time, they were a spectacular expression of the powers of destruction and suppression, which, from its conception to its fall, drove the colonial enterprise.

But, above all, no domination can exist without a kind of cult of spirits – in this case the hound-spirit, the hog-spirit, the rabble-spirit,54 and so on, so characteristic of all imperialism, past and present. In turn, this cult of spirits requires, from start to finish, a manner of evoking the dead – a necromancy and a geomancy. In this respect, statues and colonial monuments truly belong to this double universe of necromancy and geomancy. They constitute, strictly speaking, the characteristic emphases of this hound-spirit, this hog-spirit, this rabble-spirit which drove colonial racism as well as colonial power – and all that followed it: the postcolony. They are the shadow or the graph which outlines its profile in a space (African space) that can never be violated or despised too greatly.

For, given these faces of “death without resurrection,” it is easy to understand what the colonial potentate was: a typically funereal power, so often reifying the deaths of the colonized and denying their
lives any shred of value. The majority of these statues depict the ancient dead who fell in wars of colonial conquest, occupation, and “pacification” – the evil dead, elevated through vain pagan beliefs into protective divinities. The ongoing presence of the evil dead in public places ensures that the principles of murder and cruelty which they personified will continue to haunt the memory of the formerly colonized people, saturating their imaginary and their everyday places, causing within them a bizarre eclipse of consciousness, and preventing them, ipso facto, from thinking with any perspicacity. The role of statues and colonial monuments is, then, to resurrect the dead, who, during their lives, tormented African existences, often with a double-edged sword. These statues function as rites, evoking the very dead who had regarded African humanity as worthless – and for this reason, they had not the slightest scruple about the wanton spilling of African blood.

If it is true, as Hegel suggests, that each statue is inhabited by a god, which divinity do the colonial statues of Africa celebrate, if not the one who declared that going to war with “inferior races” was necessary for the advancement of “civilization”? Instead of stripping away animal connotations, statues of humans actually attempt to preserve a belief which refuses to die. The fact that so many of these monuments are dedicated to the glory of soldiers and the military indicates the extent to which the colonial unconscious has grown accustomed to massacres. These monuments of death convey it all: the celebration of a foreign nationalism, fearsome and all-conquering; the celebration of conservative values inherited from the anti-Enlightenment and most emphatically put into place in the colonies, the privileged sites of experimentation, before they once again came to prominence under Nazism, fascism, and communism; the celebration of the ideologies of inequality which were spawned by social Darwinism.

It is a testimony to the power of the secret I have evoked above that these masks of terror, made-up to resemble human faces, continue, as I have said, to occupy a central space in African towns, and despite the fact that no sepulcher worthy of that name exists for the numerous oppressed Africans throughout history. For, in practice, nothing in the attitude of postcolonial African nationalisms was simple or univocal where the relics of colonialism were concerned. Numerous colonial myths have been adapted and interiorized into apparently autochthonous cults and rituals. By contrast, during the mass of conflicts linked to decolonization or even favored during the political struggles experienced by some countries in the 1970s and 1980s, a certain number of countries tried to liberate themselves of the symbols of
European domination and to imagine other modes of organizing their public space. The first step in clearly delineating their new status within humanity was to abandon the very names they had been dressed up in during the time of conquest and occupation.

The idea was that, finally, starting with their names, they would once again possess not only themselves, but also by extension the world, which had for so long dispossessed them. Along the way, they renewed ties of continuity with a past history that the colonial parenthesis had interrupted. In granting the former colonial entity of the Gold Coast the new name of Ghana (the former West African empire), or again, by changing from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, and Haute Volta to Burkina Faso, African nationalism sought above all to regain mastery over itself and the world and, along the way, to catalyze the coming of a “god” hidden amongst us. But we also know that this concern with the “proper noun” is not unambiguous. For reasons that are more or less apparent, Dahomey (the name of a former slave kingdom on the West African coast), became Benin. Other countries sought to redesign their urban landscapes by rebaptizing some of their towns. Salisbury became Harare in Zimbabwe. Maputo was substituted for Lourenço Marques in Mozambique. Leopoldville became Kinshasa. Fort Lamy changed to Ndjamen, whilst Fort Fourreau became Kousseri, and so on. Generally speaking, however, the great architectural landmarks of the colonial period were preserved. So it is that today, it is possible to take a stroll along Lumumba Avenue in Maputo whilst admiring, along the way, the buildings bordering the avenue which are the essence of Art Deco transplanted by the Portuguese to their colony. The Catholic cathedral is, for its part, the indication of a religious acculturation which did nothing to prevent the emergence of a pronounced cultural syncretism. And so it is that in Maputo, Karl Marx, Mao Tse-tung, and Lenin cohabit with Nyerere, Nkrumah, and other prophets of black liberation. Whenever the revocation of colonial signs has occurred, it has always been a highly selective process.

It is in the ex-Belgian Congo that the embeddedness of colonial and nationalist forms has perhaps reached the highest degree of ambiguity. Here, “nativism” assumed the place of racist logic, and in doing so it restored the major idioms of colonial discourse and ordered them in accordance with the same symbolic economy as before: the mortifying adoration of the potentate – only now, the potentate was post-colonial. Under the pretext of authenticity, the country was dressed up with a new name, Zaire. Paradoxically, the origins of this name were not to be found in any ancestral tradition, but were rather due
to the Portuguese presence in the region. Then, in order to penetrate the oneiric universe of his subjects and be able to torture them more absolutely, the postcolonial potentate decided, just like the *Bula Matari* (the colonial state) before him, that he must be represented in stone and marble. Yet the lay cult bestowed upon the autocrat not only took the form of enormous statues, mighty and grotesque, wrought in cruel metal. It also required an entire emotional economy to be set up, a mixture of seduction and terror, modulating at its will the virile and the amorphous, the true and the false, using the eye and the ear as one would use orifices whose function is to viscerally open up the whole body to the discourse of an “African potentate,” who is also, just like the colonial potentate, inhabited by the hound-spirit, the hog-spirit, the rabble-spirit.

South Africa presents another configuration, a mixture of innovations and inertia, in a country where, not long ago, the last state-enforced system of racism since World War II was still thriving. Since the end of white supremacy in 1994, the official names of rivers, mountains, valleys, townships, and large cities have hardly changed. The same goes for public squares, boulevards, and avenues. Even today, it is possible to head to the office via Verwoerd Avenue (named after the architect of apartheid), to dine in a restaurant situated on John Vorster Boulevard, drive along Louis Botha Avenue and attend mass in a church situated at the corner of two roads, each named after some shady character of the iron years of the racist regime. Pompously mounted on enormous horses, the sinister and reddening army of Pretorius, Kruger, Cecil Rhodes, Lord Kitchener, Malan, and others has a number of statues deployed on the principal squares of large towns. Perched atop one of the hills of the capital, Pretoria, is the Voortrekker Monument, a kind of cenotaph, as baroque as it is grandiose, erected to the glory of Boer tribalism and celebrating the marriage of the Bible and racism.

It would seem that there is not a single petty white adventurer, whether a gold or diamond seeker, a pirate, torturer, hunter, ex-employee of the Bantu administration, or ex-prison governor who does not have an alley named in his honor in one or another of the country’s towns. All of these truly despicable and shifty individuals, who during their lifetimes unfailingly veered toward all that is low and abject (racism), can to this very day be found throughout the country, littered across its surface, like errant souls and disappointed shadows which history has rejected. They have all left traces here, either on the African bodies which they visited through burns or flagellations (an eye torn
out here, a leg broken there, in mutilations, repressions, incarcerations, torture, and massacres), or in the memories of the widows and orphans who survived such violence and brutality. From the country’s toponymy, the names of towns and numerous townships, streams and rivers, lakes, parks, and mountains, it would be quite plausible to believe you were somewhere in some forgotten corner of Holland, England, or deepest Germany, rather than in Africa. And what is worse, certain other names are literally constructed of insults directed at the original inhabitants of the country (Boesman-this, Hottentot-that, Kaffir-so-and-so). The long humiliation of black people, and their invisibility, is still traced upon the surface of this territory in golden letters, even if it is not visible in certain museums.

Paradoxically, the fact that these former colonial landmarks have been kept does not mean that the symbolic landscape of South Africa has been void of transformation. In actual fact, the decision to keep these colonial names has gone hand in hand with one of the most remarkable contemporary experiments concerning the processes of memory and reconciliation. Of all the African countries, South Africa is the one leading the most systematic reflections on the relationships between memory and forgetting – truth, reconciliation with the past, and reparation. The idea here is not necessarily to destroy monuments whose former purpose was to diminish the humanity of others, but to acknowledge the past as a base, from which a new and different future can be created. This supposes that the executioners, who, in the past, were blind to the terrible suffering they had inflicted upon their victims, will today undertake to tell the truth about what happened – and thus will unambiguously renounce dissimulation, repression, or denial, in return for forgiveness. Yet this also requires the “victims” to accept the fact that reaffirmation of the power of life, in both day-to-day activities and in the organization of institutions and power, is the best method of celebrating victory over an unjust and cruel past.

Here lies the significance of other processes of memorialization which are currently being carried out. So we see the appropriate shrouding of the bones of those who fell in the struggle; the erection of funeral steles marking the very places where they fell; the consecration of religious and therapeutic rituals destined to “heal” survivors of anger and the desire for vengeance; the creation of numerous museums (Museum of Apartheid, Hector Peterson Museum) and parks destined to celebrate a common humanity (Freedom Park); the flourishing of the arts (music, fiction, biographies, poetry); the promotion of new
architectural forms (Constitution Hill); and, first and foremost, great efforts to put one of the most liberal constitutions in the world into practice in everyday life.

The case of the Cameroon could have been added to those already mentioned. Gripped by an orgy of commotion for over a quarter of a century, this country represents, for its part, the anti-model of the relationship of a community to its trespasses, and particularly to the people whose deaths were the result of the very act of attempting to create history. For here, a temporal consciousness is the absolute last concern of the state, and indeed of society itself. Still suffering from the acute need to survive, as well as from the mines of corruption and venality, many people in Cameroon do not realize that this temporal and historical consciousness is a fundamental characteristic of our humanity. They do not see that a country which “doesn’t give a damn” about its dead cannot sustain a politics of life. It can only promote a mutilated life – a life on borrowed time.

**Conclusion**

The memory of colonization is hardly a happy one. But contrary to a tradition anchored in Africa’s consciousness of victimization, destruction was not the only thing to arise from the colonial œuvre. Colonization itself was far from being an infernal machine. It is evident that, from beginning to end, it was shot through with lines of flight. The colonial regime dedicated most of its energies either to attempting to control these flights, or to using them as a constitutive dimension, even a decisive dimension, of its auto-regulation. It is impossible to understand anything about the way in which the colonial potentate was placed in power, how he became contorted, how he was partially destroyed or metamorphosed into something else, without recognizing these flights as the quintessential forms conflict assumed.

The colony was a place of terror and horror – this goes without saying. And the losses suffered by African societies due to this encounter with the West are, in most cases, immeasurable – this, too, is an evident truth. The fact that the majority of these losses are irremediable only heightens the tragedy of their history. There are objects, and also figures and values, which can no longer be recovered, and Africans must, henceforth, live in these conditions – these truths occupy a large part of the reality of the situation. The question, today, is of knowing how to recognize sites where the memory of that phenomenon which,
in essence, represented a mixture of terror, desire, and fear, may be constructed. As we have seen in South Africa, this begins through a meditation on the ways of transforming the physical absence of those who were lost, returned to dust by the sun of trespass, into an interior presence. To remember the colony, then, is to meditate upon this absence and thus to allow the theme of the sepulcher its full force, recognizing it as a supplement to life which is essential for the resurrection of the dead, at the intersection of poetics and politics.

Translated by Louise Hardwick

Notes

2 For discussion of these kinds of issues, see Ricoeur (2000). In the African case in particular, see Jewsiwewicki (1988), and also Jewsiewicki (1993).
3 Chrétien and Triaud (1999); Cole (2001); Ranger (2005).
4 Rouget (1990); de Heusch (2006: ch. 1); Bastide (1972).
5 Khanna (2003).
6 Mbembe (2000a).
7 Vernant (1990: 29).
8 On this subject, F. Eboussi Boulaga speaks of “the reconciliation which the Muntu seeks” – a manner of indicating “agreement with himself,” “the design of living with oneself and for oneself through meditation on having and doing,” “the courage of being, doing and creating oneself.” He recognizes that this quest “is not the dream of a paradise lost, the pursuit of a fantasy, of a compact or monolithic unity,” but the ability to live amongst the world’s diversity; Boulaga (1979: 229).
9 See Bataille (1967); Arendt (1964), in particular the chapter on “race and bureaucracy”; Junger (1990); Levinas (1997).
11 Fanon expresses this impossibility of “community” in the following manner: “Colonialism is not a thinking machine or a body with the gift of reasoning. It is violence towards nature, and can only bow before greater violence.” He also comments: “for the colonized subject, life can only surge forth from the decomposing corpse of the colonizer” in Fanon (1961: ch. 1).
12 Fanon (1961: ch. 5); Fanon (1959: ch. 4).
14 Fanon (1952).
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15 Hartman (1997); Savitt (2002).
16 Vaughan (1990); Hunt (1999).
19 Arendt (1964); see in particular the chapter on “race and bureaucracy.” See also Grandmaison (2005).
20 Fanon (1961: 240).
22 See, for example, the account of the assassination of the Cameroon nationalist leader Ruben Um Nyobè, and the profanation of his corpse, in Mbembe (1986: 13–17). See also De Witte (2000: 223–78).
23 See, for example, de Arriaga (1968).
24 On colonization as an experience of subjectivation, see Bayart (2005: 197–250). See also Comaroff and Comaroff (1997: chs. 3–8 in particular).
26 Oyono (1960); Beti (1974).
27 See de Heusch (1986), particularly the chapter discussing the “roi sur la scène sacrificielle.” See also de Heusch (2000).
29 An expression used by Gérard Guillerault: see Guillerault (2003: 142).
30 Merleau-Ponty (1945: 469).
32 Amongst the other vectors of memory, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch includes sacred woods, the tombs of Muslim saints, mosques, and even certain masks and dances. See Coquery-Vidrovitch (1999: 378–9).
33 Tchak (2001).
35 Tutuola (2000).
36 See in particular Tansi (1981a); Tansi (1988); as well as Tansi (1981b) and (1995).
38 Translator’s note: an echo of Camus’s De l’envers à l’endroit.
40 Tutuola (2004).
41 Kourouma (2000).
42 Tansi (1985).
43 Kane (1961).
44 See, for example, Vera (2002), and also Tansi (1995); Tansi (1997).
45 Mbembe (2003).
46 Mabanckou (2005).
47 Dorléac (2004).
49 Mbembe (1996a).
51 Mbembe (1996b).
52 Pélissier (1978); Pélissier (1979); Pélissier (2004); Anderson (2005).
53 For a theorization of this terror, see de Tocqueville (1988).
54 Translator’s note: the original French term operates on a further, untranslatable, level of meaning, also signifying mischievousness.
55 Hussain (2003); Barkat (2005).
57 Taussig (1986).

References

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