

Summary

The author of the book, one of the most important contemporary African philosophers and historians, envisions this book as a river with many tributaries, since history and all things flow toward us now. He explains that Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world. This is the significant event, the fundamental experience, of our era. He says that we are only just now beginning the work of measuring its implications and weighing its consequences. Whether such a revelation is an occasion for joy or cause for surprise or worry, one thing remains certain: the demotion of Europe opens up possibilities—and presents dangers—for critical thought. That is, in part, what this essay seeks to examine.

To capture the precise contours of these dangers and possibilities, the authors explains that we need first to remember that, throughout its history, European thought has tended to conceive of identity less in terms of mutual belonging (cobelonging) to a common world than in terms of a relation between similar beings—of being itself emerging and manifesting itself in its own state, or its own mirror. But it is also crucial for us to understand that as the direct consequence of the logic of self-fictionalization and self-contemplation, indeed of closure, Blackness and race have played multiple roles in the imaginaries of European societies. Primary, loaded, burdensome, and unhinged, symbols of raw intensity and repulsion, the two have always occupied a central place — simultaneously, or at least in parallel — within modern knowledge and discourse about man (and therefore about humanism and humanity). Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, Blackness and race have constituted the (unacknowledged

and often denied) foundation, what we might call the nuclear power plant, from which the modern project of knowledge — and of governance — has been deployed. Blackness and race, the one and the other, represent twin figures of the delirium produced by modernity.

What are the reasons for the delirium, and what are its most basic manifestations? It results, first, from the fact that the Black Man is the one (or the thing) that one sees when one sees nothing, when one understands nothing, and, above all, when one wishes to understand nothing. Everywhere he appears, the Black Man unleashes impassioned dynamics and provokes an irrational exuberance that always tests the limits of the very system of reason. But delirium is also caused by the fact that no one—not those who invented him, not those who named him thus—would want to be a Black Man or to be treated as one. As Gilles Deleuze observed, “there is always a Black person, a Jew, a Chinese, a Grand Mogol, an Aryan in the midst of delirium,” since what drives delirium is, among other things, race. By reducing the body and the living being to matters of appearance, skin, and color, by granting skin and color the status of fiction based on biology, the Euro-American world in particular has made Blackness and race two sides of a single coin, two sides of a codified madness. Race, operating over the past centuries as a foundational category that is at once material and phantasmic, has been at the root of catastrophe, the cause of extraordinary psychic devastation and of innumerable crimes and massacres.