DOI: 10.1111/1467-8675.12381

WILEY Constellations

REVIEW ESSAY

How to think the world? Achille Mbembe on race, democracy and the African role in global thought

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Ausgang aus der langen Nacht. Versuch über ein entkolonisiertes Afrika
Achille Mbembe
Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016

Critique of Black Reason
Achille Mbembe
Durham: Duke University Press, 2017

Politik der Feindschaft
Achille Mbembe
Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017

1 | INTRODUCTION

How to think the world? What are the conditions for rethinking the world in a way that opens up an alternative way of being-in-the world, or of being-in-common? How to think an open future that moves beyond the history of colonialism and race with which the present is so deeply entangled? These questions are at the heart of a cycle of reflections that the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe started in his critically acclaimed *On the Postcolony* (2001)—a rich, figurative and temporal rereading of Africa that seeks to account for the complexities of social and political imaginations in the postcolony. In his latest three books, *Sortir de la Grande Nuit* (2010/2016),[1] *Critique de la Raison Nègre* (2013/2017a)[2] and *Politiques de l'Inimitié* (2016/2017b),[3] Mbembe broadens the perspective. The issue of how to read Africa that was central to *On the Postcolony* feeds into the larger question of how to think a globalizing world and how to reconstitute critical thought in a way that may indeed open up new possibilities for thinking a humane future. For Mbembe, however, these issues are closely connected, as thinking the world means thinking it from Africa.

Mbembe's work is both historical and philosophical. It is motivated by a critique of the resurgence of a spirit (*Zeitgeist*) of closure and segregation. Breaking with this spirit requires investigating the conditions for inhabiting the open. It means confronting the past in order to uncover the conditions of the possibility of an open future that is inscribed in the present. While his more historically oriented *Critique of Black Reason* has been widely discussed and quickly translated into English and other languages, the other two books have received far less attention. And yet, it is against the background of Afropolitanism as developed in the *Sortir de la Grande Nuit*, and within the horizon of the critique of the present as articulated in the new publication, *Politiques de l'Inimitié* that the systematic connection between

the books—and thus the impressive breadth and development of Mbembe's work—comes to the fore; from the inquiry into subjectivity and temporality in the postcolony, through an investigation of the conditions of decolonization and a rereading of the history of modernity, to an encompassing critique of the current demise of democracy.

2 | *SORTIR DE LA GRANDE NUIT*: TOWARDS AFROPOLITANISM

The main reference points for Mbembe's quest for the conditions of reconstituting critical thought reflect his own intellectual trajectory. This trajectory is most tangible in *Sortir de la grande nuit* (2016), a sweeping essay on the possibility of decolonization, which contains the core trains of thought that he will further develop in his two subsequent books. It spans West Africa, where Mbembe grew up and later taught; France, where he studied, the USA, where he taught at various universities, and finally South Africa, where he has been based for the past 15 years. Via this trajectory Mbembe reconstructs the practical sense of decolonization and interrogates the conditions for a decolonized community emerging from the dark night of the postcolonial.

Borrowing Fanon's call to shake off the long night in which we were plunged (Fanon, 1963, p. 311), the title of the book places Mbembe firmly in the genealogy of Fanonian thought. While formal decolonization was a key moment of late modernity, reappropriating the modern ideals of equality and freedom, it did not succeed in abrogating the split self of the colonial subject and thus to posit the self as a singular form of the universal. For Mbembe, however, the philosophical horizon of decolonization has always transcended the narrow, historical perspective on what it means to decolonize. It refers to a reopening of critical thought, a thinking of the coming, of the setting in, and of the rising that goes beyond the anti-colonial struggle itself. In other words, it refers to the dis-enclosure of the world (2016, p. 85[4]) and the reconstitution of the subject.

Mbembe adopts the concept of dis-enclosure (*déclosion*) from the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Nancy (2008). It refers to the reversal of a closing, to the opening of an enclosure and to the coming into being of something new that was foreclosed. Dis-enclosure invites confronting what lies beyond the enclosed. And thus, for Mbembe, the concept of dis-enclosure refers to the conditions for reopening critical thought. A renewal of critical thinking presupposes that a society is free in a radical sense vis-à-vis its own past and future (2016, p. 299). It requires breaking with the repetition of the perpetual sameness and of a tradition that has turned into law and necessity. It calls for the kind of thought that is conscious of the possibilities that lie beyond itself. In other words, it calls for reconstituting oneself as a responsible subject towards oneself, towards others and towards the world. This is what Mbembe calls the rise in humanity.

Mbembe links the notion of dis-enclosure to the colonial experience of a denial of humanity. He conceives of decolonization in terms of opening up the world and of reclaiming humanity and thus one's place in the world; an idea that is at the heart of many Black thinkers of decolonization. He traces its legacy from Fanon's theory of racialization and his insistence on a new world to come into being, to Senghor's emphasis on the sharing of differences, to Edouard Glissant's notion of encountering the world in its entirety, the all-world (*le tout-monde*) and to Paul Gilroy's idea of a planetary humanism. In all these approaches, Mbembe finds the idea of reuniting the particular African experience with the question of universal humanity through an emphasis on relating to and sharing a world in-common. While universality refers implicitly to the inclusion of preexisting entities, the in-common presupposes the communicability and sharing of the singular in its plurality. Humanity emerges from this process of sharing and communicating (2016, p. 149).

This notion of the in-common is at the root of rethinking what Mbembe calls—borrowing from Derrida (2005)—the democracy-to-come. The idea of a democracy-to-come serves as a horizon for change, for reopening critical thought and for reconstituting humanity. For Mbembe, democracy, at its core, designates an ethical incident based on the recognition of the Other in her uniqueness (*unicité*). The future of democracy hinges on the issue of how to treat the Other. Thinking a democracy-to-come and thus reorienting critical thought towards an open, unpredictable future presupposes a critique of the forms of universalism that construct the Other as an enemy. It presupposes a deconstruction of the colonial knowledge that enabled colonial rule and it requires a rereading of history that posits us as sharing a history and a future.

Mbembe interrogates the conditions for sustaining such critical thought from various perspectives along his intellectual trajectory. He starts from an autobiographical reflection on his home country, Cameroon, as the "place where the skull of a dead relative is located" (2016, p. 49). This metaphor evokes a political order founded on the radical denial of humanity to the political adversary. Those who came into power with independence treated other independence fighters as terrorists, murdered them and refused them a proper burial. And thus, the cradle of the newly independent nations bore the skulls of brothers. This fratricide is the prism through which Mbembe develops his critique of decolonization in Africa. Haunted by the ghosts of this denial of humanity to one's own dead brothers, the political order in Africa constitutes a "politics of cruelty" rather than a "politics of brotherliness and community" (2016, p. 50). It bears the mark of an independence that sacrificed freedom for "autonomy in the framework of a dictatorship" (2016, p. 53).

Turning to Europe, Mbembe argues that Europe may play a positive role in thinking the world only if it develops the capacity to re-read its history not as one of reason and universalism, but rather as one of the wolf who devours his enemy (2016, p. 94). Focusing on France, however, he shows that such a re-reading of the past is far from self-evident in former colonial powers. France set its colonies free without ever decolonizing itself. France displays a striking inability to come to terms with its colonial past; an inability reflected in the failure to engage with the intellectual project of post-colonial thought. It is based on a deep tension, particularly palpable in French republicanism, between the idea of universal equality, which points towards a cosmopolitanism of humanity, and an abstract universalism that denies the fact that the human reveals itself in singular, unique forms—and hence also denies the issue of race. As a result, France can conceive of the Other only as the double of its own narcissistic self-conception and thus fails to contribute to thinking the world and a democracy-to-come.

Given the difficulties of post-colonial African nations in reimagining their future and the tremendous failure of the colonizers to decolonize themselves, one may wonder: where should one look for points of reference for emerging from the dark night and thinking the world? Again, Mbembe's reply reflects his life trajectory. For him, it is a particular Afropolitan form of cosmopolitanism based on the idea of circulation and crossing, as well as of multiplicity and simultaneity that provides the key to substantiate the possibility of an open future. This Afropolitanism may be palpable in New York, a city characterized not just by its rich African American intellectual and artistic scene, but also by its "belief in itself and in what is coming—a future in which something new can always be created" (2016, p. 57). But it is in Africa, especially in Johannesburg, where Mbembe discovers the laboratory for "a new form of cultural mergence, the pedestal of an Afropolitan modernity" (2016, p. 61).

That this alternative form of modernity emerges in the African context is no coincidence. It is based on the long African experience of dislocation and dilatation. Throughout the 20th century the cartography of Africa has continuously been subjected to systematic instability. Metropolises such as Johannesburg have served as destinations for large migratory movements from which new forms of African urban cultures emerge. They are based on a logic of dilatation and circulation, which reflects the long history of African migration and dispersion within the continent and towards the world, most notably, of course, through the slave trade. It resonates with precolonial African political formations based on networks, on capillary forms of space and territoriality in which Mbembe sees a precolonial African modernity (2016, p. 284). It also reflects the process of immersion of people from all over the world who settled in Africa and whose history and way of being in the world is interlocked with Africa.

Building on the logic of dilatation and circulation, the notion of Afropolitanism articulates a cosmopolitan vision based on reclaiming the capacity of intersection. It aims to resist both an abstract universalism and the attempt to reconstitute an imagined unique essence of Africa. It defies any binary conception of us and them, including any identity built on exclusion or on victimhood. Instead, it emphasizes the capacity to inhabit the open that emerges from the experience of mergence and movement. It conceives of Africa as an inter-space—a space of circulating and interlocking worlds that provides a particularly stimulating context for cultivating a cultural, historical and aesthetic sensibility, which allows for recognizing oneself in the Other. Thus, it is in an African context in which Mbembe finds a practical repository for reconstituting critical thought and thinking the world.

However, the Afropolitan horizon Mbembe proposes ultimately seems to be tied to a particular elite that is able to resist both the striving to belong to what is posited as universally human and the temptation to indulge in the Afrocentric impulse that promises redemption in a glorified past. In addition to the special significance he ascribes to

Johannesburg as a source of Afropolitan thinking it is primarily African arts and most prominently novelists such as Yambo Ouologuem and Sony Labou Tansi who serve Mbembe as references for this new "cultural, historic and aesthetic sensitivity" (2016, p. 285). It stands to reason that a consciousness of interlocking worlds, together with an ability to leave one's own roots and affiliations behind and embrace the open, thrives in urban and artistic contexts. This focus on the urban and the arts, however, raises the question of how far emerging from the dark night of the postcolony is doomed to remain a project of urban or artistic avant-gardes who inhabit and have access to multiple worlds and thus easily straddle the divide between presumptuous universalism and essentializing parochialism.

3 | *CRITIQUE OF BLACK REASON*: A GENEALOGY OF RACE AND EUROPEAN MODERNITY

While *Sortir de la grande nuit* outlines a horizon for a decolonized world, Mbembe's two subsequent books deepen the inquiry into conditions of reconstituting critical thought with regard to a re-reading of the past and a critique of the present. With the *Critique of Black Reason* (2017a), Mbembe powerfully demonstrates what it could mean to provide a reading of European modernity that may transform a common past into a shared history. The keys to this alternative reading of European modernity are the twin concepts of Blackness (*nègre*[5]) and race. For Mbembe, race and Blackness are not just central elements of European imaginaries; they constitute the unacknowledged and often denied core; the "nuclear power plant" (2017a, p. 2) from which the modern project of knowledge and governance unfolds. Hence, any attempt to rethink the world as a world in-common needs to unravel the genealogy of race and Blackness.

Mbembe's reading of European modernity is rich and complex, combining multiple layers of analysis, including material, structural, discursive, epistemological, psychological, and affective aspects. It does not provide a stable, linear, chronological history. The notion of race itself has never been a stable one. It is an "image, form, surface, figure, and—especially—a structure of imagination" (2017a, p. 32), in which fantasy supersedes reality and turns it into a fleeting and ambiguous experience. Mbembe's genealogy of race and Blackness skillfully reveals how it has been shaped and reshaped by history, just as it has itself shaped the very experience and meaning of the past, the present and the future. His account is structured around three critical moments.

The first traces the concept of race to the birth of the racial subject and thus back to the slave ships and plantations that served as the backbone of the constitution of modern capitalism. For Mbembe, the Black slave represents the first racial subject. The signifier Black transformed people of African origin into bodies of extraction, into "living ore from which metal is extracted" (2017a, p. 40). Blackness became the synonym for race, and thus "one of the raw materials from which difference and surplus—a kind of life that can be wasted and spent without limit—are produced" (2017a, p. 34). This crucial role of race in an unprecedented process of accumulation is what sets the Atlantic slave trade apart from other systems of slavery. The Black Man[6] is seen at once as an object, a body, and a piece of merchandise; he has "always been the name par excellence of the slave: man-of-metal, man-merchandise, man-of-money" (2017a, p. 47).

Through a fierce critique of discourses on Blackness and Africa, Mbembe shows that race is not just the basis for the material global order but also for how we think the world. The noun Black designates "not human beings like all others but rather a distinct humanity"; it refers to those who represent "*difference in its raw manifestation*" (2017a, p. 46; original emphasis). Along with Blackness, the notion of Africa has also become a sign of ultimate alterity. Discourse on Africa is characterized by a striking abdication of responsibility and a "tremendous will to ignorance" (2017a, p. 70). Africa serves as "an inexhaustible well of phantasms" (2017a, p. 70); it refers to an "empty form that, in the strictest sense, escapes the criteria of truth and falsehood (2017a, p. 51)"; it invokes the "underside of the world"—the impotent, "incapable of producing the universal and of attesting to its existence" (2017a, p. 49). Africa stands for the "primordial arbitrariness" of designations to which nothing needs to respond but "the inaugural prejudice in its infinite regression" (2017a, p. 51).

Mbembe analyzes the sources of this fantasizing through an exploration of the psychic dimension of power and race. Race is not merely a fiction; it is an unconscious desire and a way of affirming power—it is "a specular reality and impulsive force" (2017a, p. 32). It derives its power from substituting what is with another reality. It is "an operation of the

imagination, the site of an encounter with the shadows and hidden zones of the unconscious" (2017a, p. 32). This imagination posits the Black Man, reduced to mere material energy, as the object of phantasms of horror and terror, as well as of projections of repressed desire, "of repulsion, of atrocious charm and perverse enjoyment" (2017a, p. 129). For Mbembe, the slave trade was fundamentally a "libidinal economy" (2017a, p. 116) driven by the desire for consumption and absolute expenditure. It operated on the basis of a commodification of life, which created desires that could be fulfilled only in the unlimited experience of death or in the expenditure of life. It was an "emblematic manifestation of the nocturnal face of capitalism" (2017a, p. 129), of what Mbembe (2006) calls necropolitics, the subjugation of life to the power of death. Thus, racial capitalism represents the "equivalent of a giant necropolis" (2017a, 137).

Within this nocturnal economy the Black man is construed as the "ghost of modernity"; a figure in the realm of shadows and images; a sphere "where events unfold constantly but never congeal to the point of becoming history" (2017a, p. 139); a ghost that, still today, haunts the very possibility of thinking the world. And yet, in a figurative analysis that draws on novels by Sony Labou Tansi and Amos Tutuola, Mbembe unveils the potential for regeneration that resides in this ghostly figure. With his capacity for metamorphosis and bodily detachment, with his capacity for speech, "the last breath of a pillaged humanity" (2017a, p. 135), resisting being reduced to a pile of meat through a death he did not choose, the ghost finds a means to escape in the shadows of the night.

Hence, the second critical moment Mbembe identifies in the genealogy of Blackness and race is the appropriation and transformation of Blackness from an identity judgment into a declaration of identity. The process of modernity has always been haunted by the possibility of a slave revolt that would "awaken slumbering powers" (2017a, p. 174), resist "the monopoly the master believed he had on the future" (2017a, p. 154) and reconstitute Blacks as "free subjects, responsible for themselves and responsible before the world" (2017a, p. 154). Indeed, from the resistance of the enslaved in the Americas and Caribbean to the anti-colonial and anti-Apartheid liberation struggles, the rich tradition of Black thought and religious and aesthetic practices posits the Black Man as "that which cannot be captured or controlled" (2017a, p. 28). The very notion of Blackness was transformed from a "symbol of abjection" into a symbol of beauty and pride—and into "a call to revolt" (2017a, p. 47). Blackness became "the idiom through which people of African origin could announce themselves to the world … and draw on their own power and genius to affirm themselves as a world" (2017a, p. 43).

Mbembe's account of the formation of a Black imaginary suggests that it shares many features of an Afropolitan modernity. He casts it as the product of a "polyglot internationalism" (2017a, p. 30) that emerged within a dynamic of movement and circulation (2017a, p. 14). It was nourished by the African encounter with Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition that serves Mbembe as an example of the itinerant territorialities and multiple allegiances that gave rise to a capacity of Africans to inhabit several worlds at once. The modern Black imaginary inherited this denationalized, transnationalized imagination. Engaging with the writings of Alexander Crummell, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, Marcus Garvey, Aimé Césaire and, most importantly, Frantz Fanon, Mbembe traces emancipatory visions of affirming the plurality of the world, of reimagining the Black Man as "someone on the road," and of articulating a humanism in the "language of what-is-to-come" (2017a, p. 160).

Yet, Mbembe is far from idolizing Black thought. For him, Black discourse remains deeply tied to race. Confronted with the tension between affirming the co-belonging to humanity and the idea of redemption through an emphasis on cultural difference, approaches such as négritude, Pan-Africanism and nationalist historiography inscribed themselves in an intellectual genealogy that racialized the nation and nationalized race. With Africa as the locus of "the myth of the racial polis" (2017a, p. 92), they saw "no way to imagine identity without racial consciousness" (2017a, p. 91). Mbembe is equally critical of the discourse of victimhood, which reduces the colonial encounter to a loss of authentic self and sovereignty. He emphasizes that colonizer and colonized share the very same psychic order, driven by the desire for wealth—and its repression. This "little secret of the colony," the unconscious investment in the colony as a desire-producing machine, he argues, is denied in the Black text. Inscribing the colony in a "mythology of indebtedness" (2017a, p. 119) that reflects frustrated desires that were never meant to be truly capable of satisfaction, African nationalism is precisely the product, not the overcoming, of this psychic order.

Against the background of these two critical moments in the genealogy of race, the notion of Black reason that Mbembe places at the center of his book emerges as a deeply ambiguous one; namely, "a complicated network of

doubling, uncertainty, and equivocation, built with race as its chassis" (2017a, p. 10). It is shot through with tension; a tension that reflects the very process of European modernity itself. It refers to discourses, phantasies, and practices that produced the Black Man as a racial subject, and thus to the "*Western consciousness of Blackness*" (2017a, 2 p. 8; original emphasis), as well as to the formation of the "*Black consciousness of Blackness"* (2017a, p. 30; original emphasis) that reclaims the world and the one's place within it. It therefore seeks to refute the first narrative—without, however, escaping the grip of its power. Both sides of Black reason are deeply entangled; they are but two sides of the very same constellation, the process of modernity and its foundational conflict over how to distinguish the human and the animal, reason and instinct.

By the title *Critique of Black Reason* Mbembe deliberately alludes to Kant's three critiques, founding texts of European modernity that were written at the time when the principle of race became the foundation of the modern global order. Kant sought to subject reason and the process of Enlightenment to a self-critique that investigates the conditions of knowledge independent of all experience. His project was directed against both the scientific claim to totality and against dogmatic metaphysics arising from transcendental illusions produced by a reason that defied its own limits. Mbembe's account is not a transcendental one, nor does he follow Kant's narrow conception of reason. Yet, in his critical move, he remains strikingly true to Kant's ambition. His critique of Black reason neither confines itself to a critique of the racist construction of reason in Western consciousness (including within the Kantian tradition), nor to a critique of essentialist claims to Black difference in Black consciousness. Rather, Mbembe subjects both strands, and thus reason itself as it has unfolded throughout European modernity, to a self-critique in order to investigate the conditions for thinking the world in non-racial terms.

Mbembe's genealogy of race is motivated by the question of whether the demise of European power signifies the beginning of a post-racial era—a question that he answers in the negative. In the era of neoliberalism, the racial logic of differentiation, hierarchical classification, and denigration is expanding. The globalization of markets, digitalization, privatization, new, post-imperial forms of securitization and militarization turn exploited workers into structurally indebted people, into abandoned subjects, into a superfluous humanity. The condition once imposed on people of African origin is now being generalized. This is what Mbembe calls the "*Becoming Black of the world*" (2017a, p. 6; original emphasis). It represents a third critical moment in the formation and transformation of the twin notions of Blackness and race, over and beyond the Atlantic slave trade and the birth of Black resistance—the critical moment that links the racial past with a racial future.

4 | *POLITIQUES DE L'INIMITIÉ*: THE END OF DEMOCRACY?

This is where Mbembe's latest book, *Politiques de l'Inimité* (2017b), steps in. It starts from the provocative and deeply reverberating claim that our current times witness the end of democracy. In times of large migratory movements, the advent of the digital subject and the spectacular escalation of the destructive power of markets and war, democracies have turned into securitized fortresses; into permanent states of emergency that fight a constant war on terror. Right is suspended to protect right, terror and counterterror rule in the form of necropower, a power that does not merely discipline but kills. Life becomes the medium of death, the political order its organizational form. Democracy creates a world devoid of relations driven by the obsessive search for the enemy. Democratic societies transform into societies of enmity, where enmity serves as the remaining social bond.

Based on a rereading of Fanon, Mbembe shows how, in the wake of the wars of decolonization at the end of the 20th century, war has become the global *pharmakon*—the venom and elixir of our times. The propensity to violence is driven by the fear, anxieties of annihilation, and phantasies of extermination that nurture hatred and hostility. Not having an enemy means frustrating the compulsion to scare oneself, to be deprived of the hatred that may authorize the exercise of hidden and forbidden desires (2017b, p. 93). This is why democracies continuously fabricate bogeymen, young veiled women, terrorists, sleepers, Muslims, and immigrants. They are not like "us" and, at the same time, they are not to become like us—a tension that can be sustained only through constant violence, which, at the same time, is denied and euphemized. Thus, Mbembe maintains, we are living in "eminently political times" (2017b, p. 93) in a

Schmittian sense where the enemy is not just a metaphor: the enemy is the one who poses an existential threat to "us" and therefore may be killed.

Mbembe ultimately leaves open whether the idea of a "Schmittian world, which is now our world" (2017b, p. 93) merely serves as a critical diagnosis of current times or whether it represents politics in general (see 2017b, p. 81). However, he emphasizes that the democratic propensity to violence and hostility is by no means a new phenomenon. For Mbembe, democracy has, at its core, always been linked to violence, in spite of the grand narrative of its pacifying power. It has outsourced its violent core to the plantations, colonies, prisons, and penal camps that represent the "bitter sediment of democracy" (2017b, 42), its "nocturnal side" (2017b, 47), and its own "double" (2017b, p. 55) where violence could be exercised in its rawest form, over and beyond any legal constraints. Democracy has always created societies that require a constant effort of separation, driven by the desire for apartheid. What is new, however, is that there is no elsewhere that serves as the locus of the enemy. Rather, the enemy is right within democratic societies themselves, like a cyst in the body of the nation. And thus, in a "colossal process of inversion" (2017b, p. 82), the colonial legacy of unbounded violence and hostility is turning against the societies of the colonizers themselves.

It is this "*return of the ostensibly external world into the subject* "(2017b, p. 128; original emphasis) which, for Mbembe, accounts for the destruction of the very values that democratic societies claim for themselves. Following Fanon's social psychological approach, Mbembe sees it as an expression of a social neurosis that creates psychic objects to act out one's unconscious desires. It is based on a form of racism that constantly exonerates oneself from guilt. This "frolic, jolic and utterly moronic nanoracism that takes pleasure in wallowing in ignorance and claims the right to stupidity and violence" (2017b, p. 116) is, for Mbembe, at the core of the current spirit of closure and separation. It reactivates the fervor of annihilation that ruled the colony and conceives of politics in terms of a struggle to death. However, the Black Man as the racial subject does not refer to the fabrication of bodies of extraction anymore, neither is he tied to the origins in Africa that are visible in his skin color. Rather, the Black Man of today is a "subaltern kind of human," the "superfluous and almost excess part that capital no longer makes use of and that is destined to segregation or exclusion" (2017b, p. 218).

Given this critical account of the violent history and current state of democracy, one may read Mbembe as yet another apologist of the final demise of democracy (see, for instance, Brennan, 2016; Buffin de Chosal, 2017). It is indeed striking that he concentrates almost entirely on the role of liberal democracies in the resurgence of hostility and violence. After all, authoritarian regimes are as much part of this process as democracies; in fact, they fuel the decline of democracy into webs of hostility. However, Mbembe is far from being a cynical apologist. His voice is that of a democrat. He is deeply concerned about the end of democracy that he witnesses precisely because, for him, democracy remains the only hope for a future. His book is still motivated by the fundamental question of how to foster the emergence of a thinking that may strengthen democratic politics. Yet, in contrast to his earlier works, the idea of a democracy-to-come does not serve as a point of reference. Mbembe's take on the perspective of an open future seems more pessimistic than before.

His main source for rethinking a possible future is Fanon. Even though he draws on him to bring out the tension between violence as a poison and violence as a cure, he seems less interested in Fanon as an advocate of cathartic revolutionary violence than in him as a "thinker of metamorphosis" (2017b, p. 20), of healing, and of reconstituting the relationship to the world. Mbembe mobilizes Fanon to recover a sense of humanity based on a common vulnerability and the corresponding relation of care. However, with the advent of the "neuro-economic human" (2017b, p. 225), whose emotions are genetically determined, the neoliberal ideology has dissolved the very subject of the process of healing, whether in psychoanalytical or political philosophical terms.

Confronted with such a bleak picture, Mbembe barely provides reason for hope. The ethics of the traveler (*le passant*) (2017b, p. 232) that he invokes as an antidote to the politics of enmity remains but a vague source of comfort. With its appeal to embrace the contingency of our place of birth and to embrace metamorphosis and temporal passage as the essence of being human, it certainly poses a challenge to the resurgence of nationalism, racism, and the politics of exclusion. It asks us to acknowledge that to become a human in the world means traversing the world from manifold locations in the awareness that the Earth is our common foundation. Yet, while this idea resonates with his

notion of Afropolitanism, Mbembe seems less optimistic than ever that the practical conditions of thinking the world as a thinking of passage, of transit, of flowing life (2017b, p. 233) are indeed within reach.

5 | HOW TO THINK THE WORLD?

Mbembe's perspective on how to think the world is of remarkable breadth. In his quest for the conditions of reconstituting critical thought and the resources of genuinely encountering one another, he combines various layers of historical and philosophical analysis to develop a truly global perspective on critical thought. Mbembe's historical account of race, colonialism, and democracy is not new. Similar accounts can be found in other works of postcolonial thought and historiography. Indeed, Mbembe recognizes that post-colonial theory represents a first step towards a form of thinking the world. It not only deconstructs the colonial prose, reveals the violence inherent in a certain idea of reason, and calls for an alternative reading of modernity. By highlighting the complex mechanisms and tensions of subjectivity and identity formation in the colonial situation, it also gestures towards a certain form of thinking the interlocking and crossing.

Yet Mbembe is keen to distinguish himself from central tenets of post-colonial thought. He identifies a tendency in post-colonial thought to reduce the history of formerly colonized societies to a single moment of colonization instead of thinking of history in terms of long processes of fusion.[7] And he rejects the equation and fetishization of resistance and subalternity and the celebration of difference and alterity. They result in a simplified model of agency, which construes the subaltern as either victims or heroic agents and obscures the politics of cruelty that Mbembe diagnoses in formerly colonized societies. With its one-sided focus on a critique of established European paradigms, post-colonial thought tends to reproduce the move towards closure and separation and risks losing track of investigating the possibilities for thinking the in-common.

Mbembe himself carefully resists any tendency towards polarization, opposition, or separation. This also holds true for his take on African philosophy. He engages with various lines of Black radical thought, such as négritude, Afrocentrism and Afrofuturism. His emphasis on relational forms of thinking and being in the world certainly takes its main sources of inspiration from African philosophy. He emphasizes, for instance, that, for ancient African traditions, the core question of existence is not that of being as in Judeo-Christian traditions, but rather that of relation, of mutual implication, of discovering and of recognizing the life of the Other (2017b, pp. 57–58). However, Mbembe never falls into the trap of using contrasting and falsely homogenizing or essentializing schemes to bring out the distinctiveness of one tradition or the other. Neither does he follow an Afrocentric strategy of debunking Western Eurocentrism in order to reconstruct a genuinely African philosophy. His emphasis is on connectedness and histories of entanglement. Hence, Mbembe does not deny his heavy reliance on the Western philosophical tradition. In fact, he naturally draws on European resources, especially on the French philosophical tradition, with the same nonchalance and the same critical stance that he displays vis-à-vis African sources.

Given this, one may be tempted to situate Mbembe's works within the emerging fields of comparative political theory or comparative philosophy (cf. Vacano, 2015). They seek to overcome what is increasingly perceived as a problematic parochialism in European and Anglo-American philosophy by bringing different intellectual traditions into conversation. However, their underlying assumption is that there are indeed distinct and bounded philosophical traditions to be compared.[8] This idea is what Mbembe resists. He refuses to situate himself in either a Western or an African narrative. His perspective is a global rather than a comparative one—though not necessarily in a geographical sense. Mbembe focuses on the Atlantic space, on the shared history and philosophy of Europeans, Africans, and North Americans. However, his approach is global in its resistance to theoretical segregation and compartmentalization and his emphasis on thinking the all-world that starts from the reflection of interlocking, of crossing, and of circulation. In that sense, it represents what Brooks has called an "unbounded approach to philosophy," which is "unfettered by self-limitation to engagement with what is established and familiar; it is open to what is new" (Brooks, 2013, p. 258).

And yet, there is a way in which the global perspective that Mbembe proposes has a distinctively African face. It is the African experience of intersection and of inhabiting multiple worlds, whether simultaneously or in movement that Mbembe sees as of general significance. It poses the challenge to resist both the compartmentalization of thinking

and abstract universalisms. It calls for embracing the multiple and entangled lineages of history, including intellectual history, in which we find ourselves, as philosophers and as citizens of the world. And it suggests a radical redefinition of cosmopolitanism in terms of Afropolitanism—a way of thinking the all-world, the in-common, the shared multiplicity from Africa.

Thus, Mbembe offers a challenging and timely account of a globalizing world, the conditions for critical global thought and the crucial role that Africa plays within both. For him, thinking the world and rethinking Africa are inextricably tied together. It is by rereading Africa, not in terms of the ultimate Other but in terms of a particular site for the production and circulation of general knowledge that Mbembe opens up a horizon for thinking the all-world. The African capacity for multiplicity and simultaneity provides a source for a thinking in circulation and in crossing, a thinking that is continuous with multiple, interlocking lineages. In other words, thinking the world in a way that breaks with the spirit of closure and faces up to the challenge of confronting the open requires rethinking the world from Africa, a place that is both an epicenter of current global transformations and the source of reconstituting critical thought as a thinking of the world.

NOTES

[1] I refer to the German translation (Mbembe, 2016). An English translation by Columbia University Press is forthcoming in 2019 with the title, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*.

[2] I refer to the English translation (Mbembe, 2017a).

[3] I refer to the German translation (Mbembe, 2017b).

[4] All English translations of quotes from the German editions are my own.

[5] As Laurent Dubois, the translator of *Critique of Black Reason*, notes, the translation loses some of the ambiguity and provocation of the French term *Nègre* that Mbembe uses in the original text.

[6] The translation of *le Nègre* as Black Man suggests a male-centred perspective that Mbembe does not subscribe to. Even though his reconstruction of slavery focuses on male slaves he also addresses ways in which Black women are differently affected by race.

[7] See, however, Bhambra (2014) for a post-colonial account of entangled histories and connectedness.

[8] See, however, Godrej (2009) and Jenco (2011) for an emphasis on the transformative nature of the comparative endeavor and the porosity of boundaries, though they still tend to embrace the idea that philosophical traditions are bounded.

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How to cite this article: Gädeke D. How to think the world? Achille Mbembe on race, democracy and the African role in global thought. *Constellations*. 2018;25:497–506. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12381