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Marina Gržinić*

***Necropolitics* by Achille Mbembe** **Extended essay on the book¹**

Intro²

It is a challenge and a pleasure to write an extended essay review of *Necropolitics*,³ the latest book by Achille Mbembe. An African theorist born in Cameroon in 1957, he holds a PhD from Paris (at the Sorbonne) in Political Science, and is a professor at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, and also at Harvard, in the United States. His recent books include *Critique de la raison nègre*,⁴ and *Politiques de l'inimitié*.⁵

Necropolitics takes us back to his seminal text on “Necropolitics,”⁶ translated and published in the US in 2003. At this point, 40 years after Foucault’s biopolitics,⁷ Mbembe was re-theorizing biopolitics through a necro (death) horizon, which proved to be a robust conceptual shift from occidental thought.⁸

¹ This article is a result of the research programme P6-0014 “Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy” and the research project J6-2589 “Structure and Genealogy of Perversion in Contemporary Philosophy, Politics, and Art”, which are funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

² Marina Gržinić, “*Necropolitics* (2019) Achilla Mbembeja. Razširjeni esej” [*Necropolitics* (2019) by Achille Mbembe. An Extended Essay], in T. Kancler and M. Gržinić (eds.), “Rasni kapitalizem, interseksionalnost spolnosti, bojev in mejnih teles” [Racial Capitalism. Intersectionality of Sexuality, Struggles and Bodies as Borders], special issue, *Časopis za kritiko znanosti, domišljijo in novo antropologijo*, 48 (281/2020), pp. 145–162.

³ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. S. Corcoran, Durham, Duke University Press, 2019.

⁴ Achille Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013. Translated by L. Dubois as *Critique of Black Reason*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017.

⁵ Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* [Politics of Enmity], Paris, La Découverte, 2016.

⁶ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. L. Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (1/2003), pp. 11–40.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, eds. M. Bertani and A. Fontana, trans. D. Macey, London, Penguin, 2004.

⁸ See Mbembe, “Necropolitics.”

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Necropolitics as a semiotic, literary, theoretical-technological invention has inserted itself as a cog in the machine of biopolitics. It has presented itself as the engine of thought. It provoked much resistance in occidental thought, which insisted and still tries to get rid of necropolitics in many ways, for example, to replace it with thanatopolitics.

Necropolitics is the “darker side” of biopolitics, as decolonial theory would claim. In 2003, Mbembe took a bold step: he took the sovereignty mode of governance—which until then had been in the realm of political theory and the defense of the nation-state, as a method of protecting the boundary of the sovereign nation-state—and placed it in a much broader context. Mbembe re-read sovereignty, not as a theory of protection, but as a central category of the sovereign’s decision (which began to lose its unilateral character) to decide over life and death. What had been there as an exclusive right to protect nation-state borders was reframed by necropolitics as the right to decide who should live and who must die. This short and simple statement of “who should live and who must die” is the most transparent and concise definition of necropolitics.

Necropolitics, despite all resistance and insistence on biopolitics in the Occident, increasingly proves its materiality, its necessity and contingency.

In the titular book, published 17 years after the seminal text that significantly influenced the theory and practice of philosophy, politics, anthropology, esthetics, not much more is explicitly said about necropolitics. He does, however, go into detail about the consequences of necropolitics in recent decades. Simply put, Mbembe presents the layers of forms, modes, and procedures of the necropolitical working through contemporary neoliberal global societies. It permeates the *All-World* as a total curative work. It is therefore not surprising that Mbembe makes reference to theory in forms, form is the way to redefine content, or in other words, “who should live and who must die” is presently the beginning. But how this is done in the 21st century, what are the methods and procedures to implement this central act in neoliberal global democracy—that is the task of this book. Mbembe captures the procedures and modalities of necropolitics 17 years after and centuries in the past by building genealogies of its possible beginning.

Mbembe's language is a dense literary language, a description of fragmentation, or rather, an accumulation of adjectives which present the main term over and over again—racism is in this respect profligate, extravagant, excessive and unrestrained. It proliferates so madly, poisonously, violently that it takes on a form of nano-racism, as a small invisible particle, or said in the context of current developments, like a virus. Mbembe excavates the root of every modernist concept: Democracy, Capitalism, Colonialism, Universalism, and Freedom. Yet, with various exponential adjectives, and with each term comes its violent “darker side,” it is another part of the coin, not as a binary, but as a Moebius strip, a surface with only one side (when embedded in three-dimensional Euclidean space) and only one boundary. We get a long list of adjectives added to the concept of modernity, all of which are modes of necropolitical transposition.

Mbembe groups the modalities that form clusters of horror as what is otherwise necropolitics; it is not the politics of managing life (biopolitics), of governing life (for better or worse). It is the sovereign decision about death, a killing machine to maximize profit. Therefore, post-2003 necropolitics has evolved into a system of elaborate versions of this original statement. Morality is an essential part of the philosophy of the West, which has always been rooted in Christianity. After colonialism, it continued with the two world wars and the Holocaust. The West is in constant repetition, after the Second World War a whole series of biopolitical formal, institutional, legal and economic and political mechanisms, human rights charters, international banking systems and tribunals were set up. Yet we have genocides everywhere, the most exponential in Africa, Rwanda,⁹ and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Srebrenica genocide¹⁰ in the 1990s.

⁹ The Rwandan genocide was a mass murder of Tutsi, Twa, and moderate Hutu in Rwanda, which took place during the Rwandan Civil War. It began on the night of April 6, 1994, when a plane carrying Rwanda's then President Juvenal Habyarimana and his counterpart Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi (both ethnic Hutus) was shot down. In just 100 days in 1994 (between April and July), about 800,000 people were slaughtered in Rwanda by ethnic Hutu extremists. See Helen C. Epstein, “America's secret role in the Rwandan genocide,” *Guardian*, 12 September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/sep/12/americas-secret-role-in-the-rwandan-genocide>, accessed 10 April 2020.

¹⁰ Srebrenica genocide was a mass murder of more than 8,000 Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslim), boys and men, in July 1995, during Balkan Wars. The executions were committed by the Army of Republica Srbska (VRS) that invaded the Srebrenica, town in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. See International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, “Srebrenica

To point out this system is no easy task, since that regime which exercises necropolitics most persistently, the government of whiteness, the occidental world, has developed the most distorting forms of concealment of its actual project of contemporary genocides.

After the Second World War, it became clear that the modes of killing should ask for more reasons and more explanations of the Occident, for more moral narratives. The mode of dealing with refugees, the mass flow of refugees that is a product of the proxy war for power and profit, is not to kill refugees, but to imprison them in the most miserable camps, to exclude and seal them off, yet to attribute to them the form of radicalized abandonment, not a direct killing. Why, in fact? As an Occident, the regime of whiteness cannot accept direct killings in general; the regime of whiteness and its civilizationally superior mission demand that all kinds of additional methods be developed. These forms are the main ways today. I argue that every layer of society, practice, and institutional mode of governmentality is affected by necropolitics. Jothie Rajah touches on this as well. In her talk “The Killing of Al-Baghdadi: Translating from Liberal Legality to Necropolitical Law,” announced online in Vienna in 2020, she asks:

What does this killing—an extraterritorial, extrajudicial assassination—mean for the law? Conventionally, positivist thinking regards law as bounded and binaried, such that law’s other is “illegal” or “not law.” Against this conventional understanding of the law, critical theorists perceive all that we embody, enact, and engender, including cultural texts, as expressing law and legal meaning. What then is the law brought into existence by the assassination of al-Baghdadi? Drawing on Achille Mbembe’s highly influential theorizing of necropolitics [...], Jothie Rajah argues that contemporary forms of imperialism, alongside narratives of American exceptionalism, have effected a translation from liberal legality to necropolitical law.¹¹

Genocide: No Room For Denial”, <https://www.icty.org/en/outreach/documentaries/srebrenica-genocide-no-room-for-denial>, accessed 9 April 2020.

¹¹ Jothie Rajah, “The Killing of Al-Baghdadi: Translating from Liberal Legality to Necropolitical Law,” *IFK*, March 2020, <http://www.ifk.ac.at/index.php/kalender-detail/translating-from-liberal-legality-to-necropolitical-law.html>, accessed 10 April 2020.

The analysis and presentation of the book

The book is a compilation of texts that have been produced in recent years and are now being carefully rearranged. The result of such reordering is a well-rounded thought, brilliantly translated from French into English by Steven Corcoran. The title of the French original is *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Politics of Enmity) that reappears in the present book as “The Society of Enmity,” chapter 2.

I will focus on chapters that encircle the central one, “Necropolitics,”¹² the text from 2003. I propose to give a detailed analysis on the mechanisms, the reordering of death, and abandonment of life, in the last decades. I will go into detailed analysis of the following chapters: the first, “Exit from Democracy,”¹³ second, “The Society of Enmity,”¹⁴ fourth, “Viscerality,”¹⁵ fifth, “Fanon’s Pharmacy”¹⁶ and sixth, “This Stifling Noonday.”¹⁷

In its very introductory part, Mbembe departs from Édouard Glissant’s (1928–2011) *Tout-Monde*,¹⁸ or *All-World*; he starts where he concluded his *Critique of Black Reason*. Glissant extends his attention to relations between the local and the global, especially the effects of globalization. Against this, what is called *mondialisation* (globalization) in French, he proposes a *mondialité* (variously translated as world mentality, worldliness, or worlding). This is important as Mbembe exposes a critique of abstract universalism.¹⁹ He connects this criticism with two main features of necropolitics and capitalism; one is the relation of democracy and capitalism; the other is the accumulation of enmity. He will present these relations of hatred, hostility, the voice of blood, and terror and counter-terror as the medicines and poisons of our time.²⁰ Another author who structures Mbembe’s thought in a remarkably stable way is Paul Gilroy. Gilroy’s departure from cultural studies and his call to approach philosophically the

¹² Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, pp. 66–92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 117–155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 156–184.

¹⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Tout-Monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993.

¹⁹ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 9.

²⁰ See Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, chapters 1 and 2.

work of Richard Nathaniel Wright (1908–1960), whose works dealt with racial issues, seems to be one of the ways present in Mbembe’s writings. Gilroy exposes Wright’s importance arguing, “His most significant contribution, however, was his desire to accurately portray blacks to white readers, thereby destroying the white myth of the patient, humorous, subservient black man.”²¹

Mbembe opens chapter 1, “Exit from Democracy,” uncovering a time that he sees as a reversal, an inversion of acceleration,²² a kind of persistent fossilization of the contemporary Occidental societies. This is very visible in the time of coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Democracy, writes Mbembe, is the racial system of life, that presents a double place of the black body, as labor and reserve, and colonization is a technology for regulating migratory movements.²³ Mbembe shows that from the 16th to the 19th century, capitalism practised repopulation through predation, wealth extraction, and the formation of subaltern groups.²⁴ One thing must necessarily be pointed out, even to all those who think and maintain that nothing new is produced in this book. I maintain that what we are given to read, chapter by chapter, is a never-ending process of rewriting genealogies. Genealogies are histories in the plural as political positioning, the latter is not hidden alongside “objective but dead historicity,” on the contrary, genealogies provoke, contest and tear.

Therefore, Mbembe exposes that this bone, this skull and this skeleton all have names: repopulation, the settler colony as an extension of the nation, exploitation of colonies.²⁵ The objective is to divide the humanity into those of value and those doomed to be disposed of.²⁶ He shows the influence of religion or the “religious factor” on migration and mobility.²⁷

²¹ Gilroy quoted in Abebooks, “Native Son”, <https://www.abebooks.com/Native-Richard-Wright-Harper-Brothers-New/22882338817/bd>, accessed 10 April 2020.

²² Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

The destiny of Huguenots that were French Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries that followed the teachings of theologian John Calvin is taken as an example. On March 1, 1562, troops under the command of Francis, Duke of Guise, attacked 300 Huguenots who were worshipping in a barn outside the city walls of Vassy, France. More than 60 Huguenots were killed and more than 100 injured in the massacre. Francis said he did not order an attack but instead retaliated for throwing stones at his troops. French Wars of religion sparked by the Vassy massacre led to massive violence. Protestants took control of Orleans in April 1562 and massacred Huguenots in Sens and Tours; in Toulouse as many as 3,000 people, many of them Huguenots, died in the suppression of an uprising. Shortly thereafter, religious violence escalated again. Worst of all was the Night St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, when up to 70,000 Huguenots were murdered across France, led by the regent queen Catherine de Medici, King Charles IX' mother. On the night of August 23, 1572, and for the next two days, violence spread from town to town. Officials had recruited Catholic citizens into militia groups that hunted down Huguenots, tortured and mutilated them, and desecrated the dead.²⁸

This is also one of the many historical cases in the book that serve to rethink genocidal impulses; to rethink the human, Mbembe proposes to discuss three features: first, the human condition as a world condition;²⁹ second, the redefinition of the human;³⁰ and third, computation, calculation, and the computer.³¹

What is the meaning of this? Mbembe is clear that we live in a historical context in which it is not possible to separate the digital from life,³² as the human, its form of presence, traces the shadow of digital technology. The human materiality double is none other than its digital subject.³³ This is also a moment to note that all these contradictory relations also come from a rereading; an immense referential library is also found in this book.

²⁸ The Editors of History, "Huguenots," updated September 6, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/france/huguenots>, accessed 10 April 2020.

²⁹ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

We could go—not as passers-by, but on the contrary, as forensic readers—from one to hundreds of notes that frame the chapters and provide a parallel route that is the one to dive into these references. The digital subject in question is the result of a referential reading of a volume with the same title, published in 2015,³⁴ which unfolds an interdisciplinary reflection on transformations and new figures of subjectivity in the digital age. The outcome is, as exposed by Mbembe, “the capacity to voluntarily alter the human.”³⁵

It is about a mixture of the power of capital, accumulation and devouring, artificial intelligence, which brings war and the market into symmetry.³⁶

Mbembe challenges the assumption that life in a democracy is free of violence. Simply put, either we have democracy as a potential, or we have other forms of democracies that are inextricably linked to capitalism and its violence.

About capitalism: “democratic societies are pacified society,” “but the brutality of democracies has simply been swept under the carpet.”³⁷ The historical list of faded, “crippled” democracy comes alive with Mbembe’s reading of W.E.B. du Bois’s 1935 analysis, which showed that the U.S. is a pro-slavery democracy; as early as 1848, Alexis de Tocqueville noted this pro-slavery democracy as a segregationist community.³⁸ Therefore, Mbembe states that the slave develops a racist democracy and this keeps Black people out of society.³⁹ He claims that the lynching of Black people in the United States is the basis for a racist democracy.⁴⁰

Democracy cannot be seen outside two systems, the colonial and the slave system.⁴¹ We could therefore argue that in 2020, European Union tends to be an anti-Muslim racist democracy. Mbembe sees equality as inherent to violence. He suggests that workers’ protests in response to capitalist state repression in

³⁴ See Claire Larsonneur, Arnaud Regnauld, Pierre Cassou-Noguès, and Sara Touiza (eds.), *Le sujet digital*, Dijon, Les Presses du Réel, 2015. Translated as *The Digital Subject*, Dijon, Les Presses du Réel, 2017.

³⁵ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

the early 20th century provoked the critique of democracy from the standpoint of social classes.⁴²

So he points out that the mythical foundations of democracy,⁴³ say, equality, have swept colonialism, the slave plantation, and the colonial penal colony under the rug.⁴⁴ These forms of racial democracy are pillars of the colonial-imperial order working hand in hand with weapons, technology, and medicine.⁴⁵

Mbembe recounts that the Cinchona has always been coveted for its medicinal value (for the extraction of quinine and other alkaloids), which in the heyday of European colonialism were the only effective remedies against malaria and were therefore of great economic and political importance. The artificial synthesis of quinine in 1944 and the advent of alternative therapies eventually ended the great financial interest in cinchona cultivation. Academic interest continued, however, as many cinchona alkaloids showed promise in the treatment of falciparum malaria, which has developed resistance to synthetic drugs. So we see various forms of colonial extraction that can now be added to these modernist universal practices for “humanity.” It is clear that it is about Western humanity, and the consequences are colonial experimentation and colonial medicine.

Again, this links democracy directly to violence; first, capitalist or liberal democracy has the colony within it,⁴⁶ second, it exists in and on the borders,⁴⁷ and third, it draws from history without the people.⁴⁸ The horizons that these three relations open up are that both terror and counter-terror strike at the law and rights centrally.⁴⁹ The modes of sovereignty are fundamental,⁵⁰ because the rule of sovereignty in contemporary liberal democracy is without accountability. At the same time, capital has inherited from colonial times a right to decide over life and death.⁵¹ Again, regarding coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the best ex-

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

ample is the former president of the USA, Trump. Was not the forced political action and increased militarization in the case of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outside, or above the law, called for? Various medical professionals were less and less considered, politics decides for them.

What is it that we don't understand here? Mbembe again enumerates several forms of sovereignty. It is state terror that uses ethnic contours to depoliticize social protest.⁵² The French Riots of 2005 (French: *Émeutes De 2005 Dans Les Banlieues Françaises*), was a period of three weeks of riots in the suburbs of Paris and other French cities, in October and November 2005. These riots involved youth of African, North African and French origin, who committed violent attacks and set fire to cars and public buildings. The media portrayed the riots as the rage of a barbaric mob. This was followed by a portrayal of the monopoly of power that only comes to fruition through killing.⁵³

Finally, one of the essential points in the analysis of democracy is that democracy produces a society of separation.⁵⁴ With this statement, Mbembe leads us into chapter 2, "The Society of Enmity." Mbembe refers to two positions: the first is that of a controversial German jurist Carl Schmitt, who provides a critique of parliamentary democracy—particularly as embodied in the form of the Weimar Republic—in his *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*,⁵⁵ first published in 1923 (as *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*). Mbembe recapitulates Schmitt's point by asserting that in a democracy the surplus population is wholly or partially without rights.

The second reference is Wendy Brown. In her article "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," she discusses how neoliberalism and neoconservatism are two distinct political rationalities in the United States today.⁵⁶ As she further elaborates,

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. E. Kennedy, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1985. Originally published as *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, Munich, Duncker and Humblot, 1923.

⁵⁶ Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," *Political Theory*, 34 (6/2006), pp. 690–714.

Their respective devaluation of political liberty, equality, substantive citizenship, and the rule of law in favor of governance according to market criteria on the one side, and valorization of state power for putatively moral ends on the other, undermines both the culture and institutions of constitutional democracy. Above all, the two rationalities work symbiotically to produce a subject relatively indifferent to veracity and accountability in government and to political freedom and equality among the citizenry.⁵⁷

Mbembe conveys that what we see today is a fantasy of extinction, as a product of the intertwining of capital, technology and militarism as the central nexus of neoliberal global capitalism.⁵⁸ In such a situation, the enemy is a social need, a need for the ontology of the nation, and it is constitutive of its formation.⁵⁹ The result is a hypertechnological development of the most backward nationalist reactionary blood identity politics.⁶⁰ Referring to Nicola Perugini and Neve Gordon's *The Human Right to Dominate*,⁶¹ it is obvious that militarism no longer needs a mask to advance.

A very detailed description of these relations is spread out before the reader; this is done in lush literary language with juicy coinages. They come from the literary repertoire and are transformed into political, philosophical, theoretical terms. The security state aspires to a state of insecurity; each term produces or clings to its opposite, because the only way to understand neoliberal global capitalism is through its opposite; everything that politicians, multinational CEOs, and military generals publicly proclaim is at least the opposite. The invocation of security, for example, serves precisely to produce maximum insecurity. Mbembe has come to terms with a category of doubt that is beginning to be a significant force, not truth and falsehood.⁶²

In all these constellations, Mbembe discloses that racism is the impetus. Onto it, it is that enmity is funded. He asserts that it is not so much class that unites

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 690.

⁵⁸ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶¹ Nicola Perugini and Neve Gordon, *The Human Right to Dominate*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁶² Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 55.

groups in society, but kinship, that is, the blood of the masses.⁶³ This is what Mbembe calls nano-racism,⁶⁴ less class and technology is there without innocence, made naked. The nano-racism that Mbembe speaks of it in 2015,⁶⁵ is the small-minded white prejudice,⁶⁶ but also the basis of another machinery, hydraulic racism, which is the machinery that works even without the computers, I would say, because Mbembe also considers in this machine to pump racism the juridical-bureaucratic state machine measures, and therefore to be blind is to be indifferent to differences.⁶⁷ After all, the Occident is still fomenting racism centuries later.⁶⁸ Racism is constitutive of Western instincts and economic subjectivity.⁶⁹

For Mbembe, racism is a commodity “in this era of salaciousness,” obscenity, “without this resource ‘the society of spectacle’ [...] simply no longer exists,”⁷⁰ as it has acquired the status of lubricity, carnality.⁷¹ The passion for profit, lubricity, lust, brutality and sexuality is that which promotes the society of the spectacle of racism.⁷²

Let us pause for a moment. It is obvious that the entire repertoire of primary texts from the 1960s and 1970s is getting a new look; the *Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord⁷³—to which every occidental hipster and new accelerationist has returned—is now colored by the missing part, racism.

Mbembe also shows that the West, or the Occident, is the one that defines being, and therefore, after historical horrors, after genocidal practices, it can always

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶⁵ See Achille Mbembe, “Nanoracisme et puissance du vide” [Nano-racism and the power of vacuum], in N. Bancel, P. Blanchard and A. Boubeker (eds.), *Le Grand Repli*, Paris, La Découverte, 2015, pp. 5–11.

⁶⁶ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 59.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. F. Perlman and friends, Detroit, Black & Red, 1977. Originally published as *La Société du Spectacle*, Paris, Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

preach a new beginning, the great new beginning. That is the universality of the West, to start over again, again and again.⁷⁴ The West cannot think of a proper finality, except perhaps a cleansing, which is the genocidal logic of purging everything; and if necessary, a complete destruction of the “less-humans.”⁷⁵

If there is a universality, it is the universality of violence, of the victors of wars all professing a predatory system.⁷⁶ This is also related to another fantasy that David Theo Goldberg⁷⁷ calls postracial. In the last instance, we get the illusion of a different beginning, the beginning of a different history without contemporary humanity; the fantasy of ablation.⁷⁸ Or, as Shirley Anne Tate⁷⁹ has excellently captured and elaborated: the myth of the post-race society is possible for all those Others, all those Black, but only if passing as white.

That chapter 4, which follows “Necropolitics,” is titled “Viscerality” is not surprising, for what else can be the result of the necro-governing of the death of thousands? Not subjectivity, but flesh, the crude, earthly instrumentalization of life through a perspective of death, exercised through capital, technology, militarization. What term better fits today’s necroterror and dystopian necro-future than viscerality? Let us think of the status of refugees in Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Libya, Italy, Slovenia, at the mercy of necrocapitalism of the neo-liberal era? Therefore, the techno-politics of residual governance in Africa produces a molecular colonialism on regional political futures. This molecular form of colonialism is a concept conceived by Margarida Mendes. The significance of the miniaturization of colonialism, as with nano-racism, lies in its absolute, almost “invisible” fragmentation.

Here, too, the list of terms and forms of dispossession, exploitation and expropriation grows, because global neoliberal necrocapitalism means a totality of never-ending differentiations, fragmentations and ruptures; these also affect

⁷⁴ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 63.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ David Theo Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015.

⁷⁸ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 64.

⁷⁹ Shirley Anne Tate, “Border Bodies: Mixedness and Passing in *Prison Break*,” in M. Gržinić (ed.), *Border Thinking: Disassembling Histories of Racialized Violence*, Vol. 21 of Publication Series of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2018, pp. 138–151.

the possibilities of influence on time and space and not only on the capitalist mode of production.

The result, as Mbembe claims, is the production of new forms of space.⁸⁰ He speaks of enclosure, contraction containment; the latest is a series of measures designed to protect the world's population due to coronavirus disease (COVID-19). All lead to the "impoverishment of the real,"⁸¹ which for Mbembe is a new relationship after financialization. Mbembe refers to Aeron Davis and Karel Williams' introduction to "Elites and Power after Financialization," this text brings "state-capital relations, innovative forms of value extraction, new elite insecurities and resources in liquid times and the role of elite intermediaries and experts."⁸² Mbembe's view forms an entanglement of neoliberal capitalism, computational technologies, and social media that reflects the phase of humanity.⁸³

The centrality of technology is once again revealed; digitalization brings the dimension of the nano-part (one billionth, 10⁻⁹), which adds to all these processes of subjugation, dispossession and discrimination. This is why Mbembe speaks of nano-racism; it goes hand in hand with nano-cameras and neo-fascism.⁸⁴ As Mbembe uncovers: "We can finally become our own spectacle, our own scene, our own theater and audience, even our own public. In this age of endless self-curation and exhibition, we can finally draw our own portrait. Intimacy has been replaced by what Jacques Lacan called 'extimacy.'"⁸⁵ He connects this "super-isolation of the self" to Evan Osnos's article about super-rich Americans (in Silicon Valley, New York, and elsewhere) preparing for disaster, the story of guys who want a "refuge that would be far from cities but not entirely isolated" and who "think that one guy alone could somehow withstand the roving mob."⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 96.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁸² Aeron Davis and Karel Williams, "Introduction: Elites and Power after Financialization," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34 (5–6/2017), pp. 3–26.

⁸³ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 114.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ García Martínez quoted in Evan Osnos, "Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich," *New Yorker*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich>, accessed 10 April 2020.

Here the psychosis, the Rambo fantasies and the supremacists' ideologies work together. The final chapters after the psychosis of history, the psychosis of capital, the psychosis of militarization, the fantasies of power, and supremacists' desires, etc. come to another set of in-depth reflections on Frantz Fanon. In reading Fanon (1925–1961), Mbembe exposes him as a psychiatrist, political radical, Pan-Africanist and Marxist humanist concerned with the psychopathology of colonization and decolonization. Mbembe reads Fanon through a relationship between the political and the psychiatric.

Already in his 2016 lecture, Mbembe connects the category of viscosity to two important works of Fanon's, showing "when the clinical and the political are co-constitutive and when they are not."⁸⁷ Already in his work *A Dying Colonialism* Fanon warns that postcolonial elites become predators of their societies.⁸⁸ His conceptualization of violence directly mirrors the "genocidal impulses" of European colonialism in its "'founding, empirical and phenomenal' dimension."⁸⁹

In "Fanon's Pharmacy,"⁹⁰ "Mbembe turns to Fanon to characterise 'colonisation as a prodigious machine for the production of desires and fantasies,' by no means all of which are materialistic. He reminds us that if 'there is a secret to the colony, it is clearly this: the subjection of the native by way of desire.' This is a version of Fanon which is as much concerned with what drives us as with what we wish to drive out."⁹¹

⁸⁷ Achille Mbembe, "Frantz Fanon & the Politics of Viscerality," keynote lecture for the Frantz Fanon, Louis Mars, & New Directions in Comparative Psychiatry Workshop, April 26–27, 2016, John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute, Duke University, available at <https://humanitiesfutures.org/media/achille-mbembe-frantz-fanon-politics-viscerality/>, accessed 10 April 2020.

⁸⁸ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. H. Chevalier, New York, Grove Press, 1967. Originally published as *L'An V de la Révolution Algérienne*, Paris, Maspero, 1959.

⁸⁹ Sindre Bangstad, "Achille Mbembe's Fanonian meditations," *Africa Is a Country*, December 12, 2018, <https://africasacountry.com/2018/12/achille-mbembes-fanonian-meditations>, accessed 10 April 2020.

⁹⁰ See Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, chapter 5.

⁹¹ Imraan Coovadia, "Africanism and Afrofuturism: Imraan Coovadia considers Blackness, Black Panther and Achille Mbembe's Critique of Black Reason," *The Johannesburg Review of Books*, April 4, 2018, <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2018/04/04/africanism-and-afrofuturism-imraan-coovadia-considers-blackness-black-panther-and-achille-mbembes-critique-of-black-reason/>, accessed 10 April 2020.

Fanon's importance to Mbembe as to other thinkers such as Lewis Gordon, Ngũgĩ was Thiong'o, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, is that Fanon brought to light a dichotomy,⁹² a double face that lurks on colonialism under liberal democracy. Colonialism enables democracy, so that the will to live under the supremacist regime of liberal democracy is born directly out of destruction, annihilation, and genocide. Therefore, Fanon enters to capture the dimension of destruction in three lines of debate: racism, imperialism and the right to self-determination, and our relationship to destruction and death.⁹³ Starting from this analysis, Mbembe brings together colonialism, fascism and Nazism to dismantle the first European myth of humanity with a genealogy of the camps.⁹⁴ He posits that the early brutal genocidal policy of Nazi Germany was against the Herero in 1904. He claims that the killing of the Herero was the first genocide of the 20th century.⁹⁵ The camp history taken from a study by Federico Rahola,⁹⁶ presents the camp system not as an event, but a chain of crimes.⁹⁷ Mbembe is very precise to also show the difference between the concentration camps and extermination camps for the Judeocide.⁹⁸

By referring to Fanon, Mbembe exposes his analysis of the Algerian war of independence against the French colonizers, which Fanon called "a genuine genocide"⁹⁹ and in this respect, racism is never accidental for Fanon.¹⁰⁰ Fanon speaks of two kinds of racism: of vulgar racism, we may say, the scientific racism, and cultural racism; they are subcortical, generic racisms.¹⁰¹ Fanon states that the denial of proper racism by the racist is also linked to sexuality. The Black person's virility is taken and presented as a "danger" to the dominant society, as if this "virility" is "stolen" from the dominant white community.

⁹² Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 118.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁹⁶ Federico Rahola, "La forme-camp: Pour une généalogie des lieux de transit et d'internement du présent" [The camp form: For a genealogy of the places of transit and internment of the present], *Cultures et Conflits*, 68 (2007), pp. 31–50.

⁹⁷ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 123.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

The result is a series of the most appalling consequences; the Black person is always the other, always denigrated being in a position of “object among objects.”¹⁰² Mbembe describes in detail the white racist fantasies that transform the Black person into a sexual object. He states that the “Dionysiac and sado-masochist sexuality [...] in racist phantasmagoria”¹⁰³ are both connected with the phallus.

Here as earlier in his book, Mbembe makes an essential reference to Jacques Lacan; the French psychoanalytic theorist spoke of the phallus as that signifier which cannot simply be reduced to the penis as such. It functions in a metaphorical and metonymic set of a signifier. Unlike Lacan, however, Mbembe highlights at this point that the phallus is neither

the organ without body so dear to a certain Western psychoanalytic tradition. On the contrary, in colonial—and therefore racist—situations, it represents that which, of life, is manifest in the purest fashion as turgescence, as trust and as intrusion. Clearly, it is impossible to speak about thrust, turgescence, and intrusion without restoring to the phallus if not its physicality, than at least its living flesh, its capacity to testify to domains of the sensible, to feel all sorts of sensations, vibrations, and quivering’s (a color, a scent, touch, weights, an odor). In contexts of racial domination and thus of social minoritization, the Negro phallus is above all perceived as an enormous power of affirmation. It is the name of an at once totally affirmative and transgressive force that no prohibition holds in check.

As such, it radically contradicts the racial power that, in addition to defining itself first and foremost as the power of a prohibition, also represents itself as endowed with a phallus that functions as its emblem and its finery, as much as the central apparatus of its discipline.¹⁰⁴

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From here we can read a list of ways to castrate the black man, starting with lynching.¹⁰⁵ This leads well to formulating a fundamental, cynical inversion that covers colonialist and supremacist racial fantasies: Because of the exuberant

¹⁰² Frantz Fanon quoted in Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 132.

¹⁰³ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 135.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

organ, victims are suddenly themselves responsible for the violence inflicted upon them.¹⁰⁶

“This Stifling Noonday,” chapter 6, continues the relationship to capitalism¹⁰⁷; since capitalism is an economic system but also a sin regime, it functions through psychopathological methods of coercion, organization, and redistribution of power to set things right, but only to extract their intrinsic value.¹⁰⁸

For the capitalist economic system, the only thing that counts is what can produce surplus value, profit, which is then privatized and capitalized solely by the capitalist or a multinational corporation. To extract more profit from the hyper-exploitation of the Black body, they are rendered worthless. It is then a simple matter to completely nullify labor and make labor power superfluous.

The main mechanism, as revealed by Mbembe, is ordering, such as sorting, re-organizing and economizing commodities, bodies for maximum extraction and expropriation. Three main regimes are cited: Slavery, Colonialism and Capitalism. In all these formations, as Mbembe notes, it is not so much about social death;¹⁰⁹ it is about waste, desiccation.¹¹⁰

In this chapter, Mbembe also enters into an extensive polemic with other strains of Black philosophies, both historical and present, current. This polemic already begins with the notion of “social death,” a process proposed by Orlando Patterson,¹¹¹ and continues with a distinction of three lines in history and present. The first is the Afrocentric line,¹¹² the second is Afropessimism.¹¹³ As pointed out by one of the leading figures of Afropessimism, Frank B. Wilderson III,¹¹⁴ scholar and award-winning author, Afropessimism is an unprecedented account of Blackness, where race colors (almost) everything.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹¹¹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982.

¹¹² Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 161.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹¹⁴ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020.

Mbembe is tough on it; he notes that racial pessimism is rooted in white America and its deep belief “that the freedom and security of the white race can be guaranteed only at the expense of the life of nonwhites.”¹¹⁵ The third line Mbembe favors is Afrofuturism, because of the technological elements it entails. He emphasizes that the Afrofuturist critique of humanism works in tandem with the analysis of capitalism.

Mbembe is one of the few postcolonial writers to deal so directly and forcefully with the analysis of capitalism. He explicitly elaborates the principle of race, not as a marker of identity, but as a threshold that produces the withering of life and matter and creates a null world.¹¹⁶ More so, as it is the one that also reconfigures the entire mechanism of value extraction while providing for worthless living flesh. Mbembe is constantly moving backwards and forwards, to the colonial slave system that produced the slave as human bio stock.¹¹⁷ In summation, in this extremely powerful book that needed to be presented forensically, the political dimension of postcolonial and decolonial critique is reactivated through the analysis of capitalism.

What is lacking in the book? It has no reference at all to the former Eastern European space, the once known “Second” World; the only reference to it is in the context of Balkanization and re-Balkanization, as the processes of hyper-territorial fragmentation through ethnic wars in 20th century Europe, on the territory called Balkans (former Yugoslavia). One of the possible reasons is Mbembe’s complete distancing from the idea of socialism. In particular, he seems to have a distaste for the socialist and communist waves of the 1960s that worked with decolonization.

In the last section of chapter 6 bearing the title “Capitalism and Animism,”¹¹⁸ Mbembe finally presents this universalization as objectification, as a passion for being transformed into a commodity, which is an essential feature of the time in which we live. He developed this thesis in 2016. John Drabinski¹¹⁹ has synthe-

¹¹⁵ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 162.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹¹⁹ John E. Drabinski, “Mbembe, Democracy, Animism,” December 6, 2013, <http://jdrabinski.com/2013/12/06/Mbembe-democracy-animism/>, accessed 10 April 2020.

sized well this central point of Mbembe. Drabinski writes that the meaning of the human and the meaning of the social have been radically

altered by 21st century cultural and technological life, which transforms classical Marxist conceptions of commodity fetishism and the labor-commodity link [...]. What does this mean for how we think about democracy when our models and terms for theorizing the *demos* (and co-extensive notions of belonging, justice, and the like) come from other centuries. Centuries in which the struggle was to maintain a sense of subjectivity *against* the reduction of the human subject to an object; the early Marx's humanism, we could say, is premised on just such a struggle. But the age of animism, thought in Mbembe's terms here, reverses so much of this at the moment that the desire of the human subject is to become an object and, in that becoming-object, to become animated in the new *proper* sense. That is, in the 21st-century sense, where the distinction between the virtual and the actual is utterly confusing to 18th–20th century modes of thinking the relation. Animism demands that we think virtuality and actuality differently, which, in many senses, is tantamount to saying we must figure out how to think democracy otherwise.¹²⁰

“How do we think otherwise?” asks Drabinski. Because right now, as I write this review, we are still in the pandemic mood of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

That is the task, but are we in a position to do so? An ambiguous universality, as Mbembe shows, is a process of becoming within neoliberal global capitalism that fully universalizes the colonial Black-body-thing condition across the neoliberal global necrocapitalist world.¹²¹ Are we capable of thinking otherwise? Also, it seems almost impossible to archive past and present histories within and with ordinary mechanisms of memory, recollecting and ordering—they are all outcome result of post-modernist supremacist's vocabularies, taxonomies, and so forth.

This is why Achille Mbembe speaks of the anti-museum.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.

¹²¹ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 178.

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