Critique de la raison nègre: A review

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Introduction

In 1959, a young Jewish student named Marshall Berman (2000) hazarded upon Karl Marx’s Economic and Philosophical Manuscript of 1844. He was so amazed by what he read, he immediately went out to the nearest Soviet-subsidized bookstore and bought copies for everyone he knew. Re-reading his original copy, years later, he discovered that he had underlined virtually every line in the book. Reading Achille Mbembe’s Critique de la Raison Nègre inspires the same kind of enthusiasm. Currently only available in French, it’s a book that you want to shout about from the rooftops, so that all of your colleagues and friends will read it. My copy, only a few months old, is stuffed with paper markers at many intervals, suggesting the richness of analysis and description on nearly every page. It is not a perfect book. For instance, Mbembe is almost relentlessly masculinist in standpoint and language, so that you can already imagine a Black feminist re-telling that challenges this “malestream” account, so building new, necessary layers to his analysis. He does not explicitly consider how the liberation struggles of the “Nègre” might act in concert and in tension with other liberatory movements, for instance, by still-colonized Indigenous peoples. He emphasizes literary, artistic and intellectual figures, although not exclusively, so that it is possible to imagine another re-telling, this time centering the everyday struggles of many ordinary people designated as “Nègre” over the last centuries. Notwithstanding these important limitations, this is certainly one of the outstanding intellectual
Contributions to studies of empire, colonialism, racism and human liberation in the last decade, perhaps decades. Indeed, I fear I can hardly do Mbembe’s book justice in this brief review. With that preface...

Critique de la Raison Nègre is a book about the nightmare of history and the ways that our contemporary relations of inhumanity are rooted in the inhumanity of centuries past. Mbembe puts it this way, “We are condemned to live, not only with what we will produce but also with that which we have inherited”: “The weight of history is there”¹ (p. 254). Specifically, Critique de la raison nègre is about “sedimented” ideologies of race around the Nègre, for Mbembe the emblematically racialized and so dehumanized human being of European imaginaries. The obstinate colonial drive “to divide, to classify, to rank, to differentiate” that Foucault (1966) documented in Les Mots et les Choses and particularly the determination to divide, classify and rank human beings through the idea of race, “left something, entrails, even lesions” (p. 19). Reflecting on these “entrails”, Mbembe suggests that it is difficult to overestimate the devastation wrought by the “complex” that race represents, where race is a “generator of fears and of torments, of troubled thoughts and of terror, but above all of an infinity of suffering and eventually, of catastrophes” (p. 23). This is most obviously the case with slavery but, as Mbembe argued in his influential essay, “Nécropolitique” (2006), the catastrophe of race lives on in new forms. Today, he argues, many people live in occupied zones of militarized terror that operate effectively as new colonies (2006, p. 61), in conditions that recall the living-death of life as a slave. In these conditions, the “nocturnal power” of death is wielded as an every-present possibility, creating a permanent terror that sometimes only finds its resolution in suicide. Here, death or at least the manner of death is chosen by the victim in a final act of resistance rather than decided by the executioner.²

Mbembe's ambitious book thus seeks to tell the story of the world as it was over the last five centuries, but also as it is now, with what he suggests is the generalization of the condition of the Nègre under neoliberal forms of capitalism. At the end of the book, Mbembe ventures to imagine the world-to-come (p. 253), a more just future where there is no Nègre because there is no race. This is a problematic idea as the basis for critiques of contemporary racisms and colonialisms, but perhaps a useful idea for other reasons, to which I return later in this review. In either event, however, this gesture is a reminder that despite the book’s title, this is not only a critique. Rather, it is also the story of successive self-liberations by the Nègre. Thus, the figure of the Nègre appears not only as one catastrophic outcome of racialized thinking and the attendant relations of violent racial inequality, but as a principle for as yet-unrealized, perhaps improbable but not impossible, human freedoms.

¹ All translations from French into English are mine.

² In his influential article, Mbembe (2006) writes, from Heidegger, that, “I am free to live my own life, only because I am free to die my own death” (p. 59). This is why suicide is an act of resistance, since it means wresting the sovereign's power over death from him. However, it might be observed that such resistance only takes place within a sharply reduced field of action. Hence, the real question is not the interpretation of suicide, including suicide-bombings, as resistance or even as a form of freedom, but a social context that means that the only viable choices are death (‘chosen' via suicide) or death (given by the sovereign). This is the essence of necropolitics.
The Nègre as ontological defect; and principle of liberation

Mbembe begins by observing that Europe is no longer the world’s centre of gravity (p. 9), a seismic shift that opens up new possibilities as well as potential new dangers. But the delirium at the heart of European modernity persists, he argues, not least in its effects. One outcome of that delirium is the figure – and material reality – of the Nègre. For Mbembe, the Nègre is the emblematic figure of race (p. 10), although following Deleuze, he does mention in passing that in the fevered imaginary of modern European thought “there is always a Nègre, a Jew, a Chinese, a Great Mongol, an Aryan” (p. 11). At one level, then, the Nègre is “codified madness”, so that the idea and reality of the Nègre liberates an irrational exuberance that tests the whole system of European reason. Yet race is not an unchanging signifier from the fifteenth century to the present. Instead, different, sometimes apparently contradictory meanings have been attributed to the Nègre as emblematic of race. For instance, at another, fundamental level, race designates imperfect non-European humanity, an ontological defect; that is, exclusion from humanity. The third, related signification of the Nègre as the incarnation of race is the social reality. Enslaved, the Nègre is the extractive body, a body “entirely exposed to the will of a master and from which one seeks to obtain maximum returns” (p. 36). Thus, Mbembe traces the emergence of the Nègre to early capitalism, where the Nègre is reduced to being “man-object, man-merchandise, and man-currency” (p. 11). This does not mean, however, that the Nègre is void of agency, as we will see shortly. A fourth signification is the purely fantastical Nègre, the Nègre as a thick coating “of nonsense, of lies and of fantasies” (p. 67) that envelopes and suffocates the human being designated as a “Nègre”. Such fantastical stereotypes operate as a shadow to the really-existing human and poison his existence. As Mbembe observes, in Peau noire, masques blancs (1952) Fanon explored the wounds such calcified lies provoke, while seeking to determine the conditions – the “emancipatory violence” exercised by the colonized Nègre (Mbembe p. 239) – that will enable the Nègre to shatter this calcified shell and emerge as a whole person. Finally, and only apparently in contradiction, a fifth signification is the Nègre as a principle of liberation.

Even the Nègre reduced to slavery, denied his ontologically human status and treated as a mere thing, never entirely loses his capacity for actorhood. This is not the limited agency of the necropolitical world, where the options are reduced to suicide as a “chosen” death versus death “given” by the sovereign. Rather, as Mbembe puts it, historically, this agency is performed collectively in the successful struggles for “the independence of Haiti in 1804, the combat for the abolition of slavery, the African decolonizations, and the struggles for civil rights in the United States” (p. 12), culminating in the official end of legal apartheid in South African in 1994. Such events, and innumerable others, testify to the ways in which the Nègre has never been merely an object-victim. This is the sense in which the Nègre signifies freedoms, freedoms whose modalities of (sometimes necessarily violent) expression Fanon sought to describe in the colonial context (p. 245). Perhaps it is my background in historical materialist theory, but it seems to me important that what Mbembe points to here is not a theoretical process. He is not conceptually inverting the Nègre “man-object” to reclaim the Nègre as “human-actor”. Of course, such a conceptual inversion matters. Indeed, implacably demonstrating that the Nègre is a central force
of human history in this book is one of Mbembe’s contributions as a political philosopher to these ongoing liberation struggles against what he refers to as the “Beast” of institutionalized racisms (p. 245). That is, Mbembe writes universal human history and imagines a possible just future beginning from the point of the view of the Nègre. In so doing, he affirms that those human beings reduced to being “Nègres” are not only fully human but potentially embody the most fully-realized, unalienated human being. But in the final analysis, it is the actual, material liberation struggles and not theory that creates the new signification, one equating the Nègre with freedom. For Mbembe, the near-universal acclamation of Nelson Mandela’s heroic life is suggestive of the ways that all of humanity recognizes their own struggles within the liberation struggles of those designated as “merely” Nègre (p. 26).

Colonization and freedom struggles

In a succession of dense chapters, Mbembe explores the intertwined discursive or ideological and material dimensions of these (and other) significations of the Nègre. The significations I have enumerated above are suggestive of the diversity of the most important figures of the Nègre that Mbembe’s genealogy establishes. But I make no claim to have exhaustively explored the many facets of the “Nègre” that Mbembe exposes. Here, I will just consider two arguments that he develops around various figures of the Nègre.

First, in considering the “economic, political, military, ideological or humanitarian” justifications for colonization, Mbembe observes that the following kinds of legitimating claims are made. From the point of view of the colonizer, the multiple aims of colonization are to:

- conquer new lands in order to install the excess of our population;
- find new outlets for the products of our manufactures and our mines and our primary resources for our industries;
- plant the standard of “civilization” among the inferior races and savages and pierce the shadows that envelope them;
- assure, by our domination, the peace, the security, and the wealth for so many unhappy people who never before knew these benefits;
- establish on still-heretical soil a working, moral and Christian population and spread the Gospel to the pagans or again destroy through commerce the isolation that paganism engender.

(p. 101)

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3 Mbembe is an unapologetic humanist, against those who would reject humanisms as inescapably tainted by their historical origins in European colonial relations and associated racist ideologies. In popular culture, for instance, we think of the jazz musician Sun Ra, who insisted he was not a man but an angel, so distancing himself from the horrors and failures of humanity (Nelson, 2014). Against such anti-humanist approaches, Mbembe argues that from Fanon, we inherit the important idea that “there is, in every human person, something unconquerable, fundamentally untameable, that domination –regardless of the forms it takes –cannot eliminate, nor contain, nor repress, at least not totally” (p. 245). Elsewhere, he makes similar appeals to the human, arguing that restitution, reparation and justice are the conditions for a collective rise in “humanity” (p. 257). He does, however, insist that humanity must not be opposed to nature, so that the liberatory humanist impulse must embrace all living things – otherwise, humanity opposes itself (pp. 258-259). As Mbembe puts it, “Sharing the world with other living things, that is the ultimate debt. That was the key to sustainability for humans as much as for non-humans” (p. 259). In this way, Mbembe explicitly situates his humanism within a broader respect for all life. (Thank you to Eric Ritskes for suggesting I clarify Mbembe’s humanist stance).
In all of these arguments, Mbembe maintains, race is mobilized and never simply as a secondary issue. Hence, if the arguments appear to be “economic, political, military, ideological or humanitarian” (p.101), they are all, in fact, saturated with racial logics. These racialized colonial imaginaries are shared across imperial and national boundaries, although taking somewhat different forms within different polities. They also take historically familiar but at the same time changing shapes.

By way of illustration, Mbembe considers the particular socially productive roles played by race specifically in the French context. In France, the segregation of the “races” – a common feature of human social life worldwide, up to and including contemporary apartheid – was formalized in the legal exclusion of slaves from the metropole as early as a 1570 decree (p. 103), anticipating later Darwinian struggles for segregation in order to preserve white racial superiority. A few centuries later, however, this physical separation in the metropole was established but nonetheless co-existed with exceptional inclusions of the Nègre, as part a specifically French “insouciant, libertine and frivolous racism” (p. 105). Hence, by the 18th century, a few “Nègre” were allowed to participate in the salons of French high society, bringing “a touch of exoticism and colour,” exceptions that were amply documented by the best-known French artists of the day. In one of his relatively few excursions into an explicitly gendered analysis, Mbembe here argues that the role of the “Nègresse” was a particular important fantasized element at these parties. In contemporary artists’ rendering, so-called “Black beauties” were usually depicted in the same way: celebrated for their voluptuousness, their naked breasts, their generous buttocks and their feathered belts (p. 107). Yet, they were not without their contradictory significations. On the one hand, Black women were supposed to represent “the physical world, rhythm and colours”; on the other, the hermaphrodite. When cast as “indolent, available and submissive” (p. 107), these women became the fantasies of the white French male, hence the fantasy of the white male “explorer” setting forth to mingle sexually with wives of the “savages” in the natural paradises with which these women were assimilated (p. 108). Thus, in a typically sweeping analytical narrative that ranges from the political economy to the psychoanalytical, Mbembe traces the political economy of colonization onto the racialized imaginaries of the colonizers, reminding us of the ways that the conquest of land was reflected in the colonizers’ sexual fantasies. Moreover, Mbembe is clear that such racialized imaginaries are not “merely” ideologies but inform and saturate material practices of everyday life.

If racist colonial ideas have persisted and shaped social life over centuries, however, they have at the same time taken on new, changing forms. For instance, Mbembe describes the ways that the West of the 1920s, reproducing earlier, less “scientific” racial social constructions, considered itself engaged in a life-and-death Darwinian struggle against the pollution of superior races by lesser ones. This life and death struggle entailed the biologicalization of the state, the use of the state apparatus in the defence, protection and preservation of racialized national “peoples” with supposedly characteristic, stable and unchanging biological heritages (p. 102). Various apartheids, including formal apartheid in South Africa, are the most obvious
manifestation of this state-organized obsession with racial purity. But this biological warfare continues, even in places where there is no longer formal apartheid and indeed, where such explicit apartheid, and attendant Darwinian ideologies, are formally, vigorously repudiated. For instance, as Mbembe observes later in the book, Europe has been transformed into a “fortress”, walled with aggressive anti-foreigner legislation and, it might be added, armed with a murderous indifference, when it is not outright hostility, for instance, towards the thousands of migrants and refugees seeking refuge through places like Lampedusa and Calais. This legislated xenophobia has its roots in the earlier, Darwinian ideology of selection among different species of humans. In contemporary times, however, these origins are masked and denied (p. 253) even as they continue to organize deadly transnational and state practices of racialized exclusions.

For those who might argue that the descriptions just given are not unprecedented, I would remark that Mbembe lays out these narratives in just a few pages of dense paragraphs, folding them into a much vaster analytical and descriptive vista that I can only hint at here. Thus, the arguments above are a very small part of a chapter that explores the multifaced ethos of colonial racisms (p. 99). Such colonial racisms are manifest in a thousand other ways, from the presentation of the African as a congenitally idiotic child in French school books through to the willed ignorance of colonial powers who understood, as Tocqueville remarks, that “on a battle field the victory goes...to the strongest, not the most knowledgeable” (p. 108). Africa, up to and including today, Mbembe insists, is thus a nearly inexhaustible source of colonial and now neo-colonial fantasies of possession, fantasies written self-interestedly to fill the void of voluntary ignorance. Thus, in 1879, Victor Hugo insisted that “Africa has no history,” echoing the broad understanding of the era that Africans were not capable human actors but childlike, stupid and passive, waiting to be shaped by the enlightened and enlightening colonial hand (p. 110). Of course, reading this, any contemporary Senegalese or French resident will irresistibly recall then-President Sarkozy’s infamous 2007 speech in Dakar, Senegal, when he announced in near-identical terms that, “The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered history...” (Ba, 2007). The difference of the intervening years is that Sarkozy’s speech was at least controversial. In any event, what makes Mbembe’s critique so worthwhile is precisely this masterly genealogy. He offers a complex history of the changing social and the ideological dimensions of the figure and reality of the Nègre. At the same time, he relentlessly exposes and illuminates the ideological justifications for the neo-colonial political, economic and ideological landscapes of today’s still-violently racialized world.

It would be a disservice to Mbembe, however, to focus only on how he unearths and exposes the intertwined political economic realities of colonialism and its attendant fantasies. This might erroneously suggest that he relentlessly re-centres racist colonizers, their administrations and discourses, even as he critiques the idea of the “Nègre” in all its permutations (and I do mean all, since he argues that the “Nègre” as liberatory principle is strategically necessary in the short-term but ultimately problematic). Rather, Mbembe highlights

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4 It is also worth pointing out that Mbembe’s book is a wonderful bibliography, in both English and French. It is only regrettable that there is no index.
the persistent struggles, some only provisionally successful, by human beings designated as “Nègres”. At times, he stresses collective struggles like the 1804 liberation of Haiti, where former slaves imagined a whole new world when they drew up their first Constitution as formally free peoples, forbidding the aristocracy, authorizing the confiscation of colonial property and abolishing the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate births (p. 32), among other acts. That the Haitian liberation later devolved into a place “more miserable than a colony” (p. 226) does not take away from the historical importance of this moment of human emancipation (p. 32), presumably not least in terms of inspiring other liberation struggles in the immediate and later aftermath. Later in the book, arguably reflecting his Foucauldian emphasis on the discursive – though certainly such discourses are not unlinked to material everyday struggles – Mbembe turns his attention to singular great thinkers and actors. Here, Marcus Garvey, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Nelson Mandela are the typically masculine centre of his analysis of the “Nègre”, this time as intellectual and social combatant.

Mbembe treats these four intellectual-activists as part of a broader narrative of necessary, strategic and evolutive struggles by the Nègre, within particular historical moments. Thus, he begins with Garvey’s redefinition of the Nègre’s desire for self-determination as a specifically African project of redemption. He then moves to Césaire’s affirmation of the Black man in an irredeemably plural human history, against falsely universalizing white colonial narratives. From there, he considers Fanon’s liberatory violence, arguing that for Fanon, the colonized produces his own life by murdering the colonizer, not least in the context of the Algerian “total war” (p. 236). Finally, he concludes with Mandela, who through his heroic life choices lived out “an idea which after all is quite simple, that is, how to live free from race and the domination of the same” (p. 248). This narrative of emancipation then informs his own argument, which is the call to imagine a world project that is truly universal, “a world rid of the burden of race” and consequently without the resentment and desire for revenge that all racism inspires (p. 263). Following Fanon, the aim is for every Nègre to become simply, “a man (sic) among other men (sic)” (p. 255). To Mbembe, liberation thus means a world without race, without classification and without hierarchies, where every human being is at once unique, capable of self-invention, and part of universal humanity.

Mbembe’s analysis of Aimé Césaire’s contribution, in particular, sheds light on Mbembe’s final position, which could be interpreted as peculiarly idealistic discourse: as if imagining a world without race will accomplish a world without racism. Yet, such a naïve approach does not sit with the rest of Mbembe’s analysis. How, then, does Mbembe describe Césaire and how does this allow us to re-interpret Mbembe’s final call for a world beyond race? In describing Césaire’s accomplishments, Mbembe does not disguise his admiration, characterizing Césaire’s thought as at once “an interruption, an uprising” and a bringer of hope (p. 226). Besides his relentless denunciation of racism and colonialism as violent acts of rape and of erasure (p. 226), Césaire’s main intellectual contribution, as already briefly noted above, was – in Mbembe’s view – his insistence on the plurality of the world. Put simply, Césaire argued that, “Europe is not the world, but only part of it” (p. 227). This is why Césaire insisted on the
centrality of the “Black man” and not simply “man” (again in typically gendered language) (p. 227). Against the pretended universal, but actual singular European white man’s vision, Césaire postulates the Black man as opening “a pathway to another imagining of the universal community” (p. 228). His affirmation of his “nègritude” is thus an essential charge but one that has nothing to do with race-idolatry. Rather, like Fanon, Césaire recognizes that being “Nègre” is simply one of the historical forms of human-ness (p. 230). In affirming his nègritude, he reverses a stigma, but at the same time, he claims for the Nègre a unique, different place from which to re-imagine the whole world.

Becoming ourselves in a world without race

Thus, when Mbembe calls for a world without race, he is not calling for us to abandon a critical analysis of race; this would be in flagrant contradiction with the entire premise of the book. Instead, Mbembe emphasizes that the condition of the Nègre has become generalized for many subaltern populations within contemporary neoliberal capitalism: human beings reduced to mere means, even instrumentalizing themselves for the use of others. Accommodating external desires, not least those of profit-seeking capitalists, such subaltern persons seek to be endlessly plastic, even acceding to demands “to become another” (p. 14) in the interests of short-term material gains from which they themselves do not benefit. This takes place within a rebalkanized world, or what Mbembe refers to as an “imperialism of disorganization,” with the supposedly “humanitarian” camp emblematic of what he suggests is an unprecedented complicity between economic and racialized exclusions, violently policed (pp. 15-16). Hence, when Mbembe calls for a world without race, he is being unashamedly visionary; but he is not calling for an end to still-necessary racial critiques. Rather, like queer theorists who call for a world where human beings are no longer defined as “kinds” of individuals based on their sexuality, he is reminding us that it is still possible to imagine – and to struggle for – a world in which we transcend racialized straightjackets, stereotypes, exclusions and exploitations to become more fully ourselves. Returning to his arguments early in the book, moreover, this fully becoming will not be imagined into existence. It will not be an intellectual act. Rather, it will be achieved in both heroic and everyday, embodied life and struggles that destroy the master-Nègre relationship, a relationship rooted in the transformation of the human being into property, in the act of being appropriated, of “belonging” to someone other than one’s self (p. 221). Since the Nègre only exists in this relationship of violent racialized exploitation, destroying that relationship of domination will mean the end of the existence of the Nègre – and the dawning of a new era when

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5 By “us”, I mean, with Mbembe, any critical thinker that seeks to understand contemporary capitalism, with its racialized violence and generalized precarity without safety nets (p. 257), but also any critical thinker concerned for possibilities for human liberation, that is, striving for a world in which each human being will be treated as an “end” and not merely a “means”. In a world which is at once culturally plural and a “single world” that all of humanity shares (see pp. 257-263), everyone is implicated in the struggle. Human freedom is not only a concern for those designated as Nègre, but those designated as Nègre have historically played – and will continue to play – a critical role in human liberation precisely because of their experiences of domination.
there are only human beings relating to one another and to other living beings, in the one world that we all share (on this last, see the Epilogue, “There is only one world”, pp. 257-263).

Is the (masculine) figure of the Nègre the ultimate figure of liberation? What room is there in Mbembe’s account for Black feminist struggles or, for instance, for Indigenous liberation and resurgence or for queer futures and other movements for freedom and justice? It is true, that in practice, Mbembe generally “overlooks” the gender specificities of the histories he tells, so rendering invisible his own (largely) masculinized standpoint and, in the same gesture, marginalizing the agency and intellectual contributions of women designated as “Nègres”. Similar critiques might be offered with respect to other vital concerns and struggles, for instance, around what we now call, at least in the West, minoritized sexualities. However, in theory, Mbembe’s commitment to pluralism, following Césaire, within the “one world” that all living things share (pp. 260-261), means that there is a clear opening in his analysis for multiple intellectual and material traditions reflecting diverse subaltern “standpoints”. These alternative traditions may re-appropriate his analyses or set their own insights alongside his masterful, if (like all histories) partial —which is not to excuse his masculinist bias— narratives about human domination and the human potential for liberation. The historical constructions of the Nègre as stupid and childlike, for instance, contrasts with the contradictory but simultaneous colonial framings of the Oriental as at once quintessentially spiritual and basely materialistic (see, for instance, Nandy 2007, p. 129). But there are obviously critical similarities across such different fantasized figures as the Nègre and the Oriental. Not least, as Edward Said (2000) observes, “the Oriental, like the African, is a member of a subject race and not exclusively an inhabitant of a geographical area” (p. 113), the bearer of particular, degraded ontological status rooted in race more than place. In this sense, Mbembe offers a history of all of humanity from the particular perspective of the Nègre, but in so doing he provides suggestive insights that may be taken up by other colonized, dominated and exploited peoples and allied intellectuals.

Take another example: as we have seen earlier, Mbembe observes that “benevolent” colonial rulers imagined that sub-human, childlike Nègres required intervention and guidance to survive and thrive, all while forbidding the Nègre access to a promised statute as fully human (p. 159). This is an inverted account of the real consequences of murderous colonial domination, which does not offer guidance for the well-being of the subjected but violently dominates in the interests of the colonizers. But this colonial narrative is far from unique to the Nègre, being a familiar component of many colonialisms and neo-colonialisms. Hence, diverse Indigenous peoples, imagined as perpetually deficient, are supposed to be grateful for contemporary colonial state interventions that will “integrate” them into a superior colonial capitalist political economy and attendant cultures, even as they are forcibly removed from their own lands and seas in order to make way for capitalist resource extraction and settler occupation. Transnationally, racialized rationales of (white) Western superiority are evident in contemporary “development” discourses in so-called Third world contexts. These discourses seek to justify the disciplining of racialized populations so that they participate fully as productive workers within a world capitalist system, in order to improve economic growth and, it is therefore assumed, the general welfare. Of
course, today’s benevolent governance is administered by technical experts operating in transnational institutions like the World Bank, who would vigorously deny the colonial or neo-colonial impulse behind their policies and processes of governance. But in all these varied cases, governance “over” or even supposedly “with” others (but always “for” others), depends upon racialized assumptions about the inability of supposedly biologically inferior peoples to self-determine their collective futures (or at least, the presumed congenital inability of the colonized to “self-determine” what the colonizers deem a desirable future, that is, one congruent with the colonizers’ material interests and associated values).

In all of this, Mbembe is not “only” a postcolonial scholar. For instance, those committed to combating capitalism, as an inhuman political economic system characterized by grotesque forms of exploitation rooted in an understanding of the human being as merely an end to profit-making, will find Mbembe’s approach helpful. Not least, he carefully articulates the relationship between capital’s “restless search for profits” worldwide and the violent displacement, exclusion and segregation of racialized peoples around the globe. He is pitiless in signaling the routine ways that capitalism in crisis depends upon the “subsidy” of super-exploited racialized labour (p. 117). He warns that the Nègre is increasingly a general, not specific, human condition, as neoliberal capital relations stretch worldwide premised on the idea of the human life as merely instrumental to profit-making. In short, by analyzing “with” and “from” Mbembe, many different counterhegemonic intellectuals and activists may draw out the variations and changing historical forms in persistent racialized logics that legitimate and organize material relations of capitalist colonial and neo-colonial inequalities, and attendant human violence and misery. In an interview last year, Mbembe suggests that his ambitious aim is to offer, "from Africa, where I live and work, a political, cultural and aesthetic critique of the time which is ours, the time of the world" (http://eipcp.net/n/mbembe). That may be read as an immodest or poetical statement, or both, but he largely lives up to this ambition.

There is much more to Mbembe’s book. For instance, he considers the complex ways that Christianism, through a “combination of terror and of seduction” (p. 151), was translated by African Pentecostalists into symbolic resource that allowed the Nègre to re-imagine herself as other than a mere political or economic instrument. Through embodied displays of religious devotion, a reappropriated Christianism thus allows the Nègre to act - not least aesthetically and artistically - upon the self and the world (p. 151). Elsewhere, Mbembe lays bare the multiple, sinister significations of colonial monuments. For colonialists, such “commemorative” monuments participate in the heroic narrative (p. 186) of domination; for the colonized, these sedimented blocks literally suggest ongoing occupation and arbitrary power, even in a formally postcolonial context. In typically precise, lyrical prose, Mbembe writes that colonial monuments thus function as “the sculptural extension of a form of racial terror” (p. 188). In another brief but characteristically dense and nuanced passage, Mbembe considers the different uses and abuses of memory and tradition, from the point of view of the liberation of the Nègre. For instance, with Alex Crummel he argues against an excessively exclusive focus on the pre-colonial past as a nostalgic manifestation of an “appetite for death” (p. 140). At the same time, he observes, with
Eboussi Boulaga, that memory and tradition are vital insofar as they enable the Nègre to free the self from reproducing or continuing the alienation characteristic of slavery and colonization (p. 141) by recalling and reinventing a time prior to such alienation. Despite its vast scope, Mbembe’s critique is made cohesive through its underlying, steady preoccupation with the possibilities for human beings to become truly free and equal, whilst lucidly describing and analyzing the distance of that vision from the historical and contemporary world of racialized exploitation and violence.

In short, Mbembe’s book is a rich resource to which I have already returned again and again for nuanced insights into centuries long histories of racisms and colonialisms, capitalism and exploitation. In a masterly narrative, he draws on fiction, political economy, psychoanalysis and (to an admittedly significantly lesser extent, arguably betraying a penchant for emphasizing high culture) folk wisdoms, to consider themes and topics as vital and varied as, for instance, memory and identity, religion and aesthetics, through the prisms of the symbolic and material life of the Nègre. But this book is instructive, too – and by that I do not mean pedantic but rather illuminating in the best sense – about the complexities, contradictions and possibilities in never-ending struggles for human freedoms. A world of dignity and justice may be improbable but – as Nelson Mandela, among others, reminds us – movements towards such a world are nonetheless not impossible. Need I say it explicitly? This is a brilliant book and I only hope I have begun to do it justice here.

References


