

# BOOK REVIEW:

ACHILLE MBEMBE, *OUT OF THE DARK NIGHT: ESSAYS ON DECOLONIZATION*, NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021, 254 PP. FIRST PUBLISHED IN FRENCH AS *SORTIR DE LA GRANDE NUIT* (PARIS: ÉDITIONS LA DÉCOUVERTE, 2010).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria Allen Stainsby is presently a doctoral candidate in Law at SOAS University of London. Her research focuses on international law and reparations for colonial injustice. Using a unique legal narrative from the end of the empire in South East Asia, her work examines the ways in which law shapes history, identity, and the nature of postcolonialism.

## INTRODUCTION

Achille Mbembe's poetic and passionate collection of essays, *Out of the Dark Night*, is an exploration of the contemporary world in post coloniality, and a call for a new discourse. It will appeal to readers interested in Postcolonial Studies, African Studies, and International Relations among other disciplines. His is a contemporary voice carrying on the work of Franz Fanon. Mbembe calls for us to put Africa firmly in the centre of an evolving imaginary, showing us that the process of decolonisation was not a singular event but is a "concatenation of complex and variegated processes that unfolded over a long lapse of time" and into the present.<sup>1</sup> Africa stands as an example of perseverance, resilience, and adaptation to the rest of the world in the face of innumerable crises which ultimately offer the opportunity for change. The means to harness these opportunities necessitates new models and discourses, uncoupling from old ways of thinking, and a real shift to recognising the equality and interconnectedness of all living things. No one is better placed than Mbembe in his understanding of the complexities of decolonisation to extend this invitation to create a new imaginary. Confronted with emerging contingencies, we must embrace a certain plasticity—a true reconfiguration of how we all see ourselves in the world: with each other, with our communities, and with our planet. This book is Mbembe's exhortation to connect deeply with the very humanity that unites us all on this fragile earth.

### "POST COLONIALISM? OR A COLONIAL PRESENT?"

Although colonialism was a process that sought to separate humans along racial and economic lines, it was also a mutually defining process or 'entanglement'. This shared history is not at all confined to the past but is defining of 'a colonial present'. Mbembe invites the reader to examine the way of life we have embraced in modernity, evident in both our ceaseless consumption and the technology which underpins it, as "...a planetary pursuit of pure power and pure profit...driven by capital's attempts to transform life itself into a commodity...".<sup>2</sup> He bemoans, with Marxist zeal, the awful conflation of 'progress' and democracy with consumption, commodification, and privatisation where neoliberalism is a thin veneer to neo-colonialism. Europe justified the colonial project as a civilising mission. Recently, it has been

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<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 21.

supplanted by the Chinese ‘colonist’ who makes no pretence of benign ideology.<sup>3</sup> Mbembe fears for the future of the planet based on continued exploitation and extraction. Decolonisation has not happened because the phenomenon of colonialism remains opaque and persistent; it gives with one hand while taking with the other. Mbembe criticises an industry of ‘development’ whereby Africa is objectified, seen as a problem or in perpetual crisis, but ironically offers huge opportunities as a site for industrial humanitarianism and so-called ‘good’ capitalist intervention.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter two reveals Mbembe’s debt to Frantz Fanon, who captures the true psychological impact and possibilities of the moment of decolonisation from whence the book takes its title.<sup>5</sup> For the reader, this chapter encapsulates a very useful historiography of postcolonial studies, whilst highlighting Mbembe’s impatience with stagnant critical theory, “a practice of pure negativity”.<sup>6</sup> He is scathing of the French *académie* and, indeed, French society at large in chapters three and four. The postcolonial is more than a moment after ‘independence’, it is a reconfiguration of identity for the coloniser and colonised. This ‘disenclosure’ is an opportunity after crisis, “it is synonymous with opening up and surging up, the advent of something new...”.<sup>7</sup> Yet, this process is stymied by the denial of difference. Whilst keeping the ‘other’ in abeyance through fear and discomfort, non-whites are blamed for their own “cultural causes of the failure to integrate into the nation.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, denial leads to *aphasia*, whereby debates about citizenship and the national politics of memory are silenced (to use Laura Ann Stoler’s term).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the French *académie* is complicit in its denial, bolstered by its own self-belief and clear conscience, that colonialism was about progress and enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> In Europe, “[race] remains both the result and the reaffirmation of the general idea of the irreducibility of social differences”.<sup>11</sup> Mbembe speaks of a need to recognise differences as ‘plural singularities’ and move towards a sense of ‘incommensurability’. However, how this might be accomplished in complex modern societies is left tantalisingly unclear.

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<sup>3</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 52-60.

<sup>6</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 132.

<sup>10</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 148.

<sup>11</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 60.

## AFRICA

Africa has been “constructed as a pathological case, a figure of lack”.<sup>12</sup> It has stood at the core of many descriptive discipline formations, such as anthropology, as a laboratory for how we acquire critical knowledge. This *orientalising* of the subject has always been accomplished through the filter crafted by epistemic European elites. In chapter five Mbembe examines the cultural and psychological damage that has been done to Africa through colonialism and touches upon the possibility of reparations. He sees no possibility of restitution by means such as the return of objects, which is rather an act of ‘gratuitousness and benevolence’ and not justice. Moreover, the connection of these objects with Africans’ spiritual and symbolic heritage has been severed. Such cultural heritage has also been marginalised and made ‘primitive’ because of the European values of religion and aesthetics imposed on it. Furthermore, restitution and reparations are inevitably bound up in the dominant political and legal framework which is detached from the capacity to acknowledge the truth, something far more significant. Any restitution must have a “corresponding recognition of the seriousness of the harm suffered and the wrong inflicted,” to have any true significance.<sup>13</sup> Only once there has been an acknowledgment of the wrongs committed can there follow some sort of reparations to ‘repair’ the relationship between victim and perpetrator. Mbembe believes that this must be done at an individual level, the basis of the human being.

Africa is widely viewed as a collection of disparate communities with their own identities. Often elites within these communities seek to re-entrench tradition and custom. This reproduces colonial power structures. For example, colonial implementation of customary laws fostered communalism, which often divided subjects and enhanced imperial control. However, Mbembe observes that human rights *are* individual rights, and their enjoyment is critical to the creation of modern identity.<sup>14</sup> Property ownership and the ability for individual self-realisation are often hampered by locality and by the management of key resources by elites who operate in a global arena.<sup>15</sup> Such elites are the beneficiaries of a lucrative, violent economy of war and commerce, transnational in character, which has plagued Africa for the last quarter of a century. The dynamics of these power relations are complex and perhaps intractable. The reader wonders how such self-interest can truly ever be diminished.

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<sup>12</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 170.

<sup>14</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 178.

<sup>15</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 180.

Africa has always been a place of the global in terms of the mixing and movement of people, but now more than ever, patterns of external migration mean that Africa is just as much in the world as the world is in Africa. This inside and outside mentality has created divergent yet mutually defining streams of identity which are often only demonstrated through the polar opposites of materiality, “Power and fortune, enjoyment and misery, and death...”.<sup>16</sup> Such collusion and convergence has changed the social fabric of Africa and altered the traditional relationship between men and women, also causing tensions between the generations. Mbembe explains how this is played out along lines of sexuality, both real, representationally, and in the imaginary. Much of chapter six, *Afropolitanism*, is devoted to the culturally sexualised identity of Africa and Africans in this space from both a contemporary and historical viewpoint. Indeed, this is a somewhat gratuitous Freudian excursion into the psychoanalytic politics of sexuality and repression.

Ultimately, Mbembe gives us the imperative to create a new discourse of post coloniality inspired by a positive vision of Africa, harvested from the detritus of the colonial past. His vision for humanity is unifying in its hope for a new dawn after the ‘dark night’ of inhumanity that was colonialism. It is not an easy task, but a hopeful one. It asks us to look both inside and outside, strip away our ideas about intellectual and cultural superiority, and see we are all connected as one great humanity, to each other and our precious planet. We are facing ecological crises, and yet, we also have the opportunity to create a new imaginary which allows us to finally decolonise and liberate both ourselves and our planet.

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<sup>16</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 188-190.