A Severed Poetics: A Review of Mbembe’s Critique of Black Reason

Alfred Frankowski

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Achille Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason* is as much a book that fills a vacuum in the gap between post-colonial literature and critical race studies as it is a text that screams out of a world of subaltern silenced. It is built on the fragmented discourses that remain as an archive of black intellectual culture in and against the shards of modernity. This *Critique* is cast in relation to the critical philosophy that shaped modernity: a philosophy intended to explore not only concepts and assertions, but the limits of our concepts and assertions themselves. But by focusing on *black reason*, the argument of the text begins with a sense of dislocation, since *blackness* and *reason* already carry a sense of being limits to one another in Western discourse. Mbembe is distinctly reading the archive of global black texts against the Western fantasy-machine of race itself, against a deep cut that politically severs the relation before the existence of the being, and that kills in the most prolonged fashion before birth and well after death. Mbembe’s *Critique*, therefore, challenges the reader to read through the archive of the black diaspora as a site of opposition and to go further to read against the world that has formed itself against the black text(s) itself.

I want to follow out this rift and to engage the questions that the black archive Mbembe utilizes pose as limits, and to pursue what limits appear relative to Mbembe’s own text. Why does his text favor a discourse of blackness without thematizing the anti-black violence, as such? Why interrogate these as modes of aesthetics located within the texts of the black archive, while silencing them as persistent modes of anti-black violence themselves? What is thought and yet unthinkable in this text is that the modernity Mbembe revolts against is also a remaking of the sense that defines the limit of *reason* within the texts concerning *blackness*, since black-reason is unintelligible to Western modernity. The archive is treated as a complete source, and yet it is only the remains—the remains of what has survived or the remains of what has been permitted to exist as black texts. Instead of taking this question up directly, Mbembe managing the shifting meanings and ambiguities of this limit. Meaning this is a text that is often engaged in a poetics that is also left un-interrogated from the start, and maybe necessarily so. I want to follow out Mbembe’s questioning of the existential rift between world and language that is made possible through the colonial relation to Africa and the African diaspora, but to insist on also interrogating the way the text keeps silent on the character of western colonialism as an anti-black colonialism that retains the meaning of modernity itself.

Mbembe’s *Critique* can be read as a synthetic work, drawing together many of the formative moves of race theory, economics, political history, literary criticism, and post-colonialism. He writes, “Capitalism emerged as a double impulse toward, on the one hand, the unlimited violation of all forms of prohibition, and, on the other, the abolition between any distinction between ends and means.” Mbembe insists on the deep significance of the history of colonialism in shaping not only the power relations, but the intrapersonal and existential relations of the contemporary world. As such, this is a work of the African diaspora, an Africana cosmopolitanism, and re-centering of the task of thinking along with the history of
blackness *as a way of thinking*, and in line with the work of mending and healing that shapes Fanon’s decolonial political and psychoanalytic texts. But this is also a work that unnerves a disciplined or permitted *logos* and is a courting of the way the black archive has been formed outside of the enlightenment discourse, and in this way the philosophical history/fantasy of reason appears as Western *mislology* at best. What is introduced are practices that reproduce the racialized, i.e. black body, *for* its biogenetic destruction. And while there is nothing new or novel in this post-colonial reading of modernity, there is something uniquely problematic in how this doubling of the world and language is predicated on the birth of a new sense, i.e. new aesthetic arrangements predicated simultaneously on outmoded or decaying sensibilities. Thus, Mbembe’s *Critique* also concerns texts that do not speak to one another, and therefore often stand at the limits of one another, and a context that requires a multiplication of silence throughout the production of unknown and unheard/un-hearable voices.

If I am correct in thinking that the *Critique* inhabits these two dimensions of aesthetic critique, then its focus on the black archive traces the limits of a diaspora-discourse marked by difference. As such, the text concerns a poetic relation to the modernity that shapes the texts of the dispossessed as much as it does to a sensibility of dispossession that shapes modernity. The dispossessed, however, appear without the problematizing of the sensibility that has allowed them to appear. This seems to realign Mbembe’s *Critique* as a strike against modernity on the one hand, as thriving on an archive suppressed, and yet to fit it back into that context of anti-black sensibility itself, on the other. If sensibility is at play, then a dispossessed sensibility appears only as the severed end of the discourse on blackness, the diaspora discourse, and the remains of the archive that is set within a world that rejects even these traces unquestioningly, establishing a phenomenology of the colony/colonized, and historicizing this formation within the discourse of racialization at the same time. For example, the text moves over and over the meaning of the production of black slave and reproduction of the dispossessed body *as black*. Yet, the slave, the discourse, and the body are thought as positive, as bearers of a phenomenology of blackness, and not as negations, as the remains of anti-black colonialism. As I see it, this means that his text does not put the experience of anti-blackness as an experience of reason in question, and therefore revolts only against the absence of the history of the black archive and does not go further. Why does it stall on this point? In what way is the experiential structure of anti-blackness concealed in this text? What does it mean for us to start reading the text again with this limit in mind? What does this question mean for how we think of the archive that forms the basis of this text and Mbembe’s intervention and critique?

Mbembe’s text is involved with the black archive and its aesthetics only to make sense of the history of colonization, but it does so in a way that leaves modernism’s sensibility, an anti-black sensibility, unproblematicized. Mbembe resolves the dissonance suggested by this distinction in a forceful turn against a racialized world. In this sense, his text bears the Fanonian task of mending the colonial world, or, of what he calls introducing the colonial world to a sense of becoming-black, or of thinking the future beyond the doubled world of capitalists and the wretched. But the former problem does not go away so easily: it re-emerges at the end of this text, with the turn to a future based on a political *mitsein*, or the All-World, as a world-thinking or Afro-cosmopolitanism. According to Mbembe, the burden of race is liquidated with racialization, but achieves this thought without thinking anti-black violence as
a foundation. The future is a return to the human, but it is a return that has severed its relation to the archive dispossessed, or worse: it is a future that embraces the history of the oppressed while being the severing of itself from the contextual violence of oppression. But if the readings from the archive of the diaspora tell us one thing, then it is this: a world without race is not a new world, it is the anti-black world, again and again!

Maybe we need to pause over Mbembe’s reading for another moment, and think and rethink the questions it brings to the foreground. After all, his text is critical, and therefore not dogmatic. But it also goes beyond the critical, and especially in his reading of Cesaire and Fanon. In his reading of both figures, he offers a poetic reading because what he makes use of in them is a not simply the retracing of the development of a global black political discourse embodied in negritude, but a tarrying with the meaning of their articulation of the primal scream that is reproduced in the production of the black body, on a global scale. It is in this sense that Mbembe can argue that, then as now, Cesaire and Fanon’s poetic relation to the West continues to be profound. His reading of their work is partially the work of memory and suturing, partially of rewriting and re-animating, partially contextual and decontextual—but always only partially. I wonder about the meaning of this partial reading, because it is the partial that reappears a limit, but also as a severed discourse that speaks to this world’s continual violence in new and profound ways. The text seems to be caught in the partial reading of the archive as a series of severances, a severed sense of legitimacy, a severed sense of history, a severed knowledge, a severed sense of language, a severed temporality or spatiality, and thus a severed sense of the aesthetics governing a sensibility of the world? While there is a sense of severance throughout, the severed sensibility is nowhere directly addressed, and thus remains only as the question of the world as a severed horizon, through which an anti-blackness continues to be reproduced—and along with it the questions that confront us philosophically, politically, and aesthetically.

Mbembe’s Critique directs us to take up the question of the aesthetic more directly as that which lays claim on our sensible relation to the world near and abroad, that lays claim on the diaspora. He writes, “if...difference is constituted through desire, then desire is not necessarily a desire for power. It can also be a desire to be protected, spared, preserved from danger. And the desire for difference is not necessarily the opposite of the project of the in-common.” It is through our aesthetic relationship that art and history continues the work of shaping or diverting us from this question, but what it keeps quiet is the question of the present world violence that anti-black colonialism has wrought through the creation of human commodity, the human slave, entangling anti-black colonialism as a global anti-black capitalism, the reduction of people to goods. But given the main charges of the Critique, we would have to argue that it is this political and historical arrangement that is also the creation of a sensible regime, doubled as a logos, appearing at the center of not only contemporary global politics, is not a sense at all, but a senselessness. What makes sense and what does not, what it makes speak and what it keeps silent, what it prefigures as world and what is outside of the world, but most of all what it thinks and un-thinks is its own senselessness, its anti-black sensibility governing the elimination and appearance of the thinking that takes up the archive itself, and what goes further is only the questions of the meaning of this severance as a mode of reproduction.
Maybe this is the genius of the work, in that it is a work that traces the limit of a particular logos as entangled with the question of the sensible, a question that undoes our modernisms, and in doing this, it brings us not to the political vision of a future that liquidates race-division as a possibility, but to the question of the poetics of the horizons that remain complicated and entangled in what is un-thought and un-asked. Maybe it is within the birth of the sense of anti-black colonialism that we are directed to understand the claims of the revolt that a critique of black reason begins to sketch, but that is itself a severed poetic relationality that continues the modernity informed by a sense of decontextualization of anti-black violence as such.

Alfred Frankowski is assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and African and Africana Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale Illinois. His research is in 19th and 20th Century Continental Philosophy, Aesthetics, Critical Race Theory, Post-Colonialism and Genocide Studies. He is author of The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization: Toward a Political Philosophy of Mourning (2015) and co-editor of Rethinking Genocide in Africa and the African Diaspora (forthcoming, 2019). Currently, his work concerns decolonial aesthetics, genocide in the African diaspora, anti-black colonialism, and the architectural history of lynching.

Endnotes

2 Ibid., 54-61.
3 Poetics is being used generally as a way of reading the shifting meanings that appear between word and world. See Edouard Glissant argues that the destruction wrought into the world is not primarily discursive but poetic. According to him, modernity does not start from the liberation of thinking from dogma, but from the relation that is calls all other relations into question: not from the pinnacle of the sciences, but from what made the sciences possible: the slave and the system of slavery. See Eduoard Glissant’s “An Exploded Discourse” in Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 159-220. Also see Edouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
4 Mbembe, Critique, 179.
6 Mbembe, Critique, 56.
8 Mbembe, Critique, 104.
9 Ibid., 89.
10 Ibid., 180.
11 Ibid., 183.
12 Ibid., 165.