

Critique of Black Reason: Rethinking the Relation of the Particular and the Universal

SCHALK HENDRIK GERBER

University of Stellenbosch, South Africa (schalkgerber@sun.ac.za; schalk.gerber101@gmail.com)

Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017, pp. 183 + xvii

This article reviews the 2017 English translation of Achille Mbembe's book Critique of Black Reason. It suggests that a key to understanding the work concerns the theme of the double, for instance, the critique of the double discourse on Blackness which explains the title of the book. Despite some passages of the text being overly poetic and difficult to understand, Mbembe's critical contribution in this work, to not only the philosophical debate on otherness but also critical race theory, is the attempt to rethink the relation of the particular and the universal, or in this instance Africa and the world, in order to think more critically about the responsibility of repairing the dignity of humanity in thinking our shared world beyond race and racism.

Key words: Mbembe; race; universal; particular; Black Reason; Blackness; critical race theory

Is it possible to go beyond the logic of race? Put differently, can we get past a way of thinking that sees a group of people as ontologically inferior or less than human to capitalistically exploit them as mere things? Any reader remotely interested in these questions will find *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe's latest work, not only inspiringly helpful but also challenging and sometimes even perplexing. One might consider at least three reasons for this complex encounter with Mbembe's thought. Two of the reasons concern the thematization of the topic of Blackness, and the third reason relates to Mbembe's writing style, which will be outlined in this article by linking the thematic structure of the book's argument with its chapter division.

Firstly, after the domination of the world by the West, most notably through colonialization, one would (maybe naïvely) expect that by definition the oppressive practices would cease to exist due to, for instance, decolonization. Mbembe, however, already in his introduction emphatically discredits this error of thinking by arguing that what instead is happening is a *Becoming Black of the world* (5), which means that instead of more people being recognized as *human beings like all others*, having their dignity restored, one rather encounters instances in which people of all kinds are categorized as less than human and thus economically exploited or excluded from societies as a result. Hence, from the start of the book the reader is challenged to consider the charge that racism not only has a past, or for that matter that it is restricted to people of Africa or African descent which is the primary focus of this book. It also has a future as illustrated in the various examples Mbembe mentions, from the use of "medical techniques of molecular engineering to refashion life itself along lines defined by racial determinism" (21) to present racial practices that extend to Islamophobia in America and Europe (7). To address the problem, we need to take a closer look at the logic at work in the construction of race, where critically questioning the construction of Blackness, in particular, becomes helpful.

The second reason why this book is challenging yet helpful for the reader who wants to critically engage the question of the construction of race concerns the discussion of the logic of race itself, or more specifically, what Mbembe signifies with the term *Black Reason* in the first chapter. For Mbembe the notion of *Black Reason* denotes the construction of the “Black race,” the “Black Man” (French: *Nègre*) or “Blackness” in particular, not as a single discourse but in terms of a double narrative (28). On the one hand, the discourse about race as Blackness is constructed and founded by the West, which Mbembe calls the “Western consciousness of Blackness” (28). This first narrative is intertwined with Western metaphysics itself (30), which structured the world around its own identity as a highest and grounding principle, thereby providing the rationale with which to exclude and subordinate alterity under the categories of the Western subject. And on the other hand, the second discourse regarding the Black Man, or what Mbembe calls the “Black consciousness of Blackness” (30), concerns the reactions of Black thought to the first in its attempts at self-liberation and “a declaration of identity” (28). Again, one would be tempted to think that the choice is a simple matter of uncritically preferring the latter over the former. Mbembe, however, following Fanon (159),¹ reminds us that one should be hesitant to make this choice: not only does one have to be critical about attempts at self-determination that end up re-enforcing the logic of race it claims to overcome, such a choice would also mean that going beyond race is a task to be taken up only by those who were or still are negatively impacted and imprisoned by racial constructions. In other words, the choice leads to a *secession* from the world into the particular (154). The scope of the task for Mbembe is much larger, i.e. universal. To take the first step toward imagining a world beyond race, one has to rigorously take up the critique of this double logic concerning race.

Hence a key to unlocking Mbembe’s book is the theme of the *double*, from a double discourse on Black reason to a double critique of the two narratives. It may be even better to suggest that the book has to be read as an attempt to rethink the relation of the particular and the universal, both in Africa and in the world at the same time. It is according to this key of the double that the chapter division between the first three chapters (first discourse on Blackness) and the last three chapters (second discourse on Blackness) of the book may be understood.

Apart from introducing the two discourses regarding *Black Reason* discussed above through a historical analysis of the creation of *the subject of race*, in Chapter 1 Mbembe also explores the link between the creation of race and capitalism (14), and how the notion of race made it possible to represent non-European human groups as trapped in a lesser form of being (17) that allowed for the justification of treating them as merely things to be exploited. More importantly, Mbembe shows how the discourse on Blackness and Africa originating in the West still does not correlate with reality today, and hence is constructed and greatly imaginary (12).

The analysis of the invention of the Black Man and how it is intertwined with the construction of Africa as a fictional place (38) is further outlined in Chapter 2, as Mbembe delves into *the well of fantasies* concerning race and Africa, especially regarding French colonialism (63). Additionally, the focus gradually turns to the psychological effects of the internalization of these conceptions by the subject who is enclosed by the logic of race. Chapter 3 rehearses the above-mentioned analysis of race, this time in terms of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid (78). It further analyzes the effects of the creation of race regarding *difference and self-determination* in colonial science. The result is that the subject of race becomes separated from itself, ontologically impoverished and degraded (78). This condition left the Black man the task of self-reconstruction at the end of slavery (92).

It is this task of self-reconstruction, which is taken by the “Black consciousness of Blackness” as the second discourse, that forms the focus of Chapters 4 to 6. Accordingly, the main theme of Chapter 4 is memory, or more specifically how the colony is remembered in African writings (104). This chapter further explores the psychological techniques of colonialism as described by Fanon (105-08) and how the desire for goods was produced as a means of

subjection (119). It is this desire that Mbembe calls *the little secret*, linking it to the problematic refusal of Blacks to admit unconscious investment in the colony as a desire producing machine (120).

The third reason, then, why engaging with the work is a complex matter concerns the critique that Mbembe often writes too poetically, making it hard at times to understand what he is writing about, especially for the analytically trained reader. Chapter 5 is probably the most indicative of this trend. In what Mbembe calls “the foundation of the entire book” (129), he analyzes literary works to reconstruct a phenomenology of what it took to survive under the conditions of slavery, or what he names a *requiem for a slave*. In short, the analysis shows the ghostly or nocturnal side of life (129-30) that the slave had to endure. Additionally, he explores qualities like the capacity for metamorphosis (132), which were needed to survive and keep something of what makes one human alive in the face of total dehumanizing practices. It is this appraisal that Mbembe returns to, in terms of the durability of our world (181), when he outlines the conditions required to struggle for the reparation of the dignity of all humanity.

In Chapter 6, Mbembe goes on to analyze the development of the discourse of Blackness in *the clinic of the subject* in the works of Garvey,² Césaire,³ and Fanon. Mbembe analyzes each author’s work hermeneutically by asking what one can learn from them for our time in terms of the challenge of self-determination. Mbembe praises Garvey’s vision of the project of Africa redemption (154), but he also criticizes Garvey for constructing an abstract notion of identity as “indissoluble difference and absolute singularity” (154) that becomes too particular and isolated from the world. In turn, Mbembe reads Césaire and his rehabilitation of the term *Nègre* as not leading “to *secession* from the world but rather to the affirmation of its *plurality* and the necessity of making it thrive” (158). Césaire’s return to the name Black is contrasted to Fanon’s stance that the name is only a fiction (159). Apart from analyzing the question of violence in Fanon (160-166), Mbembe finds in Fanon’s philosophy the quest for a world created together (161), where the particular is thought of in relation to the universal and the racialized subject could become a “human amongst other humans” beyond race (167). At the end of this chapter, Mbembe claims that we can move one step further than Césaire via Fanon “if we embrace and retain the signifier ‘Black’ not with the goal of finding solace within it but rather as a way of clouding the term in order to gain distance from it” (173).

Returning, hence, to the question of a creating a world beyond race, Mbembe makes it clear that this is a universal project (177). In line with the theme of the *double*, Mbembe suggests a dual approach to address the double discourse on *Black Reason*:

In this context [the Becoming Black of the world] we need a dual approach. On the one hand, we must escape the status of victimhood. On the other, we must make a break with “good conscience” and the denial of responsibility. It is through this dual approach that we will be able to articulate a new politics and ethics founded on a call for justice (178).

And ultimately, this is the importance of the book’s contribution: in wanting a dignified human existence, which is a common desire we share (182), Mbembe holds that we need to think the *in-common* that is our shared existence. This task of thinking allows for restitution and reparation of “the humanity stolen from those who have historically been subjected to processes of abstraction and objectification” (182), which “are based on the idea that each person is a repository of a portion of intrinsic humanity. This irreducible share belongs to each of us” (183). Mbembe makes this point in the epilogue through an ontological analysis of the statement *there is only one world*, a world we all share. In thinking the world, we are rethinking the relation of the universal (our shared existence) and the particular (our specific context) beyond European

reductionism (157) and Afrocentrism (178), for which we need to take universal responsibility for the reparation of this relation.

Schalk Hendrik Gerber is a doctoral student at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. His research interests lie at the intersection of continental philosophy of religion and post-colonial studies. His publications on Mbembe include “From Dis-Enclosure to Decolonisation: In Dialogue with Nancy and Mbembe on Self-Determination and the Other,” *Religions* 9, no. 4, (2018): 1-13.

¹ Franz Fanon (1925-1961) was a psychiatrist and philosopher from Martinique in the Caribbean and is one of the most important intellectual figures regarding the theme of decolonization in the African context, due to his involvement in the anti-colonial movement in Algeria.

² Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was a prominent Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist thinker from Jamaica in the Caribbean and is a famous advocate for the return of the African diaspora to the ancestral land.

³ Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) was a poet also born in Martinique and one of the founders of the *négritude* movement in the 1930's.