

## BOOK REVIEW

**Critique of black reason**, by Achille Mbembe, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2017, 240 pp., Cloth: \$94.95, \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8223-6332-3, ISBN: 978-0-8223-6343-9

Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* advances an argument familiar to scholars of critical race theory with respect to the advent of modernity, namely that the invention of blackness as a racial category and mechanism of exclusion, and the construction in Europe of reason as a fundamental attribute of, and condition of inclusion in, humanity, are not merely coeval, but contingent upon one another. This has urgent implications not only for our understanding of our histories, but of our contemporary moment, in which the logics of extractive finance capital, which were first permitted to take absolute priority over human sovereignty in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, are generating new sites and categories of exclusion, in both the global north and global south, "as capitalism sets about recolonizing its own center" (179). Even more urgent for Mbembe is the necessity of the recognition of the historical and ongoing relationship between reason, blackness, and global capital, if we are to have any hope of constructing what might yet be a just future.

Mbembe draws on a dizzying range of sources, from the depths of the archives on either side of the Atlantic, from African literature and scholarship thereof, and from the histories of African liberation movements and the arguments of their participants, to advance his argument. One consequence of this condensation is that some of his correspondents are buried in the text's extensive footnotes with minimal authorial commentary. Edouard Glissant and Paul Gilroy are among these, upon whom Mbembe is nonetheless clearly drawing when he goes beyond their observations that there is an irony in the simultaneity of the development of European liberal humanist discourse and chattel slavery across the Atlantic to insist that the one is a direct result of the other. This same dense weaving-together of philosophical, theoretical, and historical sources allows Mbembe to imbricate Immanuel Kant's Pure Reason with Black Reason, such that the construction of the liberal subject is impossible, not only materially but also conceptually, outside of the originary Othering of the Black Man, or *nègre*, through the institution of racialized, hereditary slavery. Throughout, Mbembe is most explicit in his engagement with Frantz Fanon, from whom Mbembe inherits his insistence upon a humanist position, in which the implementation of any structure of oppression is inadequate to the absolute suppression of human agency, and as the previous sentence demonstrates, his regrettably androcentric position, in which that indomitable will is implicitly and explicitly couched in a masculine body.

The text performs an analysis, at times a diagnosis, of the ways in which the figure of the Black Man has been constructed and deployed in the long history of Western modernity since the middle passage, in discourses of imperialism and in discourses of liberation, with careful attention paid to the material consequences of these discourses. The breadth of the archives that are brought to bear on this analysis, in a relatively slim volume, has the effect of forcing Mbembe to build strong claims out of archival traces that do not always seem capable of supporting the arguments he bends them towards. On the other hand, this same breadth does demonstrate the validity of Mbembe's contention that discourses of blackness and race are if not foundational to, at least ubiquitous in, our construction of modernity, and of the modern projects of knowledge and governance.

We might ask of Mbembe what is gained by distilling the “delirium” of modernity to just the two forces of blackness and race. Discourses of gender and disability similarly had fundamental roles in the origin of modernity’s biopolitical delirium, producing categories and mechanisms of exclusion that power the modern project of reason. Mbembe himself gestures, however inadvertently, to the historical imbrication of gender, race, and disability when he writes, “the name ‘Black’ was from the beginning a mechanism for objectification and degradation. It drew its strength from its capacity to suffocate and strangle, to *amputate* and *emasculate*” (152, emphasis ours). Thus, when Mbembe writes that the Black Man is the fundamental, originary Other, he is obscuring the extent to which the symbol of the Black Man draws its potency from the figures of the Black Woman and the Disabled Person. This undermines not only Mbembe’s critical purchase by its failure to account adequately for gender or disability, but also Mbembe’s political purchase, given that those who might otherwise be hailed by Mbembe’s humanist call to arms might be reluctant to have their encounters with systemic oppression articulated as a variation of racist oppression. Mbembe’s critique is trenchant, wide-ranging, and relevant to our present historical moment, but work building on Mbembe’s text – which merits building upon – would benefit from a deeper engagement with intersectional scholarship.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2018.1424384>

