

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 1 No. 2 pp. 05-07, September 2017

These reviews may be found on the RA Reviews website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-1-issue-2-september-2017/>

Achille Mbembe. *Critique of Black Reason.* Duke University Press. 240 pp. 2017. ISBN 9780822363323. Traduction and Introduction: Laurent Dubois. French Editions. Paris: La Découverte, 2013.

Reviewed by Wendy Wilson-Fall, Lafayette College, wilsonfw@lafayette.edu.

“Thoughts for the 21st Century: The Blackness of Globalization”

This book, winner of the 2015 Geschwister-Scholl Preis and Le Prix Fetkanni de la Memoire in 2013, is issued by Duke University’s John Hope Franklin Center in its English language form. It is a masterpiece. Neither gloomy or sentimental, it takes on the problem of ‘blackness’ as an artifact of the modern world, an inevitable product of the imperialist, colonialist, and post-colonial forces that were first unleashed with the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. But it does not limit itself to this framework. Mbembe explains that, “Black reason was not only a system of narratives and discourses with academic pretensions but also the reservoir that provided justifications for the arithmetic of racial domination” (27).

Elaine Coburn, author of *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* says that, “This is certainly one of the outstanding intellectual contributions to studies of empire, colonialism, racism, and human liberation of the last decade, perhaps decades...A brilliant book.” And, Andreas Eckert of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* professed it “A Captivating and simultaneously vexing mixture of historical lecture and political-philosophical manifesto.” I would argue that the book is this, and more. The main argument of the book, as I understood it, is that the concept, black, is both symptom and cause of the scourge of racism and its attendant ills that characterize our contemporary world, perhaps even the conceptual language of the world.

As Dubois, the book's translator, states in his introduction, Mbembe’s answer to the question of “What is Black reason?” is that it is what constitutes reason as we know it – the reason of state, the reason of capital, the reason of history.” (ix). Dubois and Mbembe did well to include Dubois’ reflections on the problems of translation and expression of terms that are not always easily translatable from the French. The text is complex, and sometimes difficult to absorb without careful reflection and thinking. The book is not for the faint-hearted or those looking for easy answers. In this, the book is indeed an act of courage. For those who have followed Mbembe’s work, one can see a clear trajectory from his work on the post-colony and necropolitics, as well as his lecture on the future of race and the problem of visual ontologies that he presented at the University of Witwatersrand in 2016.

Mbembe begins by pointing out that “Europe is no longer the center of gravity of our world. This is the significant event, the fundamental experience of our era.” Here he establishes the baseline for our reading; we are reminded of *chronos* and *logos* and called to imagine critical thought in the twenty-first century. What work do we need critical thought to accomplish for us so that we may see ourselves and the world more clearly? For Mbembe, to be aware of the ‘dangers and possibilities’ that the current moment presents to us is to understand that “Blackness and race have played multiple roles in the imaginaries of European societies” (1). In fact, the author identifies Blackness and race as a “vertiginous assemblage” through which “men and women from Africa were transformed into human-objects, human-commodities, human money” (2). Mbembe warns us that the “emergence of new imperial practices is then tied to the tendency to universalize the Black condition” (4). Later in the book, he creatively explores relationships of technology, machines, predatory capitalism and the ‘thing-ness’ of the black body.

Mbembe asserts that neither Blackness or race have ever been fixed notions or static legal referents, and that the creation of these terms by Europeans for diverse others had significant and destructive results that remain with us today both in our symbolic world and in our material conditions. He does a superb job of liberating us from the binary, either/or vision that sets African identity, African consciousness, and African power apart from its diverse global diaspora communities, thus opening up new ways to think of future histories, identities, and productive possibilities. With almost medical precision, the author digs into the problematic beginnings of black alienation and dis-empowerment, taking care not to trivialize any one experience while showing us the common tribulations that have so far been inescapable for people of African descent. Mbembe tells us that these experiences, in their unique and wide geographic manifestations, must necessarily be brought to light and studied within the context of why violence and oppression occurred in such varied circumstances attended by similar, if not identical, political regimes. In fact, Mbembe invites us to imagine “Black” and “African” as two sides of the same coin, concepts that are related but distinct. He asks us to agree that for this moment, we see the inevitable relationship of these terms as a matter of philosophical efficiency and as pragmatic response. It is gratifying to find a text that so successfully builds on past works, particularly of Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Dubois in making sense of racism and imperialism in the world.

One outstanding aspect of the book is the prose in which the messages of the text are delivered. At times almost poetic, Mbembe wisely restrains himself from over-explaining and over-interpretation of the conditions he describes. He clearly wants the reader to apprehend the material, to digest it, and not merely be fed simple declarations of what slavery, colonialism, poverty and powerlessness might mean to the people who experienced these deprivations. A clear example of this is his creative use of the work of Amos Tutola, *The Palm Wine Drunkard*, to create an intellectual experience for the reader that is almost visceral in its discussion. The book is also interdisciplinary in its approach; we are reminded of the transformation of Iberian society that coincided with the flow of Africans to diasporic status, the processes of denationalization that the development of Europe and early capitalism initiated the contradictions of the Enlightenment, and the relationship of reason to instinct. In spite of these broad and diverse themes, the writing is fluid and the arguments razor sharp and brilliantly thought out.

One very useful concept that Mbembe introduces is his schema of defining African social and economic relationships that mutate, evolve, and overlap that he characterizes as a quality of ‘entanglement’ (95). Another, related to the first, is his description of itinerant identities, mobility, and circulation (99). He brings these two concepts together in his discussion of the ‘logic of networks’ and proposes that “True identity, in this context, is not necessarily what fixes a location. It is what makes it possible to negotiate the crossing of spaces that are themselves in circulation because they are of variable geometry.” In this, I understand him to be discussing the variables of inclusion, adherence, and affinities that characterized early modern African spaces and their populations, and how these variables continue to influence identity and social life in African communities today. He calls this ability to navigate multiple possibilities ‘heretical genius.’ From this genius, Mbembe proposes, flows the capacity of Africans to inhabit several worlds at once and situate themselves simultaneously on both sides of an image (102).

The questions that Mbembe engages have a long and robust heritage, from DuBois and Herskovits, Mintz and Price, and also Joseph Harris and Paul Gilroy. He brings a fresh and challenging view to the problem of viewing Africa in the world, and the relationship of Africa’s diaspora populations to their geographic homeland. This is an exhilarating, troublesome text to read, and it places the reader squarely in the twenty-first century with all its challenges and possibilities. It is not possible, nor practical, to go further in this review into the many compelling passages and themes of this book. It is a rich read.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2017 by *Research Africa*, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author/reviewer, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA’s Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Review website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.