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Achille Mbembe, "Brutalism"

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Achille Mbembe. *Brutalism*. Duke University Press 2024. 166 pp. \$99.95 USD (Hardcover 9781478020875); \$25.95 USD (Paperback 9781478025580).

I read Achille Mbembe's most recent book *Brutalism* as speaking some unspeakable truths about our times, especially as a candid assessment of the postcolonial condition. Mbembe writes rhapsodic, delirious, poetic prose to make difficult, unassailable arguments in this book, under the sign of Brutalism. It is difficult to describe this book by Mbembe, the scholar who has written consistently about *necropolitics* – as a revision of Foucault's biopolitics, on Africa as a sign-system through which to understand global forms of marginality, and on the possible vantage point of another (significantly, Black) Reason. This book is Mbembe's most recent diagnoses of late capitalist dystopia. Our rationalities and associated arrogances have led us to a horrific place in the contemporary moment, he argues. He places a strong indictment of techno-modernity in his analysis. We have lost our connections to any form of inwardness – soul/interiority/authentic sensation/spontaneous desire – except of madly, mechanically aping a colonially learnt penetrative logic of power. We (I mean, here, those of us located in the post-colonial) are both victims and perpetrators. Mbembe, crucially, steers clear of giving us a neat account of victims and perpetrators. Each of my sub-headings in this review, are the questions that I think Mbembe provides responses to, loudly or implicitly.

Is this freedom?

We find a very clear diagnosis of 'whiteness' predicated upon sexual and racial domination, early in the book. Mbembe writes:

the "white man" – by which we understand a fiction of limitless power in a conquered and occupied land – will come up against foreign bodies. Accustomed to winning without being right and thanks to the hold he has on space, territories, and objects, he discovers that it is indeed possible to enjoy remorselessly, to satisfy whims through exactions and depredations of all sorts, including on bodies transformed into objects, without having the slightest feeling of anguish or guilt. ...

"White man" begins to realize that he can literally empty the Other of its content and inscribe his own truth in this vacant space, inscribe it in the form of an image or a



silhouette. (60-61)

Mbembe, shows through various examples and discussions, throughout the book that perhaps, the afterlife of colonization is that we become image/effects, finding supposed liberation in doing and being like the entities and persons who made objects out of us. He says, in the same paragraph, '[s]exual freedom here consisted above all in the right to dispose of Others as if they were objects' (60-61). The trace of sex, sexual domination, and objectification in the analysis of global distribution of power runs right through the book. But it does so in counter-intuitive ways. Mbembe *does not* repeat scholars of postcoloniality like Ann L. Stoler (*Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, Duke University Press, 1995) and others who have already shown the sexual undercurrent in the racialization of the colonized Other. Instead, Mbembe painstakingly and delicately critiques the various emancipatory movements of our times that claim to emancipate using the crutch of identity, especially, stabilising our being through sexual, ethnic, linguistic, and religious labels. Essentially, I read him as asking—are we using that same sadomasochistic colonial drives to give ourselves an illusion of emancipation? Have we become versions of the *white man* we love to hate?

Metaphysics of Home

In a congratulatory note on the back cover of *Brutalism*, Michael Hardt, states: 'Mbembe focuses our attention on the African continent, which is not only where the forms of domination and deprivation that increasingly affect the entire globe are most fully deployed, but also where the forms of reparation necessary for a future world can be glimpsed.' I differ from Hardt. In my reading, Mbembe uses Africa, as a sign (6) (he does so in *Critique of Black Reason* as well) and historical residue, which simply acts as an aid for him to theorise, especially, in *Brutalism*, our contemporary form of planetarity. In my reading, Mbembe is a universal thinker. That he is Cameroonian has no bearing whatsoever in the power of his theorisation and his attempts at hope. He may well be the *Benjamin* that we need today, albeit, and rightly, a *Black Benjamin*.

Territoriality and the need for pinning identity, aspiration, and horizon to territory (homeland?) leads to the macabre form of allocation of provincial justice that we have come to

know today as identity politics. Mbembe writes eloquently about *home* and the violence of its territorial definition:

“Home”, so the claim goes, is located at the place where you were born. It is, accordingly, a geographical space or a locality, a city, a village, a region, a territory, even a state made of impenetrable lines, or borders. These draw an interior to which is opposed an exterior, an interior that is constituted, essentially, by opposition to a elsewhere, by means of multiple segmentations. ... Taken together, all these elements make “home” a focus or system of dynamic interactions between a physical and biological environmental and a set of both human and socio-technical factors. In the metaphysical aspect, the “home” or locality is a subjective creation. It is held to be privileged space for engendering the future and attesting to the past. “Home” is believed to be the place where the ideals of ownership and security are realized. As a physical space and a way of life, home defines the circle of irredeemable debts, those which preexist us and will survive us, starting with those that bind us to our ancestors. (115-116)

Mbembe makes a voluble and clear argument in *Brutalism* against the dangers of postcolonial tribalism, prodded by global capitalist dominance, and the insistence on blood-and-soil definitions of home. He calls this insistence the root of ‘vitalist nationalism’ (116), which breeds two fears—one, of ‘duration, or of the life span of peoples, homelands, and communities’ (116), and the other, of the enemy—the bearer of *otherness* and its associated dangers. Can we turn away from such tribalist forms of emancipation—ones that breed further suspicions of enemies and strangers and foreigners? While critiquing the fortress of Europe, Mbembe asks who consume some version of progressive politics from the vantage point of the postcolony. Can we desert our petty ethno-nationalisms? Can we try not to repeat and mimic the violences of our colonizers? Can we attempt to move away from the very logic of the fortress?

While appealing to other registers of reason and other universal potentialities, Mbembe never shies away from borrowing liberally from corpuses of ancient African thought—where the self is not a stable, bounded entity, to be constantly defended against incursions of possible intruders. He states that: ‘identity is never anything but fragmented, scattered, and in shreds’

(56), and :

‘[i]n ancient African thinking, the human person is a compound of multiple living entities. It is not self-generating. Others are always responsible for its coming to life. It owes to these others not only its birth but also its language, its fundamental institutions, and its immaterial wealth, both incalculable, and nonrepayable, that it inherits’ (56). He mocks modern obsession with identity-based individualism as ‘autarky, the face-to-face with oneself, the refusal to encounter the world, or mistrust, or a self that asserts itself in solitary fashion.’ (56).

Why Brutalism?

Mbembe borrows this word from the history of architecture and sticks to it as a creative through-line for his diverse arguments. He says, :

[b]rutalism is the proper name for the apotheosis of a form of power without external limits or an outside, which dismisses both the myth of exit and that of another world to come. ... The worlds of matter, machine, and life are henceforth one. As privileged vectors of the neovitalism that fuels neoliberalism, animism, and brutality accompany our transition to a new technical system, one more reticular, more automated, more concrete, and more abstract all at once (4).

Mbembe provides an unassailable diagnosis of our stuckness, desperation, agony, and arrogance—all rolled into something that we often refer to as modernity. In Mbembe’s portraiture, we are all bound in right-angled columns of cement, and cannot find a way out. But Mbembe’s critique of late capitalist techno-modernity—with its newfound pride in digitally mediated selves (e.g., hand-held Wi-Fi-driven devices, barcode-driven authenticity, artificial intelligences) are not the most common ones we hear. He treats the world as a ruinous ecosystem, in which humans and machines are slowly turning into versions of each other—a world of ‘anthropophagous technology’ (13). He writes, ‘[i]t no longer belongs only to the external world, as a membrane delimiting the border between an inside (humanity) and an outside (nature)’ (13). And yet, in the world of socially mediated interiorities, we are invited to constantly state our internal condition on the internet in search of a real inside that must exist now that it has been displayed.

Mbembe calls this *neovitalism* (8)— a state of being that does not know how to live with loss. This, I believe, is his most forthright interrogation of the obsessively solutionist state-capital combine in which we find ourselves trapped. He calls for a liberation from the paradigm that treats all difference as a ‘cabinet of curiosities’—asking instead for an ‘antimuseum’ (8). It would be, he says, ‘an attic of the future, whose function would be to welcome what must be born but is not yet there’ (8). Mbembe’s arguments, made from the vantage point of postcolonial Africa, are not limited to the postcolonial condition and its associated laments. He resurrects old, often Western, ideals—Reason, humanity, friendship, fraternity, and openness—and shows us, however faintly lit, a pathway towards meaningful decolonization, one that doesn’t narrate difference as a ‘cabinet of curiosities. Here’s hoping we find the strength to narrate Mbembe as a philosopher for our times, Cameroonian and beyond.

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