

## Achille Mbembe

*Necropolitics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019 (trans. Steve Corcoran), 224 pp.

*Necropolitics* addresses the hidden violence of modern democracies that is becoming “increasingly difficult to escape” (6). Mbembe argues that colonial practices and war are renewed in contemporary democracy, producing a world where rights are permanently suspended; enemies are closely controlled, separated, and exterminated; and continuous mobility is necessary for survival. The book is written in a figural style of writing that “oscillates between vertiginous, dissolution and dispersal” (8) while noting the power of language to give life to those subjected to the powers of death.

In the first chapter, Mbembe suggests we are exiting from democracy, as contemporary sovereignty results in a large segment of the population living “at the edge of life” (37), subjected to either separation or death. For Mbembe, colonialism and slavery are “democracies’ bitter sediment” (20), as both are constitutive of liberal democracies. Mbembe’s analysis highlights our contemporary societies’ production of third places for brutal violence outside law, drawing parallels with both the colony and the plantation. Terror and counter-terror produce fears that justify permanent states of exception, creating conditions to continuously use death worlds outside law to protect our suspended rights and freedoms. These conditions produce strict surveillance that focuses on “maximum utility and enjoyment” (36) instead of discipline.

Chapter 2 addresses our society of enmity, tracing the origins of contemporary hate, separation, and extermination through the colonial context. The author notes that security is enforced to maintain freedom, although freedom is merely a myth to reinforce the need for security. According to Mbembe, liberal democracies rely on mythoreligious reasoning to justify the security state, normalizing separation through camps. Both nanoracism and hydraulic racism contribute to the construction of the enemy, subjecting them to “daily racist injuries” (58) that target the body, dignity, and self-esteem. Mbembe argues that racism is both a form of entertainment and linked to fantasies of annihilation.

Chapter 3 makes a significant contribution to debates about biopower and contemporary violence. Mbembe introduces necropolitics to explore the relationship between the sovereign right to kill and the creation of death worlds for large segments of the population. These death worlds are justified through the state of exception and constructions of fictionalized enemies. Revisiting Foucault’s work on biopower and state racism, he argues that biopower alone cannot account for contemporary forms of occupation. Through an analysis of necropower and biopower in slavery and colonial occupation, the author explores continuities between past and present, arguing that contemporary necropower includes disciplinary and biopolitical power, as exemplified in the colonial occupation of Palestine. Mbembe problematizes our understanding of resistance/suicide, sacrifice/redemption, and martyrdom/freedom, using the example of a suicide bombing as both an act of agency and resistance.

In Chapter 4, Mbembe explores the connections between our exit from democracy and neoliberal and global capitalism, the changing technologies of the border, and the loss of reason. He argues that technology dramatically transformed our borders, creating an omnipresent and mobile border that excludes large segments of the population. He claims the greatest threat to liberal democracy is the growing division between democracy and global capitalism. The state is controlled by economic elites whose actions solely focus on producing profits at all costs. For Mbembe, neoliberal capitalism has transformed politics into a war against the classes, separating and subjugating the poor, minorities, women, Muslims, and the disabled to continuous violence (115). Alongside these transformations, knowledge is destabilized and becomes more narrowly interpreted as “knowledge for the market” (109), as acceptable knowledge is produced through computational calculations. This transformation contributes to the loss of reason and democracy, as well as a return to animism. Mbembe argues a critique of technology and re-establishing reason are necessary to challenge the post-fact democratic order.

Mbembe uses Chapter 5 to explore Fanon’s Pharmacy, noting the connections between racism in colonial contexts and today’s necropolitical practices. Drawing on Fanon’s work, the author explores racism as both economic and biological subjugation, rooted in scientific authority and culture, as well as racism as neurosis rooted in fears of the phallus and the sexual power of Black men. Fanon’s theory of radical decolonization and relation of care are presented, as Mbembe questions the use of violence to create new sovereignty, instead suggesting violence can produce more destruction and disorder.

With Chapter 6 and the conclusion, Mbembe explores the limits of humanism, recognizing how humanism constitutes western democracies, neglects the changing relationship between human and object, and contributes to the production of death worlds. Mbembe imagines an alternative future, inspired by Fanon’s work on decolonization and relation of care, creating a form of resistance that produces co-belonging through the ethics of a passerby. These ethics emphasize the importance of restoring humanity in our contemporary conditions of fragmented power relations through mobility, journeying, and transfiguration, experiencing the world through “presence and distance ... solidarity and detachment, but never indifference” (188). For Mbembe, speech and language must become projectiles that “gnaw at the real” (189), a weapon for resistance and constituting our co-belonging.

Mbembe’s work on necropolitics demonstrates how contemporary societies have exited democracy, renewing the camp and other colonial practices to create death worlds and a society of separation. *Necropolitics* makes an important contribution through outlining the conditions of hatred and separation that constitute contemporary death worlds.

While Mbembe’s ethics of a passerby offers a path for resistance, the discussion was limited and does not include law. Socio-legal scholars will be interested in exploring how or to what extent law enables or subverts this form of resistance. Necropolitics and necropower are useful conceptual tools for analyzing violence in contemporary democracies. Socio-legal scholars should continue developing these

concepts alongside biopower by documenting contextual differences across diverse and disparate sites of socio-legal research.

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