

# The becoming-black of the world?

## On Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*

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Blackness and race have played multiple roles in the imaginaries of European societies ... the two have always occupied a central place – simultaneously, or at least in parallel – within modern knowledge and discourse about man (and therefore about humanism and humanity). ... Blackness and race, the one and the other, represent twin figures of the delirium produced by modernity.

Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*<sup>1</sup>

We have known for a long time that 'critique' – as a guide for judgement – emerged as a rule for telling apart the proper limits of reason from its various forms of error or misconception.<sup>2</sup> Critique, by definition, establishes the limits of reason; it forges the laws, ends and beginnings of thought. Critique legislates the judicious use of reason by separating it from any metaphysical or dogmatic origin, so that any risk of being carried away by the fictitious or merely pleasing is curtailed by the rule of philosophical judgement. And it is only when philosophy becomes critique that it is then able properly to articulate reason and what is essential to it – that is to say, the judicial and judicious limits of reason over and against its various improprieties (madness, metaphysics, etc), which cannot be thought about without creating unease. In this sense, critique is constituted as a defense against – or a victory won over – that of unreason; a victory that, conversely, shows critique to be always shadowed or at risk from the various lapses that would founder or rend it.

In short, the modern history of critique has been unavoidably shaped by its wish to delimit everything that emanates from unreason; a history that has often been passionately, if not deliriously, limited by its own

wish for limitation. Critique cannot help (and must to that extent affirm) being haunted by limitations that it must itself invent if its ability to do critique is to become legislative. Once critique is caught up in negotiations like this – from the start, that is, always – it is already involved in a perverse mirroring of what it deems to be false, fictitious, illusory. Or rather, if we use the word 'mirroring' here as a general term for rivalrous incorporation and rejection, no critique can avoid some relation of this sort with difference, once that difference has been established and circumscribed, however indefinitely, as the place of philosophical illegitimacy or error.

If the meaning of critique belongs to a certain epoch, the same epoch that also forged the philosophical concept of race, perhaps it is no surprise, then, that racial difference might become the crux of any thinking of critique as rule and historical concept.<sup>3</sup> This is especially so when what is conceived as critique, seeking to distinguish knowing from non-knowing, entails an understanding of race that both limits and delimits all that is in play here with the questions of justice and legislation. Such is what the Cameroonian cultural critic, Achille Mbembe, seems to imply in his *Critique of Black Reason*, in which he argues that western reason is responsible for a discourse of blackness which, beyond any legitimacy or right, may be defined as a case of delirious jurisdiction. Ultimately, as Mbembe sees it, the 'rightful claims' of reason consist, accordingly, in a racial doctrine of truth and error, in which the rational subject consistently delimits itself in racial terms. Knowing oneself, in other words, becomes a matter of knowing that one is non-*nègre*, an understanding which is here presen-

ted via a history of colonialism, slavery and apartheid.

In this way, Mbembe would like to say that 'race' is not simply the return of metaphysical error but the constitutive figure of European modernity and critique. In Mbembe's descriptions, blackness is a discourse that is always lacking in reason, validity and *savoir*. At times, he seems to imply that all that is needed to rectify this ignorance is knowledge; at others that philosophy has never been able to give difference any ontological respect insofar as reason *as such* is driven to discover itself in its differences, and its critique thereby consists in the rigour with which it overcomes that which is considered to be different. Not only is critique this desire for difference (in the sense of establishing its limits), but difference is what allows critique to become immediate and consubstantial. This means that in terms of Western culture, where self-recognition is perceived in racial terms, critique is always linked to a discourse of difference – Mbembe calls it a 'proclamation' – in order to judge that which it considers to be inferior, without right or legitimacy (183). Thus it is not important simply to judge the two terms in motion here – Blackness and reason – but also to describe how the sensuous particularity of the former becomes the constitutive condition of the latter's very *figurability* as logos and doxa. As such, the tribunal of reason can only delimit itself as a *racial* jurisdiction; the identity of which appears to be a thinking of race as the condition for our thinking anything at all.

All of this explains why Mbembe begins *Critique of Black Reason* with the emergence in Europe of a black *episteme*, with its imaginary taxonomies and codes, whose determining form, he argues, reveals a politics of right and judgement that continues to define the modern epoch. By calling this discourse 'black reason', Mbembe attempts to show how the concept of blackness emerges out of a complex synthesis of imaginary and historical developments – and one that was often unencumbered by documentary evidence. It is this that he then goes on to characterise as a history of unreason and which leads him to identify 'critique' (a word that remains oddly unspecified in his book) as the name for the exclusion of difference which Mbembe *also* recognises is beyond any traditional determination of the concept.

The curious effect of this is that a poetic, and at times brilliant, account of racist discourse is presented in tandem with a set of claims about the limits of reason – its various expulsions and refusals – as though all these claims happened at the same level. Hence black reason is presented as both an event of history and a concept that is quasi-transcendental to that history; for, as Mbembe presents it, the meaning of blackness is never simply a historical question, but is a question of critique, of judgement, that always exceeds mere historical fact. Consequently, in order to set out the racial limits of reason Mbembe has to posit, paradoxically, a blackness that precedes the very opposition between reason and unreason; an imaginary which appears to be decisive for thinking the racial limits of humanity, and which he derives from a blackness that can no longer even be named as blackness or be determined by critique.

The rest of Mbembe's book is in many ways an attempt to clarify this approach, with important considerations of Césaire, Garvey and Fanon along the way. Yet what remains indeterminate is whether blackness is therefore merely a *factum* of reason, discreetly contained in various archives, documents and codes, or whether it is that which, in the absence of reason, always exceeds the limits of critique. Despite the erudite, lyrical play of *Critique of Black Reason* it is never made clear whether race inaugurates a philosophical history of judgement, for Mbembe, or whether blackness is nothing more than the phantasm that is its philosophical concept. My suspicion is that blackness simply gets reduced to millennial claims about the future meaning of race, which is then further reduced to a claim about the growing distance between racism and race, partly no doubt under the influence of Deleuze.

The essential upshot of this complication is that it opens up a space where what might reasonably be called a historicity of race is related to a racist historicity of reason insofar as blackness both makes historical judgement necessary while disallowing any philosophical jurisdiction of its concept. In what follows, I intend to unpack the implications of this impasse in order to tease out the black obscurity of a thought that continues to define the world.

## Europe's Black Imaginary

But, first, what is black reason? For Mbembe it seems that it denotes the ways in which philosophical knowledge has comprehended blackness as a synonym for ontic destitution whether it is accompanied by subjugation or not. The seizures of peoples of African descent are, it appears, part of this more general *episteme*. It is very clear that the history and politics of race became possible only because this view of the African became knowledge and truth – that is to say, from the most moral-politico-ideological viewpoint to global forms of power and domination. As Mbembe sees it, the cause of this *savoir* derives, for example, from a *non-savoir* composed of historical, metaphysical and psychological fantasies that were themselves signs of a narcissistic incertitude or crisis in European discourses of identity. It is not clear from the text whether this *imaginaire* preceded any actual confrontation with African subjects. But what emerges from Mbembe's analyses is a European idea of the world that is instituted through multiple imaginings of *beings apart*, beyond the horizon, or located at the remotest edge of the human. It is this 'image' (a word that immediately connotes proxy, archetype and origin) that brings into being an opacity that remains completely inassimilable to philosophic thought. But just as in the Fanonian texts, which Mbembe refers to here, there is always an excess that stands apart, such as the savagery or animality of the black, which, not having found its locus or class in human being, is ranged among various phantasmagoria of the African as the *least* human, so that, in the end, blackness is a nameless, incommensurable, paradoxical limit that defies all classification. It figures a *material opacity without Dasein*.

In *Critique of Black Reason*, which represents a departure from the earlier *On the Postcolony* (2001), Mbembe intends to show how this racist vision of Europe has been 'demoted', and that the European idea of reason no longer occupies the place of telos and rule. This demotion of Europe from its centre, and the possibilities and dangers that this now presents to critical thought, is curious, but sets up the scene of critique as announced by Mbembe's title: *Critique of Black Reason*

does not have an entirely modest relationship with Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (nor, for that matter, with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*). However, just as in Kant there is always the risk of delirium in critique, which both founds critique *and* renders it precarious, so black reason is not only foundational for the idea of Europe but renders its critique delusional. Accordingly, what critique has to provide – and thereby secure as a non-racist form of judgement – is a way of thinking blackness in a non-delirious manner. This thus becomes a primary task of the book.

Conversely, if Mbembe is concerned to free blackness from its racialisation, and if that critique means in some sense rectifying the idea of blackness as intrinsically lacking – a lack judged to be outside of the limits of human experience – then all Mbembe's efforts to indict reason paradoxically ends up legislating reason in the sense of having to judge its historical improprieties. Both Mbembe and Kant share a sense (in both cases derived from the belief that race is a *question* of reason, oddly enough) that blackness constitutes the limit of reason's own legislation. However, Mbembe differs from Kant in that he thinks blackness can be restored to thought as the proper figure for what it means to be human, which he defines as the *co-belonging of all differences*. As we will see, this leads him to a principled and argued defense of humanism which, however sincere, commits him to a humanism that can only think racial blackness as something that critique must forget, and forget through the very act of returning it to critical thought so that the limits of the human can be properly judged. What is more, this possibility is here supposedly *determined* by a contemporary political context in which racial blackness, now separated from actual black people, has become the global determination of a technical or technological alienation of surplus populations. However, it is far from clear that one can derive this critique from the devalorisation of blackness as a critical principle while simply valorising humanism as, in some sense, 'non-racial' and apparently beyond the risk or possibility of racist thought. (Mbembe's book does little to dispel the suspicion that critique, as a judgement of the future, is not much more than a kind of pious optimism in this case.)



Luckily, Mbembe does not fall into this trap as straightforwardly or as consistently as this might suggest – although, as we shall see, and by a sort of inevitability, it is precisely at the moment that he attempts a counter-reading of critique that he is most vulnerable to an anti-black disavowal. At best, he is concerned to show that the concept of blackness, though a metaphysical concept through and through, became discursively effective as a power or juridical claim to truth, but is now in a singular relation to modern statecraft and sentiment. In this connection, Mbembe takes as his three main examples: the Atlantic slave trade, the birth of writing and globalisation, which he identifies with digital technologies and financial markets. To that extent he sees in all three events an example of an opening of thought that is unprecedented.

In *Critique of Black Reason* Mbembe attempts a more elaborate explanation of the relation between the plantation and the colony, as defined by mercantile imperialism, in terms of a new imperial relation between capitalism and animism; one which is generating a new narrative about blackness and what it means to be human. First he points out that capital-

ism and animism – originally kept apart – ‘have finally tended to merge’ in the era of neoliberalism; and, specifically, the extreme risks of depredation and destitution borne by slaves during early capitalism ‘have now become the norm’ for subaltern populations (4). The age-old distance between life and capital, humanity and things – an opposition which was immediately complicated by the circulation and exchange of human slaves, insofar as the latter were removed from life the better to own and govern them – has taken on a new dimension. Not only have our desires become virtual commodities, and life itself become a kind of animated prosthesis, but even our alienation, because of our transformation into ‘animate things made up of coded digital data’, has become infected by this life becoming-object, as we become virtually enslaved to a commodity relation. The fusion of animate life and late capital, the reversal of life into thing by which modernity once defined the reproductive social life-social death of the slave, is today at the heart of all social relations and desire (5).

This is enough for Mbembe to claim that the condition of the slave is now universal. The immediate resonance of all this is a world that has *become* black,

where being human occurs as a virtual imposition of becoming-object. The subsequent analysis will attempt to distinguish between this universalisation (which is the result of new imperial-technical practices) and the secondary 'fusion' of capitalism and animism in what Mbembe sees as a 'new fungibility' (5) at the root of the whole supposed 'twilight' of Europe which 'has not yet figured out what it wants to know about, or do with, the Black Man' (7). It is important for Mbembe, then, to be able to make a distinction between two types of twilight and to be able to rank the ways in which blackness has both historically (become subaltern) and is now something to be revived or retrieved as the task of critique, and which is itself the source of a new thinking of blackness (in the virtual opacity of its present) as something beyond the European thought of alterity and difference. If, as I shall be suggesting, it is *now* possible to make this distinction between blackness and being human as Mbembe wants to (as a name for a new humanism), then certain consequences will follow for an understanding of difference, and thereby of its relation to the possibility of critique. Here, at any rate, is how Mbembe represents the future he wants to tell of human beings transformed into animate things made up of coded digital data.

In his brief foray into the history of neoliberalism, Mbembe makes the following claim (and the rhetoric here is fairly typical of the book as a whole):<sup>4</sup> 'There are no more workers as such. There are only labouring nomads' (3). The tragedy of today, he avers, is that the multitude of workers are 'unable to be exploited at all' (3). In a gesture which also informs his readings of black writing and thought, Mbembe wants to show how *all* subjects now have to face the logic of an enslaved relation intrinsic to the commodity form of late capital, but that this alienation is much more of an alienation than the old idea of slavery, an idea that belongs to the history of mercantile capital, in the sense that the value of the slave occurred *through* its being both the (substance-object) means and ends (body-material-merchandise) of exchange-value. Instead, modern labour is now unencumbered by older materialisms and its mechanisms, and is instead produced by schemas and productions that have proliferated under new digital technologies. The racial forces and

relations of production that molded the plantation and colony, and which made them exist as networks of violent predation and labour, have now been displaced by an irremediable technical effect wherein life itself can be stored, modified and 'corrected'; and where the antonym of alienation, to the point of re-defining it, can only be an animistic becoming-object. The curious effect of this is that it seems to imply that to be exploited as a slave was a better historical fate – in all of its violent and murderous forms – than the modern fate of the nomadic subject who is equally in hock to 'the market and to debt' (4); as if there is nothing more tragic than the state of being indebted to one's virtual-technical image as object.

This submission to the phantasmatic generality of indebtedness establishes a non-equivalence between labour as historically understood and the field of meaningful political antagonism. And this is related to a more general point that race has always been a commodity-relation and a means of promoting blackness as human commodity, but that now this commodity-relation has completely overflowed the mercantilist limits of reason, pouring out everywhere, written virtually everywhere, and where all political traces of prior violence essentially define the world. The problem, then, is no longer to tease out the laws of racial capital, but to grasp the world-historical consequences of capital *as* technicity. Mbembe is not the first to insist that the invention of race, which appears as a synthesis of an imaginary submitted to the commodity form, is a phenomenon indistinguishable from western technical reason;<sup>5</sup> but what he wants to insist is that this forms part of a wider episteme: the *becoming-black of the world*.

One way of pursuing what Mbembe means by this is to go over the main themes of the book. *Critique of Black Reason* is composed of six chapters with an Introduction and Epilogue. It is not a historical monograph, but reads more like a series of essayistic reflections. The most original chapters – on colonial secrecy and the clinic – are those dealing with changes in the colonial *episteme*, which already goes some way towards re-dramatising how important Fanonism is for Mbembe's thought, but also how the blackness of Fanon's thought remains politically undetermined despite or because of Mbembe's humanism. What is

it that links humanism to a critique of black reason? Mbembe's answer is fourfold, and proceeds according to a variety of taxonomic codes which are probably best listed.

First, race is, perhaps not surprisingly, a perversely phantasmagoric form of thought that is capricious, inconstant and continuously mobile. In this way, by means of his description of the various fantasies that Europeans had of blackness, Mbembe reads negrophobia as a symptom of a 'deep crisis' in the European idea of reason (12); reason finds itself shipwrecked by these black phantasmas: in short, the complex history of slavery and colonialism is itself a consequence of a mode of inquiry and a culture that are 'inseparable from a work of fantasy' (17). Because blackness is a phantasmagoric veil (or image), it is both a perverse representation and an inverse reflection that saw blacks as lesser beings in the ontological work of nature and culture. In the twenty-first century this fabulation has taken on a renewed intensity, which Mbembe, focusing on what he calls a 'new political economy of life' (22), links to new fears of global security, and new biopolitical enemies, and biometric forms of surveillance.

Second, this means that black reason was not exclusively concerned with creating the image of the racial subject but was also used to underwrite the practices of its domination. The second major focus of the book is how black reason was developed and maintained by blacks themselves, who hold onto race despite wanting to refute its association with dereliction. Mbembe refers to this as a 'black imaginary' (30) that was promulgated by black radicals who sought to free themselves from race hierarchy but could not free themselves from the idea of race as ontic support. And it is because race is all too flagrantly a power to produce, and to represent, that blackness is both stripped of its humanity and reduced to a simulacrum or a ghost. In this way the problem of the image reappears. As Mbembe says: blacks both exist 'behind' appearances but are also never entirely capable of avoiding their 'systematic stigmatisation' as appearances (33). Again, it is not clear whether critique veils appearances or unveils black existences as appearances that cannot be thought of unless veiled. What critique appears to discover, then, is the unessence

of an appearance that can only be comprehended as appearance, but an appearance that consequently can only show itself, appearances notwithstanding, as limited to deceit and fabulation. This is a concern which is explicitly connected to the semblance character of blackness itself, in whose unveiling critique invents itself, and thereby its rhetoric and politics. The whole of *Critique of Black Reason* thus issues from this dual explanation: race is a fiction that limits the real to appearances, and this fiction is lived as a complex material subordination. All this is described effectively as a composite of surplus extraction (which Mbembe habitually calls capitalism's 'image'), but also a kind of savage resuscitation of a primal nature put back into an indigenous order of history.

Third, here again, as in *Critique of Black Reason* as a whole, the noun 'black' does not necessarily denote a truth but a fabulation of truth that is also the figure of a separation-segregation heavily reliant on the work of subjugation. Straightforwardly enough, Mbembe urges the idea that blackness does not exist outside of its fabulation, but that anti-colonial resistance is not wholly reducible to the property of fabulation, insofar as black human beings have always been able to make something else out of it. The ontological level of humanity is, therefore, open to blacks through a deeply humanist move. The theoretical explanation of how or why blacks 'retained the characteristics that made them human beyond subjection' (48) is, however, never explained but is represented as a testimony to the most concrete human aspiration, since humanism isn't an attribute but a capacity for belonging. This reading of black reason is then a perfect exemplar of a genealogy of a specifically modern, humanistic racism (although Mbembe does not always recognise it or explore it as such), in which black life is shorn of all reality, or responsibility, and is as such '*outside as beyond life*' (52).

We may ask, by way of a counter-argument, whether Mbembe's belief that 'there is, in every human person, something unconquerable, fundamentally untameable, that domination – regardless of the forms it takes – cannot eliminate, nor contain, nor repress, at least not totally' is one wholly shared by Fanon (249). No doubt this idea of an excess which can

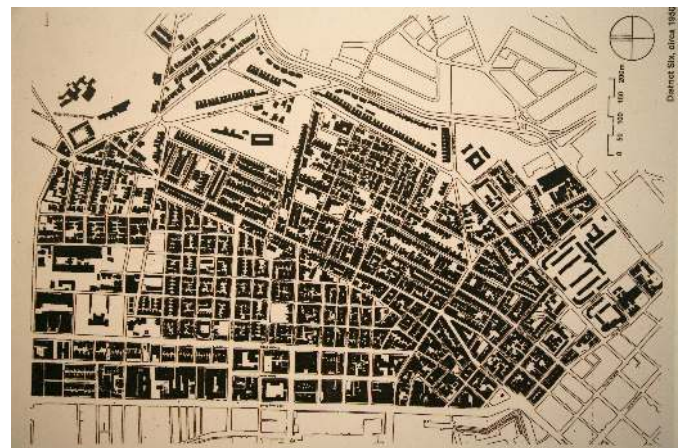
never be entirely dominated is an important one for representing freedom-as-possibility, but such is all it is. Mbembe wants to represent this indefinable element as always at work in the way humans experience the world as both risk and possibility. But why represent this excess as a creative capacity rather than as, say, the lived meaning of a death drive, which is also inalienable, untameable, prior to domination, and which Fanon also understood to be the lived meaning of black social death, a mortification which humanism can only disavow or repress – and this precisely because blackness, as is so often remarked, was produced and consumed as a kind of inanimate animation?

However much Mbembe would like to suggest that the ways in which blackness was historically thought can be contrasted with a new more inclusive concept of the human that critique must retrieve or at least reawaken as the task of thought, it seems more plausible to say that the limits of critique have always already begun, were always already twisted and distorted by the desire to see blackness as a primordial difference *within* the human, and thus cannot be, and never could be, overcome in the humanistic ways Mbembe suggests. This would mean that even the attempt to think blackness as a potentially human difference must in fact be considered an anti-black concept of reason.

Finally, *Critique of Black Reason* attempts to combine two methods, then, which I believe do not entirely mix: a historical genealogy of blackness, and an explanation of its continual signification in the present moment for a humanism to come which – however problematic Mbembe’s appeal to the non-black meaning of black life is – cannot be said to be simply historical, and therefore cannot be said to be outside of the episteme that supposedly defines it. In combining them, Mbembe has not, strictly speaking, reconciled them with each other. Why presume an archive can be decoded and then, on the other hand, present black reason as a fabulation that is still with us? What the phantasmagoric contributes to present description, by contrast, is how the racial imaginary continues to fascinate, to beguile. The two stand, as such, in a reciprocal relation which is proclaimed to be one of mirroring – a mirroring that is itself a pro-

vocation to a future imaging – something that Mbembe notes throughout as the limit of critique, but the genealogy of which remains incomplete.

In fact, what we have here is not a genealogy but a diagnostics – hence the book’s many taxonomies and lists. Thus, in Chapter Three (‘Difference and Self-Determination’) Mbembe uses the history of racism to support his by now commonplace assertion that slavery reduces the black body to a mercantile thing. Here Mbembe shows his reliance on a Foucauldian reading of modernity and, in describing liberalism as a biopolitical event that combines racism and democracy, is able to argue that liberal democracy relies on an ‘ideology of [racial] separation’ (84), or, as Tocqueville describes it in his famous study of *Democracy in America*, that blackness is the *being-apart* whose difference is itself unassimilable.<sup>6</sup>



The second proposition for which Mbembe mobilises Foucault is that racism’s various ideologies separating the human from the non-human has resulted in a black discourse of victimisation (an emphasis whose implications Mbembe has pursued through a variety of texts).<sup>7</sup> Mbembe establishes a dialectic – or is it yet another discourse of mirrors? – between racism and black responses to the mirage of difference and shows how negritude or Pan-Africanism, say, were all imbued with ‘an imagined culture and an imagined politics’ (89). But, again, this implies that reason and its resistance are part of the same imaginary, insofar as the former continues to dictate the thought and practice of the latter, so that what is racialised is always the world as a historical-technical project. This means that any attempt to go beyond such worlding is already compromised by the racial

*savoir* which founds the critique of race by delimiting it. It comes as no surprise that it is in the passages on negritude that such paradoxes come to the fore.

The questions asked by Mbembe of negritude are: why is this 'call to race' also a 'desire for [a "free and sovereign"] community'? (33, 34); and why is this desire for racial community founded on a memory of the lost, severed links of 'blood, soil, institutions, rites, and symbols' (34)? The answers to these questions are repetitive and unvarying: negritude symbolises a memory of loss that is imaginary. There appears at first sight to be a shared relation between Mbembe's reading of negritude and that of Fanon. In comments scattered throughout his works, Fanon also refers to negritude as an aesthetic driven by the lost, the irretrievable. But Fanon's point is much more nuanced, and more dialectical: it is loss itself which must be preserved and thereby disavowed, so that the schisms and losses of the colonial present can be deemed secondary or inauthentic with respect to what is deemed properly, and essentially, black. In order to analyse what he sees as an irreducibly bourgeois and yet ultimately mythical sense of a pre-colonial belonging, Fanon's political point is to show why black nativism has to rely on a figure – of a loss that can never be lost as such – for which no historical or literal sign can be substituted. The mythical symbolism of negritude is, in other words, not simply the sign of a racial imaginary substituting for a sovereignty desired but which is nowhere to be found; it also makes us see how blackness is itself a lost object that is always, in a sense, a figurative substitute for the political struggles of the present. If blackness is always already lost, or is only readable as such, what would it mean for the black to find him or herself in this parable of a black unhappy consciousness? It could be said that this is why Fanon dismisses negritude as a kind of *aesthetic nihilism*, which must be distinguished from the poetics of rupture and collision that he so admired in Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, and which he directly opposes to the imaginary terms of loss and sovereignty defining Mbembe's more limited reading. Negritude is dismissed, therefore, to the extent that it confuses spirit, soil, community, etc., with a black aesthetic which is invariably read in bourgeois, nativist terms. As such, the problem of negritude, Fanon

tells us, is not that of racialism, but the substitution of a genuinely creative negation – what he calls 'invention' – for a negation whose rhetoric is intimately related to a blackness valorised solely in white terms.

This difference between Mbembe and Fanon is also intimately related to the differing status that race is given as a universal. This is because, in his reading of Fanon, Mbembe continues to occupy the universal as a promissory form, and in a highly classical sense, whereas for Fanon (and here he is following in the footsteps of Césaire) the universal is no longer readable as the non-phenomenal ground of black life and politics. The ground has shifted, but blackness continues to be the figure crossed out of the world. One can see aspects of this disagreement in their respective responses to negritude, but also in what it means to live a free, sovereign life. Today, Mbembe notes that racial blackness no longer has any biological criterion – which has undergone digital modification – and, as such, all subaltern subjects have become diffuse human-things under the reign of capital markets. This coincides with the oft-stated belief, throughout *Critique of Black Reason*, that 'the cycle of capital moves from image to image, with the image now serving as an accelerant, creating energy and drive' (4). This allows Mbembe to denounce the ontological singularity of blackness because, he argues, racial slavery 'has now become the norm' for subaltern humanity (4). Blackness has become universalised even if it remains outside of the universal. This in turn permits him to say that the violence of predation and occupation is now that of the image, or that the image of blackness has now been mobilised beyond that of mere physical or cultural anthropology, and that, in this way, it has become systematically removed from black bodies and subjects in any determining or naturalistic sense.

In this way, Mbembe sets out to narrate why blackness without blacks has become global. Here, the role played by culture and technology seems decisive: what meaning can blackness have today – given the history of its hysterical attribution as both essence and malediction – if one were to consign its image to history? Can one think blackness without thought itself producing delirious associations? If it is, lastly, the obscure image of blackness that has, over the last



400 years or thereabouts, and for very precise economic and psychical reasons, given rise to a delirious exclusion, then can blackness ever be simply a case of a new *theoria*, of a new seeing which isn't already racially blinded and blinding? And if blackness is the figure through which the world has become increasingly technical in its very worldliness, does this really mean that the phenomenological anthropology of the world just is black reason?

## Blackness and Genealogy

Mbembe's genealogy of blackness involves broad but necessarily selective reading of the history of critique – and one will have to verify that his concern to argue for a non-racial humanism, especially as a condition of the future, tends to make him overlook or downplay some of the more obvious points that are opposed to European notions of humanism which his book unwittingly mirrors, especially in his reading of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, but in many other texts too. As I hope to show, there is here a blind spot that I don't think *Critique of Black Reason* ever satisfactorily solves.

The question of a black world arises for Mbembe, in brief, because capital no longer relies on black extraction but on the technical manipulation of difference as such. The complex situating of blackness as non-presence, the better to leave black reason behind, relates to what Mbembe calls 'the rise of humanity' (156). It is easy to see that what determines this rise is a belief in a 'world that is common to all of us' (176), the very commonality of which maintains the exclusionary relation of blackness to the world that is not here thought through, just because of the need to 'gain distance' from the philosophical concept of blackness (173). This makes of Mbembe's book perhaps a refined example of a confusion between *episteme* and any *savoir* that could go beyond it.

A comparison of Mbembe with Fanon is instructive in this regard. As already indicated, there is no doubt that Mbembe wants to occupy the place opened up by Fanonism. Yet the question remains whether Mbembe's reading is bought at the price of a powerful, but disconcerting misreading. As I shall suggest, where Mbembe sees resolutions and plenitudes,

Fanon sees schisms and differences; and where Mbembe asks for the reinvention of racial political concepts in the wake of technicisation and globalisation, Fanon presents a tabula rasa that is incommensurable to the political as such (and in which blackness cannot be thought without already being crossed through). It is tempting to speculate that this is of a piece with Mbembe's arguably most reductive gesture in his reading of Fanonism, which consists in presenting blackness as essentially a way of thinking about universal humanism, its failings in relation to others, but also its future remedy as a promissory structure. This is an odd situation given how much Mbembe's reading of Fanon, from *On the Postcolony* to *Sortir de la grande nuit*, has always relied on Bataille or Bergson rather than on, say, Lacan or Merleau-Ponty. Whereas Fanon argued that blackness is not yet in the world, Mbembe takes the opposite course: his description of the becoming-black of the world (a bold claim which is never, as such, mapped out beyond the supposed virtualisation of desire) is concerned not with what makes blackness irreducible, incommensurable, inassimilable to critique, but with the general state of the imaginary that defines it. In *Critique of Black Reason*, this emphasis is clearly observed in the way Mbembe presents black radicalism as the metaphysical dupe of black reason rather than the rigorous attempt to articulate a thought of difference that is *not yet a racial concept*, and one whose task is to go beyond the racial *proprieties* of anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, classics, theology, literary studies and psychoanalysis wherein blackness is always deemed secondary, belated, or merely empirical.

From this examination Mbembe derives a definition of black critique as incapable of dominating, without repeating, the same discourses which define its history. So nothing lies outside racial reason (except for the thought that has an aporetic and undefined relation to the empiricity of black people) – not even the anti-colonialism that refuses the colonial image. Obviously, this enables Mbembe to hold tight to the thought that any black critique must be able to think the inescapability of race in general – which would include the role played by culture, language and religion – but it also means thinking blackness *without* reducing it to, or perpetuating, black

reason. From this he derives his famous definition of the post-colony – it isn't just simply a relation of domination that is political and subordinate to economics, but an accursed share based on a principle (wherein every decision is irreducibly perverse) of sacrifice, wherein the enemy is always potentially also neighbour, brother or friend (106). In other words, sacrifice – or perpetual race war – derives its vertiginous pleasure and feral violence from the existence of an always-to-be sacrificeable racial subject.

Mbembe's description of Fanon's work therefore rests on a twofold movement: violence and predation; the relation between the two is perversely, even giddily, implicated in the other. This thematic, which is not wrong in itself, involves an emphasis which amplifies the problem with *Critique of Black Reason* as a whole: that is, the way in which being human represents, for Mbembe, the only alternative for a blackness bereft of its humanity. Thus it is not the concept of humanism itself that puts into motion that of race – the doctrines and myths of race as essence – but it is the black relationship to the human that has been distorted by, or perverted by, that of race. This set-up, which dominates the final part of the book, closes down the space opened up by what might reasonably be called a black worldliness that disallows any possible racist reading of the world, for it now seems to be impossible to be politically black without this transcendentalising appeal to the human as telos. Fanonism, however, presents another view, or, rather, the way Fanon interprets racism's perverted truth is to show how '*les damnés*' actually represent a quasi-transcendent judgment defying all reason.

One thing more. It is clear that ultimately, as Mbembe sees it, the scandal of colonial governance is libidinal-affective in nature. There must be something very reassuring about this finding of mastery / fantasy for those who see colonialism as an aberration of humanism – reduced to a perversity, the ideological power of colonialism happily has nothing disturbing about it at the level of reason. It is merely a phantasmatically destructive matter, as in the case of those it either fucks or kills solely according to arbitrary whim. But this libidinal economy forgets the dangerous and troubling tabula rasa that decolonialism presents to the status quo of the colony. And it is noteworthy

that when Fanon talks about the wretched what is noteworthy about them is that they *have no share*, as in the case of those indebted to the system, and therefore have the least to lose. It is not they, then, for whom the revolution is a matter of sacrifice to be treated tragically or expeditiously. Their violence is profound because it is founded on a ceaseless sense of precarity; as such their very existence is a refusal of the economics of racial patronage and gifts by which the colonial potentate employs / enjoys its luxurious form of power-pleasure. If Mbembe cannot see this it is because he regards the potentate and the *colonisé* as *equally* abject in their subjection to the phantasm each has of the other. It is a relation of complete servitude and luxurious expenditure. However, this is a view that cannot separate itself from the shared vision of an imaginary indebtedness shared by both African and European alike.

There are benefits to this conception of the colony as a desire-producing machine that sees Mbembe address African writing as an attempt to decipher the trauma of colonialism, both in the sense of event and shared secret. I cannot here unpack all the implications of his reading of writers such as Kossi Efoui, Amos Tutuola and Sony Labou Tansi in *Critique of Black Reason*, who are said to represent in their novels 'the nocturnal face of capitalism and the negative labour of destruction' (129). In these texts, in which the 'secret' behind appearances is unveiled, we thereby glimpse what a black critique might mean: its profoundest gesture is, in fact, a writing that reveals the force of the fantasy that separates blackness from itself, but also the signs and symbols, in short, of what makes it into a mythology and a system.

The problem with this reading is, however, that the literariness of these texts gets quickly forgotten in order to present them as a collection of deducible truths. To my eyes, Mbembe's presentation tends to elevate the literary to the level of theory, but what gets discredited or left behind is precisely the literary formal truths in which blackness comes to be written as text: just as one can never arrive at the meaning of blackness without its racist interpretation, so blackness cannot be realised as a style, form or genre without confirming that blackness is never simply present in its representations. For me, the problem of

these pages isn't that they reduce literature to theory, but that they separate the literary from the formal-historical question of textual blackness, and precisely when formal commitments cannot be reduced to that of concept or paraphrase. And this is the rub: although the promotion of black forms of resistance to racial blackness is welcome, the debasement of that resistance to philosophical style is tragic but not in the ways that Mbembe perhaps intended. To my possibly more Fanonian eyes, any critique of black reason brazenly cannot grasp blackness as anything but a historico-logical archive. But for Fanon the wretched is a figure defined by an incommensurable dissidence, and its destinies cannot be defined according to the terms of an artistic claim on being; wretchedness isn't simply a subjugation at the level of representation – it is a tragedy, but in the midst of which it is not yet clear, as in the era of classical politics, whether hope, liberation or failure will follow in its wake. For liberals like Mbembe, Fanon's revolutionary description seems like one of those many tragic narratives of liberation whose salutary unease we continue to be inspired by even if we can no longer share its passions or convictions. As such, *Critique of Black Reason* proclaims a method of analysis that seizes on the impostures of racial reason but only to discredit once again the important forms of black conviction which precisely *refuse* everything that Europe has to offer – a point that Fanon insisted on when he said that black invention must go beyond the mere mimicry of European humanism's promissory structure.

This is the problem – any decolonialism is premature as long as its revolution is not exhausted by historical overcoming – that comes to the fore in the book's final chapter and Epilogue ('The Clinic of the Subject' and 'There Is Only One World'). We know that black nationalists and Pan-Africanists invested in race as the telos of a future black world. However, that those discussions no longer compel us is not, as Mbembe claims, because anti-black racism continues to define the world, but because the promise of a black world implicitly makes race a promise more ordinary than any understanding of the world as such. These thinkers were, consequently, forced to imagine a blackness appearing *through* the relation between a

world without racism and a racism without a world. They were not discussing a false semblance so much as a telos beyond the racial thought of humanity. Their claim to a *black* future was not consequently a desire for a world without race, as Mbembe has it, but a promissory situating of blackness in historical time – namely, an insistence on the future that was also a radical refusal of how humanism has been made to fit a *white* vision of the world, and of any possible world to come. If we no longer see either their images nor their identifications as subjects mirrored in our own desire for a black world, this does not of course mean that, having survived the historical ordeal of our being, we merely seek immersion in a universal which is wholly detached, yet nonetheless still determined by, the crisis that would make us ripe for humanity; a ripening that also, necessarily, sees us as strange fruits hanging from the same tree.<sup>8</sup>

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## Notes

1. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1-2 [subsequent page numbers given in the text].
2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
3. It is perhaps worth noting in this context that recent works in the philosophy of race have struggled to go beyond mere historical description of this problem. Notable exceptions would include various works by Robert Bernasconi, Charles Mills, Donna Jones, Tommy Lott and Lewis Gordon.
4. The enunciative position of such statements is curious given that the very ability to pronounce them already presumes the author's separation from what he is claiming to decipher, the audacity of which relies on a condemnation performed but not as such interrogated.
5. Compare Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).
6. For Mbembe's relation to Foucault, see his 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15:1 (2003), 11-40.
7. Achille Mbembe, 'African Modes of Self-Writing', *Public Culture* 14:1 (2002), 239-273.
8. This is a major theme of my *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).