

Critique of Black Reason

Achille Mbembe

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With this book, Mbembe sets out to trace the interrelated formations of Western and Black consciousness of Blackness, and to explore why and how race has come to mean what it does today. This is what Mbembe achieves, through a dialogue with seminal thinkers, and through a mapping of intellectual engagement with these questions. There is a notable emphasis on topography, and therefore no danger of over-abstraction, since *Critique of Black Reason* remains grounded in spatial and economic structures and journeys through particular moments of situated thought. In this way, Mbembe follows the mutation of the idea of race through the neo-liberal period in order to examine the complicated network that is Black reason. Seeing race as “an operation of the imagination” (32) he delves in to the shadows of the unconscious to establish for us a cartography of the terms and terrains of difference.

The book travels in many directions at once, leaving us with many avenues to explore and the occasional need to stop for breath. Early chapters chart the historical (and continuing) struggles of belonging fully in a world that is structured by exclusion and inequality, and the fantasies which have engendered such a structure. Mbembe describes the production of Blackness as a double shift of subjection and extraction, in which Western consciousness of Blackness stems from a self-centred view of the other as abnormal, and Black consciousness of Blackness emerges from subsequent alienation and struggle. He reveals that race is the foundation of nation and community whilst Blackness is simultaneously seen as an exception to those foundational structures of society. This is one expulsion within a larger series of borders and divisions between peoples and cultures that Mbembe outlines. He attends to the violence and subjection at the heart of those divisions to reveal how race contradicts the idea of a single, common humanity and how race, as ultimate differentiating factor, has determined whose liberty pays for whose liberty. Positioning Blackness for us within the making of our modern world, the author reveals the presence of racial syntax across a range of historical discourses. His narration of the inextricable fettering of capitalism to racism is expertly integrated into the book as one of its strongest elements. Mbembe pays particular attention to how Black consciousness emerged in the circulations and movements of colonization and the slave trade; this is echoed in the Requiem, which he calls “the foundation of the entire book” (129).

It is only right that in that chapter, Mbembe’s prose should be at its most lyrical, and that he should underscore the liberating potential

of sound, rhythm, and dance. The relationships of distance, dependency, and debt which he traces do not occlude the path of re-invigorating Black identity which he commends. In its second half, the book turns to the reservoirs of life which open up possibilities in what Mbembe terms *work for life*—that work towards reaffirming the innate dignity of every human being (173). Here Mbembe discusses the development of Black self-consciousness. The writing is more lyrical, particularly in Chapter Five where the incorporation of texts by Sony Labou Tansi and Amos Tutuola explores the literary inscription of power, memory, and the plasticity of the human subject. Throughout, the book proves wide-ranging and invigorating. Mbembe's project gains momentum in these final chapters, and is at its clearest in his acknowledgements of those thinkers before him who have sought to free Black identity from how it has been created by the colonial past (Glissant, Fanon, Garvey, Césaire). He traces their varying hopeful, volcanic, and metamorphic thought to establish an extensive (albeit exclusively male) lineage of the philosophy of Blackness. This positioning allows Mbembe to end the book with hope and urgency, calling us with him to transcend categories and ideas of race, and to move towards one world of the *in-common*.

If writing is a process of resurrection, drawing our attention to things which have been relegated as 'excess' and 'remainder' and calling out all that is human, then Mbembe's book does such resurrecting work with creativity and care. Condensing and defining the struggle to reconcile difference is one of the greatest strengths of the *Critique*. Mbembe's book is one that needs to be delved into, and its multiple avenues of inquiry to be explored further. His discussion of the contested inscriptions of the past in the present (in statue form, particularly) could not be more timely. His insights into layers of meaning and denial, the (de)constructive power of language and text, and the creation of identity between the spatial and the temporal all demand further attention. Mbembe shakes up ideas in order to view them from a distance and re-form them: echoing other thinkers whose similar pursuits he recognises here, and illustrating his assertion that race is a logic that constantly metamorphoses (36). This book is to be foundational for the "political and ethical critique of racism and of the ideologies of difference" invoked by Mbembe, if indeed we are to struggle for "the creation of a world-beyond-race" (177).

The translation has been completed with equal expertise and creativity by Laurent Dubois, whose clarity is indicated by the explanation in his introduction of translating the French word '*Nègre*.' He chooses a trinity of words ('Blacks,' 'Blackness,' 'the Black man') to map in English the "capacious and shifting" French term which serves as the anchor for Mbembe's book (xiv). Since language is at the heart of the 'conjuring' Mbembe does here, the significance of an excellent translation must not be underestimated. Dubois skilfully conveys the author's tone, resonances, and scope. From his own understanding of the text he transforms it to give us access to the *Critique* in Mbembe's terms. The ability to negotiate and move between the unstable worlds of two languages puts into practice the

very reconciling of difference called for in the text. Dubois's commitment to such practice forms a much-needed bridge: opening up the world of Mbembe's text but also his rich (often francophone) corpus to anglophone readers for whom much of Mbembe's earlier work remains inaccessible. *Critique of Black Reason* constitutes an important move in bringing together francophone and anglophone postcolonial thought and is a timely demonstration of the re-invigorating potential of both critical thought and translation.