

Beyond the Singularity of Subordination: Césaire and Mbembe on “The Work of Man”

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines how Achille Mbembe draws upon, then iterates from, the work of Aimé Césaire to provide a rich analysis of personhood in contemporary Africa. Typically, African treatments of Mbembe’s theorization place considerable emphasis on the intellectual influence of Frantz Fanon, rightly so. And while Fanon does have a central role in Mbembe’s writing, arguably it is Césaire who prompts Mbembe to conceptually insist upon the historical malleability of racial classification, racial civic ascription, and racial subjective comprehension as these social forms are reshaped by historical development. In tracing the development of these aspects of Mbembe’s social and political thought, this paper discusses the bisections and points of departures with Césaire’s poetry and philosophy as it pertains to the notion of Blackness. Effectively the dialectical encounter with Césaire and the Caribbean situation helps give rise to Mbembe’s main conclusion that there is a severe limitation to Black Reasoning, especially when its discursive referents give preference to a sublime singularity over the mutable.

KEYWORDS Caribbean; personhood; pidentity; modernity

I
M odernity begins with “the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population,” as Marx wrote, and “the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins [which] signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production” (2011, 823). Subsequently one finds,

at the end of first light burgeoning with frail covers the hungry Antilles, the Antilles pitted with smallpox, the Antilles dynamited by alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dust of this town sinisterly stranded (Césaire 2013, 3).

Using his poetic aperture to capture the totality of what daylight reveals, this strophe in *Notebook*

of a Return to the Native Land conveys the impetus for Aimé Césaire’s drive to examine the “the dreadful inanity of our *raison d’être*” that later took the form of *Discourse on Colonialism* (2013, 3). Through showing emaciation and rampant extraction, it is for good reason that CLR James (2016) calls this text “the most devastating critique of Western Civilization that has been done in the twentieth century.”

Undoubtedly Caribbean writers have had an extraordinary record in shaping the development of global social theory. In this spirit, this paper examines how Achille Mbembe draws upon, then iterates from, the work of Césaire to provide a rich analysis of the subjective comprehension of personhood in contemporary Africa and beyond. And much like how Jamestells of Césaire’s agenda, so too is there also a larger project for Mbembe. It is revisiting how Africa

was read, how to re-read Africa, and how this re-reading is key to revitalize a canon that, Bruno Latour rightly laments, has “run out of steam.”¹

Treatments of Mbembe’s work typically point to the centrality of Frantz Fanon’s thought. For example, Sindre Bangstad (2018) notes how, notwithstanding the vast geography of Mbembe’s archives, archives which span “the continental African, the Afro-American and the European African” and how his work is rife with substantive engagements with Marcus Garvey, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan among others, “the central figure ... is undoubtedly Fanon.” Indeed, Mbembe’s conception of race owes a great deal to Fanon’s influence. “For Fanon, the term ‘Black’ is more a mechanism of attribution than of self-designation,” is a line from the early part of *Critique of Black Reason* that well encapsulates that influence (Mbembé 2017, 46). *Black Skin, White Masks* repeatedly underscores how the “negro” does not exist by and of himself; through being created as the Other his existence is codified by European institutions. And yet the imprint of Césaire’s thought can be seen too; it provides a prompt for Mbembe to conceptually insist upon the historical malleability of racial classification, racial civic ascription, and racial subjective comprehension as these social forms sit in history.

In tracing selected aspects of Mbembe’s thought, this paper discusses the bisections with Césaire’s poetry and philosophy as it pertains to the notion of Blackness. Effectively, it is the dialectical encounter with Césaire’s conception of the Caribbean (and African) situation – and how to read it – that gives rise to Mbembe’s main conclusion that there are severe limitations to Black Reasoning, especially when its discursive referents give preference to a sublime singularity over the mutable. To be clear, the issue here is not about adjudicating the priority of intellectual debts or whether Fanon or Césaire is more “influ-

ential.” Rather it is how Mbembe aims to enrich the analysis of the notion of Blackness by leaving behind Césaire’s Négritude. In staking out a position adjacent to Césaire, Mbembe, rightly in my view, implies no authenticity, only a politics evoking authenticity; no essential attributes, only a politics evoking essential attributes. Through shattering the façade of primordialism, “a greater fraternity” that is “made to the measure of the world” becomes probable (2017, 160). The result is a subjectivity that acknowledges suffering but is not determined by it either.

II

The late Didier Kaphagawani summarized the efforts by African philosophers to theorize the notion of the person as trying to bridge “the rift between theory and lived experience,” between “products of intellectual abstraction” and the “Lebenswelt” in its concrete form (2005, 77). This task has been made more difficult, he adds, because as “the scholars of African difference” invested energy into discussions of the alienation of European representation, so they neglected how their own representations were also alienating to the lifeworld they nominally addressed. These scholars “were so much steeped in articulating the ideological divides between African and Western worldviews that they lost the real self in their analyses in pursuit of something else, perhaps an esteemed value such as community,” Kaphagawani writes; their ontological conceptions driven by a political goal rather than guided by the “the manifold experiences of the self” (2005, 77).

It is this problematic that Mbembe addresses, and while he works with the language of “high theory” he sides with the experience of material situations as opposed to abstract ontology and its manufactured distinctions. Consider, Mbembe says, how despite the effort to articulate ideological difference with Europe, many newly independent African countries adopted forms of nationalism outlined nearly exclusively by European thought, adopting the logic behind the phenomenon of symbolic capital that Bourdieu so well mapped. As there was little implementation of alternatives, “postwar African nationalism followed the tendencies of the moment by replacing the concept of civilization with that of progress. But this

¹ “Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins?” Latour asks. “Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm?” (2004, 225). These are pressing questions for humanists given how late-stage colonialism has seen the fortification of Europe in advance of mass migration caused by the climate emergency, among other things.

was simply a way to embrace the teleologies of the period” (2017, 88). The influence of colonialism as an exploitative system as well as the role of capital imperatives in shaping both institutions and interpersonal conduct is here critical to the reproduction of the Black condition in the postcolonial present, it is bound up in notions of betterment.

If, as Mbembe writes, race “is an operation of the imagination, the site of an encounter with the shadows and hidden zones of the unconscious,” it is an encounter with durable effects and postcolonial forms but also its own form of teleology (2017, 32). To wit: “The term ‘Black’ referred only to the condition imposed on peoples of African origin (different forms of depredation, dispossession of all power of self-determination, and, most of all, dispossession of the future and of time, the two matrices of the possible),” Mbembe writes (2017, 5–6). Producing Blackness, Mbembe explains, is a social bond predicated upon bondage, the Black Experience is linked by subordination in the service of extraction. Hierarchies of difference and other institutionalized forms functioned to legitimate accumulation by dispossession. Still, racism is not simply a product of class relations. “Race and racism are certainly linked to antagonisms based on the economic structure of society,” he writes, “but it is not true that the transformation of the structure leads ineluctably to the disappearance of racism” (2017, 36).

Mbembe’s analysis by necessity has much to say about distinction-making and civic ascription. He opens the *Critique of Black Reason* by providing a periodization of the racialization of consciousness. It commences with the process of legalized distinctions following Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia in 1676 to co-opt and dissipate the grievances of European indentured workers by giving them higher status while simultaneously breaking the broad coalition that had formed with indentured servants of African origin. These legal decisions set in motion the mass-organized enslavement that traversed the Black Atlantic. This consciousness was reformed under colonial segregationist conditions with its scientific racism providing the rationalization for Blackness being, which denied human reciprocity and gave a social license to atrocities that follow through in Apartheid. As

“beings-taken-by-others” regulated by scripts like *Le Code Noir*, these entities are rendered to the logic of Carl Schmitt’s absolute state of exception, meaning they are ruled through a total necessary suspension of justice (Mbembe 2017, 3). As assets with the same status as furniture, extra-legal force is duly permitted to “stabilize” this exception. The “exceptional” racism towards Blackness was conjoined in “the logic of profit, the politics of power, and the instinct for corruption” and which educated the populace in “behaviors aimed at the growth of economic profitability” (Mbembe 2017, 62, 81). The result was excessive violence as a norm for the Black ruled, this violence necessary because of the vulnerability of capitalist social relations to broad-based coalitions. Although this initial periodization of consciousness does not yet fully demonstrate it (nor does it speak to trajectory) Mbembe frames Blackness as a historical conception of a kind of being that is neither entirely subject nor object, neither entirely determining nor determined.

Considering this history, how might “beings-taken-by-others” become “beings?” Can the “negroes” Césaire describes as “désêtre” (non-beings) ever “just-be-beings?” In his mature work, Mbembe believes so. But perhaps the “possibility of an autonomous African subject” requires leaving Blackness entirely (2017, 14). But to embark on explicating that argumentation, some groundwork is required, especially regarding how other intellectuals, Césaire in this case, addressed the same question but came to a different conclusion.

III

In seeking to comprehend the phenomenon of Black identity under French rule, there is some value in comparing the themes that appear in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* and *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*, a play first performed in 1964. In *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* the first twenty-four strophes draw the readers across Martinique from mornes to board houses. The geography of Black suffering is charted through the rise and fall of sugar plantations. “The poet coming to terms with his own hard logic,” is how Emile Snyder puts it; this description of the physical degradation of the “inert town” precedes the descriptions of moral degradation, for

instance Snyder (1970, 198) and Césaire (2013, 5). The dilapidated board house becomes synecdoche of colonial society and for what colonialism does to the family unit. There is the sacrificial mother, the father who beats the child to ensure that colonial authorities do not beat them worse. Through the catalogue of punishments and means of dying, so race takes form. Punishment is due because the colonial subject is Black, and the subject is Black because of the punishment dealt. Three hundred years of colonialism produced multiple signifiers of Blackness attesting to the ugly dehumanization where populations are present and presented purely in aggregate, where a “masterpiece of caricature” exists to justify that dehumanization (Césaire 2013, 29).

The rhetor emerges in strophe twenty-five and over the course of the remaining poem has an epiphany that their colonial education was one of alienation wherein Christian rituals are empty; that their intellectual formation was mainly the denial of the meanings of Blackness, which was to become bodies ready-at-hand for instrumentation. Alienation is also found in estrangement from Africanness. The rhetor invokes the Ethiopians, whom they call “truly the eldest sons of the world” (Césaire 2013, 37). Then as the *Notebook* climaxes, so the rhetor prepares for a transformation, but not one predicated upon French assimilationist ideals, but rather one informed by the recognition that what is at stake is nothing less than an insistence of fully throated humanness itself. As the strophes continue so the land comes alive through the encounters with the people it birthed. The whole purpose of this poetic movement “is to invent some form of solidarity or collectivity to fuel in turn his anti-colonial revolt,” as Jane Hiddleston writes. “To this end, he oscillates between affirming the Martinican’s belonging to the specific category of negritude on the one hand, and seeking to transcend that specificity in a celebration of universal humanity on the other” (2010, 88). Here Césaire uses the term “nègre” to symbolically subvert the pejorative connotation of the term.

In Césaire’s view the formation of collective identity requires addressing psychological dynamics. This is because colonial society was an interjection in the development of organic institutions, norms, and relations,

matters attuned to the proverbial roots and routes that form Caribbean societies. In this case the sociological supports the philosophical. These first experiments in modernity that Sidney Mintz and Orlando Patterson identify in their respective bodies of work were founded on processes of coercion, forced labour and systemic brutality. Within this socioeconomic system gender roles and their associated norms, expectations, and behaviours were naturalized; there was the accompanying violence that policed the boundaries of those roles. Despite sustained decolonization efforts, these patterns of domination have continued well into the postcolonial period. Despite much labour, even changes in political leadership and legislation appear unable to alter these violent social codes.

“The product of Caribbean experience, French education, and African studies,” Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to The Native Land* is a palimpsest, revisited several times after publication (Hale 1983, 136).² Such a revisiting is not uncommon in radical Caribbean social and political thought. As Rachel Douglas has shown, CLR James’s *The Black Jacobins* evolved through several modalities and permutations. Douglas attributes this iterative rewriting as an exercise in “rewriting historical misrepresentations” of colonial propagandists by “writing back.” If Douglas is correct that “what rewriting encapsulates is the dynamic of revolutionary process,” then it is possible to understand “rewriting as the application of Marxist historiography predicated upon a dialectical relationship of a changing text to a changing context” (Douglas 2019, 210, 211; Timcke 2020). In James’s case, both a grand narrative in *The Black Jacobins*, but also successive iterations that show how the text is “unfinished and provisional” (Douglas 2019, 132). This mirrors the character of West Indian identity, which in fusing together the grand and mutable and

² Interested readers can refer to James Arnold’s discussion of alternations and additions to strophes in various published iterations. Arnold draws attention to Césaire’s intensification of anti-capitalist anti-colonialism from 1947, and well the role of various publishers in shaping the text. Accordingly, “from 1956 onward the reader is no longer oriented toward a network of metaphors that undergird a drama of personal sacrifice. Henceforth the drama is a sociopolitical one that calls for decolonization and the democratization of economic institutions” (Arnold 2013, xix).

hereby adhering to the precepts of modernity, stands adjacent to the white bourgeois world West Indians built through sweat and sorrow.

For Césaire's intellect these difficulties underscore the psychology of political leadership in the difficult pursuit of decolonization. This topic that would stalk him as he founded the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais in 1958, the problems and other various considerations are on display in *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*. Césaire had a great admiration for the Haitian Revolution as for him it represented Négritude in action, knowingly writing *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* against a backdrop of French colonial wars raging in Algeria and Indochina. As a treatise on decolonialization, in this 1963 play-text Césaire provides a commentary on postcolonial leadership. Here the three main points are what does a leader do for independence; after independence; and, again, what role might a metaphysical conception of race be leveraged to achieve independence.

Similarly, the main motif is the fallacy of colonial imitation of the *métropole* expressed through the protagonist, Christophe. Christophe's counterpart in the play is Pétion; these two characters intended to personify different politics in the second wave of Haitian leaders during the revolution. And while Pétion has faults aplenty, it is Christophe's desire for Black identity found through re-establishing the oppressions that made the French rich so that he himself may become rich which deserves greater critique. Indeed, Christophe's projects become conjoined through the construction of a grand citadel intended to celebrate Black freedom and self-determination; but which frankly could only be built using the whip. There is also a greater moral lesson. Although there is not a neat functional relationship between Toussaint | Christophe and Lumumba | Mobutu, aspects about betrayal and foreign intervention to murder revolutionary leadership are shared and intentional. In effect, Césaire's point is too often inheritors of rule do not possess the rhetoric or gravitas to advance the ideals of revolutionary emancipation. Sensing they are not up to the task, over time they retreat to corruption, kill critics, and intensify repression to the point that present conditions are comparable to past enslavement. And so, it is a dreadful pattern of pun-

ishment and esteemed identity that connected the colonial and postcolonial worlds that both Césaire and Mbembe seek to interrupt. But whereas Césaire acted in the realm of psychology and representative politics, Mbembe proposes that self-determination of the person can give rise to self-determination of the polity.

IV

Given how Mbembe's work emerges out of the disillusionment as efforts to consolidate democratization were eroded by theatrics and performativity, a quick reading of his work will likely reach the conclusion that his project is yet another lamentation about Africa – certainly well-constructed, yes – but otherwise merely ordinary in type. Indeed, because of quick readings like this, Mbembe has not found a sympathetic audience in South Africa, where he has been based for more than two decades, where the very temper of current discourse and the preoccupation with rapid accumulation does not easily lend itself to steady contemplation. This impatience is especially keen among the country's Black Consciousness scholars (Chipkin 2002). Whereas Mbembe discusses Blackness as an imposed ascription upon a way of being that signifies modern doubt and contingency, Black Consciousness scholars by contrast think there is little equivocation around race. "He seems disinterested in pointing out the deliberate creation of the notion for political and conquest reasons," Rothery Tshaka (2018, 1) writes. But does it not seem like these are the words of those invested in using history to generate a final vocabulary, to overlook developments around the de-convergence between race and class, to pursue private gains through foreclosing the possibility of the person?

There is another charge, and that is Mbembe's philosophy that nothing positive characterizes the Black experience comes to jeopardize the tenuous political solidarity between Africans and the wider African Diaspora. In the process of that argumentation over Black subjectivity, Mbembe places considerable emphasis on the cultural differences between Blacks in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Africa. Remarking on this portion of the argument, Tshaka says that "Mbembe seems to endorse some of the most bizarre sentiments on Black people that would make any self-respecting Black con-

scious scholar cringe” (2018, 1). The cause of these dismissive remarks arises from Mbembe’s framing of Black Reason: “from the beginning, its primary activity was fantasizing. It consisted essentially in gathering real or attributed traits, weaving them into histories, and creating images” (2017, 27). In effect, Black Reason has taken on the attributes of colonial interpretation of African beliefs as fetishism and thus is not suitable for a project of an actualization of identity. “Mbembe has a deep dislike for anything African,” Tshaka says in defense of Black singularity, thereafter likening Mbembe to “Joseph Conrad” writing a catalog to please a European audience, the barb here involving invitations to speak internationally (Tshaka 2018, 1). But if acts of unnecessary meanness like these have been introduced and deemed permissive, is it not fair to comment upon how reactionaries are typically unsettled by another so conversant with Hegel and Heidegger on the one hand and Césaire and Fanon on the other? Is it not fair to comment upon the fears that the singularly cannot abide difference? Do not the answers to these questions reveal a distinctive South African intellectual xenophobia directed at the Cameroonian?

Mbembe’s project has been to take the Hegelian philosophy of history and strip it of all its racial ignorance of Africa, to insist that Africa has happenings, changes, and meanings. Hegel’s conclusion that Africa is motionless and preoccupied with fetishism provides Mbembe’s definition of the colony, “as a series of hollows” (Mbembe 2001, 179): tropes of empty land rife for Lockean property claims because the colonist cannot or will not see the “exercising of existence.” The beings that are present are deemed morally and socially empty too, suitable only for subjection. The hollows produce a place where little matters, or little can be cared about. “The colonized belongs to the *universe of immediate things*,” Mbembe writes, “useful things when needed, things that can be molded and are mortal, futile and superfluous things, if need be” (2001, 187). Subsequently, the colonized are neither entirely subject nor object. Their human fears are required to drive their utility, their objective status decided by what they are denied.

While it is somewhat standard fare to use Heidegger to amend Hegel – Herbert Marcuse and Paul Ricœur are the preeminent precursors – Mbembe

does much more than simply apply phenomenological hermeneutics to historical idealism for the purposes of analyzing the current situations on the African continent. Rather it is his thoughts about negation and death that become central to the question he poses about “how does one get from the colony to ‘what comes after?’” (Mbembe 2001, 196). This next step involves theorizing about the subjects of the various historiographies, to put those historiographies about the lifeworld into a dialectic to then examine what potential supersession may arise. Without metaphysical burdens or the expectation of being world-historical agents, what might be possible?

V

Although great caution should be taken to ensure a philosophy does not become reduced to a slogan, or a phrase reified and dis-embedded from its wider text, there is some value in using an anchoring concern as an entry point for that philosophy. Mbembe provides several openings, but among the best comes from the early pages of *On the Postcolony*, a book that took at least six years to write. This phrase is “exercising existence.” The term speaks to the interplay of spirit and lifeworld. While there is the distanced knowing of the becoming of spirit, it is the lifeworld where “individuals’ existence unfolds in practice; it is where they exercise existence – that is, live their lives out and confront the very forms of their death” (Mbembe, 2001, 15). Mbembe seeks to examine the “signs” of this lifeworld, to discuss its “eccentricities, its vocabularies, and its magic” to conceptualize subjectivity. There are three major conceptualizations of the African lifeworld worth discussing here.

First, essentialism attempts to anchor identity on features of African existence, using these particularities to claim distinctiveness. The appeals have oftentimes been to affect (like *négritude*), pre-colonial practices, language, or spirituality. Each is claimed as an intrinsic inalienable property, that because of its claimed durability, can be used as the focal point of reflection for African subjectivity. Primordial essentialism inverts the European racial natural and social science that assumed that Africans were inferior; primordialism instead claims superior traits or privileged insight. Notwithstanding its regressive tendencies, essentialist

accounts at least give the opportunity of considering African subjectivity for itself, not as the result of external historical forces or discourses. For example, *négritude* was first a moment of “situated thinking,” borne of place and time. Similarly, Garveyism had a “heretical genius.” But these are both partial within “the rise of humanity” and so need to be superseded (Mbembé 2017, 161, 102, 156).

Second, postcolonialism holds that contexts produce subjects. Accordingly, the context of enslavement, colonization, and marginalization gives unique meaning to the African experience. Through confrontation with this power/knowledge complex, postcolonialism shows the constructedness of the ‘other’ under conditions of Western modernity. To remake themselves, existence requires resistance to modernity. While always already oppositionally defined, postcolonialism makes possible thinking about new kinds of conceptions.

Third, academism positions Africans as the subject of intentional social/scientific methodology. In structural anthropology, Africans followed precepts governed by “deep” structures that are universal to the human mind. In rational choice economics, Africans made acute preferential choices given sets of constraints and opportunities. In contemporary philanthropic-development theory, Africans are actors engaged in neo-modernization with technology and trade (Mbembe 2001, 7). These subjects may have voices in these methodologies through mandated consultation exercises but are typically mute except for a small set of self-critical researchers catering to overriding global expectations and norms.

But these three conceptions will forever be partial; because through discussions of what is missing, they overlook what exists. While Mbembe suggests these conceptualizations have value insofar that they offer counterparts to the awful forms of racism they encountered, his project is to supersede them through finding a way to “exercise existence” that is not essentialist, ahistorical and elite, but rather one that centers the contingent, contemporary, and plural lifeworlds of people on the African continent. As such, Mbembe has no interest in creating a Black singularity, but rather seeks to use history and theory to contemplate present predicaments to imagine the “possibility of

an autonomous African subject,” one that is positive. But that task requires recognizing how current “exercises of existence” are fraught with violence while the construction of the subject comes during brutalization from colonial structural legacies, neo-colonial relations, and rapacious dispossession by African rulers who have little desire to end the violence (Mbembe 2017, 14). Accordingly, the lifeworld of those on the African continent are forms of hollowness, absences, negations, and death. In other words, these lifeworlds are constituted by alienation. Answers to this alienation are not to be found in religion like Christianity, which seeks to convince the faithful that through their testimony of belief they can negate death. In the face of violence, the divine “is suddenly exhausted” giving rise to “astonishment and incredulity, to the point that people laugh” (Mbembe 2001, 231). Perhaps then, “exercising existence” requires subtracting negative meaning?

VI

Life in the postcolony is “nasty, brutish, and short,” rife with excessive destructive forces that bring forth pain. Concurrently the global periphery is expanding with the postcolony suffering under debt and austerity, while avenues for people to migrate to the core are tightening. But Mbembe also wants to underline that the point is to “discover what ‘spirit’ is at work in this turbulent activity” (Mbembe 2001, 240). To begin, the resurgence of identarian beliefs around “racial realism” and their various permutations from white and black nationalism, plus the refusal to even contemplate under what conditions a subject would be willing to give up racial categories altogether, all the while navigating a heady politics of identity with boundary policing enforcing strict criteria about who is or is not, who may or may not, be a member, identify or affiliate, is troubling. Lastly, regardless of their intention, colour blindness or post-racial ideologies have functioned to dismiss the historical suffering of marginalized groups or as an excuse to argue against targeted redress. In this global context, can Blackness, as a political relation, be re-thought? Are different political relations possible?

Mbembe defines race as a system of images that forestalls any and all encounters with a subject.

Fantasy replaces reality while fear replaces ethnography with tropes of sloth, intellectual inferiority, animalism that justifies enslavement and colonial oppression, becoming a “reservoir that provided the justifications for the arithmetic of racial domination,” Mbembe writes. These notions were helpful to placate any moral reservation about “how to deploy large numbers of laborers within a commercial enterprise that spanned great distances” as a “racial subsidy” to the expanding plantation system. Accordingly, race “is an operation of the imagination, the site of an encounter with the shadows and hidden zones of the unconscious” (Mbembe 2017, 27, 20, 32).

Race as signifying a biological subject is pure fiction, but when persons engage in racist identifications, through letting it mediate one’s experience, the users allow a master’s concepts to establish the life-world. Certainly, there are several poor discourses of race, one of which “consists in expanding the Western ratio of the contributions brought by Black ‘values of civilization,’ the ‘specific genius’ of the Black race, for which ‘emotion’ in particular is considered the cornerstone.” Mbembe writes “the term ‘Black’ referred only to the condition imposed on peoples of African origin (different forms of depredation, dispossession of all power of self-determination, and, most of all, dispossession of the future and of time, the two matrices of the possible).” Subsequently, through its generalization, the term “institutionalized as a new norm of existence.” In this respect “Black Reason” cannot be separated from the “violence of capital” with its “logic of occupation and extraction.” Mbembe concedes that Black Reason is an “ambiguous and polemical term,” but he invokes it to “identify several things at once: forms of knowledge; a model of extraction and depredation; a paradigm of subjection, including the modalities governing its eradication; and, finally, a psycho-oneiric complex.” He explains, “to produce Blackness is to produce a social link of subjection and a body of extraction.” Currently, the deep investment in modernity has given rise to “new imperial practices” at the confluence of market globalization, economic liberalization, and technological and military innovation in the early twenty-first century: “If yesterday’s drama of the subject was exploitation by capital,” Mbembe writes, “the tragedy of the multitude today

is that they are unable to be exploited at all. They are abandoned subjects, relegated to the role of a ‘superfluous humanity.’ Capital hardly needs them any more to function” (Mbembe 2017, 90, 5–6, 4, 10, 18, 6, 3, 11). In effect, calls to center historical specificity cannot escape that the epistemologies are shaped by recurring structures of domination.

VII

Mbembe positions Black reason as a challenge to Hegelian conceptions of reason wherein it is regarded as objective and universal. But this Hegelian account presumes reason is revealed by spirit, rather than simply being a construction of human enterprise in specific situations. Entertaining the notion that there are different forms of reason between Europe and Africa, then the contact between Europe and Africa produces a white conception of Blackness and black conception of Blackness. We can see one part of this when, for example, Senghor equated the Africans as being close to instinct and Europe as being close to Hellenic reason. A white conception of blackness holds that Blacks are, at best, only able to comprehend the appearances of the world. As they cannot grasp the world as such, they have no grounds to claim admittance as full, moral equals and persons able to give and take reasons because they lack the capacity to understand reason and its implications. Black consciousness of Blackness “aspires also to be a color ... It is a coat of arms, its uniform” (Mbembe 2017, 152). Bearing the consequences not of choice, Blacks are aware of what is being done to them and so there are two options. The first is to concede, the second is to oppose. Both bring death, but different narratives of esteem. These two consciousnesses are classic Hegelian master and bondsman dialectic, a codependency that traps both parties in unproductive ways. The inequality further means that when the bondsman is charged with being dirty after fixing the carriage, they are sent to wash with the soap the master provides. In contemporary terms, the ills of Blackness are to be washed away through the “conversion to Christianity, the introduction of market economy,” Mbembe observes, “and the adoption of rational, enlightened forms of government” (Mbembe 2017, 87–88). However, freedom requires

that there are no masters and no bondsman.

In Hegelian categories, when the particular is falsely subsumed within the general, representation is forced to assume a determining role, which is not its calling, much like how the bourgeoisie formed the false concept of themselves as the universal class. Because of this error, the normal relationship to reality is distorted and people can only see the representation which they mistake for reality. When construing themselves as the universal class, they make their norms and values – what could also be called Whiteness – the social center. For Marx, treating representation as material and substantive is an ideological process, to idolize and treat the representation as real. The temptation to idolize representation serves the interests of political tyranny, which aims to shift focus away from the real and relies on the creation of the autonomy of representation. Marx's analysis seeds the critique of the aestheticization of politics. This is the central tenet of Marxism's conception of ideology as a mystifying effect.

Race is an abstraction. But like in Hegelian categories where opposites are mutually definitive, the same relation is at play in the dialectic of Whiteness and Blackness. Ideology turns on an inability to recognize the mediating function of representation, in assuming it is an autonomous sphere. Whereas identity is relational and historical, ideology involves overlooking how concepts of the person and their attachments are mediated through their relations to other concepts. "In consciousness – in jurisprudence, politics, etc. – relations become concepts," Marx and Engels (1845) wrote in *The German Ideology*, "since they do not go beyond these relations, the concepts of the relations also become fixed concepts in their mind." Calling it a "giant cage," Mbembe concedes that Black Reason is an "ambiguous and polemical term," but he uses it to signify "forms of knowledge; a model of extraction and depredation; a paradigm of subjection, including the modalities governing its eradication; and, finally, a psycho-oneiric complex" (2017, 10). This conceptualization is useful to address how ideology both reifies and mystifies identity.

Targeting Hegel's "cunning of reason" in which reason avoids being implicated when reasoning goes awry in the atrocities of modernity, so Blackness is

complicit too as a subtle instrument of oppression and degradation. Is it enough, like Adorno and Horkheimer argued in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that reason must be accountable to itself, for Blackness to hold itself to account? Likely not. Aside from being forever partial, at best Blackness could become "a metaphysical and aesthetic envelope" that inhibits liberatory "exercising existence" aiming "to belong fully in this world that is common to all of us" (Mbembe 2017, 176). This envelope might be comfortable for some. Many even. But is this different from prior strategies that pose either concession or opposition to Whiteness? As an alternative emancipatory avenue Mbembe believes there is much to be gained from aspiring to a "post-Césairian era." Whereas Césaire has tried to ideologically deconstruct ala Derrida, this Black | White dialectic, Mbembe means that "we embrace and retain the signifier 'Black' not with the goal of finding solace within it but rather as a way of clouding the term in order to gain distance from it" (2017, 173). Such an exercise is ever more vital in the world where subjectivity is increasingly foreclosed, neurologically fixed, set by algorithmic tools in service of market exploitation. Without metaphysical burdens to carry or the imposed presumption of being history's agent now "filling in" hollows, African peoples can just live as themselves on their own terms.

VIII

There are those who are likely to be frustrated that Mbembe points to transcendence but does not offer up a comprehensive programmatic agenda. Indeed, at times Mbembe actively resists that exercise. Such can be the frustrations with work that seeks to provide a hermeneutic construction of subjectivity considering a post-structural account of violence. But at this point, historical materialism might be able to offer due counsel. Much like Marx did not want to write "recipes for the cook shops of the future," Mbembe is not outlining a future society. Rather he is trying to identify the dialectical counterparts that may produce the conceptual resources for a future lifeworld. As opposed to thinking of African identity as a singular crystallization, identities on the African continent are capable of change, and are constantly changing. And much like Marx and Engels in *The Communist*

Manifesto understood in 1848 that communists did not yet have the movement of economic laws of motion on their side and so they bravely faced unready conditions for their revolutionary activities, regardless of whether identities on the African continent are ready to move beyond the singularity of subordination, the conditions for new ways for exercising existence could be on the horizon. Until then, through the negation of the negation, Mbembe's efforts resemble those of Theodor Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*. It is fitting that he be held in the same esteem.

To put it simply, for Mbembe Blackness and Black Reason are irrevocably partial. Hence, they put undue constraints on the thought required to meet the contemporary situation. By investing in the particularity of Black Reason one risks essentializing Blackness. This regressive movement is fantasy too, unrealistic for it declares common identity and interest that spans the globe, in doing so erasing the actual "existing exercises" taking place in diverse situations. Such an idea, much like race, can do a great deal of damage for its reification of ascription. Besides which, as Gabriel Apata writes, "to be black in America is not quite the same thing as to be black in South Africa or Brazil or Cuba or even in Saudi Arabia and allowance must be made from the different evolution and particularities of blackness across the world and the differences that each has acquired in their new locations." Lifeworlds are fragmented, and so homogeneity is pretense. What remains is complexion and lineage – race and caste – which are "superficial and unimportant" (Apata 2017). Considering this history, freedom becomes letting the subjectivity of "beings-taken-by-others" recede into the distance and embracing "beings" that are in new situations. It is in these moments we find that "the work of man has only begun" (Césaire 2013, 49).

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