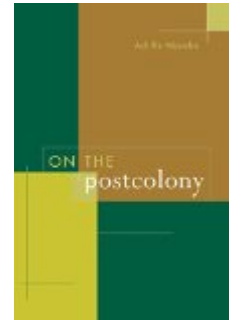




Achille Mbembe. *On the Postcolony*. Studies on the history of society and culture. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. 274 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-20435-5.



Reviewed by Bruce Janz

Published on H-Africa (March, 2002)

"Framing the Issue"

One of the luxuries of participating in a cycle of reviews of a work, such as I have been asked to do for H-Africa, is that a writer can focus on a specific theme, trusting that others from different disciplinary backgrounds will cover other themes. This is what I intend to do in this review of Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*. I will use one major theme as a connecting thread through this book, and assess his success in dealing with it. I will consider what he means by "exercising existence" (p. 15), and how it stands as a critique of ways of conceiving subjectivity in African philosophy.

Several strategies have emerged over the last few decades for articulating the nature of the person in Africa. One might be called the "essentialist" approach. This is the attempt to find the particular feature of African existence that makes it unique. So, one might appeal to emotion (negritude), community ("I am because we are"), tradition, culture, language or something else personally or culturally intrinsic and unique that can provide the starting point for reflection on Africa and the African person. It is worth noting that

there is a tension here, between establishing uniqueness and continuity with the rest of the world.

European science and social theory in times past assumed that Africans were different, by which they meant inferior, and in many cases the same tendency to argue for ontological difference also argues for ontological similarity. Negritude, for example, distinguished emotional from logical reason—but they were still both reason, equal, similar, but different. Mbembe is not the first to raise questions about essentialist approaches to African philosophy. The Malawian philosopher Didier Kaphagawani, in a posthumously published essay titled "Some African Conceptions of Person", concludes his comments about contemporary attempts by African philosophers to theorize the notion of the person as follows:

"I have...tried to expose the rift between theory and lived experience, the distance between the products of intellectual abstraction and, as Michael Jackson aptly calls it, 'the manifold and ambiguous character of the immediacy of a *Lebenswelt*'." (Kaphagawani, p. 77).

Kaphagawani and Mbembe both recognize a similar problem in African philosophy over the last several decades. Both want to resist the tendency toward essentializing the African person, and more significantly, both want to take the lived experience of the African seriously. Kaphagawani's target is the notion that the African "self" is one which must take community as a generative and fundamental feature. His wry comment is that

"the scholars of African difference 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. The concepts of the self adopted by these scholars are chosen strictly with this goal in mind: they are concerned not with what concept best captures the manifold experiences of the self but with what concept best allows them to both promote difference and derive the ontological values of the vital forces as well as communalism" (Kaphagawani, p. 74).

A second approach to the nature of the person has been to look outside, to the various forces at whose interstices the person appears. There is nothing unique inside the person (indeed, there may be no subject at all apart from the context), but there is something unique in the African experience--having been colonized, enslaved, marginalized--which makes the one living in these conditions unique. Postcolonialism and poststructuralism, whatever their differences, share this account of human existence. They attempt to chart the course of power/knowledge and desire in various forms, and to show the social construction of the self under the conditions produced by Western modernity. Specifically, the near ubiquitous concept of the "Other" begins most accounts of the person, signalling that the African person is a construct of social forces brought to bear historically, and from which there is no escape apart from altering those forces

themselves. Existence in Africa is not described solely by resistance to the conditions of Western modernity, but its impact is so profound that no account of the person in Africa can afford to start elsewhere.

A third way of thinking about the African person has been what I will call the "disciplinary" approach. This has in fact been the way Africans have been characterized by the academy over the past hundred or so years. Africans become the "black box" to be explained. They are the subject of social/scientific accounts, and become whatever those methodologies will allow or require. Under structuralism, for example, Africans became governed by socially required regularities beyond their immediate awareness. Under rational choice economics, they became agents making preferential calculations given a set of constraints and opportunities.

Under contemporary political theory, Africans are actors engaged in social evolution and modernization (p. 7). Africans, then, become the mute subjects of investigation, unable to be heard in response to these methodologies, since the responses are always another piece of data to be absorbed and interpreted, or are at worst anomalies on the graph that can be safely dismissed in the interests of an account of behaviour within Africa. At the very least, these accounts are not accounts for Africans themselves, ones which make their actions intelligible to themselves. And, these methods have been poor at incorporating non-linearity (p. 17). At their worst, these disciplinary methodologies serve simply to reinforce Africa's inferiority, as a place that lacks, where there is a fundamental absence (p. 4).

I rehearse these (familiar and simplified) approaches to put Achille Mbembe's recent book, *On the Postcolony*, into context. One way of understanding Mbembe's task is to understand what he is rethinking. Put simply, he is rethinking all three of these approaches to accounting for African life. And, he is hinting at a fourth way, one which does

not ignore the strengths of any of the three I have already mentioned, but tries to overcome the (already mentioned) limitations of each.

What are the strengths of each? The essentialist accounts of life in Africa at least give the opportunity of considering African life for itself, not as the result of external forces or someone else's agenda. The poststructural or postcolonial accounts at least make possible thinking about the true otherness of African existence, an otherness that remains a problem for Western thought to truly address and that must be theorized to truly exercise existence (p. 2). And the disciplinary accounts at least give the possibility of, well, discipline; in other words, accounts of African existence that are self-critical, and yet properly model the complexities of African life for Africans.

Mbembe's programmatic statement comes early in the book: "[F]or each time and each age, there exists something distinctive and particular--or, to use the term, a 'spirit' (*Zeitgeist*). This 'life-world' is not only the field 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. On this basis, I then asked what is the set of particular signs that confers on the current African age its character of urgency, its distinctive mark, its eccentricities, its vocabularies, and its magic, and make it both a source of terror, astonishment, and hilarity at once? What gives this set of things significations that all can share? In what languages are these significations expressed? How can these languages be deciphered?" (p. 15).

This book is about the "exercis[ing] existence." In a way it comes close to Lewis Gordon's *Existential Africana*, in that it also attempts to give an account of existence for the one engaged in it. The key in the preceding sentence is the final phrase. Mbembe regards previous attempts to theorize subjectivity as missing an account of contingent, contemporary existence *for Africans themselves*. Mbembe does not set out a general

theory on how this might happen (as if this was possible); instead, the bulk of the book consists of a set of exercises in existence, an attempt to imagine the "possibility of an autonomous African subject" (p. 14).

Yet, if we have grasped that this is Mbembe's positive program, one might be forgiven if that program is forgotten for the next two hundred pages. Indeed, chapters two through five read as an account of alienated African existence and the fundamental and ever-present violence that describes that existence at every level from the personal to the national. Is the exercise of existence anything more than a narrative of loss, absence, and negativity? Is there indeed an autonomous African subject, or is there nothing but pain?

Mbembe does, in fact, want to argue for a positive subject in the postcolony, but we must understand the path through chapters two to five in order to understand how he can conclude the book as follows: "What is certain is that, when we are confronted by such a work of art, Nietzsche's words regarding Greek tragedy are appropriate: 'We must first learn to enjoy as complete men.' Now, what is learning to enjoy as complete men--and women--unless it is a way of living and existing in uncertainty, chance, irreality, even absurdity?" (p. 242)

The path from the positive vision of African existence, in the first chapter, to the statement just made, could be made in various ways. I will choose the path of negation.

"On Nothing"

This is a book about nothing, in the best sense of the term. Not simply the nothing of the violence done to Africans, although that is addressed, and as well as anyone since Fanon has done it. Not the nothing of negation, the "otherness" of colonized Africa, although there is plenty about that as well. "[W]hile we now feel we know nearly everything that African states, societies, and economies *are not*, we still know absolutely nothing about *what they actually are*" (p. 9). And, not nothing as lack

(and the resistance to that characterization), despite comments such as: "African politics and economics have been condemned to appear in social theory only as the sign of a lack, while the discourse of political science and development economics has become that of a quest for the causes of that lack" (p. 8).

The thread that binds this book together is the nothing that forms the situation of human existence in Africa. I use the word "situation" rather than "site" purposely--the situation is the place of meanings and promises, horrors and regrets; the site is the space of possibilities. Mbembe is interested in place, not space. Not simply "where is Africa?", but "where is it possible to be African in the post-colony," or, "where is the post-colony?" If we think spatially, this place is a nothing, an absence, a "displacement" (p. 15). Historically it was no-where, at least until it was mapped and claimed as a resource. And, much of this book rehearses the modes of lack, of loss, of being no-where.

And yet, that is not the final message of the book. Existence is still exercised; it has, or finds, its place. But we are not yet at this place. Tragically, the exercise of existence is fraught with violence. Indeed, Mbembe's earlier resistance to some poststructural modes of thought might seem ironic, given the account he gives of the construction of the subject in the midst of violence. We see the tragic exercise of existence best in chapter four, "The Thing and Its Doubles." One might read this as a chapter on the alienation of representation. Not that representation alienates, although that is certainly also true, but that representation (in this case Cameroonian political cartoons) shows alienation, not simply as a faithful report of a condition, but as a complex dialectic between what is present and what is absent. Mbembe puts the visible and the invisible in tension in an attempt to show the domination under which people live. "Being-there" (real presence) and "being elsewhere" or "non-being" (irremedial absence)

are juxtaposed in these representations, and inasmuch as they are part of representation, they are also part of life (p. 144). All actions have "simultaneous multiplicities" (p. 146), seen as underground protests and civil disobedience (or corruption?), "fixes" (or informal political and economic arrangements that retain the sheen of civil society) and the misdirected and subterranean nature of business relations in society (pp. 147-8). This is not simply a cover-up of reality, Mbembe maintains. It is a set of resemblances between the seen and the invisible, which allows a critique of power in society as well as the emergence of a form of life.

This is best understood in the representations of the autocrat. He is represented in excess in every way. His caricatures exist against a backdrop of officially mandated ubiquity within the culture itself, and against his calculated multiple identities. He is all things. But the cartoons are not simply a statement that the emperor has no clothes. He is represented as a more complex negation-in-excess, one whose appetite is voracious, who does violence precisely by impoverishing the imagination of the nation, by making the nation into his fantasy (p. 165). The cartoonist does not simply make fun of the autocrat, but rather he recognizes the basic truth that life under this violence is hallucinatory, a life of insane laughter mixed with suffering. One does not laugh at the cartoon, but rather recognizes the demonic force the cartoon represents. The laughter comes "from the bottom of the chest" and "surprises beyond any warning" (p. 167). It comes from the same place as suffering. The subject, under the brutalization of the autocrat, becomes his beast of burden, sings praises to him, all the while groaning under his corpulence.

The cartoonist offers no way out of this horror of existence. Does Mbembe? Not in this chapter. Indeed, it gets worse before it gets better. In chapter five, "Out of the World," he presents us with a new type of negation, although one direct-

ed at a similar goal as in chapter four: accounting for the violence that is the lived experience of the African. This is an account of hollows, absences or negations which are forms of death. This account has two sides:

"One is the burden of the arbitrariness involved in seizing from the world and putting to death what has previously been decreed to be nothing, an empty figure. The other is the way the negated subject deprived of power, pushed even farther away, to the other side, behind the existing world, out of the world, takes on himself or herself the act of his or her own destruction and prolongs his/her own crucifixion" (pp. 173-4).

This is about ultimate nothingness. Mbembe begins with a reading of Hegel on Africa (p. 176ff) which draws out his sense of Africa as a motionless land, a land of excess and the very negation of human existence. Hegel's account is taken as the basis of the colony, which is "defined as a series of hollows" (p. 179). Mbembe's account of the hollowness of the colony is fairly standard, and touches on the emptiness of the land (from the colonist's point of view) and the metaphorical emptiness of those already there, morally and socially. Subjection to these conditions produces a place where little matters, or little can be cared about, in the Heideggerian sense of the term (*Sorge*).

"The colonized cannot be defined either as a living being endowed with reason, or as someone aspiring to transcendence. The colonized does not exist as a self; the colonized is, but in the same way as a rock is--that is, as nothing more. And anyone who would make him/her express more finds nothing--or, in any event, finds he/she expresses nothing. The colonized belongs to the *universe of immediate things*--useful things when needed, things that can be molded and are mortal, futile and superfluous things, if need be" (p. 187).

The colonized is, then, a "hollow object and a negative entity" (p. 189). So far, this account is not particularly new, although it is well articulated,

and put in terms of the effect on subjectivity that helps make Hegel's narrative more than just what is contained in the introduction to the *Philosophy of History*. The real question, and Mbembe's attempt to account for this negation, is this: "how does one get from the colony to 'what comes after?'" (p. 196). The time after the colony is a new kind of negation, that of death, which comes in many forms. Mbembe outlines several forms of death, all gory and depressing. He is interested not in the details of death for their own sake, but the meaning, as he reflects on ways of being killed, and what happens after death.

But even this negation is not the end. "How," he asks, "does one live when the time to die has passed, when it is even forbidden to be alive, in what might be called an experience of living 'the wrong way round?'" (p. 201) This is where it gets interesting and original. Mbembe has been outlining the implications of Hegel's history, which undergirds the colonial project, but the answer in the post-colony is inspired by Heidegger, and early Heidegger at that. Mbembe is interested in working out the "being-toward-death" that *Dasein* exists with. After building up of an account of alienation from chapters two through five, Mbembe gives us the first glimmering of a response in the last few pages of chapter five. And he needed to work us through forms of oppression, to the point of death, so that one could imagine existence in the face of death, rather than simply existence under the contingent brutalities of the colony.

The inspiration is Heidegger, but the details are not quite. Our being-toward-death is not simply our own death; in the postcolony, "it is power to delegate oneself that, contrary to Heidegger, enables one to delegate one's death to another, or at least constantly to defer it, until the final rendezvous" (p. 202). *Dasein* in the postcolony exists toward the collective death that comes from the conditions described through most of the book, rather than toward the individual death, which

forces fallenness and the taking of stands. It is true that Heidegger does not imagine death as other than one's own, although the factual conditions of our (collective) lives make this move one that Heidegger might be sympathetic with, if indeed one had the sense he would ever be sympathetic to the conditions of the colonized. At any rate, Mbembe is not suggesting that one's stand toward death is curtailed completely by factual conditions, but rather that one must "still know how, each time, to open or close the parenthesis in which these parts will take their place" (p. 203). The body has been deconstructed by colonialism, which makes a deferral possible. It can be temporarily re-integrated by laughter, which "reintegrates all the parts." But while deferral brings back the possibility of control, ultimately the body is destroyed. And yet, there is the "time after death":

"Henceforth, each death or defeat leads to a new appearance, is perceived as confirmation, gage, and relaunch of an ongoing promise, a 'not yet,' a 'what is coming,' which--always--separates hope from utopia" (p. 206).

After all this, there is hope. And, it is therefore no accident that Mbembe's final chapter is "God's Phallus," a reflection on three seemingly unrelated forms of the "divine libido": belief in a god that is One, the god's death and resurrection, and the phenomenon of conversion (p. 212). Why is it no accident? Because one might be led to suspect that Mbembe is suggesting that one might transcend the mundane and alienating conditions. This would be a serious misunderstanding of what he intends, and this chapter makes that clear. On the surface, this looks like little more than a critique of religion as desire, specifically as erotics. And it is that. But I believe the chapter functions to forestall a possible misunderstanding, one which various early interpreters of Heidegger were prone to, and which Heidegger himself made possible with statements such as "only a god can save us." The "on-going promise", the

"what is coming"--none of this is about transcending the conditions already described.

Mbembe is interested in a similar theme to the previous chapter, that of death. And what he is doing, it seems to me, is to say that we cannot turn the fact of death, that which gave the glimmer of an answer in the "Out of the World," into a religious answer. A new subject cannot be created by a deferral of death such as Christianity might imagine, and dealing with the fact of violence cannot be a matter of conversion. Indeed, such conversion merely does violence to language. In the end, such a path leads to madness, not madness as irrationality but the madness where "the discourse on the divine that seeks to explain itself and make itself understood by others is suddenly exhausted, exhausts its meaning, and provokes a kind of astonishment and incredulity, to the point that people laugh" (p. 231).

Which takes us to the book's conclusion. Mbembe reminds us that the point of the book has been one of subjectivity:

"The object of this book has been to see if, in answer to the question 'Who are you in the world?' the African of this century could say without qualification, 'I am an ex-slave'" (p. 237).

The important word, or letters, are of course "ex". Mbembe clearly wants to claim that life in the postcolony is brief and dissipated, that it is shot through with negative forces and excess, death and pain. But he also wants to underline that the point of the book has also been to "discover what "spirit" is at work in this turbulent activity" (p. 240). There is no linear cause and effect account here, in which oppression breeds alienation. The account of this book is "not only of unhappiness but of possibilities." These possibilities are always in the peripheral vision, though, never very clear, but not nothing, for all that. Given the absence and negation under which Africans have lived, exercising existence in Africa will always include descriptions of destruction. But this is never all. The negations have the possibility of

transforming themselves into the other, and not only just in reflective works such as this, but also in life. There is not just disorder and ugliness here, but also beauty. Mbembe continues to hold Nietzsche's words seriously, which were mentioned earlier: "We must first learn to enjoy as complete men."

This work does not read like a call to action. Some may read this book as having a resigned air about it, as giving few answers to the violence that it so eloquently describes, and that may be unsettling. But Mbembe's point is different. He wants to find "what today remains of the recognition of oneself as free will—a recognition that has marked African intelligence since at least the nineteenth century" (pp. 237-8). In other words, is it possible to be free in the midst of the violence described throughout the book. And his answer, underdeveloped but still there, is that it is possible to create a self out of even this. A life in Africa is a mirror held up to the continent:

"But, if this mirror does attest to a real presence that is, at the same time, an untenable figure, this mirror cannot tell us what participates in the figure's background, foreground, and perspectives—in what we might call its 'magma,' that is, its volume, content, and flesh ... [B]oth in the light of the advancing world and in everyday interactions with life, Africa appears as simultaneously a diabolical discovery, an inanimate image, and a living sign" p. 240).

In the final analysis, the truth about Africa that Mbembe strives to articulate is contradictory and equivocal, *but it is there nonetheless*. The mirror "reflects a figure that is in the present yet escapes it." And, those who engage in the analytic strategies mentioned at the beginning of this review (the essentialist, postcolonial, and disciplinary) only ever manage to find the Africa that is absent, but miss the Africa that is lived, that exists for those who find a way.

This review contains more description than one might normally wish, but it seems unavoid-

able in this case. Without care, Mbembe's narrative of subjectivity could be lost in the descriptions of violence and dissipation, even given that he announces it early on quite clearly. In fact, the puzzling part of the text is that he announces early on that the issue at stake is the construction of the subject for him/herself, and then it seems to drop from the agenda. It seems clear to me, though, that without that existential purpose, this text ends up as just another in the series of laments on the condition of Africans, well articulated and insightful to be sure, but unremarkable.

This story has been told using "nothing" as the organizing thread to account for subjectivity, but that need was not the only possible choice. The same story might have been told using the pivotal concept of time, for instance. The first chapter, after all, is called "Time on the Move," and Mbembe regularly brings up the nature of time. Or, it might have been told via the trope of place, including related notions such as displacement. Each story would have been the same (and it is no accident that the concepts of nothingness, time, and place are all ones that Heidegger wrote extensively about). In each case we would see a diffusion, a loss of subjectivity, followed by hints of hope. But now that the narrative has been sketched, what do we make of it?

There are certainly questions that one might raise. For one thing, these hints of something transformative are hardly developed at all. Mbembe might respond that his purpose was descriptive, that he only wishes to account for how the individual might exercise existence now. Still, the promise contained in these tantalizing comments about a subjectivity that inverts the negations and the possibilities that such an inversion might offer, could be fulfilled more than it is.

But past the wish for more clarity, one might also ask about the hints he does give us. Using Heidegger to amend Hegel is not new, but Mbembe does try a unique approach to Heidegger. In essence, he is using the hermeneuticist to address

the (post)structural construction of violence and power that forms the bulk of the book. But there is a price to be paid for this. I still wonder what sort of subject is still available, after all the alienation that is so skillfully described through the book. Why, exactly, is there hope and possibility? Perhaps more to the point, why is there still some sort of integrity in the subject after all this?

Is, for instance, the hope and possibility a sort of overcoming (and thus, covertly transcendent after all), a way of dealing with being lost in the world? Does the theorization of violence represent nothing but the alienating force that serves to make the African *unheimlich*? It does not seem so. Mbembe spends so much time talking about violence, not to imagine a world without it, or a world in which it is overcome, but in the attempt to explicate a world of authenticity that takes that violence as a fact of existence. "This is how it is to live in Africa," he seems to be saying, "now, is the hope of existence confined to the struggle to overcome that violence, or can one find one's subjectivity in a meaningful manner if overcoming violence seems remote?"

I wonder, though, whether a more useful theoretical framework to consider the possible forms of life might not be Deleuze and Guattari rather than Heidegger. Particularly in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze), we get a picture of the one who marks a territory not as a vague set of hopes and possibilities, but rather as a nomadic construction of subjectivity. One does not move to a dwelling, but one dwells by moving.

Mbembe's is a hermeneutic construction of subjectivity at the end of a post-structural account of violence. This sort of move is not unprecedented; Ricoeur has done it (Ricoeur 1976). But hermeneutic thinkers have often found themselves yearning for transcendence, whether we think about the later Heidegger, Gadamer, or even Ricoeur. And perhaps this is the reason that it is so difficult to more completely explicate the way of being that is possible in the midst of the condi-

tions described in the bulk of the book. Transcendence is not necessarily a dirty word, but it would be worth coming clean on just what kind of hope and possibility exist. As I have already argued, Mbembe seems to want to forestall that interpretation, but it is not clear what the alternative is. What, in the end, is it to exercise existence? The ground has been ably cleared to answer that question, but it still needs to be answered.

References

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translation and foreword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Dikier Kaphagawani, "Some African Conceptions of Person: A Critique" in Ivan Karp and D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000), 66-79.

Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: University of Texas Press, 1976).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

Citation: Bruce Janz. Review of Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. March, 2002.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6039>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.