

*Critique of Black Reason*  
 Achille Mbembe  
 Duke University Press, 2017  
 240 pages

Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*, first published in French in 2013 and translated into English by Laurent Dubois in 2017, brings together different analyses of the interconnections between racial thinking, postcolonialism, financial capital, postmodernity, and the politics of representation in an attempt to open up new possibilities of redefining the notion of black consciousness. Through an insightful study of the semiotics of taxonomy and its centrality in the formation of racial thinking, the Cameroonian philosopher focuses on building up a body of study aimed at proving or undermining that black reason<sup>1</sup> has often provided justification for racial domination. The concept of black reason works in parallel with Immanuel Kant's notion of the antinomy of pure reason,<sup>2</sup> which arises when it is possible to answer a question providing two valid but opposing arguments. When applied to racial identities, Mbembe notes, pure reason shifts into black reason, which responds to the contradictory dynamism that insists upon the degradation of black bodies, both constructing and representing them as social excess, and that simultaneously considers them necessary sources from which to obtain maximum financial gains. The examination of the contradictory *locus* where black individuals are caught works precisely towards the text's central point, which discusses whether a relationship towards blackness other than that based on racial domination could ever exist, or whether, to the contrary, black identity can only be conceived in relation to whiteness and in terms of fear, monetization, and precarity.

Paying particular attention to the colonial order, but also drawing on the racial dynamics that substantiated the apartheid system in South Africa or slavery in the United States, the philosopher contends that race allowed for the classification of "human beings in distinct categories [...] endowed with specific physical and mental properties" (57). These systems of institutionalized segregation, far from just establishing power through the control of death, bureaucracy, and law, anchored the sovereignty of whiteness with the support of various disciplines of social and natural sciences such as anthropology or biology. As a result, whiteness was perceived in terms of subjectivity, intellect, and consumerism. The scientific othering of blackness, in its turn, brought about the insertion of black individuals into a process of social death (78) that classified them as objects, bodies, and commodities at once. In the polarization of whiteness as humanity and blackness as social surplus, modern states have seen the possibility to exploit a new political economy of life that "goes hand in hand with the increasing power of the ideology of security aimed at calculating and minimizing the risk and turning protection into the currency of citizenship" (22). Taken to its limit, this economy allows liberal democratic regimes to set up a system of self-appointed vigilantism that surveils, targets, and eliminates

NOTES

1 | He describes it as "forms of knowledge; a model of extraction and depredation; a paradigm of subjection, including its modalities governing its eradication; and, finally, a psycho-*oneiric* complex" (10).

2 | Hence the title of the work under study, *Critique of Black Reason*, can be read as a

racialized individuals for the betterment of the community. A further analysis of this situation reveals that the problem is not as much the systematization of racial profiling as it is the assumption that racial reasoning —discrimination as a result of skin color— has superseded moral reasoning —discrimination as a result of a lack of ethical principles—. Simply put, one of the work’s central criticisms is that contemporary society has allowed and normalized the fact that a person’s right to life can be waived when skin color comes into play.

It is in his approach to the politics of death and its imbrication with racial reasoning that Mbembe comes to terms with other modern thinkers such as Foucault, Nancy, Tocqueville, Boulaga, or Fanon. Drawing on different approaches to biopolitics, the philosopher notes that racism consists in “substituting what is with something else, with another reality” (32). Such reasoning echoes Foucault’s argument in that it suggests that racism both attests to, and feeds back from, the perception that certain individuals are considered threats insofar they do not fit within the patterns of racial normativity. Contrary to Foucault, who was invested in carrying out an epistemological study of the logic of races and racism from a privileged position, the author struggles to encompass in his work the standpoint of the colonized, of the *fatal results* of history.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, he soon reaches the conclusion that regardless the point of view from which blackness is studied, death is always the center of gravity around which black bodies orbit. If they are objects of discourses, they are subjects of death (136).

Following a line of inquiry initiated in his previous works,<sup>4</sup> the references to death ultimately allow him to draw on one of the most central arguments of his work, which also brings in the text’s final conclusion: nocturnal power, the power to kill arising from a pact with the dead, or the power to die a death one desires is understood as a means to find empowerment from within oppression (135). As he notes, “the question of the pact with the dead, of the appropriation of a dead person [...] is, to a large extent, the question at the heart of history, of slavery, race, and capitalism. [...] Racial capitalism is the equivalent of a giant necropolis” (136-137). Stripped of metaphors, nocturnal power can be read as a reformulation of Martin Heidegger’s assumption that it is only in the anticipation of death that one can experience life to the fullest. Nocturnal power responds, in this manner, to the capacity to etch on the deaths died by black ancestors, to keep their memories present, and to act on the appropriation of their suffering. It refers to the purest power possessed and wielded by black bodies —that which controls death, and which visibilizes and honors the struggles of destroyed generations.

The approach to nocturnal power foretells the answer to the central concern structuring *Critique of Black Reason*. For Mbembe, there is no blackness as such outside the “dialectic of possession, belonging, capitalism, and dynamiting”, neither in life nor death, for now (153). This assertion is not as despairing as it seems at first, for he later suggests, employing a rhetoric that verges on idealism, that “until we have eliminated racism from our current lives and imaginations, we will have to continue to struggle for the creation of a world-beyond-race” (177). Furthering

---

## NOTES

3 | Emphasis mine.

4 | See Mbembe, Achille (2003), “Necropolitics”, *Public Culture*, Duke University Press, 15.1: 11-#40.

the tradition initiated by Alexis de Tocqueville and Fabien Eubossi Boulaga, who already contended the impossibility to reach racial equality and the need to seek empowerment through racial consciousness (94), the philosopher is in fact calling for a world without racism, yet for a world that still maintains a critical view of race. In other words, he is hinting at the possibility of transcending racial profiling maintaining—and celebrating—racial differences.

Taking everything into consideration, Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* is an outstanding study of the way in which the political and economic realities of colonialism, slavery, and other situations operating through racial domination have come to form black consciousness. The philosopher rereads the changes in racial power through a conscientious examination of the politics of liberal democratic regimes, the performativity of semiotics, and the deep-rootedness of natural sciences. This critical approach works towards a reformulation of the notion of power, which, in its condition of being "acquired and conserved owing to its capacity to create changing relations" (131), is slowly being conferred to black subjects, who have until now been "stuck at the foot of a wall with no doors, thinking that nonetheless everything will open up at the end. The black person knocks, begs, knocks again, waiting for someone to open a door that does not exist" (152). *Critique of Black Reason* spotlights the possibilities of pulling down the wall from within, of understanding and acting on history, and of assuming that black consciousness will never exist outside the limits of racial normativity. Racism might end, yet, he contends, races will always exist, transforming survival into a matter of finding the power of self-definition in, and through, differences, for, echoing James Baldwin's bywords, "the weight of history will be there. We must learn to do a better job of carrying it, and sharing its burden" (177).