

Postcolonial theory on the brink: a critique of Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*

Create create
create in mind create in muscle create in nerve
create in man create in the masses
create
create with dry eyes

Create create
create freedom in the slave stars
manacles of love on the paganized paths of love
festive sounds over swinging bodies on simulated gallows

Create
create love with dry eyes

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Introduction

During the birth of post-colonial theory, the foundational voices at the bedside brought their background influences to bear, as good parents do. Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall, amongst others, made sure the fledgling child was weaned on a strict diet of Lacan and Derrida, with sporadic flourishes of Althusser, Barthes and Marx as treats for good behaviour. Now post-colonial theory has grown up, it is time for a sober assessment of its contribution and look to its future. At a time when debates around colonialism and neo-colonialism are at fever-pitch, especially in terms of US foreign policy, it is crucial that the academy contributes critically to the discourse and offers a rigorous and critical challenge to the global status quo.

In this paper, I will argue that post-colonial theory is in danger of getting tangled up in its own paradigms, losing sight of the existential horizon of the contemporary post-colonial situation. The key risk is that post-colonial theory remains caught up in a semiotic frame of reference that blinds its adepts to all phenomena that cannot be readily referred to as a "text". Post-colonial theory is presently trapped within a self-referential inscriptive paradigm that by definition does not and cannot recognise phenomena that are not inscribed. This starting point means that post-colonial theory is destined to continue disengaging with postcolonial lived experience, in favour of ever more baroque and solipsistic "readings" of texts.

I shall focus my evidence for this claim by examining the work of Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe, in particular his recent text *On The Postcolony*. What is significant about Mbembe's project, in terms of a critique of the textual paradigm in post-colonial theory, is that he occupies an ambiguous (and ambivalent) space somewhere between post-structuralism

and existential phenomenology. I will suggest first of all that precisely because of this ambiguity, Mbembe fails in his stated intentions of thinking through the lived experience of post-colonial Africa to outline the conditions for a “new form of African writing”. His project is ultimately theoretically confused and devoid of productive existential engagement. Whilst Mbembe speaks, Africa in all its contingent, pre-textual complexity, remains silent, and silenced. Secondly, I will argue that *On the Postcolony* erases all precursors. Mbembe deliberately undervalues the volumes of important critical work that have been written on Africa that avoid the objections he claims to apply *tout court*. This denial of a critical tradition is in part a consequence of the post-structuralist theoretical framework Mbembe by and large adopts. The semiotic paradigm attempts to frame all objects in its own image; it therefore cannot account for how and why it has written less assimilable modes of thought out of history. In this sense, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001) have said of post-colonial theory in general, Mbembe’s work resembles a symptom or effect of a cause which it cannot itself articulate. Mbembe’s reliance on textual formalism therefore blinds his thinking to other modes of African critical expression. For example, there is little space in his theory for the organic intellectual who uses other means to produce a critically effective discourse on Africa.

Nonetheless, in spite of these troubling aporias, I will also argue that Mbembe points a way forward for a post-colonial theory to come that is ripe with potential. Whilst his proclivity for the text leads him into self-referential disengagement, the partially occluded phenomenological/deleuzian influence at work in his thought nonetheless pushes him to the brink of disclosing subterranean modes of embodied resistance. Although, as we shall see, Mbembe withdraws from this new theoretical terrain the very moment he announces it, it is in this direction that post-colonial theory can puncture its inscriptive bubble, and lead to future research that more effectively bridges the current divide between post-colonial theory and lived experience.

The theoretical context

Conventional post-colonial theory’s transparent and explicit dependence on European theoretical sources contrasts sharply with Mbembe’s position. In the introduction, “Time on the Move”, we witness a deep uncertainty about the relevance of both African and Western paradigms. This ambivalence sets the tone for the rest of his text. His theoretical stance begins by challenging enduring Western perceptions of Africa, African lived experience and the discourses that circumscribe both as overwhelmingly malignant. He suggests that contemporary European thinking, as with its historical antecedents in Hegel and elsewhere in modern philosophy, continues to position Africa as the repository for the bestial and the negative, via the trope of the animal. As a corollary, Mbembe also contests the various ways in which African theory has responded to this external negation. In a manner reminiscent of Sartre’s critique of Fanon in the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1967), Mbembe regards African intellectual responses to colonisation as inadequate and partial. He dismisses traditionalism, Negritude and Marxism as futile

gestures that respond to the threat of ontological annihilation by retreating into essentialism and romantic delusion.

In place of Western ontological violence and African escapist fantasy, Mbembe proposes a more sober approach that engages with African realities in all their contradictory complexity:

African social formations are not necessarily converging toward a single point, trend, or cycle. They harbor the possibility of a variety of trajectories neither convergent nor divergent but interlocked, paradoxical. [...] Research on Africa has hardly stood out for its attempts to integrate nonlinear phenomena into its analyses. Similarly, it has not always been able to account for complexity. (2001: 16 –17)

While the goal of thinking African non-linear complexity is therefore clear, the theoretical means for attaining that goal are less so. From the introduction, it appears that Mbembe's theoretical toolkit is drawn largely from European sources. More specifically, he appears to ground his project in a mixture of post-structuralist semiotics and existential phenomenology. Evidence of the post-structuralist influence come throughout the text, via references to the "African sign", "the *diffèrend*", the metaphorical use of the figure of "economy", reference to post-colonial Africa as a "system of signs" and, above all, the repeated reflexive framing of his project as that of wanting to "write Africa". The phenomenological influence, on the other hand, is most explicitly stated in the introduction, through a methodological *mise-en-scène*, such as in the following:

In this book, the *subject* [...] refers to two things: first, to the forms of "living in the concrete world," then to the subjective forms that make possible any validation of its contents – that objectify it. In Africa today, the subject who *accomplishes the age* and validates it, who lives and espouses his/her contemporaneity – that is, what is "distinctive" or "particular" to his/her present real world – is first a subject who has an *experience* of "living in the concrete world". (2001: 17)

Given this combination of European theoretical frameworks, Mbembe appears to be simply extending post-colonial theory's appropriation of post-structuralist and psychoanalytic resources to include existential phenomenology. This sentiment is certainly backed up at times by Mbembe, for example when he writes, "To ask whether Africa is separated from the West by an unbridgeable gulf seems pointless" (*ibid*: 14). In which case, African existential complexity appears to be amenable to a post-colonial lexicon that incorporates an earlier wave of European theory. Here, Mbembe's rejection of both contemporary Western and African theory makes an exception for its post-colonial offshoot. However, this interpretation of his theoretical position soon encounters barriers. Apart from the fact that Mbembe does not explicitly acknowledge and situate himself in such precise and unambiguous terms, two other issues

arise. The first problem with this characterisation is that elsewhere in the introduction, he appears to reject Western theory completely:

We should first remind ourselves that, as a general rule, the experience of the Other, or the *problem of the "I" of others and of human beings we perceive as foreign to us*, has almost always posed virtually insurmountable difficulties to the Western philosophical and political tradition [...] Whether dealing with Africa or with other non-European worlds, this tradition long denied the existence of any "self" but its own. (2001: 2)

Mbembe's comments here parallel deconstruction in ascribing to Western philosophy as a whole a tendency to reduce the Other to the Same (what Derrida refers to as "logocentrism" or the "metaphysics of presence"). In which case, whilst one might initially agree with his characterisation, this agreement can only be fully granted if we also agree to bracket out key existentialist and post-structuralist texts that explicitly set out to interrogate the question of alterity, from Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Blanchot through to Derrida. Unfortunately, *On The Postcolony* does not engage with any such treatments of alterity, so it is difficult to tell whether Mbembe would find sustenance from this body of work or not.

The second problem with aligning Mbembe straightforwardly with the existing post-colonial canon is his explicit denunciation in the introduction of 'Foucauldian, neo-Gramscian paradigms' that 'problematize everything in terms of how identities are "invented," "hybrid," "fluid," and "negotiated"' (2001: 5). Again, this rejection is not quite what it seems; a few pages later in the introduction, Mbembe alludes briefly to the notions of "entanglement", "durée" and "displacement" as the theoretical cornerstones of his project, and even cites Foucault as an influence in a footnote! It would therefore appear that Mbembe views Foucault, and those influenced by him (including Deleuze), as by turns friend and foe. It is not at all clear however at which points Foucault/Deleuze are useful, when not and why.

This confusion over influences, theoretical sources and methodological stance at the outset of *On the Postcolony* entail that Mbembe fumbles the vital question of connection vs. de-linkage. The issue of whether African realities require uniquely African theoretical approaches is answered with both a yes and a no. On the one hand, as in post-colonial theory, Mbembe finds utility and conceptual power within the inscriptive paradigm of the sign, as well as resources for articulating the existential condition, thanks to phenomenology. On the other hand, he calls for a "new form of writing" (2001: 14) that nonetheless rejects both contemporary Western theory and all antecedent African intellectual enquiry.

What is clear amidst the confusion is that for Mbembe, the project of arguing for a new mode of African theory therefore carries with it a necessary rejection of almost all existing European and African intellectual endeavour. Although Mbembe tacitly imports aspects of post-structuralism and phenomenology into

the background framing for the project ahead, it seems reasonable to suppose that his aim of thinking the African post-colonial situation will involve some form of hiatus with existing post-colonial theory. Although this break is not explicitly highlighted by Mbembe in the text (except insofar as he rejects hybridity et al), I shall argue later in this essay that this indeed is the case. I will suggest that the break that Mbembe inserts between his approach and conventional post-colonial theory centres precisely round the limits of textual analysis. In this case, Mbembe's text demonstrates the inherent incompatibility between post-structuralism and phenomenology; where the former privileges the sign and the semiotic, the latter emphasises embodied being in the world. I shall argue that while this opens up potentially fruitful avenues for future research, in *On the Postcolony* at least, Mbembe fails to fully resolve this incompatibility.

Whereas from the perspective of European theory, Mbembe's project can therefore be interpreted as signalling an interesting and significant advancement, as the prospective existential insertion develops and extends the scope of post-colonial theory, the outlook looks much more bleak in terms of reconstituting and re-developing existing African theory. As we have seen, Mbembe considers his project of thinking African complexity to entail the wholesale rejection and erasure of existing traditions within African thought and writing. This erasure is deeply problematic. One thing is certain; there *are* precursors who have already engaged with internal complexity in Africa that Mbembe bizarrely does not acknowledge. For example, it is difficult to understand why, in his discussion of the need to theorise African internal complexity, Mbembe failed to refer to the following memorable passage by Paulin Hountondji:

Pluralism does not come from any society from outside but is inherent in every society. The alleged acculturation, the alleged 'encounter' of African civilization with European civilization, is really just another mutation produced within African civilization, the successor to many earlier ones about which our knowledge is very incomplete, and, no doubt, the precursor of many future mutations, which may be more radical still. The decisive encounter is not between Africa as a whole and Europe as a whole: it is the continuing encounter between Africa and itself. (1983: 165).

Given his rejectionist schema of traditionalism, nativism and Marxism, which Mbembe considers to cover all the bases of existing African theory, *On the Postcolony* is given a heavy burden from the outset. Mbembe's theory will, in theorising the contradictory complexity of post-colonial African experience effectively from a blank slate, have to account for all the different historical experiences and legacies of colonialism that exist on the continent. From direct rule to indirect rule, the various forms of colonialism have each led to specific constellations of race, class and gender that are to some degree unique in each case. The question we will have to put to Mbembe's text is whether it can encompass and account for these differences. We shall have

to see if the new form of writing that Mbembe outlines is sufficiently supple enough to allow for the multiple modes of being and for contradictions that are at work in contemporary, post-colonial Africa.

Power in the post-colony

Beyond theoretical framework and methodology, we should now try to determine the substance of Mbembe's argument. What is the content of the new form of African writing Mbembe proposes? The central theme is that of theorising *power* in Africa. As several critics have noted, his theorisation of power appears, beyond the references and allusions to Deleuze, Bergson and Merleau-Ponty, to be most strongly influenced by a mixture of Foucault, Sartre and Hegel, with the negative force of Nietzschean ressentiment vibrating at the margins (Bogum 2001). Throughout the main chapters of the text, there is a stress on the various ways in which Africans are subjected to diverse forms of power – via what Mbembe refers to as “commandement”, “indirect private rule”, “entanglement” and, in the final chapter, the unifying force of the “monotheistic phallus” of Christianity. Mbembe exhaustively details how, across the continent, embezzlement and the “salary system” has locked into place an administrative and commercial clientele in support of a corrupt regime whose power extends across the citizenry. In this respect at least, the contention is clear: the African post-colonial apparatus has replicated, internalised and totalised the power structures introduced through colonisation. In the absence of the possibility of agency and resistance, African existential complexity appears throughout the text to be driven by the work of the negative, through the forces of destruction, complicity and decay. In this sense, despite the denunciation of Foucauldian paradigms referred to above, the abiding specific theoretical prism distributed throughout the text is Foucault's genealogy of power and history. In Foucault's account of the modern form of power, the body as an expressive origin, as corporeal schema, symbolic capacity and, above all, as a historical agent, is erased in favour of the body as a meaty slab for writing on. In reading Mbembe's text, we can recall Foucault's famous words in “Nietzsche, genealogy, history”:

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The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (1984: 83)

With these words in mind, Mbembe's summary call in the introduction for *another form of writing* outside of dominance, ‘I have tried to “write Africa,” not as a fiction, but in the harshness of its destiny, its power, and its eccentricities’ (2001: 17) can now be seen as a project chiefly concerned with detailing the manifold of coercive power structures, and the effects and responses these structures have at an existential level. If this interpretation is true, the focus on the inscriptions of negative power would again appear to be at odds with

Mbembe's stated aim of thinking African lived experience from a more engaged perspective. Mbembe's goals of non-linearity and historically generative forms of empowerment evaporate in the face of the work of describing and theorising domination. There is, in fact, little in the way of African "living in the concrete world" or "validating and accomplishing of the age" that Mbembe had promised at the outset. In terms of an underlying theory of power, this amounts to a heavy privileging of African *power over* (power as limitation and imposition), and scant attempts to theorise *power to* (power as capacity and agency). The "negative interpretation" that for Mbembe characterises previous discourses on Africa therefore gets replicated in his own work. In the words of one commentator, Mbembe's text repeats and entrenches the paradigm of the victim (Segall 2002).

What seems to be pushing Mbembe's thinking of power towards emphasising the negative and limitative aspect is a denial of the legitimacy of the categories of "hybridity", "agency", and "resistance". In the chapter "The Aesthetics of Vulgarly", Mbembe overtly distances his project from conventional modes of cultural critique:

The basic argument in this chapter is that, to account for both the mind-set and the effectiveness of postcolonial relations of power, we need to go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination, such as resistance vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony, totalization vs. detotalization. (2001: 103)

Again, Mbembe's argument appears at the same time to be both an implicit questioning of standard European critical concepts at the same time as an echo of the deconstructive project of transcending binaristic structures of thought. This prompts yet again the tangled question about the modes of theoretical appropriation at work in his thought. Moreover, he shares with deconstruction the problem as to what should happen after the suspension of the binary of domination and oppression. What should take their place as a third concept? We are given a clue at the start of the chapter, when Mbembe states that he wants to generalise Bakhtin's notions of the obscene and grotesque at work in non-official cultures across the field of domination itself. One of the key concepts motivating this move is his analysis of what he calls "conviviality". Mbembe cites as an example public dance performances for the despotic leader or after an execution. For Mbembe, in an African context, there are simply no spaces of resistance available outside of domination (unofficial or otherwise). In their stead, grotesque moments of duplicity and complicity spread across the entire surface of everyday life. This, arguably, is the central moment of Mbembe's thinking: that African lived experience is a messy collusion between ruler and ruled, oppressed and oppressor, executed and executioner; a non-linear controlled chaos that resists Western manichean modes of analysis, requiring a new form of writing to capture the imaginary at work. And as with Foucault, the order of things is reconfigured through internal disruption and the work of the negative, rather than any productive agency. It is in this sense that we can understand Mbembe's

refusal to countenance any notion of resistance, as a form of futile positivism. Mbembe describes this power complex as an “economy of death” (2001: 115). Power that works against the state is essentially masochistic; the only way to avoid the destructive codification of the state upon the body is to will one’s pain and to accept it as a form of enjoyment – a perverse form of Nietzsche’s *amor fati*.

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It is at this juncture that we can take issue with Mbembe’s overt analysis of power as conviviality, by locating a tension at work in his thought. What is intriguing to witness in *The Aesthetics of Vulgarities* is that Mbembe’s desire to theorise from a fresh perspective threatens at several key moments to fall back into the very binarism of resistance and domination he claims to reject. Mbembe tries to *conceal* what is effectively functioning as the concept of “resistance” in his text by semantic substitution. For example, he introduces “homo ludens” and the concept of “play” without grounding either in any theoretical framework. He then develops this notion of ludic play in terms of subversive performativity that appears to do much more than simply capitulate to the strictures of the regime:

Thus we may assert that, by dancing publicly for the benefit of power, the “postcolonized subject” is providing his or her loyalty, and by compromising with the corrupting control that state power tends to exercise at all levels of everyday life, the subject is reaffirming that this power is incontestable – *precisely the better to play with it and modify it whenever possible* [...]. What defines the postcolonized subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even where there are clear, written, and precise rules. [Emphasis in original] (2001: 129)

This quote allows us to unpack how an ambivalence over the ontological validity of the sign and text in Mbembe is manifested in terms of a deep uncertainty over the status of resistance. The key issue is that of the power of the body to resist the limitative codes of “power over”. The question to put Mbembe, against his explicit rejection of domination vs. resistance, is to ask how “play” and “modification” can have any value for “the masses”, if not in terms of resistance to the dominating power of the state? Play, in the above passage, cannot function without an underlying teleological form; the intention to “modify whenever possible” *must* have an intentional structure in order to support a framework of meaningful action. Put the other way, if play were denied an intentional structure framed in terms of resistance to domination, it would be very difficult to see the point of engaging in it. As in Nietzsche, we must be able to distinguish a “positive nihilism” that seeks to overcome (that is, it has an intentional structure and goals) from a “negative nihilism” that remains mired in its own negation (that is, exists without a telos). This distinction can only be made if one can also distinguish between absolute and relative limitative power. Unfortunately, in Mbembe’s text, this distinction is never clearly made, which muddies his argument. For example, in the passage just quoted, how can “incontestable power” maintain its

unchallengeable status, if it can at the same time be “modified” via affirmation? Logic dictates that either power is incontestable, and therefore unmodifiable, or it is not. In which case, resistance is the name we must give to the force that modifies power. And an acknowledgement of the possibility of resistance requires also that power itself cannot be absolutely incontestable.

It is Mbembe’s staunch refusal to accept a more complex account of power that embraces resistance as a possibility latent within all modes of domination and complicity that many of his critics have found especially unpalatable. As Adeleke Adeeko writes:

As much as I admire Mbembe’s breathtaking coverage of African political history, it is hard for me to accept that the potentate and the dominated share some general conviviality under the circus tent of power. It is equally hard for me to agree that something like death in and for itself is possible in the administration of capital punishment. I am not able to believe that one could say, without an explicitly *argued* refutation of Fanon’s work, that the “native” who later becomes the postcolonial subject lacks the will to resist. (2002: 6)

The irony in the chapter “The Aesthetics of Vulgarities” is that the very terms Mbembe rejected in polemical fashion in the introduction, namely “fluidity” and “agency”, he returns to *precisely* in order to articulate power dynamics within African existential contexts. Mbembe’s “baroque practices” move underneath and subvert the “written and precise rules” of state power. I suggest that the new form of writing Mbembe has sought all along begins to occur when the post-colonial subject engages in bodily practices that subvert an inscriptive framework, precisely by undermining it. The corpulent and psychotic aesthetics of the vulgar that characterises *commandement* is given redoubled affirmation, and in the process, invisibly turned against itself. A different form of writing emerges within this very moment, generated on the basis of the body in movement, as a power that relativises the apparently absolute power of the state. In the quote above, ambiguity and fluidity, the two ciphers for the tacit theorisation of resistance in Mbembe’s text, are contrasted with the writing of power. The fluid bodily practices involved in affirming power in order to modify it are therefore the very gateway to Mbembe’s “other form of writing”. Instead of the post-structuralist economy of the sign, a text that can always be made visible and articulated, a structure that denigrates the body and materiality for the sake of the visible marker of the signifier, Mbembe introduces a writing *of* (not *on*) the body. Here, the body is not an object, violently inscribed and destroyed by the state as in Foucault’s account, but rather a capacity to play and subvert written codifications. The performative body is therefore the site of an undoing of the text itself, moving below the level of explicit legibility and juridical capture, towards an underworld of evolutionary if not revolutionary intent.

The potential concealed within this moment in Mbembe's text is therefore nothing less than a rupture in post-colonial theory, away from the textualist paradigm it has been based on since its inception, towards what we can think of as a more materialist and somatic paradigm of "texture". The new post-colonial theory would be that of writing not from the point of view of clear and written rules – the cartesian/derridean economy of the sign, but from an incorporated perspective: the opaque being-in-the-world of baroque practice. Here, instead of the ocular proof of the perfectly legible text, a palimpsest presents itself – that of writing within a material frame, implying a continuum between text and body. In this way, power is theorised as multiple and always contested, ambiguous rather than a totalised regime. If this view is correct, it sheds light on the issue of theoretical autonomy vs. connection raised above. In counterposing a quasi-phenomenological corporeal play against the inscriptive codes of the regime, Mbembe is tacitly proposing nothing less than a different model for recognition itself. Instead of power being wholly grounded within and dependent upon a semiotic system, Mbembe is advocating that we learn to recognise modes of power that occupy other levels of being. Beyond the Western ocularcentric perspective, Mbembe appeals to a distinctively African configuration, where domination is contested not in its own terms, but through a somatic transfer that undermines via a perverse mimicry.

Unfortunately, this epiphany of hope and transformation gets submerged and dissipated as soon as it has been articulated. Mbembe does not explore further the rich potential of the notion of "baroque practice", nor does he discuss or further explore the notion of *homo ludens*. It is important to ask what stunts this line of enquiry. I suggest the refusal takes place because Mbembe's continued denial of the possibility of resistance would become increasingly untenable. Africa, as an "economy of death", a site of near-infinite suffering, corruption, complicity and horror, cannot fit easily with Africa as a complex site of baroque practices that creatively subverts and mangles the overt codes of state power. What remains repressed in Mbembe's text, despite his gestures towards a performative praxis in "The Aesthetics of the Vulgar", is a stronger and more developed ontology of embodied being, as well as an open acceptance of the presence of the possibility of resistance. Instead, in his attempt to articulate complexity, Mbembe throws the teleological baby of potential resistance out with the bathwater of binarism. What is elided in this move is an acknowledgement that corruption and complicity are complex, and as such, fundamentally ambiguous modes of power. Hidden within all patterns of domination are counter-currents of resistance, veiled by the pragmatics of survival. Here, we are reminded of yet another name and text that Mbembe's project erases; that of Frantz Fanon's famous analysis of the function of the veil in "Algeria Unveiled." (Fanon 1970). Fanon contrasts the Western perception of the veil as a tool of patriarchal oppression with its actual use during the Algerian war against the French colonialists. The veil becomes the site for a contradictory array of subterranean meanings that slip beneath semiotic capture, revealing the material and politically charged contestations that are at work underneath more obvious modes of codification. What Mbembe had implicitly identified as problematic in post-structuralism, namely its tendency to reduce

phenomena within a fluid signifying system, is problematic precisely because it cannot articulate the material ground that supports it. Again, if only Mbembe had made reference to this important text, there may have been less confusion about his relationship to post-structuralism as a result.

It is precisely this move from the inscriptive to incorporative, from the visible to the invisible that Mbembe appeals to through his reference to baroque practice. The failure in his thought is to extend this thinking of incorporated complexity into an understanding of how it nuances his own account of power. Instead of simply replacing the binarism of resistance and oppression with irreducible complicity and a retrenched victim paradigm, what this thinking of the invisible would open up for articulation and further exploration is a more subtle account of complicity itself. Instead of play and baroque practice thought of wholly in terms of masochism and negative dialectics, we would therefore see masochism as but one option within a whole array of possible responses to domination. Once the lid of informal practice is lifted, layer upon layer of sub-cultural resistance could be unearthed, each with their unique modes of complicity and resistance. Unfortunately, in *On The Postcolony*, this rich understanding of multivalent responses to power is refused. His notion of baroque practice ends up being a theoretical dead end in the text, precisely because it would require further theorisation of embodiment and its role in resisting inscriptive forms of power. Again, perhaps because of the same old ambivalence towards Western theory, Mbembe refuses to explicitly engage with the relation between embodiment and power from an existential phenomenological point of view. *On The Postcolony* ends with some reflections on the thought of Merleau-Ponty; had it started with an acknowledgment of the French phenomenologist's account of embodiment, the corporeal schema, intersubjectivity and perhaps even invisibility, a different development of baroque practice might have occurred.¹ Thinking through the body's relation to formal and informal, positive and negative forms of power in relation to agency and resistance would have supported Mbembe's attempts to move away from privileging a textual account of power.

In this sense, what is fundamentally absent in Mbembe's account of baroque practice is an underlying theory of agency. Mbembe forgoes any opportunity to uncover agency in previous theorisations, both in Western and African intellectual history. He could, for instance, have referred to Hegel's account of the master-slave dialectic. Hegel, surprisingly for newcomers to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ultimately placed the balance of power and agency in the slave, firstly because the slave was closer to material production through work and secondly, because the master's dependence on the slave did not require reciprocation (Hegel 1979). It is this proximity to the factors of production and freedom from dependency that Marx seized upon in his re-appraisal of Hegel's metaphysics, culminating in his theory of the heightened class-consciousness of the proletariat. Whether traced through Hegel and Marx, or through Fanon's theory of revolutionary violence (Fanon 1967), the onus should have been on Mbembe to acknowledge and critique these lineages, rather than simply deny the legitimacy of agency without argument. Indeed, there is considerable research that points in exactly the opposite direction to Mbembe's key claim that totalitarian regimes deny all modes of

agency in their subjects (Scarry 1985). The suggestion is that in “limit situations” where life is nasty and often brutishly short, there are often individual and collective forms of response that work around and underneath the explicit codes of violence by creating modes of contestation by other means. Indeed, the claim is that it is precisely through the lived experience of attempted annihilation, totalistic expropriation and servitude that the human spirit attains unmatched powers of agency and expression (Bakare-Yusuf 2001). How else, apart from through crude biologism, to begin to account for the extraordinary expressive output of black diasporic cultures?

In addition to underplaying the role of agency and resistance within existential contexts of suffering and domination, another aspect supporting Mbembe’s refusal to examine baroque practice in more detail is his over-reliance on a specific understanding of the intellectual, and what constitutes conceptual contestation within the political sphere. Mbembe’s interest seems to be in locating theoretical and political engagement in the writerly sphere of academic, juridical and overtly political texts, not on the street, the *bidonville* or within the practices of everyday life. In unison with his underdeveloped theory of bodily resistance, his thought does not engage with demotic modes of resistance and the micropolitics of daily practice. As Benetta Jules-Rosette writes,

While in the 1960s and 1970s African intellectuals played crucial roles across the continent in shaping independence struggles and new nation-states and in introducing such philosophies as Pan-Africanism, *negritude*, and African Humanism – all critiqued by Mbembe – the contemporary plight of bourgeois intellectuals as political and economic refugees has left a void in many African nation-states. In part, this void has been filled by grassroots intellectuals, religious leaders, artists, and entrepreneurs. This development is not a product of proletarian nostalgia, as Mbembe suggests, but merely a fact of daily life. These organic leaders occupy an empty space of creativity where new ideologies and cultural strategies are shaped and deployed. It is in this milieu that the responses to the devastation of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid analysed by Mbembe must be traced. (2002: 604)

Mbembe refuses to theorise the space of everyday life, nor does he engage with grassroots resistance. This is an enormous problem for his project. As Jules-Rosette points out, it is precisely within the sphere of everyday culture in Africa that seemingly absolute modes of power are contested and modified. Moreover, it is only by sidestepping the demotic sphere that Mbembe can lend his dismissal of all previous forms of thought any semblance of credibility. As we have seen, even a passing attention to existing work in African theory and writing would quickly put paid to his tabula rasa approach. Beyond the writerly sphere however, non-linear Africa has already been “writing” itself into history, whether Mbembe’s text acknowledges it or not. Whether it is Setal graffiti art in Senegal, Mami Watta across West Africa, the sapeurs in

Congo, Afrobeat or Fuji musical culture in Nigeria or an almost limitless supply of other cases, African cultural forms have continually sought to engage with and document the times (Friedman 1994, Hechte and Simone 1994). That many of these forms are not part of official culture or are not readily amenable to scholarly analysis is beside the point. What is key is that Mbembe's claim that the complexities of African lived experience have yet to be fully theorised and articulated can only make sense if one assumes that the only form of theory acceptable is that of the institutionalised intellectual surveying juridical/textual discourse.

To see this point in action, let us examine in more detail the case of Fela Kuti, the celebrated Nigerian musical revolutionary. From the perspective of an existential analysis of post-colonial African culture, with a specific focus on West Africa, an account that omits *any* reference to Fela Kuti is disappointing, to say the least. Fela's life and work stands at the intersection between the colonial and the post-colonial in Nigeria. Coming from a family background with a strong tradition of political resistance (his mother was a leading political activist, his brother, Beko Ransome-Kuti, a prominent dissident, his cousin Wole Soyinka, the renowned intellectual and playwright), Kuti's career can be characterised as politics and intellectualism by other means. On a trip to the US in the late 1960s, Kuti encountered the Black Power movement, as well as the music of James Brown, both of which became guiding influences in his work. There are many senses in which his music, through its lyrical content, his rejection of Highlife in favour of Afrobeat, the diasporic hybrid form, and his adoption of pidgin as a de facto lingua franca, go to the core of the shifting contexts of the time (Veal 2000). At his funeral in 1997, it took over five hours for the coffin to be carried from where it had been on public display in Tafawa Balewa Square to Ikeja, as over a million people flocked to pay their respects to the musical spirit of resistance of their times. If one refrains from purely textual juridical analysis, Fela Kuti's work and life yields insights into the post-colonial existential context that a library of academic texts could never achieve. That this is the case is evident in the continuing significance of his music today.²

In addition to the examination of singular examples of agency and resistance within the existential play of everyday life and culture, a post-colonial theory that focuses on lived experience and pre-inscriptive corporeal practice should also examine the productive systems that operate beneath the level of official recognition. Here, we can readily witness the power of the collective response to limit situations. In the midst of domineering regimes, arbitrary diktats and infrastructural collapse, the informal economy in countless African situations takes over and thrives. What Mbembe does not recognise is the efficiency of informal modes of distribution on the continent, and how these self-organising systems reflect modes of collective agency in pragmatic operation. As the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas found out during his Harvard research trips to Lagos, underneath the apparently chaotic collapse of its modern transport infrastructure, there are highly rationalised mechanisms of distribution at work (Koolhaas 2001). This fits perfectly with the suggestion already raised that Mbembe's project implicitly calls for a new mode of

recognition; underneath visible disorder, we find invisible processes that are both efficient and rational (Bakare and Weate 2003, Chabal & Daloz 1999).

Without a methodological acknowledgement of this, Mbembe's project of writing Africa from a fresh post-colonial perspective is surely doomed to failure, remaining empty and unsubstantiated. Without charting and coming to terms with creative strategies to overcome despotic tyranny, his text is bound to fall back on explicit modes of power and negation, resulting in the very thanatography he had hoped to avoid. Worse still, without acknowledging the ways in which the Western bias towards juridical analyses of power in various post-colonial contexts seek to re-enforce the victim paradigm, Mbembe's text itself falls prey to its own form of complicit conviviality. As Kimberly Segall writes,

To ignore the cultural invasion of legal forms and local adaptations to them – as exemplified in the operations of the postcolonial performative of victimization – thus courts the charge of a cultural blindness, an academic imperialism. (2002: 617 – 618)

Ultimately, the most fundamental cause of Mbembe's entanglement with the negative is his reductive understanding of power. Although indirectly influenced by Nietzsche (through his reading of Foucault and Deleuze), Mbembe crucially fails to acknowledge and internalise Nietzsche's most important concept – that of the will to power. He does not understand that people act for their own reasons, whether these are reflexively available or not. That complicity, corruption and conviviality is at work in innumerable African contexts is undoubtedly true; that these are performed solely for the benefit of the regime is however deeply questionable. Mbembe's mistake is to not recognise, beyond Sartrean masochism, the pragmatic complex of reasons that motivate complicity, and the unstable flux of possibility this complex gives rise to. His notion of baroque practice alludes to what the textualist terms of his theoretical position do not allow him to unpack – that resistance as a possibility is inherent within every instance of complicity.

This impoverished account of power as domination entails that the metaphysical structure of Mbembe's thought is trapped within an objectivist social ontology. Mbembe's refusal to acknowledge resistance is the corollary of a refusal to accept that in each case, complicity is enigmatic and could go either way – towards progressive or even revolutionary resistance, or towards retrenchment of the regime. For Mbembe, power in the African context is simply the various forms that domination takes. Mbembe follows the by now familiar metaphor of locating the violence of the state at the level of inscription. As with Foucault, it is hard to resist the idea that there is a degree of projection at work here. From the evidence of *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe's thought suffers from the very resentment he claims to uncover in the objects of his analysis. How else to explain his pendulous ambivalence concerning Bakhtin? On the one hand, a creative, existential thread draws Mbembe to a pre-textual ludic play that undermines the codes of the regime, on the other, his thought withdraws into the *longue durée* of the negative.

Mbembe's thought appears intrinsically wounded, scarred by an internal refusal to embrace and encounter resistance, the origins of which can only be a matter of speculation.

Perhaps the biggest irony of *On the Postcolony* is that Mbembe's attacks on a perceived romanticism within the tradition of African writing are couched in the most romantic of all paradigms – that of the lone intellectual, decrying the falsehoods by which the masses live. In the final analysis, Mbembe's project therefore appears to be a variation on a Sartrean theme: the alienated voice critiquing bad faith from an unspecified distance, announcing the necessity for a revolutionary new project via a polemical tract that takes the form of a manifesto. When asked in a recent interview about the conditions under which a positive transition could be effected in Africa, he answered,

But economic growth alone will not be enough. It should be accompanied by a serious shift in the terms of cultural rendition of contemporary African experiences. People, images and commodities have to circulate. A continental public sphere has to be nurtured through the development of mass media and new technologies. A renewal of the virtue of intellectual curiosity has to replace the current syndrome of victimization (2002b: 6)

The flawed assumptions hidden within this vision are easy to expose by simply reversing the goals. First, Mbembe assumes that "people, images and commodities" do not circulate in Africa. From the ridiculous – Ovation, the society photo magazine phenomenon in Nigeria (popular throughout the diaspora), to the sublime – such as *Another Africa* – a book of photographs by Robert Lyons with poems and an essay by Chinua Achebe, there is already an excess of people, images and commodities in circulation in Africa. The question to put to Mbembe is this: how do we explain the current popularity of the Cameroonian music form of Makossa among Lagosian youth, the presence of Saros (or the freed slaves) in 19th Century Lagos or the Islamic/Arabic inspired billowing embroidered boubou robes that are now associated with a "traditional" West African style, if not in terms of flows, exchanges, accommodations and appropriations that have long been at work in a multiplicity of African contexts? In her important work on the changing forms of sartorial practice in Senegal and South Africa, Hudita Nura Mustafa goes further, providing an historical analysis of deep-rooted forms of African cosmopolitanism. She writes,

There is nothing new about cosmopolitanism in Africa. Venetian glass bead necklaces, the use of tomato paste in cooking and the custom of speaking Arabic are all evidence of long histories of conquest, conversion, trade and appropriation. Layers of influence from Wolof status systems to Islam, French colonialism and US mass culture permeate material culture, especially dress. [...]. Such objects and images of the Dakar fashion system provide a

rich repertoire for material expressions of cultural ideals,
individual excellence and collective tradition (1998: 20)

Yet again, the audacity of Mbembe's call for flow and exchange and the erasure it commits are therefore somewhat shocking. Again, he assumes that Africa has no mass media and does not engage with new technology. But when we actually look at what obtains on the ground a vividly different reality emerges. Even a small city like Cotonou, in Benin, has eight daily newspapers, mostly privately owned; Nigeria has nearly twenty dailies and several weeklies – as elsewhere all over the continent. And with the recent phenomenon of media ownership demonopolisation, private radio stations are proliferating and television stations are being established (Fatoyinbo 1999). While Africa is still lagging behind in terms of internet usage, film-makers and musicians are adopting and readily making use of new technologies. For example, in the Nigerian video industry, digital filming and the use of DVD is increasingly being adopted. Again, young Africans are connecting and communicating in virtual space across the diaspora. Finally, Mbembe assumes that Africa is caught within a syndrome of victimisation. It behoves existential, deleuzian, feminist and other analyses of a multiplicity of African contexts to show the false grandiosity of his claims. In the same way, it behoves us to continue the work of uncovering the palimpsest of lost voices the semiotic paradigm that Mbembe partially adopts threatens to erase.

Conclusion

Mbembe's project of opening up a new epoch of African writing beyond the colonial is, as it stands, doomed to failure. It commits the double error of attempting to erase the past completely, as well as not providing any substantive ground for further development. *On The Postcolony* literally lacks body. Mbembe condemns himself to the very "narrative of loss" he had sought to avoid. His failure to see beyond de jure limitations, and his refusal to engage with everyday praxis and modes of creative resistance entail that his account is complicit with the very Western victimology that he had sought to avoid.

All this being the case, thanks to the oblique influences of existential phenomenology and Deleuze, Mbembe's work does nonetheless indicate the way forward, for African thinking, and for post-colonial thought as a whole. As we have seen, his attempt to think how oppressive power can be resisted took the form of a practice that undermines explicit modes of textuality – the written rules of State power. What remains potently unfulfilled in Mbembe's work is the project of thinking through the power of creative, embodied and material resistance at the level of everyday praxis. This project would counteract the paradigm of the victim with a conceptual apparatus that acknowledges de facto modes of resistance. The project ahead for post-colonial thought is therefore to think through existential acts of bodily resistance, and to understand in more detail how complex power dynamics *can* be modified through the pragmatics of everyday performance. This project would therefore suspend the automatic centrality currently granted to the textual paradigm, thinking beyond a cartesian understanding of the text, towards

Mbembe's very own baroque practice. In this case, the new form of writing ahead recontextualises "text" as a quasi-material substance, as a hinge between the world of concepts and the world of bodily experience. Text therefore becomes *woven*, a texture stitched into the fabric of the world. Text is put back into relation to its existential ground and becomes a palimpsest, the opaque surface upon which all forms of writing must be inscribed, rather than perpetually caught up in the self-referential delusional economy of the sign. Each new instance of writing, whether literary or otherwise, writes into a page that is already densely layered with precedents. The written codes of de jure power are finally put in relation to the de facto modes of resistance that undermine them. Via phenomenological, deleuzian, feminist or other methods of analysis, we could finally be led to the very space that Mbembe sought all along to uncover - a more complex account of power as it operates within the sinews of lived experience. From an African perspective (whether on the continent or not), this project would, above all, enable us at last to engage African existence in all its informal, non-linear complexity. Whether at the level of cultural analysis, social research or policy making, this work would start to encounter Africa on its own terms, not through a confused attempt at constructing a new form, but through a detailed engagement with modes of survival beyond the bounds of juridical recognition, as they take expression in the moment.

NOTES

¹ For a detailed analysis of Fanon's critique of Merleau-Ponty, see my essay, "Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the difference of phenomenology" in *Race*, edited by Robert Bernasconi.

² For example, in London, there is a monthly club devoted to African music called "The Shrine" (named after Fela's compound in Lagos). Again, in Cape Town, there is a café/arts centre called Kalakuta Republic, devoted to replicating the intense heterotopia that was Fela's compound.