

ACHILLE MBEMBE

The Preface and Foreword to the African Edition to

ON THE
postcolony

Foreword by Isabel Hofmeyr

ACHILLE MBEMBE

The Preface and Foreword to the African Edition to

ON THE
postcolony

Foreword by Isabel Hofmeyr



WITS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published in South Africa in 2024 by:

Wits University Press
1 Jan Smuts Avenue
Johannesburg, 2001
www.witspress.co.za

© Wits University Press
Foreword © Isabel Hofmeyr
Preface © Achille Mbembe

978-1-77614-939-1 (Open Access PDF)

This foreword and preface is freely available through Project MUSE under a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 Creative Commons License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). It was originally published as *On the Postcolony* by Achille Mbembe 978-1-86814-691-8 (Print).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher, except in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act, Act 98 of 1978.

Cover design by Hothouse South Africa

Contents

<i>On the Postcolony</i>	
– a Foreword by Isabel Hofmeyer	v
Preface to the African Edition	xiii
Introduction: Time on the Move	1
1. Of <i>Commandement</i>	24
2. On Private Indirect Government	66
3. The Aesthetics of Vulgarly	102
4. The Thing and Its Doubles	142
5. Out of the World	173
6. God's Phallus	212
Conclusion: The Final Manner	235
Bibliography	245
Index	271

On the Postcolony – a foreword

ISABEL HOFMEYR

Spread across South African university libraries are several dozen copies of *On the Postcolony*. Yet, at any one time, one will be hard-pressed to locate a copy. Many will be out with students preparing their essays on Achille Mbembe's thought. But in other cases, the book will have been out for months on end and is unlikely to be returned. These 'kidnapped' copies have entered a select club – namely those books that are in such demand that they are routinely stolen from South African libraries and bookshops. Along with Mbembe, Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon are two current favourites. Their books have compulsive powers and libraries are hard-pressed to keep replacing stolen copies. The Johannesburg Public Library had six copies of Biko's *I Write What I Like* but all have been taken out and never returned, producing the poignant catalogue entry "Biko, Steve. Long overdue".¹

What is the compulsive power of *On the Postcolony* and how has it shaped intellectual traditions in South Africa, both inside and outside the library?

Like Fanon and Biko before him, Mbembe is concerned with the pressing present political moment in which he writes and how it is shaped by the residues and remainders of colonial violence. Like his two predecessors, he does not approach this theme through the con-

ventional lenses of state and civil society, or resistance and passivity. Instead, for all three writers, the central focus is on psychic questions of the self: existential liberation, subjectivity, self-writing. All three writers move beyond existing dogma and speak to readers in compelling psychic and existential idioms. Or, as Mbembe, speaking of his own writing process, has said: “To think is to embark on a voyage of the mind. As far as I am concerned, to write is itself a form of enjoyment. This is why, in *On the Postcolony*, I wanted to experiment with the sensation that comes from a liberated mind, one that is ready to let things go off in unforeseen directions.”²

A consideration of the book’s biography illuminates its power further. It began its career in South Africa in 1992 in the form of an article entitled “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony”, translated from the French and published in the venerable journal *Africa*.³ The article itself arrived in an academic world dominated by anti-apartheid Marxist-inclined social historians intent on creating a new national history for a new political era. However, as the political transition gained momentum, the anti-apartheid historiography began to lose its traction, its narratives of resistance increasingly unable to explain a confusing post-apartheid post-Cold War world with the chilly winds of neo-liberal globalisation gathering force.

It was precisely this juncture that Mbembe’s article and then the book itself embraced, using the configuration of radical uncertainty as an opportunity to revisit themes of postcolonial crisis in Africa and to engage with the urgent issues of the present. The book approaches this task in an experimental, almost ludic way. Indeed, Mbembe has described the book as a “constellation” and a “portal with several entries”.⁴ It is a series of tentative experiments, a *tâtonnement* that approaches the intractable problem of postcolonial power in ways that depart from older orthodoxies (resistance vs passivity, autonomy vs subjection, state vs civil society, hegemony vs counter-hegemony). Leaving these well-worn abstractions behind, *On the Postcolony* foscicks in the compacted time of slavery, colonialism and postcolonialism, seeking out the psychic consequences of authoritarian violence and the logics of power that these produce in the long run. The book’s object is “postcolonial African authoritarianisms” (46) and the hierarchies of Fathers that these engender – from the deity of monotheism downwards to presidents and potentates. The book

analyses the sensory life of this gerontocratic patriarchal power and “the logic of mutual corruption and conviviality” that yokes ruler and ruled together in a shared matrix.⁵

The early sections of the book explore the violence of slavery and colonial rule by which subjects must ingest their own death and nothingness, existing as tools and things of others. “In the colonial principle of rationality, the native is that *thing that is, but only insofar as it is nothing*. And it is at the point where the thingness and the nothingness meet that the native’s identity lies” (187). One is hence compelled to “possess life, property, and body as if they were alien things ... like external matter to the person who bears them, who serves as their scaffolding” (237). A scaffold is both a supporting structure and a place of execution, an appropriate pairing for the processes that Mbembe describes, since colonised subjects have to contemplate themselves as dead matter both internal and external to themselves.

This form of subjection requires a peopling of the self by doubles, spectres and ghosts: “The native opens to the colonist as if no more than an instrument whose author or owner was, in truth, separate: a shadow, a spectre, or so to speak, a double” (237). The art of survival requires a convoluted form of proxy tricksterism as the colonised subject presents him or herself to power by means of “a specific art, that of doubling and the simulacrum [in which] to simulate is to cease to inhabit one’s body, one’s gestures, one’s words, one’s consciousness, at the very moment one offers them to another” (237). This logic of doubling and “being several in a body” (202) reproduces itself with baroque extremity under postcolonial rule as these “several” and fugitive selves proliferate, producing the “chaotically pluralistic” (102) of the postcolony. This world relies on particular styles of political improvisation and connivance between ruler and ruled which works through intimate idioms of the domestic and the family: “Precisely this logic – the necessary familiarity and domesticity in the relationship – explains why there has not been ... resistance” (104).

One of the book’s most important and controversial contributions has been this stress on the “mutual zombification” (104) of ruler and ruled as a way of understanding the intractable nature of postcolonial power. These modes of authority produce a set of interactions both brutal and ludic between ruler and ruled, often played out through discourses that rely on the idioms of the body: eating, shitting, sex,

the obscene and the grotesque played out in caustic laughter. The book hums with instances of these processes culled from everyday anecdote, newspaper reports, music, cartoons, literature. Ordinary people “kidnap power and force it, as if by accident, to examine its own vulgarity” (109).

Indeed, the book paints a picture of mutual exhaustion between ruler and ruled. Talking about his book, Mbembe has noted: “I was struck by the quasi-impossibility of revolutionary practice in the continent. There are social upheavals, to be sure. Once in a while, things break loose. But the latter hardly translate into an effective, positive, transformative praxis. It is almost always as if what ensues is a continuation in the void. I therefore wanted to be attentive to the multiplicity of holes that constantly eat away at power, penetrate it, drain it, dry up its flows without this necessarily resulting in any enhancement of life potential.”⁶

Much of the book narrates this politics of excess – humorously, coruscatingly, ludically, ecstatically, even prophetically and apocalyptically. As Mbembe has indicated: “the style of writing I adopted in this book is not one that looked for synthesis. In most instances, this style of writing aimed at speaking directly to the senses ... I decided to write a book that would make a space for resonances and interferences across different modes of thinking, neither of which was to be situated above the others – just like in music.”⁷ This reference to music is important, since much of the book has been inspired by African “fiction, fashion, painting, music, dance, the arts, and the domain of aesthetics in general”, sites of radical openness and possibility that moved away from the dogmas of Afro-Marxism.⁸

Expanding further on the theme of music, Mbembe has noted:

[A] proper biography of *On the Postcolony* is impossible without a direct reference to African music. During my days as a student in Paris, I had started listening to Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s vocal and instrumental expression, Pierre Akendengué’s songs of the forest and Ray Lema’s experimentations with classical music. It was in the late 1980s that I ‘discovered’ Congolese music. First, I was struck by the fact that in spite of its mixture of pain and suffering, this was a music of rare emotional sublimity. It could easily be characterised as a practice of jubilation ... A good reader of texts

can hear the sounds of Congolese music late in the night behind many a chapter of *On the Postcolony*. Some days, while writing this book and listening to this music, I could literally feel the transitory rhythms of earthly life in Africa.⁹

He continues:

Congolese musical imagination taught me how indispensable it was *to think with* the bodily senses, to write with the musicality of one's own flesh if we are to say anything meaningful about life in contemporary Africa. Not only could I feel with this music the movement of power, but I could also hear in it W.E.B Du Bois's injunction: 'Life is not simply fact.' Indeed, life is also the rendering of fact into song, sound and thought. Congolese music helped me to descend into the African world of the senses so I could write a book in which the song carries with it the flesh that gives it life. That is why, underneath the developments concerning violence, brutality and death, *On the Postcolony* keeps alive the possibility of a redeemed body of Africa at the day of resurrection.¹⁰

Fiction, too, plays an important role and the text bristles with references to African novelists: Sony Labou Tansi and Amos Tutuola are two favourites. As Mbembe has explained, fiction creates "unexpected bridges ... between abstraction and concreteness, the conscious and the unconscious."¹¹ Fiction presents

the human sensorium as a privileged, if dangerous, archive of the present – an archive that constantly threatens to overwhelm and suffocate the subject. It seemed to me that this new *écriture* (writing) was succeeding where the social sciences had failed to formulate new problems and to invent new concepts with cultural, political and aesthetic implications. When it came to Africa, the crisis in the social sciences could be dealt with if the social sciences were to *work through, with, and against* the arts. That is what got me on the road, in search for a social science discourse free from the dogmas of 'developpementalism' (left and right) – a discourse that would unashamedly be a political, philosophical and aesthetic practice.¹²

What of the book's broader reach and importance? To address this question is firstly to reckon with Mbembe's global stature as a revered intellectual and public figure across the French and Euro-American academies and the African intellectual world. His work has been translated into most major world languages and he has been crowned with many prizes and honorary doctorates. Yet, unusually for such a prominent global figure, he lives in Johannesburg where he enjoys a reputation both as an academic and as a public commentator who regularly writes and speaks on a host of contemporary topics including South African politics, soccer, HIV/Aids, music, literature and fashion.

A broker between worlds and languages, Mbembe has carried terms from French and given them a new lease of life in English where they have entered our everyday lexicon. One example is the term "Afropolitan" which has now been adopted by the University of Cape Town as its branding slogan. Indeed, the term "postcolony" itself is an Mbembe-ism that has been widely adopted across the humanities and social sciences. Other terms that have circulated widely due to his work are "necropolitics" and "mutual zombification".

Mbembe's interest in and writings on music, fiction, fashion, style and the politics of aesthetics form an important strand in cultural trends and across the continent. He has a close association with the magazine *Chimurenga* for which he has written on a range of themes, including Congolese music. Started in 2002 and edited by Ntone Edjabe, the magazine has since grown into an important intellectual forum for expression across the global south. Continuing the radical experimental tradition of small magazines such as *Black Orpheus* or *Transition*, *Chimurenga* forms part of a network of independent publications on the continent, such as like *Cassava Republic* in Nigeria and *Kwani?* in Kenya. Mbembe's ideas help sustain this world of independent publishing and feed into the broader cultural innovation of the continent and its ability to manifest creativity in the midst of precariousness and uncertainty.

Within the academy itself, *On the Postcolony* has an extensive footprint both in its own right and as a way of making sense of southern African material. *On the Postcolony* and Mbembe's ideas more generally have seeped into virtually every quarter of humanities and social science scholarship in and on southern Africa. Topics in which

his work is invoked include Shakespeare in Africa, studies of writers such as Ivan Vladislavić, Zakes Mda, JM Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Achmat Dangor, Marlene van Niekerk, and francophone writers based in southern Africa and beyond. His writings have inspired a generation of academic research on youth and popular culture, photography, fine art, music and fashion. His texts have penetrated the study of different languages: isiXhosa testimony on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Chiche a plays in Malawi, Mozambican and Angolan writing in Portuguese. In addition to informing discussion in political studies, architecture and urban space, his ideas have left an imprint in scholarship on critical race jurisprudence, human rights, constitutional law, biblical criticism and post-colonial theology.¹³

His ideas have proved especially adept at explaining the current shape of South Africa. As Jean Comaroff has pointed out, Mbembe was one of the first writers to grapple with the intersection of post-colonial and neo-liberal thought.¹⁴ While much postcolonial thought is good at explaining anti-colonial impulses of the past, it has less to say about the contradictory picture of the present. Or, as Comaroff asks, how best to respond in a situation where “liberation ran headlong into liberalization”.¹⁵ *On the Postcolony* specifically grapples with these issues, thinking about what it means to live in times of radical uncertainty and to feel betrayed by the present.

As the South African order becomes more neo-patrimonial, *On the Postcolony* emerges as an evermore important handbook to help us make sense of the cruel absurdities of contemporary South African life – the libidinal President, the genuflection to gerontocratic patriarchs, new forms of populist authoritarianism (whether the EFF or Pentecostalism), the omnipresence of ‘eating’ as the key metaphor of dominant political culture. As a book which examines the long arc of colonial structures and their continued residue in everyday life, *On the Postcolony* also helps illuminate the xenophobic structures of insiders and outsiders, a reprise of older colonial and apartheid idioms of the useful citizen and the criminalised surplus.

On the Postcolony is a book that speaks compellingly to our present predicaments and vibrates with the reflexes of the future. It is a book that is likely to continue to be stolen from libraries for some years to come.

NOTES

1. For details see Isabel Hofmeyr, "South African Remains: Thompson, Biko and the Limits of *The Making of the English Working Class*", *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 41 (1) 2015, in press.
2. "Achille Mbembe in Conversation with Isabel Hofmeyr", *South African Historical Journal* 56 (1) 2006, 180 (hereafter "Interview").
3. Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony", *Africa* 62 (1) 1992, 3–37.
4. Quotes from "Interview", 183 and *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 241. All further references are to this edition and are given in brackets in the text.
5. "Interview", 183.
6. "Interview", 185.
7. "Interview", 184.
8. "Interview", 177.
9. "Interview", 177–8.
10. "Interview", 178.
11. "Interview", 178.
12. "Interview", 179.
13. This information is gleaned from databases of southern African scholarship on Sabinet (www.sabinet.co.za). Accessed 30 November 2014.
14. Jesse Weaver Shipley, Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe, "Africa in Theory: A Conversation between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe", *Anthropological Quarterly* 83 (3) 2010, 653–678.
15. Shipley et al., "Africa", 667.

Preface to the African Edition

ACHILLE MBEMBE

I wrote most of *On the Postcolony* at night. It was in the early 1990s, as the deep shadow of Afro-Marxism was receding. Then, it seemed as if the study of Africa was caught in a dramatic analytical gridlock. Many scholars were peddling increasingly unhelpful maps of the present at the very moment that new dramas were taking shape. As the crisis in the social sciences was intensifying, innovative trends, even a new kind of thinking, were emerging in fields as disparate as design, fiction, fashion, painting, dance and the domain of aesthetics in general. In all these disciplines of the imagination, something of a reconciliation between so-called African identity and a certain idea of worldliness, if not cosmopolitanism, was in the making.

But a proper biography of *On the Postcolony* would be impossible without a direct reference to African music. I discovered Congolese music in the late 1980s – a time of structural adjustment programmes, wars of predation, cruelty and stupidity parading as leadership, military coups and deferred social revolutions. The emotional sublimity of the Congolese musical imagination taught me how indispensable it was to think with the bodily senses, to write with the musicality of one's own flesh. With this music I could feel not only the movement of power, but also the truth of W.E. Du Bois' injunction: 'Life is not simply fact'. Music has the capacity to marry soul and matter. Indeed,

in Africa, music has always been a celebration of the ineradicability of life, in a long life-denying history. It is the genre that has historically expressed, in the most haunting way, our raging desire not only for existence, but more importantly for joy in existence – what we should call the practice of joy before death.

The African novel is the other direct biographical element of this book. From the late 1980s onwards, the best of the African novel was already celebrating the demise of the nationalist project and of Africa's post-independence rulers' claim to stand for the Father. At the same time, the novel was alerting us to the appearance of new, uncommon forces that we could neither quite grasp nor yet capture in the then dominant conceptual languages (development, state–society relations, civil society). I had begun reading the work of the Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi in the late 1980s. Whether in *La vie et demie*, *L'État honteux*, *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* or *La parenthèse de sang*, experimentation always came before ontology. Unexpected bridges were built between abstraction and concreteness, reason, emotion and affect, the conscious, the unconscious and the oneiric. Art and thought were made to come alive and to resonate with one another. Tansi's idea of an agreement constantly deferred in order for new questions to be introduced, revealed the need to expand the *dictionary* for a rethinking, a reinvention, to happen – for difference to become productive. Contingency, uncertainty and ephemerality appeared to offer a vast reservoir of freedom and free play. I found the same ability to seize the ephemeral in Amos Tutuola's *L'ivrogne dans la brousse* and in Yambo Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence*.

This is when I decided to write a book that would make a space for resonances and interferences across different modes of thinking, neither of which would be situated above the others. The best way to do this was to explore what a political and aesthetic critique of the Father might look like in the Africa of the last quarter of the twentieth century and how, because of its powerful resonances – and hopefully its explanatory uniqueness – a critique of the Father (the 'Thing' and its doubles) would enable us to write an alternative history of our present.

Of *On the Postcolony*, it can therefore be said that it is an attempt to uncover what lies underneath the mask of the Father. What form

does the Father take in the aftermath of colonialism *stricto sensu*? What does his face look like? What are his shapes? What is produced by means of the Father and what surfaces does he engender? To paraphrase Deleuze, what I found was something like a ‘goat’s ass’ that lived under the curse, and stood opposite the face of a pagan god – death concealed in the darkness as well as darkness in the full light of day, shining and stinking. *On the Postcolony* therefore looks at the ways in which this *Phallos* in the shape of a goat’s ass stages itself and how it is refracted in the consciousness of those who are under its spell – in short, what life, lived under its sign and as a result of its (de)generative power, is about.

This way of thinking and writing is very much a product of my training in specific postwar French traditions of intellectual life (represented by, for example, Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Blanchot, Deleuze). But, as I have already said, it is also rooted in my reading of the francophone African novel and my listening to late 20th-century African music. What both traditions have taught me is that to think is to experiment. To think is also to recover and rescue the figurative power of allegory as it applies to specific realms of human experience, of which it is the adequate form of expression, or the conceptual language in which that experience alone can be expressed. To think is finally to embark on a voyage of the mind, and to write is a form of enjoyment. This is why, in *On the Postcolony*, I wanted to experiment with the sensation that comes from a mind that is ready to let things go off in unforeseen directions, at the risk of coming face to face with unspeakable desires and fears, and waking up the daemonic agencies of our underworld.

This is perhaps the reason why those who have read *On the Postcolony* without a philosophical disposition have characterised it as pessimistic. I come from a tradition in which ‘to think’ (*penser*) is the same as ‘to weigh’ (*peser*) and ‘to expose’. To think critically is to work with the fault lines, to feel the chaotic touch of our senses, to bring the compositional logics of our world to language. Critique is witnessing as well as endless vigilance, interrogation and anticipation. A proper critique requires us to first dwell in the chaos of the night in order precisely to better break through into the dazzling light of the day. We recognise the moment of pessimism when the layers of the past and the world of the present fall into the void, that is,

a place that is not a place. We recognise the moment of pessimism when we trivialise human experience or provoke misplaced empathy or contempt; when, unable to release language, we succumb to the elemental materiality of the *there is*. We enter this ‘dark night of language’ when its symbolising powers are suddenly crippled and, instead of revealing what is hidden within the self-evident and what lies beneath the surface, behind the mask, language circles in on itself and hides what it should be showing.

From art, literature, music and dance, I have learnt that there is a sensory experience of our lives that encompasses innumerable unnamed and un-nameable shapes, hues and textures that ‘objective knowledge’ has failed to capture. The language of these genres communicates how ordinary people laugh and weep, work, play, pray, bless, love and curse, make a space to stand forth and walk, fall and die. Literature, and music in particular, are also practices of desecration and profanation. Each in its own way involves a paradoxical and at times risky play with limits – both the limits set by moral or political orders and those that shape language and style, thought and meaning.

The quiet force of African aesthetic practices is to be found in the way they see every moment or instant of human existence as both entirely fortuitous and at the same time utterly singular. In the best tradition of African art, music, literature, every moment of human existence is made up of points of intensity that are never stable. There is nothing in *On the Postcolony* that could resemble a linear history. Africa will never be a given.

But confronting the archive and interrogating the future helps us to reflect critically on the present – the present as that vulnerable space, that precarious and elusive entry-point through which, hopefully, a radically different life might make its appearance. There is no future without hope – the hope that we might bring this radically different temporal life into being as a concrete social possibility, as a systemic transformation in the logic of our being-in-common and being-in-the-world as human beings.