Achille Mbembe. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran, Duke UP, 2019. Pp. viii, 213. CAD$34.39.

Necropolitics (2019) is an outgrowth of Achille Mbembe's earlier, now canonical, essay by the same name, which was published in *Public Culture* in 2003. The essay, included in *Necropolitics* as the third chapter, begins with a forceful statement: "The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die" (*Necropolitics* 66). Revisiting the biopolitical reading of governance as theorized by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, Mbembe conceptualizes necropolitics as the power over death and the power to condemn certain

subjects to be the "*living dead*" (92; emphasis in original). This shift of the object of governance from life to death reflects the contemporary modes of violence practiced by state and inter-/intra-state agents, such as occupation, genocide, terrorism, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency.

The title *Necropolitics*, translated from the French *Politiques de l'inimitié* (published in 2016), does not suggest the book's major contribution. The original title, "politics of enmity," draws attention to the structures of separation and othering that drive necropower and characterize the contemporary era as a "*world of people without bonds*" (6; emphasis in original). At the heart of this world, whose bifurcation is determined by capitalism, colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and militarization, is, according to Mbembe, "the question of knowing if it was ever possible, if it is possible, and if it will ever be possible, for us to encounter the other differently than as a given object" (40).

Mbembe traces the genealogy of the politics of enmity to colonial-era subject relations and argues that such politics lie at the foundations of liberal democracies. The first chapter, "Exit from Democracy," relates how "modern democracy in the West" is structured as a "solar body" undergirded by "*the nocturnal body*" (22; emphasis in original), through which excessive, racialized violence takes place. While Mbembe insists that a planetary democracy exists as an ideal form of ethical politics amongst human and other-than-human agents, he argues that liberal democracies erupting from and within the legacies of Western modernity have always used unlawful forms of violence to secure their body politic. To preserve their "solar" self-imaginary as a system for equality, justice, and debate, the "nocturnal body" of liberal democracies externalizes the originary violence onto "third places, to nonplaces, of which the plantation, the colony, or, today, the camp and the prison, are emblematic figures" (27). The two sides of liberal democracies illuminate what Mbembe calls the "planetarization" and entanglement of the world (9) because the state's exterior—its nocturnal "elsewhere" (40)—is linked to its solar interior. Outlining the ontological and historical conditions and contemporary formations of the politics of enmity, Mbembe addresses spatially and temporally distant contexts, including US slavery and imperialism, the occupation of Palestine, colonization and decolonization in Africa, South African apartheid, and the global North's violence against refugees and migrants. *Necropolitics*' swift movements between these realities suggest that they are woven into the fabric of necropower by the politics of enmity.

The other, an overarching concern in the book that ties the chapters together, is a polyvalent presence in our contemporary era and an analytical unit for Mbembe's study of necropower. To understand how the other constitutes the intimate relationship between *bios* (political life) and *zoe* (biological

life), Mbembe dives deeply into Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic writings. The thoughtful survey of Fanon's body of work reminds readers of his unique position in colonial wars. As a psychiatrist, Fanon treated both the torturers, the French army personnel, as well as the tortured, the Algerian liberation fighters. Through Fanon, Mbembe theorizes the presence of violence that keeps the other in place (read: in nonplace, the camp, the plantation, elsewhere) and examines how the colonial self requires a host of psychic and racist relations to hang its subjectivity in precarious balance against the other. He argues that "racism was a way for the subject to divert onto the Other the intimate shame he had of himself" (131). In other words, racism is a "social neurosis": its desire to kill the other, who is a projection of the self's "inferior elements," in fact "undermines itself and destroys from within the values that it otherwise claims to hold" (131). Mbembe concludes that racism (which is shorthand for the colonial project and the politics of enmity) functions through "a mix of fear, hatred, and displaced love" (134).

Mbembe's forays into the psycho-affective dimensions of violence reveal a critical disciplinary insight in *Necropolitics*: one cannot study bio(necro) power without an interdisciplinary attention to critical race studies and psychoanalytic theory. Moreover, this far-reaching, interventionist, and meditative book contributes to the studies of Black Diaspora, colonialism and decolonization in Africa, postcolonialism, Middle Eastern politics, political philosophy, the Anthropocene, Marxism, and Western humanism.

However, I also want to consider how *Necropolitics* evades certain critical contexts and voices that have long witnessed the intersections between violence, colonialism, and humanity—namely, women and queer political lives. This elision—which other scholars have noted, most powerfully Michelle Wright—comes from Mbembe's masculinist assumptions in theorizing the human subject. Wright argues that Mbembe's "man," as a term, cannot make an inclusive gesture toward women since one would have to change the "masculinist logics that gird assumptions of space, time, racism, violence, justice, peace" (3). Her review inspires my thoughts herein. I note that while *Necropolitics* might want "man" and "he" to be gender-inclusive terms—especially in the French-language context and in accordance with Mbembe's philosophical liberalism—the focus on the "subject of the political" (Mbembe 139) becomes constraining. Mbembe employs this terminology in relation to "the Fanonian subject," who, for the most part, is the racialized man trapped in a condition of psycho-social subjugation (139). Perhaps it is the (poor) definition of "the political" that limits not only the racialized man but also Mbembe's considerations of the politics of lived experience. What if we were to consider women's political lives? Queer politics

of life? What is the shape of such gendered experiences of "the political" in the necropolitical world?

Once Mbembe moves beyond the man-centred political realm for subjecthood, his writing takes flight. In the sixth chapter, he engages with the Afrofuturist study of the Black subject as an assemblage of "*objects-humans* and of *humans-objects*" (164; emphasis in original), a condition that, although a colonial imposition, is full of creative and social potential for transforming Western humanist conceptions of the human. Through this engagement, Mbembe passionately asserts the power of "life flows" of Blackness under duress (159)—the "brow sweat of slaves" (166)—and his belief that enslaved Black subjects "remained human to the core. They had bodies. They breathed. They walked. They spoke, sang, and prayed" (166). By way of conclusion, the book ends with a plea for vulnerability as a kind of radical openness towards the other that has the capacity to undermine the colonial politics of enmity. I cannot help but think that the ending would be richer if it made transparent the focus on men and masculinity felt throughout the book; if, in other words, the author clarified what vulnerability specifically performs for Black, racialized, and colonized men. This empowering look at men and their role in the politics of care and radical openness would allow the book to end with a gesture of kinship toward existing women's and queer scholarship as well as future writing that could potentially develop from Mbembe's critical opening.

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Works Cited

Wright, Michelle M. "A World without Most of Us*: Achille Mbembe's Critique of Black Reason* and the Politics of Postcolonial Critique." *Academia.edu*. Accessed 17 Feb. 2020.