

Korassi Téwéché

BEYOND THE POSTCOLONY

On Achille Mbembe's
Planetary Justice and Ethics

[transcript]

Korassi Téwéché
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Editorial

The book series **Philosophy – Enlightenment – Critique** aims to promote philosophical thinking dedicated to a future worth living for everyone in times of global crisis. Climate change, political and religious authoritarianism, and growing social inequalities – the manifold and interconnected issues of our time require a return to the power of reason. In the spirit of a new enlightenment, the series initiates a dialog between different philosophical schools and traditions that critically scrutinize the past and present and explore the ramifications of sustainable alternatives. This requires a re-examination, re-interpretation and revision of the philosophical canon. The series also reveals the emancipatory potential inherent in the interplay between philosophy and other disciplines such as technology or aesthetics.

Korassi Téwéché, also known as Dr Ever Aware, is a Cameroonian artist and philosopher whose work bridges critical theory and contemporary art through video, installation, and writing. He holds a doctorate from Universität Münster, Germany, and has received grants from the Hans-Böckler Foundation, the German Research Foundation (DFG), and the Cluster of Excellence at Universität Münster.

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Introduction: Thinking from Death-Worlds

“It is precisely in these terms of mutuality, solidarity, and recognition of our common vulnerability that we ought to consider the new us, or what I call the *in-common*. It is a question here of a we that includes human beings as well as objects, viruses, plants, animals, oceans, machines – all the forces and energies with which we must henceforth learn to live in bio-symbiosis.”

— Achille Mbembe

Outside a hospital, a heavily pregnant woman writhes in agony. She cries out for help, but no one responds. Her husband pleads with the nurse at reception, but she refuses to admit the woman because the couple have no insurance and cannot afford the childbirth costs. As time passes, the woman loses consciousness. She finally gives birth to a fragile little girl struggling to breathe. The baby dies shortly afterwards, and her mother, having lost a lot of blood, passes away some hours later. She leaves behind two children and a husband who are all inconsolable. Similar tragedies occur around the world today: populations decimated by hunger, epidemics, and war, while a tiny minority of the world's population alone holds three-quarters of the planet's wealth; refugees dying at sea or in deserts, while wealthy nations are increasing their border militarisation budgets tenfold; communities fighting over vital resources like land, water, and food, when companies push for deregulation and the privatisation of the planet's common resources; an environment poisoned by industrial over-exploitation, when the elites responsible for such disasters dream of escaping to exoplanets. Such is the state of the world in which we live, and which constitutes the daily tragedy of millions of people.

Regardless of where they occur or who the protagonists are, these tragedies share at least one common trait. They compel human beings to face a vital choice: either accept enduring death as an inevitable fate or look beyond it for ways to collectively reinvent conditions for a better life accessible to everyone. By 'death-world,' I refer to this experience where death is seen as an inevitable certainty. Humans living in death-worlds have lost hope for a shared, sustainable life. In other words, the main feature of death-worlds is not the inability of some spaces on Earth to sustain life. (cf. Bentz and James Marlatt 2021) Instead, death-world describes a set of beliefs that individualistic struggle against death signifies the goal of a life. In this world, only the strongest survive. The question then is how, in such a world where the competition for survival has become the unavoidable framework of behaviours, to establish a relationship based on recognising the value of life shared as equitably as possible among all Earth's inhabitants.

In other words, whether manifesting in socio-political, economic, ecological, or technological forms, the experience of inhabiting a death-world raises the crucial question of how we can conceive new conditions for life's sustainability, durability, and hope beyond individualistic and competitive struggles against death. The idea of life's sustainability and durability does not only mean finding solutions and methods of action to survival challenges. Indeed, finding solutions is essential. But beyond the quest for survival, what is at stake is the realisation of the value and meaning of life itself, and the profound transformation of human presence in the world, alongside other living beings. Have humans responded sufficiently to the question of finding a different way of thinking in a more viable manner, their presence in the world with their fellow human beings and the rest of the cosmos, or are they still destined to confront the brutal realities of death-worlds?

This book aims to explore this question. It is based on reflections on the work of Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe. Starting with a critical review of Africa's tragic history with the rest of the world – a history characterised by widespread circulation of death and the loss of hope in life – Mbembe's critical thinking contends that planetary ethics and justice are essential for sustaining life. By ethics, he means recognising our own individual and collective responsibility towards life's fragility. This planetary awareness of our shared vulnerability and accountability forms the foundation for rediscovering, sharing, and repairing the vital bond that connects all human beings with the rest of the living world. At the heart of this philosophy is a descriptive critique that complements normative reflections on humanity's modern history,

alongside new models of sociopolitical coexistence on Earth. This book seeks to outline Mbembe's main arguments whilst analysing how his ideas relate to contemporary debates about the future of life on Earth, including political, economic, and ecological issues.

The book begins with a systematic analysis of Mbembe's concepts and concludes by introducing the idea of Afroplanetarianism as a critique of his philosophy. (cf. Téwéché 2023) From the perspective of Afroplanetarianism, understanding human responsibility no longer concentrates on analysing historical relationships between humans or between humans and nature. Instead, it involves reconsidering human uniqueness and the scope of its capacities for intelligence and free will in shaping daily life. Beyond examining the causes and effects of historical tragedies, or setting ideals and models for conduct within an earthly community, the true challenge is to show how humans can utilise their natural potential to tackle the crises threatening life on our planet. In other words, Afroplanetarianism questions the very essence of Life by recognising the central event of human daily existence within the world as it is. On this basis, this philosophy provides a foundation for transcending Mbembe's critical historicism and utopianism to reassess human concrete responsibility in sustaining everyday lives both in Africa and globally. The aim is to provide new insights into how we daily interpret resilient life amidst death-worlds on a planetary scale.

To achieve this goal, the book first examines Mbembe's work up until 2024. Born in July 1957 in Malandé, southern Cameroon, Mbembe is one of the most influential figures in 21st-century postcolonial African philosophy. He left his homeland in 1982 to move to France after completing part of his education. In France, he completed his Master's in history, which he had begun at the University of Yaoundé I in Cameroon. After earning his *Diplôme d'Études Approfondies* (DEA), he finished a doctoral thesis on the history of the *maquis* in southern Cameroon at the *Institut d'Études Politiques* and the *Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne*. Since then, he has held numerous academic roles across Africa, Europe, and the United States, and in 2016 co-founded the *Ate-liers de la pensée de Dakar* with the Senegalese thinker Felwine Sarr. This initiative regularly brings together intellectuals, artists, and civil society actors from Africa and its diaspora to discuss the continent's future and its relationship with the world. A thorough examination of Mbembe's work, therefore, requires engaging with this complex biography. It will highlight the context in which his thought developed, in dialogue with diverse cultures across Africa, Europe, and the United States.

Thus, beyond the African continent, Mbembe's thought critically examines our current socio-political, epistemological, ecological, and technological crises, beginning with the "planetary turn" in human history. While he initially concentrated on Africa, Mbembe increasingly explores the planetary future of life and theory within a multipolar world, noting Europe's decline as a unique centre. Central to this analysis is the description and critique of what he terms the "unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of a global minority" or a "planetary plutocracy that devours and sequesters the goods of humanity and all living resources." (Mbembe 2020a, pp. 18–19) The concept of "power" does not solely refer to Michel Foucault's governmentality over life, nor to Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the will to power, but rather to the human aspiration for an unlimited life, which has profound implications for the future of life on Earth. (2019b, p. 14) Moreover, beyond the critical analysis, Mbembe's thought raises questions about the ethical, political, and economic conditions necessary for a sustainable world. After introducing the issue of planetary ethics and justice in his work, I will present the contextual analysis and the subject matter of this research. I will also outline the methodology used in this book, establishing a framework for my interpretation of Mbembe's complex and heterodox thoughts on ethics and political philosophy.

Ethics as the Foundation of Politics

Scholars have highlighted the importance of linking planetary justice with ethics. Despite the severe ecological, political, and socio-economic crises facing humanity, ethics suggests that opportunities for action and reparation still exist. In one of its conventions, the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation* argues that humanity still possesses the power to choose; irreversible harm has not yet reached catastrophic levels. The sustainability of our planet requires a new, enduring relationship between humans and our environment, as we enter an age characterized by wisdom, knowledge, and global sharing. (UNESCO, 2003: 5) Ethics is essential as it grounds the foundation for examining the norms that guide collective behaviour, particularly with one another, the environment, and the planet. In his book *Necropolitics* (Mbembe 2019b, p. 184) Mbembe support this idea of the necessity of ethics by presenting what he terms the *Ethics of the passerby*. The ethical issue can be framed as follows:

“Is losing everything or nearly everything – better, letting go of everything, or renouncing everything or nearly everything – the condition, then, under which we may win some serenity in this world and age of turbulence, a world in which, oftentimes, what one has does not ally with what one is and what one earns entertains only a distant relation with what one loses?” (Mbembe 2019b, p. 185)

In contrast to the human tendency to exercise unlimited control over the world and its resources, Mbembe’s ethics of the passer-by advocate for recognizing the vulnerability of life and rejecting arbitrary power. This recognition is a crucial step towards achieving planetary justice. However, what does Mbembe mean by the concept of ethics? What are its foundations, principles, and implications for contemporary political thinking, particularly regarding his idea of justice? My analysis will focus on the figure of the passer-by, a person who acknowledges their vulnerability, renounces the inclination to abuse power, shares and repairs the world with fellow human beings, and acts for the sustainability of all living beings, both human and non-human. I will discuss this ethical argument, its principles, and implications for our understanding of justice. Specifically, I will examine how the ethical principles of *renunciation*, *sharing*, and *reparation* – derived from the analysis of the *passers-by* as a subject of ethics – provide a basis for addressing planetary justice. Additionally, I will explore their cosmological foundations.

My analysis will reconstruct the genealogy of Mbembe’s notions of ethics and justice in his works up to 2024. While the roots of his ethics can be traced back to earlier writings, it is in *Necropolitics* (2019b) that this concept is present and developed. Mbembe examines how the contemporary world is characterized by global accumulation through dispossession, new forms of violence fuelled by an increasingly brutal system of power, as well as the emergence of precarious living conditions that make it challenging for many to maintain control over their own lives. (Mbembe 2017, p. 294) He highlights numerous figures, including refugees and victims of capitalist exploitation, racism, sexism, and terrorism. Beyond these specific cases, Mbembe also identifies the Living (Le Vivant) as the primary target of humanity’s destructive power. This critical diagnosis of the modern world raises the question of the necessity for ethical and political principles to protect all living beings – human and non-human – from planetary violence and promote genuine sustainability. I aim to examine the meaning of this critique, its arguments, and their development up to the *planetary turn* in Mbembe’s thinking.

I will focus on publications and conferences spanning nearly fourteen years (1984–2024). Instead of providing a chronological analysis of these publications, I will examine several texts, drawing on insights from a conference, an article, and a book, even though they are separated in time and belong to different contexts. I will base my analysis on two hypotheses. First, although Mbembe's work may seem non-systematic, an internal coherence in his thinking can be understood. Second, a comprehensive reading of his texts and lectures suggests that this unity is expressed in his approach to the problem of ethics and contemporary politics. In other words, his analyses of the crises of our time highlight a core issue, which he addresses by proposing an ethical framework that lays the foundation for planetary justice. I aim to discuss these arguments alongside the numerous influential scholars with whom Mbembe engages.

These scholars represent various fields, including psychoanalysis (Fanon, 2015), African philosophy (cf. Eboussi Boulaga et al. 2006; Diagne 2017; Kisukidi 2018; Kodjo-Grandvaux Séverine 2022; Sarr 2017), postcolonial and Afro-diasporic studies (cf. Glissant and Wing 1997) and continental philosophy (cf. Heidegger 1999; Foucault 1982; Arendt 2017; Butler 1997; Zuboff 2023), to name a few. While I do not claim to be exhaustive, I will refer to these scholars as key to interpreting Mbembe's ideas rather than as definitive authorities. I intend to reconstruct the context needed to understand the ethical and political issues that underpin his diverse and complex work. This reconstruction will allow me to reveal the coherence in the meanings, principles, and foundations of Mbembe's texts and lectures. By identifying the core problems and how they are addressed, I aim to uncover the underlying intuition that runs through many of the texts and talks published over the past forty years.

Moreover, it is crucial to examine Mbembe's methodology to grasp the meaning of his concepts of ethics and planetary justice. As I previously explained, he engages in dialogue with authors from various disciplines, including political theory, psychoanalysis, literary studies, postcolonial and decolonial theories, and ecology. This interdisciplinarity influences his writing, which emphasises qualitative analysis, vivid imagery, and hermeneutics. Abstract ideas are often complemented by detailed descriptions, which enhance understanding. He explores diverse themes, including violence, power, and domination; issues of slavery and colonisation; political and economic governance; and technology, among others. The interdisciplinary nature of his work, which is constantly evolving, is grounded in an analysis of socio-political realities, uncovering their contradictions and effects on life across the

globe. Through this perspective, the reader gains a deep understanding of the complex web of human experience in our contemporary world.

By highlighting the complexities of meaning and identifying their core issue, the book guides the reader through Mbembe's work. This approach will clarify how his descriptive analyses, drawing on research from disciplines such as economics and political sciences, serve as starting points for rethinking the normative conditions necessary for a different mode of behaviour on a planetary scale. While the descriptive reflections reveal the limitations of political, economic, ecological, and migration theories, the ethical considerations address how we can conceive a normative idea of community, rights, and justice, making the world habitable and sustainable for all its human and non-human inhabitants. Admittedly, from a methodological perspective, neither Mbembe's recent works nor his earlier writings systematically develop ethical thought. The originality of this book lies in its systematic examination of the ethical and philosophical stakes of his work. Beyond introducing Mbembe's ideas, this book will also make a significant contribution to discussions on planetary ethics and justice. I will explore how the concept of planetary community (Chapter 1) provides a foundation for developing concepts of planetary rights (Chapter 2), planetary justice (Chapter 3), and the ethics of passer-by (Chapter 4).

The first chapter will explore Mbembe's concept of the Earthly Community and how it challenges the traditional notion of community, which is typically associated with the nation-state, borders, and sovereignty. Additionally, the chapter will consider how this utopia encourages a rethinking of a new political framework, which Mbembe refers to as the 'politics of life'. The second chapter will reflect on Mbembe's thoughts on planetary rights. I will examine the arguments supporting universal rights to habitation, mobility, and breath. These rights stem from the vision of a planetary community. The third chapter will analyse the meaning of Mbembe's concept of planetary justice, including its foundations, principles, and purpose. The principles of justice are derived from two key concepts: the ethics of the passer-by and the utopia of an earthly community, along with the idea of planetary rights. Justice aims to secure a sustainable life for all human and non-human beings. The fourth chapter will offer a critical analysis of the passer-by as the ethical subject par excellence, guided by principles of renunciation, sharing, and repair of the planet. It will explore the significance of these principles in depth and how applying them in politics inevitably challenges traditional methods of establishing political communities, especially those centred on territory and nation.

Africa as the Primary Subject of Study

There has been a lack of a systematic introduction to the principles, foundations, and aims of Mbembe's ethics and planetary justice. While many scholars have explored various aspects of his thought, often relating his ideas to postcolonial theory, there has been little analysis of how his ethics of the passer-by, his critique of power, and the imperative for planetary justice are interconnected through the principles of renunciation, sharing, and reparation. This book decisively addresses this critical gap in understanding Mbembe's thought. The following discussion will outline the current state of research, highlighting the originality and significance of my topic in relation to existing interpretations of his work.

A review of the literature on Mbembe's reception reveals that two key concepts have emerged as central themes in his discourse: the *postcolony* and *necropolitics*. The emphasis on the *postcolony* by the commentators suggests that Mbembe's contributions represent an iteration of postcolonialism. (Böckmann et al. 2022; Brumlik 2022; Faets 2023; Abadie and Metende 2024) Weate (2003a, 2003b) identifies him as a significant voice in postcolonial theory, positioning his work at the intersection of poststructuralism and phenomenology. Mbembe seeks to craft a new narrative about Africa that counters Western reductionism. (2003a, p. 1) His book *On the Postcolony* (2001) is described as an example of "deconstructive postcolonialism," which Weate defines as a "theorization of the postcolonial," with Africa as its focal point. Weate delves into the theoretical underpinnings of Mbembe's critique, particularly his concept of world humanism (*en-commun*). He explains how Mbembe distances himself from nativism (indigenism) and Marxism – two influential strands of African thought that emerged after independence. This rejection paves the way for his universalism, which is rooted in a re-examination of the ideas of Fanon, Senghor, and Césaire. (Syrotinski 2007)

Moreover, it is asserted that Mbembe's work stands out as a remarkable evolution in African postcolonial criticism, actively engaging with influential thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, V.Y. Mudimbe, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, Jean-Marc Ella, Paulin Hountondji, Maurice Blanchot, Sony Labou Tansi, or Barbara Cassin. Comaroff (2015; 2010) supports this view, recognising Mbembe as a crucial figure in the postcolonial task of dismantling Eurocentrism. However, Comaroff and Comaroff (2015) go further, asserting that postcolonialism also seeks to acknowledge the contributions of Global South nations, particularly those in Africa, to the advancement

of modern theory and practice. It is essential to approach Mbembe's concept of the "rewriting of Africa" through this lens, as it highlights Africa's integral role in shaping contemporary thought. However, what distinguishes Mbembe from postcolonialism is his ability to think beyond the boundaries of this theory, which often reinforces the ideology of difference, as well as essentialism and nativism. Rather than falling into the trap of rigid identity labels and uncritical tradition, his work offers a compelling framework for understanding Africa that embraces future potential and encourages dialogue with diverse global narratives. This approach promotes self-determination and inspires a vibrant reinvention of African traditions.

This interpretation of Mbembe's work finds strong support in the analyses of Osha (2000), Abadie and Metende (2024) as well as Dübgen and Skupien (2018), who examine different aspects of Mbembe's reflection on decolonisation. Osha (2000), among the first scholars to examine the postcolony, describes this work as a polyphonic exploration of emerging death and violence in the African continent. He argues that Mbembe's critique serves as a bold inquiry into ways to confront Africa's current crises, offering fresh insights into the continent's challenges. This prompts us to look beyond ourselves, explore wider paths for self-awareness, and place our existence within a broader human context. (Osha 2000, p. 121) Similar ideas are also emphasised in a collective publication by Abadie and Metende (2024). While not an exhaustive analysis of Mbembe's entire body of work, it provides a thematic overview of the reflections inspired by the concept of the postcolony. Abadie and Metende suggest that Mbembe's concept of the postcolony shifts away from societal pasts toward understanding current issues and preparing for the future. (Abadie and Metende 2024, p. 10) Beyond the critical perspective on the postcolony Dübgen (2024) advocates an interpretation of the normative aspect of Mbembe's reflection. She suggests that Mbembe's ethical ideas on sharing can enrich contemporary discussions around African environmental ethics. Through the lens of analysis of contemporary African philosophers, she explores the roots of this ethic in the relational ontology inherent in various African traditions, such as totemism, taboo, and sacred rites, offering a nuanced understanding that emphasises the importance of these cultural frameworks in shaping our ethical outlook.

Tembo and Gerber (2020), alongside Syrotinski (2007), Comaroff and Comaroff (2015), Dübgen and Skupien (2018), explore the links between Mbembe's work and postcolonialism. They propose the concept of "postcolonial ontological universalism" to highlight Mbembe's transformative way of understanding

Africa, which moves beyond the ideology of difference tied to race, particularly blackness. They argue: “The challenge of thinking the postcolonial situation in the African context has mostly been how to think liberating difference and alterity outside the violent colonial paradigm constituted by the creation of race as Blackness, the Blackman and the fiction of Africa.” (Tembo and Gerber 2020, p. 149) Mbembe’s work poses an essential question: How can we envision a new mode of thinking that counters racial thinking? Tembo and Gerber (2020) argue that Mbembe’s answer “opens the way for what we will call here a postcolonial ontology” and “outline how this ontology reimagines the relation of the universal and particular, making it a postcolonial universal ontology.” (2020, p. 150) Thus, affirming a postcolonial African mode of self-writing requires deconstructing essentialist metaphysics and reconstructing an ontology that celebrates diverse expressions of being, fostering a sense of responsibility for all human experiences.

Critics of Mbembe have also focused on the concept of ‘necropolitics,’ a groundbreaking idea that reshapes our understanding of socio-political crises and contemporary violence across various fields, including international relations, migration, war, terrorism, racism, and borders. (cf. Brennan 2024) Esteemed scholars such as Appadurai (2006), Berlant (2007), Lykke (2019) and Weheliye (2020) highlight how Mbembe’s notion of necropolitics reveals the pervasive biopolitical violence capitalism exerts on a planetary scale. Judith Butler (2013) reinforces this idea in her interview with Athanasiou (2013), where she addresses the profound dispossession and ‘slow death’ (Berlant 2007) endured by vulnerable populations, notably migrants, in today’s world. Puar (2009) further underscores the relevance of this concept for understanding the complex geopolitics of affect and debility that characterise our contemporary landscape. Brennan (2024) carries out a critical and comparative analysis of Mbembe’s concept of necropolitical violence, drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s reflections, particularly on ‘bare life’ and ‘surplus populations’. Additionally, he examines the source of Mbembe’s thoughts on ‘sacrifice’ in relation to the work of Georges Bataille.

Mbembe’s critique effectively situates necropolitics within historical and spatial contexts, linking it to slavery and colonization and defining the plantation, the colony, and the postcolony as his delineated deathworld. (Mbembe 2001) Extending Mbembe’s insights alongside Michel Foucault’s biopolitics, Puar (2009) investigates how the body and the state of debility function as tools of contemporary postcolonial political control. (2009, p. 163) Additionally, the critical discourse surrounding necropolitics has been expanded by schol-

ars such as Davies et al. (2017), Cavanagh (2018), Morgensen (2011), Benedicty (2013), who explore its connections to Foucault's biopolitics. Likewise, research by Sandset (2021), Skorzak (2019) Sterzer (2014), Dorlin (2007) examines this concept through the lens of Giorgio Agamben's political philosophy, enriching our understanding of power in the modern age.

Thus, a thorough analysis of Mbembe's concept of necropolitics reveals the relevance of his ideas in explaining political dynamics beyond the African context. (cf. Brennan 2024) However, what is lacking is a thorough study of his ethical contributions, which would highlight the profound importance of current political, economic, and environmental challenges and suggest practical solutions. The absence of research on Mbembe's ethics also concerns the writings of those who analyse his critique of capitalism and its historical and racial foundations. In their review of the *Critique of black reason* (2017), Coquery-Vidrovitch and Warin (2015) argue that the racial question is fundamental to understanding Mbembe's critique of neoliberal capitalism. They challenge us to rethink the historical and racial foundations of capitalism, which, alarmingly, blurs the boundaries between humans, commodities, and animals. Similarly, Shipley and Comaroff (2010), in an interview with Mbembe, examine how, in neoliberalism, past forms of servile labour transformed into/ continued to survive in contemporary systems of domination. Premat's (2020) and Apata's (2025) reflections on Mbembe's influential work, *Brutalism* (2024), lead to a similar conclusion. They explain how the neoliberal political economy is one of the most significant modern forms of domination over the Earth and all living beings. These perspectives highlight the profound interconnection between issues of race and economic systems, encouraging us to re-examine, through the post-colonial lens, the very foundations of contemporary capitalism.

While many critics focus on Mbembe's critique, few analyse the important normative and ethical aspects of his ideas. Some of the most recent commentary comes from Więckowska (2021), Blaskow (2022), Faets (2023) Coates (2025). Więckowska (2021) delves into this concept within the critical framework of Afropolitanism. Taiye Selasi initially theorized this idea in her influential works, such as *Ghana Must Go* (2013), challenging the traditional narrative of a static African identity. Więckowska (2021) effectively links the passer-by concept with Afropolitanism, highlighting its significance in illuminating the Afro-diasporic experience of cultural fluidity, open exchange, and shared belonging among Afro-descendants across diverse societies. In contrast, Blaskow (2022) addresses the notion of passers-by in the context of migratory movements. Meanwhile, Kate and Philipsen (2023)

explores the concept from an aesthetic and theological perspective, drawing on Friedrich Hölderlin's work and linking it to key philosophers, including Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Luc Nancy. This exploration deepens our understanding of Mbembe's notion of the passer-by and its significance in contemporary discussions about identity and cultural exchange.

Moreover, the book will explain how Więckowska (2021) and Blaskow (2022) reflection on Mbembe's ethics overlooks critical aspects, including its meaning, principles, and cosmological foundations, as well as its significance as a starting point for his reflections on planetary justice. This limitation is also evident among authors who merely mention ethics in Mbembe without thoroughly exploring this critical concept. Catherine Coquio (2017), for example, explains how the issue of war and the critique of global violence lead Mbembe to pose the question of sharing the world, which she describes as "the return of cosmopolitanism" in a new light. She also details how Mbembe's work forms a vital link between criticising neoliberal capitalism and the aspiration to rebuild a shared humanity. Building on Mbembe's arguments about the connection between modern necropolitics and colonial history, she explores the assumption that coexistence on our planet is essential, especially as borders increasingly define bodies and territories.

A comprehensive literature review would be incomplete without critiques of Mbembe's work. His approach to postcolonial issues is significant, as it has sparked considerable academic debate. Karlström (2003), for instance, describes Mbembe's analyses of the aesthetics of power as a "radical pessimism" regarding the possibility of establishing positive power relationships in the postcolony. He challenges Mbembe's approach of homogenising subjects' complex and varied experiences in the postcolonial world. Weate (2003b) echoes this criticism, describing Mbembe's pessimistic analysis as negationist, thanatographic, and dismissive of the daily forms of resistance emerging from popular spheres in the postcolony. Similarly, Adeeko (2002) argues that Mbembe's view of power in the postcolony – characterised by a macabre aesthetic of vulgarity and an orgiastic cult of violence and death – is excessively pessimistic. Although these criticisms are legitimate, they arose in the context of the book *On the Postcolony*, (2001) and should be reinterpreted in light of Mbembe's recent works.

Hence, this non-exhaustive literature review suggests that the concepts of postcolonialism and necropolitics are crucial for understanding Mbembe's ideas, both in their early phases and in their more recent developments. These

concepts offer essential arguments for understanding Mbembe's thought either as a distinctive contribution to contemporary postcolonial theory or as a variation of current critical political theory that intersects with existentialism, phenomenology, and African environmental ethics. (cf. Abadie and Metende 2024) Furthermore, although there is growing interest in Mbembe's ethical concepts, these interpretations fail to offer a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the meanings, principles, and cosmological foundations that underpin his entire work. This lack of thorough analysis prevents a full appreciation of his complex views on ethics and politics. Critics often overlook his unique methodology and the significant cosmological, ethical, and political implications embedded in his scholarship. It is, therefore, crucial to revisit Mbembe's concepts in light of recent developments in his thinking. This evolving perspective underpins the present book. In the next section, I will outline the key elements of my argument regarding Mbembe's ethics and illuminate this planetary shift.

The "Planetary Turn"

While current interpretations of Mbembe's thought offer valuable insights, they overlook a crucial dimension in his thinking, which I refer to as the 'planetary turn.' This perspective encourages us to confront key questions about the core of his ethics, his guiding principles, and the cosmological frameworks that influence his vision of planetary justice. Viewing his work through the lens of his planetary perspective can clarify his connection to postcolonial African thought and deepen our understanding of his contributions to contemporary debates on planetary justice and ethics.

Indeed, as I have argued in the literature review, there is a strong and justified reason to analyse Mbembe's work through the postcolonial lens of Afro-diasporic philosophy. The importance of Africa as a focus of inquiry is especially evident in his publications from 1985 to 2010. *On Postcolony* (2001), first published in French by Karthala, is a significant work that initially drew attention within Anglo-Saxon intellectual circles. It illustrates Mbembe's early contributions, receiving both critique and praise for its innovative approach to African postcolonial discourse. The title "De la postcolonie" and the subtitle "Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine" pose questions about Africans' sociopolitical transition to postcolonial reality: fifty years after liberation from colonial rule, what has become of the promises of freedom? Have states successfully shifted to democratic governance, or do we face

the uncomfortable truth of failure? By diving into the aesthetics of power and exploring the grotesque nature of African states' governance, *On the Postcolony* (2001) reframes the critical question of collective responsibility for the degradation of law, freedom, sovereignty, and life in postcolonial Africa.

Instead of simply revisiting old debates about the paternalism of colonial powers, Achille Mbembe vividly depicts the raw brutality of power as it manifests across Africa's political, economic, and cultural spheres. This intricate narrative is encapsulated in the concept of the 'Postcolony,' where a psychoanalytical and aesthetic approach uncovers various forms of violence and domination in contemporary Africa. Through an examination of *On the Postcolony* (2001), alongside earlier and later works, it becomes evident that Africa is not just a backdrop but the focal point of Mbembe's analysis. While certain writings address global political problems, such as sovereignty and liberal democracy, the continent remains essential as an object of inquiry. Like many of his contemporaries, Mbembe is confronted with the question of the intellectual's responsibility to interpret the crises besieging the African continent in an unipolar world.

The decades following African nations' independence were characterised by devastating wars, military coups, challenges in establishing sustainable governance structures, the sluggish evolution of political parties, the faltering advent of multi-party systems, and efforts to conduct free elections, as well as the struggle for political, economic, and military autonomy in light of both emerging global powers and the legacies of colonialism. (Mbembe 1988) The urgency of addressing these issues became a key focus of Mbembe's thought. While his insights are grounded in his experiences in Cameroon, they also highlight the significance of his work in understanding the complexities of Africa's past, present, and future.

After independence, African intellectuals bear significant responsibilities and face crucial challenges. Among these is breaking down the long-standing dominance of Western epistemological imperialism in the African humanities. However, the impactful contributions of distinguished thinkers such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Eboussi Boulaga, Valentin Yves Mudimbe, Amos Tutuola, Jean-Marc Ela, Paulin Hountondji, and Celestin Monga, among others, underscore an urgent need to engage with Western Eurocentrism critically. (cf. Eboussi Boulaga et al. 2006; Mbembe 2017, 2021b) This ideology has unjustly claimed to represent the definitive truth about the political, economic, and cultural crises that have affected the African continent since the beginning of modernity. Mudimbe correctly described the "colonial library" as encompass-

ing Western and Eurocentric colonial narratives that shaped discussions of Africa across various disciplines, including ethnology, history, geography, and philosophy. (cf. Mudimbe 1994; Mudimbé 2016) His critique aimed to replace this colonial narrative with the continent's unique perspectives and experiences.

The issues of intellectual responsibility in analysing African crises and the deconstruction of Western epistemological imperialism have therefore profoundly influenced the context in which Mbembe's ideas emerged from 1980 to 2000. These elements shape his inquiries, hypotheses, and critiques of contemporary politics. However, Mbembe's early work serves as a framework for analysing the African continent's shared experiences with the world, particularly regarding life and death, power dynamics, desire, ownership, and violence. In other words, the discourse on Africa in his early works, along with critical reflections on colonialism, slavery, or the postcolony, lays the foundation for addressing the concept of the vulnerability of the living. From this perspective, his extensive body of work is seen as a cohesive whole that questions the future of Life as such (*Le Vivant*) on the planet, rather than limiting the discussion to postcolonial Africa alone.

Mbembe's planetary perspective draws on the ideas of influential thinkers such as Paul Gilroy and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Gilroy, whom Sindre Bangstad refers to as advocating for "planetary humanism," emphasizes the urgency of a shift in contemporary thought.¹ In a thought-provoking conversation with Tony Sandset, Sindre Bangstad, and Gard Ringen Høibjerg, Gilroy elucidates the issues at stake in his work. He argues: "I'm not sure you can have an anti-racism which is credible unless you can switch into a more constructive view of the world you want to build. You might have a black liberation project, you might have an equality and diversity project, you might have a McKinsey multiculturalism project – but you won't have an anti-racist project unless you can say the kind of world you want to see arise." (Gilroy et al. 2019, p. 188) This quote is vital for understanding the broader implications of Gilroy's "planetary humanism". His goal – clearly aligned with Mbembe's planetary thinking – is to transcend the deep-seated antagonisms rooted in historical racism, which continue to influence contemporary thought. He explains how his vision of a race-free world emerged from a thorough re-examination of the work of key

1 Sindre Bangstad, "A planetary humanism made to the measure of the world", in: *Africa is a country*, 02.27.2019. Online. Accessed on January 4, 2025.

thinkers, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon. Their insights have been crucial in shaping his ideas and Mbembe's profound perspectives. Engaging with these powerful concepts can promote a more inclusive and fair future.

An analysis of the conclusion of *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) alongside publications from 2016 to 2024 illustrates a significant evolution in Mbembe's research focus, reinforcing my assertion of a planetary turn in his thought. This period reveals a compelling coherence in his ideas, centred around key concepts such as the common, reparation, sharing, the Earth, and the planetary. The latter theme is prominently featured in numerous articles and public engagements. For instance, the conference held at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in 2018, under the auspices of the Institute of the Humanities and Global Cultures, was titled "Algorithmic Reason and Planetary Humanities." Moreover, the inaugural lecture Mbembe was scheduled to deliver on 14 August 2020 at the Ruhrtriennale art festival in Germany, which was cancelled amid allegations of anti-Semitism, was titled "Reflections on Planetary Living". Mbembe sought to address the vital question of how to reinhabit and share a planet equitably, which is urgently in need of repair due to the severe damage caused by human activity.

Furthermore, the "Planetary Humanities" conference, held in June 2021, brought together leading thinkers, including Dipesh Chakrabarty, Walter Dignolo, Rochona Majumdar, and Henning Trüper, to engage in a meaningful dialogue on pressing global issues. During this event, Achille Mbembe provocatively questioned the concept of the 'planetary', sharing his perspectives on its significance and connecting it to the ideas of both Chakrabarty and Gilroy. This conversation has continued to develop through various conferences and publications. A notable example is the interview with Nils Gilman and Jonathan Blake titled *How to Develop a Planetary Consciousness*. (2022) The discourse surrounding the idea of the planetary gained further momentum in November 2022, at the Wits University conference, where Mbembe delivered his speech, *Notes on Planetary Habitability*. He also contributed to the Holberg Prize PhD masterclass 2024, focusing on *Thoughts on the Planetary*. (2021d)

Thus, it becomes clear that a critical examination of Mbembe's contributions from 2016 to 2024, whether through conferences, articles, or interviews, is vital for a deeper understanding of his planetary turn. They emphasise his political commitment to tackling the essential ethical challenge of inhabiting and sharing the Earth fairly, balancing the needs of humans and non-humans in our interconnected world. They also highlight the need for a new interpre-

tation of his work, especially his early writings. The recurring themes of planetary issues, such as ethics, commonality, relationships, and reparation, establish a framework that challenges us to reconsider the potential for a new ethical and political relationship with all living beings. The significance of this planetary concept lies in its innovative and ethical outlook, which can offer fresh insights into resolving economic and socio-political crises in Africa and worldwide.

The *planetary ethics* focuses on “general ecology,” as discussed in *The Earthly Community* (2022). This concept serves as a normative lens through which one can examine humanity’s relationship with the living world, moving beyond both anthropocentrism and nativism. Overcoming anthropocentrism involves recognising that humans are not the centre of the universe and do not possess unlimited power. Instead, they are responsible for sharing the Earth with all living beings. Additionally, critiquing nativism requires us to expand our perspective beyond singular cultural or national identities – whether African, European, or Asian – and to appreciate the long histories of the Earth, along with the ontological reciprocity that exists among all living beings. This cosmological perspective on ethics is essential for understanding current political crises. It also establishes grand ethical principles – such as reparation, renunciation, sharing, and restitution – that are crucial to a new concept of planetary justice, necessary for the sustainability of the Earth.

Certainly, Mbembe does not clearly define the nature and extent of the responsibilities of specific communities, both in destroying and repairing life on the planet. The critique targets Western nations, which have been at the heart of modern tragedies such as slavery, colonialism, and numerous genocides, and African countries, as demonstrated by early works like *On the post-colony* (2001) or, *Out of the dark night* (2021b). This shared responsibility for the degradation of the planet’s life reserves, both historically, politically, and economically, leads to the idea of common pathways to emerge from the current planetary crisis. In other words, the sustainability of life on Earth cannot be achieved without the concept of shared responsibility in addressing past and present crimes. However, adopting a planetary perspective to tackle the world’s socio-political and environmental crises – whether in Africa or Europe – raises important questions. This discussion will examine various socio-political and economic issues, including the legitimacy of nation-state political communities defined by borders (see Chapter 1), the rights to inhabit, circulate, breathe, and share the Earth’s resources (see Chapter 2), and the meaning, principles, and foundations of planetary justice (see Chapter 3), as well as the idea and

principles of passers-by ethics (Chapter 4). By recognising the planetary dimension of these issues, the concept of planetary considers the foundations needed to develop effective responses to these challenges. In seeking planetary solutions to the violence of nation-states, migration issues, and the right to share Earth's resources, Mbembe emphasises the necessity to improve the living conditions of all beings on Earth, both human and non-human.

In a world grappling with catastrophism, Mbembe's ethics of the passer-by and the utopia of a planetary community encourage humanity to look beyond particular interests and consider the shared concerns of the Living (*Le Vivant*). The notions of *hope*, *passage*, and the *common* are essential to this reflection. The question remains whether the anthropological and political conditions needed to achieve such a utopia exist, whether humanity must reimagine new ways of understanding itself beyond mere critique, and what potential outcomes this self-assessment may have for coexisting on the planet. This organic critique of Mbembe's thought serves as the foundation for the concept of Afroplanetarianism I propose. Rather than engaging directly in this debate, the aim of this essay is modest: to provide the reader with a framework for developing their understanding of Mbembe's original and provocative thought, which has consistently interpreted the world through the lens of ever-evolving signs over the decades.

Chapter 1: The Planetary Community

Introduction

A primary survival strategy in the face of poverty, war, and limited vital resources is to retreat into one's identity. In this context, it is common to identify strongly with a particular ethnic, national, or racial group and fiercely defend one's interests. These interests are not solely material or economic; they can also be cultural, religious, or political, often involving issues of race, gender, and other social identities. Behind every claim to identity lies a hope for survival in a death-world. Although this approach protects the specific interests of a community or group, especially those with more power, it also raises concerns about its long-term effects on all living beings. Pursuing specific interests can create divisions between communities, leading to conflicts, segregation, and even wars. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy offers an essential insight in this context. He argues: "The dissolution, dislocation and conflagration of communities represents the most significant and distressing testimony of the modern world." (1990, p. 11) This chapter examines ways to address the modern problem of community dislocation by exploring Mbembe's idea of a planetary community. It highlights its main principles and key components. Additionally, it discusses how Mbembe's concept, which encompasses the collective interests of all living beings – humans and biodiversity – offers a compelling rationale for advocating for planetary rights and justice. This topic will be further developed in subsequent chapters.

I. The Foundations of the Planetary Community

Through a critical review of the current global situation, especially the numerous crises affecting relationships between individuals and communities driven

by the pursuit of exclusive control over power and resources, Mbembe's political philosophy endeavours to explain the conditions under which a new form of human relation can be established that sustains life. Humanity's progress is only possible within a community that requires a redefinition of its essence. After exploring Mbembe's concept of a planetary community, this chapter will examine one of its key features: its planetary scope. The aim is to clarify the idea of the 'planetary community', its core features, guiding principles and purpose. An analysis of this question is framed within a broader reflection on the ideas of "imperative of decolonisation" or the "politics of rising humanity" addressed by Mbembe in his book *Out of the Dark Night*. (2021b)

1.1 The *In-Common* as the Basis of Community

While contemporary political philosophy bases its concept of community on anthropocentrism, emphasising the centrality of human beings in defining community, general ecology relies on what I interpret as Mbembe's biocentrism. This perspective highlights the common life force that exists in all beings and entities on Earth.

From Anthropocentrism to Biocentrism

Mbembe's concept of community is rooted in the assumption of general ecology outlined in the first chapter of *The Earthly Community* (2022). The core assumption of general ecology is that all living beings on Earth share a fundamental trait: they have a "body." The concept of the "body" here refers to Earth itself, which supports the life of all these organisms, as evidenced by terms like "body of the Earth" and "body in its earthly dimension." This suggests that the entities that compose the earthly community are interconnected through an exchange of vital organic properties that sustain the life they share on Earth. This definition of entities based on their bodies is essential for understanding Mbembe's concept of the community, which is seen as that "common" element that the Earth possesses, as evidenced in phrases such as "common fabric," "common soil," and "common thing". (Mbembe 2023, pp. 87–89) By this, Mbembe means the constituents of humans, animals, fungi, plants, viruses, and bacteria – all forms of life that exist in diverse ways but are part of the same living system. (Mbembe 2023, p. 127)

What defines them is the fact that they share in "common" properties such as air, water, matter, and energy. (Mbembe 2023, p. 111) Sharing these core qualities allows members of Earth's community – such as humans, animals, plants,

and minerals – to undergo various forms of transformation, as demonstrated by the coexistence of organisms on Earth's surface. Building on pre-colonial African cosmogonies and engaging with the phenomenology of the body, as developed by philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is essential for examining the nature of beings, seen as the intrinsic condition for the sustainability and vitality of the earthly community. (Mbembe 2023, p. 111) In other words, general ecology advocates for a shift from an anthropocentric view to a biocentric perspective on planetary habitability and community. To fully understand the meaning of biocentrism, it is essential to differentiate it from interpretations offered by physicists and proponents such as Robert Lanza and Bob Berman. (Lanza and Berman 2010)

Mbembe's biocentrism arises from the 'general ecology' framework, as I have outlined earlier. By assuming that no human being or society exists outside their body and that the body is inseparably connected to the Earth, it follows that humans are part of the terrestrial community. From this ecological perspective, life is seen less as static and more as a complex, dynamic community of interconnected beings that cannot be simplified into single forms. This immanent structure mirrors human coexistence with their environment and the entire living world. It follows that, despite its unique characteristics, every human body bears the imprints of the universe both externally and internally. To grasp the essence of humanity and the concept of an earthly community, it is vital to consider the biological processes shared with all other living organisms on Earth. Humans only define themselves, create culture, inhabit territories, develop knowledge, and practise religion within the broader community of living beings.

The Hospitality of the Earthly Community

Raising the question of the meaning of the terrestrial community from the perspective of biocentrism and general ecology involves examining the Earth's inhospitable nature, which results from a rupture between humans, their fellow creatures, and their environment. The planet's inhospitability indicates its inability to sustain life in the long term. However, for Mbembe, this environmental crisis must not be conflated with transcendent causes or with metaphysical determinism, as articulated by Mathews (2010), Hamilton (2017), Adelman (2021), and Kotzé and Kim (2022). Instead, Mbembe postulates that this crisis is rooted in human actions and decisions. In the Anthropocene epoch, humans have emerged as a geological force. (cf. McEwan 2021; Chakrabarty 2018; Clark 2017; Davis 2016) The signs of the Anthropocene transition are evident

in climate change, ecosystem destruction, and genetic modifications. (cf. Hamilton 2017) Furthermore, this transformation signals a notable shift between humanity and its environment, impacting the complex web of relationships among humans and the wider Earth community. (cf. Haraway 2015) This rupture exposes the fragility and vulnerability of life itself, including its physical forms, supporting mechanisms, and essential resources, not only for the human race but also for all terrestrial creatures. (cf. Mbembe 2023, p. 154)

Thus, Mbembe's conceptualisation of Earth's habitability extends beyond mere geographical boundaries, encompassing all conditions necessary for the flourishing of living beings. These conditions are not solely material – such as housing, nutrition, and health – but they also highlight symbolic aspects, including the importance of sharing existence with others, asserting rights, and fulfilling responsibilities within socio-political and cultural frameworks that extend beyond ethnic, national, or continental borders. As articulated by the philosopher Nadia Yala Kisukidi (2020), inhabitation implies residing within a territory where the full range of human potential is not forcibly suppressed, and where the means of subsistence necessary for a dignified life are guaranteed. (cf. Mbembe and Sarr 2022, pp. 107–108) Therefore, the material prerequisites for habitability are deeply intertwined with ethical, political, and cultural contexts. Such frameworks allow human beings to navigate life purposefully and cohabit peacefully with all living entities. Kodjo-Grandvaux Séverine further develops this idea of “habitability as she states:

“World-making means inhabiting a world that is mine, because it makes meaning for me and because it permits me to reaffirm my belonging to a world that also belongs to me and in which I fully participate, since I co-produce it with others and with the whole of the living. But that is not all. This world is vaster still. I must expand it to the scale of the cosmos and understand that every world-memory is a cosmic memory.” (Kodjo-Grandvaux Séverine 2022, p. 184)

Thus, human habitation of the Earth extends beyond simple physical or geographical presence; it involves a deep engagement with the living world itself. It requires active and cooperative creation that reshapes human relationships with the environment. The capacity to genuinely engage with all dimensions of human life enhances collective human potential, allowing humans to create a shared world that includes all living beings. When the essential conditions for a universally accessible life are met, people from all backgrounds – regard-

less of their origins, race, nationality, class, or gender – can inhabit and share the world. This dynamic interaction fosters an environment that supports life within the larger context of the Earth. It highlights humanity’s responsibility to address disparities in conditions that affect different communities and ecosystems.

1.2 The Planetary Living

This section aims to clarify the notion of “planetary” within Mbembe’s work, providing a more detailed interpretation of his political philosophy and ethical considerations. By examining Mbembe’s concept of the ‘planetary’, I will trace its origins and development, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the meanings, principles, and ultimate aims that inform his vision of a planetary community. The analysis will adopt a critical approach, engaging with authors whose works intersect with Mbembe’s in direct or indirect dialogue. These thinkers propose a transformative model for planetary coexistence that challenges the historically ingrained objectives of power and domination.

The Planetary Shift in Human History

The discourse surrounding the planet has expanded in recent years, sparking numerous debates, conferences, and academic publications. (cf. Bonneuil 2023) Mbembe’s reflection on the notion of the planetary emphasises this shift, arguing that “the emerging paradigm is that ‘human societies and the Earth have now forged a tenuous unity.’” (Mbembe 2021b, p. 88) In other words, the paradigmatic shift in perspective within contemporary social sciences moves away from the notion that human beings and societies are separate from nature. (cf. Bonneuil 2023; Elias and Moraru 2015; Drengson 1980; Green 2022) The term ‘Anthropocene’ is central to this discussion, capturing the idea that humanity has become a geological force capable of causing significant changes in the planet’s atmosphere, geosphere, and biosphere on a global scale. (cf. Lynch and Veland 2018) This reframing challenges the traditional view of human existence by portraying individuals as active participants in the Earth’s geological narrative. (cf. Rockström 2015)

In this light, examining Mbembe’s contributions to the concept of planetary broaden our understanding of political ethics within an interconnected global community. Mbembe’s idea of “Planetary” embodies the recognition of the interrelation between nature and society, as well as between human and non-human entities. (Mbembe 2021b, p. 88) The idea of the planetary sug-

gests that the specificities and differences of cultures, histories, languages, and even socio-political conditions do not eliminate the commonality of the world, which remains the sole unifying factor among all terrestrial life forms. Mbembe argues:

“We only have one world. We might dream about colonizing Mars or Venus or other unknown planets in the future, but for the time being that is not part of our actuality. We only have one world, one solar system and for this world to last as long as possible and for this solar system not to calcinate life as such, we need to become a bit more intelligent and wiser.” (Mbembe 2021d, p. 126)

One might question what “We” that Mbembe references here actually means. Addressing this question involves considering the concept of “world.” From a broad ecological perspective, Mbembe’s notion of the “world” refers to the relationship among humans, all living organisms, and the universe. The “world” is not simply an *a priori* subjectively lived experience of the relationship between humans and their fellow humans or the Earth. Instead, it is the fundamental condition of this relationship, encompassing terrestrial existence, the body, breath, and life. This definition thus informs Mbembe’s idea of the planetary. Judith Butler explains how this idea challenges the realities of differences rooted in colonial histories and epistemologies. She quotes Mbembe’s assertion that “the political in our time must start from the imperative to reconstruct the world in common.” (cf. Butler 2022a, p. 6) Furthermore, she articulates the necessity of scrutinising the epistemological ramifications accompanying this shift from a human-centric worldview to one that embraces the concept of the planetary. This perspective holds the promise of addressing and potentially redressing global power inequities, challenging prevailing paradigms of nationalism, militarism, and coloniality, and confronting the ecological crisis faced by the terrestrial community today. (cf. Butler 2022a, p. 6)

Moreover, in her inaugural lecture titled, “Planetary Thinking in the Era of Global Warming,” delivered on the occasion of her appointment as Professor of Continental Philosophy at Leiden University on Monday, 20 November 2023, the philosopher Susanna Lindberg clearly emphasises the urgent need for continental philosophy to make a planetary turn towards an awareness of the “ecological disaster” that our terrestrial human history is facing. (cf. Lindberg 2025) In the same vein as Mbembe and Butler, and particularly thinkers such as Hans Jonas, Bruno Latour, Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Dipesh

Chakrabarty, among others, whom she cites, Lindberg delineates three essential dimensions of the planetary turn in continental philosophy: epistemological, ethical, and political. She states:

“I do believe that continental philosophy has a specific role to play in the task of thinking contemporary planetary disasters, because, more than most other academic disciplines, it can make sense of the affective charge of a situation. It can conceptualize, that is, disaster, disorientation, and even despair.” (Lindberg 2025, p. 3)

From an epistemological perspective, Lindberg recognises that the turning point to which the current ecological crisis invites us signifies a shift away from impersonal thought towards a personal experience of the disaster that threatens our being in the world. (Lindberg 2025, pp. 3–4) In Heideggerian terms, it is for our contemporary humanity to experience not finding ourselves at home in the planetary space, since this space does not make sense to us, and we do not know how to orient ourselves within it. The crucial question emerging from this planetary turn is how to understand this new space. Just as with Mbembe and Butler, whose importance of reflection on the world I have just cited in the previous paragraphs, Lindberg explains that the disorientation in which humanity finds itself due to the ecological disaster leads to an ontological reflection on the very question of the meaning of the world as such, which some continental philosophers have thematised in various ways, sometimes as an event, or ‘the end of the world’. (Lindberg 2025, pp. 5–6) What these terms have in common is that they invite us to redefine the meaning of the subject’s presence in the world, who experiences inhabitation in this devastated planet. By this, it is meant not only a new way of thinking about the world but also a new way of acting, of relating to it and to each of us – in short, both an ethics and a politics based on a new imaginary of reason. (Lindberg 2025, pp. 8–9)

Therefore, based on Butler’s analyses, and to Lindberg’s reflections, one could argue that Mbembe’s planetary concept prompts essential reflections on humanity’s need to develop a shared consciousness of the world. This perspective views decolonisation as a courageous act of embracing the world, encouraging humans to dismantle barriers and redefine identity, fostering a collective bond with the planet rather than withdrawing from it. (cf. Butler 2022a, p. 10)

Transcending the Boundaries of Our Worlds

The concept of a planetary community does not precisely align with the idea of ‘world.’ To understand this difference, it is essential to distinguish Mbembe’s interpretation of “planet” from that of “world.” The “world” is characterised by

separation, whereas a “planet” signifies radical openness, a shared world that transcends borders. In other words, the idea of a planetary world offers real possibilities that can only be realised through collective effort. Rather than being a tangible reality recognised by all Earth’s inhabitants, it is a work that remains incomplete. Mbembe emphasises this idea by focusing on the potential for a shared existence that goes beyond individual experiences, stating:

“Planetarity has thus a double dimension. On the one hand, there is no planetarity in the absence of a capacity for global representation of the Earth. On the other hand, there is no planetarity without the consciousness of a common belonging to a spatial order embracing all humanity. A planetary consciousness consequently supposes the representation of a world common ‘to all men and to all peoples,’ a common star.” (Mbembe 2024, pp. 29–30)

Although Mbembe’s interpretation of the terms “world,” “planet,” and “globe” sometimes seems ambiguous, these words can be seen to reflect the complex relationship between humans and their environment. Despite differences in languages, cultures, histories, and nationalities, all of humanity is interconnected. These differences are not fundamental; rather, they are temporary phenomena that humans can overcome. Embracing our shared humanity involves recognising our deep interconnectedness with the broader ecosystem. This concept of planetary living is further expanded in a 2022 interview with Gilman, providing additional insight into Mbembe’s perspectives.

“The planetary evokes what we call in French *le vivant*, which in English is something like ‘the living world.’ *Le vivant* is, for me, the planetary in its multiplicity, in its animate and inanimate forms, as it undergoes its endless process of transformation – a transformation which, for me, has no Omega Point. It is not supposed to reach an apex or a moment of unification.”¹

Mbembe’s clarification of the notion “planetary” offers a critical understanding of differences rooted in species, gender, class, race, religion, culture, and nation-states. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 116–117) These specificities that shape identities mask a fundamental reality: the ontological condition of the Living (*le Vivant*). Additionally, Mbembe’s distinction highlights the difficulties in translating

1 Mbembe, Achille; Gilman, Nils; Blake, Jonathan (2022): How To Develop A Planetary Consciousness? Edited by Noema Magazine. Online. <https://www.noemamag.com/how-to-develop-a-planetary-consciousness>.

ing the French term ‘le Vivant,’ which in English can be understood as the ‘living world’ or the ‘planetary.’ This refers to essential conditions for Earth’s sustainability and coexistence – both organic and inorganic, including plants, minerals, and other forms of life. In his interview, *Thoughts on the Planetary* (2021d) Mbembe explains that understanding humans’ relationship to the Earth, as the central body in the solar system, is key to this discussion of the meaning of the notion of the Living world. The Earth is not merely a background for existence; it is also the principle of habitation that links all living beings and their components in terms of definition and relation. Therefore, the Earth can be seen as a living entity. Mbembe asserts:

“What comes to my mind is the biophysical organic material and mineral order – a geological magma-filled rock topped with the entangled orders of physical, organic phenomena such as plants, animals, minerals and so forth, as well as the artifacts and things and tools we have invented. (...) I find it almost impossible to think of the planetary without thinking about life and about the Earth.”²

While anthropocentric frameworks emphasise a dualism between humans and the natural world, Mbembe’s perspective on general ecology advocates for unity, symbiosis, non-essentialism, and dynamic relationships. This idea first emerged in the article *Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola* (2003), wherein Mbembe critiques Western metaphysics’ inadequacies in accommodating a notion of human existence that embraces the dynamism of life’s interconnectedness with all beings. Furthermore, the detailed analysis of precolonial African cosmogonies strengthens the understanding of the planetary as an indivisible process of life. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 7–9) Recognising this ontological attribute emphasises the relational aspect of human existence, highlighting its non-absolute nature and its communion with all living entities. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 19–20) This relational ontology is clearly reflected in the Dogon metaphysics of Mali, the Yoruba metaphysics of Nigeria, and the cosmological stories of various communities in the Congo Basin, all of which Mbembe examines. (cf. Mbembe 2003) A key idea in general ecology, inspired by African cosmologies, is the emphasis on the principle of animation, primarily through the sharing of vital breath. Breath demonstrates that existence is not an isolated process but a shared life experience of animation,

2 Ibid.

illuminating the interconnectedness that permeates all forms of existence. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 17–18)

The Radical Openness of The Planetary

Although humans can express their ontological connections with all living beings, these representations are inherently limited by their finitude and by the transcendence of life itself. In essence, the planetary resists any complete notion of totality. Therefore, approximation is the only practical epistemological method. This view aligns with the ideas of postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, like Mbembe, argues that the planetary exceeds a simple physical depiction of the globe. Mbembe further suggests that the concept of the planetary parallels Edouard Glissant's idea of "Tout-Monde." This term captures the openness of the living world, its irreducibility to a fixed form. To effectively contextualise Glissant's idea, one must invoke the notion of the "rhizome," which recognises the complex interrelations among life forms, reflecting their dynamism and vulnerability to unexpected transformations. Mbembe expresses this perspective by stating:

"For the rest, life involves a great deal of randomness. By definition, living things are infinitely open, subject to uncertainties and probabilities. Determinism exists, but ultimately it does not govern history. History is fundamentally made up of the unforeseen, of surprises, of things that escape any systematic quantification." (Mbembe 2023, p. 169)

From the perspective of general ecology, living beings are defined by ongoing movement, which drives their change and renewal. Ethically, this view challenges traditional notions of identity, advocating for openness and encouraging a sense of responsibility in accepting life's unpredictability within the planetary system. (cf. Mbembe 2023, p. 187) Gayatri Spivak expressed a similar idea, though using different terms. She maintains the concept of alterity to define her idea of 'planetarity'. In her 1997 article, *Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet*, Spivak argues that the term "planetary" should be clearly distinguished from related concepts, such as the planet, Earth, the world, the globe, globalisation, and other similar terms. (cf. Chakravorty Spivak 2015, p. 290) She argues that these familiar terms, which have gained popularity among environmentalists and scholars of sustainability, do not fully capture the depth of the idea of "planetarity", making this concept difficult to translate. The main issue lies in the differing underlying intentions behind

“planetary” and words like “globe” and “Earth”. Spivak critiques how the latter terms uphold power relations and obscure the more nuanced significance of the concept of planetarity in tackling ecological and social justice issues. They are often employed to justify contemporary forms of imperialism and the commodification of nature within the dominant capitalist system. She writes:

“The sense of custodianship of our planet has led to a species of feudality without feudalism, coupled with the method of ‘sustainability,’ keeping geology safe for good imperialism, emphasizing capital’s social productivity but not its irreducible subalternizing tendency. This is what translates and provides the alibi for good global capitalism.” (Chakravorty Spivak 2015, p. 291)

In other words, invoking the idea of planetarity does not always serve a positive purpose. This concept can be exploited to promote hegemonic goals. The representation of the entire world, justified through the exercise of power at a given time, may conceal imperialist aims—politically, economically, and culturally. Instead of a totalitarian concept that seeks exclusive rights of appropriation or domination, Spivak proposes a concept of the planet that embraces openness and otherness. It is our experience of living on Earth – recognising its otherness – that influences what Spivak describes as “planetarity.” She sees this as encompassing Otherness and everything beyond human control. It involves the shared environment that sustains us and the planet’s own alterity, which resists human ownership or protection. Therefore, “planetarity” cannot be fully understood through geopolitical notions of the “globe” because of its profound complexity. This idea supports a view of the world that cannot be reduced to its mere existence or any specific part of it. As Spivak explains:

“In that era, then, of a breakneck globalization catching up speed, I proposed the planet to overwrite the globe. Globalization is achieved by the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. [...] The globe is on our computers. It is the logo of the World Bank. No one lives there; and we think that we can aim to control globality. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, indeed are it.” (Goetschel and Spivak 1999, p. 338)

To fully grasp Spivak’s definition, it is vital to distinguish between “the globe” and “the planet.” The first concept signifies a homogenised state that erases differences, characterised by near-complete systematisation and standardi-

sation of social, economic, and cultural norms guiding human interactions. In contrast, the planet denotes an existence within an alternative order of reality, characterised by alterity, as we navigate through it as transient inhabitants. This domain resists efforts at capture, systematisation, or homogenisation, particularly of an imperialist nature. From this viewpoint, “planetarity” is closely connected to our everyday interactions with the world, often perceived as a unified whole but experienced through lenses of distance and the unknown.

II. Towards a Planetary Community

In her interview with Sjoerd van Tuinen, titled *Care in Spite of Carelessness*, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa raises a crucial question, drawing attention to a significant insight about our current time: an increasing disconnection between humanity and the living universe. De la Bellacasa asks, “Do we live in a time of carelessness?” This question underpins Mbembe’s discussion of “planetary consciousness,” which he considers vital for understanding the true crisis facing the planetary community. I will examine the implications of Mbembe’s perspective on planetary politics and demonstrate how he addresses these issues, primarily by reflecting on Ernst Bloch’s principle of hope.

II.1 The Concept of Planetary Consciousness

The phrase “planetary consciousness” is frequently used in contemporary discussions of social, political, and environmental issues. (cf. Gidley 2007; Laszlo 2023; 2018; Leiserowitz and Fernandez 2008; Malhotra et al. 2023) Previous authors have mainly situated the concept within environmental discourse. In contrast, Mbembe provides an alternative interpretation within the broader discourse of general ecology.

Definition of the Term: Mbembe and Afro-Diasporic Thought

The ideas of “planetary consciousness” and “the planetary” are absent in Mbembe’s seminal work *On the postcolony* (2001), suggesting an evolution in his philosophical thought. In his later work, *Brutalisme* (2020a) he elucidates the notion of planetary consciousness, arguing that it represents a “common world” to all men and all peoples of a shared planet. (cf. Mbembe 2020a, p. 61) This definition is essential for two reasons. First, it establishes

the fundamental idea of planetary consciousness as inherently connected to the “representation of a common world,” thereby advancing debates over the concepts of “world,” “sharing,” and “global citizenship.” However, Mbembe differentiates his interpretation of planetary consciousness, seen as a common world, from the idea of global citizenship. He argues that the planetary includes a truly astral consciousness – an inscription within a universe that, while suggesting a terrestrial life, broadens our understanding towards the cosmos. (cf. Mbembe 2020a, p. 61) Furthermore, he advocates for a cosmological perspective that aims to transcend self-representations confined to narrow parameters defined by racial, tribal, or national affiliations.

Furthermore, often referred to as the “common world” or “capacity for care,” this idea stands in contrast to the “racial consciousness” that emerged during the early modern period, particularly within the contexts of transatlantic slavery and colonialism. In *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) Mbembe explains how Europe’s spatial imagination grew considerably from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, with the Atlantic becoming the centre of a new interconnection of worlds and the site of a fresh planetary awareness. (Mbembe 2017, p. 13) In examining his reflections on slavery and colonisation, it becomes evident that the notion of “consciousness” bears an ambivalent significance. Mbembe speaks to the development of what he terms “racial consciousness” alongside “consciousness of empire” and “imperial consciousness.” (Mbembe 2017, p. 62) At times, he describes a “negative consciousness” (Mbembe 2017, p. 127), which captures the pessimism experienced by the colonised – particularly their limited capacity to exercise free agency and to assert their existence as autonomous beings, independent of the colonial master’s control.

Moreover, the concept of “negative consciousness” refers to the historical dichotomy that existed between the enslavers and the enslaved, and, by extension, the racial divide between “whites” and “blacks”. This binary division was not only spatial; it also established a hierarchical structure that hindered equality and shared existence, thereby hindering a culture rooted in sharing, care, and reciprocity. To fully grasp this complex consciousness, Mbembe interprets the experiences of colonisation and plantation life, in which humanity faced a profound separation of consciousness. Yet, paradoxically, this division and estrangement rooted in racial capitalism became the foundation for an aspiration towards a planetary consciousness that transcends racial distinctions. Mbembe recognises that the plantation and, later, the colony constituted mechanisms within a new planetary consciousness. (Mbembe 2017, p. 79) This

insight encourages a deeper reflection on how critical reflection on the tragedy of colonisation can also present opportunities for a more inclusive and interconnected view of humanity. The plantation economy greatly influences the consciousness of both enslaved people and settlers.

Furthermore, a proper understanding of the concept of consciousness in Mbembe's work necessitates an examination of the methodological frameworks offered by W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Gilroy, particularly their use of the concept of "double consciousness." As outlined by Sindre Bangstad, Tony Sandset, and Gard R. Højberg in their article *The Double Consciousness of Paul Gilroy* (2018), Gilroy elucidate the identity crisis faced by Black populations in the shadow of slavery through the lens of "double consciousness." (Bangstad et al. 2018) He articulates this phenomenon as "the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others." Eze (2011) further elaborates on this concept, noting that Gilroy extends Du Bois's idea to explain the complexities of racial ambivalence faced by Black individuals in postcolonial Europe, which is strongly influenced by imperial, racist, and ethnocentric legacies, alongside abstract notions of national identities such as Englishness or Frenchness. (cf. Eze 2011, p. 877)

In the concluding sections of *Critique of Black Reason*, (2017) Mbembe shifts his view of "consciousness" from a descriptive to a normative perspective. Unlike Gilroy and Du Bois, he presents "planetary consciousness" as an ethical and political duty, emphasising the importance of equitable sharing of the Earth among all its inhabitants. He argues: "Restitution and reparation, then, are at the heart of the very possibility of the construction of a common consciousness of the world, which is the basis for the fulfilment of universal justice." (Mbembe 2017, p. 182) Here, the concept of "planetary consciousness" emerges as a counterpoint to both "racial consciousness" and "imperial consciousness," marking a notable shift in how humans perceive themselves. Fostering shared consciousness is crucial for humanity to recognise the importance of building relationships based on ethical principles such as "sharing," "restitution," and "reparation." (cf. Mbembe 2017, p. 182) Furthermore, this collective awareness has significant implications for our self-understanding and challenges existing notions of justice, law, and the essence of what it means to be human.

The development of the concept of "planetary consciousness" is further manifest in Mbembe's later works. Significantly, during the 25th anniversary of the Prince Claus Foundation on 10 December 2021, Mbembe presented his first detailed theorisation of "planetary consciousness" in a lecture titled "Planetary Consciousness and the Possible Future of Culture." A year later, this idea

resurfaces in an interview with Nils Gilman, titled “How to develop a Planetary Consciousness,” where it becomes a vital framework for analysing ethical and political issues, including principles of renunciation and reparation. This idea also raises important questions about whether universal principles are essential and how they foster positive human interactions worldwide. By developing this understanding, people are prompted to reevaluate their ethical beliefs and the foundations of social agreements. (cf. Mbembe 2017, pp. 182–183) In the book *Out of the Dark Night* (2021b), the idea of “planetary consciousness” is further elaborated, drawing upon the works of Édouard Glissant. Here, it is equated with the term “disclosure,” suggesting a state of mind characterised by openness, encounter, and the synthesis of diverse identities. Mbembe observes,

“The veritable disenclousure of the world is thus the encounter with the world’s entirety: what Glissant calls the Tout- Monde [All- World]. In this, it is above all a praxis of putting in relation. This thematic of relation and this question of entirety are also present in the work of British postcolonial writer Paul Gilroy, where they take the shape of a new planetary consciousness.” (Mbembe 2021b, p. 64)

As Mbembe notes, the aim in Gilroy and Glissant’s work is neither segregation nor the fragmentation of the world. The state of “disenclousure” requires detachment from the self and a resistance to the forces of self-enclosure. Conversely, planetary consciousness fosters openness to others, emphasising coexistence, reciprocity, and shared stewardship of the Earth. It means that openness prioritises mutuality and conviviality, calling for a redefinition of beings within the human sphere and the conditions under which they inhabit the planet.

Debates on Planetary Consciousness

A thorough analysis of recent literature on planetary consciousness shows its significant impact on the development of political theory, ethics, and the human and natural sciences over recent decades. Kriegman (2006) articulates the concept of “transformation of consciousness” to elucidate the increasing global awareness of interconnectedness that has evolved since the 1960s. He characterises this period as the “planetary phase of our civilisation,” providing a series of arguments supported by notable scholars such as Raskin (2006), Anderson (2006), Dower (2007), Stryker et al. (2000), and Wood et al. (2005). Moreover, Kriegman posits that individuals are increasingly inclined to perceive them-

selves as integral members of a shared community encompassing all of humanity and the broader biosphere. (cf. Kriegman 2006, p. 10) This awareness manifests through the principles and tenets of cosmopolitanism. He draws on Appiah's work to analyse how cosmopolitanism opposes chauvinism and embraces diverse cultures, perceiving all people on Earth as branches of a single family tree. For him, the spread of this enduring awareness within the new paradigm of globalisation lays the groundwork for the development of global citizenship. (cf. Kriegman 2006, p. 12)

Thus, from a cosmopolitan perspective, the concept of planetary consciousness seeks to dismantle the reification of cultural archetypes that often overlook culture's fluid and evolving nature. As Appiah (2006) noted, human societies have historically exchanged cultural ideas, resulting in continuous blending and innovation. Kriegman's interpretation involves a critical engagement with the cosmopolitan argument, particularly its critique of culturalism and identity politics. He articulates a nuanced connection between experiences of vulnerability and mutuality, the emergence of planetary consciousness, the need for a shared global community, and the deconstruction of traditional identity categories. It is essential to recognise that 'consciousness' is used here in an ethical and political sense, synonymous with 'responsibility' or 'belonging' to a cosmopolitical world, where individuals would identify themselves and recognise their mutual obligations and rights as citizens of a shared humanity.

Moreover, Rosi Braidotti (2013) engages with the notion of 'universal consciousness,' highlighting the intersection of feminism and the posthuman condition, and its alignment with the principles of postcolonialism. Both feminist and postcolonial perspectives reject the binaries of *Otherness* and the dialectics of identity and difference, which are foundational to Western metaphysics. Grusin (2017) explains that the fundamental assumption is that subjectivity, as both a discursive and material practice, is aligned with rational, universal consciousness and self-regulating behaviour. In contrast, *Otherness* is portrayed as its negative counterpart. (cf. Grusin 2017, p. 23) This philosophical approach sharply contrasts with the subjectivity expressed in early modern philosophies, where the subject is reduced to a solitary, thinking ego – an entity considered the only certainty, underpinning freedom and denying the reality of the external world. The ethical and political consequences of this perspective include affirming the insurmountable otherness of the world, along with a claim to the authority of the ego. In this context, reframing the subject as 'discursivity' and

‘openness’ to a consciousness beyond the ego can help develop an ethic rooted in encounter and the shared nature of existence.

Moreover, the concept of planetary consciousness bears significant parallels to the notion of “species thinking”. Citing Williams and Crutzen (2013), Chakrabarty elaborates on their categorisation of humans as a species, a framework they find indispensable in addressing the complexities of the current ecological crisis. (cf. Chakrabarty 2021, p. 213) This perspective seeks to transcend the temporality associated with specific human communities. Instead, it fosters an understanding of a broader historical context that illuminates both “planetary” and the “globality” of the ecological challenge. Furthermore, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020) invokes this concept within a critical re-examination of Native American ancestral wisdom, positing that “ecological consciousness requires the acknowledgement and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world.” (Kimmerer 2020, p. 1) The concept of planetary consciousness, often situated within religious and theological discourse, denotes a profound connection with the divine, the universe, and creation. (cf. Berry 1999)

Contemplating planetary consciousness is crucial across all these definitions for offering viable solutions to the modern crisis, which affects political, economic, sociocultural, religious, and ecological spheres. However, a review of the literature on this discourse shows a degree of particularism, especially when emphasising specific aspects such as environmental degradation, social inequalities, or gender- and race-based violence. The goal of promoting a global consciousness often encounters challenges in setting clear priorities, particularly in identifying problems and crafting practical solutions. Leiserowitz and Fernandez (2008) emphasize that transformative change necessitates the emergence of a new kind of human being or a shift in the human heart. (cf. 2008, p. 65) Thus, key questions arise about the conditions that enable this transformation, the processes involved, and the subjects driving this change.

For Leiserowitz and Fernandez (2008), the transition towards a new planetary consciousness hinges on creating a new narrative fostered through dialogue among all spheres of society and disciplines – from science to spirituality, encompassing the arts and education. (2008, p. 65) Elias and Moraru (2015) situate the discourse on planetary consciousness within a broader framework that transcends particular societal contexts, engaging particularly with comparative literature, literary studies, translation theories, art, and intercultural dialogue. They reference the works of Japanese-German author Yoko Tawada to argue that an awareness of translation issues is integral to the concept of plane-

tary consciousness. (cf. Elias and Moraru 2015, p. xxvii) Citing scholars such as Bernard Smith, J. G. A. Pocock, Tim Winton, Gail Jones, Christos Tsiolkas, and Alexis Wright, they contend that these authors challenge conventional notions of social scale and human agency, revealing the planetary as a stage for uneven cultural exchanges and interactions. (cf. Elias and Moraru 2015, p. xxix)

In his exploration of *Writing for the Planet: Contemporary Australian Fiction* (2015), Paul Giles traces the historical lineage of interest in planetary consciousness back to 19th-century American literature, spotlighting works like Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1967) – which employs the oceanic nature of the planet to critique terrestrial conventions – and Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). (cf. Elias and Moraru 2015, p. 145) Although there is a broad consensus on the urgent importance of planetary consciousness, it is worth questioning whether the proposed solutions and identified problems go beyond Eurocentric and Western imperialist perspectives. Specifically, do they address inequalities based on race, gender, and class? Do they promote equitable resource sharing among all Earth's inhabitants while fostering care, reciprocity, and ecosystem restoration? In the following sections, I will examine how these proposals can be thoughtfully aligned with Achille Mbembe's concepts regarding the planetary community.

II.2 Community and the Politics of Life

In his work, *Brutalism* (2024), Mbembe succinctly articulates the dilemma confronting humanity:

“For this is the final choice. Either repair or funeral arrangements. There will be no flight to any exoplanet. The Earth will be the oasis from which the ‘whole of humanity’ will undertake the gigantic work of regeneration of the living. Or it will be the universal tomb, its mausoleum, in keeping with the geological period of the history of the universe.” (Mbembe 2024, p. 149)

Faced with growing global violence, Mbembe argues that humanity must collectively recognise its responsibilities. Instead of falling into catastrophic philosophies that predict an inevitable end of history or a clash of civilisations, he advocates for the possibility of creating a new model of planetary community. Central to this idea is the need for a paradigm shift in our understanding of intersubjectivity on a global scale, to repair the Earth as a whole.

Freedom and Shared Responsibility for the Living

The thesis underpinning the politics of living presents two fundamental arguments: first, it suggests that humanity must imagine a new conception of freedom that encompasses all people and fosters shared responsibility for the planet. Second, it promotes the establishment of new planetary rights that reflect the essence of living together. These arguments are shaped by decolonial discourse and form the core framework for the “politics of the living.” The basis of anti-colonial struggles was fundamentally about rethinking the idea of freedom. As Mbembe states,

“The objective of the uprising was to be born into freedom. Its objective was to break the dead forces that limit the capacities for life. Becoming free was the equivalent of being by and for oneself, constituting oneself as a responsible human subject – before oneself, before others, and before nations. This is what I have referred to throughout this book as the politics of ascent into humanity.” (Mbembe 2021b, p. 229)

This idea of freedom sharply contrasts with the view common in Western liberal traditions, which has been involved in the injustices caused by slavery and colonisation. Mbembe’s framework of the “politics of the living” promotes a model where all humans are given equal freedom. This freedom includes the right to be legitimate co-owners of the Earth and to share its resources fairly with all other beings. Drawing from philosophical traditions from India, Vandana Shiva (2006) agrees with Mbembe’s view, suggesting that a new understanding of planetary coexistence is essential for the development of a ‘planetary democracy’. For Shiva, planetary democracy means a community where individuals share rights, responsibilities, and freedoms equally, transcending traditional divides between the universal and the particular, the diverse and the common, and the local and the global. (cf. Shiva 2006) This idea aligns with Mbembe’s concept of a planetary community, which Shiva describes as the “Earth family”, a framework that envisions a community sustained by the Earth – one that does not belong to humanity; instead, humanity is an integral part of the Earth. Shiva believes that each democracy on Earth reflects awareness of these connections, along with the rights and responsibilities they bring. However, both Mbembe and her argue that achieving this “planetary community” – which they describe as “Earth democracy” – requires a collective imagination of life and political power on a global scale. This reimagining must actively support the flourishing of all living beings.

Furthermore, Mbembe's normative ideas about "Earth democracy" remain relevant today, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted the urgent need for fairer redistribution and sharing of the conditions essential for habitability across the planet. In this context, he argues that rethinking the foundations of the democratic community must extend beyond the nation-state, implying that democracy must adapt to new demands shared by all beings on Earth rather than be limited to market laws. (cf. Mbembe 2021c, pp. 33–34) Therefore, the goal of engaging with the politics of living is to establish a normative framework for fostering a democratic community on a planetary scale, where all living beings share the Earth and its resources sustainably for the benefit of everyone.

When discussing Mbembe's insights in the context of South Africa's apartheid era, Kulundu et al. (2020) highlight the hardships faced by enslaved people, who were shackled and had limited mobility, making them vulnerable to oppression. They also question the crucial transgressive ability required to address crises stemming from this colonial history. From this viewpoint, Mbembe's contribution is key to reimagining a different concept of rights, particularly the universal right to move beyond traditional nation-state borders. This right grants all living beings the freedom to traverse the Earth without discrimination or restrictions. Hence, the right to move responds to modern coercion and limitations, especially those imposed within nation-states.

The Concept of a World Without Borders

In his 2021 article, *The Universal Right to Breathe*, published during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mbembe articulates the urgent need for a borderless world. The pandemic vividly exposed the limits of humanity's physiological endurance. It highlighted the fragility of public health systems and revealed grave injustices in the global distribution of healthcare resources, where wealthy nations secured vaccines while poorer regions suffered.

However, Mbembe's discussion goes beyond the immediate context of the pandemic. His analysis explores deeper issues, positioning the COVID-19 crisis as a prompt to reflect on the broader existential conditions of life on a planet afflicted by complex degradation and "suffocation." He critiques the systemic forces that contribute to the early end of life, emphasising the factors that have historically kept specific populations in a constant state of perilous breathlessness under capitalism. (cf. Mbembe 2021c, p. 61) Here, "breathing" is understood beyond its biological role; it symbolises the right to a dignified existence, protected by access to resources hindered by prevailing sociopolitical and eco-

nomic paradigms of global exploitation and domination. Therefore, the universal right to breathe becomes a fundamental affirmation of existence, necessitating the development of a planetary community based on equitable sharing of resources among all living beings. This critique is not just about survival; it inherently involves rejecting exclusive claims over the Earth by a privileged few. According to Mbembe,

“The universal right to breathe is unquantifiable and cannot be appropriated. From a universal perspective, it is not the right of every member of humankind but of all life. It must, therefore, be understood as a fundamental right to existence” (Mbembe, Shread 2021: 61).

Therefore, rethinking the political landscape requires a shift in perspective that sees the Earth beyond the boundaries of nation-states. The idea of a “borderless world” is central to Mbembe’s philosophical project and his vision for reimagining this global political system. This concept refers to the need for a profound reconceptualisation of global inequalities based on new economic status and geopolitical affiliations. Mbembe asserts,

“If the Earth belongs to all of us, there’s no reason why anyone who wants to shouldn’t be able to visit it. This would translate into some juridical dispensation that would be close to a borderless world. It would entail one form or another of the abolition of borders.”³

The planetary circulation of life is vital for modern democracies because it provides the essential foundation for fairly distributing the Earth’s resources among all living beings, regardless of their origin, nationality, or religious beliefs. However, the condition for this reimagining is the creation of “an alternative imaginary of life, power, and the planet.” (cf. Mbembe 2021b, p. 230) By this, Mbembe refers to the critique of the traditional concept of the Nation-State through the idea of sovereignty and borders, which colonial sociopolitical and economic structures have primarily shaped. Such an effort of critique and deconstruction requires the mobilisation of diverse resources, including spiritual insights drawn from religious traditions of deliverance, the consolidation and transnationalisation of civil society institutions, renewed juridical

3 Mbembe, Achille; Gilman, Nils; Blake, Jonathan (2022): How To Develop A Planetary Consciousness? Edited by Noema Magazine. Online. <https://www.noemamag.com/how-to-develop-a-planetary-consciousness>.

activism, and a capacity for dynamic, collective mobilisation – particularly about diasporas. (Mbembe 2021b, p. 230)

Furthermore, transforming global relationships requires integrating insights from the arts and humanities, which offer critical views and creative frameworks vital for revolutionary change. This blend of theory and practice is essential for establishing radical democratic ideas. Kulundu et al. (2020) contend that “our teaching, research, and community praxis must be border zone agile and ‘intensely local and global simultaneously’” (Kulundu et al. 2020, p. 123) They advocate for the emergence of a new imaginary of everyday conduct, a necessity borne of contemporary humanity’s existential crisis, rooted in colonial legacies. They emphasise that restoring human connection with itself and the world requires a comprehensive reform of knowledge systems and interdisciplinary collaboration, aimed at developing the skills to ask challenging questions that go beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. This idea is conceptualised as “lead from the situation,” meaning to prioritise our living realities, and to “stay with the trouble.” (cf. Haraway 2015) The term “living realities” encapsulates the experience of daily existence where the interconnectedness of human-to-human and human-to-more-than-human relations manifests in ongoing struggles. (cf. Kulundu et al. 2020, p. 123)

These ideas align with Mbembe’s call to decolonise the university and uncover global archives. (cf. Dübgen and Skupien 2018) Building a planetary community requires a re-evaluation of political foundations, goals, and values to protect the living planet and ensure equitable access to resources for all beings on Earth, including both humans and non-human beings. For this shift to become reality, a new democratic system is needed to replace the outdated nation-state model. This future planetary democracy would recognise fundamental rights, especially the rights to breathe and migrate. However, it raises the crucial question of its implementation in practice, particularly regarding the moral and political status of non-human beings. One can, for example, ask about the consequences of granting animals the right to breathe and move freely. Mbembe does not offer definitive answers to these questions, but suggests normative principles to guide both theory and practice of a new politics of life on the planet. In the following discussion, I will explore what this community-centred political philosophy could mean for Africa.

Africa in the Age of The Planetary

The idea of a planetary community challenges the notion of Africa as a separate entity, emphasising the continent’s integral place in the global network of life.

(cf. Mbembe and Sarr 2022) While the first perspective sees Africa through the lens of the “metaphysic of identity and difference”, the second advocates for exploring the historical and cosmological connections between this continent and the planetary. As Mbembe states, “Any inquiry into Africa’s place in theory is necessarily a questioning of the experience of the world in the age of planetary power.” (Mbembe et al. 2010, p. 146) This effort to envision Africa beyond mere particularism necessitates a profound reflection on postcolonial African theory. (Dübgen and Skupien 2018, p. 129) Mbembe consistently expresses this vision throughout his work, including *On the Postcolony* (2001), *Out of the Dark Night* (2021b), and various essays such as *Africa in Theory: A Conversation between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe* (2010), and *Africa in the New Century* (2016). This concept also serves as the basis for the ethical, political, and cosmological idea of “Afrique-Monde,” as discussed by Mbembe and Felwine Sarr in their influential co-edited book *Écrire l’Afrique-monde*. (2017)

However, it is in Mbembe’s early writings, *African Modes of Self-Writing* (2002), that he critically examines doctrines such as Afrocentrism, Afro-pessimism, and Pan-Africanism. He argues that these theories are driven by a “nativist impulse,” characterised by an excessive emphasis on uniqueness and an obsession with the idea of being rooted in what is believed to be Africans’ essential origins. (cf. Mbembe 2002; Dübgen and Skupien 2018, p. 129) Moreover, the concept of a planetary Africa is closely linked to the idea of Afropolitanism, which I will examine in detail in the final chapter, particularly in relation to the ethical implications of Mbembe’s political theory. (cf. Theombogü 2023; Anasiudu 2022) Afropolitanism is a “non-ethnocentric” way of conceptualising the African continent. Unlike Marcus Garvey’s pan-Africanism, Africa can be seen as a space that reflects humanity’s rich diversity. (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016, p. 31) This critique heavily relies on long-standing doubts about ethnophilosophy, as voiced by African philosophers such as Paulin Hountondji, Eboussi Boulaga, and Marcien Towa. Ethnophilosophy, originating from Emmanuel Tempels’ influential work on Bantu philosophy, sought to define a unique logic within African thought, differentiating it from primarily European intellectual traditions.

Mbembe’s critiques of ethnophilosophy and his engagement with Afro-diasporic philosophy, particularly Édouard Glissant’s concept of a shared world, underpin his idea of a planetary Africa. Africa is not seen as an essential, fixed entity ontologically separate from the rest of the world – whether historically, cosmologically, culturally, or anthropologically. Instead, beyond the assumptions of ethnophilosophy, which form the philosophical basis of Afrocentric

ideas about the continent, Africa is understood as an integral part of the global whole. This captures the core meaning of the term “Afrique-Monde,” a phrase that echoes Glissant’s concept of “Tout-Monde.” Mbembe points out that Glissant’s contribution “gave this living entity with multiple facets a name: *Tout-Monde*, or *Whole-World*.” (cf. Glissant and Wing 1997) This notion of Tout-Monde emphasises how the very idea of humanity is both an epiphany and an ecumenical outlook. According to Glissant, the World is a complex whole, reflecting humanity’s diversity not as a fixed object but as an assembly of diverse rhizomes. Humanity is not one single entity but a mosaic of countless cultures and experiences that intersect, influence one another, and evolve into new forms through symbiotic relationships. This convergence underpins the shared existence on Earth and the equitable distribution of its resources as a precondition of its sustainability and durability.

Moreover, in Mbembe’s collaborative book, *Pour un monde en commun: Regards croisés entre l’Afrique et l’Europe* (2020), the idea of a planetary Africa is emphasised as crucial for reconceptualising the continent’s development. This perspective extends beyond economic considerations, aiming to repair the world and distribute resources equitably among all inhabitants – humans and non-humans alike. Based on concepts such as “Afrique-Monde” or the “earthly community,” the notion of a planetary Africa envisions the African subject as an integral part of the whole world – culturally, politically, economically, and cosmologically. This “planetary turn” in Mbembe’s philosophy reflects an effort to identify the conditions that foster subjectivity in Africa, as part of a global movement to recognise all living beings as interconnected within a planetary consciousness.

Therefore, engaging with global socio-political and economic issues concerning a Common World is particularly relevant to sustaining life and building resilience on the African continent in the present and future. As the world moves away from the centralisation of power in a single region, there is a growing need to consider how truly free and autonomous individuals can emerge within the global community. Freedom and autonomy involve developing co-existence methods that make Africa a sustainable place for all its inhabitants. These ideas are essential for liberating both Africa and the broader world from ideologies that promote exclusive control over Earth’s resources or territories.

Nonetheless, the planetary vision raises the question of the conditions for its realisation from a political, economic, or environmental standpoint: how can a political idea of shared community among nations be justified in

Africa while persistent global structures of inequality and ongoing political, economic, and cultural dominance still exist?

Thus, the realisation of Mbembe's concept of planetary habitability raises an important issue when comparing it with Spivak's ideas. Although formulated in different contexts, Spivak's analysis provides profound insights into the challenges of translating the concept of planetarity in political environments marked by power struggles, violence, and dominance. A key question remains about the conditions necessary to foster a planetary relationship. If we are to create a utopia where all lives are valued equally and freedom is accessible to everyone, we must break away from current systems of control. Humanity is called upon to confront the obstacles posed by powerful interests, greed, and the deeply ingrained desire to dominate that seem inherent to human nature.

The awareness of the intrinsic requirement for the relational dynamic does not diminish the validity of the ethical and political principles underlying the idea of a planetary Africa. Instead, it acts as a safeguard against the potential misuse of these principles for ideological purposes, which could perpetuate existing power inequalities. However, Mbembe's critique does not hide the realities of division and conflict; instead, it encourages confronting the implications of living in an era of mutual exposure. He acknowledges, like Spivak, the reality of antagonism but aims to find a collective way of sharing the Earth as equitably as possible. While acknowledging the dystopian possibilities, both Mbembe and Spivak maintain hope for a more just form of planetary relationality. (cf. Goetschel and Spivak 1999, pp. 336–337) In this challenging environment, Mbembe's reflections on hope become particularly significant, providing avenues for further exploration in the next section. Addressing this requires a fairer approach to relationships – one that involves transformative change in how we coexist, emphasising autonomy and sovereignty for marginalised groups rather than their subjugation. Superficial planetary solidarity or mere collaboration risks merely perpetuating other forms of domination.

The Principle of Hope: An Engagement with Ernst Bloch

Given the significant challenges in establishing a planetary community, one might doubt the practicality of Mbembe's utopian vision. However, this section will examine a key argument in favour of the planetary community theory. Mbembe's approach stems from a firm rejection of nihilism, scepticism, and philosophies rooted in catastrophism. From this perspective, he demonstrates a profound engagement with the question of life, especially in his recent

works. Although his critiques can sometimes seem pessimistic, particularly in light of his early publications, an evolution towards hope for a fairer world is increasingly evident. This concept is central to his philosophy of planetarity.

Mbembe's political critique and ethics draw on a rich array of influences, including African historical sources, Afro-diasporic traditions, postcolonial theories, and pre-colonial African cosmologies. An ongoing dialogue with African Christian theologians, such as Jean-Marc Ela and Eboussi Boulaga, as well as Western theological traditions, also shapes his thought. Among these, Ernst Bloch's influence stands out. From the works of these theologians, Mbembe adopts the premise that history remains open to the possibilities of justice and reparation. This perspective is particularly evident in his seminal text, *Critique of Black Reason*, (2017) where he carefully examines the concept of hope in relation to political demands for justice and reparations. Mbembe asserts: "But as long as the retreat from humanity is incomplete, there is still a possibility of restitution, reparation, and justice. These are the conditions for the collective resurgence of humanity." (Mbembe 2017, p. 179) Therefore, the concept of a planetary community is based on the core hope that humanity's process of consciousness evolution is still ongoing, thereby enabling the development of meaningful relational foundations.

Mbembe further elaborates on the notion of hope, drawing heavily on Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia* (2000). Bloch describes hope as a cultivated attitude intrinsic to our human condition. He states that hope demands deliberate effort and ongoing commitment, viewing it not just as a passive emotion but as an active force that urges individuals towards a process of 'becoming'. He argues: "Here the world's labyrinth and the heart's paradise become visible discretely; the world in the focus imaginaries, in the more hidden, intelligible part of our subjectivity, begins to appear as hope for the future." (Bloch and Nassar A 2000, p.176)) The transformation towards a better future highlights the dynamic nature of human experience, stressing that individuals are constantly engaged in a dialectical journey toward self-realisation and collective advancement (cf. Mbembe 2020a, p. 174). This definition emerges from contemplating the meaning of human existence, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of birth. Bloch contends that the core human instinct driving existence is the pursuit of joy and happiness, an impulse that sustains hope. However, this hope, rooted in the unfinished nature of human life, is not automatic; it requires daily collective effort, especially in a landscape marked by violence and despair. Bloch argues:

“So it seems, indeed it becomes certain, that this precisely is hope, where the darkness brightens. Hope is in the darkness itself, partakes of its imperceptibility, just as darkness and mystery are always related; it threatens to disappear if it looms up too nearly, too abruptly in this darkness. We tremble in hope, in amazement.” (Bloch and Nassar A 2000, p. 201)

This quote from Bloch, which stems from his critical reflection on the modern history of the decline of the West, echoes in many ways the critique of African history by Mbembe, notably through the use of metaphors such as ‘night’, which plays a crucial role in Mbembe’s thought, as the title of the book *Out of the Dark Night* (2021b) reminds us. In this book, as in Mbembe’s entire body of work, there is undoubtedly a critical reflection on the socio-political crises occurring in Africa, viewed within the context of global crises. But beyond critique, it is a reflection on the conditions that make the emergence of life within death possible. Just as with Bloch, it is, in other words, hope for a better life that underpins the critique.

Furthermore, Mbembe adopts Bloch’s assertion that “all is not lost” and that “the future remains open,” suggesting that humanity has the potential for renewal that prevents falling into “absolute pessimism.” This idea is crucial for comprehending Mbembe’s comprehensive ethical perspective. Absolute pessimism, which sharply contrasts with hope, is depicted by what Bloch calls “negative faith.” Mbembe notes, echoing Bloch’s views, that absolute pessimism describes those who claim that life will continue its mediocrity forever, that humanity will remain in lethargy, and that the world will always look like a tomb. (cf. Mbembe 2020a, pp. 174–176) This discourse reflects a nihilistic and cynical metaphysics of pessimism. In stark contrast, hope emerges as a form of “critical and militant optimism,” rooted in a serious ethical and philosophical inquiry into the nature of humanity and the numerous possibilities for renewal on this planet. It involves the courage to embrace risk, enabling the reconstruction and reparation of a liberated, just, and joyful humanity. It is such Hope, which derives from a dynamic vision of history and time, that one finds in Bloch’s words, who affirms:

“Only the philosophy of history, also reviving what was, utopically overhauling it, places time, the intuitive form, the operative sphere of active life, at the center; and as for the concept of hope, of the philosophy of value, when it recognizes a stiller kind of simultaneity, a ‘spatiality’ of ensembles, shapes, categories, spheres, these are all finally centered around the true simultane-

ity, around the far-near 'inner space' of absolute life and existential disclosure, where the Now first brightens." (Bloch and Nassar A 2000, p. 200)

Thus, Bloch's conceptualisation of hope is rooted in a philosophy and theology of history. According to this conception, time is perceived not as a place of decline and despair, but as an opening towards a higher consciousness, which connects the human being to its source, that is, the event of absolute life. Such an event, however, can only be perceived by the subject if they have the audacity of faith to rise above the contingency of passing historical forms. In other words, space and time, in their external manifestations, call the subject to a transcendence towards a greater interior, which is the reality of the present moment. This opening of consciousness towards the absolute horizon of presence in the world is the condition of possibility for perceiving hope.

Mbembe's formulation, however, is firmly grounded in the critical philosophy of history, drawing on the memory of abolitionist and anti-colonial African struggles. He draws on the biographies of iconic Afro-descendant figures, including Martin Luther King Jr., Frantz Fanon, and Nelson Mandela, to illustrate this enduring legacy of hope. At the core of their historical struggles lies a persistent aspiration for a more humane existence. They are steadfast in their determination to counteract the pervasive nihilism and despair that marked their era. However, beyond mere survival or passive resistance, they sought to create a new reality: emancipation from the most intolerable dimensions of racism and colonialism. Mbembe explains how this pursuit ultimately aimed at the formation of a subject that, in its self-referential awareness, acknowledged its pure potential and free expression, thereby fostering a relationship with the world and others. (cf. Mbembe 2021b, p. 229) This pursuit of a free and autonomous subject forms the core principle behind every anti-colonial movement. It informs historical struggles and current reflections on hope, while embodying the planetary perspective central to Mbembe's political philosophy. This same dynamic of the battle for freedom and autonomy at the heart of suffering is what Bloch describes in these terms:

"And yet what is left for us here, we who suffer and are dark, is to hope far ahead. If it remains strong enough, becomes pure, possesses itself undivertedly enough, it will not go to ruin—hope will not let us go to ruin. For the human soul embraces everything, including the other side which is not yet. Hope alone is what we want, and thought serves hope, hope is its only space, its semantic content and its object scattered into every part of the world, hid-

den in the darkness of the lived moment, promised in the shape of the absolute question.” (Bloch and Nassar A 2000, p. 276)

These words profoundly reflect the aspirations and struggles for liberation, in which formerly colonised peoples have played a central role. Believing in the incomparable value of life despite suffering, and viewing their pain as relative compared to the immeasurable life they carry within and must defend, these people have sacrificed their lives in the fight for independence against colonisers. Thus, as Mbembe articulates, the legacy of African nationalism worth engaging with in contemporary conditions is the pursuit of a message of hope for a better future accessible to all peoples, all nations, and all species. (cf. Mbembe 2021b, p. 229) His understanding of hope does not involve a transcendent finality. The goal is not to reach a celestial realm, often associated with specific religious beliefs. Instead, hope is a dynamic process firmly rooted in the temporal realities of human existence. Rather than aiming for a state beyond historical experience, the core of hope lies in working towards a positive transformation of history itself. This is evident in the anti-colonial struggle, where hope becomes practically significant, with its horizon stretching across the Earth and its ultimate aim being universal humanity. This utopian vision of hope builds on the intellectual journey begun by anti-colonial movements.

Drawing inspiration from Césaire and Fanon, the utopia of hope aspires to create a new world founded upon the values of reciprocity, sharing, and a universal community. The shadow of catastrophe, as Frantz Fanon called it, the “Dark Night,” represents the despair brought on by violence and the decline of human dignity. Thus, the hope of utopia can be viewed as a project aimed at “emerging from the Dark Night,” a quest to rediscover the core of the human experience amid imminent threats of death and catastrophe. In this framework, Fanon’s concept of leaving the “Dark Night” resonates with Aimé Césaire’s vision of a brighter future for humankind. However, this understanding of hope does not dismiss realism. Sure, the *Common World* promoted by the planetary ethic does not currently exist. Mbembe observes that more than fifty years after decolonisation, life remains plagued by forms of violence, not only in former colonised nations but worldwide. He describes how, instead of genuine self-repossession, one witnesses a lifeless mass that signifies nothing except the form of a vibrant, joyful body. (cf. Mbembe 2021b, pp. 226–227) The ongoing presence of both traditional and modern violence and exploitation supports the desire for justice and reparation. Because violence is global, the ethics of hope imply that there is still a chance for freedom and planet-wide repara-

tion. Humanity's challenge is to transform ethical ideas into cultural practices that can lay the groundwork for concrete political steps, as without these, the future will remain out of reach.

Conclusion

This chapter examines Mbembe's concept of a planetary community. I argue that his idea of the planetary extends beyond geographical borders, encompassing a universal awareness and the intricate relationships between the physical Earth, living organisms, biodiversity, and both organic and inorganic matter. This perspective is grounded in cosmological and ethical-political ideas, promoting a way of living that encourages fair sharing among all living beings, both human and non-human. This philosophy also envisions the development of a new consciousness that includes bio-symbiosis – living in harmony with humans and the broader ecological system. In the next chapter, I will explain how Mbembe's ideas about an earthly community demand a fundamental rethinking of rights. Specifically, these include the rights to inhabit the Earth, to breathe, and to move freely. Securing these rights relies on fostering dialogue among all parts of humanity and, importantly, on listening to the planet itself.

Chapter 2: Towards Planetary Rights

Introduction

Mbembe's critique extends beyond redefining our understanding of community (chapter 1). He investigates the notion of rights within liberal democracies. He exposes the ambivalence inherent in the modern idea of rights and proposes an alternative that ensures all members of the Earth's community, both human and non-human, can live sustainably. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 96) However, how should the concept of planetary rights be articulated? What are its foundations and implications? Addressing these questions requires exploring how planetary rights arise not from the norms of any single community, but from the broader context of general ecology. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 17–22) By clarifying these connections, I seek to demonstrate how Mbembe's political philosophy offers a compelling case for the politics of cohabitation within a planetary community, as discussed in the preceding chapters. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how his approach diverges from cosmopolitan theories, one of the most prominent frameworks that address current forms of domination, particularly as observed in the political, economic, and financial systems of global governance.

I. Meaning and Foundation of Planetary Rights

Achille Mbembe's reflections on planetary rights first appeared in the French journal AOC under *Le droit universel à la respiration*. (2020b) This article was subsequently translated into English by Carolyn Shread and published in *Critical Inquiry* (vol. 47). (cf. Mbembe 2021c) A revised version of the article is scheduled to be included in the book *The Earthly Community*. (2022) The essay discusses the state of global sociopolitical and economic crises, especially during the man-

agement of the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism exemplified by the murder of George Floyd in the United States. Mbembe's ideas about the universal right to breathe and circulation stem from a critical reflection on these tragedies and current crises in international relations, particularly those related to migration, ecology, economy, and politics.

1.1 The Planetary Right to Breathe

Examining the conditions for a sustainable planetary community involves exploring the rights to breathe and move freely across the world. I have previously explained that Mbembe's concept of the planetary aim is to sustain life on Earth. Since being alive is inherently connected to the ability to breathe and move, addressing the conditions necessary for planetary existence within the planetary community entails analysing the political structures that establish the prerequisites for breathing and for the freedom of movement on Earth. These two aspects of existence – breathing and mobility – stand out as vital conditions for the continuation of life on Earth, which should be recognised as fundamental rights. By framing breathing and movement in this manner, Mbembe underscores their essential role in the broader discourse of planetary ethics, emphasising the interconnectedness of rights, sustainability, and the political responsibilities that govern human collective existence.

Philosophical Significance of Breathing

The literature following the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of examining breathing as a biological and socio-political condition essential for the sustainability of life on Earth. (cf. Härting and Meek 2024; Selim 2022; Keeva 1999; Bandman 1982) The pandemic has not only reaffirmed humanity's understanding of the crucial role of breath in the generative process of life. It has also highlighted the extent to which such a capacity can be imperilled. (cf. Gangadhar and Anand 2022) Moreover, the pandemic underscores humanity's momentous responsibility as a critical agent in the intricate evolution of life, whether through destructive practices, such as air pollution and the eradication of living conditions, or through reparative efforts centred on law and planetary justice.

Judith Butler effectively explores the theme of breathing as part of the existential crisis intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising how the spectre of death and illness has infiltrated everyday life. (cf. Butler 2022b; Butler 2022a) She refers to a common experience: a pervasive atmosphere filled

with illness and mortality that has shaped our collective existence, primarily targeting the human capacity to breathe. (cf. Dillon and Sze 2018) This profound confrontation with death invites a more nuanced reflection on grief, social connection, and the ethics of mourning in a fragmented world. (cf. Butler 2022b, pp. 1–2) In this light, as Dipesh Chakrabarty articulates, the pandemic has revealed that humans have become a geological force; our actions have engendered conditions ripe for disease and pervasive mortality, with air and the very act of breathing functioning as primary vectors of this existential threat. (cf. Chakrabarty 2021)

Furthermore, the topic's interest in breathing – and its sociopolitical and existential significance – extends beyond reflection on the pandemic, encompassing a critical examination of the history of Western philosophy in general. Many Scholars have recently critically diagnosed the absence of this theme within this history. From June 18 to 21, 2023, the Institute for Philosophical Studies at the Science and Research Centre Koper in Portorož, Slovenia, convened a conference titled "Respiratory Philosophy: A Paradigm Shift in Philosophy." Organised by Petri Berndtson, Maja Bjelica, and Lenart Škof, the conference aimed to explore the relatively under-examined theme of respiration within philosophical discourse. The call for papers articulated a significant concern:

"Breathing is a rare theme in philosophy, and it is only in recent years that philosophy of breathing as a new way of doing philosophy has begun to interest some thinkers. [...] the 'forgetting of air and breathing' (Irigaray) in European philosophical discourse is by itself one of the deepest, unacknowledged tensions, shaping its unfortunate outlook on the world." (Berndtson et al. 2023)

This observation is pertinent given that, aside from sporadic contributions in ethics (cf. Wang and Macaulay 2018), political philosophy (cf. Söffner 2023; Jankovic 2021; Dillon and Sze 2018; Bandman 1982), critical philosophy of race (cf. Meikle 2020), and environmental sciences (cf. Gangadhar and Anand 2022; Huck et al. 2021; Boyd 2019), there exists a notable absence of systematic philosophical literature dedicated to the subject of breathing. In 2013, Lenart Škof edited an anthology titled *Breathing with Luce Irigaray* (2013), where he, alongside Emily A. Holmes, examines the contributions of French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (1983), as well as Peter Sloterdijk (1998), who have played a significant role in the emergence of this nascent current known as respiratory

philosophy. As Berndtson et al. (2023) elucidate, respiratory philosophy possesses the dual merit of decolonising the philosophical curriculum by incorporating non-European sources while illuminating how the act of “breathing” has been a fundamental, albeit frequently erased, element in the history of philosophy. Consequently, it can be posited that this philosophical trajectory implicates various domains, including ontology, politics, ethics, and even spirituality, as evidenced in the writings of Škof and Berndtson (2018), Heine (2021), and Berndtson (2023). Instead of conducting an exhaustive analysis of this emerging trend, which still lacks clearly defined contours, the following section aims to examine Achille Mbembe’s engagement with this theme.

The Perspective of General Ecology

If the ultimate aim of ethics and political philosophy is the preservation of life’s reserves on Earth, the foundation of this political framework is the universal right to breathe. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 37) As I outlined in the introduction to this section, this right must be differentiated from the notion of the right to breathe as formulated by Bobeck (2023), Gangadhar and Anand (2022), Huck et al. (2021), Meikle (2020), and Boyd (2019). Whereas these thinkers derive their concepts from Western philosophical traditions, Mbembe’s framework is grounded in an understanding of general ecology inspired by African cosmologies. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 18) Reflection on the universal right to breathe emerges from a broader inquiry into life beyond the confines of politics, economics, or anthropology. Indeed, in his essay *The Universal Right to Breathe* (2021c), he asserts:

“As that which is both ungrounded and our common ground, the universal right to breath is unquantifiable and cannot be appropriated. From a universal perspective, not only is it the right of every member of humankind, but of all life. It must therefore be understood as a fundamental right to existence.” (Mbembe 2021c, pp. 61–62)

A critical analysis of this quotation provides a nuanced understanding of the meaning, foundation, and implications of the right to breathe. In this section, I aim to elucidate the significance and genealogy of this right, as well as its role within Mbembe’s political philosophy, ethics, and overarching ecological framework. What does it mean to breathe? How is breathing conceptualised as a fundamental right? The answers to these inquiries are embedded within Mbembe’s aforementioned articulation.

The discourse on breath, as articulated through the postulate of general ecology, posits that ‘breathing’ is an essential prerequisite for the existence of all living beings. It is crucial to contextualise the term ‘living’ within a broader ecological framework, where it encompasses not only humans but also the myriad of non-human entities – ranging from biodiversity, flora, and fauna to ecosystems and the Earth itself. Mbembe asserts that all these elements possess a form of life, unified by a shared capacity reliant on breathing. The repeated emphasis on concepts such as “the ground,” “our common ground,” and “the common soil” serves to illuminate the breath that animates and connects all living beings on Earth. Without this shared breath, the existence of animals, plants, and even minerals would be rendered impossible; breathing becomes the foundational condition of possibility for life itself.

At this stage of inquiry, two essential questions invite a more nuanced understanding of the concept of breathing articulated by Mbembe. How can we consider that minerals may possess an ontological capacity for respiration among plants and humans? This understanding prompts a second critical question regarding the legal standing of stones recognised as ‘living beings’ with the right to breathe. Suppose minerals are indeed considered living entities capable of respiration. Could it be argued that they deserve recognition as subjects of rights, in line with the proponents of the rights of nature? While I will not delve deeply into the complexities of rights of nature theories, it is helpful to summarise their essence. (cf. Tola 2018; Boyd 2017; Borràs 2016) Their central thesis asserts that nature should be granted rights like those conferred upon human beings. (cf. Nash 1989) A range of ethical, cosmological, and political arguments supports this perspective.

From a cosmological viewpoint, the rights of nature theory arises from recognising an ontological interconnectedness among all elements of the Earth, which is crucial for maintaining ecological balance and the viability of life itself. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 66) This interdependence among plants, animals, and humans highlights a vital earthly bond characterised by reciprocity. Thomas Berry articulates this relationship through the concept of the “jurisprudence of the Earth.” (cf. Berry 1999) Thus, acknowledging the rights of nature equates to affirming the intrinsic value of the natural world, akin to the recognition of human rights, and encompasses a commitment to ecological stewardship. Furthermore, this theoretical framework contends that human responsibility for protecting nature is intrinsically linked to the sustainability of human existence and the broader integrity of our ecology. (cf. Shiva 2006; Boyd 2017)

Based on these arguments, proponents of the rights of nature advocate transformative changes in legal theory and political practice, particularly regarding land ownership and associated jurisprudence. (cf. Borràs 2016) Such a shift is essential to align human laws with the ecological imperatives that our interconnected existence dictates. This contemplation enhances our understanding of the potential implications of classifying minerals as living things. If we assert that plants are entitled to existence free from the threat of destruction, does this not suggest that stones warrant similar protection? Equating stones with trees in terms of respiration implies that they could share similar rights. Such reasoning introduces complex considerations that deserve thorough exploration. A crucial step in addressing these inquiries involves clarifying Mbembe's perspective on life and respiration. Mbembe argues that being alive enables close communication with other universes, including the cosmic and the plant kingdom. (Mbembe 2022, p. 18) It is essential to note that he does not draw strict boundaries between human existence, the plant kingdom, and the animal kingdom; instead, he weaves these realms together through their shared quality of being alive, defined by mutual communication.

The idea that diverse kingdoms share beings highlights their unique roles in supporting life on Earth. The relationship between the mineral and plant kingdoms exemplifies complementarity, in which their interactions promote the exchange of energy essential to sustaining the cosmo-telluric balance. It becomes crucial to reconceptualise 'breathing' not solely as a biological function but as a critical form of energetic interaction that underpins the collective existence of all beings. Such interaction maintains the viability of life on our planet and ensures ecological harmony. While this philosophical stance resonates with vitalism, it distinguishes itself by rejecting a separation between the animal, mineral, and plant kingdoms. (cf. Coulter et al. 2019; Lash 2006)

Lipman (1966) describes vitalism as the belief in a specific operational principle that sets living organisms apart from the inorganic realm, operating on a dichotomy between the animate and inanimate. In contrast, the holist perspective of General Ecology advocates for rediscovering the commonalities that all entities share within the Earth and cosmos, forming the foundation for sustainable life. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 17–22) This conception of the common good defines the Earth as an overarching Living Being, encompassing both human and non-human life. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 18) Defining the Earth in this holistic way inherently affirms its capacity to breathe alongside that of all its constituents. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 8–9) As Mbembe argues:

“We must thus, when treating the Earth, bear in mind the living world in its entirety and its innumerable manifestations. Of this Earth, humans, together with animal, plant and mineral species, as well as microbes, bacteria, and viruses, seas and oceans, skies, climates, technological devices, and other artificial and externalized apparatuses, are an inseparable part.” (Mbembe 2022, p. 7)

Therefore, to reimagine the concepts of “Earth” or “Living,” one might begin by recognising the collective dependence of all elements – humans, minerals, and plants – on the vital process of breathing. In general ecology, breathing is not only an attribute of living organisms but of all entities on Earth, including minerals. Exploring this argument reveals its fundamental role in Mbembe’s perspective on planetary rights. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 100)

The Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the human experience of living in a toxic environment, underscoring the vulnerability of respiratory capacity in humans and other forms of life. (cf. Selim 2022; Butler 2022b) Two forms of toxicity endanger the breathing capacity of living entities during the pandemic: biophysical toxicity, characterised by the degradation of air, water, and land quality alongside the destruction of habitable environments, and systemic toxicity, rooted in the exploitative practices of industrial pharmaceutical firms within the framework of global financial capitalism. (cf. Smith 2009; Edwards 2014; Mbembe 2024) Environmental toxicity includes the widespread use of chemicals, such as pesticides, antibiotics, and dyes, as well as significant nitrogen and phosphorus emissions, which directly correlate with the proliferation of viruses and diseases that compromise the integrity of vital tissues in living beings. (cf. Davies 2018; Mbembe 2021c)

Just as physiological toxicity undermines human respiration and the ability to breathe, necro-political powers systematically attack the breathing capacity of the most vulnerable populations. (cf. Mbembe 2021c) This vulnerability is a specific form of social and political death, manifested in the inability to breathe, as powerfully illustrated by the tragic case of George Floyd, whose last words – “I cannot breathe” – resonate with the harsh realities imposed by contemporary necro-power within liberal democracies. Here, necro-power includes all systems of violence and domination based on race, gender, xenophobia, or police brutality that disproportionately target marginalised groups such as migrants, undocumented populations, and racial minorities. (cf.

Mbembe 2019b, pp. 38–39; Brennan 2024) Mbembe explains that in geopolitics, the forces of power are likely to remain dominant. The lack of shared infrastructure worsens global fragmentation, increasing divisions among states. (cf. Mbembe 2019b, pp. 43–46) In their pursuit of self-preservation, many nations reinforce border defences and obscure the systemic violence inflicted upon the most vulnerable. (cf. Mbembe 2024, p. 78)

Mbembe further elucidates that the vulnerability manifests vividly in regions where innocent populations suffer amidst conflict, militarisation, extrajudicial killings, economic despair, and confinement in camps and prisons. For these groups, political space has morphed into a toxic environment, leading to precarious existence and uncertain futures, where the spectre of death looms ominously, targeting the breath of life itself. Consequently, general ecology provides a robust normative framework for interpreting the thesis of a planetary right to breathe. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 17–22) Mbembe expands on this idea by asserting that any political discourse concerning the living must acknowledge that life is beyond valuation; it is, by nature, immeasurable and incalculable. (Mbembe 2022, p. 34) Thus, the right to breathe thesis seeks to present a legal counterpoint to the dominant logic of calculation that underpins the global political economy. As previously discussed, this logic fosters toxicity within biophysical, sociopolitical, and economic realms. (cf. Nading 2020; Pearce and Tombs 2019) The right to breathe signifies not only the chance for existence but also the essential need for all living beings to inhabit environments free from toxicity – whether political, environmental, economic, religious, or cultural. (cf. Davies 2018) For human beings, this implies inhabiting a space free from pollution, alongside a socio-political and economic environment that facilitates equitable access to essential resources for life, whether intellectual, ethical, nutritional, or health-related.

Ultimately, the right to breathe on a planetary scale promotes a healthy environment and protects life from the harmful effects of global systems of violence, dominance, and death. By emphasising respiration as a core aspect of life, Mbembe strengthens his critique of oppressive systems and develops an alternative view of rights. This critique is deeply connected to reflecting on the right to breathe, as the sustainability of life on Earth depends on the ability to navigate its varied landscapes, enabling the sharing of vital resources necessary for survival among all living beings. (cf. Mbembe 2024, p. 104)

1.2 The Planetary Right to Mobility

The foundation of planetary rights has been a central theme in Achille Mbembe's scholarship, particularly since his seminal work *Critique of Black Reason*. (2017) In the preceding sections, I have traced the genealogy of this inquiry through his earlier writings. In this section, I will examine Mbembe's conception of the planetary right to mobility, which is understood as the inherent right of all living beings to freely traverse the Earth. (cf. Mbembe 2024, p. 104) This right is supported by Mbembe's assertion that the Earth is a shared entity that requires collective stewardship and the unrestricted circulation of life for all its human and non-human inhabitants. (cf. Mbembe 2024, p. 150) Moreover, Mbembe emphasises the urgent need to restore these essential circulatory flows during this critical period, which is marked by growing barriers and restrictions. (cf. Mbembe 2023, p. 83) In the following discussion, I will elaborate on the philosophical implications and arguments underlying the thesis regarding the right to mobility.

Contemporary Debates on Mobility

Before examining Mbembe's arguments, it is essential to contextualise the broader discourse surrounding mobility. (cf. Sheller and Urry 2006) This will illuminate the significance of his conceptualisation of planetary rights. Sheller and Urry (2016a) outlines this broader context, positing that the field has historically been motivated by concerns for social justice, societal transformation, and the prospects of future societies. (cf. Sheller 2023) As evidenced by the monograph *"What Is the Future?"* (2016), published after the inaugural conference organised by the *Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University* in 2004, the discourse on mobility interrogates the future of urban transport, infrastructure, and the requisite conditions for a sustainable energy transition. The Alternative Mobility Futures Conference in Lancaster in 2003 underscored the pressing need for ecological transformation on a global scale. (cf. Sheller 2017, p. 4) Despite the interdisciplinary nature of the contributions from geographers, sociologists, engineers, urban planners, and environmentalists alike, a common theme emerges: the imperative to scrutinise the foundation and scope of what has come to be known as the "mobility paradigm."

Drawing from Sheller and Urry's (2016a) insights, Baldwin et al. (2019) argue that the mobility paradigm is a mode of social thought that endeavours to comprehend social life by analysing diverse mobilities and their intricate interrelations. (cf. Sheller and Urry 2016b) Its origins can be traced back to the spa-

tial turn in social theory that began in the 1990s. (cf. Baldwin et al. 2019, p. 292) For Sheller and Urry (2016a), social relationships encompass diverse forms of connection, whether proximate or distant. Thus, aim of the mobility paradigm is to examine the integral role of movement within the fabric of social institutions and practices. (cf. Sheller and Urry 2016a, p. 11) From this perspective, Coletta et al. (2020), for example, analyses mobility through the lens of spheres, connections, timelines, and processes that shape daily existence and the socio-political and economic landscape. Other scholars have explored the historical dimensions of mobility, considering its profound impact on human identity and social formation. (cf. Büscher et al. 2016) This line of inquiry also resonates with Thomas Nail's assertion that society is perpetually in motion, emphasising that human movement is always socially directed—manifested through border security, urban traffic management, technologies, and work schedules. Nail also argues that societies are not static entities but dynamic processes inherently involved in the continuous direction and circulation of social life. (cf. Nail 2020, p. 151) Consequently, mobility is viewed as an essential attribute of human existence and a key factor shaping social order and activity.

Furthermore, the social and political importance of mobility is also reflected in the work of scholars such as Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt (2013) and Tim Cresswell (2006). Bærenholdt (2013) posits that contemporary societies are increasingly managed through mobility rather than merely governing it. (cf. Bærenholdt 2013, p. 20) This perspective aligns with Carpio's examination of the historical dimensions of mobility in the American context, specifically in Los Angeles and the Inland Empire during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which explains how mobility has historically influenced racial identity and hierarchies, allowing certain groups to move while imposing restrictions on others. Cresswell (2006) employs a similar methodology to investigate the contemporary increase in human mobility and the concurrent efforts to regulate it through migration policies, as well as through art and mass culture – including photography and the automobile – and their implications for the integration of the European Union.

However, despite this diversity of scholarly contributions and methodologies, a unified perspective is evident across much of the mobility literature, which I would term “social ontology”. This concept is echoed in the works of authors such as Thomas Nail, who argues that, within a mobility-oriented framework, social stasis is an illusion; instead, we encounter regimes of social circulation punctuated by transient, contingent sites of convergence. (cf. Nail 2020, p. 151) To comprehend the migrant figure, we must also reconceptualise society

through the lens of movement. From this standpoint, the symbolic representations of migrants and refugees are significant for their capacity to reflect a social reality characterised by institutional and relational change. In contrast, a normative perspective transcends the phenomenological or social ontological frameworks above.

Bianchi et al. (2020) for example interpret the “mobility crisis” as a manifestation of inequalities in global tourism politics. They scrutinise how the rights to freedom of movement for marginalised or less privileged individuals are thwarted by systemic racism, xenophobia, and restrictive border controls, all of which are perpetuated by the historical impacts of colonial legacies, global capitalism, and geopolitical shifts. These elements are intertwined with the multi-scalar governance systems that delineate, manage, and police borders. (cf. Bianchi et al. 2020b, p. 290) Mimi Sheller emphasises the need to integrate descriptive sociological analyses with normative considerations regarding mobility justice. She asserts that the injustices of mobility stem from embodied experiences in daily life. For instance, when individuals with disabilities, pregnant women, or the elderly encounter barriers to accessing essential services due to the designed inaccessibility of transport systems and urban infrastructure, such conditions embody a profound injustice of accessibility. (cf. Sheller 2020, pp. 12–13)

Thus, the discourse surrounding mobility is reframed from its focus on the mechanistic aspects of transportation and urban planning to include a normative perspective that examines the exclusionary implications of restricted mobility for society’s most vulnerable members. (cf. Cook and Butz 2019; Heller 2021) Sheller’s broader concerns regarding macro-mobilities refer, for example, to the systematic exclusion that occurs at global scales, primarily shaped by infrastructure and transportation mechanisms, along with their political, economic, and cultural implications for human lives and movements. (cf. Sheller 2018) These implications impact issues such as climate change, migration policies, and border controls. Scholars of macro-mobility examine how narratives surrounding climate change and migration operate within a distinct power regime that is embedded in a broader political landscape. (cf. Baldwin et al. 2011) They advocate expanding Sheller’s notion of mobility justice to establish a new political discourse on climate change, framing her insights as foundational for articulating individuals’ rights to migrate in a climate-altered context. (cf. Wainwright and Mann 2018) Baldwin et al. further contend that conceptualising mobility justice as a pivotal principle would significantly enrich the political lexicon surrounding these issues, fundamentally proposing

movement as the foundational condition of social existence rather than an exceptional circumstance. (cf. Baldwin et al. 2019, p. 2)

While numerous scholars acknowledge the critical role of mobility in understanding the world's socio-political dynamics, the predominant trend is to adopt an analytical approach. (cf. Canzler and Kaufmann 2016) Rather than venturing into a normative critique that rigorously interrogates the philosophical concepts and paradigms informing the discourse on mobility, this approach is primarily framed by the social sciences. In contrast, Mbembe's notion of general ecology contemplates mobility in a manner analogous to the 'planetary mobility' described by Clark and Szerszynski (2021). Szerszynski posits that "planetary mobilities" encompass not merely long-distance movements or a compendium of interconnected mobilities across the Earth's surface; instead, they compel us to recognise all forms of mobility as phenomena intrinsic to a far-from-equilibrium planet, existing as a loosely bound dynamic assemblage that traverses the atmosphere and extends into near space. (cf. Szerszynski 2016, pp. 614–615) This cosmological perspective on mobility necessitates an examination of all the universe's constituents as an interrelated whole. Consequently, social ontology and historical phenomenology give way to a cosmological framework that Mbembe utilises to extrapolate ethical principles – namely, mobility, sharing, solidarity, and the circulation of living resources – while simultaneously engaging in a philosophical critique of state sovereignty. It is this normative orientation that I now seek to investigate.

Achille Mbembe's Approach to Mobility

Mbembe's examination of the planetary right to mobility offers a constructive perspective rooted in the African context. (Mbembe 2024, p. 97) He thoughtfully addresses the paradoxical relationship between the continent's rich human, material, and cultural resources and the systemic enclosures that hinder their potential. (cf. Mbembe 2024, pp. 100–102) Central to this discussion is the critical evaluation of the colonial idea of borders, along with the extensive bureaucratic, policing, and military infrastructures that uphold these boundaries. These factors have transformed Africa into a vast prison, where the free movement of populations is greatly restricted. To promote genuine vitality and development on the continent, Mbembe argues, emancipation from these barriers to mobility is essential:

“Of all the major challenges facing Africa at the beginning of this century, none is as urgent and as far-reaching as the mobility of its population. To a large extent, the immediate future of the continent will depend on its ability to free up forces of circulation, to set up territories and spaces in such a way that its people can move about as often as possible, as far as possible, as fast as possible and, ideally, unimpeded.” (Mbembe 2024, p. 97)

Although Mbembe does not propose a specific framework for overcoming barriers to circulation, his reflections nonetheless inspire a reimagining of the continent’s potential through ethical, cosmological, and political ambitions. Mobility is generally seen as essential for creating opportunities for societal change and economic development. Whether planned or organic, it is vital as a response to demographic growth and as a solution to climate change-related issues. The call to rethink mobility serves as a powerful reminder of the potential for renewal, international cooperation, and the sustainability of life on a global scale, particularly in light of the tragic effects associated with the migration policies of European nations. Mbembe explains:

“Today, the human cost of European border control policies continues to intensify as potential migrants face heightened risks. The number of those who have died crossing no longer gets counted. Each week brings its share of stories, each as scabrous as the next. These are often stories about men, women, and children who have drowned, become dehydrated, poisoned, or asphyxiated on the coasts of the Mediterranean, the Aegean, the Atlantic or, increasingly, in the Saharan desert.” (Mbembe 2024, p. 101)

This strong critique of European migration policies highlights not only the brutal practices of border militarisation, airport and sea controls, but also the entire bureaucratic system that almost systematically restricts visa applications from people originating in Southern countries. While citizens of Northern countries can usually move freely across borders, this right is consistently limited for those from Southern nations. The critique also involves analysing the theories that underpin these practices, which are rooted in a long Western philosophical tradition, especially regarding migration rights.

Thus, from a normative standpoint, Mbembe’s discussion of the planetary right to mobility engages in a critical dialogue with Western political philosophy. He examines the theories of hospitality that underpin modern asylum rights, notably drawing on Immanuel Kant’s insights. (cf. Mbembe

2024, pp. 24–25) He particularly highlights the importance of Kant's idea of universal hospitality, which asserts that all humans have the right to travel and find shelter, grounded in our shared ownership of the Earth's surface. (2024, p. 24) From Kant's viewpoint, as long as 'no one has an inherent greater right to any part of the Earth than anyone else,' borders do not serve as strict prohibitions. Nonetheless, Mbembe emphasises a crucial nuance in the Kantian model: the right of hospitality is merely a 'right to visit,' with no implied duty or obligation for the host community, as there is no implicit contract between asylum seekers and host societies. (cf. Mbembe 2024, pp. 24–25)

Unlike Kant's view that the social contract restricts movement and residence rights, Mbembe highlights their deep, pre-political roots. Humans naturally have the right to move freely and share the Earth to support their existence. This right is not derived from social agreements but is grounded in our fundamental nature as living entities. The right to circulation is therefore based on a cosmological and ethical perspective that emphasises the interconnectedness of all living beings and the essential need for movement. (cf. Mbembe 2024, p. 91) Although migrants, refugees, and undocumented individuals are among those most affected by mobility issues, this discussion primarily focuses on humanity as a whole. (cf. Mbembe 2024, p. 92) The main goal of creating a universal right to move is to lessen existing migration inequalities and foster a shared world – where everyone, regardless of their origin, religion, language, or continent, can live and travel freely, without facing the systemic violence present in current global migration policies and border controls. Mbembe affirms:

“How can we, under these conditions, resist this claim by one of the world's provinces to have a universal right of predation unless we dare to imagine the impossible: namely, the abolition of borders, that is, the restitution to all the inhabitants of the Earth, human and nonhuman, the inalienable right to move about freely on this planet?” (Mbembe 2024, p. 39)

Mbembe's critique prompts a reevaluation of border policies and mobility rights. Yet, it also raises concerns about whether such policies mainly advantage privileged nations, especially as travel costs – by air, sea, or land – increase. Rising expenses could benefit wealthier populations while disadvantaging those from poorer countries. Although these concerns are valid, they do not fully capture the core ideas and broader context of Mbembe's critique. Philosophically, his primary focus is on principles. The notion of borders

invites questions about the separation that underlies the political community on Earth. This separation becomes particularly problematic when it results in differentiating populations based on identity criteria of belonging. Such justifications can legitimise actions ranging from simple exclusion to more extreme measures like violence, war, or death. Ultimately, the issue is not the border itself but the underlying principles and the possible consequences of applying these principles in global politics.

A critical review of history helps us see how relevant this argument is, as it shows how the principle of separation – whether for political, biological, cultural, or religious borders – has often been used to justify some of humanity's most shameful crimes. Suppose we accept that the primary goal of any political community is to promote widespread sharing of life among all members. In that case, any form of separation based on borders contradicts this core purpose. Such separation tends to concentrate power and vital resources in the hands of a few – those who create and legitimise borders – and exposes others, especially those excluded, to harm. In international relations, borders legitimise land theft by those with political, economic, and military dominance and deny many people around the world access to these resources. This critique urges us to rethink how we define living beings and their connections, not through separation but by their fundamental need to move. This perspective can enhance our understanding of rights, freedom, sovereignty, territory, and belonging. Here, freedom encompasses both the ability and opportunity to move, which questions conventional power structures centred on borders and migration policies. Consequently, it is crucial to reevaluate our concepts of belonging, ownership, and equitable and inclusive sharing of the planet, as the extent of this freedom varies greatly worldwide.

Thinking Mobility with Édouard Glissant

The right to circulation stems from a universal ethic of sharing and reciprocity. Mbembe references poet Édouard Glissant, who states that we need others' memories not out of virtue or charity but because of the importance of Relationships. Glissant emphasises that Relationships allow us to share both suffering and the world's beauty, promoting solidarity. This process involves collectively learning how to repair the world's fabric. (Mbembe 2024, p. 25)

Mbembe's reflection on Glissant's humanistic view serves as the foundation for planetary circulation rights. It emphasises three key ideas: the shared experience of human suffering, the importance of solidarity, and the concept of reparation. Since I will explore the meaning of the ethical principle of repa-

ration in detail in the final chapter of this book, I will focus here on elaborating the general idea of relation as the basis for justifying planetary rights of circulation. Without delving into the complexities of Glissant's philosophy, it is crucial to recognise that his work is rooted in a meditation on human suffering, primarily through the lens of black suffering – a perspective shaped by the tragedies of slavery and colonisation. Glissant's inquiry guides him towards what he terms a thought of the "Whole World" or a "Poetics of Relation," driven by a keen awareness of the dangers linked to essentialising difference and identity. Historically, such metaphysical frameworks have underpinned numerous atrocities.

In the name of race theories, millions of Blacks have suffered exclusion, violence, murder, and displacement, forcibly removed from their homelands and sold into slavery on plantations across the Americas. Remembering this historical crime is crucial to preventing the recurrence of past tragedies. This outlook inspired Glissant to explore key concepts like creolity, the poetics of relation, and the rhizome. Drawing on the Caribbean's diverse, hybrid cultural history, Glissant develops a cosmological, ethical, and political framework that emphasises encounter, sharing, and solidarity among all peoples – transcending ethnicity, culture, race, religion, and nation. Such reflection aims to cultivate an ethics of encounter, solidarity, and sharing, encompassing not only historical memories and inheritances but also current and future resources for life. While identity-based thinking can cause conflict and violence along racial, gender, or national lines, focusing on the common good and solidarity promotes peace. It's about recognising our shared humanity, not erasing differences, to create a more livable world for all.

Indeed, the ethical principle of solidarity holds that humans should assist one another, regardless of their differences. This principle contrasts with individualism or communitarianism, which are often associated with a focus on self-interest. The case for solidarity among humans comes from recognising our interconnectedness, since no one can truly exist as an isolated monad. While the concept of territorial borders that justify exclusionary migration policies creates systemic inequalities in mobility between nations, solidarity encourages more positive interactions, enabling the sharing of life resources globally. In discussing the ethics of solidarity, Mbembe notes:

"It is therefore not a question of closing in on yourself, of allowing yourself to be haunted by the obsession of a home, of an in-itself, of a transcendental in-itself, but of contributing to the emergence, upon an open sea, of this new

region of the world where all of us will be able to enter unconditionally, in order to embrace, eyes wide open, the inextricable nature of the world, its intangible structure, its composite character” (Mbembe 2024, p. 25)

In today’s global environment marked by violence fueled by identity-driven obsessions – such as nationalism, populism, tribalism, and communitarianism – Mbembe’s insights invite us to revisit the roots of our planetary existence. While history has created divisions among people, reflecting on our true nature shows that these differences do not exclude one another. Instead, they are filled with a richness that, when recognised, fosters openness to encounters, sharing, solidarity, and mutual understanding. This interdependence among humans underpins the concept of a terrestrial community. Recognising and acting on this interdependence at the political and social levels calls for reimagining laws, the state, sovereignty, and freedom. Politically, this means working toward the removal of borders.

To sum up, the universal right to mobility isn’t just a theoretical idea; it plays a vital role in healing the world – a shared home for all living beings, human and non-human. The ethical principles of solidarity and sharing support the case for a planetary right to mobility in one key way: they highlight that no one can claim exclusive ownership of Earth, since all existence is temporary. This perspective brings Mbembe to assert: “Being in transit is ultimately the human condition on Earth. The task of democracy in the planetary era is to ensure passage, not to instruct new closures.” (cf. Mbembe 2023, p. 176) This argument underscores the necessity for a transformative approach to our global interactions, prioritizing shared mobility, connection, and the collective well-being of humanity.

II. Planetary Rights and Cosmopolitanism

The concept of planetary rights remains relatively nascent within contemporary philosophical discourse. Instead, we frequently encounter terms such as ‘universal human rights’. (cf. Mackey 2005; Spini and Doise 2005; Waltz 2001), global rights (cf. Oberleitner 2007; Hernandez-Truyol and Johns 1997), global citizenship (cf. Haigh 2008; Thompson 2001; Pierce 2017), and “cosmopolitan rights.” This section aims to clarify the similarities and distinctions between Achille Mbembe’s concept of planetary rights and existing cosmopolitan frameworks. While these paradigms exhibit notable divergences, they co-

alesce around a shared advocacy for alternatives to the restrictive nature inherent in national rights frameworks.

II.1 Planetarianism and Cosmopolitanism

Mbembe's idea of the planetary is similar to cosmopolitanism. Appiah, who articulated this notion in depth, traces its roots back to the Cynic philosophers of the fourth century BCE, particularly Diogenes. Historical accounts suggest that Diogenes opposed the global ambitions of figures like Alexander the Great. (cf. Appiah 2006, p. 2376) His intellectual movement encouraged individuals to detach from the customs of their localities, fostering an identity defined as a "citizen of the world." The term's etymology reflects this universality, deriving from the Greek words "*kosmos*" (meaning universe) and "*polis*" (meaning city). Appiah elucidates that the term "*kosmos*" originally referred not to Earth but to the broader universe. The early discourse on cosmopolitanism rejected the conventional notion that civilised individuals were confined to a single community among many. (cf. Appiah 2007, p. xiv) This intuition, manifest in Diogenes's daily life, was further developed by Stoic philosophers such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, as well as Christian theologians. Enlightenment thinkers, including Kant, as exemplified in the Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) and the League of Nations – Christophe Martin (1788), and Voltaire, expanded upon these ideas. (cf. Appiah 2007, pp. xiv–xv)

The Relevance of Cosmopolitanism

It is essential to recognise the historical and political context that supports cosmopolitanism. The modern significance of this idea is underscored by the awareness of the atrocities committed by nation-states against innocent people. Domination appears in many forms, mainly through the denial of human rights, past injustices, and discrimination based on race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Appiah (1997) acknowledges his engagement with these issues, propelled by his father's experiences with authoritarianism in Ghana. (cf. Appiah 1997, p. 637) This environment culminated in the suppression of freedom of thought and expression, echoing the conditions highlighted by Hannah Arendt regarding the plight of refugees, minorities, and stateless individuals in Europe during the interwar period. (cf. Arendt 2017, p. 351) Hannah Arendt expands the discussion on cosmopolitanism within the European philosophical context, building on the work of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Martha Nussbaum. In his 1996 speech at the International Writers' Parliament

in Strasbourg titled “Cosmopolites de tous les pays encore un effort!”, Derrida highlights a troubling decline in political asylum recognition in France, which he labels as a “dark year for asylum seekers in France.” (cf. Derrida 2003, p. 5) Though his focus is on France, he stresses that these core issues of cosmopolitanism extend beyond borders, echoing throughout Europe, the U.S., Asia, and Africa. (cf. Giorgi 2010; Cornelisse 2010)

Furthermore, Derrida underscores the plight of “intellectuals, scholars, journalists, and writers”, who often face substantial barriers in their quest for refuge due to political repression sparked by their public engagements. (cf. Derrida 2003, p. 6) This injustice against intellectuals, combined with the treatment of migrants described earlier, underscores the need for a critical reassessment of global rights – one that challenges prevailing notions of sovereignty and nationhood. While countries often ignore their moral and political responsibilities to support migrants and asylum seekers, reflecting on ethics is essential to rethinking how humans coexist worldwide, emphasising equal respect for dignity, freedom, and life. As a result, there is a strong need to revisit the concept of cosmopolitical rights. (cf. Ackerman and Furman 2013) Rethinking the right to asylum entails the establishment of conditions that liberate migrants, undocumented individuals, refugees, and asylum seekers from the systemic violence of nation-states, advocating for a more humane approach to national and global migration policies. (cf. Spena 2017) In the following discussion, I will explore the implications of Mbembe’s framework, considering its potential to reshape our understanding of rights in the face of global crises and ecological interdependence.

Cosmopolitanism: Between Praxis and Theory

Cosmopolitanism goes beyond just being a normative doctrine that outlines the conditions for a just model of international relations; it mainly functions as a way of life. This cultural outlook is shaped through interactions among diverse populations worldwide, especially within contexts of domination. (cf. Beck 2002; Cheah and Robbins 1998) Consequently, cosmopolitanism can be explored through two distinct yet interconnected perspectives: as an emancipatory praxis and as a critical theory of domination. The discourse seeks to unpack these dual interpretations underlying Mbembe’s analysis. (cf. Mbembe 2021b, p. 177; Landau and Freemantle 2010) While many scholars adopt an analytical and prescriptive stance, Mbembe’s approach to cosmopolitanism remains mainly descriptive. His inquiry highlights global sociopolitical, cultural, religious, and economic dynamics, emphasising urban centres, borders,

and contexts both within and beyond Africa. Critical to his discourse is the identification of an inherent desire and an active emancipatory praxis among marginalised groups. Mbembe asserts,

“This brand of cosmopolitanism, that of lower-class migrants, has led to the proliferation of fragmented spheres. We see this in the creation of veritable “holy” cities. We also see it in the fluid practices adopted by undocumented immigrants in their destination countries and the xenophobia that, at the same time, contributes to keeping them even more in the shadows.” (Mbembe 2021b, pp. 177–178)

For undocumented migrants and refugees, a common characteristic is that they face daily experiences of oppression caused by various exclusionary political, cultural, religious, and economic structures that exist worldwide. These systemic obstacles often restrict these individuals within rigid geographical, political, or historical boundaries. In this context, migration becomes a means to dismantle oppressive systems and foster the development of alternative, hybrid, open, and adaptable ways of living. Thus, cosmopolitanism can be characterised as a transgressive praxis. (cf. Landau and Freemantle 2010) Millions of itinerant individuals manifest a sustained capacity to transcend the geographic, political, and economic constraints imposed by national and international governance frameworks. (cf. Cheah and Robbins 1998) They adeptly navigate borders, forge new spaces, and engage in informal entrepreneurial activities to sustain themselves, often in ways prevailing political models deem ‘criminal.’ Mbembe explains how new bonds are formed within these spheres. In extreme cases, lawless zones emerge, creating significant disruptions to the urban fabric. (cf. Benhabib 2007) An informal economy emerges at the intersection of local and international environments. Social actors create resources under permanent instability, near-absolute uncertainty, and an extremely short temporal horizon.

These observations position cosmopolitanism as a realm of life and freedom, facilitating the emergence of new subjectivities resistant to subjugation by global structures of domination. (cf. Kriegman 2006) While this existence is invariably marred by enduring uncertainty, exemplified by the constant threat of interventions by state authority, including surveillance and repatriation, the paradox resides in the potential of this uncertainty to engender novel modes of life and existence. (cf. Pieterse 2006; Bowden 2003) While existing on the periphery of formal systems, these conditions challenge and redefine notions

of belonging and agency within an increasingly interconnected world. Appiah (2007) and Kurasawa (2004) described these contemporary emancipatory global dynamics within the framework of “cosmopolitanism from below.”

Furthermore, this definition of cosmopolitanism contrasts with the classic view, which is centred on cultural issues. It aims to consider the power relations, authority, and domination, where the stakes are no longer the struggle for recognition of identities within the context of cultural diversity in a globalised world, but rather the fight for access to resources of wealth and power. (cf. Hannerz 2007, pp. 201–202) It aims to critically reflect on the conditions for global equality as an alternative to global imbalances of power and access to resources. As Hannerz notes: “The cosmopolitan impulse has tended to favour more inclusive arrangements of compassion, solidarity, and peacefulness – again, then, extending shared moral principles to all humanity, as ‘a community of citizens of the world,’ as one dictionary definition of cosmopolis would have it.” (Hannerz 2007, p. 202) She notably cites philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, who shares this vision of cosmopolitanism defined as love for humanity beyond identity-based divisions, patriotism, or the interests of a community founded on criteria of class, race, or nation. (cf. Nussbaum 1996; Hannerz 2007, pp. 203–204)

Nonetheless, it appears crucial to differentiate between a top-down cosmopolitanism, associated with elites or aristocrats, and a bottom-up cosmopolitanism, which Hannerz describes as ‘subaltern’. (Hannerz 2007, p. 206) The former, associated with the so-called “neoliberal cosmopolitanism” of Peter Gowan, sees the need for a global order that is free from the legal restrictions imposed by strong nation-state control and taxes on the market, and perceives this as a chance to strengthen their advantages, along with their cultural, economic, and political networks of power, influence, and transnational dominance. In a compelling article outlining this trend, Gowan explains how the new liberal cosmopolitanism “seeks to overcome the limits of national sovereignty by constructing a global order that will govern important political as well as economic aspects of both the internal and external behaviour of states”. (Gowan 2001, p. 79) Contrary to this version of cosmopolitanism, the top-down approach opposes exclusionary and dominating structures based on race, class, gender, and culture. (cf. Fouquet 2018) Its advocates aspire to develop a new global political model, particularly through increased solidarity among states, which are often complicit in exclusionary structures and the domination within global governance.

Thus, what is demanded by neoliberal cosmopolitanism is deregulation and a minimal state, along with greater liberalisation of competition and the international market. (cf. Calhoun 2012; Ypi 2013; Robinson 2004; Beitz 2003; Gowan 2001) The top-down cosmopolitanism from the masses, however, calls for transnational solidarity and the creation of new structures for the equitable redistribution of global wealth. (cf. KURASAWA 2004) Excluded from the structures of international competition and scarcely benefiting from the market, the masses see in cosmopolitanism the dream of a political community founded on the ethical values of justice and solidarity among peoples beyond borders. (cf. Cheah 2006) This means that what grassroots cosmopolitanism aims for is not the dismantling of the State, but its radical transformation through the abolition of global domination and unequal redistribution of wealth. (cf. Song 2023) In other words, for grassroots cosmopolitanism, the idea of being a ‘citizen of the world’ only makes sense if the concept of global citizenship is based on the equitable sharing of planetary resources among all members of the Earth community. It is in this sense, I believe, that the possible links between cosmopolitanism on the ground and Mbembe’s idea of a planetary community beyond the nation-state should be understood.

II.2 Thinking Beyond the Nation-State

Mbembe’s reflections on cosmopolitanism address the critical question of the relevance of nation-states in the context of increasing planetary mobility and the imperative of a universal right to breathe. As previously highlighted, planetary mobility is evident in contemporary global dynamics, characterised by the movement of people and goods. These dynamics form the foundation for emerging forms of belonging and ways of inhabiting the Earth that extend beyond traditional nation-state boundaries. By rethinking these parameters, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity and community in a globalised world.

Mbembe’s Reflection on Cosmopolitanism

The anti-globalisation movements have cultivated counter-collectives united in solidarity and resistance against the detrimental consequences of contemporary globalisation. (cf. Badger 2014) The idea of “cosmopolitanism from below” describes this horizontal and transversal struggle that brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences. (cf. KURASAWA 2004; Borghi 2019; Ingram 2018) Such movements manifest in many contexts

worldwide, ranging from local neighbourhood councils and communal land tenure initiatives to transnational campaigns advocating for women's rights and environmental sustainability. Alongside this idea, Mbembe observes another aspect of cosmopolitanism, specifically concerning the elites. As in "cosmopolitanism from below," its subjects seek to escape the structures of domination and create new conditions of existence, rights, and spaces of possibility that enable the development of culture, economy, and practical intelligence. (Mbembe 2021, pp. 177–179)

Mbembe articulates that the second form of cosmopolitanism is inextricably linked to the complex emergence of a private sphere of life. Several factors influence this trend toward the establishment of a private domain. The first of these is associated with the migration opportunities available to elites, who can distance themselves from familial obligations and mitigate the social control exerted by their communities. The second factor stems from new pathways for wealth accumulation that are primarily unencumbered by state intervention – an avenue legitimised by prevailing ideologies of privatisation. In this context, elites are crafting a new identity, exploring novel horizons of opportunity, and asserting new rights as part of a global citizenship that straddles the line between tradition and modernity, as well as national and transnational domains. This reconfiguration of traditional spaces and identities brings significant advantages in terms of individual rights and property ownership. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the transformative impact of the millions of Africans in the diaspora, who contribute to the development of their home countries.

Furthermore, the cosmopolitan experience of transnational mobility benefits Africa and fosters development in other regions, including China, Europe, and the United States. Moreover, cosmopolitanism introduces an innovative paradigm for considering the individual, society, and politics. The cosmopolitan subject transcends fixed historical identities, embracing a universalist perspective rooted in shared humanity. This approach contrasts with certain philosophical strands in African thought that have sought to delineate African identity in terms of its distinctions from other cultures. Instead, cosmopolitanism foregrounds the affinities and commonalities that exist beyond mere differences. Mbembe elucidates that among African elites, this second form of cosmopolitanism aims to reconstruct African identity and the public realm through the universal imperatives of reason. (cf. Mbembe 2021b, p. 178)

The reconstruction of African cosmopolitan identity unfolds in two dimensions: first, through efforts to reenchant traditions and customs, and second, by emphasising how Africa shares the Earth with all the Living. In this philosophical framework, the discourse on property and rights takes precedence over considerations of racial, cultural, or religious particularities. The lived experience of cosmopolitanism gives rise to a non-essentialist political anthropology that serves as a foundation for rethinking socio-political, artistic, and spiritual existence in Africa and beyond. In this view, Africa is no longer perceived as an isolated entity; instead, it is integrated into the global context, characterised by its rich diversity. (cf. Mbembe 2021b, pp. 177–178) Consequently, the discourse surrounding identity shifts toward focusing on the conditions that facilitate life and the socio-political, cultural, and economic environments in which it can be empowered. (cf. Silva 2009; Appiah 2007)

Thus, Mbembe's analysis offers a profound understanding of cosmopolitanism's theoretical and normative dimensions. From a normative perspective, cosmopolitanism emerges as a doctrine that seeks to address the pervasive issue of contemporary structures of domination. This inquiry is grounded in the empirical realities of domination, juxtaposed with emerging forms of socialisation that advocate for an emancipatory global existence. Appiah, therefore, delineates two critical aspects of cosmopolitanism: The first is an ethical imperative advocating for universal solidarity that transcends citizenship. He posits that our obligations extend beyond those to whom familial or formal ties of citizenship connect us. Intrinsically intertwined with cosmopolitanism is the understanding that we have responsibilities to others that surpass conventional boundaries. (cf. Appiah 2007, p. xv)

While Appiah acknowledges the nation as a valid framework for individual development, he challenges the essentialist notion of national identity. His critique, informed by anthropological and metaphysical insights, embraces the plurality of human existence, viewing diversity as a source of richness rather than a detrimental deviation. The equal recognition of diverse cultures fosters harmonious communities of free and autonomous individuals, all of whom are endowed with equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. Appiah further argues for recognising the intrinsic value of human life in general, the particular lives of individuals, and the unique practices and beliefs that give their lives significance. (cf. Appiah 2007, p. xv)

Thus, cosmopolitanism emerges as a critical response to the ethical and political challenges of coexistence in a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-re-

ligious society. It embodies an ambition for universal solidarity among all humans, ensuring that all peoples and cultures are respected in their dignity, regardless of their differences. (cf. Appiah 2007). (cf. Appiah 2007, p. 15) Unlike a planetary community founded on ethnonational, racial, or religious exclusion, cosmopolitanism envisions a pluralistic world, where all members equally enjoy fundamental rights and are afforded the same privileges of citizenship, autonomy, and freedom in cultural, religious, and political spheres.

Jacques Derrida offers a nuanced interpretation of cosmopolitanism that aligns with previous definitions while introducing a more humanitarian and pragmatic perspective, especially regarding how to treat migrants and refugees amidst state violence. He asks: “How can the right to asylum be redefined and developed without repatriation and naturalisation? Could the City, equipped with new rights and greater sovereignty, open up new horizons of possibility previously undreamt of by international state law?” (Derrida 2003, p. 8) This re-examination of asylum rights calls for a rethinking of political communities that include and accommodate migrants with hospitality. In seeking alternative models for such communities, Derrida proposes the idea of a “free city” (*ville franche*). This concept of a cosmopolitical community, or a “city of refuge,” sharply contrasts with the nation-state’s structure and legal principles. Within this reimagined framework, individuals are viewed through a universal perspective, as Cohen states: “Cosmopolitanism considers the individual in a universal perspective”. (Cohen 1999, p. 25) However, rather than a universal concept of humanity that excludes cultural differences, cosmopolitan universalism acknowledges the diversity of cultures, nations, peoples, and religions that make up humanity. This effort is not just idealistic; it involves a critical engagement with the complexities of human coexistence in the pursuit of justice and recognition within an increasingly interconnected world.

The concept of cosmopolitanism, as explained by Appiah and Derrida, sharply contrasts with Mbembe’s approach, particularly in their core assumptions and goals. Although all three thinkers begin their critique of national legal systems from a shared recognition of the deep violence and oppression experienced by vulnerable populations worldwide – based on their origins, race, or religion – they differ considerably in their philosophical foundations and suggested solutions. Appiah and Derrida base their arguments on classical Western political philosophy, emphasising the inherent rights of individuals as human beings. Their views reflect a normative framework grounded in uni-

versal human rights, supporting the protection of asylum seekers, migrants, undocumented individuals, and those fleeing conflict.

In contrast, Mbembe's framework is deeply rooted in the principles of general ecology, which situates human rights within the broader context of the ecosystem. He argues that the basis of individual rights emerges from an awareness of life's interconnectedness, emphasising that human existence is inextricably linked to other living beings. This discrepancy in the normative justification of rights has significant implications for how we conceptualise normativity. Mbembe's critique seeks to create a protected space for the movement and flourishing of all life forms, transcending a narrow focus on human interests. This broader outlook calls for a paradigm shift from an anthropocentric worldview towards ecological consciousness. Unlike Appiah and Derrida, Mbembe's ideas stem from the Earthly perspective of the Living. As a result, cosmopolitanism is reimagined as a more profound sense of belonging to an Earthly community that grants new mobility rights and breathes new life into all its inhabitants.

Beyond the Nation-State Paradigm

Mbembe's imperative to develop new modalities of inhabiting the planet leads to the essential question: "How can we achieve this, unless by imagining political and state forms and ways of belonging that are ever more flexible, pliable, and mobile?" (Mbembe 2024, p. 104) This question encapsulates his ambition to conceptualize frameworks of belonging that move beyond pervasive mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination.

Central to this discourse is the interrogation of the parameters that delineate state belonging – precisely, the criteria that determine who qualifies as a member of the state, who possesses the right to inhabit its territory, and the underlying principles that govern these delineations. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 37) This interrogation necessitates a rigorous critique of the constructs of nationhood and state sovereignty, especially in their roles as legitimizers of violence, exclusion, and domination against specific populations. In his thorough analysis of global political and legal structures, Mbembe advocates for re-evaluating the legal foundations of mobility rights on Earth. (cf. Mbembe 2022, 92; 104) He posits that if there is an inherent connection between legitimate state violence, territorial sovereignty, and historical racism and colonialism, it becomes essential to establish a legal framework that supports planetary rights of circulation as a countermeasure to the discriminatory nature of migration policies. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 111–113) Herein lies his call for rethinking polit-

ical theory that transcends the nation-state paradigm, emphasising the need to move beyond strict notions of territoriality, borders, and defined belonging to a singular state.

Consequently, Mbembe argues that the basis for planetary mobility rights should stem from the idea that the Earth collectively belongs to all its inhabitants; in other words, no individual can monopolise or exclude others from Earth's vital resources. This conceptualisation links the planetary right to mobility with the right to land ownership and challenges the traditional understanding of state sovereignty and citizenship. In modern political philosophy, territoriality and citizenship are central symbols of state sovereignty, in which a state asserts exclusive claims over a defined territory. Within this framework, only citizens with legal recognition have primary rights to reside in that territory, with the right of residency representing a collective form of sovereignty. This model inadvertently underpins exclusionary migration policies, with borders acting as tangible symbols of such exclusion.

In contrast to this exclusivist notion of territorial ownership, Mbembe advocates for a reconceptualization of a planetary community as the foundation for mobility rights. He argues that contemporary political theory must grapple with the historical paradoxes afflicting those labelled “foreign” by existing political frameworks, who often face exclusion from essential rights within territorial communities, including the right to temporary or permanent residency. The core of the planetary right to mobility posits that states should not exercise sole ownership over territories to obstruct the movement of inhabitants or restrict their residency options. The justification for co-ownership by “foreigners” relies on a reconceptualization of the state's foundation, envisioning it as the Earth in its entirety. Drawing upon African cosmological traditions, one may conclude that the Earth possesses sovereignty by its very nature. (cf. Mbembe 2024, p. 150) This perspective characterizes the Earth not as belonging to a singular entity but as a shared inheritance amongst all its inhabitants. (Mbembe 2022, p. 36)

Ultimately, the assertion of the Earth's sovereignty allows for a critique of the current discourse on territorial sovereignty, which supports the argument for a state's exclusive control over its territory. Recognising that the Earth is sovereign and inalienable requires rethinking the state's authority and legitimacy within the context of planetary rights. The consequence of this discourse is a significant redefinition of the concept of citizenship. (cf. Mbembe 2023, p. 88) Rather than confining citizenship to individuals residing within the borders of a nation-state, it extends to what Mbembe terms the “earthly commu-

nity.” This notion is pivotal, suggesting that “the very nature of the Earth is indeed to make room for all its inhabitants.” Mbembe further posits that every human, along with other entities, embodies not merely universal qualities but the marks of shared existence, highlighting our intrinsic bonds. (cf. Mbembe 2023, p. 84) Just as the Earth accommodates all its residents, so should the State, which derives its conceptual framework from ecological principles that encapsulate the notion of community. Earth’s inherent sovereignty serves as the fundamental standard governing social and political rights to mobility and challenges the biopolitical concept of exclusive territorial sovereignty. It encourages nations to promote fair sharing of Earth’s resources, ensuring the well-being of all its inhabitants.

Conclusion

This chapter examines Mbembe’s concepts of planetary rights, focusing on their significance, key principles, and central themes. His analysis reveals that contemporary power structures often depend on segregationist ideas linked to rights, citizenship, sovereignty, and national identity. These systems promote domination not only among individuals but also between humans and the environment, impacting Nation-States and global ecological systems. To challenge these mechanisms, Mbembe suggests rethinking the concept of planetary rights. This new concept aims to create a global community rooted in sharing, reciprocity, repair, and the circulation of life. The right to circulate questions the notion that one state has sole control over its territory. His cosmological argument emphasises Earth’s sovereignty over individual states. Additionally, the discussion emphasises the close connection between the right to breathe and the right to mobility, proposing that the former sustains living communities and fosters an Earth-centred community where fair resource sharing supports the sustainability of life. Finally, the chapter examines how Mbembe’s planetary rights intersect with cosmopolitanism, arising from the need to bridge human divisions and address unequal access to rights and resources. These ideas share essential similarities with Mbembe’s concept of the planetary, though they are distinct in key ways. The upcoming chapter will examine how Mbembe’s concept of planetary rights underpins ideas of planetary justice, including its meaning, origins, goals, and normative features.

Chapter 3: Planetary Justice

Introduction

In previous chapters, I elaborated on planetary consciousness as a profound sense of belonging to a collective, earthly community that encompasses both human and non-human entities. This ethos of belonging extends beyond mere interdependence; it underscores the urgent need for a holistic approach to justice that considers the intertwined socio-political, economic, and environmental challenges confronting all forms of life. Mbembe's seminal question – “What does it mean to be human at the beginning of the 21st century?” – invites profound reflection. He posits that contemporary existence entails an awareness of the planet's shared ownership among all its inhabitants (2022, p. 34), which leads to his assertion that any exclusive claim of ownership over Earth is illegitimate (2022, p. 37). Furthermore, he advocates for an equitable sharing of the Earth's resources among all beings (2022, p. 39), thereby emphasizing the importance of the “Earthly community” in discussions on planetary justice, understood as equitable sharing, truth, and reparation. This chapter will elucidate the meaning and connections between these principles, highlighting the originality of Mbembe's viewpoint. By examining the ethical and political implications of these ideas, I aim to highlight their relevance to contemporary debates in global politics. After this examination, I will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Mbembe's arguments within the broader discourse on planetary justice. Furthermore, I will propose an alternative model of planetary governance to mitigate the risks of “abstract utopianism” that may emerge in discussions of Mbembe's ideas. This investigation aims to foster a more practical and realistic approach to addressing the challenges of justice in our increasingly interconnected world.

I. Planetary Justice as Equitable Sharing

Central to Mbembe's exploration of cosmology, ethics, and political philosophy is the recurring concept of "sharing." (cf. Mbembe 2017, 84; 157–158; 176–177; 182–183) Nicholas A. John's article, *The Social Logics of Sharing* (2013), highlights the etymology of the term "sharing" as it appears in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, tracing its origins back to the 16th century. Notably, it is synonymous with "distribution":

"The verb to share meant to cut into parts or to divide. A ploughshare, therefore, which is the cutting edge of the plough, is so called because it shares, or splits, the earth. Likewise, when a child shares his or her chocolate bar, he or she divides it by breaking it up into shares, or parts." (John 2013, p. 114)

This definition views sharing as a form of division involving separation, aligning with the idea of a zero-sum game where giving reduces one's resources. In contrast, Mbembe considers "sharing" as a process that transforms fundamental differences based on gender, race, historical injustices, class, religion, or power dynamics. This perspective is crucial for understanding the concepts and normative principles that underpin his idea of planetary justice.

I.1 The Meaning of the Concept of "Sharing"

As discussed earlier, cosmopolitanism enhances the ethics of sharing by recognising power disparities and the historical backgrounds of the involved stakeholders. In a world with uneven power dynamics, shared ethics must be rooted in equality and reciprocity to promote meaningful participation by those who have been historically, politically, socioeconomically, and culturally marginalised. Consequently, the ethics of sharing require active measures to reduce inequalities and empower everyone to set interaction rules. The difference between "sharing" and "giving" is key; sharing focuses on fair access to resources as a basis for positive engagement, rather than just the distribution of goods. (cf. Plage et al. 2017, p. 19) This distinction highlights the importance of ethical values – such as respect, humanity, and dignity – over merely material concerns. It advocates that interaction quality goes beyond access to resources and underscores the intrinsic worth of every individual, regardless of background. Essentially, the concept of sharing prompts us to reevaluate the ethical frameworks that shape our understanding of planetary

justice. It calls for a transition from materialistic views to a more refined experience that emphasises dignity, respect, and the relational aspects of human interactions. This idea raises fundamental questions that Mbembe formulates in such terms:

“how to belong fully in this world that is common to all of us, how to pass from the status of the excluded to the status of the right- holder, how to participate in the construction and the distribution of the world.” (Mbembe 2017, pp. 176–177)

The debate about planetary justice, which sharing aims to address, primarily concerns inequalities among people. While not new to philosophy, this issue remains central in modern political thought. Mbembe’s role is to place this problem within a new philosophical framework and approach we have discussed earlier. His unique method draws from often-overlooked traditions in Western political philosophy, especially Afro-diasporic, African, and post-colonial perspectives. These traditions seek to highlight what Mbembe calls the “dark side” of the West – its history of domination through slavery and colonisation. Various political and anthropological ideas justified these practices, often grounded in racial hierarchy, notions of civilisation, and property rights. In slave plantations and colonies, these ideas influenced laws and practices that upheld social order and sovereignty, leading to systemic inequalities among enslaved people, enslavers, and colonized groups. (cf. Mbembe 2017, p. 183)

Consequently, exploring conditions of planetary justice demands innovative methods to foster a shared sense of planetary community. This includes tackling the core issues behind both traditional and modern cultural, economic, and political domination, as well as the conditions necessary for sharing the Earth. This perspective resonates with ideas articulated by Volker Grassmuck in *Cultures and Ethics of Sharing* (2012), wherein he similarly explores the normative dimensions of sharing beyond mere material transactions. Grassmuck explains how the contemporary “Sharing Turn” in social theory indicates a rising interest in sharing practices. (cf. 2012, p. 17) Plage et al. (2017) further examine this transformation in their article *Cosmopolitan Encounters* (2017). They argue that ethical discussions about sharing should not only recognise historical power relationships among individuals but also address existing structures of inequalities and violence. This understanding of sharing suggests that its meaning goes beyond a purely quantitative view

focused on zero-sum resource division. Only through this approach can sharing become a central principle for a fairer planetary justice system. In the next section, I will examine Mbembe's arguments on sharing and explain how this shift in concept supports his vision of planetary justice.

1.2 A Path Toward Equitable Sharing of the Earth

The reflection on planetary justice aims to identify the key conditions for transformative politics. Among these conditions, which should promote new ways of inhabiting the Earth for all living beings, are an equitable sharing of life resources and rights regardless of race, colour, gender, origin, culture, or religion. This inquiry requires establishing normative frameworks that move away from social, political, economic, and environmental domination that have historically been justified and continue to cause suffering for vulnerable populations and harm ecosystems. Mbembe highlights this need clearly, stating:

"Given that we have not completely escaped the spirit of a time dominated by the hierarchization of human types, we will need to work with and against the past to open up a future that can be shared in full and equal dignity. The path is clear: on the basis of a critique of the past, we must create a future that is inseparable from the notions of justice, dignity, and the in-common." (Mbembe 2017, p. 177)

This view emphasises the importance of critically evaluating historical injustices to build a future grounded in dignity and collective well-being. From a cosmological perspective, reevaluating the concept of sharing provides new insights into our understanding of time and space. It also removes any excuse for humanity's failure to confront past atrocities like colonialism, slavery, and genocides. Moreover, ethically, sharing stories of suffering fosters a sense of universal responsibility among humans. It encourages acknowledging historical crimes and supports a collective push for reparations. Politically, this moral duty underscores the importance of working toward restoring the dignity and rights of victims and their descendants. Grassmuck (2012) resonates with this idea, asserting that humanity can only confront these challenges through collaborative efforts. He also clarifies the importance of restitution and reparation in achieving justice. (cf. Grassmuck 2012, p. 32)

The concept of shared history, along with the ideas of responsibility and restorative justice, reflects humanity's quest for planetary equality. This quest

has been fundamental to the efforts to liberate enslaved and colonised populations. Contemporary debates on planetary justice and equality should therefore reflect on these struggles, as they offer essential insights into current systems of inequality and their profound philosophical, political, economic, and cultural roots. Mbembe rightly observes:

“As long as destructive ideas about the inequality of human races and the differences between human species remain alive, the struggle led by people of African descent for what we can call an “equal share” – or the struggle for rights and responsibilities – will remain a legitimate struggle. It will have to be carried out not with the goal of separating oneself from other humans but in solidarity with humanity itself – a humanity whose multiple faces we seek to reconcile through struggle.” (Mbembe 2017, p. 176)

While Mbembe recognises the importance of African revolutionary movements, such as Afrocentrism, Pan-Africanism, and Afro-pessimism, in challenging colonial rule and seeking independence, he critically examines the political and ethical aspects of their ideas of autonomy. (cf. Mbembe 2002) He warns against grounding autonomy in identity-based, ethnic, or nationalistic views, recommending instead a universal approach based on humankind’s planetarity. The idea of planetary justice emerges as a response to a limited view of historical oppression, aiming to reshape our understanding of humanity and life on Earth. It emphasises sharing – of history, responsibilities, the Earth, and existence – as the key to overcoming the legacies of slavery, colonization, and exploitation.

Although Mbembe critiques postcolonial theories and their concept of identity, he nonetheless recognises their potential for emancipatory change. Thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor have disputed the notion of an “absolutely universal” and instead embraced “unity in diversity.” They viewed diversity dialectically, recognising that it includes a sense of shared humanity – acknowledging our common existence, cohabitation on Earth, and equal rights as vulnerable beings. In other words, advocates for independence have emphasised that “the only universal is the community of singularities and differences, a sharing that is at once the creation of something common and a form of separation.” (Mbembe 2017, p. 158) This essential dialectic of singularity and difference is crucial for understanding the cosmological, ethical, and political implications of sharing; it illuminates our comprehension of a planetary community and planetary justice.

The view of general ecology, combined with reflections on planetary rights and justice as fair sharing of Earth's resources, rests on the philosophical idea that a universal human perspective does not erase individual differences; rather, it enhances them. This careful sharing of individualities helps foster a "reimagining of the universal community." At the core of this dialectic, according to many decolonial theorists, is an "active will to the community." However, Mbembe cautions that a desire for community must be intrinsically linked to a desire for life: "This will to community is another name for what could be called the will to life." (Mbembe 2021b, pp. 2–3) Such aspirations shaped the anti-colonial imagination, inspiring revolutionary movements that advocated for a universal redistribution of the right to exist, communicate, and inhabit the Earth. Mbembe describes this philosophy of sharing, which includes the idea of a planetary community, as the "politics of humanity." In examining his ethical and political frameworks, I aim to clarify how his concept significantly supports defining planetary justice. In the following section, I will explore the relationship between sharing and the idea of justice, which is understood as the pursuit of truth.

II. Planetary Justice as Capacity for Truth

This section will explore the epistemic conditions that underpin sharing. Recognition involves determining the truth about the nature and causes of historical injustices, which is essential for reparation. Without acknowledging human responsibility for the ongoing violence against living beings, the construction of just political communities, defined by ideals of sharing life, remains elusive.¹ Therefore, justice should not only serve as a means of sharing but also enable the pursuit of truth and the effecting of reparation.

1 The reflections in this section are inspired by Achille Mbembe's lecture "The Capacity for Truth. Of 'Restitution' in African Systems of Thought" delivered at Anton Wilhelm Amo Lecture N°6, in Germany, 2023. In this lecture, truth is defined not only as the condition of possibility but also as one of the essential meanings of justice and the reparation of historical crimes.

II.1 The Denial of Historical Crimes

In examining the essential value of memory, truth, and reconciliation for achieving planetary justice, Mbembe highlights the critical importance of addressing denial, which denotes two interrelated forms of violence and domination. Firstly, it refers to the historical violence experienced by oppressed peoples, for example, during slavery, colonisation, and modern genocides, as well as their present manifestations. In this respect, denial signifies an ethical, political, or historical negation of life and the dignity of fellow human beings. Secondly, denial is not only the negation of life but also the refusal to confront the truth and accept responsibility for these historical crimes, thereby hindering their repair. Therefore, denial encompasses the unwillingness to confront the structural realities of past injustices and the hesitancy to engage in the arduous yet essential processes of justice and reconciliation. Mbembe states:

“In a country where very few apartheid-era atrocities have been prosecuted, where key political figures refused to testify to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where there have hardly been any acts of public contrition from former executioners and where most killers and torturers have escaped jail time, the persistent denial of white privilege partly explains the acrimonious nature of the controversy.” (Mbembe 2015a, p. 4)

Thus, Mbembe's remark extends beyond the South African context. His reflections serve as a call to action, advocating an examination of denial, an inherently tied concept to justice, as articulated by some scholars. (cf. Cohen 2013; Lacey 2013; Cajani 2021; Magnusson 2021; Avakian 2018; Ware and Harkins 2014) Moreover, the act of remembering means re-establishing the truth surrounding past atrocities. (cf. Davies and Isakjee 2019) This truth-telling process involves illuminating the enduring consequences on international relations today. To disregard this truth is to permit their perpetuation in contemporary societies, evident in the systemic racism perpetuated by state apparatuses – such as the police, judicial systems, and immigration policies – against racial minorities. (cf. Agier et al. 2008; Margarida 2017) Moreover, the denial perpetuates enduring economic and political dependence, trade inequities, and international power dynamics. It operates as both an active and passive force but is predominantly epistemic. (cf. Wall 1998; Spivak 2014)

Stanley Cohen analyses the sociological dimension of denial in the South African context. While black individuals grapple with extreme poverty, Cohen

argues, white populations continue to enjoy privileges inherited from the apartheid regime. This power imbalance only appears normal through the lens of denial, highlighting how silence and ignorance sustain such inequalities. (cf. Cohen 2013, p. x; Welch 2004; Mackenzie 2007) Cohen's sociology of denial interrogates the roots of the inequitable hierarchy between white and black populations and questions the justification for such disparities. He poses profound inquiries:

"Why had our family (and everyone like us) been allocated black men and women (who were called 'boys' and 'girls' or just 'natives') as domestic servants? Why did they live in tiny rooms in the backyard? Where were their wives, husbands and children? Why did they address me as 'baas', or 'master'?" (Cohen 2013, p. ix)

Cohen describes this moment of realisation regarding the injustices faced by the oppressed as an "epiphany." (Cohen 2013, p. ix) This 'awakening' engenders an ethical and political consciousness, prompting the fundamental question of how to engage with the suffering of marginalised populations: "What do we do with our knowledge about the suffering of others, and what does this knowledge do to us?" (Cohen 2013, p. x)

Thus, the epistemological inquiries into the knowledge of suffering among the oppressed are intrinsically linked to ethical questions surrounding the responsibilities and complicities of the privileged. Establishing the truth about past and ongoing injustices is not merely an intellectual exercise; it requires a thorough examination of collective responsibility for perpetuating these crimes. Ultimately, this consciousness regarding injustice, its systemic roots, and the obligations of the dominant must catalyse political action, particularly the cessation of violence. In Mbembe's and Cohen's works, a critical reflection on denial arises from empirical observations of socio-political and historical realities alongside normative inquiries prompted by those observations. Nonetheless, while Cohen's analysis is rooted in a specific political context, Mbembe adopts a planetary perspective. He employs psychoanalysis and political sociology to explore denial within modern human history, living memory studies, planetary ethics, and political philosophy.

Mbembe extends the discourse on denial to planetary implications, focusing on humanity's relationship with itself, nature, and biodiversity – essentially, with all living beings. He provocatively questions how knowledge of nature, biodiversity, and human and non-human populations can be transmitted

to present generations, ensuring accountability for these crimes and facilitating reparations. The goal of addressing denial is to prevent the recurrence of past atrocities and dismantle the structures that perpetuate them. Historical knowledge should serve as a foundation for a collective representation of suffering, which is essential to its resolution. This endeavour encompasses epistemic, ethical, political, and aesthetic dimensions. It is vital to establish a planetary community in which all human and non-human members engage in relationships characterised by mutual debt and reciprocity.

Moreover, politically, denial constitutes a rupture in the relationship between individuals and communities. In his seminal work, *African Modes of Self-Writing* (2002), Mbembe elucidates that long before colonisation, slavery was fundamentally predicated on a dual negation: the denial of the relationship between master and slave and the systematic dehumanisation of the latter. One of his most incisive articulations of this thesis appears in the book *On the Post-colony* (2001b), where he defines the crime of colonisation as rooted in the denial of the colonised's humanity. Mbembe posits that this denial serves as the very principle of coloniality. He writes,

"The removal of the native from the historically existing occurs when the colonizer chooses – and has the means to – not to look at, see, or hear him/her – not, that is, to acknowledge any human attribute in him/her. From this instant, the native is only so far as he/she is a thing denied, is only in as something deniable. In short, from the standpoint of a 'self' of one's own, he/she is nothing. In the colonial principle of rationality, the native is thus *that thing that is, but only insofar as it is nothing*." (Mbembe 2001, p. 187)

From an anthropological perspective, this notion of denial encapsulates the refusal to acknowledge the humanity of the 'native,' stripping individuals of the attributes that signify personhood. While the quotation does not provide a precise delineation of these attributes, it identifies the colonised as not "seen," "heard," "listened to," or "recognised" as human beings but rather as mere "things." This duality – human versus thing – illuminates a core understanding of humanity in Mbembe's work: a fellow human being is defined by mutual recognition and dignity. To be a fellow human means to be seen, listened to, and understood, affirming one's dignity as a living being and as a human being. Our inability to witness the suffering of others and our silence in the face of attacks on their dignity signify their non-existence in our universe as entities with intrinsic value. Denial thus becomes both a fracture

in recognition and a severance in relational ties. This negation, as Mbembe articulates, has historically been an object of colonial violence:

“Such is perhaps the most determining characteristic of colonial violence. On the one hand, it proceeds as if it can produce nothingness from a negation. It operates through annihilation (*Nichtung*). It would make it sufficient to deny the Other for him/her not to exist – ready, if need be, to demonstrate her/his nothingness by force. By consigning the native to the most perfect Otherness, this violence not only reveals the native as radically Other, it annihilates him/her.” (Mbembe 2001, p. 188)

Notably, Mbembe juxtaposes the notion of similarity with radical otherness that delineates the native’s experience. This concept has profound implications for both politics and anthropology, as well as for ontology. Unlike the similar, the natives are subjected to forms of annihilation which render them “nothing,” stripping them of their identities as human beings. The fellow human being emerges as an alter ego, sharing the same existential conditions of birth, death, vulnerability, and suffering; one who possesses the right to exist and to enjoy life’s material and symbolic resources equitably. In ethical and political terms, denial fundamentally undermines the ethical principle of reciprocity. Social and political anthropology elucidates how this crisis of reciprocity has manifested in the historical subjugation of enslaved individuals to extreme forms of suffering and degradation:

“Slavery, colonization, and apartheid are supposed to have plunged the African subject not only into humiliation, debasement, and nameless suffering but also into a zone of nonbeing and social death characterized by the denial of dignity, heavy psychic damage, and the torment of exile.” (Mbembe 2002, pp. 241–242)

Orlando Patterson’s notion of “social death” captures the denial of essential attributes of sociability inflicted upon the individual. (cf. Patterson 1982) This concept sheds light on the multifaceted meanings of denial described in Mbembe’s works from the early 1990s to the 2020s. Denial is presented as violent and intersects with themes of humanity (cf. 2002, p. 253), dignity (cf. 2002, p. 242), memory, law, citizenship (cf. 2019b, p. 79), responsibility (2021b, p. 167), relational debt (cf. 2021b, pp. 167–168), cultural objects, and the power (cf. 2002, p. 244). From this synthesis of references, denial can be

interpreted as a form of silence regarding past injustices, contributing to a broader narrative that seeks to obscure collective memory and accountability. In the latter scenario, the refusal to acknowledge historical crimes often stems from a critique that yields both evidence of underlying truths and a framework for potential reparative actions. Cohen articulates recognition as an “inchoate feeling not exactly of guilt but that something was wrong” (Cohen 2013, p. ix)

This perspective challenges the typical neutrality in dominant sociological approaches, as observers frequently experience profound psychological discomfort. This discomfort likely arises from a deep-seated ethical compass that informs their judgment of the specific actions’ immorality. Cohen further elucidates this dialectical relationship between knowledge and ethics, merging empirical sociological methodologies with normative philosophy. He reflects, “When I began to think sociologically about apartheid, privilege, injustice and racism, I would still return to some version of that early psychological unease. I saw this unease – correctly, I believe – arising from knowing something was deeply wrong.” (Cohen 2013, p. ix) This notion of “epiphany” can be understood as the manifestation of a collective inability to perceive injustices, leading to widespread indifference. Understanding confession as a precursor to justice becomes essential, as it lays the groundwork for rectifying inequalities and fostering a more equitable society.

In conclusion, denial is a significant barrier to pursuing planetary justice, as it often legitimises, explicitly or implicitly, the historical injustices of the past and their ongoing manifestations. Engaging with the concept of planetary justice involves breaking the silence surrounding historical injustices by revealing the truth, which could lead to reparative justice. As Mbembe articulates, “Today, the West does not simply want to rid itself of the strangers that we are. It also encourages us to reclaim our belongings. Without giving any account of itself, it finally wants to be able to declare: ‘Not having done you any wrong, I owe you all strictly nothing’.” (Mbembe 2021b, p. 168) Highlighting denial is crucial for developing a restorative justice framework. Addressing this question will form the focus of the subsequent section.

11.2 Truth and Memory of the Past

In contrast to this pervasive denial, the thesis of planetary justice posits an imperative of truth and recognition through memory. As memory is a crucial ‘mirror’ through which humanity confronts its existence, revealing truths without evasion or denial. (cf. van Noorloos 2017; Brito 2001) A profound il-

illustration of this assertion can be seen in Mbembe's critical re-evaluation of apartheid history in South Africa, where he examines the interconnection of memory, truth, and justice in relation to historical atrocities. He underscores the imperative of demythologising South African history to unearth the truths surrounding the nation's apartheid crimes. Central to his project of demythologization is the role of memory, which is posited as essential for facilitating reparations for the injustices wrought by white racism. Mbembe poignantly states,

"Bringing Rhodes' statue down is one of the many legitimate ways in which we can, today in South Africa, demythologize that history and put it to rest – which is the work memory properly understood is supposed to accomplish" (Mbembe 2015b, p. 3)

This statement is framed within the broader discourse on colonial monuments, particularly addressing the case of Cecil Rhodes, a British colonist pivotal in the colonisation of what is now known as Zimbabwe and Zambia. The ongoing debate about Rhodes' statue – and similar monuments erected during apartheid – raises critical questions about their preservation as 'places of memory' in South African public life. Two concepts illuminate the relationship between memory, truth, history, and justice from this context. First, Mbembe draws our attention to the collective South African memory of apartheid, emphasising the importance of removing the Rhodes statue. The statue embodies a place of memory, reflecting the historical atrocities of colonialism and the institutionalised racism of apartheid. Second, Mbembe calls for a transformative engagement with this memory, advocating for dismantling symbols of oppression rather than merely recounting past injustices. This proposed removal should not be interpreted as a repudiation of memory; instead, it is a recognition of the crimes that such symbols represent and an invitation to engage in "demythologization" – a process synonymous with a "capacity for truth." It is essential to confront the nation's tragic history, challenge longstanding narratives, and foster genuine justice and reconciliation in South Africa. Mbembe argues:

"Many whites have retreated to a comfortable position of personal non-culpability and are unwilling to tell the truth about past misdeeds. Born to positions of enormous social and economic advantage, they are reluctant to wash

their hands of the privileges they accumulated over three centuries and a half.” (Mbembe 2015a, p. 6)

Thus, justice is contingent upon the community’s collective capacity for truth regarding past offences; engaging with this memory is fundamental to meaningfully reconstructing society. (cf. Bernecker 2009; Nora 1989) Such recognition enables societies to reflect on themselves and rectify the historical wrongs. (cf. San Martín and Wood 2022b) Mbembe articulates the notion of becoming (*advenir*) as an ongoing process of self-awareness – an inherently fluid and never final realisation. (cf. 2023, p. 90) This concept emphasises that human relationships with time and space are characterised by dynamic growth and progression, emerging dialectically from the reparation of the past. (cf. Amadiume 2000; Campbell 2009) Hence, the capacity for truth cannot be disentangled from the collective capacity to remember; it necessitates a dialogue that bridges the present and future, prompting a critical reinterpretation of humanity’s relationship with the world. (cf. Schechtman 1994) This dialogue can ultimately lead to the establishment of a global community in which all individuals achieve reconciliation with themselves and the broader ecosystem. (cf. Mbembe 2022)

In conclusion, pursuing a more just and equitable earthly community hinges on our ability to engage with memory constructively, acknowledging past injustices while fostering a collective commitment to truth and reconciliation. Through such endeavours, we hope to build a future that reflects humanity’s diverse experiences and aspirations.

11.3 The Truth About Historical Crimes

The concept of historical crimes is mentioned in Achille Mbembe’s work, particularly in his book *The Earthly Community* (2022), where he introduces the thesis of planetary justice, defined as the capacity for truth. Mbembe asserts, “Wherever historical crimes have been committed, truth must come first, and the duty of reparation must apply to all, without discrimination.”² Historical crimes are past atrocities that have severely damaged the relations between communities and people. From a cosmological standpoint, truth-making involves remembering them and recognising them as concrete tragedies that

2 « Là où des crimes historiques ont été commis, la vérité doit venir en premier, et le devoir de réparation doit valoir pour tous, sans discrimination. » Mbembe 2023, p. 196.

require reparation, rather than mere figments of imagination or mythical narratives. To engage with the truth is to unearth traces of this history embedded in this wounded collective memory. (cf. Cubitt 2013) Mbembe addresses this topic through the lens of “yesterday’s crimes,” describing them as “stains and profanity, the splendid sterility of an atrophied existence: in short, they show the impossibility of ‘making community’ and rewalking the paths of humanity.” (Mbembe 2021b, p. 2)

In his article *Conceptualising Historical Crimes* (2012), De Baets questions whether the term “historical crimes” encompasses slavery, colonisation, genocide, war crimes, civil wars, colonial wars, wars of independence, and more. A critical feature of these definitions is their nature as “retroactive labelling” (cf. Baets 2012, p. 61) They aim to classify past violence to enable a critical reassessment of history, promote truth, and pursue reparations. While De Baets does not explicitly explain how these classifications help restore justice, it remains an essential reference for analysing Mbembe’s engagement with the concept of historical crime. Such insights can deepen our understanding of how confronting historical injustices is vital for truth-telling and fostering a meaningful debate on reparations in today’s world. This exploration clearly shows that addressing historical crimes is essential for creating an equitable system that includes all communities affected by the legacy of the past.

The complexity of historical injustices – encompassing slavery, colonisation, genocide, and violent conflicts – is a crucial element in understanding our shared humanity during modernity. As articulated by De Baets, these crimes have led to the deaths of millions and have not yet been fully acknowledged or addressed in terms of responsibility and reparations. The enduring presence of these tragedies speaks to the nature of relationships forged throughout modern history. Engaging with these past atrocities requires preserving their “traces” or “marks”. (cf. Mbembe 2023, p. 71) The exploration of truth involves rediscovering the profound implications of this shared and tragic memory: What do these events reveal about our identity, our interrelations, our communities, and the structural violence that persists in our present world? Such inquiries illuminate our planetary responsibility, a crucial condition for achieving justice, reparation, and reconciliation.

This interplay underscores why the question of memory is vital in understanding the discourse surrounding truth. (cf. Campbell 2009) Mbembe aligns with Tania Murray Li’s assertion that the Earth serves as a temporary and transient dwelling site. However, he posits that memory is integral to sustaining life; without it, the continuity of existence is jeopardised. The endurance of

life on our planet is intrinsically tied to the capacity to repair all forms of broken existence, whether within society or the natural realm. This perspective resonates with philosophers and scholars of memory, including Paul Ricoeur, Michael Rothberg, and Aleida Assmann, who recognise the intrinsic connections among memory, truth, and history. They highlight the critical roles of these elements in reconstructing human communities grounded in ethical and political principles of sharing, reciprocity, solidarity, and justice. (cf. Bernecker 2009)

III. Truth and the Idea of Reparation

In the previous section, I emphasised the importance of acknowledging the truth regarding historical crimes. A critical truth is that these crimes have established debt relationships among communities worldwide. However, debt goes beyond being merely a historical concern; it has an ontological aspect, symbolising the interconnectedness of human societies and the Earth's ecosystem. Recognising and addressing this debt is vital for understanding planetary justice, which can be viewed as a form of reparation. This section examines how these relationships of truth and debt shape the concept of planetary justice, incorporating Mbembe's perspective.

III.1 Truth About the Mutual Debts

Remembering entails recognising a bond of mutual debt among all living beings, a relationship often overlooked in contemporary discourse. (cf. Rossi 2020; Grätzel 2008) Mbembe articulates this notion by stating, "What founds both time and community is debt or, precisely, this awareness of unpayable debt, but which, perhaps because it is unpayable, must be able to be claimed back at any moment."³ This debt encapsulates the interactions of human communities throughout history, allowing for continuous development. (cf. Grätzel 2008, p. 96; Mbembe 2023, p. 65) If it is accepted that no community exists in isolation, cut off from nature or other people, then recognition of

3 « Ce qui fonde en effet et le temps et la communauté, c'est la dette ou, précisément, cette conscience de la dette impayable, mais qui, peut-être parce qu'impayable, doit pouvoir être réclamée à tout moment. » Mbembe 2023, p. 156.

this debt is essential to cultivating truth amongst communities. This acknowledgement of debt can manifest in both constructive and destructive contexts. On the one hand, beneficial interactions have historically enriched the culture and economy of specific communities. (cf. Mbembe 2023, pp. 163–164) On the other hand, violent exchanges – evidenced by the legacies of slavery, colonization, and genocide – have resulted in profound suffering, erasing entire populations and cultures (Lotter, 2017; Mbembe, 2023, pp. 12–13).

The German philosopher Stephan Grätzel (2004) has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the concept of debt, with a primary focus on its ethical dimensions. While a detailed exploration of his reflections is beyond the scope of this discussion, certain critical aspects can illuminate Mbembe's interpretation of debt. Grätzel posits that individuals experience an existential debt – a concept that transcends personal wrongdoing or transgressions. (cf. Grätzel 2004, p. 31) Rather than being a debt attributable solely to personal actions, this existential debt stems from the fundamental condition of being human – a shared burden that all sentient beings carry. This debt is intrinsic to our existence; it emerges from being alive. Moreover, in examining this existential debt, Grätzel draws on the works of existentialist philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger. (cf. 2004, p. 31) According to Heidegger, existence cannot be self-sustained or self-justified; instead, it is contingent upon an external influence or force that 'throws' beings into existence. Consequently, no individual can sustain life – eating, drinking, and simply living – without recognising their interconnectedness and indebtedness to other living entities. (cf. Grätzel 2004, p. 32)

This notion of relational debt is echoed in the works of contemporary thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Jean Ziegler, who discuss the "denationalisation" within "capitalist society". Their analyses further emphasise the ethical implications of our interconnected existence and the inherent responsibilities that arise from our relationships with others, both living and deceased. Engaging with these philosophical perspectives can deepen our understanding of existential debt as a foundational aspect of human relationships and ethical considerations in contemporary society. Beyond existential debt, Mbembe's ethics, general ecology, and political philosophy highlight the importance of recognising historical debt as crucial for ensuring the sustainability of life on Earth. In other words, to engage effectively with planetary justice, we must acknowledge the debts humans owe one another from past injustices, along with the urgent need for accountability and reparation.

By fostering awareness of the connection between historical debts and the need to address them, we can develop a more equitable and responsible relationship among people worldwide. Mbembe asserts that recognising the debt among nations requires a framework of mutual memories. The idea of “mutuality” suggests that no single group monopolises memory; all memories deserve fair acknowledgement and narration. Engaging in remembrance helps us uncover these historical crimes and the negative legacies they leave. Such awareness offers opportunities to move beyond violence and pursue reparative justice. This capacity for truth is vital for the sustainability of life, as it fosters self-awareness within humanity and helps break the cycle of violence. Memory acts as a lens through which humanity can “reproduce itself,” and “aligns words with deeds.” (Mbembe, 2023, p. 46).

Mutuality promotes the development of new relationships where communities recognise the inherent worth of each other's lives over time. It also represents a form of coexistence that enables the fair distribution of vital resources across different people and generations. (cf. Rose and Wadham-Smith 2004) Mbembe underscores this critical relational framework when he queries: “Have we drawn all the consequences from the fact that the present is the product of a debt, and that, outside this circle of uninterrupted and unpayable debt, time does not exist, or at least the consciousness of time does not exist?”⁴ This poignant question underscores the premise that the potential for planetary justice hinges on humanity's ability to learn from the past by recognising the debts owed to one another and the Earth itself. Repairing these debts is crucial for dismantling the existing power dynamics of exploitation.

III.2 Truth as Reparation of the Living

Reflecting on the necessity of truth regarding historical crimes, Mbembe raises an essential question: “What happens when [those responsible] are no longer alive? Do their descendants inherit wrongs of which they are not the direct perpetrators?”⁵ While Mbembe does not extensively specify what reparation

4 « Mais avons-nous véritablement tiré toutes les conséquences du fait que le présent est le produit d'une dette et que, hors de ce cercle de la dette ininterrompue et impayable, le temps n'existe pas ou, du moins, la conscience du temps n'existe pas ? » Mbembe 2023, p. 156.

5 « Mais qu'advient-il du moment où ils ne sont plus vivants ? Leurs descendants héritent-ils de torts dont ils ne sont point les auteurs directs ? Qu'entend-on par « irréparable » ? » Mbembe 2023, p. 189.

should entail for the descendants of past injustice victims, he recognises the crimes as inherently ‘unmeasurable,’ ‘incalculable,’ ‘priceless,’ and ‘unpayable.’ (cf. Mbembe 2023, p. 196) The urgency of recognising responsibility for historical crimes confronts the harsh reality that what has been lost is incalculable. This is particularly relevant in cases of innocent lives claimed during the brutal histories of slavery, colonisation, and modern genocides, as well as the substantial material and symbolic resources seized from non-European populations since the onset of modernity. Recognising this limitation in the discourse surrounding planetary justice, Mbembe asserts, “The incalculable and the irreparable, however, neither eliminate nor proscribe the demand for care and truth, still less than for justice. On the contrary, they merely underline their urgency and interminability.” (Mbembe 2023, p. 5) The concepts of “urgency” and “care” emphasise the critical need to cultivate a notion of justice that comprehends truth, despite the formidable challenges such an endeavour entails.

This argumentation highlights that the pursuit of truth and the practice of reparation stem from a collaborative engagement between individuals who choose to share their intertwined histories. Justice seeks to address and repair historical injustices, with truth-telling articulated as the primary manifestation of justice – serving not as a vehicle for revenge but rather as a means to regenerate a new form of planetary relationship based on responsibility towards the Living (*Le Vivant*). Thus, the concepts of truth, sharing, and reparation form the cornerstone of the argument for a planetary politics. In the first chapter of this essay, I have analysed the idea of a planetary community as the essential political horizon for the realisation of principles of sharing and reparation. My aim is not to develop these ideas further but to explain how they play a crucial role in Mbembe’s reflection on planetary justice. Together, they provide the foundational principles for a reconciled earthly community, in which each member occupies their rightful place and contributes to the sustainability of life. Mbembe argues:

“to build a world that we share, we must restore the humanity stolen from those who have historically been subjected to processes of abstraction and objectification. From this perspective, the concept of reparation is not only an economic project but also a process of reassembling amputated parts, repairing broken links, relaunching the forms of reciprocity without which there can be no progress for humanity (Mbembe 2017, p. 182).

During the modern era, African descendants were forcibly stripped from their ancestral homelands, transported across the Atlantic in brutal slave ships, and sold into enslavement. They were compelled to work without pay, stripped of the fundamental rights of human dignity and freedom. (cf. Klein 1990) The impact of these historical crimes has resulted in the loss of millions of lives and the obliteration of entire communities. The ramifications of slavery and colonialism extend far beyond a mere global imbalance of wealth and power; they have fractured relationships among human beings, who have been hierarchized, categorised, and treated as exploitable objects. (cf. Candido 2013) Ultimately, the very fabric of relationships among living beings globally has been irrevocably altered. Thus, from a retrospective examination of modern history, the idea of justice defined as reparation aims to establish normative foundations for renewing relationships on a planetary level. Mbembe states,

“As long as the idea persists that we owe justice only to our own kind and that there are unequal races and peoples, and as long as we continue to make people believe that slavery and colonialism were great feats of ‘civilization,’ then the notion of reparation will continue to be mobilized by the historical victims of the brutality of European expansion in the world.” (Mbembe 2017, p. 178)

The concept of reparation does not merely entail acknowledging these crimes; it also entails creating a new human community based on reciprocity and the sharing of resources, including those related to life and dignity. This imperative of sharing is crucial as it serves as the foundation for politics and democracy on a planetary scale. Mbembe argues that for such sharing to become possible and for a planetary democracy to materialise, the demands for justice and reparation are unavoidable, especially in the context of the democracy of species. (Mbembe 2017, p. 40).

Moreover, Mbembe points out that the violence of Western modernity has been directed not only at humans but also at the environment. (cf. Beinart and Hughes 2007a; 2007b) The term ‘*the Other*’ extends beyond human beings who have been commodified; it encompasses all of reality, which has been exploited and destroyed since the rise of modernity. (cf. Savage 1992; Klein 1990; Miller 1997) Consequently, the object of reparation is the living system as such. Here, ‘repairing’ refers to creating the conditions necessary for sustaining life. (cf. Mbembe 2017, p. 181) These conditions necessitate the implementation of socio-political, economic, and cosmological care struc-

tures. (cf. Mbembe 2017, p. 180) It requires all human beings and communities to change their ways of thinking, behaviours, and collective structures in ways that support life rather than destroy it. As Mbembe observes, humans are not the sole inhabitants of the Earth, and the boundaries of humanity should not be the only determinants of the world's inhabitants. It is increasingly clear that these inhabitants include numerous artefacts and all living, organic, and plant species. Additionally, geological, geomorphological, and climatological forces contribute to the diversity of the Earth's new inhabitants. (cf. Mbembe 2017, p. 13) Therefore, the imperative for reparation is founded on a profound awareness of the vulnerability of all human and non-human living beings. This awareness leads to both individual and collective practices of care.

The concept of vulnerability highlights that humans and all living beings are not immortal. (Mbembe 2020a, p. 27). The negative impacts of their actions are evident in tragedies such as wars and genocides, resulting in the loss of millions of lives. (Mbembe 2020a, p. 21) Additionally, the unequal distribution of wealth on Earth leads to humanitarian crises, including famine and epidemics. Ecological disasters caused by industrialisation and 'technological escalation' are also responsible for the disappearance of numerous animal and plant species. (Mbembe 2020a, pp. 68–69) These examples illustrate the extent to which living beings are vulnerable and the responsibility of humanity. (cf. Raymond et al. 2020) They challenge the modern myth of power and warn human beings against actions that could lead to the extinction of all life on Earth. Mbembe argues:

"No one has the absolute sovereign power across the entire expanse of the Earth. Some singular uses can be made of this common soil and shelter here or there. But no one actually earns it, and it is unable to be entrusted to the goodwill of a single person. In truth, we are above all its inhabitants and, most of us, passers-by on it" (Mbembe 2022, p. 36)

Given the impact of instrumental reason, which transforms human beings and the Earth into commodities, ethics seeks to guide human behaviour in accordance with principles that sustain life on Earth. The concept of reparation signifies the care of life, rather than its appropriation and destruction. (cf. Mbembe 2020a, pp. 230–231; Appiah 2004) While exclusive ownership fosters an illusion of omnipotence, leading individuals to desire the possession of living things and their commercialisation, the principle of reparation emphasises our relationship with the living and recognises their inherent vulnerability.

Mbembe metaphorically depicts this process of identifying and repairing our shared vulnerability as “reassembling the parts of an amputated body” (the body of the Earth) or “rediscovering the meaning of a shared humanity.” This reassembly transcends mere legal reparation, demanding a new ethical and political framework that aims to achieve an equitable distribution of life’s resources among all Earth’s human and non-human inhabitants.

Authors such as Buckley-Zistel et al. (2014) assert that the overarching goal of reparations is to secure and facilitate recognition and inclusion for those who have been harmed. As such, the scope of reparative measures broadens to include financial compensation, material goods, and essential services. Thus, beyond the material dimensions, reparations encompass reconciliation. (cf. McGary 2003; Jagmohan 2023; Fraley 2007) Lisa Laplante (2013) emphasizes this connection in her quest to establish a comprehensive theory of reparation. Echoing the thoughts of theorists like Mbembe, she encourages contemplation of reparation through the lens of a “continuum of justice.” Laplante describes a restorative justice model with four dimensions: material compensation, which is a fundamental first step; restoring victims’ dignity through meaningful encounters and reconciliation with their oppressors; a civic dimension that involves the state’s recognition and inclusion of victims, ensuring their access to essential goods and services necessary to uphold their rights, dignity, and freedom; and the redistribution of socio-economic resources to reduce inequalities between wealthy and impoverished populations.

Therefore, the concept of reparation extends beyond merely redistributing economic resources to embrace a sense of global responsibility. It seeks to reconsider the very status of humans in their relationships with one another and with other elements inhabiting the Earth – minerals, plants, and animals – on a new foundation. In this sense, Mbembe’s philosophy aligns with some principles of environmental ethics and planetary and global justice. The following section will provide a brief outline of these points of comparison. The aim is not to give a detailed analysis of these theories, but to highlight their shared approach in proposing solutions to the problems of sustainability and the perseverance of life on Earth within a planetary context of death-worlds. This comparative study will lay the groundwork for a critical reflection on the limits of Mbembe’s perspectives and open new pathways for thought.

IV. From Environmental Ethics to Planetary Justice

I aim to examine the roots and potential links between Mbembe's ideas on planetary justice and the discussions surrounding environmental ethics. By comparing his thoughts with these debates, we can better identify their similarities and differences. This also allows a more detailed assessment of the originality of Mbembe's perspective.

IV.1 Planetary and Environmental Ethics

Rethinking the conditions for sustaining life on Earth prompts us to explore certain philosophical traditions, environmental ethics, and ethics of nature that emerged in the 1970s through the 1990s. These movements, primarily developed in English-speaking and German-speaking countries and later in France, should not be viewed as a single, structured discipline with fixed objects, methods, or protocols. Instead, they involve diverse questions, often approached through interdisciplinary methods, that concentrate on human relationships with so-called evolved organisms, such as mammals (animal ethics), or with nature itself, including lower organisms like plants, insects, microorganisms, bacteria, and entire ecosystems. This hope is notably expressed in the works of theorists such as Hans Jonas (1984), Dieter Birnbacher (1988), Michel Serres (1995), Luc Ferry (1995), Dominique Bourg (1992), Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich (1996) and Albert Schweitzer (2006), to cite some examples.

As a physicist, philosopher, and politician, Meyer-Abich develops the notion of an ethics that goes beyond bioethics, proposing ideas for a planetary ethics. (cf. Meyer-Abich 1979; 1983) He critically analyses the historical and conceptual development of the concept of nature in the West and explains how this has led to humans being made the centre of nature. Rethinking the connections between humans and nature requires moving beyond anthropocentrism towards a perspective focused on nature itself. (cf. Meyer-Abich 1977; 1996) In other words, the human challenge is to justify our way of positioning ourselves within what he calls an 'open cosmos', which is neither centred on the Earth nor on humankind, but on nature itself. (cf. Meyer-Abich 1996) Such a revolution is even more necessary and justified because, he affirms:

"Our present state is to live without peace, to live in violence, alienation, and disorder. To endure this state and to use nature's gifts of human dispo-

sition, we have the chance in the future to recover what has been lost. We are actually living in evil, but better circumstances and ultimately peace may emerge from this intermediate state between nature lost and nature recovered." (Meyer-Abich 1996, p. 182)

In Meyer-Abich's essay, *Toward a Practical Philosophy of Nature* (1979), this critique is deepened and expanded into a reflection on how nature is treated through science, with a practical approach similar to Mbembe's planetary ethics. Among the crises critiqued by Meyer-Abich and supporters of environmental ethics, one could mention ecological disasters that paralyse certain regions of the world: millions of people face droughts each year caused by global warming, desertification, deforestation, or pollution; these tragedies are worsened by violent bushfires that, annually, paralyse entire regions and lead to the loss of human and animal lives; finally, some areas experience flooding due to heavy rains and uncontrollable rise in waters in coastal regions, destroying habitats or farmland.

Thus, according to proponents of environmental ethics, the threat of death manifesting in the sociopolitical sphere, through social inequalities or forms of political and economic violence, is seen as a reflection of another, even more brutal violence, aimed at the environment, particularly the animal and plant species that inhabit the Earth. It is the entire ecosystem – animals, plants, and minerals – that is targeted by human brutality, as Albert Schweitzer, one of the advocates of environmental ethics in Germany, reminds us. He states:

"That we are forced to destroy diverse life, whether for our preservation, to eliminate animals that are born and cannot be raised by us, or to protect ourselves from harmful animals, is the terrible law of the disunion of the will to live, to which we are subjected. We must never surrender to it thoughtlessly." (Schweitzer 2006, p. 68)

Recognising the impact of human activity on the environment, advocates of environmental ethics are seeking a new way of relating to nature – including animals and plants – that transcends an anthropocentric view. From this perspective, three key effects emerge, each set to revolutionise our understanding and practices. Firstly, epistemologically, this shift advocates replacing an anthropocentric approach with either a biocentric or physicalist one, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of the connections between humans and the natural world. Ethically, rejecting an anthropocentric view leads to the de-

velopment of new principles guiding human behaviour – principles based on respect, responsibility, empathy, reciprocity, and care for non-human species, particularly animals and plants. Politically, the idea of respecting and caring for plants and animals prompts reflection on their fundamental right to exist, opposing their killing. This ethic of life underpins Albert Schweitzer's concept of "*Ehrfurcht für das Leben*" (reverence for life), as expressed in his statement:

"Keep your eyes open so that you do not miss the opportunity to be a saviour! Do not pass by carelessly the poor insect that has fallen into the water, but sense what it means: to struggle with death in the water. Help it out with a blade of grass or a little stick, and when it then cleans its wings, know that something wonderful has happened to you: the happiness of having saved a life... acting in the name and with the authority of God." (Schweitzer 2006, p. 68)

In his commentary on Schweitzer's ethical thought, the German philosopher Stephan Grätzel (2006) explains the meaning of Schweitzer's concept of reverence for life, its foundations, and its ultimate purpose. Grätzel emphasises that Schweitzer's core idea centres on his 'mystical experience,' which leads to an internal transformation of thought and being. Schweitzer's ethics go beyond simply promoting abstract principles of conduct; instead, they are seen as an 'inspiration' that fosters a profound connection to oneself, the world, and the universe, guiding behaviour rooted in caring for life. His concept of 'reverence for life' is:

"an attitude towards life. An attitude is a relation. Here, a behaviour is developed, which, however, is not behaviour in the sense of a behavioural theory, but behaviour that has to do with the Self." (Grätzel 2006, pp. 22–23)

The concept of the Self here refers to a higher ethical instance, rooted in the primary and fundamental source of life, which manifests in the ethical subject in relation to all living beings. It is within this harmony with oneself, with the life that is within oneself and in nature – a life that calls to be protected – that ethical consciousness emerges as self-awareness in the world.

Thus, beyond their diversity of approaches and the context of their emergence, most theorists of environmental ethics question the principles that should guide human conduct towards nature. These ethics aim to critically describe the tragic effects of human activity on both animals and plants. On

the other hand, they adopt a normative perspective, focusing on the principles necessary to regulate human behaviour in accordance with greater responsibility and care for all living beings. In the face of ecological crises resulting from human activity towards animal, plant, and mineral species, these ethics affirm the possibility, even the necessity, of reforming behaviours to ensure the sustainability of life on Earth.

IV.2 Debates on Planetary and Global Justice

Reflections on ecological ethics have shaped what is generally referred to as the planetary turn in contemporary political theory, particularly through questioning the idea of planetary justice. (cf. Biermann and Kalfagianni 2020; Hickey and Robeyns 2020; Misiaszek 2020; Dryzek and Pickering 2018) Debates centre on the concept's meaning, its implications for contemporary politics and international relations, and for global governance. (cf. Kalfagianni et al. 2024; San Martín and Wood 2022a; Gupta et al. 2021a) This section aims to briefly outline their connection to Mbembe's thought. This short comparison will help us clearly position Mbembe's ideas in relation to these established and emerging perspectives.

Pedersen et al. (2024) discuss the meaning, object, and horizon of planetary justice, explaining how the holistic nature of contemporary crises necessitates a transdisciplinary, multispecies, and intergenerational methodological approach. (cf. Ryder et al. 2024; Chao and Celermajor 2023; Winter 2022) Their approach fosters awareness of the interconnectedness between the ecological and social challenges humans face today, in relation to themselves and the broader web of living and non-living beings. From this awareness emerges the concept of planetary justice as 'eco-social justice', which profoundly influences the future of life beyond current generations, aiming towards those to come. (cf. Pedersen et al. 2024) This definition is valuable because it considers ecological and social issues together, particularly in the context of climate change, global inequalities, sociopolitical and economic violence, and the relationship between humans and the natural world. Moreover, the concept of eco-social justice provides space for indigenous, non-European knowledge. It challenges the historical global power structures inherited from colonisation, particularly those that perpetuate unequal relations among peoples within political, economic, or scientific spheres of international relations. (cf. Agathanagelou and Killian 2021) Central to this is the equitable sharing of life among all Earth's inhabitants. (cf. Gupta et al. 2021a, 2021b)

However, the question of what conditions are necessary to achieve this idea of justice remains. Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (2024) emphasises the importance of personal reflection and self-work, which connect the individual to the planetary context. Kurki (2024) favours an approach based on creating relational networks between ‘pluriverses’. Ryder et al. (2024) argue that transformative changes must occur at multiple scales and across various temporal horizons. Agathangelou (2024) emphasises the direction and horizon of these changes, asserting that an equitable planetary transition requires a profound restructuring of social structures from the bottom up. This diversity of approaches to planetary justice illustrates the complexity of this notion and the need to integrate multiple perspectives to safeguard a vital, harmonious connection between all non-human species and the entire biosphere as they participate in the balance of life on the planet. (Gupta et al. 2021b)

Moreover, Mbembe’s concept of planetary justice aligns with those of the referenced theorists in several respects. On the one hand, this concept adopts a comprehensive view of the crises threatening life on Earth. The ecological approach is integrated with sociopolitical and economic perspectives, alongside a historical and decolonial approach to global injustices. This holistic view underscores that issues of planetary justice cannot be disentangled from broader questions of social justice, collective responsibility, and solidarity. (cf. Mbembe 2024, p. 25) Moreover, Mbembe’s perspectives can be engagingly compared with those of contemporary environmental thinkers like Brown and Corbera (2003), Schlosberg (2007), and Carmin and Agyeman (2011). Central to his philosophy is the ecological crisis, which he rigorously interrogates in works such as *Brutalism* (2024). Here, he draws from Anthropocene theories to explore the environmental crisis’s political, economic, and biological ramifications.

Additionally, Mbembe introduces the concept of a “general ecology,” inspired by Dogon metaphysics, that highlights the interconnectedness of all Earth’s inhabitants – humans, non-humans, ancestors, and future generations – as well as all human-made objects. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 17) This framework critically reflects on the histories of slavery and colonisation, laying the groundwork for analysing ecological challenges that transcend mere climate concerns. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 17–22) Thus, Mbembe’s critique of brutality raises essential issues regarding the quantification of existence through digital capitalism, the commodification of life, and systemic problems such as racism and sexism within the context of general ecology. Besides, the quest for a suitable concept of planetary justice resonates with the ideas of Biermann and Kalfagianni (2020). These scholars share a vision of broad-

ening the climate discourse to encompass equitable resource distribution and sharing. They note the historical marginalisation of these issues in Northern countries but also recognise a burgeoning interest in international public policy, as demonstrated by scholars' initiatives such as *Future Earth* and the *Earth System Governance Project*.

Furthermore, the academic community is increasingly engaged in discussions about who qualifies as a subject of planetary rights. For instance, Hickey and Robeyns (2020) argue for an inclusion that transcends human boundaries. Rather than adhering to a purely nationalistic framework of law and justice, they propose a planetary scale that complements existing civil rights frameworks. This concept resonates with the non-anthropocentric and post-nationalist legal perspectives articulated by theorists like Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011), who emphasise the importance of incorporating non-human entities into contemporary political discourse. In conclusion, Mbembe's insights present a profound call to reconceptualise justice in a planetary context, aligning with Caney (2006), who emphasize global solidarity among all Earth's inhabitants. His vision for a just planet invites a re-evaluation of ethical and political priorities, pushing for a collective notion of planetary justice that is both inclusive and responsible.

The originality of Mbembe's thought extends beyond mere comparative analysis, particularly his theses on planetary rights, which serve as the foundation for the concept of planetary justice. Achieving planetary justice requires acknowledging the universal right to circulation, dwelling, and breathing. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 72–77) Unlike essentialist cosmologies that portray beings as static entities, Mbembe's cosmological perspective conceptualises beings as dynamic participants in a reciprocal relationship, engaging in an ongoing exchange of matter, energy, and information with their environment. (2022, p. 54) Water, air, and soil form the basis of these vital exchanges. (2022, pp. 7–8) Mbembe elucidates the cosmological idea's significant political implications, emphasising the necessity of material, cultural, and intellectual exchanges for the survival of human communities. It also lays bare the need to critique the discriminatory migration policies currently in effect globally, as exemplified by the borders that separate nations and continents. (2019b, pp. 102–103) While citizens of Northern countries often enjoy the freedom to move across the globe, a substantial segment of the population residing in Southern countries finds such rights systematically denied. This imbalance informs the philosophy behind the universal right to circulation, which seeks to redress global injustices related to housing and residency. The idea of a

universal right to shelter envisions reconfiguring the planet as a habitable environment for all. This would necessitate the abolition of artificial borders and the implementation of policies to achieve equitable wealth redistribution. (2017, pp. 22–24)

Although Mbembe shares the libertarian critique of a predominant sovereign state (cf. 2019b, pp. 76–77), he advocates for the possibility of equitable circulation across the Earth's surface. Here, freedom does not equate to an unregulated market; instead, it embodies a commitment to the ethical principles of sharing and responsibility towards the planet's diverse inhabitants. Therefore, any notion of justice predicated on free trade, enterprise, and market dynamics must be complemented by a fair distribution of the planet's resources – encompassing not just material wealth but also intellectual, cultural, and human capital.

Furthermore, the rights to mobility and dwelling are intricately linked to the universal right to breathe, synonymous with the right to life. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical nature of this right, illuminating the severity of the ecological crisis facing humanity. (2021c, pp. 59–60) The pandemic revealed the global scope of human vulnerability, affecting every corner of the world. It also highlighted the collective responsibility to respond to such crises. It highlighted disparities in healthcare access, particularly between the Northern countries that hold vaccine patents and the majority of Southern countries. (2021c, p. 59) Thus, the notion of a universal right to breathe entails the establishment of sustainable health ecosystems globally. This right emphasises the value of all forms of life and humanity's collective accountability to dismantle oppressive structures of violence. In summary, Mbembe's understanding of planetary justice prompts critical inquiry into the normative frameworks for the "politics of the clinic" within a global context. (2017, p. 163) Ethically, this necessitates a shift in perspective, prioritising care for all living entities and restoring mutual relationships between humans and non-human beings.

IV.3 The Relevance of the Idea of Planetary Justice

Mbembe's insights into history, political economy, ethics, and cosmology provoke vital questions about the nature of planetary justice. They urge us to consider: what lessons must humanity learn from the recent course of modernity? How can our reflections on past and present injustices shape the philosophical base of a new, equitable justice framework for all living beings – humans and non-humans alike? By "history," we mean individual national stories and the

broader continuum of existence that unites all life on Earth. The term “we” encompasses all individuals who recognise a shared responsibility for the Earth and its future. At the heart of this discussion is the crucial choice between defining human identity narrowly – such as within nation-states, races, or religions – and adopting a broad vision of humanity, recognising our interconnectedness on this planet. Thus, to define human beings solely through the lens of individual identity or racial affiliation carries significant consequences for global economic and political dynamics. (2017, pp. 27–28) Addressing the question of planetary justice necessitates a bold inquiry into our aspirations for a human community that can collectively navigate the tragic memory of slavery, the violence of European colonialism across the Americas, Africa, and Asia, and the genocides endured by the Herero and Nama, the Jews, and the Armenians, among others. We must ask: What form of human community is essential for ensuring the survival of our planet? (2017, pp. 107–108)

Contemplating planetary justice requires recognising the interconnections between violence, power, and domination. Two fundamental points emerge from Mbembe’s discourse, forming the bedrock of a novel concept of planetary justice. The first pertains to identifying false dilemmas. For instance, how can we legitimately discuss “national sovereignty” in an age marked by the global climate crisis and the stark disparities in wealth distribution? The planetary nature of our economic, political, and environmental injustices implicates the survival of discrete societies and the viability of all living entities, human and non-human. Mbembe explains how these injustices pose global challenges that demand coordinated responses, shifting the focus from the sovereignty of nation-states to a conscious acknowledgement of the vulnerability of life as a whole. (2017, pp. 115–116)

The second point addresses the ethical frameworks that underpin the concept of justice, which include the principles of renunciation, reparation, and sharing. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 109–110) The principle of renunciation calls for re-evaluating individual freedoms, particularly regarding property rights and rejecting the notion of unrestricted freedom, which often legitimises the monopolisation of resources by a minority. Mbembe advocates for a paradigm that emphasises solidarity and responsibility towards all life forms. Consequently, the principle of renunciation is inextricably linked to the principles of reparation and sharing. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 37) Reparation signifies our obligation to mend the fractured relationships between humanity and the natural world. Reflecting on historical atrocities – such as slavery, colonisation, and genocide – yields deeper insight into the inequitable structures that govern con-

temporary political, economic, and cultural realities. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 118) Current ecological crises, armed conflicts, and poverty cannot be dismissed as random or predestined; instead, their roots lie in prolonged human actions and systemic injustices. The principle of reparation activates present generations' awareness and accountability for historical crimes – whether sociopolitical or environmental. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 114–115) This awareness empowers contemporary societies to foster new relationships with ecosystems based on sharing and reciprocity. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 110)

Lastly, the principle of sharing advocates for the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources among all living beings, irrespective of their origins or identities. It asserts that all inhabitants of the Earth – human and non-human – have the right to thrive by accessing the planet's shared resources. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 96–97) The Earth is a common heritage; as such, all beings must be granted the opportunity to realise their potential within its embrace. The urgent recognition of Earth's vulnerability and the inherent threats it poses to all living beings necessitates reevaluating planetary relationships that transcend identity-based frameworks. Consequently, the discourse on planetary justice should be articulated as a comprehensive politics of the living that encompasses the entire planet. This framework posits that at the core of human-nonhuman interactions lies a principle of reciprocity, asserting that all living entities on Earth deserve fundamental rights.

Thus, engaging with Mbembe's idea of planetary justice requires establishing a methodological framework that supports his theoretical discourse. Central to his perspective are three intertwined domains: history, political economy, and the ethics of the living. (Mbembe 2022, p. 113) From historical analysis, Mbembe contends that human evolution must be contextualised over the long term, incorporating a sense of Earth's temporalities that interlace human and non-human experiences. (Mbembe 2022, p. 88) The basis for this triadic understanding of temporality is the living world itself. (Mbembe 2022, p. 28) Moreover, this metaphysical interpretation is complemented by an existential understanding of history, in which past and present events are essential for making sense of human existence and community identity. (Mbembe 2022, p. 99) Thus, it becomes paramount to reinterpret historical tragedies – such as slavery and colonisation – which serve as foundational elements of modernity. (Mbembe 2022, p. 108) Mbembe's exploration of the fraught historical relationships among Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas provides the ethical grounding for his analysis. A critical assessment of slavery and colonisation

reveals a fundamental tension within the political economy: the relationship between sovereignty and property.

This argument raises vital questions: What rights do individuals or communities have regarding the exclusive ownership of Earth's resources, and what ethical implications do these rights entail? If production, the market, and property are essential to human existence and political relations, should property rights be considered exclusive, or should their limitations be considered? (Mbembe 2022, p. 36) Our understanding of the historical black slave trade, its transformation into commodities, and the ecological injustices wrought during both colonial periods and contemporary capitalism underscores the necessity for a critical discourse on freedom and sovereignty concerning property, applicable at both national and global levels. (Mbembe 2022, p. 110) Instead of adhering to an interpretation of freedom and sovereignty favoured by libertarian thought, Mbembe proposes a reimagined framework that emphasises ethical principles of co-ownership of the Earth and the shared stewardship of living beings. (Mbembe 2022, p. 102) Consequently, the underpinning of planetary justice is an ethical framework focused on the living. (Mbembe 2022, p. 123) This ethic is grounded in the ontological principles of reciprocity and mutuality among all living entities inhabiting Earth. (Mbembe 2022, p. 119)

The concept of reciprocity challenges the notion of humans as isolated monads, as essentialist ontologies suggest. Instead, it posits that terrestrial life is characterised by continuous exchanges among all beings – minerals, plants, animals, and humans alike. Dogon cosmology reinforces this viewpoint, which does not establish a hierarchy between humans, other living beings, and ecosystems but regards them as interconnected and dynamic. (Mbembe 2022, p. 18) Through this lens, Mbembe offers a conception of humanity that acknowledges human finitude and interconnectedness, framing individuals as transient participants on Earth, indebted to and in relation with every other being. (Mbembe 2022, p. 25) Ultimately, sharing the Earth entails relinquishing exclusive ownership rights over living beings and their resources, advocating for a systemic circulation of life's reserves and developing a politics dedicated to the flourishing of all living entities.

IV.4 Where does Mbembe's Critical Utopianism Fail?

The originality of Mbembe's theory invites critical engagement with the notion of planetary justice. While his premises are thought-provoking, they also ex-

pose limitations that warrant examination. This discussion will focus on two primary criticisms: the formal aspects of his theory and its substantive implications. A pressing challenge of our century, which resonates with Mbembe's propositions, is the effectiveness of political and justice theories, precisely their ability to manifest in daily practices, decision-making processes, and the frameworks of our regional and global institutions. (cf. Young 2023, p. 55; Grothmann et al. 2013) Humanity must grapple with the fundamental question of the intellectual capital required to establish an earthly community dedicated to life preservation and sustainability.

Additionally, we must consider how this capital can be operationalised within our institutional frameworks to navigate the complex landscape of planetary governance. (cf. Young 2021, pp. 1–15) This inquiry is central to contemporary global political theory. (Young 2021, p. 13) Here, “intellectual capital” refers to the knowledge required to develop behavioural mechanisms that drive transformation within institutions. (Young 2021, p. 17) Consequently, the effectiveness of modern planetary justice theories depends on their capacity to translate principles into laws, institutions, decisions, and behaviours. This task is all the more daunting given the complex realities of our world today. (cf. Young 2021, p. 7; Meadowcroft 2013) Moreover, the philosophical challenge of operationalising principles of planetary justice and their efficacy in global governance institutions is intertwined with practical issues in international politics. (Young 2021, p. 130) These practical issues encompass the asymmetries of power and diverging interests among nations. Mbembe's vision of an earthly community prompts us to consider the foundational steps required to construct an international political community capable of meaningful dialogue that transcends cultural differences.

However, given the diverse cultural notions of rights and justice, what institutional frameworks are essential for building consensus? Although some strategies for establishing normative conditions for global engagement in response to shared environmental, political, and economic challenges have been successful, a more profound commitment to creating equitable institutions that reflect ideals of justice and solidarity is vital for effectively addressing global issues. This situation emphasises the urgent need for a paradigm shift in our understanding of theory, especially within the discourse on planetary justice, to effectively confront the practical challenges of implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. As Young states, tackling these planetary governance issues requires a focused effort, metaphorically described as the need to “put all our eggs in this basket”. (Young 2021, p. 11) While this metaphor

emphasises the fundamental need for solutions in effective global governance, it also raises important questions about governance structures, implementations, and effectiveness: Who is entrusted with this “basket,” and under what conditions?

Furthermore, the egg metaphor underscores the complexities of achieving Mbembe's ideal of justice. For example, how do we effectively accommodate diverse entities and interests – whether “chicken eggs,” “ducks,” “big fish,” or “little fish” – within a single framework? This complexity challenges our understanding of the Earth's systems and the limits of Mbembe's concept of planetary justice. The substantive critique aims to outline the conditions necessary for a philosophical inquiry into the effectiveness of contemporary theories of planetary justice, which are based on a paradigm shift. It raises crucial questions: Who are the subjects of planetary justice? What are their collective and individual responsibilities? How do historical contexts influence their political, cultural, and environmental interactions? Addressing these questions is vital to avoid the trap of abstract utopianism, which overlooks the realities shaped by diverse historical trajectories that affect the Earth system. These realities are deeply influenced by the enduring impacts of colonialism, which continue to shape collective experiences and narratives worldwide.

The concept of a paradigm shift necessitates a thorough examination of the organic conditions that support planetary justice and governance. Exploring the meta-legal aspects of planetary governance encourages reflection on how to promote individual responsibility and develop the full range of human abilities necessary for creating sustainable institutions. This effort has two main goals: first, to assess the impact of personal actions on ecosystems, legal systems, and institutional frameworks; and second, to engage the entire human population in our shared responsibility to protect the planet. It is argued that various political subjectivities can coexist within a unified framework of planetary justice. Engaging with governance from a meta-legal perspective can be instrumental in resolving intricate challenges, such as the constitutive and positional effectiveness highlighted. (Young 2021, p. 13) If it holds that individuals bear ultimate responsibility for planetary crises – exemplified by harmful behaviours like environmental violence, xenophobia, corruption, and exploitation – then a nuanced understanding of these issues' historical and cultural origins can facilitate a solution to the question of institutional effectiveness. I propose the term “organic effectiveness” to describe this approach, which seeks to address problems at their roots within empirical contexts, rather than merely addressing their broad institutional manifestations. Organic effective-

ness underscores the importance of cooperation among all agents within the Earth system for achieving effective global governance and addressing planetary injustices.

The concept of “organic effectiveness” emerges from the framework of organic philosophy, a subject I explored in a prior article. (Cf. Téwéché 2023) This paradigm posits that the foundation for fostering global peace requires a profound transformation of the individual, engaging the faculties of intelligence, heart, and will. When enlightened by these three faculties, individuals attain a heightened awareness of themselves, their surroundings, and societal dynamics. They align with the ideals of goodness, truth, and unity. Such individuals transcend mere self-interest, assuming responsibility for their own existence and actively collaborating with others to shape a collective future. The significance of this perspective lies in its ability to elevate critical inquiries regarding the prerequisites for actualising the ethical principles and political philosophies that underpin genuine global democracy. In the face of an imbalanced distribution of power, characterised by the increasing monopolisation of sociopolitical, economic, and technological resources by the powerful, the notion of structural reform initiated from above risks becoming merely utopian.

In contrast, cultivating the intellectual and ethical capacities necessary to constrain the elite’s power emerges as a viable alternative. This approach emphasises the education of individuals, empowering them to recognise and harness the faculties that foster their liberation. In the context of Southern countries, particularly across the African continent, this organic philosophy offers a dual benefit: it equips individuals with the means to assert their autonomy from Western influences and simultaneously encourages them to realise their full potential as the fullest expression of their humanity. By fostering these transformative capacities, communities can collectively pave the way toward a more equitable and democratic society where the principles of justice and collaboration are upheld.

Conclusion

The principles of justice articulated by Mbembe are fundamental, providing the theoretical basis for a reimagined concept of global governance. Their effectiveness depends on comprehensive reform of planetary institutions, grounded in grassroots actions. Our organic effectiveness hypothesis suggests that profound individual transformation can drive institutional change.

Change involves translating planetary justice principles into practical actions, enabling individuals to embody ideals of care and responsibility towards nature, extend hospitality to all living beings, and share resources fairly to sustain the Earth's system. The goal is not to dismantle existing legal frameworks or undermine the legitimacy of global political institutions. Instead, it aims to establish organic foundations for their effectiveness, rooted in the emergence of free, autonomous, and responsible subjects informed by planetary rights. By cultivating innovative individuals who engage in relational ecologies, we can develop a new model of organic and planetary governance that is efficient, inclusive, and focused on preserving and sustaining the Earth system. Such a governance model, based on autonomous and co-responsible entities, would embody a system of governance by all, for all, and of all. This approach could ultimately be the most effective way to achieve true planetary justice and democracy.

Chapter 4: Planetary Ethics

Introduction

This chapter explores Achille Mbembe's reflections on ethics as a fundamental basis for his critique of politics. The final chapter of his book, *Necropolitics* (2019b) is entitled *Ethics of the Passerby*. However, what is meant by the term "ethics"? Reviewing the texts used in this term will provide insight into what ethics means. Ethics is not a central focus of *Necropolitics*. (2019b) Mbembe does not propose precepts to guide individual and collective action. Instead, he diagnoses the consciousness of the contemporary political subject and proposes implicit principles for the reparation of the living. The object of ethical inquiry is to provide foundations for the common habitability of all living beings and to sustain life on the planet in the Anthropocene crisis. (cf. Sarr 2017; Mbembe 2024) By framing the objective of his ethical approach in this way, Mbembe engages in a dialogue with contemporary theorists that analyses the multiple manifestations of this global crisis, its causes and its effects. (cf. Clark 2017; Lindberg 2025) Chakrabarty, for instance, argues that:

"The displacement of the category of physical force onto the historical-existential category of power is visible in the writings of two groups of scholars and/ or activists: those who want to assign culpability for the offense of creating the global environmental crisis, and those who seek in the crisis of global warming an ethical horizon for the future of humanity as a whole." (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 9)

In light of Chakrabarty's observation, it becomes evident that Mbembe's Planetary Ethics aims to rethink ethics as a project of reparation of the whole living, rather than as a reflection centered on the search for subjective well-being. This definition aligns with the views of scholars such as Allan Leslie, who assert

that “Thinking ethically is the opposite of thinking egoistically or selfishly.” (Allan 2015, p. 4) Unlike the subjective meaning often associated with the term “ethics,” this definition emphasises the collective responsibility that humans share. Whether referring to Leslie or Mbembe, ethics can be understood as the philosophical basis for human behaviour, rooted in general principles such as *justice*, *goodness*, or *reparation*. In this chapter, I aim to examine the meaning of ethics. The analysis will be based on interpreting the *Ethics of the Passerby* and Mbembe’s other texts and lectures. The context analysis will demonstrate the problem to which his thought responds: the critique of the modern, unlimited use of power. The second section will analyse the cosmological foundation of Mbembe’s thought and its significance, and summarise the principles that underpin his ethics, namely *renunciation* and *reparation*.

I. Prolegomena to the Ethics of the Passer-by

While many scholars have commented on the theses of *Necropolitics* (2019b) few have focused on the ethical reflections contained in the book, apart from Katarzyna Więckowska (2021), Nikolai Blaskow (2022), and Kate and Philipsen (2023). Despite their relevance, these articles do not provide a comprehensive examination of the passer-by ethic nor an analysis of its significance in Mbembe’s thought as reflected in *Necropolitics* (2019b) except Blaskow’s (2022) text. While Kate and Philipsen (2023) examine the meaning of the notion of the passer-by in Hölderlin (1998) and its philosophical revival in Heidegger (2000) and Nancy et al. (2009) highlights the centrality of this notion in debates on contemporary Afro-diasporic identity, whose horizon is traced by Taiye Selasi’s concept of Afropolitanism (2005). The two approaches to the text of the passer-by ethic diverge from Blaskow (2022) which extends beyond the figure of the *passer-by* to encompass a critique of the text as a whole. These interpretations show that Mbembe’s reflections in the *Ethics of the Passerby* are not peripheral. It is assumed that these constitute the core of the book *Necropolitics* (2019b) and may be regarded as the pinnacle of his earlier work on politics, despite the text being only five pages long and written in a markedly different style from the other chapters. Mbembe’s monologue is an inquiry into the possibility of an ideal form of shared life on the planet that challenges contemporary dwelling, founded upon the fantasy of power and exclusive forms of wealth and territorial appropriation.

In other words, the synthetic appearance of the *Ethics of the Passerby* should not mislead us about its essential role in understanding Mbembe's thought, particularly what I refer to as the *planetary turn*. As he states, *Necropolitics* (2019b) represents the inaugural argument in a trilogy, with *Brutalism* (2024) and *The Earthly Community* (2022) serving as its complements. It is therefore not coincidental that *Necropolitics* (2019b) concludes with an ethical proposition, as a continuation of the reflection initiated in the conclusion of *Critique of black reason* (2017) and as an introduction to the thesis of *Brutalism* (2024). To reveal these links, I will critically analyse the text of *The Ethics of the Passerby*. It seems reasonable to divide it into six sections, which I will analyse by theme and issue. I will then summarise the text according to two main principles constituting the principles of the passer-by's ethics. By examining the analogies with other Mbembe's earlier and later texts, it will be demonstrated how the *Ethics of the Passerby* constitutes a significant argument for critiquing power and planetary justice.

1.1 Contextualising Ethics: the Crisis of Modernity

The initial section of Mbembe's *Ethics of the Passerby* delineates the context and the problem of his ethical thinking. (Mbembe 2019b) The term 'context' is to be understood here in the sense in which the French philosopher François Rastier (Rastier 1998) understood it. Rastier refers to the relationship between the theorist and reality, which he describes as a 'zone of locality' from which the judgement emanates. (Rastier 1998, p. 99) He notes that the concept of 'context' assumes various problematising values and has two main applications. Firstly, it reintroduces a limited form of globality into interpretation. Secondly, it is used to externalise the language, conditioning the construction of meaning on knowledge of this exteriority. (Rastier 1998, p. 98) In other words, the objective of emphasising the context of enunciation is not to relativise the ethical judgement, but to illuminate the 'situation of enunciation' from which the ethical question originates, and without which it is impossible to comprehend the object, the meaning, the issues and even the purpose of the discourse. (Rastier 1998, p. 98)

Ethics as a Comprehensive Diagnosis

The contextual approach's argument reveals how Mbembe diagnoses contemporary socio-political reality. An examination of his *Ethics of the Passerby* reveals this initial situation. In the opening chapters, he poses the following question:

“What might explain the contemporary attraction exerted on the multitude by the idea of absolute and irresponsible power?” (Mbembe 2019b, p. 56) As a preliminary to our analysis of the ethics of the passer-by, we should note that this question of the dialectical relationship between power and vulnerability is not new in Mbembe’s thought, and even less so in his dialogue with contemporary philosophers from African, European, American or Asian traditions. For example, in the collective work edited with the Senegalese economist Felwine Sarr on the occasion of the *Ateliers de la pensée de Dakar*, we can read the following observation:

“On a planetary scale, we are witnessing the emergence and crystallization of a new cycle in the redistribution of power, resources, and value. Another partition of the world is being charted at the same time as other geo-graphies [geo-graphies] of the Earth are being traced. If this cycle awakens hope in expanded possibilities of life and action for many human groups, it is no less the case that, more or less everywhere, it produces collisions, promotes an unequal redistribution of vulnerability, and provokes new and ruinous compromises with forms of violence belonging at once to the future and to the archaic past” (Mbembe and Sarr 2022, p. ix)

Thus, throughout Mbembe’s work, precisely in the conclusion of *Necropolitics* (2019b) the lexical field of power, but also vulnerability, is present. He writes: “recognizing and accepting vulnerability or even admitting that to live is always to live exposed, including to death – is the point of departure of every ethical elaboration whose aim, in the last instance, is humanity” (Mbembe 2019b, p. 176) The concept of vulnerability is understood in two distinct ways. First, as Levinas sees it, vulnerability is an expression of human finitude, which connects us to all living beings. Human beings are inherently exposed to the possibility of death, which can manifest as a loss of freedom or the lack of essential conditions for survival, such as food, health, shelter, and mobility.

Acknowledging our vulnerability is crucial for understanding the need to care for life and for recognising the responsibilities individuals have toward themselves, others, and all living beings. Second, Judith Butler interprets vulnerability as a result of the power dynamics humans exercise over other living beings, considering them from socio-political, economic, and environmental perspectives. This understanding is particularly evident in the experiences of marginalised groups, including discriminated minorities and refugees, who suffer oppression based on their race, gender, or class. Recognising this vul-

nerability is essential for establishing an ethical framework, as it highlights human responsibility as both perpetrators of violence and the necessity to limit such power.

Therefore, this discussion examines how the lexical fields of power and vulnerability define the context of the passer-by's ethics. This analysis will reveal insights into the genealogy of Mbembe's ethical questioning. I will argue that "power" and "vulnerability" shape the context of the passer-by's ethic, its foundation, principles and implications. The formulation of ethical reflections and principles is a response to the contexts and problems they raise, not only in contemporary social theory but also in political praxis. (cf. Aitchison 2022; Butler 1997; Achille Mbembe 2006) It is argued that the beginning of the twenty-first century is characterised by the escalation of power, on the one hand and the consciousness of the common vulnerability of all living things on the other.

Mbembe elucidates this situation through the use of words that pertain to the lexical field of power, including: paranoid, anarchic powers; attraction of emptiness, the radicalizing difference, force of destruction, the conservation and securing of resources, the abolition of politics, the depletion of democracies, the rise of anarchism, the violation of property, the end of the state etc. (Mbembe 2019b, pp. 184–185) By 'power', Mbembe means "the human dream of an unlimited life" as it manifests itself in man's relationship with his fellow man and nature. (2019b, p. 14) This meaning is found in phrases such as "to make power over the living". By this, Mbembe means the human 'capacity' and 'will' that have the living world as their object, encompassing humans and other species. Mbembe notes explains how humans 'absolute form of power' is "the capacity to alter the human species voluntarily – and even other living species and apparently inert materials". (2019b, p. 14)

Power is defined as necropower because it attacks life itself and undermines its conditions of possibility, including territories and the natural, cultural, and symbolic resources that support it. This concept illustrates the capacity to annihilate populations and their material or symbolic life resources, as evidenced by Europe's colonial history. In the section titled 'Necropower and Occupation in Late Modernity,' Mbembe explains how Europe exerted power over much of the world through the force and brutality of colonial expansion. This history illustrates a clear manifestation of necropower, as it resulted in the deaths of millions and the appropriation and destruction of people's subsistence resources, along with their cultural and symbolic heritage.

Quoting Fanon, Mbembe describes how historically colonial necropower has functioned: through the conquest and expropriation of inhabited terri-

stories, their fragmentation into enclave zones, the restrictions on movement for the population, forced labour, and the imposition of hunger, disease, and abandonment to death. Consequently, the exercise of colonial sovereignty is characterised as necropower, which means “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not”. (2019b, pp. 79–80) Unlike Michel Foucault’s definition of power as the governance of the living or a regime of surveillance and punishment, Mbembe argues that colonial necropolitical power combines elements of biopolitical power, as outlined by Foucault, with necropolitical power. This synergy encompasses various forms of violence, including surveillance, punishment, and death.

Furthermore, Mbembe uses terms such as “the power of capital” to illustrate the relationship between the destructive power of humans and its manifestation in the appropriation of the living, especially “when it comes to extending markets and accumulating profits”. (2019b, p. 14) This force of appropriation is also described as “a bloody process of devouring (when it comes to destroying, without return, the life of beings and species)”. (2019b, p. 15) Mbembe observes that humanity’s “unlimited power of destruction” leads to an “increase in fragility” for the vast majority of the global population. This crisis is characterised by terms such as extreme fragility, vulnerability, confinement, strangulation, mutilation, suffocation, dishonoured body, divided body, body of hatred, appalling burden, false body of abjection crushed by indignity, and a disfigured, abominated, fallen body. (Mbembe 2019b, pp. 188–189)

One illustrative example of today’s human vulnerability is the global refugee and migration crisis. As a result of political or economic conflict or the exploitation of their land, millions of people are compelled to migrate (internally or externally). Nevertheless, this forced displacement from their place of origin is sometimes accompanied by a refusal to grant them asylum. Such individuals are often confined to camps or condemned to live without legal status. This precarious relationship to territoriality evidences their vulnerability. For Raffestin and Bresso, territoriality refers to the physical and imaginary spaces that shape our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting without our awareness. It is the “topos”, the location from which man constructs his existence; a hyper-space, meaning it is not merely geographical. (cf. Raffestin and Bresso 1982, p. 186) Before our birth, it “crystallises a multitude of things, banal or otherwise”, forming the fabric of that ‘everydayness’ with which we interact; it is, finally, that which “presents itself to the singular man as a tradition, because it is that which is transmitted to him little by little by the social body” (cf. Raffestin and Bresso 1982, p. 187) territoriality is, in a sense,

an “inevitable frame of reference, a concrete system of coordinates in relation to which we situate ourselves and which situates us... in spite of ourselves”.

In contrast to Raffestin and Bresso's views, Mbembe posits that territoriality has become a significant power domain for contemporary humanity. (Mbembe and Rendall 2000) This implies that the modern subject not only claims exclusive ownership of all existing entities but also justifies this claim through a range of ideological frameworks, including sovereignty, the rule of law, security, and territoriality. (Mbembe 2019b, p. 5) These notions legitimise the contemporary exercise of unlimited power in its manifestation as territorial appropriation. (Mbembe 2019b, pp. 56–57) However, Mbembe's critique is not confined to liberal democracies and their discriminatory, racialised migratory policies. (Mbembe 2019a) He also examines the effect of territorialisation, i.e., the commercial private monopoly over territories to exploit countries' soil and subsoil resources globally. (Mbembe 2021b, p. 15, 2019b, 177–178) Subsequently, he examines the social forms of power enacted in territorialisation, including identitarian and communitarian nativism. (cf. Dübgen and Skupien 2018, pp. 128–130) Examining critically African forms of identity construction that emerged in the aftermath of independence, Mbembe writes:

“Racial and territorial authenticity are conflated, and Africa becomes the land of black people. Since the racial interpretation is at the foundation of a restricted civic relatedness, everything that is not black is out of place, and thus cannot claim any sort of Africanness. The spatial body, the racial body, and the civic body are thenceforth one, each testifying to an autochthonous communal origin by virtue of which everyone born of the soil or sharing the same color or ancestors is a brother or a sister” (Mbembe 2002, p. 256)

The political effects of nativism (or ‘racial and territorial authenticity’) may include a tendency to assert exclusive ownership over a territory by a community, thereby excluding any form of openness to foreigners or acceptance of cultural, religious, racial or gender differences. Consequently, while Raffestin and Bresso's everyday life is indifferent to man, for Mbembe, its underlying logic is the abuse of power, and its principle is appropriation that exposes people to social, political, economic, cultural or even religious discrimination. This defines the meaning of the notion of vulnerability, as manifested yesterday in racial, class and gender segregation under colonialism, and today in nationalism, border regimes, and global market exploitation. M'charek et al. (2014) offer valuable insights into the technology that supports border management in

Europe and its associated racial dynamics. Their research highlights how territorial borders, much like other boundaries, contribute to a politics of belonging that distinguishes between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Understanding these dynamics reveals the critical role that border management regimes play in shaping perceptions of identity and community, encouraging us to consider how we can foster inclusion and challenge processes of marginalisation and exclusion, also known as ‘othering’.

In the name of territorial sovereignty, a vast majority of the global population, referred to as ‘The Other’, is subjected to exclusion through harsh migration policies and border controls. This is evident in the numerous refugee camps that have been established across Europe and around the world. (cf. Davies and Isakjee 2019) Mbembe’s critique addresses individual subjects, such as the neoliberal person, and the practical actions of communities, including nation-states. However, modern humanity’s desire for power is most clearly expressed primarily within the institution of the state, especially through the state’s apparatus of sovereignty.

Beyond the Diagnosis: The Ethical Appeal

Mbembe’s diagnosis explains the detrimental impact of modern power, which includes marginalising specific segments of humanity from the right to exist, move freely across the globe, and equitably share the resources necessary for sustaining life. Tracing the genealogy of power back to the tragic history of modernity, particularly during slavery and colonisation, this diagnosis seeks to propose new ethical principles for coexisting on Earth among all living beings. (cf. Sarr 2017; Lineweaver and Chopra 2012) The aim is to break the cycle of violence caused by the unlimited exercise of power. Fanon’s thought is one of Mbembe’s inspirations for this ethical thinking, mainly when he writes:

“Humanity is forever in creation. Its common content is its vulnerability, beginning with that of the body exposed to suffering and degeneration. But this vulnerability also belongs to the subject exposed to other existences that threaten its own, or possibly. Without a reciprocal recognition of this vulnerability, there is no place for solicitude, and even less of one for care”. (Mbembe 2019b, 175)

Ethics examines the historical evolution of power, its current manifestations, and the necessity of critically thinking about the conditions for a new and shared humanity. The excessive power that characterises contemporary soci-

eties, on the one hand, and the extreme vulnerability experienced by certain living beings, on the other, raise important ethical questions. The discussion surrounding power and vulnerability reveals the nature of contemporary political structures and prompts a moral examination of modern individuals' consciousness.

Moreover, by defining the enunciative situation of ethics as a dialectic between power and vulnerability, Mbembe engages, whether directly or indirectly, with numerous thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Paul Gilroy, Emmanuel Levinas, and Paul Valadier, particularly in their critiques of modernity. This section does not aim to analyse his conversation with these authors in detail, which will be the subject of a subsequent chapter. Instead, it will explore how the notions of power and vulnerability define the epistemological and political context of the discussion on ethics and its principles. This is evident in Mbembe's engagement with Levinas's work, particularly in light of the Jewish and Black experiences of vulnerability in the modern era. (Mbembe 2005) Mbembe observes that Levinas's analysis of vulnerability is primarily informed by his reflection on the tragic experience of the Holocaust, which represents a central theme in the critique of power in modern Jewish thought. He writes: "Because their inhabitants were divested of political status and reduced to bare life, the death camps, in particular, have been seen as the ultimate sign of the absolute power of the negative". (Mbembe 2005, p. 294)

From a critical examination of Levinas' philosophy and ethics, Mbembe explains how the latter discusses the relationship between freedom and vulnerability to address the complex issue of power, as expressed in relation to Jews. Furthermore, his article *Faces of Freedom: Jewish and black experiences* (Mbembe 2005) identifies human vulnerability as a central tenet of Levinas and of contemporary Jewish ethical and political thought. Mbembe argues:

"In the process, Jewish criticism, more than any other, has unveiled the profound connection that ties any ethical practice of freedom to a moral concern with vulnerability / especially as manifested in the figure of the stranger and, to a lesser extent, of the enemy [...]. In vulnerability lies a relation to the other. Indeed, there is no human subject that is not for the other. This being-for-the-other is, for him, the essence of freedom". (Mbembe 2005, p. 295)

This reflection focuses on the Jewish experience as analysed by Mbembe, particularly in light of the tragic experiences of Black slavery and colonisation.

However, its implications extend beyond these contexts. At its core, the issue of power and vulnerability raises one of the most significant questions in modern political philosophy: the normative conditions for power distribution, which are essential for establishing a sustainable political community. Every human community faces the reality of its vulnerability in the presence of power, making ethics a crucial component of political theory. This topic is explored in Paul Valadier's article *Cité fragile* (2002), where he acknowledges the political dimensions of power within the context of a sovereign state. He elucidates how tyrannical and totalitarian regimes have oppressed numerous people, leading to the destruction of lives through violence and intimidation. (2002, p. 21) The relationship between power and vulnerability is evident at both individual and structural levels, as articulated in Mbembe's concept of necropolitics. This concept views politics as the sovereign expression of power and acknowledges the vulnerability of life. The exercise of power is demonstrated through the state's control over territories and the bodies and minds of vulnerable individuals. Under the doctrine of sovereignty, modern states can determine who may live and who must be left to die:

"The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die. To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes. To be sovereign is to exert one's control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power". (Mbembe 2019b, 66)

The state is thus perceived as a mode of appropriation and domination, as it authorises the legitimate exercise of force over migrants and refugees, for example. Furthermore, this political power manifests as economic domination, as Marx understood in his critique of the modern economy. As the French philosopher Henri Lefevre noted:

"Nor did Marx discriminate between appropriation and domination. For him labour and technology, by dominating material nature, thereby immediately transformed it according to the needs of (social) man. Thus nature was convened directly from an enemy, an indifferent mother, into 'goods'." (Lefebvre 1974, p. 165)

In his critique of necropower, Mbembe does not reference Marx or Lefebvre. However, the similarities in their analyses cannot be ignored, as they highlight

the intrinsic connections between power, appropriation, and domination that emerge in modern political, economic, and technological contexts. Nature is portrayed as an adversary that must be controlled and subdued by human productive forces. However, the becoming-enemy of nature aims to make nature the object of exclusive power, thereby rendering it the property of the modern subject. For Lefevre, the prohibition of circulation is evidenced by the contemporary occupation of space in politics. This is the negative appropriation of space under the ‘reign of private property’ and technology. As a result of political occupation, the division of space into designated areas and prohibited zones exposes specific categories of people to increased vulnerability by limiting their mobility. (cf. Lefebvre 1974) A review of contemporary crises – including slavery, colonialism, genocide, environmental degradation, authoritarian rule, and technological escalation – indicates that unchecked power inevitably leads to chaos.

Ultimately, understanding the significance of this crisis, which threatens the future of life on the planet, requires addressing technological escalation. Generally speaking, Mbembe’s interest in technology is evident in several texts and lectures. While this question is absent from his early writings, it becomes central starting in the 2020s, especially with the publication of texts such as *Meditation on the Second Creation* (2020c), *Brutalism* (2024), *Future of Life and Futures of Reason* (2021a), *The Earthly Community* (2022), where the critique of technology plays a key role.¹ Without delving into this complex critique of technology, I would like to highlight three essential points that shed light on the critique of power, while also raising the issue of its limitations through a planetary ethics and justice.

Mbembe notes that technology is the quintessential space where human power over life manifests itself in its most brutal form, summarised by the concept of *brutalism*. This concept refers to human tendencies toward ‘demolition and production, on a planetary scale, of reserves of darkness.’ (2024) One might be surprised by such a diagnosis, especially since technology is today

1 The reflections that follow are based on my critical analysis of these texts. Additionally, they include Mbembe’s lectures, “Algorithmic Reason and Planetary Humanities” (2018), delivered at The Institute of the Humanities and Global Cultures, as well as “Technology and Eschatology” (2021), delivered online during the Summer School in Global Studies and Critical Theory in Bologna. Mbembe’s reflection is presented in dialogue with scholars such as Shoshana Zuboff (2023) and Michael S. Burdett (2014), among others.

seen as a manifestation of immeasurable progress in modern human history, with beneficial consequences for the planet's political, economic, and environmental future. For Mbembe, what is at stake is not technology as such, but its instrumentalization for power in the political, financial, and ecological fields. By technology, Mbembe means the capture of mineral and plant energies, as well as all ecosystems, and their transformation into machines that perform multiple functions in the human relationship with space, time, others, and nature. Among the functions of technology are the production and realisation of a specific human's dream of escaping bodily boundaries – through the creation of digital doubles in digital ecosystems – of extending the duration and power of life, but also the unlimited exploitation of lives deemed superfluous.

Moreover, the human exploitation of the Living manifests to varying degrees through the instrumental use of technology in biology, economics, and politics. Biologically, under the influence of techno-messianisms, there is an increasing prevalence of biotechnological manipulations, genetic or genomic engineering, worldwide. Economically, humanity experiences the totalization of relationships between people and the exploitation, for commercial purposes, of data derived from these interactions. Politically, one experience in certain parts of the world, notably in the North, is the use of technology in migration policies, border surveillance, warfare, not to mention the concentration of technology in the hands of giants such as Amazon and Google, resulting in new regimes of domination through control and surveillance of movements.

All of this results in the reconfiguration of relationships between humans and the rest of the living world, the creation of new forms of hierarchy, and the universal domination of a minority that possesses the technological means, condemning the majority to a state of consumption. However, beyond the unequal relationships among humans, it is the sustainability of life and the existence of life on a planetary scale that is threatened – in other words, the exploitation of all living things and their reduction to artificial machines by humans. This critique raises the essential question of the conditions under which power can be limited, as well as the ethical and political implications and purposes of such limitations for the sustainability of life on Earth.

1.2 The Object of the Ethics of the Passer-by

In the previous section, I argued that the modern excess of power and the evidence of vulnerability serve as the foundational contexts for Mbembe's ethics.

Ethics poses a crucial question: “Does this fission of power represent a chance for the human experience of freedom, or will it rather lead us to the limit of disjunction?” (2019b, p. 184) This quotation raises questions about the necessity and urgency of ethics as a critical reflection on how to renounce power in response to the universal human demand for justice and reparation. The goal is to explore, from a philosophical perspective, the arguments that support such a renunciation, and from a legal perspective, the normative conditions under which it is feasible.

The Passer-by as a Figure of Renunciation

Philosophically, the renunciation of power is justified because it highlights the vulnerability of living beings. The concept of vulnerability pertains to the universal human condition, often referred to as the Earth condition, as it has become an object of appropriation, destroying living organisms, ecosystems, and humans, ultimately affecting the entire planet. As Mbembe states, “Nothing, henceforth, is inviolable; nothing is inalienable; and nothing is imprescriptible. Except, perhaps, property – still.” (2019b, p. 184) Thus, the urgency of ethics lies in establishing a normative foundation for human responsibility toward all inhabitants of the Earth, including both humans and non-humans.

Since power in the history of Western modernity has often been justified in terms of individual freedom and natural rights, the question of its limits raises important issues regarding the normative conditions of freedom. Should we consider freedom merely the increase of power and possessions at any cost? Or could this accumulation lead to further forms of domination? At the intersection of power and vulnerability, we find the emergence of Mbembe’s concept of the passer-by ethic. Subjectively, unlimited power is inherently destructive, and this destruction becomes even more significant when the holder of power clings tightly to their possessions. From the perspective of the passer-by ethic, true freedom involves relinquishing the power associated with our origins or identities, such as the power of being born in a particular place or of owning land. Mbembe poses a critical question: “What is freedom if one cannot really break with this accident of being born somewhere – the relation of flesh and bones, the double law of soil and blood?” (2019b, p. 185) This question, which we explored in the previous section and will revisit in subsequent chapters, emerges within the context of the global violence perpetuated by racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, genocide, and the struggle for resources that generates inequalities between the countries of the

North and South, as well as authoritarian regimes. (cf. Colombino and Giaccaria 2016)

Such brutality stems from a worldview that centres on belonging and the competition to appropriate the planet's resources. In other words, global political and economic violence, poverty, and inequality among nations do not result from random circumstances. Instead, these issues are the consequences of politics that exclude and concentrate wealth at the expense of others. (cf. Rosa et al. 2017; Zarka 2013) In contrast to this tendency toward increasing power through exclusion and appropriation, ethics advocates for the principle of renunciation. Detachment, at both the individual and community levels, refers to "place of birth," "land," and "blood," which are sometimes sources of exclusion.

However, by discussing his ethical argument from the perspective of the passer-by, Mbembe illustrates that the idea of renunciation is not merely an abstract ideal. It is rooted in the concrete existence of every individual. The passer-by embodies the model of renunciation because they have come to terms with the randomness inherent in their place of birth and the constraints it imposes. Additionally, a passerby recognises the inevitable passage of time and existence. To renounce is to rediscover one's true nature and reconcile with the reality of the human condition. Mbembe writes that renunciation allows us "to learn to assume our status as passersby as the condition, in the last instance, of our humanity." (Mbembe 2019b, p. 186)

Passers-by, therefore, represent the human condition as it truly is. By letting go of attachment to their birthplace, they become open to the experience of displacement and the opportunity to share their living space with others who may initially be viewed as strangers. In this regard, the passer-by serves as a model of renunciation for humanity. While birth symbolises belonging – or even exclusivity – renouncing it allows for the possibility of a shared existence, welcoming others, and fostering reciprocity. To illustrate this, Mbembe evokes French words such as "passant," alongside terms like "passeur," "passage," and "passager," while distinguishing them from "migrant," "refugee," "exile," and "nomad." (2019b, p. 186)

The Passer-by as a World Citizen

Frantz Fanon, the Martinican philosopher and psychiatrist, is a key figure in discussions about the ethics of the passerby. Born on June 20, 1925, and passing away on December 6, 1961, Fanon was intellectually and politically opposed to the French colonial administration. In 1955, he began to support the

Algerian National Liberation Front, having lived and worked in Algeria since 1953. Mbembe describes Fanon's decision to detach himself from his homeland and relocate to a foreign land as a 'transfiguration,' binding his fate to the fight for Algerian humanity oppressed under colonial rule. The "transfiguration", Mbembe states, "demands that the subject consciously embrace the broken up part of its own life; that it compel itself to take detours and sometimes improbable connections; that it operates in the interstices if it cares about giving a common expression to things that we commonly dissociate." (2019b, p. 187) In contrast to the human tendency to regulate behaviour according to individualistic, communal, or protective principles, Fanon chose to renounce the privileges of citizenship and its associated benefits to fight for Algeria's liberation. He ultimately fulfilled the highest ideal of the struggle against colonial power, even at the cost of his own life.

The choice of Frantz Fanon as a theoretical example of renunciation to illustrate the argument of the passer-by raises ethical questions. Is it ethically justifiable to use violence, even in the pursuit of freedom? My goal here is not to delve into this complex issue. Instead, I aim to explore the rationale behind Fanon's selection as a model for understanding the ethics of the passer-by as a whole. By examining Fanon's life alongside the context in which the ethic of the passer-by was developed, I think this choice can be justified. This ethic aims to analyse the normative conditions for renouncing unlimited power, which manifested itself in the colonial regime. The ethical principle of renunciation legitimises equality, sharing, solidarity, and reciprocity among living beings. Fanon embodied this ideal in both theory and practice. He aligns well with Mbembe's description of the passer-by as: "the figure of a human out to make great strides up a steep path – who has left, quit his country, lived elsewhere, abroad, in places in which he forges an authentic dwelling, thereby tying his fate to those who welcome and recognize their face in his, the face of a humanity to come." (2019b, p. 187) Fanon not only renounced the security of belonging to the French state but also advocated for the oppressed in Algeria and confronted the abuse of power under colonialism. Through his thoughts and political activism, he created the conditions for a more just humanity and reconciliation between colonisers and the colonised.

Finally, Mbembe's text introduces the object of ethical enquiry and its purpose. The object of ethics is human existence, which undergoes a process of transfiguration. Mbembe argues: "But passing from one place to another also means weaving a twofold relation of solidarity and detachment with each of them. This experience of presence and distance, of solidarity and

detachment, but never of indifference – let us call it the ethics of the passerby.” (2019b, p. 188) The ethical transfiguration of the individual makes them aware of the importance of renunciation. This awareness fosters a sense of planetary consciousness, responsibility, and solidarity, allowing one to feel a part of the world without experiencing exclusion or discrimination. It fosters reciprocity among people that transcends their differences.

Living as a passer-by allows an individual to foster what can be called a ‘global relationship’. (cf. Glissant and Wing 1997) Through renunciation, humans open themselves to a multitude of places, form connections with diverse cultures, and share the Earth with others. This approach prioritises the care of every life, irrespective of historical, national, or cultural differences. What will then emerge is a relatively apparent demand for a possible universality, or at least of an idea of the Earth as common to humans’ communal condition. Both Fanon and Glissant argue that the essence of universality lies in the shared humanity of all individuals. However, this initiative goes beyond humanity; it emphasises the sharing of life and the capacity to overcome the divisions between human and non-human living beings.

The idea of this common condition is rooted in the work of Edouard Glissant, particularly his concept of “*relation mondiale*”. This concept departs from the Eurocentric perspective on cultural hegemony and differences. According to Glissant, indeed, what characterises the world is not a hierarchical relationship between forms and beings, or an ontological difference of almost insurmountable identities, but rather a dynamic openness made of exchange, encounters, and sometimes the union of opposites, which leads to the creolization of nearly everything. Instead of an ontology of identity and difference, Glissant’s poetic approach proposes an ontology of the common, in which history is a sharing of memories, or cultures are not fixed but mobile, and where the past, present, and future of peoples are glimpsed within a relational horizon in which “Europe, which has given so much to the world and taken so much in return, often by force and by ruse, is no longer the world’s center of gravity”. (2019b, p. 188) This assertion reveals the shortcomings of classical ethical thinking, which has traditionally framed freedom, property, and relationships solely in terms of difference, race, and exclusion.

The key ethical question is whether, amidst contemporary abuses of power and the human experience of vulnerability, it is possible to establish a community grounded in the sharing of life and reciprocity among all human beings and the living world. Before discussing the cosmological foundations of Mbembe’s thought, I will examine the philosophical meaning of his ethics,

with a particular focus on the definition of the passer-by in the history of Western philosophy. I will engage with the works of thinkers such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Luc Nancy, with whom Mbembe interacts. This exploration will help clarify the meaning of ethics and its guiding principles. The final part of the chapter will summarise ethical principles based on two concepts: renunciation and reparation.

1.3 The Meaning of the Ethics of the Passer-by

Kate and Philipsen (2023) trace the possible genealogy of the idea of the passer-by, which is central to Mbembe's examination of ethics, in the work of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin. They write:

“Hölderlin's winking language projects a public space which now, two hundred years later, has evolved into the complex globalized world of strangers: not only refugees and migrants, but indeed all of us. The “ethics of the passer-by” is necessary, as the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe proposes. We hope to have shown that Hölderlin's late poetry evokes the first hints of such ethics” (Kate and Philipsen 2023, p. 17)

In interpreting the connection between the ethics of the passer-by and Friedrich Hölderlin's ‘Ode to Rousseau,’ as analyzed by Kate and Philipsen, we gain further insight into the thesis of the ethics of the passer-by. The concept of the passer-by, as described by Friedrich Hölderlin and later taken up by Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy, conveys the idea of renunciation. This perspective is instrumental in enhancing our understanding of Mbembe's ethics, as I will explore in the final section of this chapter.

The Passerby as a Symbol of Ephemeral Time

Beginning with a philosophical and theological reflection on the ephemeral nature of time and its connection to existence, Kate and Philipsen, reflecting Hölderlin's ideas, pose the question: “What instance can mediate this experience of being strangers and passers-by as a fundamental experience of modernity?” (2023, p. 3) In his ‘Ode to Rousseau,’ Hölderlin recognizes that defining the passer-by is inseparable from understanding time. Subjectively, time presents itself to individuals as either familiar or foreign, constantly fluctuating and dynamic. On one hand, it is experienced collectively through the rep-

etition of gestures, words, and habits – essentially, all the characteristic features of a society that Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) termed “social-historical”. Although Mbembe does not explicitly mention Castoriadis’s intuition in his analysis of the concept of the passer-by, I believe it is essential to establish this connection. Philosophical reflection on time provides a crucial foundation for understanding the figure of the passer-by. Castoriadis’ notion of time is rooted in the social imagination; its meaning is embodied in institutions and shapes the meaning, rhythm, orientation, and significance of both individual and collective life. This sense of time contributes to our collective identity, as it serves as the mirror through which we perceive ourselves and our relationship with the world and society. Castoriadis elaborates on this idea:

“It is not only that the social-historical institution alone can ‘state’, ‘formulate’, ‘explicitate’ the idea, the schema, the actuality of identity: the social-historical institution alone brings identity into being, for the first time in the history of the world, by bringing into being the identical as rigorously identical. In this sense, ‘full’ identity exists if and only if it is instituted.” (Castoriadis 1987, p. 205)

Identity is reflected in people’s ways of life, characterised by the repetition of activities, from seasonal festivals to daily routines. This creates a specific norm or shared understanding to which each new member of society adapts and conforms. However, Hölderlin points out that this mimetic experience of time hides another essential aspect: the passage of time itself. The figure of the passer-by emerges from the human condition, extending beyond the boundaries of social time. This condition is illustrated by the idea of the stranger from a foreign land to whom hospitality is offered: a migrant, a refugee, or any visitor who does not belong to the everyday life of the society.

Alternatively, a passer-by might be anyone encountered whose presence signifies absence. In both scenarios, an ambivalence exists in human existence. The presence of the *Other* compels the individual to confront a different experience of time. It forces one to relinquish their habits, worldview, and everyday experiences. Consequently, the individual becomes a stranger in their home, confronted with new experiences, must adopt different habits, and ultimately be elsewhere. Having become a stranger to themselves, the individual begins recognising their contingency. This leads them back to an original sense of temporality, focused on the flow of life that extends beyond the structures of their community – and this is revealed to them by the stranger who enters

their lives. Both the passer-by and the stranger represent two sides of the same coin of human nature.

In their analysis of Jean-Luc Nancy's interpretation of the stranger and the passer-by, Ten Kate and Philipsen pose a question that encapsulates the central issue at hand: "Who then is this stranger coinciding with his embodiment, his concrete manifestation? Who is this absence coinciding, not with his presence, but with his constant presentation in the words of the poem?" (2023, p. 10) Consequently, both the passer-by and the stranger signify a person primarily because the stranger is, first and foremost, a transient being. Neither the Earth nor any social institution can be considered his eternal home. Humans do not exist as proprietors; they are merely visitors, a status determined by birth and death. Becoming aware of this nature reveals its ontological truth, which transcends socio-historical temporality. This attribute of transcendence brings the passer-by and the stranger closer to the divine, as suggested by Hölderlin and Heidegger.

When Kate and Philipsen ask, "can one think the figure of the stranger as a 'human' who constantly bears the signs, the 'hints' of the divine within himself?" (2023, p. 10) they aim to clarify Heidegger's notion of the passer-by. In this context, Heidegger's concept of the 'divine' refers to the capacity to transcend the limitations of time. Unlike a tree in a garden, a human being is not situated in the world in the same way. While a tree exists passively, a human is capable of intellectual activity, action, desire, and attachment to objects, and can also transform them. Deep within themselves, through their thinking, humans perceive the strange truth of being, which encompasses the finiteness and contingency of everything, including themselves. Through this capacity for transcendence, individuals recognise their mortality.

The idea of the human being as transcendent suggests a particular relationship with time, which Heidegger describes as the 'sign' or the 'wink of God.' Unlike ontotheology, Heidegger argues that transcendence is not about being outside the world, but rather about belonging to it in a way that evades any fixed identity or withdrawal. Humans coexist with other beings, suggesting a connection to God or a higher Being. However, *being* in this context does not correspond to Aristotle's primary force or the monotheist notion of God found. Instead, it represents an existence that calls to humans to confront the reality of their own finitude. Being embodies both absence and presence, the unknown and the known, the unmanifest and the manifest, as well as a closed and open system. When Being reveals itself, it does so fleetingly, appearing as a stranger. The moment humans recognise its presence, it becomes obscured

once again. Heidegger suggests that this existence serves as a sign toward the divine: “the human mind” can “foreknows life’s melody and rhythm,” preceding the gods (his own gods) to announce their arrival.

This ability allows humans to transcend the socio-political structures of the imagination in which they are born and grow. Humans serve as a sign of God because they share an essential trait: being both strangers and passersby. Moreover, humans are strangers because their earthly existence begins at birth. The Earth provides a welcoming environment, and the living offer hospitality. During their lifetime, humans form relationships and engage in communication with others until their departure. As mere passerby, they remain strangers to both the world and the social institutions of their communities. The temporality of society does not erase this fact. Castoriadis clarifies this coexistence of the social imaginary with original life when he states:

“The social-historical emerges in what is not social or historical in the pre-social, or the natural. The emergence of otherness is already inscribed in pre-social, or natural, temporality. This term implies a being-thus in itself, at once undisputable and indescribable, of the first, ‘physical’ and ‘biological’, stratum, which every society not only presupposes but from which it can never be absolutely separated-distinguished-abstracted.” (Castoriadis 1987, pp. 204–205)

There is a distinction between social time, a construct embedded within institutions, and ‘pre-social’ time, which exists independently and is linked to the physical and biological duration of existence. Castoriadis argues that social-historical time is a perpetual flux of self-alteration, manifesting only through the creation of stable figures that allow it to be perceived. In contrast, biological time is dynamic and aligns with the natural world. This aspect of life enables individuals to perceive the truth of existence beyond the limitations imposed by institutions and conventional wisdom. This non-restrictive dimension of time – this openness toward indescribable transcendence – constitutes the subjective consciousness of the passer-by. Though Castoriadis does not explicitly address the figure of the passer-by, his critique of social history and identity offers a deeper understanding of its significance in the works of Hölderlin, Heidegger, and even Nancy. By defining the passer-by as a stranger, these thinkers emphasise the inherent capacity to transcend social temporality. As Kate and Philipsen note, referring to Lacoue-Labarthe (1989):

“As strangers we are passers-by, receptive for the signs of what comes to us from an undetermined future, instead of beings who are frantically seeking the safe contours of a demarcated presence and identity, of the proper, the self and the same.” (Kate and Philipsen 2023, p. 3)

Being a foreigner means lacking a homeland. Birth reminds us that we are merely temporary visitors on this Earth, and time inevitably takes away everything we possess, starting with our memories, bodies, and desires. As Kate and Philipsen note, the challenge lies in transforming this experience of vulnerability, along with the potential for growth it offers, into a foundation for a new political praxis. Więckowska (2021) provides insight into this issue. Her article outlines the origins of Afropolitanism and its development in literature, philosophy, the arts, and contemporary Afro-diasporic culture. For brevity, I will not delve into those details here. Instead, the focus is on how Więckowska connects Mbembe's ethics with Selasi's theory of Afropolitanism. An analysis of her article highlights specific characteristics of the Afropolitan subject that align closely with those of a passerby. These characteristics include a detached relationship with reality, encompassing time, space, culture, and ultimately, the body and life itself. It can be argued that Afropolitanism is a descriptive and normative concept of contemporary Afro-diasporic existence. In an interview with Sarah Balakrishnan, Mbembe, developing Selasie concept idea, explains:

“Afropolitanism refers to a way – the many ways – in which Africans, or people of African origin, understand themselves as being part of the world rather than being apart. [...] Afropolitanism is a name for undertaking a critical reflection on the many ways in which, in fact, there is no world without Africa and there is no Africa that is not part of it.” (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016, p. 29)

The idea of “Afropolitanism” presents a nuanced view that contrasts with concepts like “Pan-Africanism”, which Mbembe links to emphasising black identity as a racial ideology. An insightful analysis of contemporary Africa reveals that African identity extends beyond mere skin colour or ethnicity. (Cf. Theombogü (2023) The continent is home to individuals of diverse backgrounds, including those of African, European, Asian, American, and Chinese descent. This rich diversity is evident in South Africa, Angola, and Mozambique, highlighting the complexity of African identity. Embracing this diversity can foster a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be African in today's world.

Moreover, both Selasi and Mbembe explain that the meaning of the concept of afropolitanism also arises from an observational analysis of the evolving socio-political, economic, cultural, and artistic dynamics of Afro-descendant communities in the diaspora, particularly in Europe, the United States, and other regions worldwide. As mobile subjects, they no longer view themselves as citizens of a specific locality; instead, they identify as citizens of the world – thus, their cosmopolitanism. Over time, they have developed a non-ethnocentric perspective on reality, encompassing time, space, and history. Rather than being passive victims of their tragic pasts, which include slavery and colonization, these individuals assert themselves as responsible agents who embrace the complexity of their local contexts. They craft their intricate daily lives from a tapestry of diverse traditions, customs, cultures, and aesthetics. Therefore, an Afropolitan acts as a responsible agent who remains open to history and its possibilities.

The figure of the passer-by, as described by Kate and Philipsen in the works of Hölderlin and Heidegger, closely resembles that of the passer-by in the previously mentioned texts. One key similarity lies in the awareness of the limitations of historical communities, typically identified with the concept of the nation-state. The discovery of a more complex temporality of existence, which is not monolithic, necessitates a deconstruction of the myth of origin upon which these concepts are based – namely, ethnicity, family, community, and nation. Does the notion of locality not align with Castoriadis's search for the pre-social origin of the political community? This transcendence of the subject is reflected in embracing new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, as well as recognising the dynamics of change among members of African societies, who increasingly assert their diverse cultures, alongside a multitude of languages. This evolution leads to a complex, heterogeneous living space without a singular centre.

In contrast to the idea of Africa constructed by proponents of Afrocentrism, Afropessimism, or pan-Africanism in the aftermath of independence, Afropolitanism emphasises an open and complex view of Africa, devoid of a singular spatial or temporal centre. (Theombogü 2023) Both individuals and communities are receptive to change, constantly navigating the complexities of mobility. (cf. Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016) This is illustrated by contemporary sociological studies of African and Afro-diasporic families and kinship, which often comprise individuals from diverse backgrounds who celebrate different cultures, enriching their collective heritage. Więckowska references Knudsen and Ulla (2020), describing the Afropolitan as essentially 'in transit' and 'multi-local'. This highlights the precedence of locality over

ethnic, national, or racial identities, exemplifying the Afropolitan's value placed on transcendence concerning attachments to the past. Furthermore, it underscores the prioritisation of openness over closure and multiplicity over unity. Regarding spatial relationships, the Afropolitan subject no longer bases their identity on a fixed abode or territory, thereby relinquishing exclusive ownership of a particular place.

Furthermore, Mbembe's ethics of the passerby also aligns with the crossing philosophy – known as *philosophie de la traversée* – by Cameroonian philosopher Jean-Godefroy Bidima. (cf. Bidima 2002) Bidima's concept of crossing originates from philosophical reflections on human existence marked by birth and death. Essentially, this philosophy rejects essentialism, cultural identity politics, and communitarianism. (cf. Bidima 1995) It emphasises core ideas of human temporality such as openness, complexity, impermanence, possibility, and relationality. In his critical review of modern African philosophy's history, guided by “crossing philosophy” principles (or “*philosophie de la traversée*”), Bidima explains how the first generations of African philosophers, in their various debates, were very concerned with issues of (African) identity and grounding, which has curiously led to a poverty of thought on otherness. (Bidima 2002, p. 8) The concept of otherness takes precedence over that of identity because it highlights a view of human nature and community as ever-changing rather than static. Ethically, this means no person or community is entirely self-reliant. Belief involves participating in dialogue with neighbours within an open community, requiring ongoing self-questioning, re-examining inherited knowledge, and reflection. Furthermore, this dialogue calls for embracing the other and encouraging mutual exchanges.

However, Bidima's idea of ‘otherness’ differs from Mbembe's concept of ‘in-commun.’ The primary distinction is that ‘otherness’ remains within the metaphysics of identity and difference, whereas ‘in-commun’ seeks to transcend this dialectic. Although similar, the vitalist perspective in this ethics differs from the philosophy of crossing, particularly in its fundamental bases. The ethics of ‘in-commun’ is rooted in a broad cosmology that encompasses not only humans but all living beings on Earth. Moreover, Mbembe's critique questions traditional politics, opening the way for a new form of community – the terrestrial community – and a new understanding of politics – the politics of the living. Both the concepts of ‘otherness’ and ‘in-commun’, however, converge in their critique of contemporary crises, mainly through an emphasis on *crossing* and the *passersby*.

Finally, a parallel can be drawn between how Bidima and Mbembe focus on the future of Life on Earth through the lens of crossing philosophy and the ethics of the in-common. Their ideas raise the key question of how humans can create the best conditions for all beings, especially amidst ongoing threats of death within contemporary sociopolitical, economic, or religious contexts. Living according to the crossing philosophy involves cultivating relationships with oneself and others that foster openness, encounter, exchange, and connection. This way of life is dynamic, orienting itself toward the present and future rather than being anchored in the past, in pursuit of optimal existence. Unlike traditional African philosophies that emphasise the 'having-been,' Bidima stresses the significance of the 'not yet' (*nondum*), resonating with Ernst Bloch's concepts of hope. (Bidima 2002, p. 8) Hope and crossing underscore the 'not-yet' and the ephemeral, elusive nature of future possibilities. As Bidima notes, this notion challenges mere projection, highlighting ambiguities, shifts in the journey, and the openness of history to new opportunities. It shifts the focus from past origins to what is emerging and the transitions involved. (Bidima 2002, p. 8)

In summary, examining the genealogy of the passer-by figure and comparing it with the Afropolitan or Bidimas crossing subject reveals important implications for modern subjectivity, especially regarding temporality, spatiality, and the range of cultural, political, and artistic influences that shape our reality. Both the passer-by, the Afropolitan, and the crossing subject represent a way of life grounded in values such as openness and a rejection of exclusive ties to objects linked to a specific history. I argue that this perspective aligns with Mbembe's ethics and reflects principles of existential philosophy relevant to our current era. Essentially, it signifies practical wisdom in life with ethical, political, economic, and cultural impacts.

Moving Beyond Identity and Belonging

To establish a meaningful connection between the analysis of the passer-by in Hölderlin's work, the Afropolitan, and Mbembe's ethics of the passer-by, it seems necessary to move beyond viewing the passer-by merely as a model for understanding the diasporic identity within the context of global mobility, particularly regarding migration. Beyond the anthropological and cultural dimensions of identity, reflecting on the figure of the passer-by invites a critique of contemporary humanity and its relationship to property. To fully grasp the significance of this concept, it is crucial to situate Mbembe's ethics within the broader context of his work, particularly his critique of the exclusive right

of ownership. Mbembe's critique aims to clarify a specific type of human relationship to existence that is characterised by exclusion. (cf. Brinkman 2000; Miller 1997) This critique extends to racism, atavistic nationalism, nativism, and border politics, all rooted in the central issue of property, whose ultimate manifestation is the will to power. (cf. M'charek et al. 2014)

A careful reading of Mbembe's work suggests a specific interpretation of the relationship between power and property. This relationship laid the foundation for both colonial domination and post-colonial power. As he argues, Fanon's decolonisation theory is primarily grounded in a political theory of ownership that also embodies an ethics of struggle. For Fanon, struggles for independence are about self-ownership. There are efforts to repossess what is rightfully ours, which may involve reclaiming it by force if necessary. The processes of abolitionism and decolonisation were synonymous with reappropriating oneself, one's land, and one's traditions, mainly because the logic of colonial power rested on the exclusive right of ownership. The coloniser wielded unlimited power over the colonised by appropriating their lives and resources. Mbembe notes that this appropriation was justified through a legal framework:

"The civilized had a right to dominate the noncivilized, to conquer and subjugate the barbarians because of their intrinsic moral inferiority, to annex their lands, to occupy them and make them subjects. The original legal right of intervention was considered part of "just law," which could be applied equally to wars of extermination and to wars of subjugation. Out of the just law of war was born the just law of property." (Mbembe 2017, p. 61)

In other words, exclusive property rights were philosophically justified and legally founded. War acquired its complete legitimacy as the political manifestation of this right in the context of conquest. It symbolised the unlimited exercise of colonial power. Contemporary forms of governmentality in 21st-century liberal democracies exhibit a logic that is similar to that of earlier systems. The concept of property encompasses both material and intangible assets. The subjects of power may include the state and global financial systems operating under capitalist exploitation of labour and property.

Mbembe highlights that state capture has emerged in the context of hyperglobalization, which has led to the development of rules regulating intellectual property, capital flows, and investment protections. While these rules aim to generate and safeguard profits for financial institutions and multinational corporations, they can be reframed to support broader social goals. By

recognising the interconnectedness of politics and economics, as well as the relationship between public and private property, the state, and capital, we can work towards reducing the concentration of power among a small elite. This shift could lead to a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, ultimately decreasing the impoverishment of the majority. (cf. Villadsen and Wahlberg 2015)

The concept of 'pauperisation' underscores the importance of addressing the unequal distribution of wealth, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the monopolisation of shared resources. These challenges contribute to rising living costs and are relevant not just in the global context between Northern and Southern countries but also in all contemporary societies facing significant change. As Mbembe points out, these trends can lead to deeper social divisions and more significant distributional challenges, ultimately undermining social agreements within communities. By recognising the implications of unchecked power, we can work to foster more equitable economic systems and address systemic issues. Mbembe emphasises that tackling this systemic crisis is crucial to strengthening the foundations of a democratic society and to providing an opportunity for constructive reforms.

In essence, globalisation has significantly transformed the conditions of relationships at a socio-political level. In this new context, where the tendency is to cling to material possessions and continually seek to expand personal power, the figure of the passerby serves as a powerful reminder of our shared human experience. This experience encompasses the ideas of passage, finitude, mortality, and the transitory nature of all possessions. When individuals recognise themselves as strangers or passersby, they gain valuable insights into the ephemeral nature of life. By relinquishing the illusion of omnipotence, they can appreciate that the wealth they accumulate, the cultural products they create, and the territories they claim will ultimately be left behind when they pass on. This awareness paves the way for dissolving fixed notions of identity and difference, while also encouraging a re-evaluation of the concept of power and property rights. I propose that adopting this ethical perspective is crucial for fostering a unified humanity that stands in solidarity with all living beings and the world. Furthermore, embracing this mindset may lead us toward a new political and cosmological understanding of life that celebrates interconnectedness and mutual respect.

This concept, illuminated by the figure of the passer-by, offers an opportunity to rethink our thoughts, existence, and relationships rather than viewing them as a tragedy. Critique aims to inspire the emergence of a new human-

ity that actively rejects catastrophic and nihilistic ideologies often associated with philosophies of despair and the end of history. Central to this transformation is the exploration of language, the evolution of the human condition on Earth within a new political community, and ultimately, the well-being of all living beings. As Mbembe suggests, our current context is shaped by a culture of power and death, primarily due to humanity's strong attachment to modern symbols of authority, such as capital, technology, territories, and even the human body. (cf. Shaw and Meehan 2013) These symbols embody cultural, political, and economic dimensions. (cf. Papastergiadis 2010; Wolfe 2006) Recognising this attachment can help illuminate the roots of contemporary conflicts and violence, which I will explore in the subsequent chapters. (cf. Parizot 2018)

In this context, the reflection on the ethics of the passer-by is intended to establish a foundation for a renewed understanding of our place in the world. It means engaging with others, fostering exchange, promoting solidarity, and cultivating mutuality. As Kate and Philipsen express, "Hölderlin's aim is not a nostalgic (re-)construction of a lost 'home' for the modern alienated Self but the invention of a language for and of "(our) time": the time of modernity in which a radical openness of history to a real future may turn us all into strangers." (2023, p. 3) The concept of 'radical openness' suggests that by reconnecting with our origins – the figure of the stranger who is the human being here on Earth – we can explore new perspectives on humanity, society, politics, and economics. This perspective offers a refreshing counterpoint to the individualism that dominates modern philosophy and ethics. The following section will delve into the cosmological foundation of Mbembe's ethics, a crucial element for understanding its significance.

II. Foundation and Principles of Ethics

In the previous section, I examined the foundational ideas behind the ethic of the passer-by. My focus was on its context, objectives, and the challenges it presents. Ethics emerge from critical reflections on the current global socio-political crisis, particularly the unchecked power dynamics among individuals and between humanity and nature. This situation invites us to reconsider how power is wielded, as these dynamics contribute to our collective vulnerabilities. The concept of the passer-by provides a valuable normative framework for shaping individual and collective behaviour. It promotes ethical values that encourage us to renounce exclusive claims over reality. This raises important

questions about establishing a solid foundation for such an ethic. Should humanity rely on traditional ontologies or metaphysical frameworks that have contributed to our present challenges, or is it time to create a new foundation to revitalise our ethical perspectives and political actions? Mbembe challenges contemporary societies to reflect on this need for a new paradigm. He formulated the issue of the foundation of ethics as follows:

“Can the question of governing the Earth be grasped simply through the categories of social anthropology inherited from the nineteenth century? To what extent does the digital density of the contemporary human subject and its relationship with the animal, mineral, and vegetable world, as well as with the rest of the living world, oblige a way of thinking about the Earth that is no longer based on the old separation of subject and object, of the useful and the useless, of that which counts and that which does not?” (Mbembe 2022, p. 15)

This section aims to constructively explore the philosophical quest for a new foundation that underpins our reflections on the ethics of the passer-by and its guiding principles. Mbembe’s insights offer a compelling argument for the ethical principles of reparation and renunciation as essential conditions for limiting power. By advocating for a refoundation of ethics grounded in a cosmology of the living or general ecology, we open the door to transformative possibilities for ethical thought and political practice.

II.1 The General Ecology as the Foundation of Ethics

To fully understand Mbembe’s ethical argument, it is helpful to examine the concept of ‘general ecology’. This idea is introduced in his work *The Earthly Community* (2022), which serves as a section title in the first chapter. (2022, p. 7) General ecology highlights the interconnectedness of all elements within the universe, emphasizing the ‘mixing’ or ‘sharing’ of life across the animal, mineral, plant, and human kingdoms. (Mbembe 2022, p. 7) It illustrates that the Earth is part of an integrated living system that transcends the traditional boundaries between nature and culture as well as history and geography. Each element within this intricate web is interconnected with the Whole, existing in continual flux and engaging in cycles of circulation, renewal, and regeneration. Moreover, this concept recognizes the impact of human activities, such as creating images, symbols, information, and developing artifacts and

tools, which are integral to the ongoing process of ecological renewal. Mbembe refers to this continual process as “general ecology”. (2022, pp. 18–19)

What is General Ecology?

General ecology views the living world as a unified entity comprising diverse manifestations, encompassing both organic and inorganic environments. (cf. Dieterlen 1955; Mbembe 2022) In contrast to Nancy, Hölderlin, and Heidegger, who grounded their ideas in Western ontotheology and metaphysics, Mbembe draws from pre-colonial African cosmologies. This perspective views animals, biodiversity, and humans as part of a life continuum, reflecting the evolution and transformation of all beings. It identifies the elements of air, Earth, fire, and water as fundamental to this dynamic, alongside humans, spirits, plants, and animals. (cf. Zahan 1949; Mbembe 2022) These elements encapsulate the Earth, embodying both movement and a shared power among all beings. (cf. Morton-Williams et al. 1966; Mbembe 2022)

By examining these elements, we gain valuable insights into the core principles of African cosmologies, particularly the unity that exists within the diversity of the Earth's constituents. (cf. Ganay 1949; Mbembe 2022) This understanding leads Mbembe to explore what he calls the coexistence of beings in a ‘compensatory relationship.’ This concept suggests that beings possess an intrinsic rhythm as they exchange reciprocal energy. (Mbembe 2022, pp. 19–20) The term ‘exchange of energy’ refers to the fundamental interactions and mutual dynamics that emerge from this vital momentum. (2022, p. 8) Such dynamics play a crucial role in the regeneration of life on Earth, underscoring the importance of understanding these relationships to foster a more holistic perspective on life. (2022, p. 9)

General ecology offers a constructive perspective on the Earth, viewing it as a dynamic and vibrant entity marked by continuous evolution, transformation, unity, and multiplicity. These characteristics enable the Earth to exist, nurture and support diverse life forms. Mbembe emphasises that the Earth uniquely balances austerity and abundance, providing an inclusive habitat for all living beings without distinction. Philosophical insights from the Dogons and reflections from thinkers like Germaine Dieterlen (1962) and Amos Tutuola (1952) collectively highlight Earth's significant diversity and adaptability, its openness to various elements, and its ever-present dynamism. (Mbembe 2022, p. 8) In this framework, general ecology underscores a profound ontological relationship among all elements of the Earth. It illustrates how the Earth welcomes and sup-

ports each being. (Mbembe 2022, pp. 14–15) This assumption of general ecology is the foundation for Mbembe's ethical and political thought.

General Ecology and Ethics

The ethics of the passer-by foster a recognition of the vital relationship each individual has with the Earth. From the standpoint of general ecology, every human being is intricately linked to the Earth as a whole, transcending narrow ties to specific territories, such as ethnicity, nation, or continent. This broader understanding is essential for appreciating the thesis of the passer-by's ethic, particularly regarding the concept of living and the relationships that unite all beings with their ecosystems, regardless of their place of origin. As Mbembe articulates:

“At the limit, a ‘human’s specificity’ is not to belong to any particular place, since this human, composed of other living beings and species, belongs to all places together. Learning to move constantly from one place to another should be its goal, as it is, in any case, its destiny” (Mbembe 2019b, pp. 187–188)

While certain philosophical traditions focus ethics on the uniqueness of individuals in relation to other living beings, general ecology advocates for an ethical framework rooted in openness and reciprocity between humans and the world. By adopting this perspective, we can cultivate a more comprehensive and interconnected understanding of our role within the broader ecological community. (cf. Fernandez 2019) Exploring birth, life cycles, coexistence, circulation, and dwelling is essential. While birth does not define life in itself, it serves as a pivotal gateway into a terrestrial existence that has been evolving for centuries. Mbembe insightfully states:

“For that matter, there is no secret that birth as such conceals. Birth offers but the fiction of a world that is past despite all our attempts to attach it to everything that we venerate: custom, culture, tradition, rituals, the set of masks with which each of us is decked out.” (Mbembe 2019b, pp. 187–188)

This suggests that an individual's future and manner of existence are not pre-determined; instead, the essence of life remains an enigma. Dwelling on Earth among the living invites us to embrace an openness to the unknown and fosters a spirit of coexistence. (cf. Lenaerts 2006) Moreover, Mbembe emphasises that

shared experiences and circulation are essential for a deeper understanding of life beyond individual conception and birth. As individuals journey from one geographical location to another, they share their lives with others, enriching their experiences as they traverse the globe. Each new encounter allows individuals to explore new potentialities. Consequently, history is marked by circulation, encounter, and distancing processes. Life can be seen as an open synthesis of possibilities rather than a fixed substance. This idea underpins the concept of the *Passerby*. Mbembe expresses the profound meanings associated with the term “*passerby*”. He observes,

“Few terms are as laden with meanings as *passant* is. But, for starters, this word *passant* contains several others within in, beginning with *pas* (“not” as well as “step”) – at once a negative instance (that which is not or does not yet exist or exists only through its absence), and a rhythm, cadence, and even speed, along a course or a march, or through a displacement – that which is (in) movement.” (Mbembe 2019b, p. 186)

This quotation raises questions about what Mbembe means by “not yet being.” He asserts that the *passerby* “does not yet exist or exists only through its absence.” (Mbembe 2019b, p. 186) The Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction suggests that something cannot both ‘be’ and ‘not be’ simultaneously. This principle underlies Western understandings of identity, where the *self* is often seen as a consistent substance. However, Mbembe challenges this view by proposing that life consists of “a series of moments and instants that lack any overarching unity.” (Mbembe 2003, p. 21) Therefore, he encourages us to acknowledge the fluidity and dynamism of life, which is full of potential and not limited by predetermined outcomes. By embracing life’s possibilities for thought, action, and personal development, individuals can transcend the confines of cultural and educational influences and the restrictive systems that may shape their sense of self. This mindset allows for a more expansive and authentic journey of self-discovery and growth.

Moreover, to further develop this argument, Mbembe introduces the concepts of event and movement, which provide a deeper understanding of life as a coexistence of being and “not yet being,” as well as identity and difference. (2003, pp. 2–3) This definition challenges notions of biological essentialism and nativism. Life is not limited to the past; it is a dynamic process. The ‘past’ should be seen as an active process. Potentialities emerge and strive to be born within the event of life in the present. As Mbembe articulates, “life does

not exist in and of itself. It does not reflect a generic property but a mode of being-in-the-world; in short, a manner of confronting and engaging with the world and its full range of potentialities.” (Mbembe 2003, p. 1) Building on the concept of life, Mbembe articulates an ethic of commonality that prioritises the collective well-being of all living beings.

Embracing principles of openness and dynamism paves the way for creating new and meaningful connections among all living beings. An individual open to the diverse facets of their existence can transcend the limitations imposed by identity, community membership, and territoriality. By fostering these inclusive connections, we can collaboratively cultivate a harmonious existence for everyone. Mbembe declares: “future thinking will necessarily be about passage, crossing, and movement. This thinking will be about flowing life, about passing life, which we strive to translate as an event” (Mbembe 2019b, p. 188) A similar vision of the world shared in common is further explored in the book *Brutalisme* (2020a) Mbembe argues that being a passerby is fundamental to the human condition on Earth. Democracy’s role in our planetary age is to ensure, organise, and manage this passage rather than to create new forms of closure. (Mbembe 2020a, p. 52)

By embracing the ethics of the passerby, individuals can cultivate a deeper awareness of their connection to the source of life, transcending their personal histories. This heightened awareness allows them to recognise, welcome, and share their lives with other humans and all living beings. Three cosmological arguments emphasise the importance of openness. First, life itself is inherently open and in constant flux. This openness begins at birth and continues as individuals grow, becoming increasingly aware of the life they carry within, which connects them to the universal life of the cosmos. Essentially, each person is not merely an object but a subject of life, playing a unique role in the circulation of life on Earth. Their body functions as a passage, while their breath symbolises their shared existence with fellow humans and non-human beings. From a socio-political perspective, this dynamism is evident in the processes of care and sharing that shape human relationships daily. This understanding of the Earth is just one among many.

According to Mbembe, the Earth is not merely a geological formation or a compact mass of multiple and stratified layers. (Mbembe 2022, pp. 8–10) It is not a silent entity but is caught in an endless network of symbolic functions. It can be viewed as the “actual womb of the world,” ensuring the balance of the cosmos, and thus making it a space of commonality and sharing. (Mbembe 2024) In other words, there is a fundamental bond between human events and

the Earth. (cf. Pravinchandra 2016) The Earth makes human life and all forms of life possible. Currently, it is the only planet known to contain life. Thus, Mbembe concludes that if the Earth functions, there can only be a shared identity under the generalised circulation of life and living things. Humans are called to return to these circulations and flows of life. The concept of ‘circulation’ is thus central to both Mbembe’s ethics, political philosophy, and cosmology. It not only defines life as a dynamic process but also establishes the normative conditions necessary for sustaining ethical and political relationships on Earth. (cf. Messeri 2017; Lineweaver and Chopra 2012) Thus, Mbembe argues:

“Our fundamental relationship to the Earth, Mbembe argues, is therefore that of the passer-by. The Earth receives us and shelters us as passers-by. It also maintains the traces of our passage as passers-by, and, in the last resort, it is perhaps this tension between sojourn and temporality, passage and permanence, that gives the Earth its character as indecipherable enigma, something that the ideology of property stubbornly refuses to accept.” (Mbembe 2022)

In the final analysis, the concept of the passer-by illustrates the human ability to share and nurture the life that circulates on Earth. (cf. Messeri 2017; Stein Pedersen et al. 2019) The principle of general ecology sheds light on the passer-by’s consciousness and informs their behaviour about the transient nature of life. Freedom is understood to encompass three key elements: first, an awareness of the interconnectedness of all living beings; second, a renunciation of power and ownership over living beings and Earth’s resources; and third, a commitment to caring for and repairing the reciprocal relationships between humans and other forms of life on the planet. The argument suggests that a concept of human freedom rooted in renunciation and a sense of ‘being in common’ is essential for the survival of the human species and the continued existence of life on Earth. (cf. Al-Nakib 2020; Milligan 2016)

In conclusion, the primary aim of general ecology is to lay the groundwork for the ethics of the passer-by. This involves investigating the meaning and conditions of individual responsibility in the context of power abuse, stemming from the exclusive appropriation of the Earth on one side and the experience of vulnerability on the other. Having explored the historical context of Mbembe’s ethical dilemma, I will examine the principles underpinning the passer-by’s ethics. In the next section, I will explain how the concepts of the passer-

by, alongside ideas of openness and circulation, form the basis for imagining and justifying Mbembe's ethical principle of reparation.

II.2 The Principles of the Ethics of the Passerby

Mbembe defines the ethic of the passer-by as "an ethics that says that only by moving away from a place can one better name and inhabit it". (Mbembe 2019b, p. 188) He does not provide a clear directive for conducting or outlining an ideal of the good, at least not in the way classical ethical theories do. Instead, he suggests possible conditions for habitation on Earth. However, what does the notion of 'moving' entail? Who moves, and for what reasons? Blaskow effectively addresses a fundamental tension in Mbembe's text: his difficulty delineating the practical implications of his ethics for individual and political action. As Blaskow points out,

"The question remains, as to how such a perspective may bring about the sort of genuine social and cultural change claimed? [...] In addressing that question, we need to discover what kinds of elements go to make up such an ethical pharmacology?" (Blaskow 2022, pp. 31–32)

It seems reasonable to suggest that Mbembe's somewhat complex ideas contain essential ethical implications for individual and collective life. I will interpret the passer-by's ethics in this section in relation to Mbembe's other works. After analysing the text on Ethics of the Passer-by, which introduces the ethical question and develops the central argument, I will highlight the philosophical principles underpinning this ethic. These principles include the principle of reparation (Mbembe 2019b, p. 185), while the principle of renunciation will be discussed in the final section.

The Principle of Reparation

Blaskow's (2022) critique provides a framework for exploring the principle of reparation, which is vital for understanding the relevance and implications of Mbembe's ethics. He notes,

"While its great strength as an analysis is to provide us with a rich vocabulary to describe the crisis we are going through, it does not provide any effective way out. More pertinently, it describes the problem and even points to where

humanity is headed, but does not diagnose the issue in a way that enables us to deal with it practically and effectively.” (Blaskow 2022, p. 33)

Blaskow presents four objections to the passer-by ethic. First, he questions the implications of this ethic for practical action. Second, he highlights the challenge of translating this ethic into concrete language and actions. Third, he discusses the effects of this ethic on the lives of those who practice it. Lastly, he considers whether it is possible to live such an ethic on a global scale, beyond the specific context of the state. The goal of this section is not to answer Blaskow’s objections, which are indeed pertinent, but rather to understand them in light of Mbembe’s entire body of work. Despite these limitations, we can derive certain principles from the ethical perspective of the passer-by. Although Mbembe does not explicitly articulate these principles, they allow us to consider the implications of his theory for practice.

The first principle is reparation, which appears across Mbembe’s texts, articles, and lectures. This principle can be defined as acting upon and accepting our collective responsibility for life. It stems from planetary consciousness, which asserts that we live alongside all human and non-human beings and share the Earth with them. Therefore, we must take care of this shared space. (Mbembe 2019b, p. 187) The ethical question that arises from the concept of ‘in-common’ is as follows: “If ultimately, humanity exists only through being in and of the world, how can we find a relationship with others based on the reciprocal recognition of our common vulnerability and finitude?” (Mbembe 2019b, p. 3) For Mbembe, the term “other” encompasses all who have suffered injustice and violence, not only as a result of racial exclusion policies but also due to global economic domination. The ethical principle of reparation is firmly anchored in the recognition of the vulnerability of living beings, particularly in light of the historical encounters between the West and the rest of the world during slavery and colonialism. This vulnerability remains evident today through postcolonial authoritarian regimes, global capitalist systems, and neoliberal policies. (Gilroy 2020)

The concept of vulnerability suggests that humans and living beings are not immortal. Several factors contribute to the extinction of species on Earth. Among these causes is human activity. The detrimental effects of human activity can be evidenced by the occurrence of catastrophic events such as wars and genocides, which result in the loss of millions of lives. Furthermore, the unequal distribution of wealth on Earth contributes to humanitarian crises, including famine and epidemics. Finally, the disappearance of animal and plant

species is caused by ecological disasters due to industrialisation and technological escalation. (cf. Mbembe 2020a, pp. 68–69) The examples illustrate the extent to which living beings are vulnerable and the responsibility of humanity (cf. Raymond et al. 2020). Furthermore, they challenge the modern concept of power and instrumental reason, which claims to liberate humans from finitude and death. (cf. Goldberg 2018; Parisi 2017)

Consequently, the consciousness of sharing a collective life is a pivotal aspect of an ethics of reparation. This principle entails caring for human relationships with other human beings and living creatures, particularly those who are vulnerable, such as the ill, the poor, refugees, and those residing in camps. (cf. Mbembe 2017, p. 7; Cock 1981) The principle of reparation offers an alternative perspective on the relationship between humans and the Earth through the lens of passer-by ethics. According to Mbembe, no individual has sovereign power over the Earth. While there may be ways to utilise this shared soil and shelter across various locations, it cannot be owned or entrusted solely to one person's goodwill. Ultimately, we are primarily its inhabitants, and for many of us, we are just passing through. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 36)

In light of the impact of instrumental reason – particularly the transformation of the human being and the Earth into commodities, the degradation of ecosystems through overexploitation, and the inequality that results from the pursuit of individual profit – ethics aims to derive human behaviour from principles that guarantee the sustainability of life on Earth. (Xu et al. 2020) The concept of reparation refers to the care of life rather than its appropriation and destruction. (cf. Mbembe 2020a, pp. 230–231; Appiah 2004) No one, not even a state, has the right to own the Earth, argues Mbembe. Notwithstanding legal fictions, we are not its owners if, by 'property rights,' we mean the integral holding and exercise of 'full powers over the thing-object of law'. (cf. Mbembe 2022, p. 36) Consequently, the core argument of the principle of reparation is what Mbembe terms the 'planetary entanglement' of the living. (Mbembe 2001, p. 81, 2021b, pp. 7–41) This argument is the premise of Mbembe's dialectic of the planetary subject. It could be interpreted as the foundation for his cosmology, ethics, and political criticism. The concept of 'planetary entanglement' posits a debt relationship between humans and the living world. (Mbembe 2020a, pp. 98–99) Life on Earth depends on the continued existence of the human species and its biodiversity. Any adverse action on the living affects the evolutionary cycle of life on Earth and compromises the human species. (Mbembe 2020a, pp. 177–178)

Finally, in the context of the inherent tension between the human tendency towards excessive power and the reality of the contemporary crisis, particularly the finitude it exposes, the principle of reparation is a relevant consideration for developing concrete responses. In Blaskow's description of the passerby's ethics, he outlines the crises the planet faced around 2020. (Blaskow 2022) These crises included the significant bushfires that threatened a substantial portion of Australia, destroying numerous human lives, protected species, and ecosystems. Furthermore, the economic and social consequences of these disasters, including material losses, were considerable, estimated at thousands of dollars. The disasters, the inevitable result of global warming, are leading to other international crises, such as the displacement of thousands of refugees and the necessity for humanitarian aid.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted stark inequalities between the developed and developing worlds, particularly in access to resources needed to contain the epidemic, including vaccines, medical supplies, and other essential materials. (Sabu 2020.) The simultaneous occurrence of these crises underscores the urgent need to rebuild the foundations of our humanity. (cf. Mbembe 2022, pp. 114–115) However, it is unclear how reparation can be made if this principle is not considered and recognised as a fundamental guiding principle for our communities' daily activities. The current planetary crises necessitate a reevaluation of the principles that underpin the approach to problems and the conception of solutions. Elements of this rethinking can be found in Mbembe's 'passer-by' ethic.

Blaskow emphasises that Mbembe confidently disregards the confines of national history, identity, and borders, expanding his concept of geography to encompass the entire world. This 'throw-away' attitude reflects the assured perspective of the passer-by, promoting a counterintuitive approach to the current global crisis. By prioritising mindset over mere policy, this perspective offers an intelligent and empathetic framework for effectively addressing global challenges. (cf. Blaskow 2022) With Blaskow, we can argue that even if this ethics does not prescribe practical conduct to guide politics, it has the merit of formulating principles that serve as reference points for thinking about a new way of living and a politics of life for our time. By assuming our status as passers-by, we not only recreate our cultures, but also repair life from all that alienates it. The following section will examine the second principle of the Passer-by ethic, namely the principle of renunciation.

The Principle of Renunciation

In the preceding section, I analysed the ethical principle of reparation. It has been demonstrated that reparation signifies the acknowledgement of past transgressions, the establishment of a novel human community predicated upon the tenets of accountability, and the sharing of the planet and its resources. This section will analyse the second principle of the passer-by's ethic, which is the principle of renunciation. Although this principle was not explicitly discussed in the works before *Necropolitics* (2019b) Mbembe's ethical and political critique must be fully understood. The principle of renunciation is the fundamental ethical condition for achieving reparation. In this sense, it is inextricably linked to it. In his book *Brutalism* (2024), Mbembe explicitly demonstrates the link between the ethical principle of renunciation and reparation. Mbembe writes:

"Reparation requires the renunciation of exclusive forms of appropriation, the recognition that the incalculable and the inappropriate exist and that, consequently, there can be no exclusive possession and occupation of the Earth. As a sovereign body, it belongs only to itself, and no one can enclose its reserve of germinal matter, neither in advance nor for eternity." (Mbembe 2024, p. 150)

This quotation highlights the exclusive appropriation of the Earth, the reduction of all reality, including the human, to the status of an object of calculation available for the market, and the appropriation of the inappropriate as a central theme in Mbembe's philosophy. The question is thus: to whom do the Earth and its living beings belong? (cf. Kasting and Catling 2003; Lineweaver and Chopra 2012) This question critiques the tendency of a section of humanity to claim ownership over humanity's goods, biodiversity, and the Earth as a whole. The Ethics of the Passerby is predicated on the recognition of a dichotomy between, on the one hand, the human tendency to become attached to the Earth and to claim exclusively the resources it provides and, on the other hand, the necessity to renounce all forms of exclusive appropriation as a condition for attaining greater freedom and solidarity among all living beings. Mbembe presents this dilemma in the following terms:

"Is losing everything or nearly everything-better, letting go of everything, or renouncing everything or nearly everything-the condition, then, under which we may win some serenity in this world and age of turbulence, a world

in which, oftentimes, what one has does not tally with what one is and what one earns entertains only a distant relation with what one loses?" (Mbembe 2017, p. 195)

In light of Mbembe's concept of renunciation, it is necessary to inquire about its precise meaning. This quotation presents the ethical hypothesis of renunciation as the ethical condition of individual serenity and the relationship between living beings. However, to comprehend the implications of this hypothesis, it seems necessary to employ hermeneutical methodology. The notions of 'losing everything' and 'letting go of everything' will be interpreted in terms such as 'moving away', as the subject's renunciation of exclusive ownership over the Earth. (Mbembe 2020a, p. 237) An examination of Mbembe's ethical reflections, as presented in this essay, in conjunction with other writings that address the question, will lead to an interpretation of the hypothesis of renunciation as a core principle of the ethics of the passer-by.

The ethic of the passer-by may be defined as the subject's self-renunciation of the exclusive ownership rights, which is governed by the law of soil and blood. The argument that justifies this renunciation is the ephemeral nature of life, on the one hand, and the contingency of all those powers to which man aspires by nature, on the other hand. The objective is to replace individualistic ethics and the economy of death with the politics of life, sharing, and responsibility, which entails stripping away the power symbolised by capital. (cf. Koning 2018) To understand this argument, recall the ethical dilemma presented in the text. Mbembe's reflections on the ethics of passersby were informed by a concern with the planetary abuse of power, its negative consequences, and the question of freedom. (Mbembe 2017, p. 147) In analysing the text of the passer-by's ethics, it was argued that the ethics defined power through synonyms such as 'force' and 'law of the sword'. However, Mbembe provides a more explicit definition of this concept in his book *Brutalism* (2024). Mbembe writes,

"By 'force' and 'power', one ought to understand not only the spurting explosion of bodies and muscles, of fire, machines, electricity, rolling mills, gases, or even what have been new materials, or even the kind of 'storm of steel' most effectively summed up by the idea of the bomb. We must finally understand the term 'force' as the *appropriation* of the *inappropriable*." (Mbembe 2024, pp. 9–10)

This definition is of great importance, as it elucidates both the ethical quandary of the bystander and its intended outcome. Indeed, ‘force’ and ‘power’ are defined beyond their materialistic meaning, as formulated in Western metaphysics. Aristotle, for instance, and a long tradition of metaphysics defined power as dynamic – that is, movement. The capacity to set things in motion is a defining characteristic of power. However, in Mbembe’s work, the concept of power is described as the human tendency to exercise an exclusive right of ownership over the living, to appropriate that which is in-appropriable. The notion of “inappropriability” is defined as everything that cannot be the object of an instrumental right of use or abuse due to its incommensurability. For example, the collective resources of the planet that are indispensable for the perpetuation of life – air, water, and ecosystems – are not subject to appropriation. This encompasses the fundamental right to life, including the right to life of humans. The assertion that life and resources are inalienable implies that they possess a value that transcends the limitations of instrumental use by individuals or human communities.

Mbembe’s critique of power appears not only in the book *Brutalism* (2024); it also appears in earlier texts, such as *Out of the Dark Night* (2021b), where power has manifested itself in both colonial and post-colonial regimes and in slave systems. (Mbembe 2021b, p. 2) In *Out of the Dark Night* (2021b), colonial rule is characterised as ‘a will to power’ and refers to relations of domination (Mbembe 2021b, p. 65). Mbembe writes:

“The critique of colonialism or the imperial fact has not yet said anything about colonialism and imperialism until it confronts this will to power and how its ontological, metaphysical, theological and mythological dimensions are constantly veiled. As a will to power, colonial reason is at the same time a religious, mystical, messianic, utopian reason.” (Mbembe 2013, pp. 89–90)²

This statement explains Mbembe’s conceptualisation of will to power. This notion does not simply refer to the instrumental use of political force, but to a complex mechanism of commodification that transforms humans and the natural world into marketable objects. (cf. Morales 2017; Savage 1992) Both the enslaved and the colonised were the concrete figures who experienced this commodification. Due to their exploitation, they became objects of Western capitalist economic and political violence. Mbembe writes: “Power of capture,

2 My translation.

power of control and power of polarisation, capitalism has always needed racial subsidies to exploit the resources of the planet” (Mbembe 2017, p. 179) The concept of power can be understood as an expression of individuals’ will to exercise control over both their bodies and territories. Mbembe employs a psychoanalytic and gender theory-informed approach to analyse this concept. The utilisation of power during the periods of slavery, colonialism and post-colonialism is symbolised by the phallus, the male genital organ. This symbolism is not solely associated with the pursuit of sexual violence and domination but also with the enjoyment of pleasure to the fullest extent. The will to power is thus defined as the *hubris*, consumption, excess, extravagance and expenditure of the subjects’ lives. This concept offers a fresh perspective on the critique of capitalist modes of accumulation during slavery and colonisation, which remains ongoing in the contemporary global economy. (cf. Achtnich 2022)

At the foundation of ethics lies the idea of renouncing power. The question underlying this idea is how to establish a planetary human community founded on care for life, planetary responsibility, and justice. The limitation of human power represents a solution to political and economic excesses, as it manifested during slavery and colonisation and remains evident in the post-colonial era. Ethics aims to establish the normative criteria for limiting individual and collective ‘power’ across the globe, for sharing life on Earth in a context marked by the extreme fragility of all and everything. (cf. Mbembe 2019b, p. 184) The ethical subject renounces the impulse to possess everything exclusively for themselves or their community, affording all living beings, human and non-human, an equal opportunity to benefit from the resources of life.

It is, however, of the utmost importance to differentiate the ethical principle of renunciation proposed in the passer-by ethic from other forms of renunciation specific to monotheistic religions. Indeed, in monotheistic faiths, renunciation is understood as a process of inner transformation for the believer, leading to an identification with an ideal of life as envisioned by the divine will. In Christianity, the act of renunciation necessarily entails the sacrifice of one’s life on the Cross, which represents the surrender of one’s will and desires. Renouncing one’s family and friends is thus perceived as a precondition for adhering to the divine will, which guarantees the subject’s salvation. The concept of renunciation has been interpreted in various ways throughout the history of Christianity. This can be observed in the varying interpretations of the concept among desert monks, missionaries and priests. Among the Church Fathers, notably St Augustine, renunciation means the surrender of the individual’s freedom, will and conscience to God. This entails replacing the terrestrial

metropolis, founded on human affection for self to the extent of contempt for God, with the celestial metropolis, founded on human love for God to the extent of self-contempt. The objective is the salvation of humanity.

However, the ethical horizon of passerby ethics is the Earth. The concept of renunciation is ethical, political, and cosmological rather than theological. This principle has a planetary scope, extending the individual to the horizon of the living. Furthermore, the objective is not the pursuit of individual well-being or spiritual fulfilment. The *raison d'être* is to create the conditions for a planetary distribution of life resources. This definition of ethics differs from those whose horizon is individual happiness. In contrast to individualistic ethics, which is concerned solely with the subjective satisfaction of the individual, the ethics of the passer-by is oriented towards the repair of the living. The intention is to liberate the self from the excesses of power. This ethical stance is predicated on the cosmological assumption of humanity as an open system, inextricably linked to all living organisms.

Blaskow recognises the idealism behind this hope but also sees its potential through the figure of the passerby. This figure has a positive connotation, as it affirms the original, unrealised character of a subject. While Blaskow appreciates Mbembe's work, he points out a weakness in it. He argues that Mbembe's chapter on *Phanon's Pharmacy* directly addresses core issues of colonialism and ways to overcome oppression. This is demonstrated by revealing the hidden terrors of democracy, exposing 'brutal behaviour by individuals of the highest culture.' The harsh truth remains that the primitive man within each of us is still alive, and these primitive conditions can always be reawakened, thus confirming that such a psyche is indestructible. (Blaskow 2022)

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss the meaning, context, foundation, and principles of Mbembe's ethics of the passer-by and demonstrate their relevance for our understanding of contemporary politics. While contemporary excess of power manifests the vulnerability of the modern subject, ethics raises the issue of its limitation and the sharing of life resources among all living beings on Earth. In essence, ethics does not oppose the concept of interest per se, but rather its application – the egoistic will to power that governs any quest for interest. In contrast to the narrow self-interest of the subject in liberal democracies, Mbembe's ethics proposes the interest of the whole living being. It extends the

notion of interest beyond the individual and the community of blood and history. This means a willingness to engage ethically in reparations and sharing life on the planet. The subject of ethics becomes aware that “the Other is only the Other insofar as he has a place among us, insofar as he finds some room among us, insofar as we make a place for him among us. Recognition of the human that one is, such is the condition under which the man that lives on this Earth, this Earth as the home of all, is more than a pile of organs.” (Mbembe 2019b, p. 140) In a context where individual interest, pleasure and enjoyment are perceived as the purpose of existence, this ethic may appear utopian. Nevertheless, Mbembe posits that this is the only viable approach to ensuring the continued existence of life on Earth. Only the subject who acknowledges their status as a passer-by, their vulnerability, and that of others, can share the Earth and life resources among all living beings, human and non-human.

Conclusion: Towards Afroplanetarianism

“All of us have our own life destination, a place we are trying to reach. And for everyone, there is the possibility of getting there someday. We just don't know where that promised fountain is located. But once we get there, we realize that this is it, this is the place we have longed for. We realize and experience the meaning of our life.”

— Mosatsugu Momotake

Two significant encounters have profoundly influenced my introduction to philosophy: Martin Heidegger and Achille Mbembe. My engagement with Heidegger's work accompanied me throughout my Master's degree in philosophy, which I completed in 2012 at the Catholic University of Central Africa in Yaoundé, Cameroon. In contrast, Mbembe's thought has been central to my doctoral research, which I began in 2020 at the University of Münster in Germany, and the outcomes of which are published in this book. When referencing Heidegger, I do not intend to suggest a direct connection between his philosophy and Mbembe's; instead, I aim to clarify the historical and philosophical context that sparked my interest in Mbembe. This background provides the context for a critical re-evaluation of the initial aims I set for my research into his work. After outlining this context, I will discuss several strengths of Mbembe's philosophy, especially its framing of ethical and political questions relevant to our time. I will briefly explain how this thought broadens new perspectives in contemporary debates about the future of life on Earth, initiated by those advocating for environmental ethics, global justice, or planetary ethics and justice. This critical re-examination will establish the foundation for exploring the concept of afroplanetarianism, which I propose

as a way to reimagine the future of life in Africa and worldwide, beyond the limitations of critical historicism and utopianism that characterise Mbembe's thought.

How to Philosophise in Death-Worlds?

My experience of socio-political and economic turmoil in my native Cameroon – and in various other African countries I have visited – has shaped my philosophical inquiries. The political landscape in which I was conducting my studies was characterised by profound violence and socio-political inequalities. In 2012, shortly after completing my Master's thesis on the question of ontological difference in Heidegger, I witnessed the eruption of violence caused by the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Cameroon. This conflict was followed by the brutal repression of populations advocating for educational and juridical reforms in the English-speaking regions of the country. These two geopolitical crises, marked by significant loss of life and massive displacement, were compounded by Cameroon's authoritarian rule of President Paul Biya, who has held power for over forty years.

But beyond these tragedies, what characterises Cameroon's crisis, as well as the crises in other African and European countries I have visited, is the experience I mentioned in the introduction to this book: the concept of the death-world. This refers to a common sense shared by many populations regarding the absurdity of life and its value, as well as the loss of understanding of humans' potential to overcome the socio-political, economic, and environmental crises of our time. This loss of meaning and wonder about human existence on Earth manifests negatively through increased pessimism, relativism, or catastrophism, signalling the end of history. Notably, the crisis has also manifested as an escape from history, with one primary symptom being the devaluation of the human. This imaginary of escape moves in two directions: upwards, with a rise – particularly in northern hemisphere countries – of blind faith in technology as an unconditional substitute for humans; or downwards, with a romantic revival – especially among some peoples of the southern hemisphere – of the belief in an original harmony between humans and nature, and the hope of finding within it a soul supplement to overcome our contemporary tragedies.

Thus, the demotion of humans in their essential uniqueness inevitably led to the emergence of a particular kind of relationship with life in general, char-

acterised by relativism or romantic indifference. In either case, humans were no longer regarded as a significant event, whose realisation of their incommensurable value and inner potential could enable them to overcome crises encountered in the realms of thought and sociopolitical, ecological, and technological action. Having lost faith in themselves, they were valued only insofar as they were constantly dependent on external supplements – technology or natural forces – whose ultimate aim was to avoid death. This perpetual struggle against death, which paradoxically led to the rejection of concrete reality, became the foundation of the bond humans maintained with the collective. It not only resulted in the obliteration of the sense of their belonging to the world as individuals and as a political community, but also in the withering of all hope regarding the development of their potential on Earth.

While Heidegger's work introduced me to the importance of the question of being through the lens of ontological difference, it offered limited guidance on how to overcome the existential and philosophical crises of the death-world I faced. Sure, Heidegger's concerns primarily focused on what distinguishes humans from other beings. His thesis suggests that humans are not engaged with the world like a tree; instead, they are open to being through what he calls the *Ereignis*, which could be interpreted as the divine aspect of humanity. However, in contrast to ontotheology, which defines the divine in terms of a transcendent horizon, Heidegger approaches it through the existence of *Dasein*. In Heidegger's view, humans reveal the *Ereignis*, implying that it is in everyday life where humanity demonstrates its unique capacity for self-reflection, existential questioning, and the awareness of mortality. This philosophical framework raises essential questions about reconciling such ontological ideas with the concrete realities of the death-world in my country, Cameroon, and abroad. Recognising human despair and the loss of hope for a better, sustainable life for all, as an alternative to the political and economic brutality experienced in Cameroon and elsewhere, leads me to question Heidegger's thoughts on the ontological difference between humans and other entities. It was this questioning that sparked my initial encounter with Achille Mbembe's work.

From Ontology to Ethics: The Utopia of the In-Common

As I outline in this book, the core focus of Achille Mbembe's philosophy extends beyond the traditional search for an ontotheological being; instead, it revolves

around the concept of the human relation to the whole Living. Although this emphasis might not be immediately apparent in his earlier writings, a critical re-evaluation reveals how this perspective has evolved. Consequently, the motivation behind my engagement with his thought was twofold.

Firstly, I identified specific limitations within Heidegger's philosophy, particularly regarding the meaning and implications of ontological difference. Overcoming these limitations, I believed, required a shift toward Mbembe's philosophy, which highlights the necessity of grounding ethically and politically the conditions for a new human relationship to the Living being – *le Vivant* – rather than merely questioning being itself. Second, I was convinced that moving beyond Heidegger's ontology can transform our understanding of humanity's role, guiding principles of behaviour, and relationships with all living entities towards the tragic realities of the death-world. By prioritising life over ontology, I sought, through Mbembe's work, to explore a method for overcoming the crises I faced, along with their effects – such as pessimism, relativism, and romantic indifference – that characterise our death-worlds, from which new principles of conduct may be derived.

This attempt to transcend the pitfalls of metaphysics motivated me to study Mbembe's philosophy more closely. His reflection begins with observing what he describes as the widespread circulation of death in Africa and globally, evident in concepts like necropolitics, politics of enmity, or brutality. In response, he adopts the methods of critical historicism and utopia. While the first method aims to uncover the historical roots of today's sociopolitical, economic, and technological crises, the second seeks to think, from a normative perspective, about ethical and political proposals to address them. These solutions involve reflection on the cosmological foundations to build sustainable relationships between humans and all living beings on Earth.

Rethinking the conditions for the sustainability and resilience of life on Earth, as a way to transcend the tragic realities of our death-worlds, involves rediscovering what humans share with other living beings and drawing on essential principles for positive and transformative conduct. Instead of pursuing onto-theological solutions, what is needed is a critical reflection on the intrinsic bonds that connect humans beyond differences based on gender, race, class, and species. My aim, therefore, was to examine how Mbembe's cosmology, ethics, and politics – defined by the core idea of human entanglement with all living entities – ground such common principles of sustainable and durable life on Earth, whose goal is to facilitate individual and collective action globally, as well as serve as a model for planetary community, rights, and justice.

The initial ethical principle, which could help humans transcend the tragedies of the death-world and is rooted in general ecology, is renunciation. This concept suggests that individuals, as passersby, should guide their behaviour through self-renunciation, involving the relinquishment of all forms of unrestricted power over living entities. Two main arguments support the thesis of renunciation. First, it is recognised that the presence of passersby is ephemeral; second, the idea is that any exclusive claim to control a specific territory will ultimately be illegitimate. My examination of these arguments has led me to reflect on the meaning, foundations, and consequences of ethical principles of sharing and repairing, as complements to the principle of renunciation. These three principles advocate for the redistribution of life resources among all living entities on Earth as a prerequisite for the sustainability and resilience of the entire ecosystem. They are essential to conceptualise an earthly community, rights, and planetary justice.

The Conditions of a Terrestrial Community

The utopian vision of an earthly community, grounded in the passer-by's ethics and the politics of living, raises critical questions that deserve consideration. The goal is not to challenge the ethical validity of the principles underpinning this vision nor to doubt the strength of its cosmological arguments or conclusions. Instead, the focus is on clarifying the conditions required to realise the utopia Mbembe proposes, highlighting the unspoken aspects – those ambiguities often ignored due to limitations in discourse or the challenges inherent in the questions themselves. These overlooked elements are crucial for understanding how to achieve the aim of utopia. A key point is recognising that not all individuals experience the same living conditions. The reality of global material and socio-political disparities is so significant that it cannot simply be dismissed by a utopian narrative, regardless of its importance.

Although the Earth is a single entity, its resources are unevenly distributed; access to wealth and opportunity is often unequal. Some populations have greater access to resources, while others face systemic barriers that hinder participation in political, economic, and technological progress. Additionally, historical contexts complicate discussions of responsibility for the damage to relationships between people and other living beings globally. Even though it is ethically justifiable to claim shared responsibility among humans, we must recognise the historical injustices committed by certain groups alongside those victimised at different times. Therefore, the responsibility for repar-

ative actions cannot be shared equally. Recognising these disparities in our collective experience of the world is not an assertion that such inequalities are unchangeable; instead, it emphasises the importance of seeking factual truths about history.

As Mbembe contends, this recognition is crucial for promoting justice and reconciliation, thus opening the way for meaningful responses to the ethical challenges of communal living. From this perspective, we can raise several important questions about the relevance of Mbembe's philosophy: Does it truly empower the marginalised towards political and economic liberation, or does it risk entrenching new forms of exploitation by those in power? What does a common world mean within a global socio-political and economic landscape marked by ongoing inequalities and deeply rooted structures of violence? How do we assess the significance of ethical principles, such as renunciation, reparation, and truth, in response to the pressing demands of oppressed groups for genuine empowerment?

Without tangible acts of justice and reparation, one might reasonably argue that this utopian vision risks becoming a new ideology that sustains existing power dynamics. By emphasising ethical and political norms of renunciation and reparation for all living beings, the concept of planetary may obscure significant differences, both in problem formulation and in the development of practical solutions. The core of this critique is simple: for the idea of a terrestrial community based on planetary rights to be meaningful and relevant, it must catalyse dismantling the current status quo. This revolution necessitates a shift towards an emancipatory framework for those oppressed by unjust systems, rather than a mere collective utopia that overlooks the realities of exploitation and inequality. Only through such a transformative approach can we hope to redefine the pursuit of a just and equitable earthly community.

To thoroughly appreciate the critique presented, it is vital to revisit the foundational context of my inquiry. As I have previously stated, my engagement with Achille Mbembe's thought was driven by the urgent experience of political and economic violence in my homeland, Cameroon. On one hand, Mbembe's exploration resonated with me on an existential level, going beyond mere philosophical and theoretical interest. The importance of Mbembe's ethical framework lies in his ability to draw from African and global histories – such as colonialism, slavery, and other systemic violence – to critique the underlying structures of being, identity, and difference that continue to cause harm. In this perspective, ethics is no longer limited to personal conduct; instead, it broadens to include a planetary scope aimed at nurturing and healing

the living. I believe this conception of ethics has the potential to transform significantly our understanding of crises that threaten individuals and communities worldwide, as well as the particular challenges I face in my own life.

The lack of a precise formulation of actionable solutions that empower the oppressed with the epistemic and practical means for their liberation raises serious concerns. The ethic of the passer-by, central to the vision of an earthly community, risks becoming an ideology of domination cleverly disguised as an ethic of coexistence. This does not challenge the validity of ethical principles or their intended purpose; instead, it questions the silence surrounding the necessary means to achieve the stated goals. By encouraging a re-examination of these means – specifically, the preconditions and practical capacities required for implementing coexistence – this critique assesses the relevance of such ethics in relation to their actual impact on those who endure injustice daily. This rethinking of ethics critically reflects the aims that guided my initial research on Achille Mbembe. Far from expressing disillusionment with the solutions he has proposed for today's crises, this critique seeks to go beyond them. Recognising the limitations within his extensive work provides a foundation for exploring what lies beyond the proposed solutions by emphasising the conditions necessary for their full realisation. From this perspective, it is essential to consider the criticism Mbembe has faced in recent years – particularly concerning his role in co-organising, alongside some actors from African civil society, the Africa-France summit at the request of French President Emmanuel Macron.

While this engagement may be justified within the framework of international cooperation, it inevitably raises important questions. Is this involvement truly aligned with liberating African nations from Western political and economic dominance, whose so-called *Francafrrique* is considered one of its tools? How can we assess the relevance of the pan-African civil society structure established under Mbembe's leadership, known as the Foundation for Innovation and Democracy in Africa, in genuinely defending the interests of Africa's populations against Western Global Institutions, given that these institutions are the Foundation's principal financial supporters? Therefore, it is not surprising that some critics perceive a contradiction between Mbembe's political efforts and his original critique of neo-colonial domination. Although such engagement cannot be fully equated with his theoretical work, it highlights certain limitations of that work, especially when considering the often complex relationship between theory and practice.

Beyond merely exposing the contradictions between theory and practice, this commitment highlights the limitations of the planetary approach to contemporary political crises – specifically, its failure to adequately consider the conditions necessary for realising the utopia of an earthly community. To address this, we must collaboratively reflect on our singularities and shared experiences as essential elements of authentic political thought. Considering singularities does not mean succumbing to metaphysical essentialism; instead, it requires an awareness of the contingency underlying the human political condition. Recognising this contingency – encompassing inequalities and injustices – enables us to develop solutions that respect the ideal of a shared world while outlining the tangible conditions for its realisation. This endeavour demands the dismantling of institutions and structures of predation that permeate both impoverished nations and the broader global context, characterised by political, economic, and technological exploitation.

What Can We Expect from Philosophy?

Mbembe recognises the unique historical trajectories of societies. The manifestations of power, violence, and domination, alongside modes of resistance shaped by slavery and colonisation, have historically varied across different regions. However, merely acknowledging these distinctions is insufficient; it is equally essential to propose nuanced solutions tailored to each community's specific needs. We must provide pathways for people to reclaim their economic, political, and technological autonomy. Framing the problem in this manner does not entail abandoning ethics; instead, it involves critically examining the tangible conditions necessary for ethical realisation, transcending mere utopian aspirations. These objectives, though relevant, raise several questions that I do not wish to discuss in depth here, but rather highlight as openings towards a search beyond Mbembe's thought. The first and perhaps most fundamental question concerns the very status of our research: what can philosophy do in times of crisis? Is there any hope? Or is all hope in vain? This question interrogates the status of philosophy in the face of vulnerability in all its forms.

On one hand, philosophy is called to seek truth. Humanity is both unified and diverse. This unity in diversity is felt in life's joyful and sorrowful moments. On one hand, all humans experience this unity simply through their biological nature, as Mbembe reminds us. We all require air, water, Earth, and the es-

sential elements for survival on our planet. We also feel unity during moments of joy and happiness, through friendship, love, and solidarity among people, whether in politics, economics, culture, or religion. It is essential to acknowledge the unity of the human experience and condition as part of the existence of living beings. However, while it is true that humanity is one, together with the living, it is also true that there are many humanities, many worlds, and that the experience of living varies across different parts of the Earth. The question is how to thematise the experience of multiplicity without obscuring the truth of commonality. Answering this question is not only an act of truth from a theoretical perspective; it is also an act of ethical responsibility and justice towards those who, although aware of their unity with the human race, tragically experience the reality of their singularity. This argument is all the more compelling given that these individuals make up the majority of the human population. It consists not only of those who have faced historical violence but also of those who continue to experience it today. What relevant response can philosophy offer these populations? This question leads us into the second dimension of philosophy, namely the need for modesty and humility.

Philosophy can be humble and modest in asking questions and providing answers about the crises of complex human experience, mainly when this experience occurs within a dominant context. By “humility” and “modesty,” I mean ethical qualities that arise from the heart, rather than the earlier-mentioned pursuit of truth, which is an intellectual attitude. From the heart, philosophy finds the need for compassion towards the most vulnerable. Compassion primarily involves listening to their grievances. This listening is possible when philosophy recognises that they are the primary recipient of its message. Even if philosophy has a universal aim, it cannot be deaf to the cries of suffering that come from ongoing worldly experience. To listen does not mean praising the differences at the core of humanity, but acknowledging the tragic reality of inequalities and domination.

Humility entails providing conditions for sharing. These are the appropriate words to address those excluded from humanity for various reasons. What do we say to help them out of this situation? This question introduces us to the third dimension of philosophy, which involves the courage and boldness of the right word. While the pursuit of truth stems from the intellect, humility arises from the heart, and audacity from free will. It is the capacity to stand with the weak and craft responses that restore strength rather than sustain the status quo, under the guise of offering a universal message. In the specific context of reflecting on political crises in Africa, I have introduced the concept of

“Afroplanetarianism” to describe this ability to unite intellect, heart, and will. (cf. Téwéché 2023) The importance of these aspects of our shared humanity becomes crucial in finding solutions to the complex crises confronting African populations and their diaspora.

Afroplanetarianism seeks to rediscover what it truly means to be human in this critical modern era. This calling applies to all people and communities who endure domination in religious, political, cultural, and economic spheres. The personal and collective experience of such domination necessitates a radical re-evaluation of philosophy’s role and mission in understanding and addressing daily crises, while providing meaningful responses. It is less about creating a new ethical or political theory of reality than providing individuals with tools to break free from their chains, wherever they may be, and to stand up again both as individuals and as a community. Through their intelligence, they uncover the secrets of their oppression, the meaning of their life, and what it truly means to live on this Earth. This question is neither political nor anthropological but existential. Thanks to their heart, those who ask this question realise that only they can free themselves from their daily circumstances. In other words, general ethical principles are illuminated by the practical realism of reflection. Ultimately, free will enables the application of concrete means to achieve the understanding gained by the faculties of both the intellect and the heart. In essence, it is vital to actively pursue autonomy without relying on the hope of redemption from an old master.

Any experience of the world is inherently linked to the ability to rediscover these vital resources of the intellect, the heart, and the will. Rediscovering the resources embedded within these fundamental human faculties for understanding and challenging political struggles on the African continent and its diaspora is a key condition for gaining autonomy from current structures of domination. Furthermore, I will argue, it is the only condition necessary for building, with the rest of the world, an earthly community founded on the ideals of ethics and planetary justice as envisioned by Achille Mbembe.

Towards Afroplanetarianism

When we think of Africa, a specific region of the southern hemisphere often comes to mind – its diverse population, rich cultures, languages, and traditions. Africa represents a treasure trove of knowledge and practices that shape the lives of its people in our daily imagination. However, from the perspective

of afroplanetarianism, this land – the African continent – is seen as a fragment of Earth's crust, which itself originated from a colossal explosion billions of years ago. Africa is simply a spark of this primordial explosion of Life, alongside other continents, planets, and galaxies. This explosion, which occurred in the distant past, continues to unfold through Africa's present. Yet this Life is not confined to a specific place; its boundaries extend infinitely. This is also true of Africa. Its boundaries are limitless. This implies that wherever Life flourishes, Africa is present: it lives and breathes in every mineral, plant, animal, and human face on Earth. Every element of this planet can be a source of creativity that contributes to Africa's Life.

Considering the conditions for a sustainable life in Africa means becoming aware of this intrinsic continuity with Life originating from the primordial explosion. Afroplanetarianism seeks to express the significance and reality of this belonging, its dynamic and ongoing evolution, of which African societies, along with the mineral, animal, or plant worlds, bear marks. This suggests that the death-worlds Africans experience are merely shadows hiding a much larger, more profound reality: *Life in its infinite expansion*. Just as every element that makes up the universe contains within it the spark of Life, so does every part of Africa, regardless of its appearance, form a fragment of this continuum. Beyond recognising this *event*, Afroplanetarianism raises the question of how each African, wherever they are, can express this Life through their thoughts and everyday actions, *in common* with the rest of the world.

Answering this question requires a new way of rethinking the meaning of human presence within the planetary dynamic of Life, of which Africa is a sign. While the critique of Western modernity has revealed the irrationality humans are capable of, particularly regarding the reasonable use of their powers, knowledge, and possessions, it has not yet shown us the ultimate horizon of Life. In other words, humanity has not yet answered the question of what truly makes human beings human and how to positively manifest the powers of their intelligence, heart, and free will for their own well-being, the well-being of their fellow beings, and the sustainability of planetary Life. Addressing this question requires the rehabilitation of anthropology not merely as a discipline, but as a daily transformative practice.

In other words, according to Afroplanetarianism, anthropology is no longer solely an abstract answer to the question of the meaning and purpose of human Life on Earth. This philosophical question must give way to the transformative practice of each individual in daily life. At the core of this transformation are self-work – the daily cultivation of the potential of intelligence,

heart, and free will – and the discovery of the meaning and incomparable value of our presence in this world, beyond historical contingencies. Such a work of transformation nevertheless requires a horizon for its manifestation. It is within the social and political environment, through the practical realisation of a concrete task, that it is accomplished. By *dialectical utopia*, I mean the sociopolitical, cultural, economic and spiritual transformation that emerges from the individual subject's self-awareness of their original bond to the source of Life.

The historical horizon manifests not as a foundation or an end goal, but as a laboratory for experimenting with the various models inspired by the subjects' creative imagination. The result of such a dialectic is the creation of innovative models of living together that are no longer solely based on knowledge derived from the past, but on the realisation of the immeasurable richness of each human potential – intelligence, heart, and will. Such a vision of individuals and societies in their becoming within space and time has the merit of drawing lessons from the past, without, however, hypostatizing its concepts and paradigms. Above all, what prevails is the implementation through daily action and reflection – both as individuals and as a community – of the ultimate potentials of imagination that humans possess, for the positive transformation of their existence and their environment.

Such a vision contrasts in its foundations, means, and purpose with the visions of critical historicism or utopian thought, due to its pragmatic realism on the one hand and its heuristic and symbolic value on the other. Pragmatic realism means taking into account the limits of human contingency, that is, what humans are capable of achieving within the scope of their current knowledge and means. On the other hand, from a heuristic perspective, this vision draws on knowledge of historical human societies, their ways of thinking, acting, and inhabiting the world, as well as established practices. However, these knowledges from the past are not regarded as definitive truths about humans and Life, but as hypostases of a deeper reality which, in itself, eludes all form. This reality is Life, of which each individual and collective history is only an imperfect manifestation. Finally, from a symbolic point of view, this vision recognises the essential value of each human person for the manifestation of the terrestrial becoming of planetary Life.

Wherever they are located, every human being is recognised as an essential part of this Life that flows from its origins, of which Africa is an integral component. In other words, every human is regarded, in body, mind and history as a manifestation of a deeper reality that transcends their subjective experi-

ence. However, this notion of transcendence should not be viewed as a utopian fantasy, but rather as the result of critical reflection and transformative action on oneself and the world, with the lived social experience in space and time serving as its horizon. Africa, being part of this horizon, participates in this movement of planetary self-transformation, of which Life is the principle and the ultimate goal.

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