

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-

tories, 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 Lefebvre 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.