

## Introduction: Thinking from Death-Worlds

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

– *Achille Mbembe*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Ethics as the Foundation of Politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Africa as the Primary Subject of Study

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The "Planetary Turn"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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