

It's Anti-Colonial Theory's Chance to Shine

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Today's world appears to be utterly shattered. Decades of endemic financial catastrophe and stagnating real wages have exacerbated global inequality to the point that eight white men now hold the same wealth as the world's poorest half. Many regions of the world are engulfed in ostensibly nihilistic violent wars, contributing to a reality in which one out of every hundred persons on the earth is a refugee. Temperatures are now 95% certain to increase past the two-degree Celsius threshold, making the most hazardous effects of global climate change almost unavoidable.

This does not even take into account the rise of racist, alt-right, and fascist forces in the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world. All of this comes at a time when governments and institutions around the world appear woefully unable to even begin addressing issues that are critical to human life.

This brave new world is not only depressing, but it also provides significant problems to individuals whose academic and political work entails critically confronting the world in order to develop the theoretical tools – or, as Amilcar Cabral (1979) suggests, weapons – required to alter it. Today's academic workbench of notions, theories, and analysis is utterly inadequate to look into the abyss in front of us, let alone provide significant counsel for systemic reform. The fact that most of the intellectual legacy that now structures the academy was created alongside imperial or liberal political and historical trajectories is one reason for the significant gap between existing ideas and current political reality. Many of the revered intellectuals on whom we base our present political imaginations were often complicit in the solidification of the European state system and Western imperialism. Theorists celebrated a politics of mass demonstration and deliberation, social movements, democratisation, and post-Cold War global civil society during the twentieth century. Theoretical insights garnered from these historical events today appear to be either complicit in, or unnecessarily stressed by, the current circumstances. Similarly, many of the political

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and theoretical apparatuses used to critique this history seem to pale in comparison to a historical moment that appears to demand renewed militancy of purpose, a willingness to take risks for justice, and an urgent need for even more vibrant and vital human solidarity networks.

As a result, it's not unexpected that, in the contemporary context, political philosophers in the Western academy have begun to return to the African anticolonial archive's shelves. The twentieth-century anti-colonial battles in Africa, the African diaspora, and around the world appear to be speaking in instructive and unexpected ways once again. This comeback is for a good purpose. These are poetic yet abrasive voices, theoretical but instantly applicable to the specifics of struggle. These essays about colonialism, race, class, violence, and government steer clear of abstract thinking – and the polish and precision that comes with it. Rather, they are timely declarations made with a sense of urgency. The assumed audience of African anticolonial ideas was frequently one's closest and intimate comrades, rather than academics. Even if the exact outlines are not totally discernible in the present moment, the horizons of these texts and discussions frequently include futures full of possibilities.

Several recent publications have claimed, in various ways, that returning to African anticolonial philosophers considerably enriches contemporary theoretical understandings and political conflicts. Gary Wilder's *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (2015), Robbie Shilliam's *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (2015), and Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) all build the compelling argument that the ideas, concepts, and modes of argument developed throughout anticolonial struggles in Africa and by the African diaspora are unambiguously suited to assist add up of – and intervene into – the current. In contrast to previous debates concerning "African philosophy" or the popular flip toward "comparative" or "global" ideology, these 3 authors don't request to "bring" black and African voices "into" a tutorial field; nor do they think about anticolonial thought to be confined to a selected location, restricted to a selected set of "problems," or exclusively targeted on the goal of national independence. Instead, Wilder, Shilliam, and Mbembe consider anticolonialist

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labour to be a human legacy that transcends time and space. For example, Wilder makes it apparent that he is more interested in attempting to 'deprovincialize Africa and the Antilles' than in 'provincializ[ing] Europe.' To do so, he examines Aime Cesaire's and Leopold Sedar Senghor's political and intellectual work in ways that highlight their broader commitment to articulating a post-national (and post-continental) human politics as a radical critique of Western modernity, rather than the narrow plotting of national independence or a black political identity. Shilliam, likewise, emphasises the epistemic and tangible networks via which liberatory impulses embedded in black power movements and RasTafari spiritual practises disseminated among religious, activist, and youth communities in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and beyond. Mbembe also opposes the separation of 'Africa' from the rest of the globe, arguing that the racialized practises and knowledges that were once used to justify Africa's colonisation have now spread far beyond race. The usage of 'Black' and 'Africa' as references to create racialized categories has become universalized beyond race in political and epistemological operations.

These authors share a dedication to rereading African peoples, practises, and ideas as crucial to understanding the present reality, particularly as they relate to the rejection of the Western modern and colonial agenda. They place anticolonial intellectuals in their historical contexts while avoiding reducing their arguments to these temporal and spatial circumstances. This essay debunks the all-too-common belief that the anticolonial project is over – or at least largely failed. Rather than refuting such charges, Wilder's *Freedom Time* deftly demonstrates that such assertions are only relevant if one considers that Cesaire and Senghor, the book's two protagonists, were primarily concerned with ending colonial control inside specific geographic locations. Contemporary readers, according to Wilder, often overlook the reality that these two intellectuals saw their intricate intellectual and political endeavours as part of a larger effort to recreate modern humanity beyond the nation-state. As a result, Cesaire and Senghor's work should not be viewed through the prism of national independence, but rather for the political aspirations they embody that have yet to be fulfilled. 'Scholarship for a long time advocated one-sided understandings of Cesaire and Senghor as either essentialist nativists or nave humanists,' adds Wilder. Negritude was

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presented as an affirmative theory of Africanity rather than a critical theory of modernity, regardless of whether it was embraced or criticised.' Instead, according to Wilder, Cesaire and Senghor rejected "the doxa that self-determination necessitated state sovereignty," instead arguing that "colonial peoples cannot assume to know a priori which political arrangements would best allow them to seek substantive freedom." In this way, Cesaire and Senghor were intellectuals who lived as multifaceted and fluid thinkers who engaged in a 'pragmatic orientation' that was "inseparable from a utopian commitment to political imagination and anticipatory politics through which they sought to transcend the very idea of France, reinvent the globe, and initiate a new epoch of human history." This necessitates seeing Cesaire and Senghor as practitioners of a type of thought that is both "strategic and principled," "gradualist and revolutionary," "realist and visionary," and "timely and untimely."

Wilder's book alternates chapters between Cesaire and Senghor, charting their intellectual progress, interaction, and collaboration, as well as how their beliefs evolved over the course of their engagement with party and state politics. It is possible to appreciate the entire subtlety of these texts by reading them as if they were already instantiated inside a political terrain. For instance, Wilder says in a chapter about Senghor's African socialism that Senghor "asked neither for France to decolonize Africa nor for Africa to liberate itself, but for Africans to decolonize France." To this aim, African socialism was more than a political platform or an attempt to reform Marxist theory; it was a way of understanding the world that allowed for the prospect that Africans may be agents of "planetary redemption" and "human emancipation." This perspective explains Senghor's seemingly irrational political devotion to regional federalism as well as his intent on maintaining a familial relationship between Senegal and France (two political positions often cited as evidence of his inability to uphold the true promise of national independence). Instead, Wilder proposes that thinking "alongside Cesaire and Senghor" necessitates "engag[ing] a future that might have been." While the particular conclusions reached by Cesaire and Senghor may not be "applicable to contemporary times," the "issues



they recognised" continue to exist, and their "utopian realist thought, at once concrete and world-historical, nevertheless resonates."

Shilliam's book, *The Black Pacific*, traces anti-colonial activists and intellectuals across space and time in a similar way. Shilliam's study is centred on the complex links between the Maori and Pasifika peoples of Aotearoa (New Zealand) and the 'children of Legba,' rather than the exchange between Francophone Africa, France, and the Caribbean. Legba is an African cosmological character who connects the spiritual and physical realms. Shilliam begins with a 1979 exchange between Maori elders and their visitors, a black theatrical group and a RasTafari band from England, who were visiting Aotearoa NZ. The elder, or kaumtua, welcomed the visitors, stating, "Everyone being one people," to which the theatre director responded, "The ancestors are gathering because we have met today." Shilliam's larger thesis about the previously existing "deep, global infrastructure of anti-colonial connectedness" is reflected in this interaction. He compares these actual and genuine ties with colonial ethnographic mapping approaches that intended – and continue to seek – to firmly establish separation amongst colonial subjects while maintaining a gaze fixed on Europe. Shilliam responds by proposing a "decolonial science of "deep relation"" that identifies moments of spiritual synchronicity between Legba's spiritual descendants, the Pacific Island figure of Tāne/Māui, and the Arcadian Hermes within the Western philosophical tradition. Shilliam does it by demonstrating the underlying spiritual links that underpin strong and connected relationships. While the 'manifest world is a broadly (post)colonial one, constructed through imperial structures that foster the one-way transmission of political power, social connections, and knowledge,' he claims that huge 'hinterlands of the spiritual domains' exist alongside this world. Legba, Tāne/Māui, and the Arcadian Hermes are always assisting in the translation and binding of the manifest and spiritual worlds, eschewing a "developmentalist definition of time" in favour of one that can account for "the repair of ancestral bonds." Re-centering anti-colonialism in this shared spiritual heritage stresses the deep human ties that, if nurtured, could help to heal colonial wounds. Shilliam examines the movement and adaptation of Black Power in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Māori and Pasifika peoples' embrace of the political concept of blackness, the spiritual and cultural

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circulation between liberation, RasTafari, and indigenous Raṭana theologies, and the movement of Maōri and Pasifika activists between Ethiopia, South Africa, the Caribbean, and the African diaspora in England, among other topics.

Unlike Wilder and Shilliam, who situate anticolonial thinking and practise within the expansive spatial, temporal, and spiritual realities of specific individuals, Mbembe's Critique of Black Reason rewrites modernity's history as the'mobiliz[ation]' of 'Africa and Blackness' with the goal of 'the fabrication of racial subjects.' Mbembe's book, which he describes as a "river with numerous tributaries," investigates the changing nature of race and Blackness in a world where "Europe is no longer the centre of gravity." Between theoretical interactions – with Fanon, Cé saire, Foucault, Arendt, and others – and the historical events that generated both modernity and racist partition, the book moves quickly and expansively (the slave trade, the Haitian and American Revolutions, the Algerian War, and others). He divides 'the biography' of the 'assemblage that is Blackness and race' into 'three critical moments': the Atlantic slave trade, the 'birth of writing' marked by Blacks demanding 'the status of full subjects in the world of the living' (spanning from the Haitian Revolution, abolition, African decolonization, American civil rights movement, and the dismantling of apartheid), and the current period of 'neoliberalism.' We now live in an economic and racial order defined by 'Silicon Valley industries and digital technology,' in which 'time flies,' workers have been replaced by 'labouring nomads,' and 'the tragedy of the multitude,' comprising'superfluous humanity,' has become 'that they are unable to be exploited at all.' Within this new epoch, race and Blackness have taken on new forms, to the point where colonial technologies developed to separate and manage human beings according to racialized categories have now been replaced by a universalized Blackness that extends beyond race: "for the first time in human history, the term "Black" has been generalised." This new fungibility, this solubility, which has been institutionalised as a new standard of life and has been extended to the entire planet, is what I refer to as the world's Becoming Black. Islamophobia, for example, follows conventional racist logics; nevertheless, qualities that were once reserved for presumably biological races have now been attributed to "culture" and "religion." While Blackness has become universalized beyond race, Mbembe contends that the

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'Western consciousness of Blackness,' which reduces humans to 'a racial subject and site of savage exteriority,' has always coexisted with the 'Black consciousness of Blackness,' namely the articulation of Blackness within a 'long history of radicalism, nourished by struggles for abolition and against capitalism.' As a result, blackness exists within a 'manifest dualism,' serving as both 'the living crypt of capital,' through which 'skin has been transformed into the form and spirit of merchandise,' and 'the symbol of a conscious desire for life, a force springing forth, buoyant and plastic, fully engaged in the act of creation and capable of living in the midst of several times and several histories at once.' It is possible to retain the 'possibility of restoration, reparation, and justice' by drawing from these 'reserves of life' and the amazing unwillingness to 'retreat from humanity' that defines Black life. Whatever our current 'horizons of...struggle,' the fundamental struggle for Mbembe remains 'how to belong fully in this world that is common to all of us, how to pass from the status of the excluded to the status of the right-holder, how to participate in the construction and distribution of the world' – that is, the creation of a 'world in common.'

These three texts, taken together, provide insights into the possible benefits of basing modern political and theoretical actions inside the outlines of widely acknowledged African anticolonial philosophy. First and foremost, all three are concerned with the concept of time and temporality. While colonialism is generally analysed in a linear fashion, with a break from the pre-colonial past giving way to a post-colonial present, these three authors show how emancipatory ideas of freedom necessitate sticking with modernist, developmentalist views of time. For example, Mbembe notes that "remembrance among Blacks is heavily reliant on the critique of time...Time is produced out of the contingent, ambiguous, and contradictory relationship that we maintain with objects, with the world, or with the body and its doubles." Wilder investigates "how a certain historical epoch may not be identical with itself, and historical tenses may blur and interpenetrate" in *Freedom Time*. The past becomes more pliable and contingent as a result of this focus on time and temporality, and the future becomes more open as a result. Wilder emphasises this idea by setting his work in the 'postwar opening,' a fluid, contested, and heterodox historical moment that

existed between 'previous moments of epochal transition' (i.e., the 1790s–1840) and our 'present conjuncture.'

Second, these three volumes demand that we study the connections between possible academic politics, economics, and epistemologies and those needed by an anticolonial politics that is still very much alive. Shilliam, for example, reminds us that if we want to achieve 'epistemic justice,' the 'seedbed of such a decolonial effort' cannot be found in academic discourse, but rather in the living knowledge traditions of colonised peoples.' If this argument is taken seriously, then anticolonial practise in the academy must acknowledge that even our own "self-reflexivity" is not a "unique product of modernity," but rather a "institutionally traditional" form of knowledge that requires any claim about the "superiority of Western academia" to be "radical questioned." Unlike academic, colonial, and Western sciences, 'decolonial science cultivates knowledge, not produces it' - production is an act of expanding the self, but cultivation needs us to 'till' in order to 'turn matter around and fold back on itself in order to rebuild and foster growth.' Planting and maintaining seeds for the unexpected, unknown, and even impossible is part of cultivating knowledge. As a result, the decolonial science of deep interactions cultivates its own 'biotope,' involving a 'circulatory' and 'continuous oxygenation process,' generating its own 'grounding.'

Finally, all three books share a similar endorsement of a politics of liberty, solidarity, and interconnectivity that is both terribly fragile and unimaginably durable. Anticolonial concepts and practises, according to Wilder, Shilliam, and Mbembe, are already embedded in the present and remain part of our human inheritance. They also argue that studying this corpus of work allows us to see political freedom and human liberation as a mission that is both already here, entrenched in the past, and perpetually on the horizon.

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