
Review Essay

A time for anticolonial theory

Isaac Kamola

Trinity College, Hartford, CT 06106, USA.
ikamola@trincoll.edu

Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World

Gary Wilder

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. xi + 384.,
ISBN: 978-0-8223-5850-3

The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections

Robbie Shilliam

London: Bloomsbury, 2015. vi + 251 pp.,
ISBN: 9781472519252

Critique of Black Reason

Achille Mbembe, Laurent Dubois, trans.

Durham, NC: Duke University Press., 2017, ix + 215 pp.,
ISBN: 978-0-8223-6343-9

Contemporary Political Theory (2019) **18**, S67–S74. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0161-8>; published online 5 October 2017

*For, in the end, there is only one world. It is composed of a totality of a thousand parts.
Of everyone. Of all worlds.*
—Achille Mbembe (2017, p. 180).

Today the world seems profoundly broken. Decades of endemic financial crisis and stagnant real wages have produced planetary inequality of such magnitude that eight white men now own the same wealth as the poorest half of the world's population (Oxfam, 2017). Seemingly nihilistic armed conflicts engulf many regions of world, contributing to a reality in which one in every hundred people on the planet lives as a refugee (Connor and Krogstad, 2016). It is now ninety-five percent likely that temperatures will rise above the two-degree Celsius threshold, making the most dangerous effects of global climate change largely



inevitable (Rafferty *et al.*, 2017). And this does not even include the success of racist, alt-right, and fascist movements across the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. All this at a time when governments and institutions around the world seem completely ill-equipped to even begin engaging the issues central to human survival.

This brave new world is not only profoundly dispiriting, it poses very serious challenges to those whose academic and political practice involves critically engaging the world with the aim of crafting the theoretical tools – or, as Amílcar Cabral (1979) might suggest, weapons – needed to change it. Today, the academic workbench of concepts, theories, and analysis seems woefully inadequate to honestly stare into the abyss before us, much less provide meaningful guidance for systemic transformation. One reason for the considerable gulf between available theories and present political realities stems from the fact that much of the intellectual tradition structuring the academy today was built alongside imperial or liberal political and historical trajectories. Many of the cherished thinkers we draw upon to construct the contemporary political imaginaries were often coconspirators in the solidification of the European state system and Western imperialism. During the twentieth century, theorists engaged in celebrating a politics of mass demonstration and deliberation, social movements, democratization, and post-Cold War cosmopolitan civil society. The theoretical lessons learned from these historical moments now seem either complicit in, or overly stressed by, the weight of the current pressures. Similarly, many of the political and theoretical apparatuses used to critique this history pale in the face of a historical moment that seems to demand a renewed militancy of purpose, a willingness to take risks for justice, and the urgent need for even more vibrant and vital networks of human solidarity.

It is not surprising, therefore, that within the current conjuncture political thinkers in the Western academy have begun returning to the shelves of the African anticolonial archive (for example: el-Malik and Kamola, 2017; Pham and Shilliam, 2016; el-Malik, 2016). The twentieth-century struggles against colonialism in Africa, the African diaspora, and around the world, seem to once again speak in instructive and unexpected ways. There is good reason for this return. These voices are poetic yet strident, theoretical but immediately practical to the particularities of struggle. These writings on colonialism, race, class, violence, and governance avoid abstract musing – and the polish and perfection of argument that goes along with it. Instead, they are timely statements made with great urgency. The assumed audience of African anticolonial thought was often not scholars, but rather one's immediate and intimate comrades. The horizons of these texts and arguments often contain futures filled with possibility, even if the specific outlines are not entirely discernable in the present moment.

Several recent books have argued, in different ways, that returning to thinkers of African anticolonial struggle greatly enriches the theoretical understandings and political struggles of the present. 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 make the compelling argument that the ideas, concepts, and modes of argument developed during anticolonial struggles in Africa and by the African diaspora are uniquely suited to help make sense of – and intervene into – the present. Unlike previous debates about 'African philosophy' or the popular turn towards 'comparative' or 'global' political theory, these three authors neither seek to 'bring' black and African voices 'into' an academic field; nor do they take anticolonial thought as confined to a location, limited to specific set of 'problems', or focused exclusively on the aim of national independence. Instead, Wilder, Shilliam, and Mbembe treat the work of anticolonialism as a human inheritance, one that transcends time and space. Wilder, for example, clearly states that he is less interested in 'provincializ[ing] Europe' than in working to 'deprovincialize Africa and the Antilles' (p. 10). To do so, he tackles the political and intellectual work of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor in ways that force attention to their broader commitment to articulating a post-national (and post-continental) human politics, as a radical critique of Western modernity rather than the limited plotting of national independence or a black political identity. Similarly, Shilliam foregrounds the epistemic and manifest networks through which the liberatory desires embedded within black power movements and RasTafari spiritual practices circulated among religious, activist, and youth communities in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and beyond. Mbembe also rejects the compartmentalization of 'Africa' from the world, demonstrating that the racialized practices and knowledges once used to justify the colonization of Africa have become widely generalized beyond race. The political and epistemic practices that used 'Black' and 'Africa' as references to concoct racialized categories have become universalized beyond race.

These authors share a commitment to rereading African peoples, practices, and thought – especially as they relate to the refusal of the Western modern and colonial project – as central to understanding the contemporary condition. They contextualize anticolonial thinkers within their specific conjuncture, while taking care not to reduce their arguments to these temporal and spatial contexts. This work short-circuits the all-to-common assumption that the anticolonial project is a finished – or largely failed – project. However, rather than rebutting such accusations, Wilder's *Freedom Time* gracefully argues that such claims are only relevant if one assumes that Césaire and Senghor, the two protagonists of his book, were primarily concerned with ending colonial rule within particular geographical spaces. Wilder argues that contemporary readers often miss the fact that these two thinkers understood their complex intellectual and political projects as engaged in a wholesale rebuilding of modern humanity beyond the nation-state. As such, the work of Césaire and Senghor should not be understood through the lens of national independence, but rather read for the not-yet-realized political visions they contain.



Wilder writes: ‘Scholarship long promoted one-sided understandings of Césaire and Senghor as either essentialist nativists or naïve humanists...Negritude, whether embraced or criticized, was treated as an affirmative theory of Africanity rather than a critical theory of modernity’ (p. 8). Wilder argues instead that Césaire and Senghor actually reject ‘the *doxa* that self-determination required state sovereignty’ and instead proceeded from a position that ‘colonial peoples cannot presume to know a priori which political arrangements would best allow them to pursue substantive freedom’ (p. 2). In this way, Césaire and Senghor were intellectuals who lived as complex and fluid thinkers engaged in a ‘pragmatic orientation’ that ‘was inseparable from a utopian commitment to political imagination and anticipatory politics through which they hoped to transcend the very idea of France, remake the world, and inaugurate a new epoch of human history’ (p. 2). This requires understanding Césaire and Senghor as practicing a form of thinking that is simultaneously ‘strategic and principled, gradualist and revolutionary, realist and vision, timely and untimely’ (p. 2).

Wilder’s book alternates chapters between Césaire and Senghor, tracing the evolution, exchange, and collaboration between these two intellectuals, as well as tracing how their ideas evolved over the course of their engagement with party and state politics. Reading these texts as already instantiated within a political terrain makes it possible to grasp their full nuance. For example, in a chapter on Senghor’s African socialism, Wilder writes that Senghor ‘called neither for France to decolonize Africa nor for Africa to liberate itself, but for Africans to *decolonize France*’ (p. 214). To this end, African socialism was not simply a political platform, or an effort to remake Marxist theory, but rather a way of imagining the world that left open the possibility that Africans were the agents of ‘planetary salvation’ and ‘human emancipation’ (p. 215). This approach helps explain the seemingly quixotic political commitment that Senghor held concerning regional federalism and his insistence on maintaining a fraternal 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 suggests that thinking ‘with Césaire and Senghor’ requires us to ‘engag[e] a future that might have been’. While the specific conclusions Césaire and Senghor arrive at might not necessarily ‘be applied to our times’, ‘the problems they identified’ still ‘persist’, and their ‘utopian realist thinking, at once concrete and world-historical, still resonates’ (p. 256).

Shilliam’s book, *The Black Pacific*, similarly traces connections among anticolonial activists and intellectuals across space and time. However, rather than examining the exchange between Francophone Africa, France, and the Caribbean, Shilliam locates his study in the dense relationships between the Māori and Pasifika peoples of Aotearoa (New Zealand) and the ‘children of Legba’. Legba is a reoccurring figure from African cosmology that mediates the spiritual and physical worlds. Shilliam opens with the story of a 1979 exchange between Māori elders and their guests, a black theater troupe and a RasTafari band visiting Aotearoa NZ from



England. The elder, or *kaumātua*, greeted the visitors, saying: ‘everyone being one people’ to which the theater director replied: ‘the ancestors are meeting because we have met’ here today (p. 1). This exchange reflects Shilliam’s larger argument about the already existing ‘deep, global infrastructure of anti-colonial connectivity’ (p. 3). He contrasts these lived and meaningful connections with the colonial ethnographic mapping practices that sought – and still seek – to firmly establish separation between colonial subjects, with a gaze remained firmly trained on Europe. Shilliam counters by offering a ‘decolonial science of “deep relation”’ (p. 13) that draws out the moments of connectivity between the spiritually synchronistic descendants of Legba, the Pacific Island figure of Tāne/Māui, and the Arcadian Hermes within the Western philosophical tradition. In doing so, Shilliam provides evidence of the profound spiritual bonds that ground relations of strength and connectivity. He argues that, while the ‘manifest world is a broadly (post)colonial one, structured through imperial hierarchies that encourage the one-way transmission of political authority, social relations and knowledge’, there also exists alongside this world vast ‘hinterlands of the spiritual domains’ (p. 20). Legba, Tāne/Māui, and the Arcadian Hermes continually assist in that translation and binding of the manifest and spiritual worlds and, in doing so, they eschew a ‘developmentalist understanding of time’ in favor of one that can account for ‘the reparation of ancestral ties’ (p. 21). Re-grounding anticolonialism in this shared spiritual inheritance emphasizes the dense human connections that, through their cultivation, might inform the healing of colonial wounds. Shilliam demonstrates the durability of these deep relations in chapters examining the movement and adaptation of Black Power in Aotearoa NZ, the embrace of the political concept of blackness among the Māori and Pasifika peoples, the spiritual and cultural circulation between liberation, RasTafari, and indigenous Rātana theologies, and the movement of Māori and Pasifika activists between Ethiopia, South Africa, the Caribbean, and the African diaspora in England.

Unlike Wilder and Shilliam, who locate anticolonial thinking and practice within the expansive spatial, temporal, and spiritual realities of specific individuals, Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason* engages in nothing less than a rewriting of the history of modernity as the ‘mobiliz[ation]’ of ‘Africa and Blackness’ with the goal of ‘the fabrication of racial subjects’ (p. 129). As a ‘river with many tributaries’, Mbembe’s book examines the evolving nature of race and Blackness within a world in which ‘Europe is no longer the center of gravity’ (p. 1). The book moves rapidly and expansively between theoretical engagements – with Fanon, Césaire, Foucault, Arendt, and others – and the historical events that created both modernity and racialized partition (the slave trade, the Haitian and American Revolutions, the Algerian War, and others). He re-casts ‘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 right



movement, to the dismantling of apartheid), and concluding with the current period of ‘neoliberalism’ (p. 3). In this latest period, we now inhabit an economic and racial order defined by the ‘industries of the Silicon Valley and digital technology’, in which ‘time passes quickly’, where workers have been replaced by ‘laboring nomads’, and ‘the tragedy of the multitude’ – comprising ‘superfluous humanity’ – has become ‘that they are unable to be exploited at all’ (p. 3). Within this new epoch, race and Blackness have taken on new forms such that the colonial technologies once developed to separate and manage human beings according to racialized categories have now become replaced by a universalized Blackness that extends beyond race: ‘for the first time in human history, the term “Black” has been generalized. This new fungibility, this solubility, institutionalized as a new norm of existence and expanded to the entire planet, is what I call the *Becoming Black of the world*’ (p. 6). Islamophobia, for example, operates according to the traditional logics of racism; however, the characteristics once used to describe supposedly biological races has now been applied to ““culture” and “religion”” (p. 7). While Blackness has become universalized beyond race, Mbembe argues that the ‘*Western consciousness of Blackness*’ – which reduces humans to ‘a racial subject and site of savage exteriority’ – has always existed alongside the ‘*Black consciousness of Blackness*’, namely the articulation of Blackness within ‘a long history of radicalism, nourished by struggles for abolition and against capitalism’ (pp. 28, 30). Blackness therefore exists within a ‘manifest dualism’, both ‘the living crypt of capital’ through which ‘skin has been transformed into the form and spirit of merchandise’, but simultaneously ‘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’ (p. 6). Drawing from these ‘reserves of life’, and the awesome refusal to ‘retreat from humanity’ that defines Black life, makes it possible to maintain the ‘possibility of restitution, reparation, and justice’ (p. 179). For Mbembe, whatever our own ‘horizons of...struggle’ might be today, the fundamental struggle 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 the distribution of the world’ – that is, the creation of a ‘world in common’ (p. 176).

Taken together, these three books offer insights into the potential benefits of grounding contemporary political and theoretical practices within the contours of African anticolonial thought, widely understood. First, all three are fundamentally concerned with the question of time and temporality. While colonialism is still often studied in a linear fashion – representing a break from a pre-colonial past, and eventually giving way to a post-colonial present (Cooper, 2002, pp. 14–16) – these three authors highlight how emancipatory conceptions of freedom require tarrying with modernist, developmentalist conceptions of time. Mbembe points out, for example, that the ‘remembrance among Blacks depend[s] to a large extent on the critique of time...Time is born out of the contingent, ambiguous, and contradictory relationship that we maintain with things, with the world, or with the body and its



doubles' (p. 121). In *Freedom Time*, Wilder examines 'how a given historical epoch many not be identical with itself and historical tenses may blur and interpenetrate' (p. 15). This attention to time and temporality allows the past to become more malleable and contingent and, thus, the future becomes more open. Wilder highlights this point, situating his book within the 'postwar opening' – a historical moment that was fluid, contested, and heterodox, existing between 'earlier moments of epochal transition' (i.e., 1790s–1840) and our 'contemporary conjuncture' (p. 14).

Second, these three books demand that we examine the relationships between the possible politics, economics, and epistemologies within the academy and those demanded by a still-very-present anticolonial politics. For example, Shilliam reminds us that if we aim for 'epistemic justice', then the 'seedbed of such a decolonial project' cannot 'be found in academic discourse but in the living knowledge traditions of colonized peoples' (p. 7). If one takes this argument seriously then both 'personal and institutional' anticolonial practice within the academy requires acknowledging that even our own 'self-reflexivity' is not 'a unique product of modernity' but rather an 'institutionally traditional' form of knowledge, and one that demands that any claim about the 'superiority of Western academia' be 'radically questioned' (p. 9). Unlike academic, colonial, and Western sciences, 'decolonial science *cultivates* knowledge, it does not *produce*' knowledge – production is an act of extending the self, while the cultivation of knowledge requires that we 'till' in order to 'turn matter around and fold back on itself so as to rebuild and encourage growth' (p. 24). Cultivating knowledge involves planting and tending seeds for the unexpected, unknown, and even impossible. The decolonial science of deep relations, therefore, engages in the cultivation of its own 'biotope', involving a 'circulatory' and 'constant oxygenation process', thereby establishing a 'grounding' of its own (p. 25).

Finally, these three texts share a common affirmation of a politics of freedom, of solidarity, and interconnectedness that is both extremely fragile yet durable beyond imagination. Wilder, Shilliam, and Mbembe insist that anticolonial thought and practices are already embedded within the present, and remain part of our human inheritance. They also suggest that turning to this body of work makes it possible to understand political freedom and human emancipation as a project that remains radically inclusive, spatially expansive, and temporally heterodox – both already present, rooted in the past, and always on the horizon.

References

- Cabral, A. (1979) The Weapon of Theory: Presuppositions and Objectives of National Liberation in Relation to Social Structure. In PAIGC (Ed.), *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings of Amílcar Cabral* (pp. 119–137). New York and London: Monthly Review Press.
- Connor, P. and Krogstad, J.M. (2016) *Key Facts about the World's Refugees* 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/05/key-facts-about-the-worlds-refugees/>.



- Cooper, F. (2002) *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present*. In M. Klein (Ed.), *New Approaches to African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- el-Malik, S.S. (2016) *African Political Thought of the Twentieth Century: A Re-engagement*. New York: Routledge.
- el-Malik, S.S. and Kamola, I. (2017) *Politics of African Anticolonial Archive*. Rowman and Littlefield International: London.
- Mbembe, A. (2017) *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Oxfam. (2017) *Just 8 Men Own Same Wealth as Half the World*, Oxfam 2017. <http://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2017-01-16/just-8-men-own-same-wealth-half-world>. Accessed September 15, 2017.
- Phạm, Q.N. and Shilliam, R. (2016) *Meanings of Bandung Postcolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions*. London: Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Raftery, A.E., Zimmer, A., Frierson, D.M.W., Startz, R. and Liu, P. (2017) Less than 2 °C warming by 2100 unlikely. *Nature Climate Change*, 7(9): 3352.
- Shilliam, R. (2015) *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Wilder, G. (2015) *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.