

A NECROPOLITICAL APPROACH TO WASTE THEORY*

Martín Fernández Fernández
Universidade da Coruña

ABSTRACT

Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019) provides an innovative approach to dissect human relations in a contemporary world where an increasing number of people are deemed superfluous and disposable under late capitalist logic. His book offers a genealogy of the current state of affairs from a post-Foucauldian perspective that centers on the notion of race and the conception of sovereignty in Western liberal democracies. Rarely associated with Waste Theory, Mbembe articulates a necropolitical approach that complements Zygmunt Bauman's conception of "human waste" and Giorgio Agamben's theorizations on the figure of the *homo sacer*. This article thus argues that Mbembe's *Necropolitics* stands as a major contribution to the field of Waste Studies, in that it encloses a reflection on the racial Other as human waste from a perspective that has not been sufficiently studied.

KEYWORDS: Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, human waste, *homo sacer*, *nanoracism*, Waste Theory.

UNA APROXIMACIÓN NECROPOLÍTICA A LA WASTE THEORY

RESUMEN

Necropolitics (2019), de Achille Mbembe, aporta una aproximación innovadora para analizar las relaciones humanas en un mundo contemporáneo en el que un creciente número de personas es considerado superfluo o desechable bajo la lógica tardocapitalista. El libro ofrece una genealogía del actual estado de la cuestión desde una perspectiva post-foucauldiana que se centra en la noción de raza y en la concepción de soberanía en las democracias liberales occidentales. Raramente asociado con la Waste Theory, Mbembe articula una aproximación necropolítica que complementa la concepción de "residuos humanos" de Zygmunt Bauman y las teorizaciones sobre la figura del *homo sacer* de Giorgio Agamben. Este artículo, por tanto, sostiene que *Necropolitics*, de Mbembe, se erige como una importante contribución al campo de los *Waste Studies*, ya que encierra una reflexión del Otro racializado como residuo humano desde una perspectiva que no ha sido suficientemente estudiada.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, residuos humanos, *homo sacer*, *nanoracismo*, Waste Theory.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2023.86.09>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 86; April 2023, pp. 147-156; ISSN: e-2530-8335



INTRODUCTION

In an era faced by unprecedented challenges, the global response has been characterized by a reinforcement of borders, a usual practice in Western democracies, that has increased inequality worldwide. This has come alongside a resurgence of the drives that characterized the first half of the twentieth century, as the ghosts of racism and fascism have been feeding on the latest global crises. In *Necropolitics* (2019), Achille Mbembe ponders on these pressing issues through the Other to deconstruct today's relation of enmity against this figure in a genealogical trip from colonial times, through slavery in the US, Nazism in Germany, apartheid in South Africa, and the occupation of Palestine, among others, to the refugee crisis of the mid-2010s in Europe. The Cameroonian author puts a varied array of thinkers in conversation, merging the francophone and anglophone critical traditions to paint his portrait of the contemporary world. Yet Mbembe's major influence is the political and psychiatric work of Frantz Fanon, who becomes a guide of sorts throughout the book. Drawing from all these sources, *Necropolitics* analyzes a current situation where inequality, racism, violence, and terror are rampant on a global scale, while also offering a glimpse of hope from an Africanist perspective in the construction of, using Édouard Glissant's terminology, an "All-world" (Mbembe 2019, 9) for all humanity.

This article argues that Mbembe's *Necropolitics* stands as a major contribution to the field of Waste Studies, in that it encloses a reflection on the racial Other as "human waste" (Bauman [2004] 2021) from a perspective that has not been sufficiently studied. To do so, the article first offers an overview of the notion of necropolitics as fully conceptualized by Mbembe in his 2019 book, while also pointing out its direct relation to Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualization of human waste; and, second, it introduces Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* to discuss its connection to the necropolitical wasted human, linking the latter to the processes of wastification and Mbembe's conceptualization of *nanoracism*. The canonical theorizations on human waste, mainly based on Bauman's *Wasted Lives* (2004), did not dwell enough on the materiality of racialized bodies, leaving a gap open for other scholars to explore further. While Mbembe is rarely associated with Waste Theory,¹ his scholarly work does contribute to filling this space, and shares a vast amount of common ground with this theory. In 2003, Mbembe publishes his article

* The research for this article was funded by the project "Literature and Globalization 2: Communities of Waste" (ref. PID2019-106798GB-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the AEI (National Research Agency), and the Margarita Salas Postdoctoral Fellowship, financed by the Ministry of Universities of Spain and NextGenerationEU, 2022-2024. This work also benefits from the collaboration of the research group "Cultures and Literatures from the United States of America" (Universidade da Coruña).

¹ The upcoming scholarly production on Waste Theory may change this trend in the near future, as several presenters at the 34th European Association for American Studies Conference – Wastelands held in Madrid (2022) hinted at the applicability of necropolitics to Waste Studies.



“Necropolitics” in *Public Culture*, where the concept is deeply explored for the first time in English, and where Bauman and Agamben are not just clear influences, but referenced frequently throughout the discussion. Mbembe’s article wound up becoming the third chapter of his 2019 book, acting as a conceptual core that tied together the rest of the monograph, where the presence of Waste Theory permeates his necropolitical approach to the contemporary world.

THE NECROPOLITICAL EXCLUDED BEING

In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe conceptualizes the Other through different but synonymous terms resulting from colonial and late capitalist logic to refer to the same category of excluded being. He focuses on the histories of the so-called “disposable,” “superfluous,” “redundant,” “useless,” or “excessive” to dissect the system of subjugation that has been putting these labels on individuals and communities in contemporary times. This approach to the Other reminisces of, and coalesces with, Bauman’s theorizations on “human waste.” In the introduction to *Wasted Lives*, the Polish sociologist defines “human waste” or “wasted humans” as “the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant’, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay” ([2004] 2021, 5). Expelled from society, these subjects experience a process of “slow death” (Berlant 2007) spurred by what Bauman calls “forces of globalization” ([2004] 2021, 128).² While Bauman explores their effect on the excluded being to articulate his Waste Theory, Mbembe’s theorizations complete it by interconnecting this set of forces and conceptualizing them under the notion of *necropolitics*.

Departing from the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, Mbembe puts forward the concept of necropolitics as a system of domination that thrives on the production and consumption of human waste. This perspective incorporates the traditional accounts of sovereignty, which Michel Foucault summarizes as “the right to *take* life or *let* live” (1978, 136; italics in original), and a reflection on the evolution of war against the othered communities. For Mbembe, necropolitics, or necropower,

account[s] for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*. (2019, 92; italics in original)

² In an article for *Critical Inquiry*, Lauren Berlant posits that “[t]he phrase *slow death* refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (2007, 754; italics in original).



This variety of human waste, the “living dead,” resulting from necropolitics operates in a globalized context where contemporary states exist in a constant state of warfare against an alleged enemy. This antagonistic entity is usually reified into the figure of the Other, whether the threat is unfounded or not, intranational or international. For Mbembe, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories stands as “[t]he most accomplished form of necropower” (2019, 80). The apartheid regime in South Africa had already tested various techniques to transform natives into “living dead,” but the Israeli state has perfected their subjugation and destruction through its state-of-the-art weaponry and militarization. Necropolitical power thus produces, is inflicted on, and thrives on wasted humans, all at the same time.

The obsession of Western states with the biophysical elimination of the Other, perceived as superfluous and disposable, stems from a relation of enmity that presents an intricate connection to reason and terror. The histories of the brutalization of slaves in the US or the Nazi genocide in the concentration camps reveal a bureaucratization of terror in the subjugation and disposability of the excluded being that is deeply related to the advances in technology over time. Through the production of terror, whose efficacy was first tested in the European colonies, necropolitical power maintains its sovereignty over the othered communities. According to Mbembe, the origins of this procedure illuminate a history of modern democracy in the West that “is, at bottom, a history with two faces, and even two bodies—the solar body, on the one hand, and *the nocturnal body*, on the other” (2019, 22; italics in original). While the former relates to the expansion and advances of Western democracy, the “nocturnal body” is responsible for the early modern systems of subjugation that fueled the “solar body” from the shadows. Nowadays, the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, or the advent of the so-called war machines deployed in the Gulf War and the Kosovo campaign, instantiate the level of destruction carried out by the nocturnal body in the battle for power. In this light, Mbembe incorporates a necropolitical vision to the canonical notion of sovereignty, conceptualizing it as “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (2019, 80; italics in original).

Like his perspective on sovereignty, Mbembe’s theorizations on necropolitics center on the notion of race, as he posits that, “[t]o a large extent, racism is the driver of the necropolitical principle” (2019, 38). Since early European colonialism, the Western conceptualization of race has shaped human relations on a planetary scale. Using US slavery as an example, Mbembe argues that the colonialist method, which “thrived by excreting those who were, in several regards, deemed superfluous, a surfeit within the colonizing nations” (2019, 10), later defined the pro-slavery democracy of the US. The division between free and enslaved gave rise to an invisible border that used extreme violence as a mechanism of social control. This dual conception of humanity permeated the history of modern democracies in the West, for they capitalized on the exploitation and disposability of the colonized and enslaved to progress. On this pretext, modern democracies exteriorized violence in isolated places like colonies or plantations, while fearing that this same violence resurfaced in the metropolis (Mbembe 2019, 27). This fixation with retaliation would lead them to increase the brutal violence inflicted on the colonized peoples. Over time,



the perfection of this globalized system of domination originated the contemporary necropolitical power, a power that is mainly driven by racism and the production of human waste.

The combination of these two elements results in a by-product of necropolitics that triggers *racist wastification*; that is, the production of wasted lives out of racial relations. Both the natives in the colonies and the racialized minorities in the West are turned into human waste in the organization of colonial and Western societies, following the principle that, as Bauman remarks, “[w]hen it comes to designing the forms of human togetherness, the waste is human beings” ([2004] 2021, 30). Racism, more than any other factor, plays a pivotal role in this process, as it stands as the central mechanism in the production of human waste worldwide. Comparing race with class, another hegemonic operator in the organization of human relations, Mbembe emphasizes the centrality of racism in his critique of biopower. For him, “racial thinking more than class thinking [...] has been the ever-present shadow hovering over Western political thought and practice, especially when the point was to contrive the humanity of foreign peoples and the sort of domination to be exercised over them” (Mbembe 2019, 71). The resulting subjugation transforms the racial Other into human waste through a process of racist wastification that is fueled by necropolitical power in a world where, as Bauman contends, “[t]he ‘problems of (human) waste and (human) waste disposal’ weigh ever more heavily on the liquid modern, consumerist culture of individualization” ([2004] 2021, 5).

The rapid technological advance of our age has raised an ontological dilemma for the human species. Drawing from Martin Heidegger’s *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1977) and Margarida Mendes’s “Molecular Colonialism” (2017), Mbembe discusses the technological challenge of algorithmic forms of intelligence to human exceptionalism, which has so far produced “a *matrix of rules* mostly designed for those human bodies deemed either in excess, unwanted, illegal, dispensable, or superfluous” (2019, 96; italics in original). Once again, the Gaza Strip stands as a paradigmatic case in the treatment of the Other, in that the Israeli forces have turned the Strip into a carceral state for wasted humans. Its gigantic walls bear witness to a process of borderization that fosters the use of violence and the proliferation of impassable places where, as Bauman points out, “[i]mmigration officers and quality controllers [...] are to stand guard on the line separating order from chaos (a battle line or armistice line, but always suspected of inviting trespassers and being ready for conflagration)” ([2004] 2021, 28). This is also happening at the very heart of Europe, where necropolitics and global conflicts have triggered the return of what Mbembe describes as “camps for foreigners” (2019, 102). Samos, Lesbos, and Lampedusa are just various examples of how racism and the fear of the Other have led to a prioritization of an alleged sense of security over freedom in contemporary democracies.



The necropolitical wasted human maintains an intricate relation to the notion of “bare life” that Giorgio Agamben develops in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). Agamben’s detailed exploration of the juridico-political category of *homo sacer* originating in ancient Roman law unveils a still extant subject in Western politics, whom he characterizes as “the body of the sacred man with his double sovereign, his life that cannot be sacrificed yet may, nevertheless, be killed” (1998, 10). Since the *homo sacer* cannot be offered to God in a ritual, being thus barred from divine law, and is liable to be killed in the community without legal consequences, being thus barred from human jurisdiction, this subject suffers a double exclusion that results in a life devoid of value. As such, his bare life takes place in a wasteland plagued by the constant threat of violence. Agamben argues that “[t]his violence—the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit—is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege” (1998, 82). This renders *homo sacer* the epitome of the prototypical excluded being, which leads Bauman to define him as “the principle category of human waste laid out in the course of the modern production of orderly (law abiding, rule governed) sovereign realms” ([2004] 2021, 32).

The etymology of *homo sacer* sheds further light on his major role in the conceptualization of human waste. Agamben’s exploration of the ambiguous meaning of the term *sacer* over history identifies a revealing entry in Alfred Ernout’s and Antoine Meillet’s *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (1932). As Agamben documents, “[s]*acer* designates the person or the thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying; hence the double meaning of ‘sacred’ or ‘accursed’ (approximately)” (1998, 79; italics in original). This definition buttresses the foundational relevance of the *homo sacer* in the notion of human waste, as it is attributing the possibility to dirty, or the possession of a filthy nature, to the category of wasted human, thus equating him/her to material waste itself. This becomes central in the configuration of Waste Theory, especially in works such as Susan Signe Morrison’s *The Literature of Waste*. In her book, Morrison points out that “[t]he equating of humans with waste allows for the disposal of such members of humanity via ostracism, defamation, exclusion, and even death” (2015, 10). Once transformed into wasted humans, their disposal may take place through any of the preceding mechanisms, in that their intrinsic condition of *homo sacer* originates a bare life whose brutalization and destruction means nothing to sovereign power.

This perspective on sovereignty aligns with Mbembe’s necropolitical approach. In his discussion on the notion of *homo sacer*, Agamben contends that “the production of bare life is the originary activity of sovereignty” (1998, 83).³

³ For an insightful reevaluation of the concept of bare life through the lens of Black studies, see Alexander Weheliye’s *Habeas Corpus* (2014), especially chap. 2, “Bare Life: The Flesh.” Here, Weheliye incorporates Hortense Spillers’s (1987) vision of “body” and “flesh” to Agamben’s



Following this rationale, the processes of wastification are thus directed by sovereign power, which operates through necropolitics in contemporary times. Resistance to these processes has become increasingly difficult to articulate with the passage of time, while the history of the last three centuries demonstrates that it still is a feasible practice even under the most extreme systems of subjugation. As Mbembe remarks, “[s]ince modernity, every project of genuine human emancipation has aimed at preventing the human from being treated as an object and ultimately from being turned into waste” (2019, 114). The particularities of slavery in the New World within the early modern resistance to capitalist commodification set a clear framework to instantiate the resistance to wastification. In a 2018 interview published in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Mbembe discusses this phenomenon with David Theo Goldberg, arguing that what differentiated African slaves was that they continued to “produce symbols and rituals, language, memory and meaning” despite the brutalizing conditions of enslavement. For Mbembe, “[t]his Sisyphus-like effort to resist being turned into waste partly explains why plantation slavery differs from other forms of genocidal colonialism” (Goldberg 2018, 212).

The contemporary period presents a different paradigm considering the global proliferation of necropolitical sovereignty, for it has further triggered the transformation of larger communities of people into human waste. In a similar light, Agamben contends that “today’s democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life” (1998, 180). Yet the processes of wastification take place within the West at the same time. Prior to the advent of modernity, the bare life of *homo sacer*, the wasted human, might have an escape from the physical boundaries of the sovereign state. As Agamben remarks, “his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land” (1998, 183). Nowadays, there seems to be no escape, the threat of violence is ubiquitous, in that globalization has torn down almost every refuge from wastification.

Globalization has also further fueled the racist affects of necropolitical power in a digital era where *nanoracism* pervades the global sociocultural fabric. Mbembe conceptualizes the notion of nanoracism as a “narcotic brand of prejudice based on skin color that gets expressed in seemingly everyday anodyne gestures, [...] but also, it must be added, consciously spiteful remarks” (2019, 58). Their hidden purpose is to taint, humiliate, and injure individuals and communities to ultimately leave them “with no choice but to self-deport” (58). Excluded from society, the racialized

theorization on bare life, providing an approach that broadens the former conceptualization of the latter notion through a racially-conscious perspective. Additionally, like Mbembe, Weheliye criticizes Foucault’s biopolitical theory, which Agamben follows to articulate his conception of *homo sacer*, for “in both cases theories of racism and/or race appear almost exclusively in conjunction with the extremity of Nazism” (2014, 64); a stance that overlooks the historical relevance of plantation slavery, among other cases.



subject undergoes a process of wastification where nanoracism plays a major role, as it acts as a constant reminder of his/her condition of waste, reinforcing his/her subjectivation as *homo sacer*—whose intrinsic qualities may explain why this type of racism is usually overlooked. Despite its apparent banality, especially when compared to physical violence, nanoracism articulates a dangerous discourse that underpins wastification. As Morrison points out, “[w]e perceive waste in a chain of composted linguistic nonhuman actors” (2015, 6); while the language of waste is suffered by human subjects. The injuries of nanoracism do not directly materialize on the physical body, but they still wear out racialized people, slowly and silently. Its invisibility ultimately stands as one of its most pernicious qualities. As Mbembe contends, “[n]anoracism, in its banality and capacity to infiltrate into the pores and veins of society, is racism turned culture and into the air one breathes” (2019, 59).

This virulent form of racism combines with a more tangible type to complete human wastification. For Mbembe, “[n]anoracism has become the obligatory complement to hydraulic racism—that of juridicobureaucratic and institutional micro- and macro- measures, of the state machine” (2019, 59). Racial profiling, mass incarceration, barbed wire fences, militarized frontiers, clandestine deportations, or the so-called refugee camps are just some examples of the materialization of hydraulic racism. These techniques respond to a primitive fear that lies behind Western societies in which, as Mbembe describes, “Negroes, Arabs, Muslims—and [...] Jews—take the place of their masters and transform the nation into an immense dump, Muhammad’s dump” (2019, 59-60). The phobic fixation with the dump, paradoxically conceived of within the very Western mind itself, experiences a process of inversion that results in the wastification of the racialized subject, who becomes the target of a spiral of violence that, being inflicted on a *homo sacer*, is intrinsically neglected. Drawing from Saskia Sassen (2014), Mbembe therefore concludes that “[t]oday’s Negro is a ‘depth Negro,’ a subaltern category of humanity, a *genus of subaltern humanity*, which, as a superfluous and almost excessive part for which capital has no use, seems destined for zoning and expulsion” (2019, 178; italics in original).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the last chapter of *Necropolitics*, Mbembe encourages the formation of a properly human world, while further exploring Anti-Negro racism from an Africanist viewpoint. He first posits the history of Negroes, not as an exogenous narrative, but as an integral part of Western history. Providing the colonized subjects with historical agency fosters an alternate perspective to understand the context of Black life. Instead of departing from “what some have called ‘social death’ as this matter of waste,” Mbembe proposes “to retrieve the human from a history of waste or, to put it differently, a history of desiccation” (2019, 158). This understanding of the past seeks to propel the creation of the new humanity, along with another form of sovereignty and the disarmament of necropolitics. For Mbembe, the critique of Western humanism must thus “shift because it must confront something not



so much unique as soiled, wasted lives it must attempt to retrieve from a broken existence” (2019, 161). This reconstruction from scratch, from what is left after the desiccation of history and the retrieval of waste, must decidedly lean on Afrocentrism to bring about the All-World of the new humanity. At times when democracy is in crisis and neoliberal ideology is striving to liquidate the subject with agency, the current planetarization of inequality expands a subaltern category of humanity, the necropolitical wasted human, that anticipates a bleak future if, as Mbembe exhorts us at the conclusion, the All-World project is not undertaken with decision, once and for all.

Reviews sent to the author: 21/11/2022

Revised paper accepted for publication: 21/01/2023



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