



## Creative Intervention

### Infesting Mbembe

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“[Positive] Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life” (Mbembe 21).

Mbembe, Achille. 2003. “Necropolitics” in *Public Culture*, 15(1). Meintjes, Libby trans. Duke University Press.

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‘[Positive] life is [medical]ized. [Power] is given to local [Military Commanders] to use [their] discretion as to when and whom to [treat]. Movement between the territorial cells requires [Tru- yada®]. Local [queer] institutions are systematically [as- similated]. The besieged population is deprived of their means of income. Invisible [disability] is added to outright [compliance].’ (Mbembe 30).

Mbembe, Achille. 2003. “Necropolitics” in *Public Culture*, 15(1). Meintjes, Libby trans. Duke University Press.

“**[Capitalism]** sought to transcend **[dis]** closure, at least theoretically, when it abolished the distinction between **[positive]** and **[negative]** [...] and affirmed the community of humanity that was henceforth supposed to link **[Big Pharma]** and the **[positive]**, the **[detectable]** and the **[undetectable]**” (Mbembe 219).

Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “God’s Phallus” in *On The Postcolony*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

“The [positive] is therefore kept alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity. The violent tenor of the [positive]’s life is manifested through [Big Pharma]’s disposition to behave in a cruel and intemperate manner and in the spectacle of [power imposed] on the [positive]’s body” (Mbembe 21).

Mbembe, Achille. 2003. “Necropolitics” in *Public Culture*, 15(1). Meintjes, Libby trans. Duke University Press.



“Because the  
[positive] life is like a  
‘thing,’ possessed  
by [another person],  
the [positive] existence  
appears as a perfect  
figure of a shad-  
ow” (Mbembe 22).

Mbembe, Achille. 2003. “Necropolitics” in *Public Culture*, 15(1). Meintjes, Libby trans. Duke University Press.

*Infecting Mbembe I-V* (2013-2014)

plaque mounted typography, each ink jet panel: 91 cm x 121 cm x 0.635 cm

*Infecting Mbembe* was exhibited as part of *TSG: Fall To Pieces* (curated by Syrus Marcus Ware) at The Gladstone Hotel, summer 2015.

My text panels, *Infecting Mbembe I-V*, perform a visual intervention, a lens to de/construct what I imagine as a biopolitical-necropolitical axis, and the biopolitical and neoliberal investments (and management) of HIV/AIDS. Through layered, visual methods of superimposition and overwriting, and a loose interpretation of palimpsest, this intervention aims for deeper, more meaningful understandings of the complex mechanisms, regulations, and apparatuses that entangle in this politicized axis of power, control, and production (of life, death, bodies, and identities).

In his seminal article that names “necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe suggests it is not the struggle for autonomy in figures of sovereignty but the “*generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*” that are crucial to understanding necropower and its political framings (Mbembe, 2013, p. 163; emphasis in original). In this way, race and racism are implicit in necropolitics, including notions of (and practices entwined with) disposable populations, and the fabrication of “everyday deathworlds” (Haritaworn, Kuntsman & Posocco, 2014, p. 2) such as war, torture, imperial invasion and infrastructural warfare, and the expanding carceral state. The textual stratum of *Infecting Mbembe* feels for the symbiotic co-presence of life and death. This co-presence is manifest in the gaps between rich and poor, citizens and noncitizens; queer neoliberalism’s actions of interior marginalization, self-loathing, and internalized homophobia; and queerly abjected populations that are marked for death in context with HIV/AIDS and/or the associated processes of corporeal productivity (Cazdyn, 2012, p. 152-154; Foucault, 1990, p. 140) that, on one hand, transcend death itself by way of disease management and, on the other, re/emerge through the vexed practices of HIV criminalization. It is in/between these layers that necropolitics, terror, and the weaponization of life operate in reciprocal re/action. Mbembe insists “[a]ny historical account of the rise of modern terror needs to address slavery, which could be considered one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation” (Mbembe, 2013, p. 169). From this wasp’s nest of theories and lived experiences, one question emerges: In what ways do processes of pharmaceutical industrialization enslave bodies in the absence of a cure?

Once a death sentence, HIV/AIDS has become a life sentence. Big Pharma’s emphasis on rendering the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) benign, by way of disease management, requires a close reading in/between the lines, so to speak. This in/betweenness vividly reveals itself when these efforts to render benign are contrasted by – and in direct conflict with – society’s virulent image of HIV/AIDS. Here, in/betweenness becomes a break in *the normal*, a state of exception, and a brutal measure of corporeal productivity that is embodied in two ways: 1) a *new chronic* mode, “a mode of time [...] for an undying present that remains forever sick, without the danger of sudden death” (Cazdyn, 2012, p. 5); and 2) the vexed practices of HIV criminalization, of which Canada is a leader. Normative breaks also insert in other political and social contexts and layers. Foucault (2013, p. 74;

my insert) argues that “[racism] is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die [a social death]”. Thus, a biological ordering occurs, imposing distinctions and hierarchies (of race, gender, sexuality, and orientation) that, in turn, fragment the spaces and layers that biopolitical power seeks to control. This fragmentation, or *othering*, makes it possible to establish relationships between life and the death of the other in biological (and social) terms. Foucault (2003, p. 73) forewarns the building of monsters, such as viruses today, is “a formidable extension of biopower [that] will put it beyond all human sovereignty.” This forewarning bears frightening resemblances to early conspiracy theories surrounding the AIDS pandemic, theories that have not completely vanished – despite the cleansing overtones.

*Infecting Mbembe* deploys, interrogates, and works through academic citation strategies in order to construct an expanded visual lexicon that shares, *queers*, and worries original scholarly texts and their intended and/or interpreted meanings, and significances. *Infecting Mbembe* specifically takes aim at the interchangeability of power’s object(s) of control, and the subjectivities that embody and occupy those objects. Select citations from Mbembe’s *On The Postcolony* and *Necropolitics* are overwritten as *becoming sites* of new meaning-making. These becomings replace language of power, racialization, and slavery with superimposed HIV/AIDS *isms* and/or vocabulary. In each instance, the word being overwritten remains visible to the viewer by way of reduced opacity. This play of opaqueness seeks to push the real differences – between HIV/AIDS, racialized incarceration, and murder – to perform important tensions. In this way, the viewer can perceive (or interpret) Mbembe’s original meaning in a contextual relationship with the “infecting” superimposition. Each panel seeks to demonstrate the processes of taxonomization that are central to biopolitics. In this way, word substitutions (through superimposition) construct another axis, one that delineates non-white and HIV-positive bodies as markers at either end. This second, imaginary axis is wrapped in finer layers of exchange that become possible as populations face into – and live with – precarity, dispossession, and the threat of being disposable.

*Infecting Mbembe* is not an erasure but a suturing of language on race and slavery. This suturing performs, in turn, a redescription of HIV/AIDS (and its intersectionalities) and, more importantly, the pandemic’s colossal impact on African nations and peoples. Che Gossett (2014, p. 32) notes,

The inside/outside history of AIDS activism seems especially relevant if we consider past forms of criminalization and securitization – from the HIV prison camps at Guantanamo during Clinton’s presidency to the Jesse Helms-inspired HIV travel ban – and considering the present moment in which segregation of HIV-positive prisoners continues in South Carolina as well as emergent scholarship on the ways in which mass incarceration, criminalization of sex work, drugs have all escalated HIV/AIDS.

With these constellations of thinking in mind, *Infecting Mbembe* performs a lack of discrimination and, at the same time, discriminates. It is a mirroring of psychic damage that reflects the savage, lived nature of the HIV/AIDS condition, a nature that is often constructed as “manageable,” for commodification’s sake. The panels play with “form misrecognition” to consciously generate art work that can be misconstrued as “snobbishly stylized,” a space where “[c]ontent is abnormal and the form is normal” (Grzanic & Tatlic, 2014, p. 137; emphasis in original). Non-apologetic in stance, *Infecting Mbembe* is a high-risk provocation.

Queer, HIV-positive, and writing from a location of white male privilege, I am caught – like a deer in headlamps – by my own hyphenated identity and the trans/figurative possibilities that abound in dialogue with Mbembe’s clarity, intensity, and urgency. Acknowledging my personal loss of pure, uncontaminated health and the risky business of mixing *isms*, I rub up against (and with) the ghost of José Esteban Muñoz (2009, p. 72-73):

To accept loss is to accept the way in which one’s queer-ness will always render one lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws. To accept loss is to accept queerness – or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement. To be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality’s path. Freed men escaping slavery got lost too, and this is a salient reverberation between queerness and racialization.

Correspondingly, the life of a slave – framed by Mbembe (2013, pp. 169-170) as “a form of life-in-death” – results in a triple loss: loss of “home,” body rights, and political status, or *bare life* (Agamben, 1998, p. 8). The final outcome: social death, expulsion from humanity altogether, the “perfect figure of a shadow” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 22).

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