

Resisting Necropolitics: Reconceptualizing Agency in Mbembé and Agamben

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/08/21/resisting-necropolitics-reconceptualizing-agency-in-mbembe-and-agamben/>

JONAS SKORZAK, AUG 21 2019

The works of Achille Mbembé and Giorgio Agamben show how notion of (state) power and sovereignty developed in a Western context do not suffice to explain what happens at the margins or outside of Western societies (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2015, pp. 73–74). However, their theories did not properly conceptualize those subjected and are unable to deal with the many and everyday forms of resistance (e.g. Akıncı, 2018; Makley, 2015; Ryan, 2016). Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender and sex as well as the agency of subjects can aid us in developing the theories of Mbembé and Agamben further. The works of Butler, Mbembé, and Agamben can all be placed within the history of poststructuralist thought (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 77) with all three building on the work of Michel Foucault.

This essay will argue that the related concepts of Mbembé's "living dead" and Agamben's "bare life" should be reconceptualized as performative acts in line with Judith Butler's theory in order to allow for agency and acts of resistance/subversion by people relegated as such disposable life. While I agree with the utility of their concepts of necropolitics and the state of exception, their victims are almost condemned to passivity and should, therefore, be reimagined in a manner that allows for resistance. To do so, this essay will first present the work of Mbembé (2003) and Agamben (1998) and show how their concepts are often associated with each other. Subsequently, a generalized account of Butler's (1988, 1999, 1993/2011) theory on the performative constitution of gender and sex through the congealing repetition of acts within the regulatory frame of heteronormativity is detailed. Finally, I will apply her theory to our case of "bare life," offering a novel and expanded theorization of those declared inhuman and opening the space for resistance and subversion.

Mbembé and Agamben on State's Right to Kill and Bare Life

While mainly focusing on Mbembé's theory as he incorporates some work of Agamben (cf. Mbembé, 2003, pp. 12–13), I will try to offer a joint account of their thoughts on subjugation. Mbembé (2003, pp. 11–12) starts from the idea that sovereignty is characterized by the power to decide who may live and who must die, which goes beyond Foucault's biopolitical "make live and let die". Biopower functions by dividing people into those worthy of living and those unworthy using *racism*, a "biological caesura" that enables the distribution of people into subgroups and permits the right of death (Mbembé, 2003, pp. 16–17). According to Agamben (1998, pp. 7–8), the threshold between "bare life" (biological/bodily life) and political existence (*bios*) is fundamental to Western politics where *zoe*, the former, is only included in the *polis* (body politic) by means of an exclusion. This centrality of the threshold makes the politicization of bare life (i.e. biopolitics) the nucleus of sovereign power (Agamben, 1998, p. 6). For Mbembé, prevalent sovereignty is aimed at "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (Mbembé, 2003, p. 14). This right to kill finds its normative basis in the state of exception and the relation of enmity, which are constantly produced and appealed to in the form of an Other as a mortal threat whose biophysical elimination secures me (Mbembé, 2003, pp. 16–18). Modern sovereignty blurs the biological and political realm up to the totalizing convergence of the two in the concern with the bare life of the citizen, which is accompanied by the process that makes the state of exception the rule (Agamben, 1998, p. 9). With the politicization of life, a decision on the threshold beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant, a category of "life unworthy of being lived," is made, which corresponds to the bare life-threshold (Agamben, 1998, pp. 139–140).

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For Agamben (1998, pp. 170–172; p. 166), the principal place of these trends is the (concentration) camp, which is characterized by the absolute *conditio inhumana* where all life is wholly reduced to bare life. The camp is where and when the state of exception becomes the rule and, thus, where fact and law become blurred (the sovereign simply wills the exception), so that the normal order is suspended and anything becomes possible (Agamben, 1998, pp. 168–171). Reflecting that, Mbembé's (2003, pp. 22–25) colonies are the site, where biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege come together, and where the exercise of that sovereignty is not subject to law. Mbembé (2003, pp. 25–27) agrees with Fanon that colonial occupation is a matter of creating new spatial relations that divide people into compartments and relegate the colonized into a “third zone between subjecthood and objecthood.”

Such places, where sovereignty means defining who matters and who is disposable, show how *necropower* operates. This notion emerges because biopower is unable to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death. Necropolitics attempts to explain the deployment of weapons of mass destruction and the “creation of death-worlds,” forms of social existence where whole populations are subjected to “conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (Mbembé, 2003, pp. 39–40). These *homo sacer* (“sacred man”; e.g. camp inhabitants), the figure bringing bare life into Western politics, are those who are to be killed but not sacrificed, making them completely subject to the power of death (Agamben, 1998, pp. 99–100). Necropower is characterized by three features resulting in the proliferation of conflict sites and contact (Mbembé, 2003, pp. 27–29): Territorial fragmentation makes movement impossible and separates populations. *Vertical sovereignty* extends sovereignty to the third dimension, whereby colonial occupation operates through verticality and the symbolism of being on top with most precision policing done from the air (e.g. drones; pp. 28–29). These two result in *occupational splintering*, typified primarily by seclusion but also the control, surveillance, and separation of the populations designated as disposable. The third feature, infrastructural or siege warfare, as embodied in the activity of bulldozing, is about the coordinated and systematic sabotage of the enemy's societal and urban infrastructure (p. 29).

Butler on Performativity, Norms, and Resistance

If Butler's theory would need to be summed up in one sentence, it is probably the following one from *Gender Trouble*: Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal [i.e. materialize] over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of thing (Butler, 1999, p. 33).

The materialization of regulatory norms, such as gender or sex, which produce the bodies they govern, happens in a performative fashion, whereby performativity is understood as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces what it regulates (Butler, 1993/2011, pp. xi–xiii). The construction of such categories is thus a “process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (pp. xviii–xix). Hence, the materiality of such norms (e.g. sex) is the most productive effect of power and is sustained through and as a materialization of such regulatory norms, which makes the body viable and intelligible in the first place by giving it meaning (pp. xxiii–xxiv; p. xii). This materialization of norms requires those identificatory processes by which the norms are assumed and which “precede and enable the formation of a subject” (p. xxiv). Identification takes place through the (regulated and repeated) practice of repudiation of what does not conform to the norm, producing a disavowed but necessary domain of abjection and the inhuman (pp. xiii–xiv). There is no prior subject but instead the “I” is formed through the discursive social recognition of the subject, i.e. the materialization of such regulatory norms as sex (p. 171).

To open space for agency and resistance, it is important to take a closer look at performativity. Here, performatives are derivative and a reiteration of a (set of) norm(s): The force and necessity of these norms are dependent on the “citation” or approximation of these same norms through such performative acts, which are also compelled by those same norms (Butler, 1993/2011, pp. xxii–xxiii). That is, a performative only provisionally succeeds insofar it “accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practice”, but that historicity of force constrains how one can repeat it (Butler, 1993/2011, pp. 172–173). The subjectification by regulatory norms also enables (even produces) the subject who would resist those norms, which situates agency as a reiterative or re-articulatory practice immanent to power (not external and opposed to it) (Butler, 1993/2011, p. xxiii). Latter fact is derived from the implications of the reiterative nature of performance: The necessity of reiteration shows the inefficacy of the norm – materialization is never quite complete and bodies never fully comply,

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as the aforementioned “approximation” implies (p. xii; p. 176; p. 181). It also shows that the (re-)production is instable as gaps and fissures open up in the constructions, that which escapes or exceeds the norm or cannot be wholly defined or fixed by its repetitive enactment (p. xix). These instabilities, possibilities for rearticulation, can be used for subversion by co-opting the practices of the norm’s reproduction to question the hegemonic regulatory norms (p. xxi; p. xii). Such subversion can be practiced by a theatrical citation that mimes and renders hyperbolic the discursive norm that abjects the one resisting, which exposes the (historicity of the) underlying regulatory norm (pp. xxviii–xxix; p. 181; pp. 176–177). This is done by drag performances or the “queer” movement who rework abjection into political resistance.

Performing and Resisting “Bare Life”

While Butler originally applied her theory to sex and gender, the poststructuralist theory is applicable to any discursive construct, especially those that, like race (cf. Mirón & Inda, 2000), come to be embodied by people and that substantially form their subjectivity. As the remarks on abjection and resistance indicate, her theory is useful to reconceptualize the living dead, a group clearly positioned in the dimension of abjection. Thus, our focus is on the imposition of disposability and the space of resistance herein. Gender, sex or race are implicated in power relations (e.g. heteronormativity, white supremacy) and materialized in the body (i.e. embodied), so it should be even easier to theorize the construction of such categories more loosely connected with bodily features.[1] Making the connection even more obvious, Mbembé’s and Agamben’s theories are based on Foucault’s concept of biopolitics: As explained in the first section, this power defines itself “in relation to a biological field” (Mbembé, 2003, p. 17) with a line called racism dividing people into us and the bare, disposable life. This is taken up in *Dispossession* (Butler & Athanasiu, 2013, pp. 31–33), whereby humanness is differentially allocated with a boundary between those rendered properly human (i.e. *bios*) and those who are not (i.e. *zoe*), the disposable life. The “logic of dispossession” (Butler & Athanasiu, 2013, pp. 19–23), arguably an instrument of necropower, excludes subjects by eviscerating the conditions of possibility for life and humanity, both *zoe* and *bios*, which makes “assigned disposability” a state of induced inequality and destitution. Reflecting Mbembé’s and Agamben’s remarks on the state of emergency, a discourse of “crisis” is produced and managed by a neoliberal regime that leaves it as the only rational and viable form of governance (Butler & Athanasiu, 2013, pp. 149–150). Hereby, the “crisis” becomes a perennial state of exception that attempts to eliminate any deviation and enables the selective suspension of law and the lethal disposing of bodies (p. 168). Henceforth, “necropolitics” is one of those regulatory norms that control the performances that constitute it, whereby the performances, their role in the reproduction, and their control over the norms differs between those doing the dispossessing (e.g. the politician declaring an emergency, the soldier manning the checkpoint) and those dispossessed (e.g. by complying with orders).

How does resistance to disposability look like? Recalling earlier comments on resistance, the starting point is the inefficacy of those reiterated performances, of those repetitions of norms/discourses, and, henceforth, the implicated power cannot fully subject the individual. While performatives are necessarily implicated in the creation of (the processes necessary for) precariousness, possibilities of critical invocation and rearticulation of the normalized order (the thresholds and limitations) remain (cf. Butler & Athanasiu, 2013, pp. 126–127). In popular resistance movements, we see the “performativity of [social] plurality” which troubles the ontology in which subjects are formed and which not only resignifies public space (e.g. street protests) but also the line demarcating the private from the public (see the role of social media) (Butler & Athanasiu, 2013, pp. 153–155). Resistance to enforced precarious living pertains to the forces of survival and endurance, which are no mere self-preservation but the exercising of contingencies of freedom even in unfree, bare life-conditions (cf. pp. 180–183). However, the material conditions brought about by destitution can undermine the desire and capacity needed for a subject who can question and offer itself up to others (pp. 109–110). In contrast, only Mbembé mentions resistance and there it pertains to martyrdom (i.e. suicide bombers) seen as an expression of freedom: By linking one’s death to the death of others, the body is sacrificed to overcome mortality and unfreedom (Mbembé, 2003, pp. 36–39). This is clearly a much more narrow path for resistance as the subjugation to the power of death can only be defeated by sacrificing the life that is to be killed but not sacrificed (cf. Agamben, 1998, pp. 71–73).

To quickly exemplify the consequences of this reconceptualization, I will use the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), because it was Mbembé’s first and foremost example to illustrate his theory of necropolitics, and

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the situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh, due to its contemporary character. Regarding OPT, Mbembé (2003) speaks of “*absolute* domination” (p. 30), characterizes the prevailing logic of survival as one of “each man is the enemy of every other” (p. 36), and freedom as only arising in martyrdom (pp. 37–39). Meanwhile, in ordinary forms of resistance, such as non-compliance with Israeli restrictions, or in the weekly protests against the wall in Bil’in, which cuts residents off from 60% of the village’s farmland (O’Loughlin, 2007), we can see the exercise of freedom-as-resistance by supposedly bare life. Especially women, for example, practice “*şumūd*”, an infrapolitics of everyday (nonviolent) resistance, on an ideational level by stubbornly maintaining joy and hope in the form of a struggle to maintain a normal and enjoyable life, linking that pursuit to resistance against Israeli occupation and patriarchal control (Richter-Devroe, 2011). To take another example: As the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (FFM Myanmar, 2018) documents, the Rohingya have been subject to severe restrictions of their human rights for years, including severe movement restrictions, strict population control measures or statelessness (pp. 137–138; pp. 127–128; pp. 137–138), and have now even become the victims of a genocide (pp. 365–366). This led to a mass exodus to Bangladesh, where many now live in destitute conditions in overcrowded refugee camps (Frelick, 2018, pp. 9–11; UN High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). Despite that, they still practice resistance by, for example, refusing to be returned to Myanmar (Ellis-Petersen, Rahman, & Safi, 2018), by continuing a violent struggle within so-called Ethnic Armed Organizations (like the Arakan Army; e.g. Amnesty International, 2019), or by practicing various forms of activism that publicize their plight (e.g. rohingyatoday.com) – not to speak of all the undocumented acts of daily resistance.

Conclusion

By viewing necropolitics and bare life as constructed and materialized by the repeated performances of subjects, we can reconceptualize these theories and can explain acts of resistance that occur daily in east Jerusalem or Myanmar as arising from the rearticulation of those reiterated acts. Even necropower is not all-powerful and can fully materialize or subjugate as the need for repetition proves. Ideally, further research would investigate such a theoretical evolution of concepts like necropolitics and homo sacer towards a performative account further by, for example, providing a detailed account of how the theories would change in detail or by doing empirical research that further tests the compatibility of such repressive power with the resistance examined here.

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Notes

[1] Doubts regarding the construction and performance of seemingly natural features do not arise here

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Date written: May 2019*