

Spectral Haunts of the Museum – Accumulating the Other

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1. The Anti-Museum

In a little under three pages of his earth-shattering opus *Necropolitics*, political philosopher Achille Mbembe sketches the figure of the Anti-Museum. He accomplishes this through the acknowledgment that the 'entering' of the Atlantic slave trade into the museum is "undesirable" and mostly remains vacuous.¹ Following most Afro-decolonial works, the Atlantic slave complex (more than a trade) is analyzed as the essential factor of modern capitalism. Educated in the European West or under the identification of modernity with the long road towards humanism and a certain white man's call to 'Sapere Aude!', the notion of the slave may only recall plantations in the Americas and images of bigoted mistakes made by men far removed from those that shed the vestiges of medieval orders. But note that modern capitalism is inherently linked to sugar, tobacco, and cotton, pleasurable and clean resources made available through the triangular trade. This trade was determined by its reliance on the black people as slave labor, as the violation and exploitation of black beings for the extraction of the highest surplus value possible.² In this, the slave appears as a "cog in a planetary-scale process of accumulation,"³ with the forceful removal of people from the African continent, followed by their abuse, breaking of skin, rape, and subsequent relegation to the bottom of every social structure priming both capitalism and the intellectualization of the western world.

If then, the slave would enter the museum in Mbembe's conception, the museum would cease to exist and become something else entirely. This follows the notion that the museum is historically not an "unconditional place of reception for the multiple faces of humanity taken in its unity,"⁴ acting rather as space where injury and violation toward the Other – as in the marginalized and non-western subject/object – appears in classification and presentation of their bodies and cultures. Herein, two logics, of separation and assignation, constitute a classification and presentation of the Other that results in the establishing of different stages of humanity (if any), civilization and ultimately treatment in society.⁵ In the

¹ Mbembe 2019, 171

² Warren 2018, 6.

³ Mbembe 2019, 170.

⁴ Mbembe 2019, 171.

⁵ Mbembe 2019, 171

case of the slave, 'showcasing' in the museum would "doubly hallow the spirit of apartheid" that bases itself on a 'cult of difference, hierarchy, and inequality.'⁶ In other words, displays of the slave trade remain unable to look beyond and refrain from reproducing the logic of separation and assignation of an essential difference between the Other and the civilized self. This inability hinges on the practice of museums as spaces of "neutralization and domestication" of "living forces,"⁷ when objects become bereft of "their breath" and are turned into lifeless matter.⁸ Yet, slavery carries with it the "power of scandal" that must be preserved from neutralization to ensure that the slave as a figure carries "insurrectional power" as in the ability to shock us when confronted with the transatlantic slave trade and initiate a change of systems from it.⁹ In order to maintain these transformative aspects from the harrowing history and its consequences, the institution of the anti-museum needs to be established.

For Mbembe, the anti-museum is not an institution in the traditional sense but the "figure of another place," one of "radical hospitality."¹⁰ This hospitality and "refuge" extends to those who have been differentiated and exploited, the "rejects of humanity" that attest to the sacrificial system of modernity.¹¹ This can only be accomplished when the slave "haunts" the museum in a mode of "breaking and entering" and maintains a spectral dimension that lets it be "everywhere and nowhere."¹² Beyond the poetics of Mbembe's concept of the anti-museum that are needed to contend with the "abominable event of slave trade" and prevent us from "drawing facile consequences" of the display of slavery, I am interested in this very notion of the spectral that enables a transformation of the museum up unto its unbecoming. Established under the material logic of accumulation and the display of cultures and artifacts, the museum needs a spectral haunt to accompany its very existence and practice. This spectrality can be manifold, and this essay will pursue three connected routes: (1) the grappling with the underside of excessive and ideological accumulation while pushing the museum beyond the archive under destructive logics of differentiation and consumption through (2) in-depth understanding of racialization in the projects of modernity and museology and (3) proposing a sensory practice informed by new materialism and atmospheres to create a mode of 'breaking and entering' and aisthetical relation with the world.¹³

⁶ Mbembe 2019, 171.

⁷ Mbembe 2019, 172.

⁸ Mbembe 2019, 171.

⁹ Mbembe 2019, 172.

¹⁰ Mbembe 2019, 172.

¹¹ Mbembe 2019, 172.

¹² Mbembe 2019, 172.

¹³ Sriram 2025.

2. Necrocapitalism

Karl Marx channeled the age-old notion that money can never be clean when he stated that capital is stained with blood from "head to toe," dripping from every pore "with blood and dirt."¹⁴ Subhabrata Banerjee analyzes our contemporary economic system as necrocapitalism, wherein "accumulation by dispossession and the creation of death worlds in colonial contexts" constitute its base structure.¹⁵ Necrocapitalism updates the notion of racial capitalism by Cedric Robinson, marking capitalism as aiming to differentiate people into races to create the dialectical difference of race to enable exploitation.¹⁶ This differentiation and dispossession is enacted by states or transnational corporations and materializes land through privatization or ceases control over natural resources away from Indigenous populations, becoming a form of accumulation and creation of a "Capitaloscene" that relies on death, torture, suicide, slavery, and the destruction of livelihoods.¹⁷

This may evoke images of period pieces and evil colonialists hunting for ivory in white suits shooting PoCs that are only armed with sticks and stones, but it is much rather a "new form of imperialism" equally enacted by private militaries as it is by lawyers and HR – all of them 'managing' violence in their specific ways.¹⁸

We can mark this mental difference in the playbook of dispossession through the addition of 'necro' to capitalism as well. 'Necros', in contrast to 'thanatos' does not simply denote death as definite destruction and end of life, but speaks of life as a "form of death,"¹⁹ when "living in the present" becomes unbearable, and the boundaries of life and death become blurred.²⁰ Norman Ajari contrasts definite death and the production of unlivability when he refers to a perspectival shift from the racial dehumanization enacted by Nazism towards the Atlantic slave trade: Other than clear genocidal intentions, the 'necro'-aspect of the slave trade centered on "systematically depriving human life of [...] dignity."²¹ In terms of control, the introduction of death as a form of life shifts Foucauldian biopower towards the governing of mortality instead of life.

¹⁴ Marx, 1867, 926 quoted in Banerjee 2008, 12.

¹⁵ Banerjee 2008, 15.

¹⁶ Robinson 2021, 26.

¹⁷ Krenak 2024, 18;20.

¹⁸ Banerjee 2008, 15.

¹⁹ Ajari 2023, 58

²⁰ Ajari 2023, 59.

²¹ Ajari 2023, 13–14.

Similar to the rise of modernity, the market may appear to be on a quest to enable exchange between rational actors in order to amass wealth for everybody, yet the reality of accumulation carries with it the instrumentalization of humans and the deconstruction of their bodies.²² This occurs in a split between creating death for a particular portion of people to maintain the production of life for those considered universal,²³ with sovereignty appearing as the power to decide upon the value and political relevance of life and create 'exceptions' to this rule.²⁴ Here, then, both humanism and capitalism hold the power to create 'death-worlds' or a "permanent state of death" for racialized bodies as an "exception" to the normative order.²⁵ Even though most of this critique centers on the exploration of the meaning of the colony for biopower, its tools of dispossession and "discrimination as a condition of the possibility of a state" remain present in every neo/necrocapitalist configuration.²⁶ The contemporary death-world of cobalt mines in Congo is a striking example,²⁷ yet the condition of migrants laboring in low-wage sectors in capitalist countries speaks to the division of modes of life and death that enact "a seemingly endless series of setbacks, aggressions, and prohibitions" for racialized bodies "that necrose existence and provoke a loss of faith in the world."²⁸ This recalls what Mbembe refers to when speaking about the "planetarization of Apartheid" and borderization as a tool of democratic order. Banerjee uses the image of the "sword of commerce" to distinguish the practices of necrocapitalism from the physical violence and actual sword that was used to rule colonies in the past.²⁹ The postcolonial sword of commerce is covert and manages global violence while appearing to create a "business-friendly climate."³⁰ Both necrocapitalist accumulation and colonialism share practices of (1) domination of space, the (2) reformation of natives' minds, and the (3) incorporation of local economic production into western schemes.

The museum as an institution, maintained today under the project of humanism and universality, as in creating access and education on the arts and culture for all, is still entrenched in and benefits from the 'domination of space,' the 'reformation of minds' and local economic production of necrocapitalism.³¹ Following the aspects of 'neutralization' and 'domestization' Mbembe mentioned above, the discursive power of the museum

²² Mbembe 2019, 68.

²³ Banerjee 2008, 14 (Quoting Montag 2005, 15).

²⁴ Banerjee 2009, 9.

²⁵ Mbembe 2019, 163.

²⁶ Mbembe 2019, 162.

²⁷ <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/02/01/1152893248/red-cobalt-congo-drc-mining-siddharth-kara>

²⁸ Ajari 2023, 13–14.

²⁹ Banerjee 2008, 4.

³⁰ Banerjee 2008, 18.

³¹ Franklin 2020, 5.

begins in a "disciplinary coercion" of deciding the values of objects and their modes of display.³² This includes their status as high-art or relegation to more anthropological systems of engagements as part of 'foreign' or 'ancient' cultures altogether. When including today's modes of awareness, for instance, in attempts to allow for the repatriation of colonial artifacts or the allowance of rituals to take place with previously stolen goods to keep their 'breath' alive,³³ the museum is not the high-minded temple of theft and strict neutralization anymore, yet its practices and the accumulation of art cannot escape the historical interdependence of colonization and creation of European sovereignty. Engaging in the museum and its curatorial practices inevitably leads to states of exception that reproduce binaries, when, for instance, we as onlookers are engaged in art historical discourse of understanding renaissance paintings under a trajectory of progress and African artifacts as frozen objects of timeless or rather undeveloped people. Even if the idea of forms-of-death may seem far removed from the museum as such, like every Western institution, the museum creates an ontological and epistemological space that directly benefits from colonial modes of control.³⁴

3. Entering the Museum

When I – born a brown man in Germany, son of Tamil war refugees, and highly educated in all matters of culture, art, and society – enter a museum in Germany, two events occur concurrently. I notice the watchful eyes of hall attendants or curatorial staff while browsing the room – eager to discipline my undisciplined skin, exuding the danger of touching an object or misbehaving towards these hallowed halls. Equally, if these hall attendants are POCs, or when maintenance staff (who are usually of color) notice me, there is a sense of surprise, relief, and familiarity. Not infrequently, a nod is exchanged, acknowledging my presence as a 'practitioner of high culture,' mixed with the happiness that some of us 'wretched' don't need to clean or stand for endless hours to walk the earth.

While the connection of necrocapitalism and the logic of accumulation may still appear removed from the notion of an anti-museum and a spectral haunting thereof, the anecdote of entering the museum acts as the first experience of a haunting spectrality. With necrocapitalism operating through the creation of different spheres, the museum establishes a space of political and intellectual sovereignty and a counter-sphere where "forms of domination, exploitation, and violence" rule, appearing as a spectral dimension

³² Banerjee 2088, 7.

³³ Classen 2017, 141.

³⁴ Banerjee 2008, 10.

that, for Mbembe, makes the museum unfit to host the realities of slavery.³⁵ As the transatlantic slave complex may never enter the museum properly and truly destroy the institution, migrant bodies and bodies of color may transgress this place as 'imperial exceptions' to the clean orders of a (necro-)consumerism.³⁶

In many cases, this paradoxical relationship envelops the own racialized body when present in the museum – a relation of (a) anxiety of not belonging in the space because of race/class/gender differences reflected by the normative consumers of culture and (at worst) the curatorial staff itself. And (b) a relation built through the harrowing knowledge of colonial and necrocapital realities when experiencing anthropological, ethnographic exhibitions or those that deal with environmental destruction at large – simply knowing of the realities of racialized bodies upholding systems of accumulation in the colonial past and the globalist present through the exploitation of life, land and labor. This may mark a shift in the notion of the anti-museum and the value of spectrality as such. I argue that while the anti-museum as a figure of space is entirely desirable, for the purposes of this essay and entering museums that still operate under the premises of neutralization and domestication, the desired shift lies not in the nature of the exhibition (the what) but in the experience of it (the how).

In terms of a critique of modernity and capitalism, this shift pertains not only to learning how these projects codified race, class, and gender for their own means but to reflecting and critiquing the embodied realities that follow from this. Regarding racialization as a form of Othering to subjugate, relegate, and borderize, race must be examined as "bodily sensation and visceral feeling" that reveals and problematizes "how social norms, values, and relation of power are habituated and materialized into a lived embodiment."³⁷ For Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown, race is "materially felt and tangibly experienced," akin to a spectral dimension that "prove[s] that race is precisely and skillfully deployed (or masked) to institutionalize the values infused into varying shades of human bodies. Race is nowhere and everywhere, proximate and distant, visible and invisible at the same time".³⁸

In the above example, the reality of race does not only mean an 'it could happen to you' for PoCs when experiencing colonial artifacts but draws towards how race inflects on "minute

³⁵ Banerjee 2008, 12.

³⁶ Banerjee 2008, 33.

³⁷ Sekimoto and Brown 2020, 2.

³⁸ Sekimoto and Brown 2023, 200.

behaviors and remarks" in the space of the museum as it does in public.³⁹ In this sense, race fills the air and our very experience, while whiteness acts as a "shelter" from the "toxicity of racism."⁴⁰ In necropolitical terms, this spectrality of the notion of race implicates that white bodies are allowed to be "fully moral agents" and "neuro-economic human[s] that are allowed to walk the halls of various institutions as purely ocular beings."⁴¹ This ocularcentrism, especially in the historical generation of the museum as a visual space of intellectual experience that reinforces the division of mind and body creates whiteness as a template to experience knowledge and truth led by a neutral and scientific gaze. In contrast, colonization appears as a tool that aims to "decerebralize" the Other by making them foreign to their environment and enacting a "systematic break with reality."⁴² With implications far beyond the museum, this decerebralization appears as a mechanism of how modernity colonizes the senses to evoke transcendence as a commodity that reinforces the notion of a "translucent world" free from histories of violence or racialization.⁴³ The presence of the Other in these translucent spaces for Mbembe creates a "radical uncertainty" that reveals the exploitative systems underlying notions of freedom and consumption.⁴⁴

In the difference between understanding race as a "construct" or "structure of oppression" that is disembodied itself and race as an assemblage of "sensuous realities with texture, movement, rhythm, temperature, and weight,"⁴⁵ the radical uncertainty that haunts normative culture turns to a powerful tool of knowledge and action. With race as a bodily and sensorial event – as "something that happens, rather than something that is" reveals the "entanglements" of subjects, sensations, discourses as well as institutions.⁴⁶ Turning back to entering the museum, the harrowing experience of race herein, reflecting sensual relations as social relations of the past and present,⁴⁷ reveals racialization as a technology of modernity and exploitative accumulation, regulating "how bodies move, feel, sense, think, and interact with other to achieve particular social outcomes."⁴⁸ In this, sensory whiteness appears as a norm that enables the denial of other sensory relations towards the

³⁹ Sekimoto and Brown 2023, 200.

⁴⁰ Sekimoto and Brown 2023, 200.

⁴¹ Mbembe 2019, 67; 183.

⁴² Mbembe 2019, 146.

⁴³ Mbembe 2019, 113–114.

⁴⁴ Mbembe 2019, 102.

⁴⁵ Sekimoto and Brown 2020, 3.

⁴⁶ Sekimoto and Brown 2020, 3.

⁴⁷ Sekimoto and Brown 2020, 5.

⁴⁸ Sekimoto and Brown 2020, 21.

world – for instance in the need to ‘display it to make it graspable’ – and in turn transforms race or class distinctions into “physiological sensations” to enforce social hierarchies.⁴⁹

Following this doubling of at once ‘sensing racialization’ through “racialized senses,” race becomes a haunting and “hegemonic presence” in the museum and elsewhere.⁵⁰ This never means that race is a fact rooted in biological differences as various histories of violence have built upon, but that “race exists socially” and that our attempt to dismantle it begins in “transforming the ways in which we inhabit and extend our bodies and senses towards one another” – especially in the context of an institution built to act as an epistemic space of encountering culture(s).⁵¹ Sekimoto and Brown point towards the historical conception of race as a text that doubles as an ocularcentric and intellectualized perspective on bodily realities. As a critique of Stuart Hall, who introduced the idea of reading culture and race ‘as text’ and revolutionized cultural studies in the process, this metaphor inevitably reproduces a structuralist stereotype of distant vision and reading as modes of comprehension.⁵² In this concept, however, the immediate sensory experience and materiality of bodies experiencing race are subsumed or dismissed entirely. Sekimoto and Brown remedy this by acknowledging race as multisensory and using a multimodal approach. This multimodality as an “epistemological orientation” exceeds the textual and visual towards embodiment, emplacement, and the dynamics of felt dimensions and social interaction.⁵³ Accordingly, I argue that multimodality opens a way to respond to the spectrality of experiences, in all their harrowing extensions, when making histories of exploitation and necropolitical undersides of our contemporary systems felt. Most importantly, this goes beyond emotions or linguistic comprehension of ‘more than words,’ encompassing “unnamed and untelligible space[s]” that transform our being in the world and relation to one another.

⁴⁹ Sekimoto and Brown, 30.

⁵⁰ Sekimoto and Brown, 43.

⁵¹ Sekimoto and Brown 2020, 43.

⁵² Sekimoto and Brown 2023, 203.

⁵³ Sekimoto and Brown 2023, 203.

4. Haunting our Senses

What conclusion can we draw from this twisting analysis of the anti-museum, necrocapitalism, and the felt experience of race that haunts the institution built upon histories of violence and tragedies enforced by capitalist accumulation?

For one, a multimodality of experience and especially a multisensoriality in the museum – exploring and curating exhibitions beyond their apparent visibility and including more senses and practices – may help to change the museum from a place of neutrality and ‘timeless viewing’ into a political and ethical experience that pushes us towards social justice.⁵⁴ Surely, a danger remains of using the museum solely as a “sensory playground” in the sense of an experience economy that utilizes the senses to obscure the experience of racialization or other forms of discrimination while engaging viewers solely as consumers. What sensory studies scholar Constance Classen calls “nurturing” a “multisensory aesthetics” draws closer to the museum as a “sensory forum.”⁵⁵

This switch can always be relegated to the visitor of the museum and result in an ‘epistemological metroidvania’ of trying to glean knowledge and study the consequences in a multi-faceted and complicated world. Still, I argue that this change toward a socio-political meaning despite histories of violence and the colonization of the senses needs to be anchored in production as much as in reception. Institutions should try to avoid reproducing sensory hierarchies when trying to advance a multisensory and multimodal approach to the experience of their spaces. For example, making events like the trench wars of WWI experientially available through sounds and smells may help underlie the violence and despair of the past; it might also reproduce a spectacularization of such events.⁵⁶ Similarly, while viable to approach a larger variety of visitors, the senses should not be used as ‘lower forms’ of knowledge creation for those deemed incapable of comprehension, for instance, in thinking that letting people ‘smell’ or ‘touch’ immediately lowers the cultural relevance and impact of an exhibition. Classen acknowledges this when pointing towards the deeply political question of “sensory access” to the museum – not to speak of allowing bodies of the Other in the spaces altogether.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Classen 2017, 141.

⁵⁵ Classen 2017, 135; 141.

⁵⁶ Classen 2017, 139, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/events/first-world-war-galleries>

⁵⁷ Classen 2017, 140.

I contend that allowing the senses into the museum and acknowledging the presence of spectral haunts, such as racialization in the museum, expands upon the notion of atmospheres as proposed by the late philosopher Gernot Bohme. In his conception, sensory perception is always connected to an 'affective affliction' by the experiences and the bodies within. To perceive must necessarily entail that we build a relationship with the world through our bodies and do this with other people and their experiences as well.⁵⁸ This draws us closer to understanding the split between the actual (*Wirklichkeit*) and real (*Realität*), as that is what concerns our perception and afflicts us and the thought-to-be objective world.

In relation to the museum and necrocapitalist powers, this allows us to understand the fashioning of the world in its ideological weight and discriminatory practices that some may feel directly but remains obscure to others. With atmospheres as a relation themselves constituted as sensory "co-presence of subject and object," we are enabled to deconstruct Aristotelian (and with that capitalist) notions around value and substance. This draws us closer to the intrusion, or keeping with the theme, the spectral dimension of the ethical that carries into the ontology and epistemology constituted by capitalist regimes.

Sensing as an *aisthetical* engagement with the material world in all its social inflections on our very perception carries an ethical call to acknowledge the material and 'marks on bodies' or 'neutralizations' and 'domestication' that at once drive and impede our cultures.⁵⁹ As with the experience of race, this at first destabilizes the subject and its relation with the world, for instance, in the anxiety and harrowing experience of understanding the racialized histories of capitalist accumulation and its consequences on institutions. Yet, as Mbembe argues in his necropolitics, there is a possibility towards a 'radical hospitality' and 'relation of care' in the engagement with the harrowing aspects of our contemporary world. Turning towards the future of the museum when faced with the haunting spectralities that point towards ongoing histories of violence, the relation of care can be posed as yet another spectral dimension that lives through the ephemeral experience of atmospheres and its multimodal potential.⁶⁰ Allowing us to experience the spectrality of the institutions and the bodily realities of others serves as a tether of the self to the Other, a reciprocal recognition that starts with vulnerability and transforms into accountability. This exposure leads to what Mbembe calls "future thinking," a multisensory and multimodal critique of nocturnal fissures constituting our life, that is about "passage, crossing, and movement [...] about

⁵⁸ Bohme 2014, 47–8.

⁵⁹ Barad 2007, 178; 185.

⁶⁰ Mbembe 2019, 175.

flowing life, about passing life, which we strive to translate as an event" and ultimately leads to the ability to built spaces of "collective decision-making."⁶¹ The anti-museum is rooted in what Mbembe calls a "mourning of what has been lost" and will therefore transform the very core of the institution beyond its original conception.⁶² This is a necessary step to transfigure the structures of power that create this loss in the first place. In 'sharing the sensible' and allowing the Other with all its haunts into the museum, we engage in a practice that strives to "render the world habitable again and for all."⁶³

⁶¹ Mbembe 2019, 181; 188.

⁶² Mbembe 2019, 161.

⁶³ Mbembe 2019, 161.

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