**Interview Coding and Memoing Exercise**

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**Instructions**

The following is an interview with Achille Mbembe, a philosopher and social theorist from Cameroon. In this activity, you will go through making codes from this interview. The goal is to conduct a round of open coding to produce an idea of what Mbembe is arguing. What examples does he provide? What concepts does he employ?

First, open NVivo and create a new project, NVivo Workshop. Then, upload into the new project this file. After, begin reading the interview, highlighting when you want to produce a code. Remember, you can make a new code or code at an already existing code. Also, you can make sub-codes, if you think that there is a master code that is then differentiated into competing or co-occurring ideas. Once you feel you have a good set of codes with which to discuss, you can stop.

Next, you make a memo about your coding. You want to discuss what codes you developed, how you see the codes fitting together, and an overarching theme of the interview. We will use this as a way to discuss the qualitative research process.

**Interview**

Nilsen: In April 2015, the Rhodes statue fell in South Africa at the University of Cape Town. How did you interpret that event?

Mbembe: For those who are not aware of who we are talking about, Cecil John Rhodes was a privateer. He was a ruthless actor in the mercantile expansionism that characterised 19th century settler colonialism in the southern part of Africa. Through political alliances, sheer brutality and expediency, he carved out for himself a huge chunk of South Africa’s mineral wealth, in particular diamonds in Kimberley and gold in the Witwatersrand. He bestowed some of the land he had grabbed in Cape Town to the university which, in return, erected a statue in his honour on the steps of one of its main buildings.

Rhodes prefigured the extraction and privatisation of ill-gotten wealth neoliberalism today has pushed to a refinement unseen in the history of humankind. He was a precursor of the type of predatory economic system and plutocratic politics at work in most parts of the world today, the results of which are the raping of the biosphere and the destruction at a massive scale of the basic conditions of life on Earth.

I interpret the toppling of his statue as a small, symbolic victory, in the long and protracted struggle for universal justice.

Nilsen: So there is a lineage from Rhodes to the neoliberal order we see today?

Mbembe: There is an explicit kinship between plantation slavery, colonial predation and contemporary forms of resource extraction and appropriation. In each of these instances, there is a constitutive denial of the fact that we, the humans, coevolve with the biosphere, depend on it, are defined with and through it and owe each other a debt of responsibility and care.

An important difference is the technological escalation that has led to the emergence of computational capitalism in our times. We are no longer in the era of the machine but in the age of the algorithm. Technological escalation, in turn, is threatening to turn us all into artefacts – what I have called elsewhere “the becoming-black-of-the world” – and to make redundant a huge chunk of the muscular power capitalism relied upon for a long time. It follows that today, although its main target remains the human body and earthly matter, domination and exploitation are becoming increasingly abstract and reticular. As a repository of our desires and emotions, dreams, fears and fantasies, our mind and psychic life have become the main raw material which digital capitalism aims at capturing and commodifying.

During Rhodes’ times, the exploitation of black labour went hand in hand with a virulent form of racism. Contemporary capitalism still relies on racial subsidies. But the technologies of racialisation have become ever more insidious and ever more encompassing. As the world becomes a huge data emporium, tomorrow’s technologies of racialisation will be more and more generated and instituted through data, calculation and computation. In short, racism is relocating both underneath and at the surface of the skin. It reproduces itself via screens and mirrors of various kinds. It is becoming both spectral and fractal.

Otherwise, as far as the toppling of Rhodes’ statue is concerned, my argument has always been that the statue should have never been there in the first instance.

Nilsen:  As a symbol?

Mbembe: Yes, as a reminder of the various crimes this cruel man committed in his attempt to deny black people any right to a human future in South Africa. As a reminder, too, of the cynicism with which he tried to launder his ill-gotten wealth under the guise of philanthropy.

But a proper critique of Rhodes’ style of predatory economics and plutocratic politics cannot be limited to South Africa alone or to the confines of a specific nation-state. The project he served was colonial and imperial. Its horizon was not South Africa-centric. Ultimately, Rhodes is the symbol of the double damage capitalism in its racial, colonial and imperial form inflicted upon humankind and upon the biosphere. Such should be the starting point of any critique of Rhodes which strives to avoid the pitfalls of national chauvinism.

Nilsen: At the Holberg Debate at the University of Bergen tomorrow, you will discuss social movements through history. How will you describe this social movement, compared to, for example, the student movements in the late 1960s?

Mbembe: These are two different events. They are happening at two different historical moments in two different places. I am not even sure that contemporary protagonists have any knowledge or memory of what happened in 1968.

If my understanding is correct, one of the goals pursued by the decolonisation movement in South Africa is to unbundle what is perceived as a structure of repetition, an old racial order which keeps donning the mantle of the new in its attempt at masking its degeneracy. In this context, to dismantle “whiteness” implies the awakening to self-knowledge and the reshaping of institutions inherited from a brutal past. In this sense, the decolonisation project is both a critique of institutions and a critique of knowledge.

The actual question is whether in this instance, such a critique has been articulated in a way that is intellectually and politically compelling. Indeed with the drive towards the automatisation of existence, contemporary social movements operate in a context characterised by huge changes in human experience. It is not only that the economy is becoming the eminent site of the new struggles for life. It is also that people and things, nature and objects, we are all increasingly at risk of being transformed into artefacts.

Many of these changes are partly enabled by the technological escalation represented by ubiquitous computing. A major consequence of this “great transformation” is that the human of the first quarter of the 21st century is not exactly the human of the late 1960s. The modes of individuation are not the same. Nor are the forms of subjectivation or its content. The complex entanglement of the human and the technological so typical of our age has deeply transformed the ways in which cognitive processes unfold, how people dream and what kind of change they dream about, in short, how the political is configured and experienced. In assessing the qualities and properties of contemporary mobilisations, we must therefore factor in the impact of media technologies on the formation of political subjectivity.

Striking in this regard is the apparent shift from a politics of reason to a politics of experience, if not of viscerality. In the eyes of many, personal experience has become the new way of being at home in the world. It’s like the bubble that holds the foam at a distance. Experience nowadays trumps reason. We are led to believe that sensibility, emotions, affect, sentiments and feelings are the real stuff of subjecthood and therefore of radical agency. Paradoxically, in the paranoid tenor of our epoch, this is very much in tune with the dominant strictures of neoliberal individualism. It is also in line with the ongoing reconfigurations of the relation between technology, reason and other human faculties.

Whatever the case, this has given rise to ambiguous forms of collective mobilisation, most of which we shouldn’t romanticise. Behind the mask of radicalism, there is something fundamentally ambivalent in the political discourse of decolonisation when, for instance, the injunction to decolonise goes hand in hand with high tolerance for xenophobia or the desire to control and defend what amounts to inverse racial borders. There is something fundamentally debilitating when subaltern resistance politics is limited to an endless performance of purity and self-righteousness, or to a competition about who has suffered the most on the spiralling scale of victimisation.

The same pathos is to be found in most debates on curriculum reform, on what we must or must not read and why, in short, on how to reconfigure or redesign the archive. Although fought in the name of equality and justice, some of these mobilisations might end up reenacting a sectarian logic of enclosure, underpinned as they are by flawed notions of identity, gender or culture as spaces of protection and immunity, as borders which allow for a closing off from “those who are not as radical as us”.

Finally, a number of these mobilisations grant a preeminent status to notions of self and experience. The idea according to which self and experience – or for that matter radical agency – must now be found in the intimate microspheres of everyday life must be subjected to a thorough critique. Too often, it is presumed that our intimate interiorities, our moods, our states of mind are “safe spaces”, the only spaces immune to racism and neoliberal intoxication. In fact, under contemporary conditions, there is no longer any “zone of being” that is free from “contamination”.

The political cannot be reduced to the painstaking management of emotionally safe spaces and shared atmospheres. Radical agency is not about the sharing of boundaries. It is about deborderisation. It is simply not true that unless I have undergone the exact same experience as the other, I know nothing about his or her pain and should simply shut up. Insofar as to be human is to open oneself up to the possibility always already there of becoming (an)other, such a conception of self and identity is by definition antihuman. The political in our time must start from the imperative to reconstruct the world in common. For the idea of decolonisation to have any purchase at a planetary scale, it cannot start from the assumption that I am purer than my neighbour.