



## **Jury-report Spinozalens Award 2025: Achille Mbembe**

### **About the Spinozalens**

Today more than ever, our complex society needs critical reflection. The tidal wave of opinions we are bombarded with every day in the press and on social media challenges our ability to think and reason, as well as the important issues that need to be addressed. Moreover, a simple 'agree' or 'disagree' is no longer enough: those who contribute positively to societal debates should also be prepared to look critically at their own positions. It is precisely this critical attitude that the International Spinoza Prize Foundation would like to encourage by organizing educational and public activities in Flanders and the Netherlands in celebration of its international Spinoza Prize laureates.

The International Spinoza Prize Foundation has a two-year cycle. Each cycle focuses on a pressing social issue, such as 'Sustainable solidarity', 'Health, risk and society' or 'Technology'. An independent jury of Dutch and Flemish academics and writers selects a winner for each theme.

The Spinoza Prize is awarded every two years around 24 November. This is the birthday of the Dutch philosopher Baruch de Spinoza, after whom the prize is named. The award ceremony takes place in The Hague, the city of peace and justice. The Spinoza Prize, awarded for the first time in 1999, consists of a bronze statuette of Spinoza and an honorarium of 10,000 euros. In return, a series of public lectures will be given in the Netherlands and Belgium, and a Dutch edition of one of the laureate's books or texts will be published by Boom Publishers.

### **The theme of the Spinozalens 2025: future-proof solidarity**

The theme of the Spinozalens 2025 is future-proof solidarity. In today's society, where different population groups often live in separate spheres and polarization is increasing, solidarity is under considerable pressure. What's more, these pressures on interconnectedness are not just national. Cross-border developments such as climate change, migration and rapidly evolving digital technologies are putting our interconnectedness to the test.

Future-proof solidarity in times of climate change, migration and digitalization is not only a complex philosophical question, but above all an urgent global issue. And it is broader than the already complicated issue of inequality and socio-economic differences.

What new questions about solidarity do these developments raise? Do we need to broaden the notion of connectedness to see what we have in common? Do we need to rethink connectedness and solidarity between humans and other species? Can we as humans be in solidarity with technological artefacts such as robots or AI? How can we live in solidarity with vulnerable people in times of climate change? And what new forms of solidarity can we already see emerging?

These questions were at the heart of the Spinoza jury's deliberations. The members of the jury wanted to select a thinker who could not only clearly articulate the question, arrive at a refined and sophisticated analysis, but also formulate inspiring answers. They unanimously chose Achille Mbembe as their choice for 2025. Mbembe's beautiful and powerful books address the Spinozalens 2025 theme in a rigorous, innovative and comprehensive way.

### **The jury**

This year's jury consisted of Benham Taebi, Professor of 'Energy & Climate Ethics' at TU Delft and member of the Scientific Climate Council; Sandra Ponzanesi, Professor of Media, Gender and Postcolonial Studies at Utrecht University; Naomi Jacobs, Assistant Professor of Bioethics at the University of Twente; Manu Claeys, writer, activist and member of the Antwerp Climate Council, and the chairperson Huub Dijstelbloem, Professor of Philosophy of Science, technology and Politics and Director of the Institute for Advanced Study of the University of Amsterdam.

### **The 2025 laureate: Achille Mbembe**

The jury unanimously selected Achille Mbembe as the laureate for 2025 award. Mbembe's beautiful and powerful books engage with the theme of the Spinozalens 2025 in a rigorous, innovative and comprehensive way.

Mbembe is an internationally recognised intellectual authority whose work consist of a vast oeuvre, but whose thought is also constantly in motion, with a driving force. Mbembe interprets his ideas with a barely contained anger. He makes us look at ourselves. But he also articulates a message of hope, a hope that comes from the African continent. He continues to coin new concepts that offer a different perspective on the world and identify the dilemmas of our time.

Mbembe was born in Cameroon in 1957. He earned a PhD in history from Sorbonne University in Paris, France, in 1989. He then obtained a D.E.A. (Diplôme d'études approfondies) in political science from the Instituts d'études politiques in the same city. He has held appointments at Columbia University in New York, Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., University of Pennsylvania, University of California, Berkeley, Yale University, Duke University and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Dakar, Senegal. He is currently a research professor of history and politics at the Wits Institute for Social and Economy Research at the University of Witwatersrand.

Probably Mbembe's best-known concept in the Netherlands and Flanders is *necropolitics*, known from his book *Necropolitics (Politique de l'Inimité, 2016)*, a defining term in his thinking, already made explicit in a 2003 essay. More recently, in his Holberg Lecture 2024, Mbembe explains that the combination of physical destruction as is the fate of many migrants and refugees with the destruction of the earth gives the term 'necropolitics' its catastrophic weight.

His unwavering commitment to thinking about life and solidarity in times of death is also evident in an essay published in Dutch translation in the magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* (28 April 2020) during the Corona pandemic. It was entitled 'The universal right to breathe'. The essay teaches that the corona pandemic forces us to think about solidarity. The pandemic showed a return of the body. Something we had gradually become unaccustomed to. We have, he argues, 'never learned how to die.' The pandemic also re-introduced us to non-delegable death. He ends the essay with the question: Are we capable of rediscovering that each of us belongs to the same species, that we have an inseparable bond with all life? Before we take our last breath, perhaps this is the key question. We must, he concludes, 'rebuild a habitable Earth so that we can all breathe again'.

A major source of inspiration for Mbembe is the work of Frantz Fanon, the French-Caribbean writer, psychiatrist, philosopher, freedom fighter and revolutionary who died of leukemia in 1961 at the age of 36. His best-known work in the Netherlands is probably *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

An important part of Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) consists of a conversation with his work. Building on and in conversation with Fanon's thought, Mbembe develops a genealogy of the category of blackness, from the Atlantic slave trade to the present day. His aim is to critically reassess the history, racism and future of humanity. Unravelling the intellectual consequences of the reality that Europe is no longer the center of the world, Mbembe maps the relationships between colonialism, slavery and contemporary capitalism and extractivism, the practice of extracting natural

resources, mainly for exporting. He traces the association of blackness with the biological fiction of race and theorizes 'black reason' as a set of discourses and practices that equate blackness with the non-human in order to perpetuate forms of oppression. Mbembe argues that this equation of blackness with the non-human serves as a template for all new forms of exclusion. Also Roma, Uyghurs or Palestians can be black.

The recurring critical analysis of technologization and the threat to existence posed by the Anthropocene is further developed in his book *Brutalism* (2020). Now he explicitly addresses the destructive power of capitalism. Like Brutalist architecture, he argues, capitalism creates an effect of overwhelming weight and destruction. In our digital, technologically oriented age, capitalism has artificialized humanity and humanized machines. This mixing of the natural and the artificial poses a planetary existential threat. He warns for a society in which the goal is to accelerate the mutation of the human species into a state that is simultaneously plastic and synthetic.

In his Holberg Lecture (2024), 'The Earthly Community', Mbembe explained that three questions have haunted him for the past three decades. These questions are about the future of life, the future of reason, and the future of the earth. The Anthropocene and the age of techno-libertarianism challenge us to seek and explore another form of existence. It expresses the need to reconfigure the archive, our collective memory. The African archive is an indispensable resource. It includes images and objects. Images and objects are also fragments of texts, ways of thinking. Images and objects show us that humanity is bound to the earth. To the surface of the earth, African art and artefacts offer a different, animistic perspective. They show that life consists of all kinds of movements and connections within an eco-technical atmosphere.

In Achille Mbembe, we could not have wished for a better laureate or one more relevant to the times we live in. The jury sees him as an eminent thinker with a thought-provoking body of work that can help us navigate the many challenges we face. His rigorous analysis of the history of colonialism, the African archive, the way humans are connected to the earth and each other, and how techno-capitalism and extractivism threaten the future not only of our existence, but of life and breathing in general, can offer us hope and guidance in difficult times and raise the level of public debate.