

Achille Mbembe

Challenge

The Universal Right to Breathe

The Achille Mbembe Challenge invites students to develop an idea or solution that contributes to a more equal and just world for all, with a fairer distribution of the right to breathe. That solution can be anything: a podcast, an app, a work of art, a ritual, a video, a product, a campaign, advice to a museum or a minister, and so on.

The central question of the contest is: how do we ensure the right to breathe for everyone, regardless of where you live and who you are?

Breathing can be understood both literally and figuratively. It includes having access to your own stories and traditions, not being stifled by someone else's version of your history or technological development, and giving everyone an equal opportunity to experience their heritage.

This design assignment is illustrated in the three cases that follow. Choose the case that most appeals to you.



Case 1: Resistance and climate justice - How far can you go?

Climate change affects everyone differently. Wealthy countries like the Netherlands and Belgium have more money to adapt, although here too, we are increasingly noticing the effects. People who have contributed the least to the problem, such as residents of Pacific islands or farmers in Africa, are often hit hard by climate change, much harder than we are. For them, climate change is not a distant reality; daily, they deal with floods, extreme drought, and food shortages. Animals and plants also suffer from climate change, which in turn threatens entire ecosystems.

This injustice raises essential questions: What can we do to address it? And how far can we go in our resistance? For example, did you know that one return flight to Greece for your summer vacation emits about as much CO₂ as an average inhabitant of Tanzania produces in four or five years? That illustrates the uneven distribution of greenhouse gas emissions.

Many people are concerned about these problems. Some are taking action. This resistance can take different forms. A few examples:

- Organising climate marches, such as the school strikes;
- Participating in a climate camp;
- Making protest signs and taking action (online);
- Civil disobedience, such as blocking roads;
- More radical actions, such as defacing buildings.

Some actions raise difficult questions. When does climate activism go too far? And who determines what is 'too far'? Is it okay to break the law for a better future?

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What we can learn from Achille Mbembe

Mbembe has given considerable thought to resistance and justice. He helps us explore these questions. In his book *Critique of Black Reason*, he analyses what he calls 'emancipatory violence' – moments when oppressed groups revolt. He explores the circumstances under which resistance may be necessary to bring about genuine change. But in *Exit from the Long Night*, Mbembe also warns us that resistance should not itself create new forms of injustice. He therefore argues for 'reparative justice': resistance that not only breaks down, but also builds something new and better.

In his recent work, Mbembe uses the word 'planetarium'. By this concept, he means that people and the earth are inseparable. He believes we need to think differently. We should consider not only national boundaries and economic gains, but also the well-being of the entire planet.

Mbembe organizes Western thinking that separates nature from culture, humans from animals, and developed from underdeveloped. He advocates for a planetary perspective as an alternative to our current way of thinking. Planetary thinking means, among other things:

- All life is interdependent.
- Damage to ecosystems affects everyone.
- The exploitation of nature and the exploitation of people operate according to the same mechanism.

According to Mbembe, following colonialism, Western capitalism has created an order that depletes both people and natural resources. The world is divided into areas where people are protected and areas where people can be 'sacrificed'. Climate change makes this unfair division even more visible.

Examples

In the Netherlands and Belgium, we see different forms of climate activism:

- Extinction Rebellion (XR) regularly organizes road blockades, such as on the A12 in The Hague. Participants block the road by sitting down and refuse to leave, even when the police summon them. Many young people also participate in this.
- In 2022, two Just Stop Oil activists glued themselves to the painting *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer in the Mauritshuis in The Hague. The painting was protected by glass and remained undamaged, but the frame was damaged. This action caused much debate.

Proponents say, 'The climate crisis is so urgent that we need radical actions to wake people up. Politicians don't listen to ordinary demonstrations.'

Opponents say, 'This kind of action only makes people angry and distracts from the climate message. You won't win support with it.'

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Meanwhile, we find that the costs and benefits of climate policy are unevenly distributed. Some people can afford solar panels and electric cars, while others struggle to pay their energy bills. Is that fair?

CHALLENGE - Breathing Fairly

Design assignment

How can we care for the climate in a way that benefits all people, animals, and other organisms?

Explanation

Design an innovative action, product, campaign, artwork or other expression that guarantees the right to breathe for all, while exploring the ethical limits of climate activism and solidarity. Climate change affects everyone differently. How do we ensure that everyone has an equal right to breathe?



CASE 2: The Restitution Dilemma - Who do the objects of museums belong to?

Imagine this: you visit a museum and see beautiful objects from Africa, Asia, or South America. But how did they get there? Many of these objects were collected during colonial times, when the Netherlands, Belgium, and other European countries dominated large parts of the world. Sometimes they were bought or given as gifts, but often they were stolen or forcibly taken away. Nowadays, more and more countries and communities are requesting the return of these objects. But is it that simple? Here are three examples that illustrate the complexity involved.

Examples

The Benin Bronze

In 1897, British soldiers invaded the Kingdom of Benin (present-day Nigeria). They took thousands of beautiful bronzes and works of art, which are now in museums around the world, including in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Rehabilitation is not just a matter of 'keeping or giving back'. In 2020, the Congolese activist Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza walked into the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal (NL). He grabbed an African sculpture from its pedestal and said he was taking it back to Africa with him as a protest. Is this theft or a legitimate means of drawing attention to injustice?

Today, we often look for creative solutions such as:

- Shared ownership - The object alternately stays in different countries.
- Temporary loan - The object travels between museums worldwide.

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- Digital copies – 3D scans can be shared worldwide.
- Collaboration – European museums and countries of origin collaborate on exhibitions and research.

Compare it to shared custody after a divorce: parents share responsibility for their child even though they no longer live together. Similarly, countries and museums could collaborate as joint guardians of their heritage.

Or consider borrowed items: if you borrow something from a friend but don't return it, will it always remain theirs? Or think of heirlooms: to you, an object may have personal meaning, but to another family member, it has mainly financial value.

What we can learn from Achille Mbembe

Mbembe has interesting ideas that help us think about culture and history. According to him, we should not view culture as something that belongs only to one country or group of people, but rather as a shared aspect of all humanity. We all share in each other's stories and history.

This means that cultural objects, such as art, statues, or historical artefacts, actually belong to all of us. They tell the story of humanity as a whole.

At the same time, Mbembe acknowledges that significant harm occurred when colonial powers removed cultural objects from other countries. When important cultural objects are taken away, people are disconnected from their history and identity. Imagine if someone suddenly took away essential photos of your family – you would be missing a crucial part of your own story.

By removing objects, colonial powers gained control over whose stories and histories mattered. Some stories were preserved and displayed; others were forgotten or destroyed. Mbembe believes that true freedom and respect are only possible when we recognize that all cultures are equal. Everyone has a right to their heritage and stories.

CHALLENGE - personal and shared heritage

Design assignment

Design a creative solution to the issue of (colonial) heritage. Find a solution that does justice to Mbembe's thinking and the shared responsibility for and recognition of historical injustice.

Explanation

Everyone has a right to their heritage and stories. Museums are full of things that were once 'taken' from other countries. Now, countries want their heritage back. But who decides to whom something belongs? And how do you resolve that fairly? Or, in other words, how do we ensure that everyone has an equal right to breathe? Design an innovative action, product, campaign or artwork that provides the right to breathe for all, while exploring the ethical limits of restitution (looting).



Case 3 - Digital colonisation - is there an alternative to the narrative of big tech companies?

Today's technological developments are generally a continuation of the colonial legacy in which land, resources and wealth were conquered or looted. Today, colonialism is not so much about the annexation of geographical territories as in colonial times, but mainly about virtual space. It is claimed by a limited number of multinational corporations. They own the data, hardware, and software, forming a monopoly known as GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft). Digital colonialism involves the exploitation of human and non-human species and the commercialisation of all possible forms of life using data. This technological development is often presented as an irreversible and unstoppable process. Other approaches to and dealings with resources are labelled (negatively) as 'primitive', 'magical' or 'spiritual'.

Examples

In the mainstream history of technology, for example, the Pyramids of Giza are considered a technological masterpiece, even though they are the product of a dead culture. However, root bridges, which are still being constructed in northern India, are often overlooked in historiography.

With this case, we want to explore forgotten, pre-modern technological practices and actualise them for our current society. How can these practices enrich and adjust our image of technology?

What we can learn from Achille Mbembe

In his book *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe introduces the concept of 'necropolitics'. That concept is about the power to determine whose stories, culture and history are allowed to exist or disappear. Mbembe argues that true freedom is only possible if we recognise that all human cultures are equal and entitled to their heritage and stories.

In *Brutalism*, Mbembe focuses on the destructive forces of capitalism. In our digital age, humanity has now become mechanised and machines humanised. This blending of the natural and the artificial poses an existential, planetary threat, according to Mbembe. Yet Mbembe's message is also hopeful. He draws hope from what he calls 'the African archive'. African art and artefacts offer a different, animistic perspective in which humans and the earth cannot live without each other and are connected in a sustainable way.

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CHALLENGE - from extractive to regenerative

Design assignment

Design a policy, product or service that challenges the dominant discourse about technology that big tech companies present to us.

Explanation

Think of a policy or technology that wants to be more regenerative than extractive, meaning it wants to give back to the planet more than it takes (or at least give as much as it takes). In the spirit of Mbembe's African archives, you can draw inspiration from indigenous practices that revolve around the stewardship of the earth for future generations. It does not have to be a totally new policy or product; it can be a new design for an existing product that incorporates the above values. It must also be suitable for our Western contemporary culture.

CHALLENGE - from extractivism to regenerative

Design question

Devise a policy tool, product or service that challenges the dominant discourse on technology that big tech companies present to us.

Explanation

Consider policies or technology that want to be more regenerative than extractive, meaning they want to give back to the planet more than they take (or at least give as much as they take). In the spirit of Mbembe's African archives, you can draw inspiration from indigenous practices that revolve around the stewardship of the earth for future generations. It does not have to be a totally new policy or product; it can be a new design for an existing product that incorporates the above values. It must also be suitable for our contemporary Western culture.