

# Achille Mbembe Challenge

## Case description

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.



### 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 CO<sub>2</sub> 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 criticizes 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.'

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?

# Abille Mbembe Challenge

## Case discription

### 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?

