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## **Decolonial Articulation of Potentiality: On Opening and Going Beyond to the Figure of “Becoming the Negro of the World”**

**Abstract:** As stated by Giorgio Agamben, in Western philosophy, potentiality is part of a very long tradition. Potentiality represents one of the central concepts of Western philosophy, already claiming this status with Aristotle, who posited potentiality against actuality, framing it into a specific register of knowledge, to a specific mode of anthropogenesis, to an anthropological machine. However, what does this mean for the politics of potentiality, if, as shown by Marina Gržinić in her book *Estetika kibersveta in učinki derealizacije* [*Aesthetics of the Cyber World and Effects of Derealisation*], in the chapter *Zunaj biti* [*Beyond Being*], potentiality is thematised through the tradition of metaphysics as a process that never really comes to an end, incessantly deciding upon what counts as human and what does not. In this respect the aim of this text is threefold: first, to suggest that potentiality is to be examined within the context of the process of anthropogenesis as put forward by Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal*; second, in order to show their inadequacy, to critically evaluate political ontologies of potentiality within the Western anthropological machine; third, following Achille Mbembe’s political figure of “becoming the Negro of the world”, to (de)articulate the concept of potentiality, consequently positing it beyond the Western anthropological machine and offering its decolonial articulation.

**Keywords:** potentiality, anthropological machine, anthropogenesis, “becoming the Negro of the world”, decoloniality

Potentiality represents one of the central concepts of Western philosophy, already claiming this status with Aristotle, who posited potentiality against actuality. However, what does this mean for the politics of potentiality if potentiality is thematised through the tradition of metaphysics as a specific register of knowledge, which, as shown by Marina Gržinić in her book *Estetika kibersveta in učinki derealizacije*,<sup>1</sup> in the chapter “Zunaj biti”,<sup>2</sup> is incessantly implicating what counts as human and what

<sup>1</sup> English translation: *Aesthetics of the Cyber World and Effects of Derealisation*.

<sup>2</sup> English translation: *Beyond Being*.

does not, revealing the central conflict in humanity of a man.<sup>3</sup> Following Gržinić, this process could be defined as anthropogenesis, as process of humanization, that occurs within the interiority of a man, formulating something that Gržinić, after Giorgio Agamben, calls the anthropological machine. In this respect, the aim of this text is threefold: first, to suggest that potentiality is to be examined within the context of the process of anthropogenesis as put forward by Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal*;<sup>4</sup> second, in order to show their inadequacy, to critically evaluate the political ontologies of potentiality within the anthropological machine; third, following Achille Mbembe's political figure of "becoming the Negro of the world",<sup>5</sup> to decolonize the concept of potentiality, consequently positing it beyond the Western anthropological machine.

The problem of potentiality is constantly returning within the Western anthropological machine. In this vein, a question needs to be posed: what happens with the thematization of this concept if its impossibility is intertwined with a specific structural configuration – with the anthropological machine?

The use of the concept of potentiality has spread after the turmoil of the 1970s, due to a series of militant sequences – let us remember the Italian case of the so-called 'Years of Lead'. Consequently, the seventies witnessed several conceptions of potentiality that shared, as Katja Diefenbach states in her text *Im/Potential Politics: Political Ontologies of Negri, Agamben and Deleuze*, a heretic reading of Marx, that was not so much derived from the usual critique of political economy, but mainly from Spinoza's concepts of conatus and potential, Nietzsche's concept of becoming, Sorel's concept of class division, Bataille's concept of inoperative negativity and Heidegger's idea of the abandonment of Being.<sup>6</sup>

In her text, Diefenbach is focusing on political ontologies of Antonio Negri, Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze, claiming that all three should be understood as an epitome of the troubled relation between politics and philosophy. In this vein, Diefenbach stresses that all three conceptualizations are marked by ontologization and existentialization of politics, suturing the ontological problem of potentiality with politics on one hand and crisscrossing politics and philosophy on the other hand.<sup>7</sup> According to Diefenbach, this results in a situation where the comprehension of paradoxes of this suture is virtually impossible: be it Negri's hybridization of Spinoza and Marx, i.e., Spinoza's conatus and Marx's living labor from the *Grundrisse*, where labor power is established as a general possibility; Deleuze's subtractive dimension of

<sup>3</sup> Marina Gržinić, *Estetika kibersveta in učinki derealizacije* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2003), 130.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> In Slovenia, Achille Mbembe's concept "becoming the Negro of the world" was first introduced by Marina Gržinić in her text "Kolonializem Evrope, dekolonialnost in rasizem," in *Politika, estetika in demokracija*, ed. Marina Gržinić (Novo mesto, Ljubljana: Luminus, Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2015), 1–131.

<sup>6</sup> Katja Diefenbach, "Im/Potential Politics: Political Ontologies of Negri, Agamben and Deleuze," EIPCP – European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0811/diefenbach/en>, accessed April 1, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

singularization, that is contesting the condensing aspect of political action of singularities coming together, putting forward a subtractive dimension of singularization, where the matter is of what is subtracted when the body seizes its degree of singular potentiality; or Agamben's mechanism of separation.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that Diefanbach exposes the intricate use of philosophical concepts in relation to politics, most notably contested in the 20th century, which was, as Alain Badiou claims, haunted by an extremely difficult non-dialectical relation between *necessity* and *will* due to what he calls a *passion for the real*.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the thesis that this text proposes is, that Diefanbach overlooks the mode of functioning of the anthropological machine, neglecting – referring to Gržinić – that today the main political conflict is the conflict between the animality and humanity of man, meaning that the notion of potentiality cannot be thought separately from the anthropological machine. Contrary to Diefanbach, this exact structural point is underscored by Agamben in his analysis in *The Open Man and Animal*, where he demonstrates how distinction between man and animal has been fabricated by the legacy of Western thought.<sup>10</sup>

Agamben discloses what he calls an anthropological machine, its functioning being based on a specific mechanism: “[it] functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human”.<sup>11</sup> Or to refer to Gržinić in *Estetika kibersveta in učinki derealizacije*, Agamben's anthropological machine functions in such a way, that what is recognized as human is produced by excluding a not (yet) human.<sup>12</sup> This is precisely the point for which this text claims is productive when we try to think about potentiality differently: on one hand Gržinić's definition clearly demonstrates potentiality being immanently imbued with the structure of the Western matrix, meaning that for the sake of its decolonial dearticulation, the concept of potentiality needs to be examined at the very threshold of this structure of the Western matrix, leading us again to Agamben, to its discovery of the anthropological machine, that needs to be understood as something that has important ramifications not just for thinking about potentiality differently but also for the formation of emancipatory politics.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> *Passion for the real* operates through the power of semblant and it is in this very semblant that another way of accessing the real is possible. As Rado Riha explains in his text *The Semblant and the Act*, Badiou's stake is, that in the twentieth century they are two possible ways of how passion for the real is handled: the predominant, the destructive one, could not handle any form of mediation, any representation of the real, meaning it was literally attempting to enforce direct access to the real. Although, referring to Badiou, there is another way: a non-destructive way via the act of subtraction as an operation that “[exposes] an irreducible gap between the real and its semblance”, meaning that it can illustrate minimal, yet absolute difference; Malevich's *White on White* being for instance the epitome of this subtraction protocol. Rado Riha, “The Semblant and the Act,” *Filozofski vestnik* 300 (2009): 1, 11, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Marina Gržinić, *Estetika kibersveta in učinki derealizacije* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2003), 136.

However, at this point it is important to consider the very structure of the Western matrix which cannot be understood without the logic of modernity, which has according to Charles W. Mills radically transformed our notions of liberalism, egalitarianism and individual,<sup>13</sup> meaning that modernity has established itself as a specific signifying order, lucidly defined by María Lugones in her text *Toward a Decolonial Feminism* as something that organizes the world in a specific way: “Modernity organizes the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogenous, separable categories.”<sup>14</sup>

Lugones further elaborates this logic of modernity by delineating its central mechanism, i.e., the dichotomous hierarchy between human and non-human that occupies the central criterion for deciding who is civilized and who is not or to put it differently, only the civilised are human, whereas enslaved and colonized are classified as not human.<sup>15</sup> Following Lugones, it can be stated that those who are excluded from the symbolic of the modernity are understood as not worthy enough to enter the symbolic order of modernity, yet this exact structural position of the exclusion is also the very kernel of the logic of modernity. In this vein, Lugones’ decolonial position demonstrates the brutality of the Western anthropological machine: its incessant rotation that is prescribing modes of worthiness and unworthiness which are disclosing the empty rotation of this machine. Therefore, at this point, the real question is, how to think this machine without repeating its mechanism of anthropogenesis that is activated by ontology, which cannot be thought separately from metaphysics.

According to Gržinić, there has been a number of projects that have at least to some degree tried to modify the Western anthropological machine. However, despite their effort, they are still entangled with this very machine: be it Badiou’s event by which, referring to Gržinić, he aspires to think anew the specific point in the logic of order to radically turn upside down the whole of temporality and its modality,<sup>16</sup> be it Lacan’s emergence of the new signifier, that has, referring to Alenka Zupančič Žerdin, the ability to delimitate the repeating entity of *One plus*;<sup>17</sup> be it Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of becoming as a dynamic movement of change, flight, or movement within an assemblage; be it Catherine Malabou’s concept of plasticity as being a prelude to new forms subject to criticism.

To some extent, it seems that Malabou’s concept of plasticity could open new ways of tackling this machine, as she suggests that plasticity could be understood in terms of a double movement: “[situated] between two extremes: on one side, the taking on of form (sculpture, molding, fashioning of plastic material); on the other, the annihilation of form (plastique, detonation).”<sup>18</sup> Even more – Malabou states that the philosophy to come must explore the space of the collapse of messianic structure

<sup>13</sup> Charles W. Mills, “Kant’s Untermenschen,” *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy* (2005): 3.

<sup>14</sup> María Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” *Hypatia: a Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 25, 4 (2010): 742.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Marina Gržinić, *Estetika kibersveta in učinki derealizacije* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2003), 144.

<sup>17</sup> Alenka Zupančič Žerdin, *Seksualno in ontologija* (Ljubljana: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 2011), 107.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (Bronx, New York: Fordham University, 2008), 70.

which could conveniently be attributed to circulations of discourses which are claiming that philosophy has come to an end. Furthermore, her concept of plasticity could be conceived in terms of regeneration, whereas her concept of destructive plasticity as the “other movement”, brings her system of thought relatively close to the very threshold of the anthropological machine. Still, even though Malabou introduces a much-needed critique of the structural conditions of Western philosophy, in the end, she remains within this very system of the anthropological machine.

At this point we need to go back to Agamben; in her book *Estetika kibersveta in učinki derealizacije*, Gržinić finishes her thematization of the status of the anthropological machine with Agamben, claiming that it was Agamben who posited a thesis of “beyond being”, consequently abandoning the ever-repeating sequence of division of the anthropological machine. To refer to Gržinić, postulating such a thesis literally means opening a different kind of temporality and most importantly, to stop losing time with trying to transform the same old, foundational sequence of the anthropological machine. Therefore, it could be presupposed that to think about the concept of potentiality differently, one needs to follow Agamben. In this vein, it could be claimed, that the concept of potentiality ceases to be in danger in facing yet another impasse, although what is at stake here, is to think potentiality from the perspective of the complete impossibility–impossibility from the perspective of the anthropological machine.

If one looks at how the concept of potentiality is appearing in Agamben’s work, it becomes clear that it lies at the very foundation of his thought. Agamben’s texts *On Potentiality, Bartleby, or on Contingency* and *The Open Man and Animal* are indispensable for his work on the concept of potentiality. If *On Potentiality* offers a unique reading of Aristotle’s *De Anima*, delineating contours of Agamben’s potentiality, that is – so to speak –based on the “existence of potentiality”, *Bartleby, or on Contingency* opens questions related to politics of resistance, whereas *The Open Man and Animal* contextualizes these issues within the context of the Western knowledge matrix. Conceptualizing potentiality in the described terms enables Agamben to outstrip conceptualizations, where potentiality is understood as that which posits itself against actuality, which means that the notion of potentiality should not be comprehended in terms of privation.

A rather detailed theoretical curve into Agamben’s work on potentiality has been necessary to demonstrate that Agamben’s position on potentiality makes it possible to think about “all that” which does not actualize, thereby underlining Agamben’s ability to stipulate the reflection of the very status of the subject and contingency of the politics in terms of the existence of potentiality. In this respect, it can be said that Agamben formulates potentiality as something that also includes “not to be”, which means that impotentiality also becomes part of the potentiality, quoting Agamben: “But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality. The greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of human impotentiality.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality,” in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University, 2000), 182.

The first part of Agamben's quote could be explained within the realm of political action, implying a subject that is already recognized as being human (enough) within the established representational regime of the symbolic economy of the anthropological machine. On the other hand, the second part of Agamben's quote demonstrates a fundamental fracture between human and animal, man and non-man, once again revealing the vile machine of the anthropological machine. Hence, Agamben's notion of potentiality as "existence of potentiality" attests itself to be productive when we try to evaluate the relation between potentiality and politics of resistance, as it is disclosing a mode of operation of the anthropological machine, where metaphysics needs to be understood as its vital part.

Any serious attempt of trying to envisage an emancipatory struggle needs to consider the reality of neoliberal globalization and, as we have stated on several occasions in this text, the hideous nature of the anthropological machine, which is – as Gržinić stresses in *Estetika kibersveta in učinki derealizacije* – in the very centre of globalization. In this regard, we are proposing that Agamben's impotentiality could be comprehended in two possible ways: following Gržinić, the first is the approach of a critical assessment and de-articulation of the very structure of the Western matrix of knowledge, its anthropological machine, the idea of anthropogenesis, whereas the other approach is the mode of Bartleby, the scrivener, who, even if he is fully capable of writing, one day simply decides to stop writing without any expressed reason other than his constant refrain: "I prefer not to."

In *Examining Potentiality in the Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben*, Elizabeth Balskus explains that by becoming a scrivener who does not write, Bartleby preserves his potentiality in its purest form.<sup>20</sup> Bartleby's stance also directly relates to the inoperative, which is, besides decreation and profanation, a constitutive element of Agamben's notion of potentiality.

In the case of Bartleby, inoperativeness manifests itself in Bartleby's own self-nul-lifying, in decreation as a manifestation of the ambivalent "threshold between doing and not-doing", that stems from Agamben calling into question the supremacy of rationality within the Western tradition, which, quoting Balskus: "[has] for so long<sup>21</sup> been almost synonymous with morality within the Western philosophical tradition, particularly in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant"<sup>22</sup> Balskus' quote on the supremacy of rationality demonstrates two things: first, that rationality is of course arbitrary and second, in relation to Kant's categorical racism, once again the logic of the anthropological machine is disclosed. Therefore, Bartleby should be seen as a figure that contests the mechanism of this anthropological machine. In this aspect, we can understand why Bartleby does not explain its behaviour, although it could be stated that his conduct is expressing what could be defined as an *impossible choice*, implying that inoperativeness is impotentiality

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Balskus, "Examining Potentiality in the Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy* 19, 1 (2010): 167.

<sup>21</sup> Reversed by Nina Cvar for the purposes of the quotation.

<sup>22</sup> Balskus, "Examining Potentiality in the Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben," 172.

which could be conceived as something that is unwilling to comply to the position administered to a human animal by the symbolic order (of modernity); as a decreation not wanting to comply to what is but even to what has been; and lastly, it is also profane as an example of a possible new use, immanent to governance's contestation.

To sum up, Agamben's potentiality cannot be approached only from *something that is not to something that is*, meaning that potentiality is not something that could be understood in terms of a straight line. Consequently, Agamben's position can stir an already established social structure, thereby opening a "hatch" that can renew potentiality of the world. However, it is necessary to conceptualize Agamben's potentiality in terms of Gržinić's thesis, which claims that Agamben abandons the (Western) anthropological machine.<sup>23</sup> Hence Agamben's position is important for our proposed thematization of potentiality, as it could be claimed, that by untying potentiality of processes of anthropogenesis, we can also unlink it from its suturation with politics, as demonstrated by Diefenbach.

Therefore, it can be stated that Agamben's conceptualization of potentiality brings him to the very threshold of the Western anthropological machine: if potentiality of impotentiality is Bartleby, Bartleby's gesture also reveals something more sinister – the structural logic of the Western anthropological machine. After all, Bartleby's strange, yet perverse necessity to erase himself to resist (which is different from Badiou's "passion for the real") tells us more about this very matrix in which Bartleby is operating than Bartleby himself. Yet again, precisely because of Agamben's specific conceptualization of potentiality as "existence of potentiality" of all that is not actualized, this impotentiality becomes potentiality, however not in *the form of radical self-erasure, but in an urge to leave*, to abandon this anthropological machine.

However, what Agamben has taught us is that by leaving the Western anthropological machine new possibilities open. Although, these possibilities need to consider (Western) Europe's inability (or unwillingness) to self-reflect on its colonialism, consequently further reproducing its coloniality and racism. At this point it has become obvious that another logic of thought is needed – a logic that is going to be fully aware of today's intense processes of racialization in their relation to neoliberalism, exploiting and dispossessing millions, abandoning them, being most visible in the EU's policies on refugees and asylum seekers; a logic that is going to fully recognize and embrace the perverse symbiosis between capitalism and the concept of race; a logic that needs to liberate itself from epistemic coloniality, that insists on, quoting Gržinić in her text *Europe's Colonialism, Decoloniality, and Racism*, "[capturing] Blackness and Black people in the prison of 'Negro Reason,' seen as a deviant from and subjugated to human reason."<sup>24</sup> In this respect, following Gržinić, we are going to recommend that this new logic could be found in Mbembe's work *Critique of Negro Reason*.

<sup>23</sup> Marina Gržinić, *Estetika kibersveta in učinki derealizacije* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2003), 144.

<sup>24</sup> Marina Gržinić, "Europe's Colonialism, Decoloniality, and Racism," in *Postcoloniality – Decoloniality – Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, ed. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker (Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag, 2014), 143.

Following Gržinić's translation,<sup>25</sup> Mbembe, one of the most important theoreticians from Africa and a key figure of critical black thought, a philosopher, and a public intellectual, is posing two theses: the first claims that Europe is no longer the centre of gravity of the world, which, as stated by Gržinić, opens new possibilities, but also brings dangers for critical thought; the second thesis debates "the becoming Negro of the world", where Mbembe, as stated by Gržinić, is alluding to Deleuze's concept of "becoming", quoting Gržinić: "Mbembe takes the phrasing coined by Gilles Deleuze of constantly changing as becoming (and not 'being'), of becoming in the sense of emphasizing the primacy of desire over power, and suggests a radical turnover, namely, that of 'the becoming' Negro of the world."<sup>26</sup> He proposes to universalize the dehumanization of the "Negro" and to take it as the human condition produced by present neoliberalism. This is a gesture of negative universalization, of taking that which figured as the product of the systematic colonial exploitation of millions of Africans, into the main logic of neoliberalism in the era of global capitalism. Mbembe states that the condition of Atlantic colonialism which transformed the Black African Body into an object of merchandise, literally into something to be traded and made disposable, today is a condition of humanity in neoliberalism. To encapsulate, this new logic of thought, which Mbembe hopes would be open to all, is, referring to Gržinić, dearticulating three constitutive dimensions of the Western matrix of knowledge theory, time, history and agency.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1970s various conceptions of potentiality became increasingly popular, however they mostly resulted in aporias, but not because of the absolutization of philosophical philosophemes, as claimed by Diefenbach, but because of the absence of critical introspection of their own conditions of knowledge. By critically evaluating political ontologies of potentiality within Gržinić's analysis of Agamben's concept via the anthropological machine and by demonstrating Agamben's own work on potentiality, this text has outlined the genealogy of potentiality within the Western matrix of knowledge, that cannot be understood without modernity which, according to Walter Mignolo, is a European narrative that hides its darker side – "coloniality" that needs to be comprehended as constitutive of modernity.<sup>28</sup> However, the evocation of Mbembe's theses offers us a decolonial articulation of potentiality: it could be said that Mbembe starts where Agamben ends, as Mbembe with his theses offers us a new kind of logic of thought – a logic that is aware of the processes of racialization and their relation to the gelatinized social reality of global capitalism; a logic that is aware of exploitation, dispossession, and the abandonment of millions; a logic that detects a perverse symbiosis of capitalism and race; a logic that is aware that it is governed by the co-propriety of capital and power, and a logic that unlinks itself from coloniality.

<sup>25</sup> When conducting research for this text, Mbembe's book was not yet translated into English. Therefore, the text follows Gržinić's translation. However, an English translation of Mbembe's book has been available since February 17, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Mignolo, "Coloniality: The Darker Side of Modernity," [http://www.macba.cat/PDFs/walter\\_mignolo\\_modernologies\\_eng.pdf](http://www.macba.cat/PDFs/walter_mignolo_modernologies_eng.pdf), accessed April 1, 2017.

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