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Filozofski vestnik

Filozofski vestnik

THE BODY IN THE FIELD OF  
TENSIONS BETWEEN  
BIOPOLITICS AND  
NECROPOLITICS

Edited by  
Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek

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**Filozofski vestnik**

**The Body in the Field of Tensions  
between Biopolitics and Necropolitics:  
Analyzing the Future of the  
Prosthetic Body in the 21st Century**

Edited by

**Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek**

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# Contents

Filozofski vestnik | Volume 44 | Number 2 | 2023

- 7 **Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek**  
Introduction

## The Body of (Necro) Politics

- 19 **Marina Gržinić**  
The Body in the Field of Tensions between Biopolitics and Necropolitics:  
Analyzing the Future of the Prosthetic Body in the 21st Century
- 53 **Sayak Valencia**  
The Body as Mass Media in the Livestream Regime
- 71 **Adla Isanović**  
Differential Body Politic beyond Pacified Techno-Futures
- 95 **Jonathan Beller**  
Arbitrage on Life, *Differánce* of the Flesh: Racialization and  
Colonial Gender Formation as Algorithmic Innovation

## Labor-Techno-Racialization in Necrocapitalism

- 133 **Neferti X. M. Tadiar**  
Global Refuse, Planetary Remainder
- 161 **Nina Cvar**  
Emancipating from (Colonial) Genealogies of the Techno-social  
Networks or Reversing Power Relations by Turning the Predator  
into Prey in Jordan Peele's *Nope*
- 181 **Kishonna L. Gray**  
Killing the Black Body: Necropolitics and Racial Hierarchies  
in Digital Gaming
- 199 **Claudia Tazreiter**  
The Migrant and Marginalized Body in Connection with  
Digital Technologies as a Prosthesis of the Monstrous

## The Body of Affects, (Non)Human Animals, Performativity in Resistance to Oppression and Whiteness Racist Systems

- 219 **Zarja Vršič**  
Body in Mind: The Role of the Body in Damasio's Theory of Emotion
- 239 **Vesna Liponik**  
The Tropicological Animal: Beyond the Body and the Sovereign

265 **Katerina Paramana**  
The Oscillation of Contemporary Bodies between Biopolitics and  
Necropolitics: Tania Bruguera's Wrestling with Power Structures

287 **Adam Rudder**  
Dancing with Social Death: The Necropolitics of Performing  
Afro-Slovene(ness)

### **Bodies of Necrolives**

307 **Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese**  
"Never Settler Enough": The Double Economy of Terror and  
Deaths in Custody in Australia

329 **Hiroshi Yoshioka**  
Experiencing Biopolitics: A Personal Story

343 **Fahim Amir**  
Drones, Bodies, Necropolitics: Hobbesian Shadows over Afghan Lands

367 **Jovita Pristovšek**  
Endless Lists: Racialization, Divisions, Abandonment, Seclusion

393 **Conversation with Jill H. Casid and Anna Campbell**  
Marina Gržinić, Jovita Pristovšek, and Vesna Liponik

### **Echoes**

419 **Nina Cvar**  
Extended Review of *Political Choreographies*, *Decolonial Theories*,  
*Trans Bodies*

433 **Notes on Contributors**

# Kazalo

Filozofski vestnik | Letnik 44 | Številka 2 | 2023

- 7 **Marina Gržinič in Jovita Pristovšek**  
Uvod

## Telo (nekro) politike

- 19 **Marina Gržinič**  
Telo v polju napetosti med biopolitiko in nekropolitiko:  
analiza prihodnosti protetičnega telesa v 21. stoletju
- 53 **Sayak Valencia**  
Telo kot množični medij v režimu prenosa v živo
- 71 **Adla Isanović**  
Diferencialna politika telesa onkraj pacificiranih tehnoloških prihodnosti
- 95 **Jonathan Beller**  
Arbitraža o življenju, *differánce* mesa: rasizacija in kolonialno oblikovanje  
spola kot algoritmična inovacija

## Delo–tehnologija–rasizacija v nekrokapitalizmu

- 133 **Neferti X. M. Tadiar**  
Globalni odpadek, planetarni preostanek
- 161 **Nina Cvar**  
Emancipiranje od (kolonialnih) genealogij tehnodružbenih omrežij  
ali preobrat razmerij s spreminjanjem plenilca v plen v filmu *Nak*  
režiserja Jordana Peela
- 181 **Kishonna L. Gray**  
Ubijanje črnkega telesa: nekropolitika in rasne hierarhije v digitalnih igrah
- 199 **Claudia Tazreiter**  
Migrantsko in marginalizirano telo v povezavi z digitalnimi tehnologijami  
kot protezami pošastnega

## Telo afektov, (ne)človeške živali, performativnost v uporabi proti zatiranju in rasističnimi sistemi belosti

- 219 **Zarja Vršič**  
Telo v umu: vloga telesa v Damasijevi teoriji čustev
- 239 **Vesna Liponik**  
Tropološka žival: onkraj telesa in suverena

- 265 **Katerina Paramana**  
Oscilacija sodobnih teles med biopolitiko in nekropolitiko:  
spopad Tanie Bruguera s strukturami moči
- 287 **Adam Rudder**  
Ples z družbeno smrtjo: nekropolitika uprizarjanja afro-slovenstva

### **Telesa nekroživljenj**

- 307 **Suvendrini Perera in Joseph Pugliese**  
»Nikoli dovolj naseljski«: dvojna ekonomija terorja in smrti v  
policijskem pridržanju v Avstraliji
- 329 **Hiroshi Yoshioka**  
Doživljanje biopolitike: osebna zgodba
- 343 **Fahim Amir**  
Droni, telesa, nekropolitika: hobbesovske sence nad afganistanskimi ozemlji
- 367 **Jovita Pristovšek**  
Neskončni sezname: rasizacija, delitve, zapuščenost, osamitev
- 393 **Pogovor z Jill H. Casid in Anno Campbell**  
Marina Gržinić, Jovita Pristovšek in Vesna Liponik

### **Odmevi**

- 419 **Nina Cvar**  
Razširjena recenzija knjige *Politične koreografije, dekolonialne teorije, trans telesa*
- 433 **Podatki o avtorjih**



Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2002, I published an extensive volume on the body, entitled “The Body/Le corps/Der Körper,” in a special issue of *Filozofski vestnik*.<sup>2</sup> Little did we know that the post-9/11 necrocapitalism would bring about a transformation of capitalism that some could only vaguely imagine, but no one could foresee in it the renewed expansion of a murderous regime of destruction, exploitation, abstraction, financialization, and digitalization.

In the 2002 volume, I compiled positions that I admired and that opened up thinking that was not accepted in traditional philosophy. The proposed thinking and topics were mostly parked at the margins of philosophy, such as media studies, cultural studies, feminist studies, and postcolonial studies. However, I was very fortunate to be able to publish the volume and literally disappear from *Filozofski vestnik* for a while to research and write, which allows me to recapitulate the last twenty years with this volume.

The last two decades have seen the rise of global neoliberal capitalism and its hyper-fast changes that always already systematically involve destruction, dehumanization and subjugation. The other side of this process, which is developing at the speed of light, is the world of technomedia, the internet and artificial intelligence, which has opened a completely new debate about the body, intelligence, the unconscious, and geopolitics.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this monograph are the result of the research programme P6-0014 “Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy,” and the research project J6-3139 “Reconfiguring Borders in Philosophy, Politics, and Psychoanalysis,” which are funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

<sup>2</sup> Marina Gržinić Mauhler, ed., “The Body/Le corps/Der Körper,” special issue, *Filozofski vestnik* 23, no. 2 (2002).

This has led me, twenty years later, in 2023, to propose this comprehensive volume for *Filozofski vestnik*, Volume 44, Number 2, entitled “The Body in the Field of Tensions between Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Analysing the Future of the Prosthetic Body in the 21st Century.”

I invited my colleague Dr. Jovita Pristovšek to be a co-editor after the editorial board of *Filozofski vestnik* accepted my proposal. We set about compiling a list of authors we had been following for a long time, some of whom only approached us with their ideas and contributions as the work progressed, and whom we were eager to invite.

The exploration of the human body’s role within the intricate web of political, social, and technological power dynamics has remained a cornerstone of critical analysis. Rather than confining our scrutiny solely to the realms of techno-bio-power and bio-capitalism, a pivotal turning point occurred post-2003 with Achille Mbembe’s publication of “Necropolitics.”<sup>3</sup> This seminal work underscores the imperative for any interdisciplinary discourse encompassing philosophy, aesthetics, politics, social constructs, and economic structures, alongside technological and institutional scrutiny, to acknowledge the intricate interplay of power mechanisms. This constellation necessitates consideration of power dispositifs, governmentality, sovereignty, ideologies, and the emergence of necrocapitalism.

Steering away from fixating on the techno-bio-power and biocapitalism paradigms, it becomes increasingly evident that a paradigm shift is warranted, embracing the interconnectedness of the human body with necropolitics, necropower, and necrocapitalism. This recalibration unveils a transformed geopolitical landscape wherein spaces evolve into arenas of ruthless hyper-power, marked by the rigid regulation and manipulation of bodies teetering on the brink of being designated as necro-bodies. While this concept might not always be explicitly articulated, its undercurrent resonates throughout the analyses presented in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

While biopolitics once held the potential for emancipation, albeit limited to privileged bodies in the Western world, the concept of necropolitics presents a starkly contrasting panorama, one that resists easy alignment with emancipatory politics.

Central to our focus is the intricate interplay of affective, biological, technological, social, economic, and political forces. These forces intertwine in a manner that inexorably draws the previously established biopolitical landscape into the gravitational pull of the necrocapitalist future—or rather, the lack thereof. Through such a recalibration we see the changed geopolitical landscapes transforming into spaces of brutal hyper-power of regulation and management of bodies that transform into necro-bodies. If for biopolitics it was clear that it can be seen as an emancipatory possibility in the Occident, for the visions of necropolitics we cannot simply accept any emancipatory politics.

In light of this, our inquiry extends to reconfigured bodies, the intricate nexus between body politics as both corpus and corpse of governmentality, a reevaluation of geopolitics, and the emergence of bodies within necro-techno-science regimes. These themes precipitate a profound interrogation of our contemporary condition, encompassing not only the unfolding nature of our lives, forever in a state of becoming and mediation, but also the foundations of our theoretical frameworks, terminologies, and horizons.

The volume's trajectory oscillates between two cardinal philosophical poles. On one axis lies a rigorous epistemological endeavor to unearth and articulate existing knowledge and analyses—an endeavor complicated by the normative dimensions that biopolitical paradigms impose on theoretical exploration. Simultaneously, the volume is entrenched in philosophical edifices we have constructed in the era of necrocapitalism, prompting us to grapple with the very essence of our intellectual production within this context.

Conversely, the question that remains is what contemporary philosophy has theoretically produced in relation to the body today.

When we distill the undeniable aspects from the volume, the foremost outcome involves a comprehensive exploration of Black cultural dialogues concerning technology's role in shaping intellect, social interactions, progress, and even

culture itself. This examination encompasses a review of diverse approaches to conceptualizing and theorizing Blackness, Black bodies, Black culture, and their interplay with technology. Central to this exploration is a sharp delineation that the concept of racialization reveals.

André Brock, in his chapter “Making a Way Out of No Way: Black Cyberculture and the Black Technocultural Matrix,”<sup>4</sup> presents a sharp distinction that highlights race and makes another important point: “Black technology users are not white (even if they are Western), so it becomes necessary to interrogate how Black people make sense of their existence as users and as subjects within advanced technological artifacts, services, and platforms.”<sup>5</sup> This is an analysis of Black cultural discourses about the impact of technology on various aspects of life, highlighting the particular perspective of Black technology users. The future that is the target, then, could be seen as both predicting “of a utopian (to some) race-free future and pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide [as] the predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere.”<sup>6</sup>

The volume consists of four parts and concludes with an extensive interview with Jill H. Casid and Anna Campbell and we close with an **extended review** by Nina Cvar of the newly published volume *Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies*,<sup>7</sup> revolving around the topics of this journal volume, but differently.

The first part, **The Body of (Necro) Politics** (with contributions by Marina Gržinić, Sayak Valencia, Adla Isanović, and Jonathan Beller) proceeds from Mbembe’s concept “Necropolitics,” which was further developed in his book

<sup>4</sup> André Brock Jr., “Making a Way Out of No Way: Black Cyberculture and the Black Technocultural Matrix,” in *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 210–42.

<sup>5</sup> Brock, 210.

<sup>6</sup> Alondra Nelson, “Introduction: Future Texts,” *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 1–15, [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2\\_71-1](https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-1), quoted in Brock, “Black Cyberculture,” 215.

<sup>7</sup> Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek, eds., *Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2023).

*Critique of Black Reason*,<sup>8</sup> and in *Necropolitics*.<sup>9</sup> The term refers to a particular form of governance and exercise of sovereignty that focuses on the power to dictate who may live and who must die. In other words, it examines how certain political regimes and structures exercise control not only over people's lives but also over their deaths.

Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is rooted in the history of colonization, slavery, and racial oppression. He argues that states exercise their political power by inflicting violence and death on marginalized groups, often for maintaining their dominance and control. In this framework, the power of the state manifests itself not only through the administration of life, but also through the administration of death. Necropolitics is concerned with how state power, biopower (the control of populations and bodies), and sovereignty interact to shape the lives and deaths of individuals and groups.

The body of necropolitics refers to the physical and symbolic ways in which this power is exercised and realized. It encompasses the violence, oppression, and control exercised by state institutions, as well as the cultural and discursive mechanisms that justify and normalize these actions. The body becomes a site where the politics of life and death converge, where the state exercises its authority over life through its capacity to cause death.

Necropolitics also means examining how certain groups are seen as expendable or dispensable by those in power and how this dynamic plays out in different social, economic, and political contexts. It draws attention to the ways in which structural violence, racism, and inequality intersect and determine who is valued and protected and who is subjected to harm and death.

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<sup>8</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), originally published as *Critique de la raison nègre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013), translated in Slovene by Suzana Koncut as *Kritika črnskega uma* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2019). See also afterword to the Slovenian edition by Marina Gržinić, "Svet kot sopripadanje," 277–97; and Lev Kreft, "De te fabula narratur," 299–311.

<sup>9</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). See also Marina Gržinić, "Necropolitics by Achille Mbembe: Extended Essay on the Book," *Filozofski vestnik* 42, no. 1 (2021): 221–43, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.42.1.10>.

Necropolitics encompasses the complex and often brutal ways in which political power is exercised, particularly in contexts where marginalized groups are systematically subjected to violence, oppression, and death. It challenges us to critically analyze and confront the mechanisms by which sovereignty is enforced and maintained, and to consider alternative modes of governance that prioritize the dignity and well-being of all people.

The second part, **Labor-Techno-Racialization in Necrocapitalism** (with contributions by Neferti X. M. Tadiar, Nina Cvar, Kishona L. Gray, and Claudia Tazreiter) delves into the intricate interplay between labor, technology, and the politics of death and control.

Labor is used as a means of subjugating and exploiting racialized communities. By forcing individuals into low-paying, hazardous, or unstable jobs, those in power can maintain control over these groups and perpetuate social and economic inequality. The concept of labor as a tool of necropolitical subjugation and racialization intersects with other forms of oppression, such as race, gender, and class, and connects multiple layers of marginalization based on various aspects of their position.

Understanding labor as a tool of necropolitical subjugation and racialization requires a critical analysis of historical and contemporary labor practices, power structures, and their impact on marginalized communities. It underscores the importance of addressing systemic injustices and working towards equitable and just labor conditions for all individuals, regardless of their racial background.

Technological advancements have facilitated global supply chains and the outsourcing of labor. This has geopolitical and economic implications, affecting trade dynamics, labor rights, and refugee/migrant conditions across borders. How economic systems, driven by labor and technology, contribute to human suffering and death for profit. This involves investigating the role of necrocapitalism, consumer demand, and corporate interests. Algorithms, technologies, and scientific research involve conscious decisions that can influence how racialized bodies are treated and represented. Understanding the embodiment of technologies and their impact on racialized bodies raises important ethical questions.

It prompts us to consider issues of agency, consent, accountability, and the responsibility of technoscientific practitioners to address biases and injustices. The embodiment of technologies and their role in shaping racialized bodies is a complex and multifaceted topic. It requires a critical examination of how technologies are designed, implemented, and used, particularly in relation to algorithms and other forms of technoscientific practices. By understanding these dynamics, we can work towards more equitable and just interactions between technologies, bodies, and society.

The third part, **The Body of Affects, (Non)Human Animals, Performativity in Resistance to Oppression and Whiteness Racist Systems** (with contributions by Zarja Vršič, Vesna Liponik, Katerina Paramana, and Adam Rudder) highlights how emotions, the treatment of nonhuman animals, acts of resistance, and performative acts are embodied and interconnected.

The “body of affects” underscores that emotions are not just abstract psychological experiences, but are also deeply embedded. Exploring the body of affects is about understanding how emotions are experienced and expressed through the body and how they intersect with broader cultural, social, and political contexts. “(Non)human animals” is a term used to explore the relationship between humans and other animal species. It is concerned with the complex ways in which humans interact with and influence other animals, both domesticated and wild. This topic is important for discussions of animal rights, environmental ethics, and the political responsibility humans have toward nonhuman living things.

The “body of performativity” examines how individuals and groups use performative acts to shape and express their identities, challenge social norms, and engage in cultural and political critique. When these elements—bodies of affect, bodies of resistance, and bodies of performativity—are considered together, it becomes clear that emotions, resistance, and performative acts are intimately intertwined with embodied experiences and processes of racialization and subjugation. Drawing from theories of performativity that emphasize how language and actions construct identities and social norms, this concept highlights how marginalized communities can use performative acts to challenge, disrupt, and subvert oppressive structures.

“Whiteness,” with the social construction of White identity and the privileged exercise of power, results in violent racial inequalities and discrimination within structures, institutions, and practices; the focus is on the oppression and marginalization of non-White individuals and communities. Exploring the connections between these concepts involves analyzing how Whiteness is violently embedded in various social systems, resulting in systemic racism.

These themes are interconnected through the exploration of power dynamics, identity, and social structures. They illuminate the ways in which individuals and groups experience and resist oppression, whether through embodied emotions, relationships with animals, performative acts of resistance, or analysis of systemic racism. By examining these issues together, scholars and activists can better understand the complexities of oppression and how to combat it on many fronts.

The fourth part, **Bodies of Necrolives** (with contributions by Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, Hiroshi Yoshioka, Fahim Amir, and Jovita Pristovšek) is about better understanding our past, present, and future in a world that has been fundamentally changed by necropolitics, and we have the opportunity to reshape what we might call the history of geopolitical transformations.

In the context of necropolitics, “necrolives” refer to the lives of individuals and groups subjected to the violence, oppression, and death-related practices of necropolitical regimes. The bodies of necrolives encompass the physical, emotional, and social experiences of those whose lives are marked by necropolitical dynamics. The physical bodies of necrolives bear the scars of violence, exploitation, and neglect. These bodies are subjected to state-sanctioned harm, such as police brutality, forced labor, or other forms of violence that are part of a necropolitical strategy. Their psychological and emotional well-being is severely affected by the constant threat of death, oppression, and discrimination. Living under necropolitical conditions lead to trauma, anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness. Necropolitical regimes often target specific groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, or other factors.

When considering geopolitics in Australia and Afghanistan, this points to the historical and contemporary implications of racialization, divisions, abandonment, and seclusion within these regions. Geopolitical dynamics often involve



power struggles, territorial disputes, and sociopolitical inequalities, which intersects one with the other. In relation to Covid-19, it illuminates how the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, leading to racial disparities, social divisions, neglect of certain communities, and the enforced seclusion of individuals due to lockdowns and quarantine measures. The pandemic's impact could be seen through a necropolitical lens, highlighting how power structures influence who is disproportionately affected by the virus and its consequences. Understanding the bodies of necrolives involves recognizing the complex interplay between structural forces, individual experiences, and collective responses. It underscores the need to confront and address the harm caused by necropolitical regimes while advocating for transformative change that respect the dignity and rights of all people, regardless of their social or political circumstances.

The **Conversation with Jill H. Casid and Anna Campbell** is a reconceptualization of several themes to develop an aesthetic that incorporates notions of the necropolitical and redefines the concept of the Anthropocene as the Necrocene. The Necrocene implies an era marked by death, decay, and the consequences of human impact on the environment, as well as a critical reflection on the choices individuals and societies make that contribute to the transition from the Anthropocene to the Necrocene. These reflections serve as cautionary tales or reflections on the unsustainable path of the Anthropocene.

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## **The Body of (Necro) Politics**



Marina Gržinić\*

# The Body in the Field of Tensions between Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Analyzing the Future of the Prosthetic Body in the 21st Century<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

body, biopolitics, necropolitics, prosthetic body, tensions, 21st century, future

## Abstract

The article contributes to the understanding of how societal conflict, aggression, and racism are intertwined with the concepts of the body and necropolitics. Achille Mbembe's exploration of historical conflicts refers to the way in which states and other necropolitical entities exert control over life and death. Persistent conflicts reflect a form of necropolitics in which certain groups are subjected to violence and death as a means of maintaining power. Frank B. Wilderson III's analysis of aggression towards Black individuals reveals how the body, particularly the Black body, is subjected to policing and violence. This speaks to the concept of necropolitics as it highlights how certain bodies are deemed expendable or "killable" in society, and how the policing of Blackness can be seen as a form of controlling and subjugating these bodies. The rationalization of racist acts against meticulously selected groups and bodies that are highly racialized in contemporary necrocapitalism illustrates how the politics of death and violence are used to maintain class and racist hierarchies and control over different bodies.

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# Telo v polju napetosti med biopolitiko in nekropolitiko: analiza prihodnosti protetičnega telesa v 21. stoletju

## Ključne besede

telo, biopolitika, nekropolitika, protetično telo, napetosti, 21. stoletje, prihodnost

## Povzetek

Članek prispeva k razumevanju, kako se družbeni konflikti, agresija in rasizem prepletajo s koncepti telesa in nekropolitike. Raziskovanje zgodovinskih konfliktov Achilla Mbembeja se nanaša na način, na katerega države in druge nekropolitične entitete izvajajo nadzor nad življenjem in smrtjo. Trajni konflikti odražajo obliko nekropolitike, v kateri so določene skupine podvržene nasilju in smrti kot sredstvu za ohranjanje moči. Frank B. Wilderson III v svoji analizi agresije do Črnskih posameznikov razkriva, da je telo, zlasti Črnsko, podvrženo policijskemu nadzoru in nasilju. To govori o konceptu nekropolitike, saj osvetljuje, kako določena telesa v družbi štejejo za potrošna ali za tista, ki jih je možno ubiti, in kako je policijsko nadzorovanje Črnskosti oblika nasilnega nadzora in podrejanja teles. Racionalizacija rasističnih dejanj proti skrbno izbranim skupinam in telesom, ki so v sodobnem nekrokapitalizmu močno rasizirana, ponazarja, kako se politika smrti in nasilja uporablja za ohranjanje razrednih in rasističnih hierarhij ter nadzora nad različnimi telesi.



## Introduction

My starting point is necropolitics, because it is obvious and it is proven every day anew that biopolitics, which has its roots in the post-World War II period, has not been able to properly grasp, to conceptualize the new millennium: we see increasing racializations, exploitations, militarization, and so on. What I want to say is that biopolitics is not enough. The management of life by postwar liberal politics occurred in two steps: the reproduction of capitalism and profit after the Holocaust as a massive genocidal extermination of millions of Jews who were well-integrated citizens of Europe, despite centuries of exposure to the constant pogroms of right-wing political formations in Europe. The extermination of millions of Black people and communities under transatlantic slavery and the horrors of colonialism is an almost unimaginable genocide in terms of duration, spatiality, and scale.

I did not adopt these terms and ideas to save my “innocence,” White innocence as Ruth Gilmore defines it.<sup>2</sup> In 2008, I unraveled the constitution of the “Swiss jewel” on the sunny side of the Alps, namely how Slovenia was supposed to function after its 1991 declaration of independence (undeniably, I say that quite clearly) and what we have gotten in the 30 or so years since. Slovenia, in fact, has steadily and decisively transformed itself into a nation-state, following an almost textbook 19th-century constitution of the nation-state. In 1992, it created an internal enemy for itself, and then, with a swift governance that only after 2003 (when Achille Mbembe introduced the term worldwide) could be called necropolitics, for what it really was: an instituted murderous decision who may live and who should die.<sup>3</sup>

The result was that Slovenia erased 30,000 people from its civil register,<sup>4</sup> most of them in 1992, at that time, they were internal migrants of the working class from other republics of the former Yugoslavia. The erasure from the register of permanent residents carried out by the administrative authorities of the Republic of Slovenia was an arbitrary act for which there was no legal basis, as the Constitutional Court found. It mainly affected persons who were born in other republics of the former Yugoslavia, held citizenship of another republic of the former Yugoslavia but lived in the former Socialist Republic of Slovenia, where they had a permanent address.

In 2008, I called this act of erasure, the act of social and real death (in “Euro-Slovenian Necrocapitalism”),<sup>5</sup> for the future interests of neoliberal capitalism. This necropolitical act found its continuation in the former Yugoslavia with a genocide classified as such by both the International Criminal Tribunal for

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017), 225–40. See also Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Insurgent Flows. Trans\*Decolonial and Black Marxist Futures: A Conversation with Ruth Wilson Gilmore,” by Marina Gržinić and Tjaša Kancler, in *Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies*, ed. Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2023), 218–38.

<sup>3</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

<sup>4</sup> “About Erasure,” The Erased: Information and Documents, Peace Institute, accessed August 28, 2023, <https://www.mirovni-institut.si/izbrisani/en/about-erasure/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See Marina Gržinić, “Euro-Slovenian Necrocapitalism,” *Transversal* (webjournal), Transform, February 2008, <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0208/grzinic/en.html>.

the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ)—the Srebrenica genocide in 1995.<sup>6</sup> In 2002, the late feminist Žarana Papić referred to the genocide in Srebrenica by the macabre plan of the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević and the Serb paratroopers of the “Republika Srpska,” the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as “turbo fascism.”<sup>7</sup>

## The Map

What do we have as coordinates for this article? Let’s start with the historical context of biopolitics, drawing on Foucault’s exploration of state racism and its development, particularly in relation to Nazi ideology. We also draw on the work of Domenico Losurdo, who explores Michel Foucault’s stance on issues such as apartheid, torture, and oppression. Losurdo incorporates historical references to Karl Marx’s observations on slavery to illustrate the intertwining of racism and power dynamics.

In one of the best-known works on biopolitics, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” *Lectures at the College de France, 1975–76*, Michel Foucault writes:

At the end of the nineteenth century, we see the appearance of what might be called a State racism, of a biological and centralized racism. And it was this theme that was, if not profoundly modified, at least transformed and utilized in strategies specific to the twentieth century. On the one hand, we have the Nazi transformation, which takes up the theme, established at the end of the nineteenth century, of a State racism that is responsible for the biological protection of the race. [...] Nazism was thus able to reuse a whole popular, almost medieval, mythology that allowed State racism to function within an ideologico-mythical landscape similar to that of the popular struggles which, at a given moment, could support and make it possible to formulate the theme of race struggle.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In July 1995, Serb military forces of Republika Srpska invaded the town of Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within days, more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men were imprisoned, abused, tortured, and then executed.

<sup>7</sup> See Žarana Papić, “Europe after 1989: Ethnic Wars, the Fascisation of Social Life and Body Politics in Serbia,” in “The Body/Le corps/Der Körper,” ed. Marina Gržinić Mauhler, special issue, *Filozofski vestnik* 23, no. 2 (2002): 191–204.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the College de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 82.



In their 2018 Spanish text entitled “Necropolitics: Strategy of Extermination of the Black Body,”<sup>9</sup> Eliseu Amaro de Melo Pessanha and Wanderson Flor do Nascimento, both from the University of Brasilia (UnB), decode some details about the possibilities offered by Foucault in relation to the work of Domenico Losurdo. Here I refer to Losurdo’s text published originally in German in 2008 to be translated in Spanish in 2011<sup>10</sup> and then appearing also in Losurdo’s 2017 Italian book.<sup>11</sup>

Losurdo pens that “when Foucault holds his course of lectures at the Collège de France analyzed here—we are in 1976—the apartheid regime of racist South Africa is still very much alive. On the other hand, about ten years earlier Hannah Arendt had drawn attention to an important point.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published in 1963, Arendt writes: “There certainly was something breathtaking in the naiveté with the prosecution denouncing the infamous Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which had prohibited intermarriage and sexual intercourse between Jews and Germans.”<sup>13</sup>

More, referring to Bernhard H. F. Taureck’s 2004 *Michel Foucault*,<sup>14</sup> Losurdo comments:

The protest against the massacre of Algerians in Paris promoted by Jean-Paul Sartre and which also sees the participation of Pierre Boulez, a friend of Foucault, the latter does not seem to join. More generally, he does not seem to play any role in the fight against torture and the ferocious repression with which power tries to

<sup>9</sup> Eliseu Amaro de Melo Pessanha and Wanderson Flor do Nascimento, “Necropolítica: Estratégias de extermínio do corpo negro,” *ODEERE* 3, no. 6 (July–December 2018): 149–76, <https://doi.org/10.22481/odeere.v3i6.4327>.

<sup>10</sup> Domenico Losurdo, “Como nasceu e como morreu o ‘marxismo ocidental,’” trans. Carlo Alberto Dastoli, *Estudos de Sociologia* 16, no. 30 (2011): 213–42. Originally published as Domenico Losurdo, “Wie der ‘westliche Marxismus’ geboren wurde und gestorben ist,” in *Die Lust am Widerspruch: Theorie der Dialektik—Dialektik der Theorie; Symposium aus Anlass des 80. Geburtstages von Hans Heinz Holz*, ed. Erich Hahn and Silvia Holz-Markun (Berlin: Trafo, 2008), 35–60.

<sup>11</sup> Domenico Losurdo, *Il marxismo occidentale: Come nacque, come morì, come può rinascere* (Bari: Laterza, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Losurdo, “Como nasceu,” 230; my translation.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Bernhard H. F. Taureck, *Michel Foucault*, 3rd ed. (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2004).

crush the struggle for national liberation. It has rightly been observed with regard to Foucault that “his critique of power continues to look to Europe.”<sup>15</sup>

Losurdo notes meticulously that even prior to the whole period in focus relating biopolitics, Karl Marx writes in “The North American Civil War” in London on 20 October 1861:

At the same time, under Buchanan’s government the severer law on the surrendering of fugitive slaves enacted in 1850 was ruthlessly carried out in the states of the North. To play the part of slave-catchers for the Southern slaveholders appeared to be the constitutional calling of the North. On the other hand, in order to hinder as far as possible, the colonisation of the Territories by free settlers, the slaveholders’ party frustrated all the so-called free-soil measures, i.e., measures which were to secure for the settlers a definite amount of uncultivated state land free of charge.<sup>16</sup>

This intertwining, which goes hand in hand and reveals the deadly entanglement of the South and the North on the common ground of deadly racism, is obvious on the juridical-legal and constitutional levels.

Following Pessanha and Nascimento, I must emphasize another point highlighted by Mbembe in 2016, which reads:

Pushed to its logical conclusion, the phantasy of annihilation or destruction envisions not only the bombing of the planet, but also the disappearance of humans, their outright extinction. This is not an apocalypse as such, if only because the notion of the apocalypse presupposes the survival, somewhere, of a witness whose task it is to recount what they see. It is a form of annihilation conceived not as a catastrophe to be feared, but rather as a sort of act of purification by fire. However, it remains the case that this purification would be the same as an annihilation of present humanity. Such an act of annihilation is supposed to open

<sup>15</sup> Losurdo, “Como nasceu,” 228; my translation.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, “The North American Civil War,” in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975–2004), 19:37.

the way to another beginning, the inception of another history without today's humanity. It is, in this sense, a phantasy of ablation.<sup>17</sup>

Mbembe's perspective of annihilation, and purification, is precisely punctuated, as are David Theo Goldberg and Susan Searls Giroux's insights into the persistence of racism in the world.

With a reference to Goldberg's 2015 *Are We All Postracial Yet?*<sup>18</sup> and Goldberg's and Susan Giroux's 2014 *Sites of Race*,<sup>19</sup> Mbembe also argues somewhat earlier in the text:

Racism—whether in Europe, South Africa, Brazil, the United States, the Caribbean or the rest of the world—will remain with us for the foreseeable future. It will continue to proliferate not only as a part of mass culture, but also (we would do well not to forget it) within polite society, not only in the old settler colonies, but also in other areas of the globe, long deserted by Jews and where neither Negroes [Nègres] nor Arabs have ever been seen.<sup>20</sup>

The opening sentences of Mbembe's "The Society of Enmity" are also revealing, as he reports on two positions that currently dominate our lives, the Freudian and the Lacanian. Mbembe states, "Perhaps it has always been this way"<sup>21</sup> and adds a reference to both in an endnote: "As Freud argued in 1915, history 'is essentially a series of murders of peoples.' [ . . . ] Lacan went further in the 1950s, remarking that 'our civilisation is itself sufficiently one of hatred.'"<sup>22</sup>

These can be parallel with accounts of Frank B. Wilderson III on the role of policing in maintaining White social equilibrium and psychological well-being, particularly with violent re-racialization of Black communities. In an interview

<sup>17</sup> Achille Mbembe, "The Society of Enmity," trans. Giovanni Menegalle, *Radical Philosophy* 200 (November/December 2016): 34.

<sup>18</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> David Theo Goldberg and Susan Searls Giroux, *Sites of Race* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Mbembe, "The Society of Enmity," 31.

<sup>21</sup> Mbembe, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Mbembe, 23n1. See also Sigmund Freud, "Our Attitude towards Death," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 14:289–300; Jacques Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

conducted after the 2014 incidents in Ferguson, Missouri and the shooting of Michael Brown, Frank B. Wilderson III says: “Policing—policing Blackness—is what keeps everyone else sane. And if we can start to see the policing and the mutilation and the aggressivity towards Blackness not as a form of discrimination, but as being a form of psychic health and well-being for the rest of the world, then we can begin to reformulate the problem and begin to take a much more iconoclastic response to it.”<sup>23</sup>

Ana Guglielmucci’s exploration of misplaced bodies and decontextualized representations of death is instructive in this regard. Guglielmucci’s 2020 “Necroscapes: The Political Life of Mutilated and Errant Bodies in the Rivers of Colombia,”<sup>24</sup> exposes the misplacement of bodies and corpses as historical fact. Referring to Pamela Colombo and her 2017 book *Espacios de desaparición: Vivir e imaginar los lugares de la violencia estatal* (Vanishing spaces: Living and imagining the places of state violence),<sup>25</sup> Guglielmucci reflects on decontextualized representations of death in spaces that appear outside of place and outside of time, without any clues that might allow us to understand the reason for a particular death, if I put it in my own words.

Finally, I want to put into the discussion Scott Burnett and John E. Richardson’s analysis of racial justifications for atrocities, drawing on current events such as the Utøya massacre, the Charlottesville rally, and the mass shooting in Christchurch. They note in their 2021 “‘Breeders for Race and Nation’: Gender, Sexuality and Fecundity in Post-war British Fascist Discourse, Patterns of Prejudice”:

The demographic threat of racialized Others often features in rationalizations for racist atrocities, such as misogynistic fantasies about socialists and women allowing Muslims to “swamp” Europe (expressed by the perpetrator of the Utøya massacre in 2011), white Americans being “replaced” by other races as part of a Jew-

26

<sup>23</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, “We’re Trying to Destroy the World”: *Anti-Blackness and Police Violence after Ferguson; An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III*, interview by Jared Ball, Todd Steven Burroughs and Dr. Hate (n.p.: Ill Will, 2014), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ana Guglielmucci, “Necroscapes: The Political Life of Mutilated and Errant Bodies in the Rivers of Colombia,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 29, no. 4 (2020): 555–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2021.1885356>.

<sup>25</sup> Pamela Colombo, *Espacios de desaparición: Vivir e imaginar los lugares de la violencia estatal (Tucumán, 1975–1983)* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2017).

ish plot (which “united” the right in Charlottesville in 2018), and the Christchurch mass murderer’s repetition.<sup>26</sup>

Historical atrocities such as the Holocaust, transatlantic slavery, and colonialism call into question the efficacy of biopolitical theories. Foucault’s exploration of biopolitics is significant, his study of state racism and its metamorphosis in the twentieth century, especially in the context of Nazi ideology. However, contemporary philosophers of Black thought develop a thought-provoking facet when they consider the notion that police violence and hostility against Black positions and communities could be understood as a manifestation of neoliberal necrocapitalist societal well-being and equilibrium. It also invites us to critically rethink conventional perspectives on social dynamics and delve deeper into the intricate webs of power, racism, and ideological justifications. It quickly becomes clear, however, that contemporary philosophers of Black thought offer an alternative perspective, viewing police violence against Black communities as an expression of neoliberal necrocapitalism and challenging conventional views of power dynamics, racism, and ideological justifications.

### Racism and Racial Capitalism

This is not an epic account of Black thought (for us mostly “innocent” White readers and writers in the European context), but a political-theoretical task to unearth Whiteness along with racial capitalism. The re-emergence and global visibility of the actions and protests of the Black community, particularly through the Black Lives Matter movement, pushes us to move beyond philosophical rhetoric and engage with the struggles of marginalized communities, particularly the Black community. Therefore, we do not only live in necrocapitalism, but “racial capitalism.”<sup>27</sup>

27

In his seminal book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, published in 1983, Cedric Robinson challenges the point of Marxist theory, according to which capitalism in its primitive accumulation phase was not yet

<sup>26</sup> Scott Burnett and John E. Richardson, “‘Breeders for Race and Nation’: Gender, Sexuality and Fecundity in Post-war British Fascist Discourse, Patterns of Prejudice,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 55, no. 4 (2021): 332, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2021.2011088>.

<sup>27</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Originally published in 1983 by Zed Press.

proper capitalism. Robin D. G. Kelley writes about Robinson's work in the introduction to the *Boston Review*'s issue on "Race, Capitalism and Justice":

Capitalism and racism, in other words, did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of "racial capitalism" dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide. Capitalism was "racial" not because of some conspiracy to divide workers or justify slavery and dispossession, but because racialism had already permeated Western feudal society. The first European proletarians were *racial* subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Gypsies, Slavs, etc.) and they were victims of dispossession (enclosure), colonialism, and slavery *within Europe*. Indeed, Robinson suggested that racialization within Europe was very much a *colonial* process involving invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy.<sup>28</sup>

Robinson's theory suggests that racial categorizations and hierarchies were integral to the development and maintenance of capitalist structures. In a racial capitalism, economic exploitation is intertwined with the exploitation and subjugation of racialized groups. This theory challenges the notion that capitalism operates independently of racial dynamics and shows how these systems intersect and reinforce each other. It challenges us to confront the deeper impotency and violence inherent in our White discourses and perspectives.

Robinson writes that the

violent event of colonial aggression and its corollary of "Indian" slavery had already been transmuted in [Benjamin] Franklin's [1753] neo-nativistic "American" mind into a relationship of supplication secured by an economic rationale; indeed, the dependence of "new Comers" on natives already reversed. The curtain of supremacist ideology had by now begun its descent on American thought, obscuring from the historically unconscious generations of descendants of colonialists and later immigrants the oppressive violence and exploitation interwoven in the structure of the republic.<sup>29</sup>

28

<sup>28</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, "What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?," *Boston Review*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/robin-d-g-kelley-introduction-race-capitalism-justice/>.

<sup>29</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 77.

It underscores the need to deconstruct these discourses of the White power regime by recognizing our own limitations and the harm that is in our words and ideas. Both passages underscore the importance of moving beyond theoretical consideration to engage with actions, and consequences that shape the discourse of racism, and to work to understand the complexities of racial dynamics in ways that are not just neat academic pursuits but promote meaningful change.

Crucial to racial capitalism is a terrifying repetitiveness. A continuous murderous act of capitalism that brings death to Black people again and again, as an “afterlife of slavery.”<sup>30</sup>

The task will be to once again draw a double root in this context and enter into an analysis of Fanon’s 1952 work *Black Skin, White Masks*.<sup>31</sup> Fanon, as a psychoanalyst, refers directly to Freud, Jung, Lacan, etc., to address the question of race and racism, the unconscious, and ultimately the universalization of the Black body in the perspective of disalienation rather than through decolonization, which, as one of the key themes of studies of anti-colonial struggles, pushes Fanon and other Black thinkers to a particular place “outside” the White framework of “universal philosophy and theory” and locates them within what is called “separate” studies. Fanon’s analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks* addresses the complex interplay of individual psychology, social structures, and racial dynamics. He explores the multifaceted nature of racism and how it shapes identities and relations on personal and collective levels.

In 2008, the second translation by Richard Philcox of Fanon’s book *Black Skin, White Masks* was published.<sup>32</sup> This triggered a series of reflections and comparisons with the much more popular *The Wretched of the Earth* which was published in 1961, when Fanon passed away.<sup>33</sup> Sunit Singh’s 2010 review of Fanon’s

<sup>30</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006). See also Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967). Originally published as *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952).

<sup>32</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963). Originally published as *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961).

second translation highlights differences with the first English translation by Charles Lam Markmann in 1967, in addition to many important points in the new translation, and continues a number of lines of thought.<sup>34</sup>

A crucial point Singh makes is that racism is presented in the context of *Black Skin, White Masks* as a symptom of capitalism. This perspective connects the problem of racism to larger socioeconomic structures and suggests that racism is intertwined with capitalist systems and power dynamics.

Singh criticizes the newest in the aftermath of the 2008 translation, triptych structure of Fanon's book, that is summarized as follows: "'The Eurocentrism of psychoanalysis,' a bid to reckon accounts with Negritude, and a concerted effort to develop a 'philosophy of decolonization'—as if these formed a triptych."<sup>35</sup> Singh points out, however, that this apparent triptych of concerns is deceptive or illusory (*trompe l'oeil*), indicating that there might be more complexity to Fanon's approach than a simple three-part framework.

Singh highlights the distinction between the theme of "disalienation" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and the anxieties about "decolonization" in Fanon's later work, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* discusses the concept of wanting-to-be-White as a form of neurosis resulting from the internalization of colonial subjugation. He argues that due to the historical context of colonization and the promotion of White superiority, Black individuals have been made to feel inferior, leading to a desire to emulate White characteristics and norms. This internalized sense of inferiority is deeply rooted in the history of colonial oppression and economic exploitation, creating what he calls an "inferiority complex."

30

Fanon's concept of "epidermalization" refers to the way in which these feelings of inferiority become ingrained in their own skin color as a sign of their perceived inferiority, leading to a psychological conflict and a desire to be "White" in order to escape this negative self-perception. For the Black man, this aliena-

<sup>34</sup> Sunit Singh, review of *Black Skin, White Masks*, by Frantz Fanon, *Platypus Review* 21 (March 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/03/15/book-review-frantz-fanon-black-skin-white-masks/>.

<sup>35</sup> Singh, review of *Black Skin, White Masks*.



tion results in a double dilemma, the “first, economic. Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority.”<sup>36</sup>

In Singh’s words, an individual Black man cannot overcome racism merely by immersing himself in the mythical or cosmic aspects of Black civilization, as if it were solely a matter of spiritual salvation, just as a neurotic cannot heal solely through knowledge. A “cure” is possible only by analyzing racism as a symptom of capitalism. This process involves challenging preconceived notions and examining the impact of racism. Fanon challenges the notion that Whiteness is merely the inverse of Blackness. He argues that disalienation, the process of regaining one’s true self, cannot be a simple negation of Blackness due to the deep-seated and negative associations attached to it.<sup>37</sup> As Singh points out, Fanon’s ideas have parallels with Jean-Paul Sartre’s assertion about antisemitism “overdetermining” the Jew. Both thinkers highlight how certain identities are burdened with societal preconceptions and biases that affect personal experiences. Fanon addresses how assimilation remains elusive for the Black man due to the burden of historical experiences and the “fact of Blackness.”

As Singh states, “Fanon attempts to hook the temporal core of psychoanalysis explicitly to the Marxist conception of emancipation.”<sup>38</sup>

Disalienation will be for those Whites and Blacks who have refused to let themselves be locked in the substantialized “tower of the past.” For many other black men disalienation will come from refusing to consider their reality as definitive. [...] In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a black civilization unjustly ignored. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to sing the past to the detriment of my present and my future.<sup>39</sup>

Fanon discusses disalienation for both White and Black individuals who refuse to be confined by the weight of history. He advocates for transcending past grievances and not fixating on resurrecting a particular historical identity, as this can hinder progress. Overcoming racism’s inherent narcissism involves breaking

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<sup>36</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), xv.

<sup>37</sup> Singh, review of *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>38</sup> Singh.

<sup>39</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), 201.

free from the neurotic repetition of racial constructs and embracing a vision of a more just future. Drawing from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,<sup>40</sup> Fanon emphasizes that the socialist revolution finds its inspiration in the future.<sup>41</sup> However, he also critiques the reification of the concept of "race," which tends to fix individuals into societal roles.<sup>42</sup>

Fanon touches on the burden of history that Black individuals carry. Their historical experiences shape their present identities and affect their struggles for recognition and agency. Fanon states: "I am not a prisoner of History. [. . .] I must constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists of introducing invention into life. [. . .] And it is by going beyond the historical and instrumental given that I initiate my cycle of freedom."<sup>43</sup>

In *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe's commentary on race emphasizes the concept of "race" as an iconic currency, a visual and symbolic representation that operates on the periphery of perception and human interaction. He discusses how power in colonial contexts often revolves around the ability to control what is seen and what remains invisible, highlighting the sovereignty of those who dictate visibility: "To a large extent, race is an iconic currency. It appears at the edges of a commerce—of the gaze."<sup>44</sup> In his discussion of Fanon, he points out that "Power in the colony [. . .] consists fundamentally in the power to see or not to see, to remain indifferent, to render invisible what one wishes not to see. [. . .] Those who decide what is visible and what must remain invisible are sovereign."<sup>45</sup>

Fanon's passage and Mbembe's commentary together underscore the insidious nature of structural racism. This form of racism is embedded in social systems, including necrocapitalism, and affects not only social structures but also the deep-rooted psychological layers of individuals. Fanon's emphasis on the pres-

32

<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1926).

<sup>41</sup> Singh, review of *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>42</sup> Singh.

<sup>43</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), 204–5.

<sup>44</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 110.

<sup>45</sup> Mbembe, 111.

ent and future aspirations of the oppressed speaks to the urgency of addressing systemic racism and its pervasive effects on individuals and societies. Mbembe's insights also illustrate how power dynamics are intertwined with the control of visibility and invisibility and how this plays a role in perpetuating racial inequalities.

In 2020, when his life was snuffed out under the knee of a police officer in the United States, the three words "I can't breathe" by George Floyd once again became a call for racial justice and police reform in the United States and around the world. The last time these words caused an uproar, they were shouted by Eric Garner when police killed him in New York City in 2014. In a historic act of solidarity not seen since the days of the American civil rights movement, millions of people took to the streets for weeks. They protested, knelt, chanted, and demanded change, not just in the United States, but around the world.<sup>46</sup> The phrase was written in July 2014 to mark the death of Eric Garner, who had been placed in a chokehold by Daniel Pantaleo, an officer with the New York City Police Department. In the video, which shows Garner being held down by several officers, he can be seen saying "I can't breathe" eleven times before losing consciousness and dying. When it was announced on December 3, 2014, that the jurors had decided not to indict Pantaleo after a two-month review of the case, protests erupted using Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," as slogans and chants. After the acquittal of the police officer who put Garner in a chokehold in December 2014, the use of the slogan rose dramatically amid widespread protests.

C. Riley Snorton's 2017 *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* is a book about racial history whose "problem under review [. . .] is time."<sup>47</sup> Following Fanon, Snorton is interested in the "mechanics of invention" and seeks to understand "the conditions of emergence of things and beings that may not yet exist."<sup>48</sup> Snorton claims that relating Blackness and transness leads to "insights that surpass an additive logic" and can foster "strategies for inhabiting

<sup>46</sup> "I Can't Breathe': The Refrain That Reignited a Movement," Amnesty International, June 30, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/i-cant-breathe-refrain-reignited-movement/>.

<sup>47</sup> C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xiv.

<sup>48</sup> Snorton, xiv.

unlivable worlds.”<sup>49</sup> In search of a new vocabulary, Snorton argues that “blackness finds articulation within transness.”<sup>50</sup> The two categories share connections that he calls “transversal,” but there are also transitive connections that unite the two in “moments of transition.”<sup>51</sup> Snorton reveals how “captive flesh expressed an ungendered position that defines race as the sine qua non of sex.”<sup>52</sup> Central to Snorton’s discussion is Hortense Spillers and her formulation of the flesh: its existence and persistence “in excess of linear time [. . .] gives rise to how sex and gender have been expressed and arranged according to the logics that sustained racial slavery.”<sup>53</sup> “Captive flesh,” he argues, “figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being.”<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, he discusses “fungible flesh as a mode for fugitive action,” and the Black mother, “rendered as the zone of nonbeing,” as an “onto-epistemological framework for black personhood.”<sup>55</sup> Blackness is “a condition of possibility that made transness conceivable in the twilight of formal slavery.”<sup>56</sup>

Snorton writes in his magnificent and painful book about “Blake Brockington, a black trans man who garnered national attention in 2014 as the ‘first out trans homecoming king in . . . North Carolina.’”<sup>57</sup>

He continues later on:

In an interview, Brockington related, “I’m still a person . . . [and] trans people are still people. Our bodies just don’t match what’s up [in our heads]. We need support, not people looking down at us or degrading us or overlooking us. We are still human.” The frequency with which he availed himself of interviews and participated in Black Lives Matter rallies and events associated with Transgender Days of Remembrance is perhaps the evidence of an impetus to replace one collective

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<sup>49</sup> Snorton, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Snorton, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Snorton, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Snorton, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Snorton, 53.

<sup>54</sup> Snorton, 57.

<sup>55</sup> Snorton, 12, 106, 108.

<sup>56</sup> Snorton, 135.

<sup>57</sup> Snorton, x.

function with another. In one of a number of photographs taken at a rally in late November 2014, Brockington is positioned between two signs, which read “I have the right to be alive” and “I am not a criminal.”<sup>58</sup>

This photo prompts Snorton to point to another image of racial capitalism. He says:

The photograph occurs as an afterimage, what Kimberly Juanita Brown defines as “an ocular residue, a visual duplication as well as an alteration,” in a riff on Audre Lorde. Dressed in all black, Brockington wears a shirt that bears a list of names conjoined by ampersands and “finished” with an ellipsis: “Emmett&Amadou&Sean&Oscar&Trayvon&Jordan&Eric&Mike&Ezell& . . .” A few months later, his own name occupied the elliptical space.<sup>59</sup>

In 2015, the death of Blake Brockington, the Black trans man and Black Lives Matter activist was reported as suicide. Brockington’s shirt with a list of names begins with Emmett Till. Till was a 14-year-old Black boy who was brutally beaten and killed in the Mississippi Delta in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a White woman, Carolyn Bryant.

After kidnapping and pistol-whipping Till, Bryant’s husband Roy and half-brother J. W. Milam shot him in the head, tied a 74-pound cotton fan around his neck, and dumped the boy’s body in the Tallahatchie River. Determined to publicize the atrocity, Till’s mother Mamie Emmet insisted on an open casket, and images of her son’s mutilated body flooded the media to the horror of White and Black Americans.<sup>60</sup>

In her 2015 *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*, Kimberly Juanita Brown writes:

Mamie Till, Emmett Till’s mother, is the other “her” who forces a photographic engagement with the murder of her only child, and in Lorde’s poem Mamie Till is also the “her” who “wings her hands / beneath the weight of agonies re-

<sup>58</sup> Snorton, xii; brackets in the original.

<sup>59</sup> Snorton, xii.

<sup>60</sup> Anne Sarah Rubin, “Reflections on the Death of Emmett Till,” *Southern Cultures* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 45–66, <https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.1995.0000>.

membered,” and her son’s famous photographic imprint lingers over and through Lorde’s articulation. In the doubling properties of her use of “refuse” (“lying amid the sidewalk refuse”), Lorde locates an urban iteration of a southern horror steeped in what Saidiya Hartman calls “the afterlife of slavery.”<sup>61</sup>

Mamie Till, the mother of Emmett Till, becomes a central figure in forcing a confrontation with the horrifying reality of her son’s murder. In Audre Lorde’s poem, Mamie Till is depicted as the one who carries the weight of agonizing memories, symbolizing the ongoing impact of the tragedy.

This brings us to Audre Lorde’s “Afterimages”:

I  
 However the image enters  
 its force remains within  
 my eyes  
 rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve  
 wild for life, relentless and acquisitive  
 learning to survive  
 where there is no food  
 my eyes are always hungry  
 and remembering  
 however the image enters  
 its force remains.<sup>62</sup>

The “doubling properties” of Lorde’s use of the word “refuse” connects urban settings to the traumatic history of the South. This reflects an afterlife of slavery, as articulated by Saidiya Hartman, where historical traumas continue to reverberate. Brown defines the position of the afterimage of the Black body as the afterlife of slavery, repetitions of the indelible memory of slavery, whether it functions as “afterimage, double exposure, hyperembodiment, or the ocular and auditory meditation of a diasporic riff, repetition brings the figuration of slavery

36

<sup>61</sup> Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>62</sup> Audre Lorde, “Afterimages,” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 339.

into being.”<sup>63</sup> Easily said, but deeply under the image “we think of the afterimage as a violation of the gaze.”<sup>64</sup> What does “violation of the gaze” mean here? The idea of the afterimage as a “violation of the gaze” suggests that these recurring images challenge the comfortable viewing experience. They demand attention to the distressing realities they represent, breaking away from traditional modes of passive observation. It also suggests that contemporary art often appropriates images of suffering and the “Other” in ways that perpetuate White innocence. These images can become a means for Whites to show emotional concern without necessarily addressing the systemic problems that cause the suffering.

As Michael A. Chaney writes in his 2008 *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity to Antebellum Narrative*: “Whether through citation to an unexpected portrait, appropriation of traditional visual technologies, or proximity to illustration, the intertexts of *Fugitive Vision* require a critical sensibility open to an aesthetics based on experiences of oppression that challenge a hermeneutics of accessibility, rationality, and correspondence.”<sup>65</sup> This requires a critical stance that goes beyond mere accessibility and rationality to understand the complex layers of meaning behind such imagery.

What is the meaning of this? That there is a whole set of libidinal mechanisms, essentially racist, operating at the heart of capitalist society, forming its social bond and at the center of the (White) unconscious. It is an intertwining between the capitalist system’s pursuit of a never-ending surplus value and an inexorable exploitation made possible by mechanisms that constantly racialize the produced “Other,” disposable, exploitable, and so on.

### Which Bodies Matter?

In his 2022 “Diversity or Exclusion? Psychoanalysis ‘Explains,’” Stephen Frosh writes that “Exclusions take place across many domains—sexuality, gender, class, nationality—and in many circumstances. All these need to be observed and documented, but it is probably fair to say that the racialization of exclusion

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<sup>63</sup> Brown, *Repeating Body*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Brown, 11.

<sup>65</sup> Michael A. Chaney, *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity to Antebellum Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 211.

is paramount.”<sup>66</sup> Or, to put it more bluntly, as Frosh explains, this rationale is central to Afropessimism, something that I think is crucial to understanding, as Frosh lays out:

To use the trope activated by Christina Sharpe, we all live “in the wake” of slavery, a wake that widens with time; yet, pushing this further, those who are most in the wake—the descendants of slaves and the inheritors of the mantle of slavery—are now bordered by it, so that they are distinct from those outside the wake, who are nevertheless impacted upon by its flow and force. Expressed more simply, let us just say that in this view, the lives of black people are radically differentiated from the lives of white people; and the barrier between them, which is anti-black racism, structures this differentiation as subjugation and exclusion.<sup>67</sup>

The metaphor of living “in the wake” of slavery, as articulated by Sharpe,<sup>68</sup> highlights the ongoing influence and repercussions of historical events like slavery, which continue to shape contemporary society. Importantly, Frosh extends this metaphor by suggesting that those most affected by the wake—descendants of slaves and those inheriting the legacy of slavery—are not just living in the wake, but are effectively bordered by it.<sup>69</sup> This border creates a distinct separation between those inside the wake, who experience the direct and systemic effects of racial oppression, and those outside the wake, who may still be impacted by its flow and force but not to the same extent.

Frosh’s analysis emphasizes the enduring impact of historical injustices on marginalized communities. These historical injustices, that include colonialism, slavery, apartheid, have far-reaching consequences. In simpler terms, Frosh’s perspective acknowledges a radical differentiation between the lives of Black people and White people, with anti-Black racism serving as the structural barrier that enforces this differentiation through subjugation and exclusion. This viewpoint aligns with Afropessimism, a theoretical framework that critically ex-

38

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Frosh, “Diversity or Exclusion? Psychoanalysis ‘Explains,’” *Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics* 86 (September 2022): 9.

<sup>67</sup> Frosh, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> Frosh, “Diversity or Exclusion?,” 10.



amines the persistent anti-Blackness in society and the ways in which it shapes the social, economic, and political realities of Black individuals.

As Frank B. Wilderson III argues in his 2010 book *Red, White & Black*, “no slave, no world. And in addition, as Patterson argues, no slave is *in* the world.”<sup>70</sup> He underscores the central role that slavery played not only in the existence of the Black community but also in the global world. The violence is unique, particularly during the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage. This violence, he argues, erases their metaphysical foundations, customs, and sources, leaving them vulnerable and disconnected from their cultural roots. “Rather, the gratuitous violence of the Black’s first ontological instance, the Middle Passage, ‘wiped out [his or her] metaphysics . . . his [or her] customs and sources on which they are based.’”<sup>71</sup> Thus, “as an accumulated and fungible object, rather than an exploited and alienated subject, the Black is openly vulnerable to the whims of the world, and so is his or her cultural ‘production.’”<sup>72</sup> Wilderson’s argument takes a critical turn when he characterizes the Black individual as an “accumulated and fungible object” rather than an “exploited and alienated subject.”<sup>73</sup>

He argues: “All these Others are none other than the Lacanian contemporaries or, in the vernacular most salient to the Slave, Whites and their junior partners in civil society—Humans positioned by the Symbolic order.”<sup>74</sup> Wilderson sees Lacan’s process of full speech for Whites as contingent on the Black Other as a frame of reference, “which remonumentalizes the (White) ego” and “is an accomplice to social stability, despite its claims to the contrary.”<sup>75</sup> Moreover, “whereas Lacan was aware of how language ‘precedes and exceeds us,’ he did not have Fanon’s awareness of how violence also precedes and exceeds Blacks.”<sup>76</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>71</sup> Wilderson, 38; brackets in the original.

<sup>72</sup> Wilderson, 56.

<sup>73</sup> Wilderson, 56.

<sup>74</sup> Wilderson, 70.

<sup>75</sup> Wilderson, 75, 77.

<sup>76</sup> Wilderson, 76.

Wilderson brings in Lacanian theory and contends that Lacan's notion of full speech for Whites is interlinked with the presence of the Black Other as a reference point. This dynamic reinforces the (White) ego and contributes to societal stability, despite claims to the contrary. Wilderson's analysis challenges conventional paradigms and highlights the intricate interplay of power, language, violence, and identity in the context of racial dynamics. This distinction points to the objectification of Black individuals, rendering them vulnerable to the arbitrariness of the regimes of White capitalist power, including the manipulation of their social and cultural production.

In his 2021 article titled "Do Black Lives Matter in Psychoanalysis? Frantz Fanon as Our Most Disputatious Ancestor," Daniel Jose Gaztambide revisits a similar theme and argument.<sup>77</sup> He begins by noting that each psychoanalytic tradition identifies its lineage with a particular ancestor—Sigmund Freud as the "father" of psychoanalysis, Sandor Ferenczi as a once-lost "mother," and Jacques Lacan as the prodigal son advocating a "return to Freud."<sup>78</sup> These figures have served as foundational sources for scholars exploring psychoanalytic perspectives on various aspects of society, including race, class, sexuality, and gender both within the consulting room and in broader societal contexts. But where does Fanon stand in this trajectory? Gaztambide's article situates Fanon as a controversial and influential figure in this evolving psychoanalytic landscape, contributing to the broader conversation about the intersection of psychoanalytic theory and social justice.

More, Gaztambide, in his recent 2022 article "*Entre Negros, Blancos y Judios: Revisiting Claudia Tate's 'Freud and His Negro' with Puerto Rican Eyes,*"<sup>79</sup> refers to a now epochal 1996 text by Claudia Tate, in which she presents and then analyzes an anecdote narrated by Freud and recalled by Ernest Jones.<sup>80</sup> The direction

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<sup>77</sup> Daniel Jose Gaztambide, "Do Black Lives Matter in Psychoanalysis? Frantz Fanon as Our Most Disputatious Ancestor," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 38, no. 3 (July 2021): 177–84, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pap0000365>.

<sup>78</sup> Gaztambide, 177.

<sup>79</sup> Daniel Jose Gaztambide, "*Entre Negros, Blancos y Judios: Revisiting Claudia Tate's 'Freud and His Negro' with Puerto Rican Eyes,*" *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-022-00304-1>.

<sup>80</sup> Claudia Tate, "Freud and His 'Negro': Psychoanalysis as Ally and Enemy of African Americans," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1996): 53–62.

taken by scholars like Gaztambide and Tate delves into the complex and often uncomfortable intersections of psychoanalysis, race, and power dynamics. By revisiting historical texts and anecdotes, they reveal how psychoanalytic theory and practice have been entangled with racialization, colonialism, and oppressive hierarchies.

Namely, Freud, who came regularly to Vienna in 1886, actually took his American patient, his “Negro,” as Freud called him, with him. Gaztambide offers a number of thoughts that I recuperate here, recalling that Tate argued how

for African Americans, psychoanalysis was both an ally, “a weapon . . . to articulate the complex effects of racism” and an enemy aligning itself “with the forces of domination and oppression.” Analyzing Freud’s infamous “joke,” “twelve o’clock and no negro,” referring to an American patient who missed their session, Tate revealed his enactment of a kind of “discursive Blackface,” eliding the equation of Jewishness and Blackness made in his turn-of-century European world while repositioning himself as a colonial master. The effacing of Freud’s racial difference as a Jew was made possible by whiteness, whose “social borders were marked by ostracized blacks. This confinement repressed the ‘primal scene’ of the larger culture and its racial castration.” Anti-Blackness functions precisely as a “primal scene” confronting the racialized subject—whether white, Black, or non-white—with the gratuitous violence visited upon Black people.<sup>81</sup>

By obsessively repeating this joke, Freud “reconstitutes the polarized economy of [White over Black] power . . . by transforming this relationship into a tripartite one of . . . whites, Jews, and Negroes before collapsing the triangular formulation into the simple polarity of white and black.”<sup>82</sup>

Tate argued that this allowed Freud “to erase the figurative blackness of the Jewish body.”<sup>83</sup> As demonstrated by Gaztambide, Tate shows how “Freud was haunted by this association, performing his anti-Black ‘joke’ as a way of dis-

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<sup>81</sup> Gaztambide, “*Entre Negros, Blancos y Judios*.”

<sup>82</sup> Gaztambide.

<sup>83</sup> Tate, “Freud and His ‘Negro,’” 57.

elling his racial anxieties—as if to say ‘I am not a negro,’ not as statement of fact but as anti-Black performance.”<sup>84</sup>

Tate’s analysis reveals how this seemingly innocuous joke actually embodies a form of “discursive Blackface,” where Freud elides the racial and colonial implications of his language while reinforcing a power dynamic that positions him as a colonial master.

Importantly, Tate highlights the dual nature of psychoanalysis for African Americans—it can be both an ally for articulating the complexities of racism and an enemy aligning itself with forces of domination and oppression. By examining Freud’s joke and its repetition, Tate exposes how it reconstitutes and reinforces the power dynamics of White over Black, eventually collapsing the intricate tripartite relationship between Whites, Jews, and Blacks into a simplistic polarity of White and Black.<sup>85</sup>

Gaztambide draws attention to the equation of Jewishness and Blackness in Freud’s time and the erasure of Freud’s racial difference through the lens of Whiteness. This erasure was facilitated by the societal borders marked by ostracized Black individuals, effectively repressing a larger cultural understanding of race and its castration of racial identities. He further underscores the role of anti-Blackness as a “primal scene” that confronts individuals of all racial backgrounds with the gratuitous violence inflicted upon Black people.<sup>86</sup>

### **Historicization of the (White) Unconscious: Freud, Fanon, Malabou, and the Racial Unconscious**

42

In addition to the civil protests and disobedience of Black African American citizens in the United States in the previous century and their struggles through the long centuries of colonialism through the Jim Crow era to Black Lives Matter today, the question of the impact on psychic structure under the heavy processes of extractivist exploitation and structural racialization has once again, as so often in history, risen to the surface. More precisely, where is and where was

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<sup>84</sup> Gaztambide, “*Entre Negros, Blancos y Judios.*”

<sup>85</sup> Tate, “Freud and His ‘Negro,’” 57.

<sup>86</sup> Gaztambide, “*Entre Negros, Blancos y Judios.*”

psychoanalysis in this process? In the Freudian and Lacanian elaborations of the psyche, the libido, and the unconscious, the lineage of Black thought in contemporary psychoanalysis is almost absent, but it can be enumerated: Fanon, Spillers,<sup>87</sup> Tate.

But at the same time, in retrospect, we see a reordering of vocabulary and implications because, due to the specific constellation of the new millennium and the war in Iraq and the Middle East, the year 2000 brought to the American public corpses and US soldiers disfigured to a degree that even the heavily controlled mass media coverage of the post-2001 intervention by the United States and its allies in the Middle East could not prevent. The images of the mid-2000s, the trophy images (paraphrasing Suvendrini Perera)<sup>88</sup> captured in hyper-racialized selfies of US soldiers in Iraq, and the contemporary trophy bodies captured in these racist images in the Middle East as a “gift of freedom” (paraphrasing Mimi Thi Nguyen)<sup>89</sup> from the White Military Coalition, as the Occident embarked on a mission of perpetual war to save our “innocent” White civilization, were reflected in a theoretical turn regarding the White Unconscious and its new elaboration.

In 2017, in “Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production,” I wrote the following, “I want to radicalize the status of images of the digital (financial) mode of production; more than that, I want to ask: (1) what is the racial(ized) unconscious (see the adjective in front of the unconscious) of these images, and (2) what is their status in relation to the imperial, colonial, necropolitical and racial line that cuts global neoliberal capitalism from within and heavily conditions contemporary necropolitical capitalist production and its financial-images?”<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> See Hortense J. Spillers, “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother’: Psychoanalysis and Race,” *Boundary 2* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 75–141, <https://doi.org/10.2307/303639>.

<sup>88</sup> Suvendrini Perera, “Dead Exposures: Trophy Bodies and Violent Visibilities of the Nonhuman,” *Borderlands e-journal* 13, no. 1 (2014): 1–26, <https://doi.org/20.500.11937/4074>.

<sup>89</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>90</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production,” in *Regimes of Invisibility in Contemporary Art, Theory and Culture: Image, Racialization, History*, ed. Marina Gržinić, Aneta Stojnić, and Miško Šuvaković (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 13.

This view holds that racial terms and their extensions accumulate over time and form racial populations, driven by predictable effects arising from real physical experiences and encounters. Controlling the movement and positioning of racialized individuals. This control is a form of exercising power that places racialized bodies in specific social, physical, and psychological contexts. The experiences of marginalization, dehumanization, and racialization Fanon speaks of can be understood through the lens of spatial dynamics in which individuals are denied full existence and agency within particular spaces, histories, and presentations that are reordered by the racial unconscious. Necropolitical racial capitalism, in the wake of Robinson theory, has created a new relationship to all possible density; no concept can escape the processes of racialization, can it? Fanon already hinted at this in the 1950s with a not-so-dramatically different vocabulary (he speaks of the cultural unconscious, disalienation, etc.).

This is consistent with Jeffrey Prager's thought-provoking 2017 article "Do Black Lives Matter? A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Racism and American Resistance to Reparations," in which Prager examines the complex dynamics of racism and its impact on the reparative impulse and social progress. Prager's analysis focuses on the concept of racism and its role in maintaining a divisive barrier between racial groups, particularly between Whites and Blacks. Prager writes:

Racism, however, emphasizing the reality of *racial difference*, continues, as always, to serve as a powerful defense thwarting the reparative impulse. The result has been the securing of physical separation between Whites and Blacks and the persistence of psychic enmeshment. Absent the implementation of a politics of reparations, African Americans will never achieve externality, or independence, from the White mind.<sup>91</sup>

44

Prager contends that racism, which focuses on highlighting and exaggerating racial differences, functions as a powerful defense mechanism for the regime of Whiteness that maintains a physical separation between White individuals and Black individuals, thereby perpetuating an ongoing sense of psychological

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<sup>91</sup> Jeffrey Prager, "Do Black Lives Matter? A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Racism and American Resistance to Reparations," in "Psychoanalysis and the Political Unconscious," special issue, *Political Psychology* 38, no. 4 (August 2017): 637, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12436>.

imprisonment. In essence, Prager's study illuminates the complicated interplay between racism, reparations, and the broader struggle for racial equality and autonomy. By taking a psychoanalytic look at these complex dynamics, he provides insight into the deep-rooted obstacles that stand in the way of the need to address historical injustices for a more just society.

These thoughts are all the more pertinent given the persistence of the thesis of understanding the unconscious, which is mutable and changeable, along racial disparities, which received a new theoretical twist in 2007.

In 2007, Catherine Malabou published the book *Les nouveaux blessés: De Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains* [The new wounded: From Freud to neurology, thinking about contemporary trauma],<sup>92</sup> translated into English in 2012 as *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage (Forms of Living)*.<sup>93</sup> This is how Catherine Kellogg describes it in her chapter "Plasticity and the Cerebral Unconscious: New Wounds, New Violences, New Politics," I quote:

In her 2007 book *Les Nouveaux blessés*, Catherine Malabou stages an encounter between contemporary neuroscience and psychoanalysis that is without peer. She identifies a constituency she names as the "new wounded"; those whose brains are ineradicably changed as a result of brain damage or severe trauma. These wounds can neither be explained nor offered help by way of psychoanalysis, as it presently understands itself. In proposing a theory of subjectivity that has the "matter" of the brain and its relationship to the psyche at its root, this chapter asks whether Malabou's new materialist approach to psychic events threatens to alter a theory of psychic life that was materialist all along?<sup>94</sup>

Symptomatically, in 2007, one of the most famous images of the Iraq War was a photograph taken by Nina Berman at a commercial portrait studio in a small

<sup>92</sup> Catherine Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés: De Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains* (Paris: Bayard, 2007).

<sup>93</sup> Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage (Forms of Living)*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

<sup>94</sup> Catherine Kellogg, "Plasticity and the Cerebral Unconscious: New Wounds, New Violences, New Politics," in *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 114.

town in Illinois. A young couple stands side by side, looking at the camera. The groom is wearing a decorated uniform, but his facial features have literally melted away. He has no nose, no chin, no ears, and no hair. His head seems to hang straight down from his shoulders, and his face is so badly burned that it is difficult to decipher his facial expression. The portrait is just one of a much larger series Berman shot on behalf of *People* magazine showing the recovery, homecoming and wedding day of Marine Sgt. Ty Ziegel. Ty's second deployment to Iraq was interrupted when a suicide bomber blew himself up near his vehicle during a routine patrol. The searing heat melted most of the skin from Ty's body and blinded him in one eye. His skull was so badly crushed that doctors had to replace it with plastic. Ty had to endure 19 surgeries. Berman completed the series over the course of three separate visits. First, he documented Ty's recovery and then, after his release, the couple's wedding in late 2006.

Back to Malabou and the context presented: what is this we have before us? Why does it appear in 2007? While we have images of brutal disfigurements of Black bodies and those made "the Other" through ongoing hyperviolent processes of racialization, should not we also say that we are looking back from the future? As the images of disfigurements are ubiquitous, it is necessary to invest in a new logic that also takes in the necropolitical brutalities in general that are exponentially increasing along the racial/colonial divide, millions of disposable refugees, overkilling. Add to this the connection of the repressed history of colonialism and slavery with disfigurements of soldiers coming home from wars in the Middle East. The horrors of disfigurements and brutalized Black bodies, from slavery to colonialism, are shaped by racial structures that are visibly imprinted on the body. The body is literally melted down in colonialism through whipping, beating, and cutting. But also, in recent history, as Kimberly Juanita Brown described in 2015 the afterimage of the Black body as the afterlife of slavery, repetitions of the indelible memory of slavery.<sup>95</sup> Second, the cerebral unconscious makes a shift (bypassing the racial unconscious) from what Nina Cvar points out in this volume, "from labor to affect."<sup>96</sup>

46

<sup>95</sup> Brown, *The Repeating Body*.

<sup>96</sup> See Marina Gržinić in Bogdan Popa, "Insurgent Flows. Trans\*Decolonial and Black Marxist Futures: A Conversation with Bogdan Popa," by Marina Gržinić and Tjaša Kancler, in Gržinić and Pristovšek, *Political Choreographies*, 139.



In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon starts a very important sequence of thoughts. He is discussing the concept of the collective unconscious and the archetype of the “uncivilized savage” or the “black man” that Jung suggests exists within the European collective unconscious.<sup>97</sup> Fanon begins by mentioning that he’s examining the symbolic crystallization of reality and how it relates to psychology. He then introduces Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious, which is a concept in Jungian psychology that refers to a shared reservoir of experiences, memories, and archetypes that are inherited from our ancestors. Jung’s idea, as Fanon notes, includes the presence of an archetype that represents “bad instincts” and the “uncivilized savage,” which Jung associates with the “black man.”<sup>98</sup> Fanon, however, expresses skepticism about Jung’s interpretation. He states that he believes Jung is mistaken in linking these negative aspects solely to the “black man.” Fanon’s skepticism stems from his broader critique of how racial biases and colonial ideologies have influenced psychology and the understanding of race. He argues that these ideas have been used to perpetuate the subjugation and inferiorization of Black individuals by pathologizing their identity and attributing negative characteristics to them based on their skin color.

In the next step Fanon underlines, “We need quite simply to demonstrate that Jung confuses instinct and habit. According to him, the collective unconscious is part of the psyche; the myths and archetypes are permanent engrams of the species. We hope we have shown that this collective unconscious is nothing of the sort and that, in fact, it is cultural, i.e., it is acquired.”<sup>99</sup> It is not surprising, then, that, as Sara Ahmed notes in her 2006 *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, “what bodies ‘tend to do’ are effects of histories rather than being originary.”<sup>100</sup> Ahmed emphasizes the idea that human behavior and actions are shaped by historical and cultural contexts. This perspective aligns with Fanon’s critique of Jung’s concept in that it emphasizes the influence of history and culture on individual and collective behavior.

In 2018, in “Giving Back the Land,” Burnett writes:

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<sup>97</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), 164.

<sup>98</sup> Fanon, 164.

<sup>99</sup> Fanon, 164.

<sup>100</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 56.

Fanon invokes a highly context-specific *cultural unconscious*. He characterises it, in a manner that points towards the importance of discourse, as “a constellation of postulates, a series of propositions that slowly and subtly—with the help of books, newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio—work their way into one’s mind and shape one’s view of the world of the group to which one belongs.” For white-skinned people, a Black body is a dirty body, both morally and physically; Blackness is to whiteness as darkness and sin are to innocence and “magical, heavenly light.” The unconscious is populated with these indexical relationships, which shape profoundly individual desire and behaviour.<sup>101</sup>

And continues: “The Black imago plays a role in the development of the white self, as the perfect Other, ideally not-self and “absolutely unassimilable.”<sup>102</sup> Burnett, like us, does not want to leave the implications of this reinsertion of Fanon in the canonical White history.

In short, racial concepts and their extensions, as well as the control of the movement and positioning of racialized populations and individuals, constitute modes of (racial) governance and (racial) sovereignty that place racialized bodies in specific, disposable, disfigured social, physical, and psychological contexts. Fanon’s concept of the zone of non-being for highly racialized subjects, maintained through the logic of an “afterlife of slavery,” leads to a different understanding of the unconscious in racial necro-capitalism.

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<sup>101</sup> Scott Burnett, “Giving Back the Land: Whiteness and Belonging in Contemporary South Africa” (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2018), 264, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.18854.14401>.

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## The Body as Mass Media in the Livestream Regime

### Keywords

biopolitics, necropolitics, gore capitalism, livestream regime, gender, sexuality

### Abstract

In the article we discuss the meaning of the body in its material dimension in relation to its transformation in the current context, which is determined by the multi-layered convergence of biopolitics (Foucault 1978–79), necropolitics (Mbembe 2003), digital psychopolitics (Han 2014), and gore capitalism (Valencia 2010). It is an inquire of the ways in which the contemporary body becomes a form of mass media for certain populations who choose to consent to the mandate of making themselves entrepreneurs of their own bodies within the livestream regime (Valencia 2016, 2018). The author analyzes a variety of representations of femininity taking physical form g-locally in bodies, which—in an effort to comply with capitalist mandates and with binary choreographies of gender and sexuality—become businesses themselves.

## Telo kot množični medij v režimu prenosa v živo

### Ključne besede

biopolitika, nekropolitika, gore kapitalizem, režim prenosa v živo, spol, spolnost

### Povzetek

Članek obravnava pomen telesa v njegovi materialni razsežnosti in v povezavi z njegovo transformacijo v kontekstu, ki ga določa večplastna konvergenca biopolitike (Foucault 1978–79), nekropolitike (Mbembe 2003), digitalne psihopolitike (Han 2014) ter »gore kapitalizma« (Valencia 2010). Izraz »gore« se navezuje na filmski žanr, ki prikazuje izjemno, brutalno nasilje, Valencia pa z »gore kapitalizmom« reinterpretira hegemonsko globalno ekonomijo v (geografskih) mejnih prostorih, zlasti v Tijuani na meji med Mehiko in ZDA.

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V članku raziskuje načine, na katere sodobno telo postane oblika množičnega medija za določene populacije, ki se odločijo privoliti v vlogo podjetnikov lastnih teles znotraj režima prenosa v živo (Valencia 2016, 2018). Avtorica analizira različne reprezentacije ženskosti, ki prevzamejo fizično obliko globalno-lokalnih teles, ki v prizadevanju, da bi ustregla kapitalističnim zahtevam ter binarnim koreografijam spola in spolnosti, postanejo sama po sebi poslovni subjekti.



Translated by JD Pluecker

## Introduction

The body is the cornerstone of the history of struggles, resistance and subversion. At the same time, it is the object of plunder, fascination, and unequal relations in a Western culture that finds surplus value in the denial of the materiality of the bodies that it exploits.

I begin this section with a series of questions: are our bodies really ours? What is the value of the body in contemporary societies outside the markets of beauty, fitness, and wellness? What do we know of our own bodies? Where might we find the cultural, social, political, economic, and symbolic frameworks to interpret them?

When it comes to the body, we find more questions than answers, because in our present time and ever since the mid-twentieth century, the individual body has been over-represented as a highly profitable aesthetic-cosmetic image.

We live in extractivist societies that obtain their economic, symbolic, political, cultural and gender benefits (among others) through the spectralization and alienation of our individual bodies, but also through the erasure of the relationship between the social body and nature.

This kind of separation inhibits the potential of the body in its relation to other bodies and to nature, reducing it to mere labor power that is transformed into capitalist surplus value. In this regard, then, the subject of the body is broad,



compelling, and multifaceted, and its meanings are dependent on geopolitics and culture.

To this end, there is no single version of what a body is or can be. Western narratives about the body, however, have given shape to its history and intensely limited the body through discriminatory codifications. This is particularly evident during the various colonial periods where laws of exclusion and inferiorization of others were constructed, particularly in relation to polarizing narratives of race, class, gender, language, body diversity, etc.

In this sense, we must remember what Silvia Federici argues in relation to the history of the body:

The history of the body is the history of human beings, for there is no cultural practice that is not first applied to the body. Even if we limit ourselves to speak of the history of the body in capitalism we face an overwhelming task, so extensive have been the techniques used to discipline the body, constantly changing, depending on the shifts in labor regimes to which our body was subjected to. Moreover, we do not have one history but different histories of the body: the body of men, of women, of the waged worker, of the enslaved, of the colonized.<sup>1</sup>

I quote Federici's words because they describe the body's political history and its relation to the world we have inherited, that is to say, they speak to us of a capitalist world, which, beyond a system of production, has been a process of confinement and amputation of bodies.

In this sense, I connect this historical and situated perspective of the body with the contextual analysis of phenomena linked to neoliberalism and what might be called "a death regime" in the contemporary moment occasioned by necropolitics. Achille Mbembe defines necropolitics as the governing of populations through the routine massacre of the colonial era, extended in the present day to border areas and vulnerable communities.<sup>2</sup> This massacre produc-

<sup>1</sup> Silvia Federici, "In Praise of the Dancing Body," *Gods and Radicals* (blog), *A Beautiful Resistance*, August 22, 2016, <https://abeautifulresistance.org/2016/08/22/in-praise-of-the-dancing-body/>.

<sup>2</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

es surplus value through the conversion of exchange values into necro-values (necro-surplus).

In this essay, I'll pay particular attention to the connection between necropolitics and violence in Mexico as produced by the necro-state and organized crime. I have attempted to identify this connection using the term "gore capitalism,"<sup>3</sup> which I use to refer to explicit and unjustified bloodshed as the price to be paid by the Third World (understood as spaces of neocolonial plunder, that is, intensifications of the material dispossession of the colonial period into the present day). The Third World clings onto ever-more-onerous logics of neoliberalism, leading to a large quantity of dismemberings and viscera, frequently intermixed with organized crime, the cis-tem of the gender binary, compulsory heterosexuality, and the predatory uses of the body, utilizing extremely explicit violence as a tool of *necroempowerment*.

By necroempowerment, I mean the processes that transform contexts and/or situations of vulnerability and/or subalternity into situations of possibility for action and self-empowerment, reconfiguring them through dystopian practices and a perverse self-affirmation through the practice of violence.

As I mentioned earlier, gore capitalism is not simply a criminal economy, but it reinforces certain logics and social choreographies around gender and machismo in which the cisheterosexual binary grants cisheterosexual men the power to wield violence upon other populations considered vulnerable: feminized people, children, and other men who are neither cisgender nor heterosexual, among others.

56

The contribution of gore capitalism is not only to describe the predation of neoliberalism, but also how it links up with colonial logics of subhumanization of certain populations and typically crystallizes in a cishet masculine subject who must be subsumed within these logics in order to become a modern, civilized "provider." This is what I call necromasculinity.<sup>4</sup> It is part of the subjectivities

<sup>3</sup> Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, trans. John Pluecker (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See Sayak Valencia, "(Necro)Masculinidad, Estado-Nación y democracia," paper presented at the conference Proyecto Ballena, "Vida y Política," organized by Centro Cultural

produced by a reinterpretation of the logic of the modernization/colonization project that has led to a kind of necro-narco-modernity in Mexico, because it is linked to racism and processes of racialization that make certain bodies disposable and convert them into “minority becomings.”<sup>5</sup>

Another important aspect of gore capitalism is its predatory use of bodies, with a particularly sensationalist violence wielded upon the bodies of cis and transwomen and also upon those bodies that express themselves as feminized, in which human trafficking is converted into a market niche of the underground economy that maintains the formal economy.

This predatory violence is, in addition, cosmeticized<sup>6</sup> since it is not just a space of work, but also a space of socialization, consumption, and construction of a cultural imaginary linked to the normalization of death and to the processes of extraction of life generated by necropolitics.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of gore capitalism is a critical argument that emerged out of transfeminism,<sup>8</sup> an attempt to make explicit the dystopian alliance between racist, colonial, military, capitalist heteropatriarchy and necropolitical masculinity or

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Kirchner, Buenos Aires, December 4, 2020, YouTube video, uploaded by Centro Cultural Kirchner, December 16, 2020, 54:48, [https://youtu.be/MDrw\\_D\\_5AKA](https://youtu.be/MDrw_D_5AKA).

<sup>5</sup> Felix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografías del deseo*, trans. Florencia Gómez (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> By “cosmetics” I refer to those processes of beautification and standardization of contemporary taste linked to the cultural products of narcoculture, in which there is no longer an appeal to aesthetics alone, a discipline associated in the West with ethics and politics, but which uses elements of design and digital beautification to present its images without ethical costs to delimit its meaning to a mere cultural consumption based on a supposedly beautifying and captivating neutrality.

<sup>7</sup> Mbembe, “Necropolitics.”

<sup>8</sup> From our perspective in the Global South, the term transfeminism is understood in a broad and intersectional sense, recovering the political potential of the prefix “trans,” which etymologically signifies movement, transit, displacement. For this reason, our transfeminism considers populations beyond self-identified cisheterosexual women as subjects of feminisms, positing strategic alliances with collectives of diverse subjectivities: trans people, undocumented migrants, people of functional diversity, sex workers, environmental leaders, people looking for their disappeared family members, politicized feminized subjects in the search for justice in cases of femicide and transfemicide, and other issues not considered by traditional agendas of institutional feminism that limit their discussions to a politics of sex and gender, leaving out pressing problems like the ones already men-

necromasculinity, which is understood as a widespread form of governance in the Mexican context (which is neither exceptional nor exclusively related to the model of narco as a business). This argument can also serve as a category for reading the necropolitical forms of governance in Latin America that appear more or less openly in the geopolitics of the Global North, as in the United States and its camps (that are called concentration camps)<sup>9</sup> for migrant children, or in the European Union and its policy of death, which are applied live and in real time against undocumented migrants who are shot at prior to reaching European shores or who are left to drown in the Mediterranean.

This normalization of death that is transmitted “live and from the scene” through mass media and social media has led me to think that this transmission of killings “live” represents a shift from gore to snuff. These two cinematic genres differ from one another in that gore is bloody spectacle (made with a low budget and a kitsch aesthetic), while snuff is basically founded on the idea that the killing shown is not fake, but rather that its value lies in the fact that it is produced in order to film the killing of someone “live and from the scene” for the consumption of the viewer.

While gore films work with the idea of representation, snuff films are grounded in the power of killing directly and transmitting it with impunity. In this displacement, I find a successful metaphor to explain some forms of *Realpolitik* in contemporary necrodemocracies.<sup>10</sup>

With this in mind, I propose that gore capitalism has not only become a snuff politics in Mexico, but also that it inaugurated a new genre in the representation of g-local violence. This shift from the spectacularized violence of gore to the practical and intimidating violence of snuff leads to a didactics of cruelty that nor-

58

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tioned within the framework of the fight against neoliberalism, which in many territories extracts profit through gore capitalism.

<sup>9</sup> See Gerardo Lissardy, “Por qué están llamando ‘campos de concentración’ a los lugares de detención de inmigrantes en Estados Unidos,” BBC News World, June 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-48781955>.

<sup>10</sup> Xavier Brito-Alvarado and José Capito Álvarez, “Neoliberalismo como necropolítica zombi,” *Argumentos: Revista de Crítica Social*, no. 22 (October 2020): 252–79.

malizes a regressive sensibility.<sup>11</sup> Through undisputed agreements, these buttress violence against certain bodies constructed historically, socially, economically, and politically as others: migrants, feminized people, sexual and gender dissidents, racialized people, etc.

Snuff politics<sup>12</sup> is enacted in an increasingly open way, becoming a form of state governance and emotional anesthesia for the viewer, who concurrently reproduces images derived from this snuff politics, creating a set of iterations that lead to a social imaginary in which minoritized bodies are read as disposable or as bodies destined for death.

I use the term “livestream regime” to refer to this continuity between gore capitalism and its pragmatic transfer into the legal snuff policies of the First World, which kills live at the scene and disseminates the killing through newscasts and digital media.<sup>13</sup> I maintain that this practice is grounded in a fascination with violence of all intensities generated by necro-pop as an aesthetic that normalizes violence, destruction, and murder through cultural products disseminated by mass media and—especially over the last two decades—by virtual social media and by entertainment platforms in the era of e-communication.

From my perspective, the livestream regime is a form of governance of sensibility that is no longer limited to the cinematographic imagination, which inspired me years ago to propose the term gore to explicate the capitalist system we inhabited in the border space of Tijuana and which rapidly veered into snuff. This regime has now transcended the division between fiction and reality and is grounded in the pre-production of reality through aesthetic and cosmetic mon-

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<sup>11</sup> Sayak Valencia and Liliana Falcón, “From Gore Capitalism to Snuff Politics: Necropolitics in the USA-Mexican Border,” in *Necropower in North America: The Legal Spatialization of Disposability and Lucrative Death*, ed. Ariadna Estévez (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2021), 35–59.

<sup>12</sup> By “snuff politics” I mean a modality of governance of emotions that operates through the construction of social consensuses that appeal solely to the feedback of feelings of individual grievance, where narratives presented by the media and selective digital folklore tend to confirm pre-existing prejudices within an axiology inherited from racism, misogyny, and the cishet norm.

<sup>13</sup> Sayak Valencia, “Psicopolítica, celebrity culture y régimen live en la era Trump,” *Norteamérica* 13, no. 2 (July/December 2018): 235–52, <https://doi.org/10.22201/cisan.24487228e.2018.2.348>.

tages in order to re-elaborate visual-social consensuses and challenge the truth pacts with which images of reality are read.

The livestream regime is not only a dystopian audiovisual genre of hypermediation, but also the diffusion of a form of governance of populations that is disseminated through digital, psychopolitical means<sup>14</sup> and normalizes extreme violence, injustice, and dispossession directed at historically vulnerabilized populations like cis and trans women, sexual and gender dissidents, racialized people, and migrants, among others.

I propose that the livestream regime is a mechanism of governance that produces not only ultra-cosmetic images and imaginaries of violence in order to render them profitable, but also hijacks the meaning of images of social resistance in order to undermine them through extreme banalization.

This is achieved through at least two means: 1) The decontextualized and unparalleled bombardment of images of murder, that is, the over-exposure of victims in newscasts and tabloids converting these people into a kind of trash, as well as re-victimizing them through newspaper headlines or comments on news stories on social networks. 2) The production of a fractured narrative and its distribution through cultural products like television series or e-series, movies, advertising, fashion, and design, which together cosmeticize violence and de-center the real meaning of resistance or social indignation held within these images or stories, a sort of gentrification of the struggles to produce official codes of reading violence and its cooptation and institutionalization, along with its distortion and/or the emptying of meaning of notions like “gender equality,” “sexual diversity,” or “LGBT rights.”

60

We have moved from a biopolitical regime of the living<sup>15</sup> to a “regime of the live,”<sup>16</sup> from biopolitics to a digital psychopolitics<sup>17</sup> that does not exclude nec-

<sup>14</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Valencia, “Psicopolítica.”

<sup>17</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*.

ropolitics<sup>18</sup> but rather normalizes it through the creation of necroscopies,<sup>19</sup> that is of the production of “scopic regimes,”<sup>20</sup> accepted by society in a de-literate and hyperconsumerist way.

I believe that the openly explicit aesthetic—in which everything can be depicted in the most violent and extremely engrossing ways—allows us to think about the shift from gore capitalism to snuff politics.

This transformation is disseminated through necroscopies (fascination with and normalization of violence at all its levels), which leads us to process images as in a “cross fade”<sup>21</sup> in which contradictory and dissociated images govern contemporary life.

I propose then that this normalization of violence goes unnoticed because there has been a rewiring, a redesign of the *sensorium*<sup>22</sup> and of the mechanisms of perception and the sensibility with which we approach reality through the popularization of audiovisual devices and virtual social networks that challenge and restructure the regime of truth. What is produced in this process is a bio-hypermediated subjectivity in which the material elements of the body are combined and are repeatedly modified with virtual prostheses like facial or corporeal filters that lead to a desire for cosmetic transformation.

The goal is to create a certain likeness and a verisimilitude with the biopolitical ideals of gender, sexuality and class through the creation of a body that becomes a screen incarnate. The screen is no longer reduced to the mobile communication device but rather appropriates the user’s bodily materiality, in which

<sup>18</sup> Mbembe, “Necropolitics.”

<sup>19</sup> Sayak Valencia, “Necroscopía, masculinidad endrúaga y narcografías en las redes digitales,” in *#NetNarcocultura: Estudios de género y juventud en la sociedad red. Historia, discursos culturales y tendencias de consumo*, ed. Virginia Villaplana Ruiz and León Olvera Alejandra (Bellaterra: Institut de la Comunicació, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2022), 39–60.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1988), 3–27.

<sup>21</sup> Cross fade is the cinematic editing technique in which the last image of a shot dissolves while, superimposed onto it, the first image of the following shot takes shape.

<sup>22</sup> Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *And: Phenomenology of the End; Sensibility and Connective Mutation* (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2015).

the embellished image seems to exhaust the political possibilities of the body and to ontologize its image. This leads to a reduction of the images of resistance to varying violences to mere bloody anecdotes that cannot compete for the attention or social empathy attained by the emotional gentrification produced by the “beautified” images of engrossing violence, thus stripping the images of their capacity for resistance.

### The Body as Mass Media

Just as images become objects of consumption themselves, the body in the current moment has become not just a receiver/reader of images and audiovisual cultures, but also a living techno agent that produces grammars and processes experiences of hypermediation, becoming, in addition, a platform that incorporates new mandates of gender and consumption.

I will attempt to clarify this point: I am drawing on the idea of the architect Beatriz Colomina who argues that after World War II, architecture and buildings become mass media themselves.<sup>23</sup> In her book *Domesticity at War*, as exposed by Hilde Heinen’s review, “Colomina’s introduction evokes the strange contradictions of postwar architecture, which was ‘aggressively happy.’ Modern architecture borrowed the techniques and materials of the military, but turned them into tools to shape a new sense of domesticity.”<sup>24</sup>

That is, Colomina posits that theories of cinema and advertising are crucial to undertake a contextualized decoding of modern architecture. We see how those same elements of cultural reading in conjunction with all the gadgets and virtual platforms of the internet—in order to represent the body—construct and utilize the body itself as a corporealized screen that retranslates content from the mass media and becomes a kind of human poster. What is merged together are the various logics of advertising, surveillance, aesthetics, gender binaries and racist, sexist, and aporophobic politics, in addition to contemporary resistances.

62

<sup>23</sup> Beatriz Colomina, *Domesticity at War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Hilde Heynen, review of *Domesticity at War*, by Beatriz Colomina, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 4 (December 2008): 623, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2008.67.4.623>.



The body then is the medium and the message, since it produces semiotic, technical codes that customize content on social networks and produce market niches that feed neoliberal economies that, at multiple levels, have the body as primary producer and consumer.

One could say that in these new “economies of attention,”<sup>25</sup> the meaning of the body shifts and is redefined in relation to the cult of consumerism, becoming mass media that simultaneously reconfigure what Colomina referred to as a sense of a new domesticity.<sup>26</sup>

In this context, the rise of the regime of sensibility and the “creation of a neoliberal common sense”<sup>27</sup> in relation to cosmeticization (clearly delinked from ethics and politics) is disseminated through culture, art, architecture, and mass media. An example of this objectivization of the body in the new society of consumption is apparent in the world of art: one of the first recorded instances of corporeal intervention was undertaken in the 1960s by the US American artist Andy Warhol in his photographic series tracking his facelift operation.

This is just one instance of how the body became mass media from the 1960s onwards. With cosmetic surgery, it becomes an object of desire and consumption among the US American masses. In this sense, Warhol is a pioneer in the exhibition and transformation of the body as mass media in accordance with the construction of a capitalistic subjectivity and also as an entrepreneur of his own self.

Warhol is a direct antecedent of the contemporary celebrity culture, understood as focused on the production of cultural icons out of individuals whose merit and notoriety are produced through the exhibition of their intimacy and their eccentric way of acting. One of the artist’s most accurate statements was the following phrase: “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.” What he foresaw was that access to media and people’s appearance within it would be an ordinary activity in the hypermediated societies of our day.

<sup>25</sup> Marta Peiraro, *El enemigo conoce el sistema: Manipulación de ideas, personas e influencias después de la Economía de la atención* (Barcelona: Debate, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Colomina, *Domesticity at War*.

<sup>27</sup> Irmgard Emmelhainz, *The Tyranny of Common Sense: Mexico’s Post-Neoliberal Conversion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021).

However, the transformation of the body into a disruptive message that has been undertaken in performance art and its crystallization in extreme body art has been disputed by new actors, especially feminine actors, who are making their bodily matter not just into objects of transformation, but also entirely re-configured bodies. Their message is related to the new appetites imposed by the (neoliberal and heteropatriarchal) market, and their transformation speaks to us of a fluidification of the meanings of the categories of the eccentric and of gender as performance and plasticity.

I find that in the contemporary practices of capital production, femininity as performance has become labor, a space for self-production in which social capital has been replaced by erotic capital,<sup>28</sup> in order to transform itself into economic capital and to confront the demands for hyperconsumption within contemporary neoliberalism.

As an example of this, I will analyze a variety of different representations of femininity embodied g-locally by bodies that—in their efforts to comply with their mandate to hyperfeminize themselves—displace the scopic regime of corporeal intelligibility of the human and become plastic bodies, mannequin bodies, chimeric bodies that proliferate across the Western and/or Westernized world.

But above all, it shows us that the relationship between ciswomen, body, and work will unfold in our own day in a hypermediated way through a renegotiation and profiteering off of the hyperfeminized ideal that converts femininity into a market niche and a job for people like Kim Kardashian or the Mexican *buchonas*.

64

Kim Kardashian is a celebrity who has transformed herself into a business-owner and main character in a reality show focused on her life and on her family titled *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. The figure of Kim is paradigmatic for our analysis, insofar as she has become a sociocultural phenomenon, evidence of a complicated relationship between the body as a mechanism of mass communication and the construction of a hypersexualized and hypermediated femininity as a form of work. In fact, her launch to fame took place in 2007 with the viral-

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<sup>28</sup> Catherine Hakim, *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

ization of a homemade sex tape transmitted by Vivid Entertainment Group, a production house for pornographic films.

What is emblematic about this celebrity's triumph in the media is that her physical attributes and hypersexualized voluptuousness intersect with questions of race and class. Although she is the daughter of a prominent, multimillionaire attorney of Armenian origin and a friend of Paris Hilton, her physical characteristics link her to a racialized phenotype, which is reassembled through plastic surgery and makeup in order to establish models of non-Caucasian beauty in the US American context. It should be noted that her bodily characteristics are similar to those of the Mexican *buchonas*<sup>29</sup> or the Colombian *prepagos*<sup>30</sup> (escorts).

In both cases, the bodies of these ciswomen—incorporated into neoliberal logics and in the latter case clearly linked to gore capitalism and narcoculture—become entrepreneurs of their own selves. With their corporeality, they transmit and reaffirm certain stereotypes of hypersexualized femininity, reproducing sexist fantasies and the objectification of women, while at the same time embracing the logic of entrepreneurship and upending moralizing, traditional readings of aesthetics and the autonomous and profitable use of sexualized bodies that has been historically denied to women.

Of course, my analysis does not seek to celebrate the perpetuation of macho gender stereotypes that deposit desires for thingification on feminized bodies. On the contrary, I am looking to show how a practice that could be read in a simplistic way and connected solely to superficiality and the celebrity culture industry actually has many features that connect it with a wider political and economic cartography that speak to us of the restructuring of the concept of work, economic stability, profiteering off the body, the materialization of binary biopolitical ideals of gender and sexuality, the embodiment of cosmeticization disseminated by the mass media, and the physical safety of many women today.

<sup>29</sup> See “¿Qué son las buchonas? Emma Coronel y las mujeres del narco,” *Fuerza Informativa Azteca*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.tvazteca.com/aztecanoticias/notas/buchonas-quienes-son-mujeres-narco-emma-coronel-especiales>.

<sup>30</sup> Gloria Franco, “‘Las convenientes’, la dura competencia de ‘Las prepagos,’” *El Tiempo*, February 27, 2013, <https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-12623834>.

In the g-local context, these figures are paradoxical because they are both objects of desire and nodes of influence for populations that identify with them to different degrees, but they are also morally controversial because they are ferociously criticized from a classist perspective that bases its argument on a common sense educated by White, heterosexual, and bourgeois taste. Thus, the arguments against them intensify when the phenotype of the desired woman is not in line with the Caucasian model.

All of these investments in physical optimization are indicators of the power and influence held by erotic capital, since as Catherine Hakim argues, “A major reason why erotic capital has been overlooked is that the elite cannot monopolize it, so it is in their interest to marginalize it.”<sup>31</sup> Or even more so, “patriarchal ideologies have systematically trivialized women’s erotic capital to discourage women from capitalizing on it at men’s expense.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, if women charge for it, it is to the detriment of patriarchal power, since their economic, social, and symbolic rise provides freedom of action and movement, since it is proven that “there is a noticeable ten to twenty percent ‘beauty premium’ in earnings across the whole workforce.”<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, there is no questioning of neoliberal logic, and this gesture of feminine autonomy is re-absorbed within it.

This extreme intervention of the body connects these habits of the feminine body—which at first glance seem docile, submissive, and conservative—with a radical rupture with the intelligibility of the body as human, linking them to a kind of self-produced cyborgs, a new twist for the market in desire and sexual consumption.

66 It does not seem an exaggeration to make this argument, if we compare the images of Kim Kardashian, the Mexican *buchonas*, the Swedish Pixee Fox<sup>34</sup> (who has removed most of her ribs in an effort to imitate the body of Jessica Rabbit, the famous cartoon character), Valeria Lukyanova<sup>35</sup> (the self-described human Barbie) in Russia, and the next-generation sex dolls of the US company Abyss Creations (RealDolls) that already feature artificial intelligence, voice,

<sup>31</sup> Hakim, *Erotic Capital*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Hakim, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Hakim, 5.

<sup>34</sup> See Fox’s Instagram profile @pixeefox.

<sup>35</sup> See Lukyanova’s Instagram profile @valeria\_lukyanova21.

and movement in some parts of their bodies. These dolls embody and share the same prototype of a hypersexualized body that turns itself into a company.

On platforms like Instagram or YouTube, these women become trendsetters who, through hashtags, make their own images go viral, as they reap the benefits of sponsorship by a variety of companies looking to promote their products.

Thus the figure of the *buchonas*, celebrities like the Kardashians, and living Barbies call into question the power of money and the transformation of subjectivity that influences different populations, above all racialized groups. This transformation of public figures who create aspirational ideals through which their bodies represent and provide evidence of forms of entrepreneurship that include choosing the body itself as a type of work and company-of-the-self conceal the unpleasant consequences of surgeries and the negative aspects on physical and emotional health these can lead to, without mentioning the implicit risks involved, in the case of the Mexican *buchonas*, of having direct connections to criminals.

The aspiration for racial Whitening through surgery does not always realize its goal, and, on the contrary, the excessive use of these procedures feeds a scopic regime of intelligible bodies as post-human.

The expansion and standardization of the aesthetics and prosthetics of global gender with local retrofits based on cultural, racial, religious, and economic features provides us with a frame to think through the seizure and the transformation of the sexed, gendered, racialized, sexualized body into a form of mass media. This body is assembled according to new market needs and provides pointed messages about the political and relational use of materiality or the new plastic materialities produced in laboratories and operating rooms and their relationship to the system of bio/necro/psychopolitical management.<sup>36</sup> Within this system, freedom has been reduced to the freedom to make a body for oneself, not for one's life but for the market.

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<sup>36</sup> Sayak Valencia and Katia Sepúlveda, "Del fascinante fascismo a la fascinante violencia: Psico/Bio/Necro/Política y mercado gore," *Mitologías Hoy* 14 (December 2016): 75–91, <http://doi.org/10.5565/rev/mitologias.395>.

This regime of the production of the live connects biopolitics—as a technique for population management—and the maximization of all the processes associated with life with the regime of the “live.”<sup>37</sup> In this regime, what is maximized are the processes of exhibition of intimacy, the proliferation of images, and the production of reality through the visual mediation that makes use of the regime of sensibility and establishes a common sense and a scopic regime around the biopolitical ideals of body, sex, sexuality, value, merchandise, and entrepreneurship.

Before I close, it is worth mentioning that certain counteroffensives—which are also part of this media-morphosis (a play on the words “mass media” and “metamorphosis”)—use the tools of communication and distribution through social media to create dissent and to produce communities of meaning that are not only post-lexical (based solely on images), but also articulate critiques through the use of images and cultural mechanisms. All of this is in the search for a collectivity of critique and constant transformation that places agreements about reading in accordance with transfeminist social justice. Examples of this are technopolitics,<sup>38</sup> memepolitics, activism 2.0, digital folklore as represented by feminist memes, and hacking of images to produce dissent with other content. All of this shows us that even in the ultracosmetic space there are artifacts of anti-design that are not anchored in authorship, but rather flow in networks and drifts in which what is more important are the atmospheres and ecosystems that they produce through their many layers of meaning.

In addition to their semiotic message that has been media-morphosed, these speak to us of the need to create other categories that reflect this complexity, that is, to take into our own hands the possibility of constructing urgent and situated knowledge through self-organized epistemic creativity that shows us that creativity and the production of critical discourse do not always go hand in hand with grandiloquence or the Western certification of lexicons for the discursive, visual, auditory, sensory, and political revolt. In this revolt, the collective, collaborative, and interpersonal realms have a crucial role to play, as they open up

68

<sup>37</sup> Sayak Valencia, “Psicopolítica”; Sayak Valencia, “El régimen está (transmitiendo en vivo,” *Re-visiones* 9 (2019), <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7211193>.

<sup>38</sup> Javier Toret and José Pérez de Lama, “Devenir cyborg, era post-mediática y máquinas tecnopolíticas. Guattari en la sociedad red,” *Tecnopolítica*, April 15, 2013, <https://tecnopolitica.net/content/devenir-cyborg-era-postmediatica-y-maquinas-tecnopolitica-guattari-en-la-sociedad-red>.

possibilities for dissent and autonomy in a world that appears to not have other options beyond a collective *emotional anesthesia* in the face of this ultra-cosmetic capitalist conservative regime that broadcasts and profits from its atrocities live and in real time.

In the end, this is what I understand by the materialization of virtual networks: the inverse movement toward the body's spectralization that can be organized in social media but which materializes in collectivities and online and offline potentialities. This is because both worlds work in conjunction like a DNA chain that constructs contemporary subjectivity and reproduces certain government projects on populations through gender, sexuality, class, and race, etc.

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## Differential Body Politic beyond Pacified Techno-Futures

### Keywords

body, violence, racialization, digital coloniality, necropolitics, forensics, technologies of power

### Abstract

By critically analyzing the status and differentiation of bodies and their lives, the author expands the vision of governmentality beyond the West in order to define the body beyond the pacified techno-promises of their emancipation through fragmentation, calculability and programmability. By elaborating the nature, power, and promises of dominant digital technologies and technobodies, the author conceptualizes them in relation to the shift between bio- and necropolitics/power and in relation to violence, (digital) coloniality, and racialization to which bodies are exposed. It is about the normality of violence against the Other, also in relation to the principle of separation of virtual bodies and “surplus flesh,” which increases exponentially with technological development. The author seeks to understand how we have come to the point where techno-objects are humanized, given agency, while the body and life of the Other are dehumanized, deprived of any rights. The article contextualizes and re-politicizes the shifting relations between subject and object, particularly within our forensic contemporaneity.

## Diferencijalna politika telesa onkraj pacificiranih tehnoloških prihodnosti

71

### Ključne besede

telo, nasilje, rasizacija, digitalna kolonialnost, nekropolitika, forenzika, tehnologije oblasti

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## Povzetek

S kritično analizo statusa in razlikovanja teles in njihovih življenj avtorica širi pogled na vladnost onkraj Zahoda, da bi opredelila telo onkraj pacificiranih tehnoloških obljub o njegovi emancipaciji prek fragmentacije, izračunljivosti in programabilnosti. Z elabracijo narave, oblasti in obljub dominantnih digitalnih tehnologij in tehnoteles jih avtorica konceptualizira v odnosu do premika med bio- in nekropolitiko, bio- in nekromočjo ter v odnosu do nasilja, (digitalne) kolonialnosti in rasizacije, ki so jim ta telesa izpostavljena. Gre za normalnost nasilja nad Drugim, tudi v povezavi s principom ločevanja virtualnih teles in »odvečnega mesa«, ki s tehnološkim razvojem eksponentno narašča. Avtorica skuša razumeti, kako smo prišli do točke, ko so tehnobjekti počlovečeni, dobijo oblast, medtem ko sta telo in življenje Drugega dehumanizirana, prikrajšana za vse pravice. Članek kontekstualizira in repolitizira spreminjajoča se razmerja med subjektom in objektom, zlasti v naši forenzični sodobnosti.



In October 2017, Saudi Arabia became the first UN-recognized country to grant citizenship to an anthropomorphized robot named Sophia (“Wisdom”)—a status reserved for humans. Although Sophia is a robot, she enjoys more rights than women or foreign workers in this country where many people are virtually stateless and rightless.<sup>1</sup>

Just a few months earlier, the EU Parliament had proposed a set of regulations to regulate the use and creation of artificial intelligence, including the granting of “electronic personhood” (e-person status) on the most advanced machines to ensure their rights and obligations. Although this has not been accepted, discussions about their citizenship and personhood are very active. While considering rights of humanizing machines, refugees, migrants and unwanted locals are reduced to flesh and bones, deprived of any rights and left to die in the Mediterranean Sea and within the EU borders.

<sup>1</sup> On politics and economics of its (racial, gendered) design, performativity, and co-working of different regimes, see Jaana Parviainen and Mark Coeckelbergh, “The Political Choreography of the Sophia Robot: Beyond Robot Rights and Citizenship to Political Performances for the Social Robotics Market,” *AI and Society* 36 (September 2021): 715–24, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-01104-w>.

While the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially the young ones, are leaving their country to achieve minimum conditions for a life, one of the leading politicians, in the 2022 election campaign announced the plan to replace this void, these citizens, with robots.

We live in a time marked by the vision that everything is programmable, including the body and life. As Achille Mbembe writes, reason is also under scrutiny as it is increasingly replaced by instrumental (weaponized) rationality and as “the human brain is no longer the privileged location of reason. The human brain is being ‘downloaded’ into nano-machines.”<sup>2</sup>

Technoliberalism promotes the idea that technological development is leading us into a whole new phase of human emancipation (in which humans are liberated from the embodied constraints of race, gender, and class). We have reached a point where techno-objects are humanized and given agency, while the body and life of the Other is dehumanized, objectified, and deprived of any agency. The question is, how did we get to this point and where will it take us? How do today’s technological devices relate to control over our bodies, our lives, and our deaths? And finally, what about potentiality?

Aiming to critically analyze the status and differentiation of bodies and their lives, this text extends the vision of governmentality beyond the West to define the body beyond biopolitics and pacified techno-futures. Thus, the democratizing potentials of digital technologies and technobodies are critically elaborated to challenge both prosthetics and democracies as our necropolitical reality is produced by extreme violence, coloniality, and racialization (both micro and macro racism) to which bodies and technologies are subjected.

73

In the context of this elaboration, the text argues that outsourcing violence and the invisibilization of colonial divide and racial cleansing is a strategic move of necrocapitalism and that in order to understand its modus operandi, we should also recognize the specificities of the new forms of fascism and dehistoricization in our contemporaneity.

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<sup>2</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Bodies as Borders,” *From European South* 4 (2019): 14.

I argue that coloniality today is digital and that digital technologies and databases are the main technologies of power that control bodies and subjectivities, quantifying them and treating them as calculable objects. They are also differentiating bodies in order to cut off surplus flesh. Furthermore, I argue that databases and forensic contemporaneity should be conceptualized in relation to bio- and necropolitics/power.

My thesis is that necropolitical, database, and forensic turns are interconnected and are shifting relations between contemporary subjects and objects and their realities, while continuing to follow the logic of coloniality and racialization.

Finally, the text will address the potentiality that can also be seen in decolonial strategies of delinking, unlearning, counterforensics, and other critical practices.

### **The Body beyond Biopolitics and Pacified Techno-Futures: Violence, Colonial Divide, Racial Cleansing, and Its Invisibilization**

Understanding the status of life and body politics, its relations to new technologies and potentiality requires its contextualization in relation to governmentality and its three dimensions: rationalities, techniques, and subjects of government.<sup>3</sup>

When Michel Foucault introduced the concepts of biopolitics and biopower in the 1970s, he explained how and why the biopolitical state is able to exercise authority over the behavior of populations and individuals at every level in order to “foster life” or “disallow it to the point of death” (“to live and let die”). However, as several authors have recognized, the concept of biopolitics is not sufficient to understand the changes and current logic of global capitalist neoliberal governability and the deathscapes of the 21st century (Achille Mbembe, Marina Gržinić, Ann Laura Stoler, to name a few). In short, Foucault’s work did not directly theorize how colonialism is inherent in the process of biopower, past and present. It had to be repoliticized from the perspective of those who were not and are not counted as valuable enough for biopower. The first step, then, is to expand the vision of governmentality and sovereignty beyond the West.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 2000), 219–20.

Achille Mbembe, in his 2003 text “Necropolitics,” made this necessary connection by adding the concept of necropolitics to conceptualize the “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death”<sup>4</sup> that are related to the state of exception, the technologies of destruction, and the war machine of the global capitalist neoliberal world today. Expanded to include the concept of necrocapitalism, Gržinić elaborated further that the current logic is that of “let live and make die” and that racialization, exploitation, abandonment and the production of deathscapes, for the production of capital’s surplus value, are implemented not only in the Third and Second, but in the First (capitalist) World as well.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the necropolitical logic and measures of regulating life (bios) from the perspective of death (necro) form the core of global capitalist neoliberal governmentality.

Critically elaborating on the democratizing potential of digital technologies and cyborg bodies is also to question not only prosthetics but also democracies. Our necropolitical reality is determined by inherent violence, coloniality, and racialization to which bodies and technologies are exposed. They not only coexist, but rather collaborate with the Western concept of the peacefulness of democracy and global neoliberalism.

Mbembe has made an important contribution to this relation between violence and democracy with his work on what he calls the “inversion of democracy.”<sup>6</sup> Mbembe argues that the “process of pacification of customs which led to contemporary democracies is inseparable from the production and reproduction of violence elsewhere”<sup>7</sup> and that “the strength of modern democracies has always rested on their capacity to reinvent themselves and constantly invent, not only their form, but also their idea or concept’ while, on the other hand, this ‘was done

<sup>4</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

<sup>5</sup> See Marina Gržinić, “From Biopolitics to Necropolitics and the Institution of Contemporary Art,” *Pavilion: Journal for Politics and Culture* 14 (2010): 9–93.

<sup>6</sup> As Gržinić states, “Either we have democracy as a potential, or we have other forms of democracies that are inextricably linked to capitalism and violence.” Marina Gržinić, “Necropolitics by Achille Mbembe: Extended Essay on the Book,” *Filozofski vestnik* 42, no. 1 (2021): 228, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.42.1.10>.

<sup>7</sup> As summarized by Ricardo Pagliuso Regatieri and Patrícia da Silva Santos, “The Nocturnal Body of Democracies,” *Civitas* 22 (2022): 5–6, e41851, <https://doi.org/10.15448/1984-7289.2022.1.14851>.

at the cost of concealing their origins in violence.’”<sup>8</sup> More specifically, Mbembe situates the origins of the violence of contemporary democracy in what colonial capitalism created, providing an example of the “outsourcing of violence” to the colonies that occurred simultaneously with the pacification of Western societies. The colonies, as permanent spaces of exception, separated from the normal operations of civil life, were simultaneous with the metropolises (as sites of the rule of law), and their separation was based on racialization (which in this way contributed not only to economic growth but also to the pacification of civil life and the attribution of violence to the racialized body of the Other).

In addition, the colony was a site of experimentation with population management and technological developments that paved the way for violent tactics, warfare, and strategies of establishing camps outside of the colonies in the aftermath of colonialism.

The legacy of distancing from violence is also linked to numerous contemporary processes. For example, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s was perceived as happening not in the center of Europe but in the wild Balkans. In this case, the Balkan as a surplus of Europe stands for a separate and distanced Other. This continues today. When Russia launched an aggression against Ukraine in 2022, we kept hearing that the war in Ukraine was the first war on European territory since World War II (although the war crimes and genocide in the 1990s were the result of the turbo-nationalism and turbo-fascism that characterized the Greater Serbia project on the territory of the former Yugoslavia).

As Mbembe writes:

76

The contemporary era is, undeniably, one of separation, hate movements, hostility, and, above all, struggle against an enemy. Consequently, liberal democracies—already considerably leached by the forces of capital, technology, and militarism—are now being sucked into a colossal process of inversion.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016, Kindle), 30, quoted and translated in Regatieri and Santos, “Nocturnal Body of Democracies,” 6.

<sup>9</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 42.

Gradually replacing the proposition of universal equality, which, not so long ago, made it possible to contest substantial injustices, is the oftentimes violent separation of a “world without.” This is the “world of undesirables”: of Muslims encumbering the city; of Negroes and other strangers that one owes it to oneself to deport; of (supposed) terrorists that one tortures by oneself or by proxy; of Jews, so many of whom one regrets managed to escape the gas chambers; of migrants who flow in from everywhere; of refugees and all the shipwrecked, all the human wrecks whose bodies resemble piles of garbage that are hard to tell apart, and of the mass treatment of this human carrion, in its moldiness, its stench, and its rot.<sup>10</sup>

This principle of separation and enclosure, hatred and violence, has also penetrated the spaces of digital networks. Actually, as Mbembe notes, the violence has increased “hand in hand with an exponential acceleration of technological development and industrial innovation, the continuing digitalization of facts and things, and the almost universal advance of what might be called *electronic life and its double, or robotically adjusted life.*”<sup>11</sup>

Racism is one of the primary mechanisms of necropolitics.<sup>12</sup> Complementing the systematic and institutional macro-racism of state apparatuses, there is another, fragmented, everyday micro-racism that attaches itself to minute details and is used to stigmatize and dehumanize the Other. Mbembe refers to this micro-racism as nanoracism (“that narcotic brand of prejudice based on skin color that gets expressed in seemingly anodyne everyday gestures, often apropos of nothing”<sup>13</sup> that recompose micro- in macroracism). Both forms of racism, according to Mbembe, are rooted in the history of modern Western democracy and its associated colonialism, which requires systemic inequality to function and sustain itself. As Gržinić recognizes, there is a direct link of Mbembe’s concept of nanoracism with Margarida Mendes’ concept of the “molecular form of colonialism” and “miniaturization of colonialism.”<sup>14</sup> As Claudia Aradau and Tobias Blanke noted, while Mbembe’s concept of nanoracism has so far received little attention, it is very helpful for understanding racialization of the algorithm-

<sup>10</sup> Mbembe, 38–39.

<sup>11</sup> Achille Mbembe, “The Society of Enmity,” trans. Giovanni Menegalle, *Radical Philosophy* 200 (November/December 2016): 30.

<sup>12</sup> See Mbembe, *Necropolitics*; Gržinić, “Necropolitics by Achille Mbembe.”

<sup>13</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Gržinić, “Necropolitics by Achille Mbembe,” 233.

mic reason and “to render the racializing effects of algorithmic othering through anomaly detection. Nanoracism helps us understand the transformation of minute or banal details, a ‘small modification’ into a potentially dangerous other.”<sup>15</sup> As Gržinić explains: “The centrality of technology is once again revealed; digitalization brings the dimension of the nano-part [. . .] it goes hand in hand with nano-cameras and neo-fascism.”<sup>16</sup> Nanoracism might appear as insignificant but is potentially deadly.

As Gržinić elaborated, the coexistence of biopolitics and necropolitics has far-reaching consequences. Among them is that the status of nation-states (old nation-states, colonial and antisemite, all sovereign states are now *war-states* in control of military and war-structures) is transformed into *necropolitical states* (that decide who should live and who must die). On the other hand, as she notes, “the old Eastern European states, the former Communist states, are all just nation-states and nationalism is their depoliticized violent ideology.”<sup>17</sup>

This shift brings us to turbo-nationalist neoliberalism,<sup>18</sup> which has applied to Eastern Europe a specific format of fascism that Žarana Papić conceptualized as turbo-fascism<sup>19</sup> (“hegemonic postsocialist nationalisms in the Balkans in the 1990s, specifically in Serbia, i.e. national separatisms, chauvinist and racist exclusion or marginalization of (old and new) minority groups”).<sup>20</sup> As Papić described, “Turbo-fascism in fact demands and basically relies on this *culture of the normality of fascism* that had been structurally constituted well before all the killings in the wars started.”<sup>21</sup> Being raised on the “*normality of the evil* against the Other” in everyday life from the late eighties, turbo-fascism and Serb crimes

<sup>15</sup> Claudia Aradau and Tobias Blanke, *Algorithmic Reason: The New Government of Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 89.

<sup>16</sup> Gržinić, “*Necropolitics* by Achille Mbembe,” 234.

<sup>17</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Introduction: Burdened by the Past, Rethinking the Future: Eleven Theses on Memory, History, and Life,” in *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism and Turbo-Nationalism: Rethinking the Past for New Conviviality*, ed. Marina Gržinić, Jovita Pristovšek, and Sophie Uitz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2020), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Gržinić, 8.

<sup>19</sup> See Žarana Papić, “Europe after 1989: Ethnic Wars, the Fascisation of Social Life and Body Politics in Serbia,” in “The Body/Le corps/Der Körper,” ed. Marina Gržinić Mauhler, special issue, *Filozofski vestnik* 23, no. 2 (2002): 191–204.

<sup>20</sup> Gržinić, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>21</sup> Papić, “Europe after 1989,” 199.



in Bosnia and Herzegovina were, as Papić writes, “not just a repetition but a *reinforcement*, and continuation of the Fascist crimes of the past Second World War. It is [. . .] a very malignant *continuation* of the ‘reawakening of old ghosts.’”<sup>22</sup> Turbo-fascism and turbo-nationalist neoliberalism describe perfectly our political reality, not only in the 1990s, but also in the period after and today. Indeed, turbo-nationalism is on the rise throughout Europe, as is the normalization of violence against the body of the Other (be it a refugee, a migrant, or any other body that does not fit the role of a proper citizen).

This process is linked to other tactics of the same politics and power—and that is the erasure of history and the tactics of brutal and systematic dehistoricization, which in fact serves the necropolitics, the ongoing coloniality, and the growing fascist elements of politics that are at the core of governmentality both in the local context and in contemporary Europe. Gržinić wrote extensively and very precisely about how necrocapitalism profits from the forced erasure of the past producing more and more processes of dehistoricization and depoliticization. Whether it operates as a “pure trans-historical machine” (logic of neoliberal Western world) or through “embracing historicization as totalization” (former Eastern Europe embracing “turbohistoricization—turbo meaning a hyper-expedient, fast method of disposing of any other history than the nationalistic majoritarian one”)<sup>23</sup> the result in both cases, as Gržinić points out, is the suspension of history that works with intention to dispose any alternative within it.<sup>24</sup>

However, as Gržinić points, turbo-nationalism and turbo-fascism are not about forgetting the genocide but about its glorification, while postmodern fascism is about “pseudo-amnesia.”<sup>25</sup>

In all these processes, as well as in the politics of life and body and the politics of (in)visibility, technologies of power/knowledge play a crucial role.

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<sup>22</sup> Papić, 200.

<sup>23</sup> Gržinić, “Introduction,” 2–3.

<sup>24</sup> Gržinić, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Gržinić, 9. On the postmodern fascism, see Santiago López Petit, *La movilización global: Breve tratado para atacar la realidad* (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2009).

## Digital Technologies (as Prosthetics of Power) and the Separation of the Virtual Subject from the Surplus Flesh

More than two decades ago, Gržinić critically analyzed the specifics of the development of new media outside the First (capitalist) World, including the war zones in the former Yugoslavia. She accurately pointed out that at the end of the 20th century we had digital traces, but no food.<sup>26</sup> While the world was talking about the promise of virtual bodies floating around, we simultaneously and literally had material bodies struggling to survive, war crimes, mass killings, and hiding bodies in the middle of Europe.

Similar to Gržinić, in the summer of 1995, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker published a text in the summer of 1995 about two events that took place on the same weekend in July 1995—these two simultaneous events were the “shipping” of Windows 95 in Redmond, Washington, and the fall of UN safe zone Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As Krokers recognized in the summer of 1995 when critically analyzing the technological acceleration and hype in the West that coincided with the genocide in Bosnia, the effect of this hype was the bitter division of the world and human bodies into a privileged virtual flesh and what they bitterly called a surplus flesh.<sup>27</sup> More precisely, the result of this division was total indifference to the various forms of violence to which the surplus flesh or Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life”<sup>28</sup> is exposed and which are registered by all these brand new technological devices. At the end of the 20th century, Gržinić and Krokers have actually uncovered a clear colonial divide within a medium that was undoubtedly perceived as democratic.

80 Digital technologies, (digital) archives, and modern/capitalist/colonial systems have long been so intertwined that we can say that coloniality is now digital.<sup>29</sup> The digital mode of production is directly linked to global capitalism, capital/

<sup>26</sup> See Marina Gržinić, *U redu za virtualni kruh* (Zagreb: Meandar, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, “Windows on What?,” *CTheory*, August 24, 1995, <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14852>.

<sup>28</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> The term coloniality (which emerged in South America in the 1990s) identifies and describes the living legacy of colonialism in contemporary context that has survived formal colonialism and has been integrated into subsequent political and social orders.

power and democracy. Moreover, the coloniality of the concept of the “digital divide” supports the (re)production of new/old borders and divisions between the “developed” and the “developing” world, as well as the subjugation of certain bodies, knowledges, and cultures.<sup>30</sup>

Digital technologies are prostheses of power. As Mbembe has shown, we have arrived at this point through three simultaneous and interrelated “mega processes”: *early 21st-century corporate sovereignty* (“unprecedented consolidation of power and knowledge (political, financial, and technological) in the hands of private high-tech corporate entities whose sphere of action is not one country or one region, but the globe”);<sup>31</sup> *the computational speed regime* (technological escalation that has not only “redefined the nature of speed, unshackled markets and the economy” but is also continuously monitoring our behaviors in order to modify and optimize it);<sup>32</sup> and *the dialectics of entanglement and separation*.<sup>33</sup>

The computational regime,<sup>34</sup> or the digital mode of production<sup>35</sup> or rather what I call digital coloniality,<sup>36</sup> aim not only to enable the predictability of our behavior, but rather to turn the body and its life and all substances and phenomena into quantities. To convert them in technical means, to serialize them, and make them readable by computers. To capture, extract, accumulate, and automatically process data to identify, select, sort, classify, recombine, codify, to exclude, or to be excluded or used in manufacturing new types of services and devices that are sold for profit.<sup>37</sup> These technologies fragment the human body in order to re-compose it to neutralize risk legitimized by security reasons.

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<sup>30</sup> Dalida María Benfield, “Introductory Notes,” in “Decolonizing the Digital/Digital Decolonization,” ed. Dalida María Benfield, *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* 3, dossier 1 (September 2009), <https://globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/projects/wko-digital-1>.

<sup>31</sup> Mbembe, “Bodies as Borders,” 6.

<sup>32</sup> Mbembe, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Mbembe, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Mbembe, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production,” in *Regimes of Invisibility in Contemporary Art, Theory and Culture: Image, Racialization, History*, ed. Marina Gržinić, Aneta Stojnić, and Miško Šuvaković (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 13–28.

<sup>36</sup> Adla Isanović, *Regime of Digital Coloniality: Bosnian Forensic Contemporaneity* (Frankfurt am Main: CEEOL Press, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Mbembe, “Bodies as Borders,” 7.

Digital mode and databases facilitate this kind of management and control of people, from biometric data on refugees and migrants to extending borders into the human body, to forensic archives, financial data, and data mining. Digital technology is now the primary tool for controlling the human body and subjectivity. They “treat *life itself as computable object*.”<sup>38</sup> For such visions, every body is predictable. There is also a distinction between potentially risky bodies and those that are not.<sup>39</sup> We live in a state of exception and control is implemented through these technologies.

Concrete political practices and decisions are now determined by knowledge extracted from databases and even executed by semi-autonomous decision-making technologies. As Eyal Weizman writes, calculation as a technique of government is undertaken by the powerful and “‘on behalf’ of those it subjugates.”<sup>40</sup> Actually, this power is based “in the very ability to calculate” and to “act on these calculations.”<sup>41</sup>

Viewing the body as an archive/database represents a return to the reductionist understanding of life and is based on the assumption that knowledge is already stored within it, just waiting to be extracted through technologies. Technologies are transforming human life into “biometric life” and citizens into data migrants. We are witnessing “a gradually extending intertwining of individual physical characteristics with information systems—a process that has served to deepen faith in data as a means of risk management and faith in the body as a source of absolute identification.”<sup>42</sup> The individualization of bodies and lives that these technologies enable does not make them politically significant, but rather prepares them for programmed visions. Such a practice, which seeks the ultimate truth about the subject in the objectified properties of his or her body, which views the body as an archive, is reminiscent of old colonial concepts and practices.

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In his analysis of “human-machine-algorithmic apparatuses” and “death by metadata” that define drone-based military force and the practice of kill-

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<sup>38</sup> Mbembe, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Mbembe, 8–9.

<sup>40</sup> Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2012), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Weizman, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Mbembe, “Bodies as Borders,” 9–10.

ing-at-distance, Joseph Pugliese introduces the notion of the bioinformationalization of life,<sup>43</sup> meaning that living bodies are reduced to informational “patterns of life”<sup>44</sup> that can be algorithmically processed as killable targets or not.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to the propagated scientificity that legitimizes this, Pugliese defines this algorithmic process as an “art of *divination*”<sup>46</sup> that is not only inherently imprecise, but also subject to the racial and gender biases of its human architects.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, as Pugliese writes, the law is nowadays erasing the link between the executor and the executed, and robotic wars become normalized as part of civic life.<sup>48</sup> Analyzing what he calls the practice of *sparagmos* (Greek term for the ritualized dismemberment and dispersion of corpses), he refers to the art of killing “that dispersed and attenuated the role of any individual in the act of murder.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, this erasure of the human killer is occurring in our time simultaneously with the process of humanization of technology (i.e. AI).

Finally, in relating these digital technologies, databases, and knowledge production to biopolitics/biopower and necropolitics/necropower, I argue that if the archive is a biopolitical tool that plays a crucial role in governance, then databases should be conceptualized in terms of the shift between biopolitics and necropolitics, biopower and necropower.

Databases are the main power technology of global neoliberal governmentality. They are able to strategically capture, model, control, and secure the gestures, behaviors, and discourses of living beings by determining what we have been,

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<sup>43</sup> Joseph Pugliese, *Biopolitics of the More-than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 37.

<sup>44</sup> Pugliese, 178.

<sup>45</sup> Pugliese, 178–79.

<sup>46</sup> Pugliese, 184.

<sup>47</sup> Pugliese, 184–87. See also Michael J. Albert, review of *Biopolitics of the More-Than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence*, by Joseph Pugliese, *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 17, no. 3 (October 2021): 648–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872120970871c>.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Pugliese, “Prosthetics of Law and the Anomic Violence of Drones,” *Griffith Law Review* 20, no. 4 (2011): 931–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10383441.2011.10854726>, quoted in Raenette Taljaard, “A Critical Discourse Analysis of Drone Warfare and Drone Norm Life Cycles” (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2020), 161.

<sup>49</sup> Pugliese, *Biopolitics of the More-than-Human*, 37.

what we are no longer, and what we are becoming (operating at the intersections of power and knowledge relations).<sup>50</sup>

### **The Body within Necropolitical Forensic Contemporaneity and Shifting Relations between Subject and Object**

I have explained the work of the database and the digital power of identification, calculation, separation, and of ordering of various forms of life and the living body in general, but what about the death and devastation that necropolitics leaves in its wake?

As part of contextualizing the contemporary body-politics, I propose to acknowledge the “forensic turn.”<sup>51</sup> The reason for this is that, simultaneously with the shift between bio- and necropolitics and power in the wake of extreme violence, mass deaths, and atrocities, we have a development and prevailing usage of forensic methods and aesthetics through different “forums” (i.e., international humanitarian politics, law, but also art). They play a key role in the politics of visibility, the ways of seeing, knowing, and communicating, in ordering the visible. Political and legal decisions are based on them. Digital technologies and databases support this emergent sensibility attuned to material investigations.

There are numerous examples of the entanglement of death and body politics through forensics. For example, writing of forensics as commercial services, Silvia Posocco analyzes the case of transnational adoption and surrogacy that make explicit the relations between war, structural violence and crisis, and of global shifts in the organization and governance of reproduction.<sup>52</sup> Through this concrete contemporary example from the globalized borderlands between Guatemala and Mexico, she shows the “interrelatedness of vitality and death, and the nexus between biopolitics and necropolitics.”<sup>53</sup>

84

<sup>50</sup> I developed this thesis in *Regime of Digital Coloniality*.

<sup>51</sup> Eyal Weizman, “Introduction: Forensics,” in *Forensics: The Architecture of Public Truth*, ed. Forensic Architecture (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 9–32.

<sup>52</sup> Silvia Posocco, “Harvesting Life, Mining Death: Adoption, Surrogacy, and Forensics across Borders,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 8, no. 1 (2022): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v8i1.35071>.

<sup>53</sup> Posocco, 1.

In my 2021 book *The Regime of Digital Coloniality: Bosnian Forensic Contemporaneity*, I approached forensics through the analysis of other examples, including those related to Bosnian forensic contemporaneity. One of the reasons for this focus is that in the last 20–25 years, the forensic reality in Bosnia, the mass graves and related war crimes, and especially the bodies dismembered and dispersed through them, have played a crucial role in the development of forensic science and new forms and practices of knowledge production and visibility. If after Auschwitz we had the era of the witness (based on the voice of survivor), international courts established after the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda started the new one: the era of *the evidence of things*.

The thesis I argue is that necropolitical, digital/database, and the forensic shift are interrelated and that together they shape and change the relations between contemporary subjects and objects and their realities.

The rise of the politics and aesthetics of the database and forensics is changing the capacity of witnessing and transform the role of testimony. It is a shift from speaking subjects to “objects that speak,” to an object-oriented juridical culture. More precisely, the forensic sensibility seeks to displace human testimony (the fragility of the witness’s memory, the complexity of the subject, and the ambiguity of language) and turns instead to material science, probability calculations, and/or in some cases even (semi-)automated interpretative technologies, promoting objects, data, forensic practices and technologies as neutral, objective, and more trustworthy. In an age that celebrates automatization, algorithmic regimes and the integration of language with code, these technologies are promoted as the greatest authority.

To return to the Bosnian example, while in biopolitical archives the body is fragmented to be recomposed in a certain identity (to be programmable), in necropolitical turbo-fascistic (primary, secondary, even tertiary) mass graves the body is fragmented and dispersed in order never to be reconnected again. Its aim is complete erasure.

For this reason, mass graves and excavated bones have made the forensic method central to the postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina—its democracy, justice, and memory. In this way, digital technologies and forensics entered the political space. Forensic methods enabled the bones to recover their name and voice,

their identity, to make visible the body, what turbo-fascism wanted not only to eliminate, but to erase completely from concrete space, history and knowledge.

Forensics is seen as a methodology that allows the community to bury those who were tortured and executed and thrown and scattered in various mass graves, but also as crucial to the status of knowledge, visibility and potentiality.

It is important to emphasize that after the denial of genocide by Bosnian Serb politicians and Serb leaders, with continuous historical revisionisms, erasure of memory and erasure of history—as the last phase of genocide—today we are actually witnessing its glorification and celebration, rehabilitation of fascist ideologies. Turbonationalism and turbo-fascism are on the rise not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but, unfortunately, throughout Europe. Apart from the fact that we keep hearing “Never again!” Because of this palpable threat, the knowledge and visibility of the Bosnian forensic archives are crucial.

So the question that arises in the next, concluding section of this text is actually the question of potentiality.

### **Potentiality: On Resistance and Decoloniality**

As elaborated, there is an uneven distribution of life and death forms and their possibilities, accumulation, and dispossession as bodies and their data inhabit and move through contemporary contexts.

In addition to that, human bodies are increasingly embedded in complex techno-structures and techno-bodies. The new technologies inserted into the human body bring new complexities and have contributed significantly to theoretical discussions of “body drift” (Arthur Kroker) and the posthuman future. These notions of body drift are based on the ideas of posthumanism and the body of complexity brought about by the “data flesh” and the “regime of computation” (Katherine Hayles), “companionism” and hybridities of bodies (Donna Haraway), postmodernism and the contingent body (Judith Butler), etc.<sup>54</sup> However, what is missing from these visions of the multiplicity of bodies as they

86

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<sup>54</sup> See Arthur Kroker, *Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).



are lived today (bodies as gendered, sexualized, labored, disciplined, imagined, and technologically extended) is the racialized body. Questions about the future of the body in a society dominated by computers, challenged by the ideas of companion species, and this war regime in which we live, unfortunately seem to constantly avoid the question of the racialized body.

Human-machine-algorithmic prostheses are primarily available to those who fit the figure of the human (“unhumans” have no access to them). Moreover, how human-machine-algorithmic prosthetics, including robots, AI, and other digital technologies, serve as “slaves,” or “surrogates for human workers within a labor system entrenched in racial capitalism and patriarchy,”<sup>55</sup> is rarely addressed. As Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora show, both racialization, coloniality and patriarchy are fundamental to human-machine interactions and to the definition of the human. While simultaneously promising a revolutionary and bright future, “they replicate and reinforce racialized and gendered ideas about devalued work, exploitation, dispossession, and capitalist accumulation.”<sup>56</sup>

However, there is still the possibility of designing alternative models of technology that reject the racial and colonial logics that sustain the current order of things and master-slave relations.

First, as Arturo Escobar<sup>57</sup> and other decolonial theoreticians, including Walter D. Mignolo, urge, instead of universalist paradigms that define governmentality, meaning and interpretation within “Western cosmology” as “epistemic hegemony,”<sup>58</sup> we should move to *pluriverse*, plural ways of imagining life on the planet, alternatives coming from different geo-localities and body positions and, importantly, not to a new universalism.

<sup>55</sup> Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), blurb.

<sup>56</sup> Atanasoski and Vora, blurb.

<sup>57</sup> Arturo Escobar, “Sustainability: Design for the Pluriverse,” *Development* 54, no. 2 (June 2011): 137–40, <https://doi.org/10.1057/dev.2011.28>, quoted in Ahmed Ansari, “What Knowledge for the Decolonial Agenda in the Philosophy of Technology?,” in *Distributed*, ed. David Blamey and Brad Hylock (London: Open Editions, 2018), 185–97.

<sup>58</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “On Pluriversality,” *Walter Mignolo* (blog), October 20, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140629144207/http://waltermignolo.com/on-pluriversality/>.

Dominant science and technology policies are predominantly those of the old imperial powers and shaped by coloniality. They approach the Other as non-agents, or rather as spectators.<sup>59</sup> The same is true of digital technologies as prosthetics of power and the societies they serve. Other knowledge is muted—not recognized, unwanted, not asked for.<sup>60</sup> The idea that technologies must be imported from the developed West is part of the colonial narrative of bringing civilization and modernity to supposedly violent, backward geolocations and bodies (idea of humanizing racialized Others through imposition of technological solutions).

We need to find alternative ways to think about technology and technicity. We need to *delink*, to use Mignolo’s term, from the modernity and modern technicity and practice “thinking from the borders”<sup>61</sup>—to decolonize knowledge bodies, and the technologies linked to them.

As Mignolo and other decolonial scholars have shown, delinking does not mean disappearing. Rather, it means *reconnecting* and reappearing differently. It also means questioning the genealogies of technology in relation to modernity and beyond it, as something other than what it might be; questioning the role of technology in shaping our bodies, subjects, and subjectivities, repurposing it for new purposes, or shaping it differently—because technology has the potential to be both “poison and cure.”<sup>62</sup>

In analyzing the relationship between technology and coloniality, for example, Gertajn van Stam writes how “the I-Paradigm,” the individual, aligns with assessments of how Western culture and modernity “calls for the limiting of oneself in one’s private, egotistical ‘me’, with a tightly isolated circle where one

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<sup>59</sup> Gertajn van Stam, “Appropriation, Coloniality, and Digital Technology, Observations from Africa,” in *Proceedings of the 1st Virtual Conference on Implications of Information and Digital Technologies for Development (IFIP 9.4)*, ed. Silvia Masiero and Petter Nielsen (Oslo: Department of Informatics, University of Oslo, 2021), 712, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2108.10087>.

<sup>60</sup> Van Stam, “Appropriation,” 712.

<sup>61</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (De)Coloniality, Border Thinking and Epistemic Disobedience,” *Postcolonial Studies* 14, no. 3 (2011): 273–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2011.613105>.

<sup>62</sup> Ansari, “What Knowledge.” In reference to Derrida’s *pharmakon*.

can satisfy one's own urges and consumer whims."<sup>63</sup> What he highlights are individualism and universality as dominant paradigms guiding "contemporary renderings of digital technologies."<sup>64</sup> In the African context, on the other hand, the focus is rather on "aligned *being*"<sup>65</sup> and the "We-Paradigm—the paradigm of *interbeing*—[that] sees universalized, normative knowledge as external to the community, and is quick to link such knowledge to external belief systems, power and domination."<sup>66</sup> Interbeing is something that "exogenous digital technologies appear to have great difficulty recognizing."<sup>67</sup> In van Stam's words, the alternative is about shifting the paradigm from *individualism* to *community*—"with its social-personhood—issues of colonialism fall away" (since the "We-paradigm is incompatible with notions of supremacy, hegemony, and domination," as well as with colonialism).<sup>68</sup>

Speaking of strategies of resistance and potentiality, Ariella Azoulay, using photography as an example, suggests moving its origin from the realm of technologies to the realm of body politics. In her book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Azoulay shows that the institutions that make up our world, from archives and museums to notions of sovereignty and human rights to history itself, are all dependent on imperial ways of thinking, on the ordering of time, space, and politics.<sup>69</sup> She argues, however, that by practicing what she calls potential history, we can still reject the original violence and try to repair our broken world by looking at the past, the institutions, and their political tools that served to destroy people, objects, and whole worlds.

Paula Gaetano Adi applies Azoulay's "principle of reversibility," meaning that we go back to 1492 as the "marker of reversibility" and imagine that the origins

<sup>63</sup> Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Other*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Verso, 2008), cited in Van Stam, "Appropriation," 715.

<sup>64</sup> Van Stam, "Appropriation," 715.

<sup>65</sup> Van Stam, 789. "The single human being is understood as *a person*, a human entity within a social network of relationships with companions, ancestors, the living, and the yet to be born, as well as non-humans." (Van Stam, 715)

<sup>66</sup> Van Stam, 715.

<sup>67</sup> Van Stam, 715.

<sup>68</sup> Van Stam, 715.

<sup>69</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

of AI technology go back to the fifteenth century, not the Cold War.<sup>70</sup> Actually, we propose here to apply Azoulay’s work to think of other technologies that are “crucial in establishing a ‘differential body politics’ necessary to justify and reproduce imperial and destructive practices.”<sup>71</sup> *Unlearning* then “means to foreground the regime of imperial rights that made its emergence possible.”<sup>72</sup> In that sense, unlearning robots “means to foreground an imperial regime of forced labor, exploitation, rationalization, and instrumentality that made possible the emergence and flourishing of this technology.”<sup>73</sup>

What would it mean if we extended this method to databases, computers, and algorithms, tracing its origins back to the fifteenth century? Following Azoulay’s proposal, this would mean unlearning the origins of these technologies as told by their inventors, “capitalist investors, by statesmen and military forces, by those who claimed to own images of others,”<sup>74</sup> the data of others, “by those who invaded others’ world as part of extractive expeditions,”<sup>75</sup> both physical or virtual. Rethinking the origins, history, practices, and futures of robots, and exploring them as part of the governmentality in which we live and die today.

The origins of robots and AI lie, as Gaetano Adi writes, “when the category of the Human was invented”—that is, as suggested by Walter D. Mignolo, “when a selected community of humans of a given religion, in a continent called Europe and around fifteen century, self-defined themselves as humans in their praxis of living and being, and applied their self-definition to distinguish, classify and rank lesser humans.”<sup>76</sup> Their invention goes hand in hand with “the quest to digitally mimic human cognition [that] is no more than a new reincarnation of the imperial concept of the ‘Human as Man,’ who placed his capacity for rea-

<sup>70</sup> Paula Gaetano Adi, “Imagine Going on Strike: Intelligent Machines,” Verso Books (blog), March 3, 2022, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5269-imagine-going-on-strike-intelligent-machines>.

<sup>71</sup> Gaetano Adi.

<sup>72</sup> Azoulay, *Potential History*, quoted in Gaetano Adi, “Imagine Going on Strike.”

<sup>73</sup> Gaetano Adi, “Imagine Going on Strike.”

<sup>74</sup> Ariella Azoulay, “Toward the Abolition of Photography’s Imperial Rights,” in *Capitalism and the Camera*, ed. Kevin Coleman and Daniel James (London: Verso, 2021), 27.

<sup>75</sup> Azoulay, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “The Invention of the Human and the Three Pillars of the Colonial Matrix of Power,” in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 153–76, quoted also in Gaetano Adi, “Imagine Going on Strike.”

soning at the center in the self-definition of humanity” again, reinforcing racial and colonial logic while “also upholding the technoliberal project that promise revolutionary liberation from labor inequality, dispossession, differences, and exploitations.”<sup>77</sup>

In short, unlearning technologies of power means asking what it means to be a “Human,” it means “to expand and re-claim a definition of life and humanity offered by the possibilities of the artificial.” In that sense, the artificial could be seen as “our opportunity to not only renegotiate our future, but to re-claim the very conditions of humanity today.” That is why Gaetano Adi calls to consider robots as “*comrades* in the flight for repairing our shared world,” as a potentiality, “as a way out to capitalism, modernity and colonization; as our opportunity for rewinding and unlearning the imperial violence inflicted by digital technologies, artificial intelligence, data analysis, and machine learning.”<sup>78</sup>

Similarly, forensics and databases could be our companions in the struggle against racialization and violence, to create other visions of bodies and lives, to reclaim our world and our agency, to create new ways of seeing and open possibilities for “the future of conviviality.”<sup>79</sup> However, the struggle must not be limited to technologies themselves, but must be conducted in conjunction with other critical, denormalizing, and decolonizing practices.

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<sup>77</sup> Gaetano Adi, “Imagine Going on Strike.”

<sup>78</sup> Gaetano Adi.

<sup>79</sup> See “Project,” *Genealogy of Amnesia: Rethinking the Past for a New Future of Conviviality*, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, accessed August 5, 2023, <https://archiveofamnesia.akbild.ac.at/>.

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## Arbitrage on Life, *Differánce* of the Flesh: Racialization and Colonial Gender Formation as Algorithmic Innovation

### Keywords

life, derivatives, racialization, colonial gender formation, femicide, currency issuance

### Abstract

Who/what can be had at an ontological discount? By grasping the “anitrelationality” and “dismediation” of social relations by capital’s system of accounts, we discern not only the epistemicide and the expropriation of the cognitive-linguistic by capital, we shed new light on racial abstraction and gender abstraction. We grasp in “the coloniality of race and gender” the logistics of abstraction that at once code the social factory and give rise to what I have called the derivative condition—a condition in which the multiple forms of being, when dissolved in and as executable information, are functionalized as contingent claims on the value-form by means of “the world computer.” When we say that semiotic processes are metapragmatically put under economic and informatic pressure, we are also saying that the datafication expresses more than a simple analogy to the commodity form by assigning numbers to qualities. Rather, datafication appears as the preeminent mechanism for the commodification of sociality, and thus also encodes access to social currency. Femicide and the ritual violence of parastate cartels of “gore capitalism” can be seen as alternative means of issuing derivative (soft) currencies by imposing extrajudicial if equally violent systems of account.

95

## Arbitraža o življenju, *differánce* mesa: rasizacija in kolonialno oblikovanje spola kot algoritmična inovacija

### Ključne besede

življenje, derivati, rasizacija, kolonialno oblikovanje spola, femicid, izdajanje valut

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## Povzetek

Koga/kaj je mogoče dobiti z ontološkim popustom? Z razumevanjem »anirelacionalnosti« in »dismediacije« družbenih odnosov, ki jo izpeljuje sistem bilanc, ki ga določa kapital, ne razberemo le epistemicida in razlastitve kognitivno-jezikovnega, ki prihaja od kapitala, temveč tudi na novo osvetlimo rasno abstrakcijo in abstrakcijo spola. S »kolonialnostjo rase in spola« lahko pojasnimo logistiko abstrakcije, ki hkrati kodira družbeno tovarno in povzroča to, kar sem imenoval derivativno stanje – stanje, v katerem raznovrstne oblike bivanja, kadar so kakor izvršljive informacije in raztopljive vanje, s pomočjo »svetovnega računalnika« postanejo funkcionalne kot kontingentne zahteve do vrednostne oblike. Ko pravimo, da so semiotični procesi metapragmatično postavljeni pod ekonomski in informacijski pritisk, pravimo tudi, da datafikacija izraža več kot zgolj analogijo z blagovno formo s tem, da kvalitetam pripisuje številke. Nasprotno, datafikacija se kaže kot poglobitveni mehanizem za komodifikacijo družbenosti in tako kodira tudi dostop do družbene valute. Femicid in ritualno nasilje paradržavnih kartelov »gore kapitalizma« lahko torej razumemo kot zgolj drugačno obliko izdajanja izpeljanih finančnih instrumentov v (mehkih) valutah, a z uvedbo nelegalnih, čeprav enako nasilnih sistemov računanja.



In a brilliant essay entitled “Racial Capitalism,” Jodi Melamed argues that

we need a more apposite language and a better way to think about capital as a system of expropriating violence on collective life itself. To this end, one way to strengthen racial capitalism as an activist hermeneutic is to use it to name and analyze the production of social separateness—the disjoining or deactivating of relations between human beings (and humans and nature)—needed for capitalist expropriation to work. Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests a similar understanding of racial capitalism as a technology of *antirelationality* (a technology for reducing collective life to the relations that sustain neoliberal democratic capitalism) in her seminal definition of racism.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jodi Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 78, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076>. See also Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

The generalized production of antirelationality, or what Allen Feldman calls “dismediation” in *Archives of the Insensible*<sup>2</sup> entails, in political terms, the severing of horizontal connections among various social agents. This severance effects what I have elsewhere called read-write ontologies.<sup>3</sup> Marxism has understood this severance of individuals from their historical milieus as the dissolution of traditional societies and the subsequent separation; these ideas are detailed, for example, in the work of Georg Lukács as reification<sup>4</sup> or Guy Debord as spectacle.<sup>5</sup> Decolonial scholarship sees antirelationality as epistemicide.<sup>6</sup> The dissolution of prior ontologies, *their cultures and material cultures*, was not just a stage of primitive accumulation, but in many cases, genocide.

In semiotic terms, as Paul Kockelman details in “A Semiotic Ontology of the Commodity,” the dismediation organized by racial capital can be expressed as the delimiting of a “conditional relationality” generally operative in an open semiotic field of signifying practices by a “collateral relationality”<sup>7</sup> in which the value-form overdetermines the semiotic process and thus *the semiotic processing* of sociality. Melamed writes:

Although at first glance, dense interconnections seem antithetical to amputated social relations, it is capitalism’s particular feat to accomplish differentiation as dense networks and nodes of social separateness. Processes of differentiation and dominant comparative logics create “certainties” of discreteness, distinctness, and discontinuity—of discrete identities, distinct territorializations and sovereignties, and discontinuities between the political and the economic, the inter-

<sup>2</sup> Allen Feldman, *Archives of the Insensible: Of War, Photopolitics, and Dead Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Beller, *The World Computer: Derivative Conditions of Racial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Black and Red (Maitland: Bread and Circuses, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> See Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (June 2000): 215–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>; Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality,” *Cultural studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 449–514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Kockelman, “A Semiotic Ontology of the Commodity,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (June 2006): 89, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2006.16.1.076>.

nal and the external, and the valued and the devalued. In the drawing of the line that constitutes discrete entities and distinguishes between the valued and the devalued, people and situations are made incommensurable to one another as a disavowed condition of possibility for world-systems of profit and governance.<sup>8</sup>

Melamed's point about people being made incommensurable to one another identifies a peer to peer *dismediation*. People in our midst, across the tracks, across the border or at the podium, become incomprehensible in certain dimensions—and therefore *narratively* (and perhaps horizontally) incommensurable—incommensurable to one another in their/our social differences and in the violence of rupture that is at once entailed and disavowed in the creation of these differentiations. This epistemic incommensurability inherent in racism, sexism and the repression endemic to oppression, is effected not only through the violent reorganization of perception, apperception, institution, ideology, and infrastructure on the horizontal plane we might refer to as “the ground,” but through the concerted and disciplining curation of emergent forms of embodiment and, of course, labor. Nonetheless, and despite their re-encoding as anti-relational (or indeed by virtue of it), bodies *retain* their commensurability and are *rendered* commensurable in another system of account, that of capital and its capacities for horizontal organization through vertical integration. These myriad bodies, however, are assigned values and thus accounted for in the ratios determined by racial capitalist semiotics—its denomination of life, significance, meaning and worth in money as wages, value, price, but also as opportunity, power, claim on reality, risk, precarity, etc., all of which have their economic metrics.

By transforming relationality, racial capital “impose[s] a forgetting of interconnections, of viable relations, and of performances of collectivity that might nurture greater social wholeness, but are deactivated for capital accumulation and state management.”<sup>9</sup> Socially, conditional relationality becomes collateral relationality; the broadband pluripotentiality of meaningful interchange faces the *metapragmatic dissolution* of various forms of sociality to become *the condition of relations of liquidity preserving collateralization*. Who/what can be composed as an asset and by what means? Who/what can be had at a discount? By grasping the contrast between alternate ontological accounts of social relations and

98

<sup>8</sup> Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” 78–79.

<sup>9</sup> Melamed, 79.

the proletarianization of narrative and relational capacity by capital's system of accounts, we begin to discern not only the expropriation of the cognitive-linguistic by capital and the productive role of creatively navigating its forms of false consciousness. We also grasp the logistics of abstraction that at once code the social factory and give rise to what I have called the derivative condition—a condition in which the multiple forms of being, when dissolved in and as executable information, are functionalized as contingent claims on the value-form. To take just one example: your social graph indexes your credit-worthiness and thus what you will pay for money.

Skipping ahead analytically, the commodity-formation of living, where the logistics of price recursively reinscribes the emergent conditions of living across a multitude of social differences, leads to a double articulation of everyday life. This emergence is recursive and dialectical. At one and the same time we dream in the semantic life world and simultaneously in the capitalist one. We dream in “natural language” and the imaginaries of our communities, but also in and through a system of accounts that we will here identify as capitalist datafication and its calculus of costs, benefits and risk. For the moment, we will leave images out of the discussion and analytically collapse the essential functions of visual culture into the categories of perception and apperception. When we say that semiotic processes are metapragmatically put under economic and informatic pressure, we are also saying that datafication, as we increasingly know it under the regime of ubiquitous computing, which presumably indexes life informatically, expresses more than a simple analogy to the commodity form by assigning numbers to qualities. Rather, datafication is a mechanism that has become the preeminent mechanism of commodification.

Famously, the commodity has a use value comprised of its physical qualities and an exchange value in which there is “not an atom of matter.”<sup>10</sup> The exchange value is manifest in the “hieroglyph” that is the commodity, and, in Marxist thought is indexed in the field of exchange to “abstract universal labor time”—the *quantity* of “socially necessary labor time” inherent in each commodity. The price thus indicates the exchange rate of one commodity for another, by a comparison of the quantity of necessary labor inherent, on average in each commodity type. How-

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 138.

ever, 1) this comparison, if not made directly with the money commodity, is mediated by money, and 2) the “socially necessary labor time,” indexed by a quantity of money, is an abstraction that generalizes labor time (“abstract universal labor time”) from all the particulars of labor. This analysis of “socially necessary labor time” inherent in the commodity is the result of a background calculus that comes about in practice by averaging the costs of fungible options through the socio-metabolic exchange of commodities—and as Frederick A. Hayek brought out in his analysis of the “telecommunications”<sup>11</sup> of money (albeit without any reference to the specific importance of labor) creates a form of distributed but actionable knowledge regarding price and value derived from what people do in market transactions. More directly, the market produces knowledge from what happens when people spend their money, and it does so by collapsing a tremendous amount of information into the informatics of price.

A key socio-technical result of all these market exchanges is abbreviated and functionalized as a “real abstraction” by the specific commodity that becomes the general medium of exchange, namely, the money commodity.<sup>12</sup> Money is abstraction in practice. Once a particular commodity achieves this status, be it shells, gold, or fiat money, it is capable of notional and real pricing in its function as “the money-commodity” in “the motley mosaic” of the relative values available for exchange. The value of all commodities can now be organized by means of comparison with the single standard, money. Money then indicates the ratios of abstract universal labor time between one commodity and others as price ratios denominated in the commodity serving as money. The money commodity, or simply money, we must remember, is that particular commodity (also procured through labor) which rises to the status of general equivalent. In simple circulation we exchange one concretized form of socially necessary labor time for another, money for commodity, commodity for money.

100

Anticipating further discussion of what becomes for us the key term “informatic labor,” we add here that what is being quantified in the exchange valuation of the commodity is the value of abstract labor time necessary to change the state

<sup>11</sup> Frederick A. Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” in *Knowledge Management and Organizational Design*, ed. Paul S. Myers (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996), 7–15.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020).

of the matter in question from that of its inputs plus the value of these inputs. State changes, whether in everyday matter, cognitive conditions, or data sets platformed on discrete state machines, become cyphers of value. The values of commodities are discerned, abstracted, and thus measured in terms of material state changes indexed to labor time.<sup>13</sup> How much labor is required to produce a particular change of state in a particular form of matter? Though as Marx wrote, “there is not an ounce of matter in exchange value,” exchange value is a social assessment of the abstract universal labor time necessary to create the material state changes that are legible. The price, then, is a partial decryption of the hieroglyphics of the commodity, a processing of the manner in which matter has been informed, a calculation about the general cost of accessing such a materialized state from a particular place and time, it is a read of a commodity’s *in-form-ation*.<sup>14</sup>

We thus also observe from this exploration of the ontological transformation of the status of objects by money, that a Commodity C is composed of Raw Materials R plus Labor time L.  $C = R + L$ . However, the raw materials in a current phase of production were very likely themselves purchased as commodities composed of labor and raw materials—as with lumber purchased to build a table, or a motherboard to build a computer. Thus, “raw materials” can be seen as implying regressions ( $R' = R + L$ ) to some prior state, which in the last analysis would be a pre-infrastructure and precapitalist state whose historical origin has all but disappeared and whose costs have been layered into current commodity production and amortized as a series of cycles of capital and, at the extreme, epochs of capitalism. “Nature” is thus the limit case to capital’s representational horizon, and as such beyond its purview.

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<sup>13</sup> We note for future consideration that just as Moishe Postone has shown that the expansion of capitalism and the generalization of the commodity form (and its prices) results in the abstraction and we should say occupation and indeed colonization of time, so too will the regime of informatic labor and computation, generate its temporal effects—new forms of non-synchronicity, local run times, repetition, non-linear times, and even silos of time. See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> We further note here that this read is always from sometime, somewhere, and is therefore in flux, which is to say volatile, which is to say derivative. A strike price on a volatility spread of prices moving around a value, is not the value itself, it is a contingent claim on that underlier.

Nonetheless, capital builds itself upon precapitalist and precolonial materialities that not only persist but inform its substrate. Atoms and electron bonds pre-exist the modern period, of course, but their changes of state as value can be indexed to the history of racial capitalist colonization. The history of capitalism is thus presupposed and collapsed in the sale of each and every commodity when paid for “in full,” wherein all prior costs have been amortized, that is to say accounted for so far as capital’s ledgers are concerned, going all the way back to deep time. The costs borne during a history of production but not paid for (in wages or reparations) have been externalized as suffering and the proceeds from this violent externalization reaped as profit. Capital, as Robert Meister puts it, compounds injustice.<sup>15</sup>

What those costs were, how they were configured, and who paid (bodily, socially, ecologically, epistemologically) is a topic we cannot avoid and must continuously bear in mind. This disavowed history is all the more important because the value of the past injustices of racial capitalism is compounded by the fact that capital uses the proceeds to finance further cycles of injustice down to the present and into the future.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the legibility of commodities in the calculus of value is inseparable from the (il)legibility of people and peoples in the same calculus. In the wake of colonialism and of chattel slavery—social and institutional techniques of value extraction whose value to capital has been compounded in the present arrangements—it becomes imperative to view the history of capital as a ceaseless arbitrage on the cost of labor at the expense of life. The cheapening of labor is a cheapening of life for the benefit of capital and that of the owners of capital. From the standpoint of capital, the cheapening of life is also a peculiar type of innovation.

102

Capitalism is an exercise in efficient management (“optimization”) that includes not simply technical development but the driving down of the cost of labor per unit commodity: one definition of efficiency means less labor to create or accomplish the same thing. Driving down the cost of labor to combat the falling rate of profit is thus also a ceaseless driving down of the existential status of people, below a particular socially negotiated average in a society—negotiated,

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Meister, “Justice as an Option,” in *Justice Is an Option: A Democratic Theory of Finance for the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 109–36.

<sup>16</sup> Meister.



it should be said through custom yes, but also resistance, refusal and doing otherwise. Decreasing the cost of labor per unit commodity is accomplished in part by placing differentiable others partially or completely outside “society”—on the margins, on the periphery, across the border, in the ghetto, the shtetl, the reservation, the camp, the colony, the domestic space, the whorehouse, or the prison; in “female” bodies, “brown” bodies, “native” bodies, “disabled” bodies, “alien” bodies. The socially negotiated price of labor depends on the socially negotiated price of laborers subject to social differentiation. The equation of decreasing labor costs per unit commodity that comes with increases in the technological efficiency of capital is balanced not by every member of society having access to proportionally more wealth in the form of more commodities as their just share of the social product. Rather, the falling rate of profit that drives efficiency actually decreases the share of social wealth accessible to wage workers relative to that accessible to capital. Those whose wages are discounted access an even smaller proportion of the social product as they are induced to give a larger proportion of their working day to capital for the same subsistence wage, thereby producing wealth for capital and poverty for themselves. This arbitrage on the cost of labor is an arbitrage on life.

Capital offsets the falling rate of profit by taking an increasingly large portion of the working day as surplus labor (and thus paying for a smaller portion of the working day). This is standard issue Marxism. The falling rate of profit as an unavoidable, i.e., mathematical, consequence of the fundamental law of capital expansion demands constant innovation. Innovation can take many forms, but as noted above, all are aimed at lowering the cost of labor per unit commodity and thus engage in market arbitrage: building the same thing for less while being able to sell it at the same price, or in abstract terms, harvesting value at a lower cost to capital due to lag times in the generalization of (the technical knowledge of) innovations. This driving down of the cost of labor, necessitated by the falling rate of profit, along with the struggle among the many capitalists for higher rates of surplus value relative to the general rate of return on capital, required and requires a method of discounting the cost of labor which, without the romantic trappings, simply means increases in “efficiency.” Efficiency here consists not only in making things “smarter” (cheaper) with “labor-saving” devices, but also in forcibly discounting people, their communities, their material worlds, their lands, biospheres and histories, their ontologies and lives. For capital, smarter here means discounted costs, by any means. While some of this

passing on the costs of production to workers and ecosystems has been referred to as the creation of “externalities,” we want to note here the monetary, informatic and narrative-semantic implications of “discounting.” We further note that the expansion of capital, whether as technical innovation or as the discounting of people’s claims on the social product and thus on reality, means precisely colonization and imperialism (this observation is, or should be, uncontroversial given the history of capital expansion), and thus, as we will explore further, means also racism, sexism, and war. Racial capitalism is a planetary endeavor, and racism, sexism, and warfare are fundamental tools of innovation, of revolutionizing the productive forces. Racial capitalism, or what I sometimes call *computational racial capitalism*, endeavors to organize all aspects of the known and knowable world in accord with the requisites of the value-form.

In what follows, we focus on the central roles of social differentiation and/as computing, *a computing without which racial capitalism can no longer exist*. But what is to be eliminated? Where to begin?

### **An Expanded Consideration of “Algorithms of Oppression” (Nobel)**

We can glimpse the scale, focus, and scope of the world-historical endeavor that culminates in converting the digits of the invisible hand to those of the AI of a virtual machine that I have hypostasized as “the world computer,”<sup>17</sup> by turning to the work of Aníbal Quijano. Quijano’s work stands alongside Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism*,<sup>18</sup> and in this context can be seen to supplement Robinson’s deduction of the concept “racial capitalism” that inspires the work of Melamed and so many others. It helps here to take up the challenge posed by Melamed to sharpen our understanding of the forms of violence against collective and racialized life that are constitutive of racial capitalism. For Quijano, “the idea of race” that lays the groundwork for both the colonial and post-colonial eras, is an “idea” emerging from historical and material innovation. Reflecting on the historical moment of its writing, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Social Classification” opens as follows:

<sup>17</sup> Beller, *World Computer*.

<sup>18</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

What is termed globalization is the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism as new global powers. One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism. The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established.<sup>19</sup>

For Quijano, “Eurocentrism,” “the idea of race,” and elaborate, discriminatory social classification are part of colonialism, and more than that, these innovations outlast the historical phase generally understood as colonialism. This “new model of power,” which would indeed outlast the planetary cancer of the so-called colonial world, embarked on “the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of ‘race,’ a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others.”<sup>20</sup> Quijano says, “On this basis, the population of America, and later the world, was classified within the new model of power.”<sup>21</sup> The accompanying process “involved the constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources and products.”<sup>22</sup>

In laying out the form and terms of this new structure for the control of labor and its resources and products, Quijano writes:

Social relations founded on the category of race produced new historical social identities in the Americas—Indians, blacks, and mestizos—and redefined others. Terms such as *Spanish* and *Portuguese* and, much later, *European*, which had until then indicated only geographic origin or country of origin, acquired from then on a racial connotation in reference to the new identities. Insofar as the social re-

<sup>19</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Social Classification,” trans. Michael Ennis, in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, ed. Marel Moraña, Enrique D. Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 181.

<sup>20</sup> Quijano, 182.

<sup>21</sup> Quijano, 182.

<sup>22</sup> Quijano, 182.

lations that were being configured were relations of domination, such identities were considered constitutive of the hierarchies, place and corresponding social roles, and consequently of the model of colonial domination that was being imposed. In other words, race and racial identity were established as instruments of basic social classification.<sup>23</sup>

It should be remembered that the role of these classifications was the control of labor, and thus also, the organization of capital. It was, in short, an innovation, a revolutionizing of the productive forces, a violence that had ideological and practical dimensions for the colonizers. Quijano tells us that “as time went by, the colonizers codified the phenotypic trait of the colonized as color, and they assumed it as the emblematic characteristic of racial category.”<sup>24</sup> “In this way, race became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of world population into ranks, places and roles in the new society’s structure of power.”<sup>25</sup> Thus there emerges “a systemic racial division of labor.”<sup>26</sup>

This “racial division of labor” is intensified by the organizational power of money and its withholding. Or rather we could say that monetary organization and racial differentiation co-evolved. With the emergence of a racial (racializing and racialized) division of labor we also find “a quasi-exclusive association of whiteness with wages, and of course, with the high-order positions in the colonial administration. Thus each form of labor control was associated with a particular race.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, “Europeans associated nonpaid or nonwaged labor with the dominated races because they were ‘inferior’ races. The vast genocide of the Indians in the first decades of colonization was not caused principally by the violence of the conquest or by the plagues the conquistadors brought, but because so many American Indians were used as disposable manual labor and forced to work until death.”<sup>28</sup>

Money, it seems, confers not only agency but also recognition for certain forms of embodiment at the expense of others. American Indians were imagined by

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<sup>23</sup> Quijano, 182.

<sup>24</sup> Quijano, 182.

<sup>25</sup> Quijano, 183.

<sup>26</sup> Quijano, 184.

<sup>27</sup> Quijano, 185.

<sup>28</sup> Quijano, 186.

their colonizers as only the means to value and never as recipients of value, and as Tzvetan Todorov<sup>29</sup> argues, the genocide in the Americas was not an atavistic holdover from the Dark Ages, but the first thoroughly modern historical occurrence: a genocide in which the abstraction power of the value form thoroughly and instrumentally organized apperception by removing the “Indian” from the colonizer’s capacity for mutual recognition. It is as if money not only secures Whiteness but confers it. With this “whiteness as value,”<sup>30</sup> we might confirm Frantz Fanon’s observation that at first the colonized man only wants to kill his colonizer, live in his house and sleep with his wife.<sup>31</sup> There is a burgeoning model of agency that is simultaneously linked to wealth and race; the semantic fields and imaginaries that these weave through practice are themselves colonial. We cannot emphasize enough that money and its calculus created a kind of presence in the social accounting that is to be associated with not only rights and existence, but also with “the human community” and “humanity.” The power of money to confer humanity (and Whiteness, by the very denial of it to others) became more generalized by means of racial abstraction, and the violence inherent in making these abstractions “real.” From this we can (also) infer that in this worldview, which, Quijano persuasively argues, was becoming generalized, and thus “universal,” humanity” has been de facto, i.e., by historical material definition, “White.” And Whiteness, no less cooked up than this so-called humanity, perceived itself to be, as it were, at once a sign of it and one with it. Those from whom humanity (and wages) were withheld were *made* unworthy—violently so—while this self-same violence was used to produce Whiteness in its beneficent humanity, megalomania and narcissism in a Eurocentered world-view. Money, then, conferred belonging and was, in fact, a form of social know-how and socio-semiotics—a medium of practical knowledge that, on the one hand, conferred social currency that included access to social product, recognition, and belonging, and, on the other made its holder a contractual party to unspeakable violence—the unspeakable, irredeemable, and disavowed vio-

<sup>29</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Neferti X. M. Tadiar, “In the Face of Whiteness as Value: Fall-Outs of Metropolitan Humanness,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 143–82, <https://doi.org/10.1215/quiparle.13.2.143>.

<sup>31</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

lence constituent of “the human community,” about which we could correctly remark that there is, in fact, no such thing and that there never has been.

Today, hopefully, we already know versions of this demoralizing story from Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Enrique Dussel, and many others.<sup>32</sup> I have little to add, except perhaps a perspective on what has become of all this. Racialization in all its brutality, is also a form of calculus and now computing, a means to the assignation of number and value to life. This quantification is of course, affective, experiential, contestable, contested. Lived abstraction.

Quijano remarks that along with such material violence dedicated to the advance of what would become the economics and culture of Humanism, the colonizers also waged epistemic war as they

repressed as much as possible the colonized forms of knowledge production, models of the production of meaning, symbolic universe, and models of expression and of objectification and subjectivity. As is well known, repression in this field was most violent, profound, and long-lasting among the Indians of Ibero-America, who were condemned to be an illiterate peasant subculture stripped of their objectified intellectual legacy. Something equivalent happened in Africa. Doubtless, the repression was much less intense in Asia, where an important part of the history of the intellectual written legacy has been preserved. And it was precisely such epistemic suppression that gave origin to the category “Orient.” [ . . . ] In different ways in each case, the Europeans forced the colonized to learn the dominant culture in any way that would be useful to the reproduction of domination, whether in the field of technology and material activity or of subjectivity, especially Judeo-Christian religiosity. All of those turbulent processes involved a long period of the colonization of cognitive perspectives, modes of producing and

<sup>32</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>; Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures),” *Boundary 2* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 65–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/303341>.

giving meaning, the results of material existence, the imaginary, the universe of intersubjective relations with the world: in short, colonization of the culture.<sup>33</sup>

We should note at this point that the coloniality of power means epistemicide. The simultaneous emergence of Eurocentered capitalism with racial classification entails not only acts of violence that were unprecedented in their intensity and scale, but also acts of violence aimed at controlling labor. They therefore sought their institutionalization through the colonization of culture and, as mentioned at the outset, the conscription of the socio-semiotic as well as practical capacities of Indigenous and then enslaved populations. Thus, we see a radical divergence between the system of accounts that organizes racial capitalism, and the many systems accountable in and to the various ontologies, cosmologies, structures of feeling and ways of life antecedent to and yet persistent in forms of temporality and fugitive survival contemporary with racial capitalism. With *Orientalism*, Edward Said reveals the violence of this wealth appropriation/making as one with the violence of culture appropriation/making in Europe, both in the form of the “West” and of its constitutive fetish, the “Orient,” and so much of what emerges between.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, Mark Driscoll identifies “white superpredation” as a modality designed by Whites to put the Chinese “entirely at their disposal” in both a financial and ecological “CO<sub>2</sub>loniality.”<sup>35</sup> It would certainly be a major analytical and political error to understand these racial orders, which are also forms of geopolitical, cultural and ecological coordination, simply as the sovereign imposition of an imperial monologue or monoculture that held sway as if without struggle. Nonetheless, we may observe that the struggle to impose classification on the planet is a thoroughgoing affair occupying a superabundance of energy. The social practices entailed in the installation of an episteme, are also forms of economic practice and ecology that will come to be called biopolitics and later necropolitics.

109

Quijano notes the systemic coordination endemic to this model of power required its institutionalization as well as “the control of intersubjectivity.”<sup>36</sup> We begin to see that Kockelman’s account of the displacement of “conditional rela-

<sup>33</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality of Power,” 189.

<sup>34</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

<sup>35</sup> Mark W. Driscoll, *The Whites Are Enemies of Heaven: Climate Caucasianism and Asian Ecological Protection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality of Power,” 193.

tionality” by “collateral relationality” in semiosis, mentioned above as an overdetermination of semiotic function by the exigencies of capital-logic (derived by Kockelman from neo-liberal NGO-colonialism in an ecological tourism site in Guatemala), is a world historical project of unprecedented violence. At minimum, it registers the existential threat of insolvency under a capitalist money economy on meaning and world-making. But we also should register that collateral relationality, understood as a feature of racial capitalism gives rise to what Hortense Spillers has called and called out as “an American grammar.”<sup>37</sup> This grammar depends on and is founded in the reduction of enslaved Africans to “flesh” during the middle passage, and on the violent epistemic destruction that accompanied the physical and psychic terror of plantation slavery along with the national and racist disavowal of this history. Referring to the coloniality of race, Quijano shows, that “this model of global power [which includes the epistemic and semiotic functions under discussion here] is the first that covers the entire population of the planet” and that “humanity in its totality constitutes today the first historically known global *world-system*, not only a world.”<sup>38</sup>

## The Program

Regarding this “first historically known global *world-system*,” which we endeavor to show here has morphed into the operating system of a virtual machine, we must also say, if race, then gender and sexuality. In “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” María Lugones, in critical dialogue with and against Quijano among others, offers “a framework to begin thinking about heterosexism as a key part of how gender fuses with race in the operations of colonial power.”<sup>39</sup> Lugones further specifies, “Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a *new gender system* that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers.”<sup>40</sup> Taking Quijano’s understanding of gen-

110

<sup>37</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

<sup>38</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality of Power,” 193.

<sup>39</sup> María Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” in “Writing Against Heterosexism,” ed. Joan Callahan, Bonnie Mann, and Sara Ruddick, special issue, *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2007.tb01156.x>.

<sup>40</sup> Lugones, 186; italics added.



der as “too narrow and overly biologized,”<sup>41</sup> Lugones argues that, “the heterosexualist patriarchy has been an ahistorical framework of analysis” and seeks “an understanding of gender that sees it as a colonial concept.”<sup>42</sup> She asks:

How do we understand heterosexuality not merely as normative but as consistently perverse when violently exercised across the colonial modern gender system so as to construct a worldwide system of power? How do we come to understand the very meaning of heterosexualism as tied to a persistently violent domination that marks the flesh multiply by accessing the bodies of the unfree in differential patterns devised to constitute them as the tortured materiality of power?<sup>43</sup>

The question concerning “the tortured materiality of power” is made more complex along axes of imposed differentiation because Lugones also pursues

the indifference that men, but more important to our struggles, men who have been racialized as inferior, exhibit to the systematic violences inflicted upon women of color. [. . .] Feminists of color have made clear what is revealed in terms of violent domination and exploitation once the epistemological perspective focuses on the intersection of these categories. But that has not seemed sufficient to arouse in those men who have themselves been targets of violent domination and exploitation any recognition of their complicity or collaboration with the violent domination of women of color. In particular, theorizing global domination continues to proceed as if no betrayals or collaboration of this sort need to be acknowledged and resisted.<sup>44</sup>

Lugones puts this forcefully, not just as in intervention in the critical moment in which she writes (namely 2007), but as a provocation to rethink the historiography and theory of postcolonial accounts of colonization, where complicity and betrayal of “women of color” have offered payoffs to those who would be men. Lugones wants to make visible “the instrumentality of the colonial/modern gender system” and “to reject this gender system as we perform a transformation of communal relations.”<sup>45</sup> For it is precisely the dismediation and indeed shat-

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<sup>41</sup> Lugones, 193.

<sup>42</sup> Lugones, 187.

<sup>43</sup> Lugones, 187–88.

<sup>44</sup> Lugones, 188.

<sup>45</sup> Lugones, 189.

tering of community that colonization accomplishes by imposing its particular framework of race and gender.

Lugones' argument, like Quijano's, is too complex and nuanced to do it full justice here. For the purposes of this essay however, it is important to note that she cites the argument in *The Invention of Women* by Oyéronké Oyewùmí that "gender was not an organizing principle in Yoruba society prior to colonization by the West."<sup>46</sup> Quoting further we find:

For females, colonization was a twofold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination. The creation of "women" as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was unthinkable for the colonial government to recognize female leaders among the peoples they colonized.<sup>47</sup>

Lugones adds that Oyewùmí "notes that the introduction of Western gender system was accepted by Yoruba males, who thus colluded with the inferiorization of ana[tomical]females."<sup>48</sup>

In detailing what in effect were and are the wages of masculinity, Lugones also considers the work of Paula Gunn Allen, who "characterizes many Native American tribes as gynocratic" and "emphasizes the centrality of the spiritual in all aspects of Indian life and thus a very different intersubjectivity from within which knowledge is produced than that of the coloniality of knowledge in modernity."<sup>49</sup> According to Lugones, Allen sees the destruction of gynocracies as

crucial to the "decimation of populations through starvation, disease, and disruption of all social, spiritual, and economic structures." The program of degynocratization requires impressive "image and information control." Thus "recasting archaic tribal versions of tribal history, customs, institutions and the oral tradition increases the likelihood that the patriarchal revisionist versions of tribal life,

112

<sup>46</sup> Oyéronké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 31, quoted in Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 196.

<sup>47</sup> Oyewùmí, *Invention of Women*, 124, quoted in Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 197.

<sup>48</sup> Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 197.

<sup>49</sup> Lugones, 198.

skewed or simply made up by patriarchal non-Indians and patriarchalized Indians, will be incorporated into the spiritual and popular traditions of the tribes.<sup>50</sup>

Thus we see that “*information control*” is a kind of encoding that is also a form of *programming*, and that codification not only containerizes its referent as something like an underlier, but by indexing it constitutes, addresses and indeed instructs agents who will interpret the codes that signify on her/it. I dwell here on Quijano and Lugones at such length because together their work provides an opportunity to observe the coloniality of power working through and as the imposition of a framework of race and gender. This framework invests power and divests particular people(s) of power in accord with the requisites of codes of capital expansion. This claim is not offered to exhaust the affective dimensions of either the hatred and fear with which colonialism proceeds, or to foreclose knowledge of the suffering and resistance that colonization and its aftermath produces. John Keene’s *Counternarratives* and Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts” come to mind as exemplary openings onto the presence and abiding struggle of those subject to the of the epistemic colonizing and racializing foreclosure endemic to racial capitalism.<sup>51</sup>

Even if we are inclined to doubt the totalizing accounts rendered here in the powerful work of Quijano and Lugones, which I must confess, I am, my drift here is that we attend to the organizing principles and recognize that they project an idealization of global capitalist power: an idealization that I want to bring out as the ideal *program* of racial capitalism and its calculus.

Lugones’ follow-up to “Heterosexism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” the essay “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” states:

I understand the dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human as the central dichotomy of colonial modernity. Beginning with the colonization of the Americas and the Caribbean, a hierarchical dichotomous distinction between human and nonhuman was imposed on the colonized in the ser-

<sup>50</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 42, quoted in Lugones, “Heterosexualism,” 199.

<sup>51</sup> See John Keene, *Counternarratives* (New York: New Directions, 2016); Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.

vice of Western man. It was accompanied by other dichotomous hierarchical distinctions, among them that between men and women. This distinction became a mark of the human and a mark of civilization. Only the civilized are men or women. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species—as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild. [. . .] The behaviors of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual and sinful. [. . .] The civilizing transformation justified the colonization of memory and thus of people’s senses of self, of intersubjective relation, of their relation to the spirit world, to land, to the very fabric of their conception of reality, identity and social, ecological and cosmological organization. [. . .] In using the term *coloniality* I mean to name not just a classification of people in terms of the coloniality of power and gender, but also the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization that fits them for the classification, the process of subjectification, the attempt to turn the colonized into less than human beings.<sup>52</sup>

This universal reduction, here violently and as it were universally imposed by the coloniality of race and gender, is the central feature of the program of racial capitalism and of its dialectical leap into computational racial capitalism. This reduction, we could say with Spillers analysis of the middle passage in mind, *to flesh*, is ideational and socio-semiotic in as much as it produces social death. But we cannot emphasize enough that such sensibility-defying reduction is executed and imposed through cascading acts of ongoing violence—violence whose avalanche brings (some of) us into the present. As Quijano noted, this is the precondition for “globalization” and—in my own critical-theoretical terms—for the emergence of the machine language and the operating system for the virtual machine that is the world computer.

114

### Agency/Subjectivization/Currency

The principle of incentivizing the reduction of others, narratively, ideologically, materially and corporally to be sure, but eventually to the statistical and probabilistic forms with which we are increasingly familiar and disconcertingly com-

<sup>52</sup> María Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” in “Feminist Legacies/Feminist Futures: The 25th Anniversary Issue,” ed. Lori Gruen and Alison Wylie, special issue, *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 743–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x>.

fortable becomes a general paradigm in the operating system of computational racial capitalism. Increasingly, the categories pertinent to financial management are all categories. This relentless application of racial capitalist classification, heuristics and statistics presupposes and further enables the reduction of being and of beings to number, to information. The world-system that emerges as the coloniality of power percolates into and granularly re-codes the various worlds, their ontologies, cosmologies, social relations, practices, and more, and in doing so, in rendering everything and everyone computable, it saturates semiotic processes with blood. The blood of racial capital, that accompanies its classifications along with their explicit and implicit systems of accounts and discounts, is to say the blood of those who are in one way and another denied humanity in the production of so-called humanity. The blood of the enslaved, the colonized, the raped, the desecrated, the encamped, ravaged and annihilated is exacted at the bottom of the stack. This encoding is (or would be) imposed universally, pushing the claims of “prior” and/or pluriversal ontological beliefs and practices, as far as possible to the margins and/or into the enclosures. It is as if computational racial capital’s anthem, hummed in the background, were “Social Death for Y’all!” The entire epistemic framework of racial capital, which excludes or encapsulates its contradictions and sustains the expansion of the dominance of the value form is at once materialized in “civilization’s” institutions, technologies and infrastructures, and built on bloodshed—built, to be clear, with the express intention of shedding more blood. Nearly everyone yet living is existentially forced to find their place within this practical, socio-semantic, material webwork of operations, whether through subjective adaptation, reservation, incarceration, abjection, willing participation, or other psycho-somatic aspects of rationalizing a generalized demonization through and as the myriad means to further colonization.

These everyday striations of race and gender, and the statistical matrix that they give rise to in which “the laws of chance” are free to operate, constitutes, I am afraid, “our” framework of emergence, that is, the framework at least in part, of anyone who would claim rights, citizenship, or access to the social product (and thus—temporary— exemption from social death) in the terms currently offered by capitalism—by anyone, who for example, uses money. Like the plastic filled oceans, this deadly field of emergence overcoding social relations and striated by the vectoral and indeed matrixial logic of racial capital as a calculus of social difference is the water in which we swim in and the air we can breathe. Cue

those Hollywood images of the hordes dressed in rags clambering up mountains of people to get over the wall.

But the war of each against all is not only brutish. Often, it is far more sophisticated and refined. Almost civilized. Recognizing the near total saturation of the global socius by the practical and semiotic requirements of racial capitalism and its relentless value computing in through and by means of social relations helps us perhaps to better understand Sayak Valencia's powerful analysis of "gore capitalism" as a *systemic* emergence.<sup>53</sup> Gore capitalism, for Valencia, becomes a culmination of sorts of (a qualitative shift in) the colonial logic of racial capitalism, a condition of what we are here endeavoring to understand as world-computing. It is as if verisimilitude were not to be found on Fox News, but with *Westworld*.<sup>54</sup> Focusing on "the big postmodern city of Tijuana" in which "the urban landscape has been altered by houses papered with 'For Sale' signs and by people carrying guns," Valencia records what is clearly a well know local fact: that "*becoming a murderer* allows an individual to have access to and to legitimate oneself within a consumption-based existence."<sup>55</sup> What is well known in Tijuana may be no less true on the US side of the border, but the mediations, entanglements, and forms of disavowal are different. For Valencia, the "endriago subject" is the emerging subject-form responding with violence to the new and ever more brutal terms for survival in a landscape extending across Mexico, much of Latin America and the world, a landscape and a socius that has been destroyed by colonialism, depleted by imperialism, and decimated by neo-imperialism. For the endriago subject "violence is converted into a resource for the gangster to manage, produce, and sell; it has become the tool *sine qua non* to carve out a space on the capitalist ladder."<sup>56</sup> "Using extreme violence endriago subjects create a lifestyle, work, socialization, and culture."<sup>57</sup> "The subjectivities operating within and characteristic of gore capitalism are endriago subjects,

116

<sup>53</sup> Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, trans. John Pluecker (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2018).

<sup>54</sup> *Westworld* is an American science fiction thriller franchise that began with the 1973 film *Westworld*, written and directed by Michael Crichton, and whose latest sequel is a television series by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy that first aired on HBO on October 2, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 195.

<sup>56</sup> Valencia, 197.

<sup>57</sup> Valencia, 138.

who have created a kind of new international class that we have called *the criminal class*.”<sup>58</sup>

Valencia writes:

In gore capitalism, traditional weapons have been converted into ancillary tools compared to new methods, which assume an increased level of cruelty. These methods—founded in extreme ferocity and efficacy—become means to deploy, reinforce, and preserve their powers of intimidation; thus, they create a reticular and managed terror, transferred from the bodies of the injured and murdered into the bodies of those who have not yet suffered such violence. Research into the most effective and cruel methods of torture and killing leads to the introduction and implementation of a series of techniques including decapitation, dismembering, immersion into pools filled with piranhas or crocodiles, or into acid (which dissolves living victims into practically nothing). What has been fashioned is a semiotics of violence and a *signature* specific to each mafia organization.<sup>59</sup>

Valencia’s work is a smart and harrowing analysis of experiences and practices that though geographically situated beyond the borders of the global North are at once responses to the violent colonial and imperial accumulation that underwrites its constitution and, also, characteristic of the forms of hyper-masculinity reigning in the state-fascism of the superpowers themselves.<sup>60</sup> The collapse of others, their work, their lifetimes into raw material for endriago self-fashioning, produces vectors of subjective agency. This is a fractal logic as well as a fascist one. The global expansion and intensification of capital logic imposes shifts in forms of subjective agency and expression, as well as the intensification and partial recasting of gender as social differential. These mutations index a further collapse of the guarantees promised by development capitalism, albeit selective

<sup>58</sup> Valencia, 283.

<sup>59</sup> Valencia, 154.

<sup>60</sup> We note in the above a dynamic similar to what Sara Ahmed calls “affective economies,” in which the stickiness of signs is then inscribed on bodies through the particulars of their precarity and circulate in the production of affect. The fractal model of capitalist agency demands a revolutionization of productive force, which in this case entails becoming your own law, your own regime of truth, that secures your currency. The law itself becomes subservient to branding, and the cartel emerges to impose its economy and style, in short, to impose its claims on reality.

and minimal, which, systematically, it can no longer afford to deliver on or even promise.

This mutation is a kind of intensification that is also an internal collapse, that at once gives the lie to the rule of law and to the sovereignty of the state form, and deals out dire consequences for those least able or willing to become brutal. What the notable work on the US Mexico border has documented and theorized (Rosalinda Fregoso,<sup>61</sup> Melissa Wright, Lourdes Portillo and others), including practices of feminicide, disposable life, “denationalization” and the institution of a necropolitical order in which gendered violence, at times in the form of ritualized rape, torture and murder, becomes a new vernacular of masculine and governmental sovereignty, has in Valencia’s view become part of the structural mutation that Valencia christens “gore capitalism.” Alongside a system of maquiladoras in which the disposability of young women is in fact the very thing that represents their value,<sup>62</sup> “Mexican drug traffickers enact a particular style of violence that they link to a signature or a brand in underworld tradition.”<sup>63</sup> The narcos (and the police) are writing code. Valencia describes in gruesome detail, “some codes linked to the semiotics of overspecialized violence,”<sup>64</sup> and argues that “*the lacerated and violated body is itself the message.*”<sup>65</sup>

From the theft of life in the maquiladoras at five dollars a day, to the theft of life in toto by means of rapacious feminicide of the police and drug cartels alike, we see the further development and refinement of capital’s “factory code,” as a social factory code, the elaboration of the tool kit endemic to computational capital’s operating system. Lourdes Portillo’s film *Señorita Extraviada* (2001), an important if controversial work, also details the ritual cutting of the backs of young women as a kind of signifying process practiced by, in Valencia’s terms, endriago subjects. This transformed existential and semiotic field, in which “*the*

118

<sup>61</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, “‘We Want Them Alive!’: The Politics and Culture of Human Rights,” *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 12, no. 2 (March 2006): 109–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630600583296>.

<sup>62</sup> Melissa W. Wright, “The Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women, and Maquiladoras,” *Public Culture* 11, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 468, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-11-3-453>.

<sup>63</sup> Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 155.

<sup>64</sup> Valencia, 162.

<sup>65</sup> Valencia, 163.



*illicit appropriation of the body of the Other has become a kind of currency*<sup>66</sup> is built by hypermasculinist self-assertions of a right to violence and the “complicit masculinities”<sup>67</sup> that directly or tacitly endorse these “rights,” and benefit from them. Such masculinities emerge out of the coloniality of race and gender described above by Quijano and Lugones, and appear as a kind of next stage, a mutation of the requisite codifications of gender, race and class for the development of racial capitalism. They assert the right to issue, that is, to mint local currency and to sign transactions on the flesh of their victims, an assertion, by means of the absolute reduction of, in this case, young women to victim, trophy, and sign that becomes part of the financial messaging percolating through the global compute. The issuance of currencies and signing of transactions is not a metaphor here, it is a feature of emergent economy. It creates binding contracts and gives endriagos and their cartels purchase on the world and on the world of commodities.

Lest anyone think these mutations are merely local phenomena, similar forms of gore capitalism and hypermasculinity are visible from Bolsonaro’s Brazil to Duterte’s Philippines and far beyond. Everyone, everywhere seems to be issuing derivative currencies, and we suddenly grasp that the Facebook “like” and cryptocurrencies themselves are endemic to a new social (dis)order in which everything has become (is revealed as) a derivative (a contingent claim on the underlier “Value”), while the right to issue has become a new form of social struggle. From prison in Sao Paulo, gang leader of the Primer Comando de la Capital (PCC, Capital’s First Commando), Marcos Comacho, also known as Marcola, notes the mutation, and tells his cowed interviewer that emerging beyond the now staid conceptions of class struggle “there is a third thing”:

**O Globo:** Aren’t you afraid of dying?

**Marcola:** You are the ones afraid of dying, not me. Better said: here in jail, you can’t come over and kill me, but I can easily have you killed outside. We are human bombs. In the slums, there are a hundred thousand human bombs. We are right in the middle of the unsolvable. You are between evil and good, and in the middle, there’s the frontier of death, the only frontier. We are already a new species, different bugs, different from you. For you, death is this Christian drama ly-

<sup>66</sup> Valencia, 159; italics added.

<sup>67</sup> Valencia, 270.

ing in a bed, with a heart attack. Death for us is daily bread, thrown over a mass grave. Weren't you intellectuals talking about class struggle? About being a martyr? A hero? And then, we arrived! Ha, ha . . . I read a lot; I've read 3,000 books, and I read Dante, but my soldiers are strange anomalies of the twisted development of this country. No more *proletariat*, or unhappy people, or oppressed. There is a third thing growing out there, raised in the mud, educated through sheer illiteracy, getting their own diplomas on the street, like a monstrous Alien hidden under the crevasses of the city. A new language has already sprung. That's it. A different language. You're standing right before post-poverty. Post-poverty generates a new murderous culture, helped by technology, satellites, cellular phones, internet, modern weaponry. It's all that shit with chips, megabytes.<sup>68</sup>

The violence of the codes of value, the “new language,” bound up in and bound to value capture, iterating recursively through the cycles of world history, have done their work in the imposition and mutation of the lived abstractions of racial capitalism. The struggle for liquidity again revolutionizes the rules of the infernal game. The metapragmatic imperative to stave off insolvency, leave your old ontology, and enter “the false community of the commodity” has organized planetary space-time under the reign of an epistemology and a cosmology built on violence. One result is the hyper-masculinity of an emerging, indeed insurgent criminal class that rises to fill but also reformat “that desire called fascism.” In the Philippines, the extrajudicial killings of supposed drug addicts becomes a kind of necropolitical signifying by the Duterte regime—bound corpses with heads wrapped in tape with clown faces drawn on them in Sharpie by the very cops who killed them have become a kind of vernacular—a vernacular, which is again to say a kind of currency—one that backed by violence, compounds violence, pays dividends, creates new businesses and income streams. The negotiation of racial capital's encodings of the semio-social milieu, where differentiable others become means to income streams, has created situations akin to Batesonian schizophrenia.<sup>69</sup> If the terms of the imperatives (their metapragmatics) cannot themselves be overturned, capital's schizoid overcode produces innovation for capitalism overturning its existing rules by means of the very activities (and desperation) generated by its contradictory scripts. That too

120

<sup>68</sup> Marcos Camacho, “There is a Third Thing,” interview by O Globo, trans. Pepe Rojo, *Hostis* 1, July 22, 2017, <https://incivility.org/2017/07/22/there-is-a-third-thing/>.

<sup>69</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

is innovation. These vernacular of violence in necropolitical orders are merely intensifications of the everyday language of empire—a virtuosic reappropriation of its expressivity by those whom the current law does not quite serve. These new vernaculars of power, written on the flesh to create both victims and kin, are currencies of the flesh, economic media that propose innovations in the procuring of deliverables by reducing their cost of production.

**O Globo:** But, couldn't there be a solution?

**Marcola:** You will only get somewhere if you stop defending “normalcy.” There won't be any more normalcy. You need to auto criticize your own incompetence. But, to be quite frank, your morality. We are at the center of the unsolvable. The difference is we live here, and you have no way out. Just shit. And we already work in it. Understand me, brother, there's no solution. And you know why? Because you can't even understand how widespread the problem is. As the divine Dante wrote: “Abandon all hope. We are all in hell.”<sup>70</sup>

“We are all in hell.” The competing and contradictory parameters of capital's imperatives to freedom and to subjugation, that is its dialectic of freedom by means of subjugation, create schizoid ruptures in the framework of morality and indeed of reality. In the current global conjuncture, the rule of law is obsolete and the reigning order is hell itself. The double standard, freedom for self, subjugation for the other, solvency for self by means of insolvency for the other, is the standard. Again, the mutation takes place not because of a shift in the character of the primitives of the code of racial capitalism (accountability through solvency), but an intensification. A change in the quantity of events organized by this dialectic leads to a change in the qualities of its expression. The codes themselves, as differentiated strategies for the pursuit for autonomy by means of the subjugation of others, as means to assemble contingent claims on the social product, come into contradiction as competing forms of social currency (social programs), different in allegiance, group or cartel, but with the same basic extractive logic. The war of each against all has become a war among the various currencies of violence. The offloading of capital's contradictions onto the people of the world driven by the imperatives to balance accounts among the hard currencies of banks and states, in short, driven to stay liquid in geopolitical terms in order to survive, means that people survive through social computing, a continuous calculus among the

<sup>70</sup> Camacho, “There is a Third Thing.”

competing soft currencies, and therefore among the competing regimes of truth and reality propositions. Social computing of this type emerges as a structural response to the globality of racial capital's computations of value. The overriding imperative in this game, the rule that trumps them all, is that this game will be fully lived: each player must fight to survive (to secure guns, protection, food, shelter). In a world in which non- and ante-capitalist forms of social belonging have been cannibalized and social guarantees have been all but eliminated, survival is purchased by maximizing one's returns in a specific currency. In gore capitalism endriago subjects have found ways to collateralize violence and their capacity for violence, and from this securitization of the flesh of others, this banking on death, they can derive recognition, agency, employment, currency and income. Social accountability to cartelized regimes of violence provides their liquidity. Arbitraging the rule of law, endriago subjects find a cheaper pathway to value. Arbitraging the state, they find a way to impose a new law, for less. They do so through an arbitrage on life, by cheapening it through its generalized devaluation. Such is innovation.

In the chapter of *Gore Capitalism* called "Transfeminism and New Masculinities," Valencia writes that because endriago subjects "are simultaneously subjects of rebellion and servitude,"<sup>71</sup> it becomes crucial in resistance movements that "the deconstruction of masculinity and the creation of a plurality of masculinities go hand in hand with gender-based perspectives and transfeminism. By transfeminism, we mean not only a social movement made up of women, but also as an epistemological category for the conception and creation of new, non-dystopian—feminine and masculine—identities."<sup>72</sup> Such a "deconstruction" along with the creation of new identities points the way to alternative currencies, the currencies of alternative modes of life and living.

122

### **(Alternative) Futures**

Invoking Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga keen awareness of the difficult road for the overturning of heteropatriarchy,<sup>73</sup> Valencia pursues a notion of mi-

<sup>71</sup> Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 272.

<sup>72</sup> Valencia, 273.

<sup>73</sup> Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022). See also Cherríe

croplitics whereby in “making the violence visible, we might create a critical consciousness and resistance that could lead to active engagement and the joint creation of *responsible intersubjective agreements, endowed with agency*.”<sup>74</sup> This notion of “responsible intersubjective agreements endowed with agency” is of great importance and I will return to it. Valencia says, “The force of *corporeal politics* is founded on the fact that our bodies are repositories of all actions; they are relational and can be understood as integral and active parts of events, as vehicles and linkages of socialization.”<sup>75</sup> “If we *build politically by virtue of the vulnerability of our bodies*, then we have to recognize the vulnerability of the body as something indisputable.”<sup>76</sup>

Such an account resonates with the domain of relations surfaced by Neferti Tadiar’s dialectical notion of “vital platforms,” in which embodied social relations such as kinship form economic networks that at once sustain their participants, distribute care and responsibility, and are mobilized by capitalism.<sup>77</sup> It also resonates with Paul Preciado’s “somatopolitics” and the politics and logistics of “the pharmacopornographic era,” in which a cyborgian matrix of body, technology and spectacle navigate the desiring landscape of racial capitalism.<sup>78</sup> Recognizing the myriad strategies of corporeal capture by vectors of gore capitalization, Valencia says:

We urgently need to extricate the body from media discourses that spectralize it, so that we might depict it in all of its potency and importance. If we are able to re-ontologize the body, we will be able to re-semanticize the power of death in the gore capitalist and patriarchal framework. This re-semanticization of the body and its pain will emerge from language, critique, and performative practices that are developed in public space and through *queer multitudes*.<sup>79</sup>

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Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

<sup>74</sup> Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 288; italics added.

<sup>75</sup> Valencia, 288.

<sup>76</sup> Valencia, 289.

<sup>77</sup> Neferti X. M. Tadiar, *Remaindered Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

<sup>78</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: Feminist Press, 2013).

<sup>79</sup> Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 292.

It is possible and perhaps advisable to embrace this call for a re-semanticization of the bodies without resorting to an ontological projection. Such a project for the creation of new language that might recast and re-express forms of embodiment is taken up, for example, in Tatiana Huezo's film *Noche del Fuego* (*Prayers for the Stolen*, 2021). This harrowing and beautiful film depicts the daily lives of three small town girls in Mexico whose mothers must hide their burgeoning adolescence from view in order to protect them from the boys and men who are either being recruited to the police and the cartels or are already members of these organizations. Much of the film takes place in the absence of fathers who have left for *el Norte* to find work and send remittances but are not heard from again. In seeing both the consequences on family life of the state and para-state systems, and also the powerful and imaginative connections forged by the young girls in a climate of ambient fear, we may understand at a profound level something more about the ways in which capital genders the body and puts some bodies under siege. We witness: Men must decide how they will betray their families, through desertion, low wage ecologically destructive jobs in mining, or criminality. Mothers must not only supplement their income by working in the poppy fields, but must cut their 10-year-old daughter's hair against their will, and punish them for the use of makeup. They must dig holes in the ground where their children must hide when cartel vehicles drive by. School teachers leave out of fear or for refusing to pay off the cartels so that they can work, gunmen and militia roam the streets. Dead girls are found dumped in the brush.

Huezo's film also shows the intimacy and strategy that evolves among the girls as they cope. The children practice a telepathic sensitivity to one another's mental states, they sing and swim together, and the camera shows us clearly that under the threat of the foreclosure of their futurity (the constant fear of abduction, rape, torture and death) they are making themselves a new kind of body. Similar to but different from say the implants among the 2030's cadre in *The Peripheral*, they create a delicate psycho-somatic tissue among themselves, that binds their subjectivities and fates while also creating a form of comfort, mutual awareness and protection. Without resorting to a new ontology or ontological projection of corporeal essence, this remaking of body and sense resonates with Valencia's call for a "re-semanticization of the body [that] cannot be conceived of without deconstruction and criticism of hegemonic masculinity—articulated in the first

person.”<sup>80</sup> For, “when there are no other options to choose from, we must be capable of transforming the sole option not into a withdrawal or death, but rather into a condition of resignification.”<sup>81</sup>

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To conclude then, at a time when gore capitalism presents itself globally as the sole option available, we must work so that instead of killing us, it might resignify us and lead us to re-think our very selves.”<sup>82</sup> So says Valencia, and I agree. If we have taken time here in the detailing of the coloniality of race and gender, the transformation of social relations, perceptions, subjectivities, corporealities and cosmologies, it is to argue that these abstractions are operationalized as real abstractions. Race and gender as real abstractions are endemic to the operationalization of the bios by the world computer. This virtual machine platforming computational racial capital is itself platformed on the bios. It operates through the incorporation of bodily existence captured and controlled through the variegated imposition of a matrix of operationalized abstract categories. Subaltern agency may be found in the temporalities of this matrix and in what Tadiar calls “remaindered life.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, we must understand “the stack” as the various social institutionalizations and machine formalizations of a computational racial capitalism that has emerged over the course of centuries. What we call computation is not only ambient, but is itself the result of the historical sedimentation and institutionalization of inequality.

The double articulation of expression as semiotic and as information in the relentless compute of value must be challenged by altering the structure of agency in both domains, that is, in the domains of meaning and of computability. At a schematic level, this challenge entails altering modes of inscription, legibility, datafication, and relation. At a socio-political level, it entails finding ways to make the pluriversal values of liberation from the multiple oppressions capable of becoming persistent in organizational, which is to say economic, modes.

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<sup>80</sup> Valencia, 293.

<sup>81</sup> Valencia, 295.

<sup>82</sup> Valencia, 295.

<sup>83</sup> Tadiar, *Remaindered Life*.

Queer, anti-racist, decolonial sociality, and ecology, for example, must find their economy.

Though we will pause here, we do so having understood that the issuance of alternative currencies and new transaction types is becoming a central question of our time. Racial capitalism is already presiding over new forms of issuance. New currencies, likes, brands, memes, cryptos, signature forms of violence and many more address the simmering afterlives of colonial racism, sexism, nationalism, subjectivity, speciation, and sovereignty. They are socio-semiotic, psycho-libidinal, and profoundly embodied. Economic media is of the flesh.

We may sum these insights up by recognizing that the rules for financial expression are changing and indeed have changed, and to avoid the default derivative protocols of endriago subjectivity and fractal fascism (or for that matter the default violences of national monies, national banks and their state, militaries and policies), a re-imaging of value- and values-creation is at the forefront: for along with a new politics of production and distribution, in short, of world-making, comes an ecopolitics and a politics of care. The social derivatives we have considered above, those risk management strategies for a volatile world that are contingent claims on the underlier value, are perhaps not the only derivative contracts that subaltern forces can write. Can we create social currencies informed by Valencia's notion of "responsible intersubjective agreements endowed with agency?"<sup>84</sup> Can such agreements be platformed? How? The Narco-traffickers use technological prosthetics for their embodied organizing, what new types of technicity and computing might emerge from subaltern strategies? How might the oppressed denominate value(s) with expressive, qualitative, future-writing forms, creating not just new types of writing but new forms of non-hierarchical social media that is also economic media? The hand up, the caress, the shared meal, the loving glance, the whisper of the ancestor, the moment of trans-subjective becoming, also leave their marks on the body. How to transmit these markings and preserve their qualities in a non-extractive medium? The body's "re-semanticization" is a cultural question and a political question, yes, and it is an economic question as well. It's easy to say we want different values so that the oppressed may live and thrive, and we do. More difficult to say is that we want alternative social currencies of our own design—unless we

126

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<sup>84</sup> Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 288.



perceive that these differences and forms of *differance* are already being practiced. Might currency be backed with conviviality and radical care instead of differentials founded in violence?

Just as revolution can no longer be adequately specified without an understanding of race, gender and sexuality, so too, we wager, can it no longer be undertaken without computing, calculation and economic media, for these latter are the compilers and thus the new ground of the former, as well as the means by which alternatives may be held open. How will alternative futures immanent in our survival be made current, how will these “not yet”<sup>85</sup> find their currencies? How will “we,” the revolutionary remainders of racial capitalism, yet living everywhere, including in “our very selves,” issue our emancipated futures?

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<sup>85</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

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# **Labor-Techno-Racialization in Necrocapitalism**



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## Global Refuse, Planetary Remainder

### Keywords

good life, disposable life, global refuse, servitude, socialized reproduction, colonial ecology, planetary remainder

### Abstract

The line separating the “good life” and the savagery that the “good life” requires, or, perhaps what might be articulated as the line between the space of biopolitics and the space of necropolitics, is maintained in the present through both practices of global policing and imperial war. These practices of policing and war produce the very global refuse that constantly threatens the “good life”—actively wasting the lives and livelihoods of people and non-human lifeworlds Western colonialism established as the raw materials, instruments, and objects of its civilizational goal—against which violence acts to protect a fundamentally human life worth living. At the same time, through capital-intensive projects of “saving” the very targeted populations it destroys, permanent war also produces the subordinated life that will come to serve as the means of maintaining and upholding that “good life.” Beyond this mode of colonial inhabitation, however, subsist other ecologies of life-making practices on the part of those deemed disposable, a planetary remainder which might well be our only hope for a possible future.

## Globalni odpadek, planetarni preostanek

133

### Ključne besede

dobro življenje, življenje za enkratno uporabo, globalno zavračanje, suženjstvo, socializirana reprodukcija, kolonialna ekologija, planetarni preostanek

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## Povzetek

Meja, ki ločuje »dobro življenje« in divjaštvo, ki ga »dobro življenje« zahteva, ali morda to, kar se lahko artikulira kot meja med prostorom biopolitike in prostorom nekropolitike, se v sedanosti ohranja s praksami globalnega policijskega nadzora in imperialno vojno. Te prakse policijskega in vojnega delovanja proizvajajo prav tisti globalni odpadki, ki nenehno ogroža »dobro življenje« – ki aktivno zapravlja življenja ter preživetje ljudi in t. i. nečloveških življenjskih svetov, ki jih je zahodni kolonializem vzpostavil kot surovine, orodja in objekte svojega civilizacijskega cilja. Edina zaščita temeljnega človeškega življenja, vrednega življenja, pa je nasilje proti »dobremu življenju«. Hkrati z intenzivnimi projekti kapitala, ki na videz »rešujejo« prav tiste ciljne populacije, ki jih ta nenehno uničuje, permanentna vojna proizvaja podrejeno življenje, ki služi kot sredstvo za ohranjanje in vzdrževanje tega »dobrega življenja«. A onkraj takšnega načina kolonialnega bivanja obstajajo še druge ekologije praks, ki ustvarjajo življenje. Prihajajo od tistih, ki so obravnavani kot odvečni, planetarni preostanek. Ta pa je morda naše edino upanje za možno prihodnost.



In his book, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?*, Ghassan Hage argues that two types of sociality obtain in the world today: “One is defined by a civilized, cosmopolitan, state-regulated, lawful, welfare-supported, ecologically concerned exploitation. The other is defined by a savage, anarchic capitalism, [. . .] dominated by unchecked exploitation, theft and pillage.”<sup>1</sup> The first is regulated with a policing logic, the second is a space of war. The first is dependent on the second.

## The “Good Life”

134

Of the distinction between the good life and the savage life, Hage writes, “The line separating cosmopolitan goodness from colonial savagery [. . .] aims to ensure that its citizens’ experience of the ‘good life’ is not perturbed by the experience of the savagery needed for this good life to be experienced.”<sup>2</sup>

The offshoring of violence necessary for the “good life” in the metropole is undoubtedly a remnant of Western colonialism in the modern era. Yet it is also a

<sup>1</sup> Ghassan Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Hage, 66.



structural relation of imperialism operating within the contemporary global capitalist economy, exemplified not least in the dumping of toxic industrial waste to the waters and lands of postcolonial and indigenous nations, that is, in the imperial exercise of what Max Liboiron understands as the power and permission to pollute the habitations and lifeworlds of others.<sup>3</sup> By offshoring the forms of waste that capitalist production inevitably creates—waste as not the byproduct but rather as the constitutive condition of the mode of producing capitalist value—imperialism continues to actively make the present lifeworlds of the descendants of the colonized into places of global refuse. Global refuse thereby becomes the space where “savagery,” as Hage designates the practices of unchecked exploitation, theft, pillage, and constant war, is allowed and normalized.

The line separating the “good life” and the savagery that the “good life” requires, or, perhaps what might be articulated as the line between the space of biopolitics and the space of necropolitics, is maintained in the present through both practices of global policing and imperial war. Even as these practices of policing and war produce the very global refuse that constantly threatens the “good life”—actively wasting the lives and livelihoods of people and non-human lifeworlds Western colonialism established as the raw materials, instruments, and objects of its civilizational goals—the violence that policing and war constantly wield is embraced by those it protects as necessary to ensure the protection of a fundamentally human life worth living.

Counter-insurgent policing and war hold at bay for the enfranchised citizenry of that good life, of the very violence they inflict and stoke elsewhere, no longer only to quell rebellion but also to fuel greater and greater enterprise. For war is a global enterprise with proliferating subsidiaries—certainly the auxiliary industries of security (immigration agencies, their border police, offices of records and documentation, courts and detention jails, weapons of surveillance and debilitation, technologies of control), but also industries of humanitarian rescue, relief, aid, and reconstruction, closely aligned and even overlapping with the very military agencies whose work of devastation necessitates the projects of welfare assistance, social rehabilitation and development, and economic growth that follow in the wake of war. In this way, permanent war does not only increase the price of the “good life,” but, through capital-intensive projects of

<sup>3</sup> Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

“saving” the very targeted populations it destroys, also produces the defeated, subordinated life that will come to serve as the means of maintaining and upholding that “good life.”

In the contemporary moment, the “good life” is valued life—that is, life that intrinsically bears value and is potentially valorizable (able to accrue more value). The “good life” functions not simply as a moral ideal, but also and perhaps more importantly as a socio-economic imperative, which failure to heed is met with punishment.

Entire industries of domestic, border, and overseas or extra-territorial security oversee the meting of punishment with batons, guns, and bombs, in practices of torture, assassination, and arrest. Punitive agencies abound. These punitive agencies are assumed by ordinary people in their everyday, intimate relations as well as embodied by petty cops and bureaucrats in all the institutions of enfranchisement (education, employment, civil service, public office, social welfare). Punishment is direct but also ambient, inflicted by iron spikes on low walls to prevent seating, divided benches in parks to prevent sleeping, escalating rents and prohibitive subway tickets, poisoned drinking water, toxic food, eroding, empty soils, hazardously subpar construction standards, stolen lands, and foreclosed homes. Such is the experience of constant assaults on those “savaged” by such punishment, which is already part of imperial war—those non-citizens who by deed and definition are precluded from the “good life” of the already human.

This colonial relation, in which biota deemed lesser and lower life are conscripted to serve their eminently human superiors, expresses itself today as the relation between disposable life and valued life, or, between *life worth expending* (life with the capacity to yield value through its wasting) and *life worth living* (life with the capacity to accumulate value through its exercise and enjoyment). The former (the descendants of the colonized, deemed less than human) are charged with bearing the burdens, pains, and trauma that the latter (the always already human) are spared and offshore to others—domestic workers, caregivers, content moderators alike charged with sparing their employers and clients all that might disrupt or perturb the “good life” of their valued existence, and more, charged with caring for, comforting, and enhancing that valued life.

## Disposable Life

Disposable life can be considered simply as life placed at the disposition of valued life, for which it serves as material and means of living. If in today's global economy the living of valued life—its reproduction—has been made productive (in a word, capitalized), disposable life has been made serviceable as the means, instruments, and machines of that productivity. Drivers, couriers, food service workers, janitors, housekeepers, nannies, all see to the maintenance, improvement, and facilitation of the value-productive life-movements of others. They act as private human utilities—components of what I have called vital infrastructure—for the social reproduction of valued life, and therefore as the very means of that life's productivity. Put differently, these workers serve as the means of production of *life as labor* (the global cognitariat). Subordinated to meet the needs of others, their own disposable lives comprise in aggregate form the *vital infrastructure*, like appliances, houses, and roads, supporting and enabling the activities and movements of valued life. As the life globopolitical citizens wield as their own human commodity capital in the entrepreneurship of themselves—being for themselves their own capital, being for themselves their own producers, being for themselves the source of their earnings, as Foucault would have put it<sup>4</sup>—valued life is what disposable life makes possible and upholds.

The Philippines is one of the biggest manufacturers, providers, and brokers of such serviceable life for the global reproductive economy. Before the global pandemic, the nation annually deployed around 2.3 million workers as overseas or migrant labor in some two hundred countries and territories, including sea-based commercial fleets, around the globe.<sup>5</sup> While that exported labor force has been reduced to 1.83 million as a direct result of the pandemic,<sup>6</sup> the Philippines

<sup>4</sup> In neoliberalism, Foucault writes, "*Homo œconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself [. . .], being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the course of [his] earnings." Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), 226; brackets in the original.

<sup>5</sup> "Total Number of OFWs Estimated at 2.3 Million (Results from the 2018 Survey on Overseas Filipinos)," The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), Republic of the Philippines National Government Portal, April 30, 2019, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/total-number-of-ows-estimated-23-million-results-2018-survey-overseas-filipinos-0>.

<sup>6</sup> "2021 Overseas Filipino Workers (Final Results)," The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), Republic of the Philippines National Government Portal, December 2, 2022, <https://>

remains one of the world's most important sources of serviceable life. The majority of this labor force consists of women employed in so-called "elementary occupations" (defined by basic, lower-value skills)—cleaning and maintenance of apartments, houses, kitchens, hotels, offices, and other buildings, food preparation, kitchen assistance, etc. But a large percentage of this force also consists of men employed as low-level seafarers in the global shipping industry, which transports 90 percent of the weight of all global trade. Filipino contract workers constitute a quarter of the world's seafaring labor force of 1.6 million, making them the second largest single source of seafarers, surpassed only by China.<sup>7</sup>

The Philippines has also become the world's largest destination for business process outsourcing (BPO), with US companies making up the majority of its clients.<sup>8</sup> It is the leading contact or call center country globally, employing 1.2 million workers, which adds to the number of workers employed in overseas contract work. It is in this capacity—as a major producer and provider of de-territorialized, ancillary humans as "essential" (yet disposable) service labor in industries of global reproduction and as mediatic components of productive vital global infrastructure—that we see the importance of the Philippines' historical transformation for today's new global economy based on the production of ceaseless life-activity, boundless connectivity, and infinite circulation.

Seafarers in the global shipping industry, call center and IT (internet technology) workers in the global BPO (business process outsourcing) industry, digital operators in online healthcare and intimate labor (sex work) services, content moderators for social media, and microworkers for digital search engines and other ICT (internet and communications technology) software-as-a-service (SaaS) businesses—all these workers function to conduct and maintain the logistical, transportive, and communicative flows for the global life of capital. Very importantly, these workers do not only maintain these flows by operating and maintaining the technological machinery comprising the vast infrastructures of connectivity (communication, transportation, logistical networks) that undergird global cap-

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psa.gov.ph/content/2021-overseas-filipino-workers-final-results.

<sup>7</sup> Aurora Almendral, "The Lonely and Dangerous Life of the Filipino Seafarer," *New York Times*, November 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/world/asia/philippines-mariners-cargo-ships.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Nikhil Chandwani, "Philippines' BPO Industry: In 2019 and Beyond," *Entrepreneur Asia Pacific*, February 9, 2019, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/327758>.

italist supply chains and markets. They also become essential parts—vital components—of the transnational physical, technological machinery and computational platforms comprising the circulatory pathways of global capitalism.

Contracted, casual workers labor as ghosts in the machines. For example, Filipino contract workers operate as human optical-character-recognition (OCR) engines for online archival databases, crucially carrying out for computers what the latter cannot as yet carry out themselves, such as recognizing and making legible the outmoded print fonts of early modern texts.<sup>9</sup> Contracted Filipino “freelancers” work as literal digital appendages of “click-armies” or “white troll farms” boosting circulation for a variety of platforms.<sup>10</sup> And they work as digital operators working in politically-motivated (dis)information networks, “seeding political content” and “engineering virality” for local and global clients, as Jonathan Corpus Ong writes.<sup>11</sup>

As Stephanie Santos highlights, Filipino as well as Mexican contracted workers also operate as the “artificial ‘artificial intelligence’” behind digital pet avatars in online healthcare service apps, tasked with monitoring, communicating with, and providing daily reminders for the health of their client patients.<sup>12</sup> Compensating for the deficiencies and inadequacies of the computer programs they work for, microworkers as well as digital AI operators carry out crucial “computational” processes to supplement the algorithms generating the artificial intelligence of these technical machines. In this way, these workers function as human components of capitalist platforms—incorporated, as Santos writes, as

<sup>9</sup> Tung-Hui Hu, *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches From an Age of Disconnection* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022), xviii.

<sup>10</sup> Shibani Mahtani and Regine Cabato, “Why Crafty Internet Trolls in the Philippines May Be Coming to a Website Near You,” *Washington Post*, July 25, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/why-crafty-internet-trolls-in-the-philippines-may-be-coming-to-a-website-near-you/2019/07/25/c5d42ee2-5c53-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/why-crafty-internet-trolls-in-the-philippines-may-be-coming-to-a-website-near-you/2019/07/25/c5d42ee2-5c53-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html).

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Corpus Ong, *Trolls for Sale* (Makati, the Philippines: Everything’s Fine, 2022), 28. See also Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent A. Cabañes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines* (n.p.: Newton Tech4Dev Network, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Dimatulac Santos, “‘Being There for the Client’: The Intimate Labors of Care Coaches” (unpublished paper, presented at the Puón Institute, San Fernando, La Union, January 9–13, 2023). The notion of “artificial artificial intelligence” comes from Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

“technological apparatus[es], specifically as akin to programming or code,”<sup>13</sup> their embodied subjectivities and intelligences disappeared and absorbed into the software of platforms.

Like Filipino content moderators for social media platforms, human OCR engines and AI pet avatars literally inhabit the computational machines they supplement, becoming cognitive and affective capacities that are integrated as functional parts of the platforms themselves. They are “helpers” of capital machines in the same way that domestic workers and caregivers are “helpers” of the capital lives they serve—with “helper” a code word for domestic servant.<sup>14</sup> It is not simply coincidental that both content moderators and domestic workers are employed as “cleaners.”<sup>15</sup> More than a simple analogy, there is a historical and social-material continuity between these two forms of capitalist servitude, which conscript Filipino workers for the reproductive maintenance of valued and valorizable life and its machines.

Alden Marte-Wood and Stephanie Santos brilliantly observe this continuity between domestic work and nursing, on the one hand, and content moderation, on the other—two industries in which Filipino workers figure prominently—in their understanding of content moderation as a remediation of older forms of exported Filipino care.<sup>16</sup> “Filipino content moderators work not just as custodians but as caregivers of the internet,” they write.<sup>17</sup> Marte-Wood and Santos em-

<sup>13</sup> Santos, “‘Being There for the Client.’”

<sup>14</sup> “Helper” is the translation of *katulong*, the term used for domestic servants in the Philippines. In another theoretical language, digital micro workers are “helpers” of fixed capital (machines of computational capital), becoming themselves parts of fixed capital, as well as “helpers” of variable capital (life as labor) and commodity capital (life as capital).

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Chen, “The Laborers Who Keep Dick Picks and Beheadings Out of Your Feed,” *Wired*, October 23, 2014, <https://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/>. Similar topics are also addressed in the documentary *The Cleaners (Im Schatten der Netzwelt*, 2018), directed by Hans Block and Moritz Rieseewieck.

<sup>16</sup> Alden Marte-Wood and Stephanie Dimatulac Santos, “Circuits of Care: Filipino Content Moderation and American Infrastructures of Feeling,” *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 101–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/vrg.2021.0007>.

<sup>17</sup> Marte-Wood and Santos, 106. Similarly, Jan M. Padios argues that call center work demonstrates a contemporary instantiation and transformation of the way that the cooperative, affective, and communicative capacities of Filipinos have historically been extracted through an intimate technique of U.S. colonial power. What she calls Filipino/American relatability or relational labor, a racialized mode of sociality, has become a form of social

phasize that it is the complex mediation work, entailing emotional intelligence, interpretative sensitivity, and intimate, bodily labor and subjective fortitude (in processing psychically damaging and traumatic content), performed by these “indirect knowledge workers” that maintains safe online *environments*—“privatized online ‘commons’”—for US American and other global citizen social media users. Even as the workers’ physical bodies remain in the Philippines, the digital care work of Filipinos “becomes disassembled, technologically mediated, and digitally distributed through global information networks.”<sup>18</sup> Cast as routine, basic cognitive tasks and reduced to an executable program (the binarizing decision to “delete or ignore”), complex Filipino care in content moderation becomes encoded into the data architecture of social media platforms, producing what Marte-Wood and Santos call the “infostructures of feeling”<sup>19</sup> making and shaping American sociality itself. In this way, the mediatic function that Filipino content moderators perform become vital components of the reproductive infrastructure (part of the larger protected, enabling *environments*) for what I referred to earlier as the valued life of globopolitical citizens.

Rather than simply a general objectification of human labor and its subordination to machines (readily recognized and explained in critiques of capitalism), what we see in global servitude is a racialized and gendered subordination and conscription of non-subject humans for the servicing of the “demands” (social needs and desires) of full-subject humans, mediated through platforms.

The racialized and gendered deployment of subordinated humans as media for already (and would-be) human subjects is a testament to how the legacies of colonialism and slavery continue to inform the dominant (racial, sex-gender) protocols codified in the most advanced capitalist media technologies (as means of value-extraction). We certainly see this continuity in the recasting of the historical function of the slave as a tool or instrument of their sovereign master in the organization of service labor within mobile-app-based enterprises. I have elsewhere described such enterprises as seeking the perfect meshing of two orders of social media: technological and human, the fusion and incorporation of the

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capital and cultural resource exploited by the nation-state and fueling its neoliberal aspirations. Jan M. Padios, *A Nation On the Line: Call Centers and Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Marte-Wood and Santos, “Circuits of Care,” 112.

<sup>19</sup> Marte-Wood and Santos.



disaggregated “dividuated” human parts of contemporary capitalist enterprises as component media within a total, integrated platform—the programming of “lesser” human functions as media for the already, fully human.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, the configuration of disassembled and distributed bodily capacities of those coded (through race and sex-gender) as less than human is placed in the service of (in servitude to) the integral bodies of individual and collective subjects of the human defined as the life-form of value.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond the conscription of particular individual and group social identities for this subordinated mediatic function within capitalist technologies, we also see the legacies of colonialism and slavery play out in the present through contemporary imperial forms of war, which expand the reproduction of capital by means of relentless, dispossessing assaults against postcolonial, Black, and indigenous communities’ own social reproduction. Imperialism consists of these practices of “primitive accumulation” undertaken and legitimated by means of statecraft, international realpolitik, and militarist powers, all closely attuned to the global economy, which is their field and object of action. This relation of constant violence sees to the creation and forced reproduction of the environs—the *enabling means, media, and milieu*—necessary for the labor-capital relation to exist and grow, indeed, to expand. Those means, media, and milieu provide unencumbered (free-flowing) access to and availability of resources and labor-power that capital requires. More than simply a repository of disposable natures (raw materials, “free” or wage labor), means, media, and milieu indicate the broader corporeal, social, and ecological conditions necessary for the accumulation process of capital “in all its value relations and material relations” to proceed.<sup>22</sup>

Dispossessed by state counter-insurgency wars, forced structural adjustments, economic and financial policies detrimental to workers, peasants, and the urban poor, and outright land and natural resource theft at home, and by systemic legal exclusions, social diminishment, and racialized punishment in host coun-

142

<sup>20</sup> Neferti X. M. Tadiar, “City Everywhere,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 33, no. 7–8 (December 2016): 72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416675676>.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the human as the life-form of value, see also my *Remaindered Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 49–52.

<sup>22</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to the Economic Theory of Imperialism,” trans. Nicholas Gray, in *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Peter Hudis and Paul Le Blanc (London: Verso, 2013–), 2:262.



tries, discounted skilled workers from the Philippines as well as other parts of the global South are continuously made available for the lower tiers of the global service economy. At once “freed” up from stable places of sustainable livelihood and employment (now foreclosed) yet kept captive by the states that control their movements and control their rights, these exemplars of serviceable life can be mobilized to serve as both the means of reproduction and production of capital globally. They serve, on the one hand, as vital components of the infrastructure for the social reproduction of capitalizable life and, on the other, as vital components of the platforms for production of capitalist value.

The serviceability of the disaggregated bodily life-capacities of the dispossessed and their subordinated incorporation within the ever-expanding machines of capital is part of what Hage calls generalized domestication, “a mode of inhabiting the world through dominating it for the purpose of making it yield value: material or symbolic forms of sustenance, comfort, aesthetic pleasure, and so on.”<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the domestication of certain species, generalized domestication is characterized by “the domestication of one’s whole environment”<sup>24</sup> and as such is necessarily a violent process. As Hage understands it, while it is “a struggle to make things partake in the making of one’s home, [. . .] a struggle to be ‘at home in the world,’” it is also paradoxically “a mode of domination, control, extraction, and exploitation.”<sup>25</sup> Such a mode of inhabitation creates precisely the conditions of global refuse concomitant with the cultivation of life and species that can yield value. War is the means of creating conditions of absolute expendability, conditions deliberately maintained for making domesticated human life available as forms of organized, technologized servitude.

## Servitude

What is servitude if not the work of subordinating one’s desires and needs to those you serve, of orienting yourselves always to your *amo*’s (master’s) concerns, problems, preference and pleasures, even anticipating what these might be, and acting according to how these concerns, preferences, and pleasures might be addressed or met.

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<sup>23</sup> Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> Hage, 87.

<sup>25</sup> Hage, 91.

Servitude feeds the entitlement of the served. The served see themselves as higher order beings living more complex and ultimately more valuable lives. They may outwardly sympathize with the plight and hardship of those for whom “it must be so hard,” yet they do not balk at having that plight benefit them. In fact, they convince themselves of their own generosity in “helping” those people who then come into their service. And yet, and for this very reason, they feel a certain level of contempt for their servants, and not just for the serving classes in general, and even more so, for the pools of disposable populations out of which these serving classes emerge, whether that contempt is very mild, nearly indiscernible, or great and unabashed. For the relationship only reinforces its premise, namely, that servants somehow deserve their place as the served deserve theirs, that their life-times are worth less than the life-times of their employers, that their skills and capacities are less valuable than the skills and capacities of those they wait on and tend to.

Good servants, epitomizing the gold standard of servitude, go beyond ministering to the declared needs of their employers. Besides their trustworthiness and “honesty”—that is, the reliable likelihood that they will not steal from those they work for, even while their “extra” skills and capacities, including their care, and their very life-times are stolen daily (the theft dissimulated by the remuneration of their service labor-time with a wage)—what good servants do is inhabit the subjectivities of their masters/employers, identify with their feelings and views, and defend their property and their interests.

Today, global servitude is the colonial and capitalist conscription of modes of cooperative living and sociality that have been described as the “ethics of care” of non-capitalist (or pre-capitalist transformed into peri-capitalist) societies.<sup>26</sup> This “care” is embodied in people’s older, capacious capacities to incorporate others in one’s actions, to act in and embody a kind of polytropic capacity—what others have defined as affectability, dividuality, fractal personhood, and social heteronomy (rather than the individual autonomy and sovereignty of modern

144

<sup>26</sup> See Stuart A. Schlegel, *The Wisdom from a Rainforest: The Spiritual Journey of an Anthropologist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

subjects).<sup>27</sup> These corporeal capacities for extended being, the divisibility and coordination of personal bodily faculties and social relations in everyday practices of shared life, which have been honed in domestic communities, are what countless dispossessed people rely on for their own and their family's survival. These capacities are conscripted, however, not only in their incorporation as operational functions within capitalist platforms, but also in the interface between those technological platforms and people's own social corporeal networks of social reproduction, or what I understand as their *vital platforms*, subaltern self-programming social machines of life-making that capital taps and depends on as a form of "nature" that it can freely appropriate.

### Socialized Reproduction

Capitalism's development occurs through the socialization of production, emblemized by the factory in its industrial moment and the social factory in its postindustrial moment. What figures less in many historical accounts of this development is capital's reliance on the socialization of reproduction carried out by peoples who had to rely on their own resources and subsidies for subsistence survival, and further, the role of this socialized reproduction of Third World peoples in the transformation of late twentieth and early twenty-first century global capitalism.

Socialized reproduction has been the subaltern driver and condition of possibility of the migrant labor industry, the growth of the service economy, the shift of capital investment from manufacturing production to biopolitical, cognitive, immaterial and material circulation and reproduction as sites of its highest value extraction, where exploitation is distributed and multiplied over a wider and more layered expanse across the entire social field than its predecessor of modern industrial production, which nevertheless had also relied on colonial peripheries or plantations of cheap "inputs" as unrecognized sources of value—

145

<sup>27</sup> See Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward A Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Roy Wagner, "The Fractal Person," in *Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia*, ed. Maurice Godelier and Marilyn Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 159–73; Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is—And Is Not* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

free or next to nothing raw materials or fixed capital (including unpaid and enslaved human labor).

The unprecedented global distribution of production is matched by the unprecedented distribution of reproduction. Even as reproduction becomes capitalized (and thus socialized), whether in the service economy or in the cognitive, communicative media economy (software as service business platforms in transportation, business process outsourcing, and social media), it continues to rely on another sphere of socialized reproduction—this time on the part of peoples wielding their own “stock” (their own human capital comprised of social relations), in which they are both *shares* and *shareholders*, in order to subsidize their incomes or wages, and to buoy up their individual lives as well as their collective (kin/family) life.

These domestic social networks comprised of kin and kin-like or kin-affiliated relations are *vital platforms* of today’s global capitalism, which come with their own sets of rules, obligations, needs, and histories.

James Scott notes the persistence of autonomy of these older social units in post-colonial nations (in contrast to the relative success of modern liberal states in settler colonial nations, where the legislation of individual freedoms enabled the state “to sweep away first in law and increasingly in practice, most of the ‘private’ individuals and social units who had functioned as intermediaries between the state and the individual”).<sup>28</sup> Scott writes, “Having yet to secure the individual freedoms of the modern liberal state, the practical or operative freedom of most Southeast Asians depends, to a considerable degree, on the relative autonomy of the social units within which they live.”<sup>29</sup> This “*relative freedom of non-state social units to determine their own residence, their own forms of community, and their own forms of property and production as opposed to the imposition of state-mediated forms of these*”<sup>30</sup> is what has propelled and enabled the continued thriving and survival of domestic communities that have historically served as resources (free, disposable nature for the taking) for colonial and capitalist powers.

146

<sup>28</sup> James C. Scott, “Freedom and Freehold: Space, People and State Simplification in Southeast Asia,” in *Asian Freedoms: The Idea of Freedom in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. David Kelly and Anthony Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38.

<sup>29</sup> Scott, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, 38.

As the self-sustaining autonomy and forms of subsistence of postcolonial, especially rural, domestic communities come under continuous assault through processes of primitive accumulation, what remains in their possession is not simply their individual bodily labor-power, which certainly they sell on the labor market as “freed” wage workers. What also remains for them is their kinship networks, a social corporeal, cooperative life-making power (and program) that enables survival for those whose life-forms and agencies are always interactively imbricated, dependent, and attached.

### **Relations of Life Expenditure and Help**

In the home country, people are left to care for the extended lives left by diasporic Filipinos, caring for family members who did not migrate with them, with fiat currencies earned elsewhere, converting their more valuable life-times into life-extensions of the kin of Filipinos everywhere, making possible the global “life” of Filipinos.

Everyone wastes their lives differently. In an economy of collaborative sustenance, you do what you can. Kin abroad might waste their life-times in employment, which might mean nothing more than expending their own low-value life-times in place of the high-value life-times of their employers, saving the latter valuable, capitalizable time, by taking on the unproductive work of their reproduction and maintenance, doing their chores, preserving and caring for their capital assets (houses, children, free time).

Meanwhile, local kin of those abroad might waste their life-times wading through traffic, filling out paperwork, waiting in lines, as public, bureaucratic and private agencies demand their expenditure as the content of their enterprises, which speed up and slow down, authorize and deauthorize, processes at every turn, with every turn incurring fees—notarizing documents, procuring the correct stamps, checking the boxes, filling out proper signatures.

In turn, local kin might be attended to by retinues of helpers of their own (poorer relations, or relations for hire), waiting on them, on demand, ready to do their bidding—find parking, deliver a package, run an errand, buy a part, fix things, fix papers, go out in the rain, slog through floods and crowds, be a body in a line, hold a place, be on hold, wait—to take an order, to move, to be of use. These

helpers are paid to shoulder hardship, to take on in their own bodies the discomfort, the dirt, the exhaustion and the emptiness of time lived and expended for others—life-times rented out for any reason whatsoever.

These are relations of variable expenditure, gradations of valued utility, that go all the way down chains of reproductive care of diminishing worth, each predicated on the extraction of others, until the very last drop, until one reaches those whose lives cost next to nothing, if not nothing altogether, and where people pass over to being worth more dead than alive, those whose role is now to serve as fodder for derivative value-making exchanges over murder and induced death (the police, the funeral parlors, the media, the humanitarians, the scholars)—the economy of life expenditures led by global and local enterprises of security wars.

Here everyone stands: servants, killers, and the dead—each on the precipice of falling into the other, each struggling to rise above, to accumulate and solidify, with only the last—the fully expended or eliminated—coming to a full stop.

What can make a difference (as great as the difference between living and dying) is one's relations' connection to networks of social value. Here is the meaning of social death—the severance from social being and status, from kinship, which for the disenfranchised is the primordial and remaining condition of *pagiging tao* (being human).

And yet the descendants of the colonized survive on more than these forms of expenditure. We also survive on the time-consuming lending of ourselves to each other, the very exchange, partition, and extension—the many kinds of giving—of what we have, who we are, where we might be, what we can reach, to sustain those of whom we similarly partake. We thrive to the extent that we depend on these vital platforms we come to be a part of and that we work to sustain as a matter of “mutual being,” a matter of our own life and death.

148

### **Bodily Transformations and Other Life Persistence**

The qualitative leap forward in technical process (attained by a new generation of machines), which each epochal shift in capitalist society entails, is propelled as much as enabled by the shifts and transformations in the collective and individual bodies (socialites and personhoods) of those whose lives and labors are

required for the social utility, operation, maintenance, facilitation, and valorization of those machines.<sup>31</sup>

Much is written about the shifts in subjectivity and sensibility of the vast users of digital media, many of these observed as the fragmentation and destruction of attention, the alienation and wounding of sensory and perceptual experience, the loss of memory and extension, the dispossession of youth, agency, and creativity, the derangement of human faculties and social relations, the lethargy concomitant with the imperative of productivity, etc.—changes alternately described as debilitating and sometimes differently abling—even as the online social reproductive activity of those very users seemingly permanently attached to their digital devices provides the “free labor” drawn on to build social media platforms and increase their value and power.<sup>32</sup>

There are certainly many detrimental social and subjective changes that are constituent effects of the digital age, but what is only now gaining more attention (and should be connected to the experiences of users, which also includes them) are the transformations required of workers on the back end of these same platforms. As the physical, psycho-affective, and social-relational living labor of workers enters directly into the operating systems of these computational machines that make possible the circulation-driven global economy, their bodily capacities become ever more integrated within and integral to the “planetary socio-natural system” that is global capitalism in what Martin Arboleda terms the fourth machine age.<sup>33</sup>

As Arboleda understands it, the fourth machine age is characterized by the synergistic fusion of human, non-human, and extra-human capacities across physical, digital, and biological domains, an unprecedented scale and immediacy of coordination that contemporary technological and scientific advancements make possible and controllable.<sup>34</sup> This contemporary megastructural, industri-

<sup>31</sup> Martin Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2020), 36.

<sup>32</sup> See Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (London: Verso, 2022); Hu, *Digital Lethargy*; Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> Arboleda, 49.

al-technological organization of capitalist production has given rise to “a polarizing alienated industrial organism—the collective laborer—whose material constitution is contingent upon the uneven distribution of productive attributes among its organs.”<sup>35</sup> While engineers, scientists, and designers are charged with complex parts of the labor process, their productive subjectivities expanded and developed, other workers are degraded “as mere appendages of technological infrastructures”<sup>36</sup> or slotted in manual/low-skill labor.

“The movements of worker’s bodies are what make the movement of global cargo possible,” Deborah Cowen notes, detailing the ways in which the rhythm of workers’ bodily movements in transport industries (shipping, airlines, trucking, and trains) are minutely calibrated with the logistics systems that undergird the high-speed commodity circulation of global supply chains.<sup>37</sup> Workers’ bodies are calibrated to the “body” of the lively transnational socio-technical system even as those same bodies are made to bear the costs of ensuring (securing) the steady flow of global trade through these chains.<sup>38</sup> As in past moments of capitalist machinofacuturing, workers’ bodies become instruments, tools, and appendages of capitalist machines but they are no longer confined to a single factory or locale. Rather they become parts of “the concrete corporeality of the sum total of the vast multitude of labors living under the geographies of capitalist society,” which are now distributed across the planet yet finely coordinated through mega computational-technical infrastructures anchored in, yet traversing, individual nation-states.<sup>39</sup>

Disposable workers’ bodily capacities become integrated in the more degraded organs of “this multiscalar, heterogeneous, and transnational industrial organism as a working whole.”<sup>40</sup> Beyond being simply connected and coordinated across diverse geographies in the transnational “stretching” of the factory, which prompted the rise of geo-economic calculative technics at the core of the

150

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<sup>35</sup> Arboleda, 79.

<sup>36</sup> Arboleda, 79.

<sup>37</sup> Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 125.

<sup>38</sup> Cowen, *Deadly Life of Logistics*, 113.

<sup>39</sup> Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*, 52.

<sup>40</sup> Arboleda, 80.



logistics revolution,<sup>41</sup> their vital capacities are fused with capitalist machinery, harnessed as both wage labor and means of production (blurring the distinction between variable capital and constant capital), exploited *and* appropriated, subsumed in the creation of increasingly sovereign megaplatforms whose powers of emergent self-directed growth and expansion are internally enhanced by vital capacities fused with their own machinic intelligence.

As Marte-Wood's and Santos' discussion of Filipino content moderation shows, the living labor and complex subjective and interpretative intelligence of humans as media are incorporated into the machine-learning of social media platforms themselves.<sup>42</sup> In this way, we might understand the harnessed capacities of serviceable life (transformed into components of machine intelligence)—slotted in technological labor tasks of purported low complexity—as contributing directly to the dynamism, growth, and development of platforms' programming software, and therefore to the continual leaps forward in processes of technical innovation otherwise solely attributed to high-end programmers and designers.<sup>43</sup> These human mediatic components therefore do more than maintain the platforms of value-productive connectivity and circulation. They are also organic to the purported self-improvement and evolution of “smart machines,” whose efficiency, speed, and automation are necessary for the aggressive pursuit and accumulation of relative surplus-value (the driving force of technological innovation).

Human media act not only as vital components of capitalist platforms but also as vital constituents of those platforms' natural-technical conditions of possibility, or, what Gilbert Simondon called the associated milieu of the technical object, which I read here as the very technical being (in the contemporary moment, the planetary computational socio-technical system or, in Jonathan Beller's analysis, “the world computer”) of global capital itself.<sup>44</sup> A view of the as-

<sup>41</sup> Cowen, *Deadly Life of Logistics*, 104. Cowen importantly argues that the revolution in logistics that began in the 1960s effectively realizes the value-productivity of transportation and movement (that is, of circulation as well as of manufacture production), whose potential Marx himself glimpses and suggests in the second volume of *Capital*.

<sup>42</sup> Marte-Wood and Santos, “Circuits of Care.”

<sup>43</sup> During the 1980s rise of East Asian industrialization, much of this low-level technological labor was outsourced to surplus populations of the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2017); Jonathan Beller, *The World Computer:*

sociated or enabling milieus of the labor-capital relation brings into focus those other corporeal or life conditions required for the assembly and operation of the collective laborer as “a pulsing, breathing, planetary organism.”<sup>45</sup>

Arboleda for example notes that the consolidation of the degraded organs of the collective laborer depends on the systematic assault on older rural, communitarian, agrarian forms of sociality.<sup>46</sup> In the mining industry as well as other resource extractive industries, on which the digital, robotic, and microelectronic technological innovations of the fourth machine age depend, the ongoing dismantling of older social forms, including forms of intimate and interdependent relations between human and non-human natures, has resulted in entire lifeworlds transformed through destruction into disposable resources. Such lifeworlds have become turned into what in Chile are informally called *zonas de sacrificio* (sacrifice zones), degraded environments collapsing under the social privations and predatory violence (street fights, drug abuse, sexual assault, theft) as well as severe (air, water, noise) pollution and toxicity resulting from intensive extraction, exploitation, and dispossession.<sup>47</sup>

Imperialism is this very dispossessive process by which entire necropolitical zones of global refuse, including disposable “surplus populations” and toxic, poisoned wastelands, are produced as a necessary dimension of the natural-technical milieu of the collective laborer.

The conditions of global refuse that global capital’s command over the planetary organism of global labor entails—the laying waste to people, the earth, waters and seas that a growing literature on the capitalocene has amply demonstrated is the necessary consequence of the capitalist mode of production<sup>48</sup>—points to

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*Derivative Conditions of Racial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021). For Beller, the “world computer” refers to the entire virtual operating system of the global communicative infrastructure, which results from “the practice that is information’s endless computation” (Beller, 264), including the cognitive and sensual capacities folded into cybernetics.

<sup>45</sup> Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Arboleda, 79.

<sup>47</sup> Arboleda, 94.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015); Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016).

the broader and longer historical colonial ecology of contemporary capitalism. Malcolm Ferdinand argues that colonization's principal action was the act of inhabiting, an act that was "based upon a set of actions that determined the boundaries between those who inhabit and those who do not inhabit," between lands that are inhabited and others not, between homes and ways of living that are proper forms of habitation and those that are not.<sup>49</sup> Ferdinand writes, "Colonial inhabitation refers to a singular conception with regard to the existence of certain human beings on Earth—the colonists—of their relationships with other humans—the non-colonists—as well as their way of relating to nature and to the non-humans of these islands."<sup>50</sup> Akin to Hage's notion of generalized domestication, colonial inhabitation is a mode of being structured by principles of territorial domination, exploitation and extraction of land and nature, and othericide, that is, the denial of Otherness and its reduction to the Same of the colonizer. Founded on the violences of land seizure, land clearing, and the massacre of indigenous peoples, colonial inhabitation establishes forms of habitation—what we might understand as forms of its own reproduction—based on intensive monocultures and mass exploitation of human beings, paradigmatically exemplified by colonial plantations and slavery. These forms of habitation, whereby the inhabitants are the masters and the enslaved are those who do not inhabit but instead exist only to be used as the tools and raw materials (resources) of the inhabitants, can be seen shaping the "good life" of contemporary global capitalism and the devastation of its enabling milieus.

### Colonial Ecology, Planetary Remainder

As we've seen, colonial inhabitation shapes the relation between globopolitical citizen-subjects and human mediatic components of infrastructure and software for capitalist enterprises. It also shapes the continuous process of global depeasantization required for resource extraction industries—or what, citing Achille Mbembe, Arboleda describes as "the transformation of formerly free peasants into *bodies of extraction*—that is, bodies that extract minerals and are also rendered into living deposits for the extraction of value."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 27.

<sup>50</sup> Ferdinand, 27.

<sup>51</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), Spanish translation quoted in Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*, 78.

More than the instrumentalization of labor commodities to be expended in the production of extrinsic value, the utilization of humans as commodities with the intrinsic capacity for the incubation and (re)production of future value was historically developed through the enslaved Black woman, as Jennifer L. Morgan and Françoise Vergès have powerfully shown.<sup>52</sup> These historical social processes integral to the production of value continue to underpin and shape the most technologically advanced forms of capitalist mediation today. Indeed, the relations of colonialism and slavery can be understood not only to have organized the contemporary divisions of organs within the collective laborer, but also to have been codified as racial, sex-gender logics that permeate and inform the protocols of capitalist production in all its material relations, including the imperial formation of capital's associated milieus.

The ecology of colonial inhabitation, which manifested itself early on in the history of European settler colonial settlement as “a condition of continual disruption: of plowed fields, razed forests, overgrazed pastures, and burned prairies, of deserted villages and expanding cities, of humans, animals, plants, and micro life that have evolved separately suddenly coming into intimate contact,” is now planetary in depth and scale.<sup>53</sup> To recognize the planetary scope of this colonial ecology calls us to attend to the transformation (destruction, renovation, alienation) of older forms of human-extra human cooperation and other ecologies in the face of this global generalized colonized domestication of the earth, which harnesses what it finds value-producing while sloughing off what it deems waste, while eliminating populations and species it finds threatening to its own aims and existence, producing “an ephemeralized world” composed of entire zones of disposability (of expendable resources, viewed as both surplus and waste—the former to be freely appropriated, the latter to be redeemed and repurposed through investment).

154

In that broad scale transformation, however, we also see the inventions and re-configurations of agencies and engines of collective life-making on the part of

<sup>52</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Françoise Vergès, *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*, trans. Kaiama L. Glover (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>53</sup> Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 291–92.

those deemed disposable, such as those human populations whose capacities and faculties are to be integrated into the circulatory and nervous systems of the collective laborer. As the global pursuit of relative surplus-value through technological innovation proceeds at a relentless pace, and circulation, movement, and connectivity become ever more important to value-production, their bodies of servitude are split and fragmented, their faculties divided, made into fungible component functions in this planetary technical-natural organism of production. At the same time, other bodies are rendered absolutely expendable, becoming part of the raw materials consumed by global machines of communication, logistics, circulation, and war—fuel for the ever-enlarging sociometabolic reproduction of capital. Yet even as capital depends on these bodies of disposable life to form the sinews and flesh of its planetary corporeality, those very bodies are also engaged in their own social reproduction, engaging in forms of life-making that capital draws on as part of its enabling milieu, which it paradoxically destroys and preserves.<sup>54</sup>

We are therefore called upon to see the changes in the material-social fabric of planetary relations, particularly the transformed configurations of immanent socio-natural capacities of disposable humans, in terms of their own life-making practices and protocols, beyond their disassembled and distributed capacities incorporated as digital appendages of capitalist machines. I have in mind the dividual bodily and relational capacities comprising people's social matrices of survival—older forms of cooperation and social reproduction, which are harnessed to the dominant colonial-capitalist ecology but are not fully subsumed by it.

Certainly, migrant workers' bodies become fused with the tools, machines, and implements of their work, their movements finely calibrated to the algorithmic programs for global production. Through her brilliant performance and kinaesthetic archiving of Philippine workers' bodily and affective labor in the global service and entertainment industries, movement artist Eisa Jocson has highlighted both the disciplining colonial power that commands their bodily trans-

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<sup>54</sup> This is Claude Meillassoux's understanding of imperialism's paradoxical relation to non-capitalist domestic communities. Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

formations and the virtuosic human mediatic capacities that workers exercise to heed that command.<sup>55</sup>

Jocson explores and demonstrates the pliability and malleability of their gendered, sexual, and racial identities, their physical, socio-cultural mimetic and empathetic abilities, their bodily and psycho-affective capacities for inhabiting and transmitting signs, emotions, messages, capacities for being the mediums of others' desires, fantasies, being. In doing so, she attends to the high-level of skill, fluency, and corporeal virtuosity of Filipinx bodies extracted and incorporated in and as "service machines," capacities that emerge out of another genealogy and ecology, beyond those of colonial inhabitation in the history of capital.

Even as they can mold their bodily emotive selves to meet the needs of an imperial capital sensorium, these workers are also shape-shifting to meet the needs of their own families. As Valerie Francisco-Menchavez argues, migrant workers importantly act as important nodal actants in networks of multidirectional care, their bodies occupying more than one space-time as they endeavor to be virtually at home (in the Philippines) while being physically at work often simultaneously through the very same technologies that other workers are fused with.<sup>56</sup> While they work to keep their host/employers' bodies and lives intact, their care work put towards reproducing the latter in the life-form of value as full-subject humans, they also engage in a mode of living and inhabiting of distributed bodily being, across multiple spaces and persons, whose distances are bridged by technologies, letters, remittances, words, and images, gifts and acts of reproducing themselves and other dividual members of another corporeal structure, which I have called vital platforms. Geraldine Pratt notes, "An individual Filipina caregiver enrolls her entire family when she migrates,"<sup>57</sup> and as Francisco-Menchavez observes, the roles that migrant workers' appear to have vacated to work abroad are "absorbed and distributed through the extended kin net-

156

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Jocson's works, *Host* (2015), *Happyland Part I: Princess* (2017), *Your Highness* (2017), and *Becoming White* (2018), available at <https://eisajocson.wordpress.com/works/>.

<sup>56</sup> Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

<sup>57</sup> Geraldine Pratt, *Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labor and Love* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xxviii.

works that were already there.”<sup>58</sup> Both Pratt and Francisco-Menchavez carefully attend to these networks consisting of the bodily lives, faculties, capacities, and relationality of kin, friends, and affiliates—what I have called vital platforms—which people both continue to mobilize and revise certainly as components, but also as coders, programmers, and users.

The difference between the planetary organism that is global labor and the corporeal webs composed of the latter’s extended living networks of survival spells a planetary remainder—an excess of life-making beyond capital’s biopolitical command. To attend to the mycorrhizal form of these social human networks calls us to older relations of living that persist, even if under painful duress. Mycorrhizae are “fungal helpers,” extending their bodies through thread-like strands which mediate the nutrient exchange between the soil and trees, whose roots they fuse with. Forming a “biological *communications network*” below-ground, they figure kinds of mediating agency, symbiotic relations, and non-human forms of species cooperation on which so much living depends.<sup>59</sup> To view the vital platforms of people in these terms of non-human being is to consider other ecologies of lifemaking, which these matrices of living might yet imply, insofar as these forms of social reproduction on the part of dispossessed communities were historically, genealogically, and yet might be cooperatively entwined with these very non-human natures and lifeworlds. I see these other ecologies—or perhaps “alterecologies,” following Michelle Murphy’s notion of “alterlife”<sup>60</sup>—as the subsistence that happens both despite and beyond the seeming total global subsumption of planetary life. They compose the planetary remainder that may well be our only hope for another future.

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<sup>58</sup> Francisco-Menchavez, *Labor of Care*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Phillips, *The Holistic Orchard: Tree Fruits and Berries the Biological Way* (Vermont: Chelsea Green, 2011), 5.

<sup>60</sup> Michelle Murphy, “Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations,” *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (2017): 494–503, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.02>. Also quoted and elaborated on in Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*.

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Nina Cvar\*

## Emancipating from (Colonial) Genealogies of the Techno-social Networks or Reversing Power Relations by Turning the Predator into Prey in Jordan Peele's *Nope*

### Keywords

body, race, algorithmic governmentality, computational unconscious, Eurocentric matrix of power, *Nope*, Jordan Peele

### Abstract

The article aims to map the contemporary techno-social networks, together with delineation of the algorithmic governmentality, computational unconscious, the epistemic structure of the Eurocentric matrix of power haunted by its own repetition of the constant abyss of horrors, only to search for gestures of resistance. Gestures of resistance, contrary to the false conviction of capitalist realism, can be found everywhere, including in Jordan Peele's *Nope* (2022). Through a variety of motifs, themes, and cultural and cinematic references, Peele creates a resistance image, i.e., an image that resists the historical trajectory of the violence of the digital colonial matrix of knowledge. In particular with *Nope*, in which the history of racial violence is disentangled by evoking the relation between the entanglement of capital and epistemic violence embodied in an all-devouring predator UFO. But *Nope* is also about visualizing silenced histories. Indeed, to strive to capture UFO with the camera is to break away from modernity as a totalizing onto-epistemology and in this register generating a false universal subject of a Man.

## Emancipiranje od (kolonialnih) genealogij tehnodružbenih omrežij ali preobrat razmerij s spreminjanjem plenilca v plen v filmu *Nak* režiserja Jordana Peele

161

### Ključne besede

telo, rasa, algoritmična vladnost, računalniško nezavedno, evropocentrična matrica moči, *Nak*, Jordan Peele

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## Povzetek

Namen članka je kartirati sodobna tehnodružbena omrežja skupaj z razmejitvijo algoritmične vladnosti, računalniškega nezavednega in epistemične strukture evrocentrične matrice moči (ki jo preganja lastno ponavljanje nenehne brezna grozot) ter poiskati geste upora. V nasprotju z napačnim prepričanjem kapitalističnega realizma, lahko te geste odpora najdemo povsod, tudi v filmu *Nak* Jordana Peeleja (2022). Peele z različnimi motivi, temami ter kulturnimi in filmskimi referencami ustvari podobo odpora, tj. podobo, ki se upira zgodovinski poti nasilja digitalne kolonialne matrice znanja. Zlasti v filmu *Nak* je zgodovina rasnega nasilja razgrnjena z osvetlitvijo razmerja med prepletenostjo kapitala in epistemičnim nasiljem, ki pa je utelešeno v vse požirajočem plenilskem neznancu iz vesolja (NLP). Toda *Nak* govori tudi o vizualiziranju utišanih zgodovin. S kamero ujeti NLP namreč pomeni pretrgati z modernostjo kot totalizirajočo onto-epistemologijo in v takšnem registru generirati lažni univerzalni subjekt Človeka.



## Introduction

As argued by Tiziana Terranova and Ravi Sudaram, the techno-social hypothesis is based on the idea that the social is never about the possession of an intrinsic or pre-existing reality, but is, to speak with Michel Foucault, historical, “transactional.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, the articulation of the social in light of the emergence of the digital as the dominant contemporary mode of production is about the interplay of power relations as well as everything that eludes them—in particular, the question of the status of bodies in this new condition of prescriptive humanity generated by the programmability of algorithmic instructions.

162

How can we think about the body, which is, in Marina Vishmidt’s words, “a site where all politics has to begin but which itself manages to avoid scrutiny as a political problem or a contradictory enunciation,”<sup>2</sup> in this realm of tech-

<sup>1</sup> Tiziana Terranova and Ravi Sundaram, “Colonial Infrastructures and Techno-Social Networks,” *E-flux Journal* 123 (December 2021), [http://workero1.e-flux.com/pdf/article\\_437385.pdf](http://workero1.e-flux.com/pdf/article_437385.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Marina Vishmidt, “Bodies in Space: On the Ends of Vulnerability,” *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 8 (Autumn 2020): 35, [https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/rp208\\_vishmidt.pdf](https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/rp208_vishmidt.pdf).

no-social networks for which Ravi Sudaram argues that one cannot think without considering the importance of the colonial techne and the colonial social?<sup>3</sup> Or to go back to the late 2000s: if, according to Marie-Luise Angerer, the central question was *whose body*, affirming the need to understand the body and the subject,<sup>4</sup> then the pressing question today is how to emancipate bodies from the pervasive postcolonial infrastructure, characterized by the loss of the distinction between the social (government, welfare) and the medial (entertainment, cinema, TV) in the postcolonial environment of the intertwining of sovereignty, government with the multiplicity of circulations (media forms, beliefs, desires, commodities, money)?<sup>5</sup>

This text therefore aims to map the contemporary techno-social networks, together with delineation of the algorithmic governmentality, computational unconscious, the epistemic structure of the Eurocentric matrix of power haunted by its own repetition of the constant abyss of horrors, only to search for gestures of emancipation. Gestures of resistance, contrary to the false conviction of capitalist realism, can be found everywhere, including in Jordan Peele's *Nope* (2022).

### The Contemporary Regime of Techno-Social Networks and Its Structural Omnipresence

To map the contemporary regime of techno-social networks, I will redefine Jacques Rancière's notion of regime. If, according to Rancière, a regime is a kind of link between the production of works (or artistic practice) and the forms of visibility that these forms take,<sup>6</sup> I will define techno-social networks as a regime that operates by creating a link between technology and the social. Contemporary techno-social networks are characterized by the combination of digitalization, global outsourcing, off-shoring, environmental catastrophe,<sup>7</sup> surplus

<sup>3</sup> Terranova and Sundaram, "Colonial Infrastructures."

<sup>4</sup> Marie-Luise Angerer, "The Body Bytes Back," in "The Body/Le corps/Der Körper," ed. Marina Gržinić Mauhler, special issue, *Filozofski vestnik* 23, no. 2 (2002): 221–32.

<sup>5</sup> Terranova and Sundaram, "Colonial Infrastructures."

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Phillipe Deranty, "Regimes of the Arts," in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Phillipe Deranty (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 116–30.

<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Ignorance Too, Is a Form of Power," interview by Malka Gouzer, Chilperic, November 9, 2020, <https://www.chilperic.ch/interview/achille-mbembe-15.html>.

population forced to take precarious jobs with stagnant wages,<sup>8</sup> leading to an extreme concentration of wealth.<sup>9</sup> This enmeshing of technology and society is by no means new. Technology is thus revealing not only how we interact with nature, but more importantly, how social relationships are formed and the mental categories that accompany them.<sup>10</sup>

With digitalization impacting all social spheres,<sup>11</sup> the categories of modernity, i.e., class, gender, and race, are being redefined,<sup>12</sup> resulting in unique forms of the exercise of power. In this regard, the techno-social is not just about delegating social interaction, but also about processing the content generated by social interaction.<sup>13</sup>

Following Tiziana Terranova and Ravi Sundram, technology attains a kind of double position: it acts as a precondition and as an affordance of post-human performative assemblages<sup>14</sup> that lead to the construction of contemporary social formations whose predominant mode of production is the digital mode of production. According to Marina Gržinić, this mode of production exemplifies the techno-capitalist division of labor, a form of social programming that leads to an increased commodification and computerization.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 139.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie; Erster Band, Buch I, Der Produktionsprozess des Kapitals* (Hamburg: Otto Meissner, 1867), 352, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/page/marx-k1-1867>.

<sup>11</sup> Christoph Musik and Alexander Bogner, eds., *Digitalization and Society: A Sociology of Technology Perspective on Current Trends in Data, Digital Security and the Internet* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), 1–14, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel Dixon-Román, “Algo-Ritmo: More-Than-Human Performative Acts and the Racializing Assemblages of Algorithmic Architectures,” *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 5 (October 2016): 482–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616655769>.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Erickson, “Social Computing,” in *The Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction*, ed. Mads Soegaard and Rikke Friis Dam, 2nd ed. (Aarhus, Denmark: Interaction Design Foundation, 2014), chap. 4, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/social-computing>.

<sup>14</sup> Terranova and Sundaram, “Colonial Infrastructures.”

<sup>15</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production,” in *Regimes of Invisibility in Contemporary Art, Theory and Culture*, ed. Marina Gržinić, Aneta Stojnić, and Miško Šuvaković (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 13–28.

In order for this contemporary regime to operate, the body is subjected to a combination of capital pressures. Technologies are equally important, however, as they constitute bodies as technical means to achieve certain ends, where-in these ends are socially embedded and the embodiment is a conglomerate of different sets of agencies.<sup>16</sup> Achille Mbembe claims, for example, that under neoliberal conditions we witness a “convergence, and at times fusion, between the human being and the objects, artefacts or technologies that supplement or augment us.”<sup>17</sup>

This force of capital to which bodies are subjected is perhaps best defined as brutalism.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Mbembe’s writings assume racialized bodies<sup>19</sup> for which, as Joseph Confavreux argues, neoliberalism has constituted a “gigantic pumping and carbonization mechanism.”<sup>20</sup> The genealogy of contemporary techno-social networks thus requires a delineation of the relation between technology, capital, and racialization. However, Mbembe’s thesis of “becoming Black of the world,”<sup>21</sup> according to which the term “Black” has been generalized and thus has become a new norm of existence that extends to the entire planet, refers to a generalized, vulnerable and precarious mode of existence, which is further transformed into coded digital data in the digital mode of production.<sup>22</sup>

## Ubiquity of Algorithms: Algorithmic Governmentality

Each historical era develops its own privileged ways of imagining or making sense of the world.<sup>23</sup> Ours is characterized by codes and algorithms. In this re-

<sup>16</sup> See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Achille Mbembe, “The Digital Age Erases the Divide between Humans and Objects,” *Mail and Guardian*, January 6, 2017, <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-01-06-00-the-digital-age-erases-the-divide-between-humans-and-objects/>.

<sup>18</sup> Mbembe, “Ignorance.”

<sup>19</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Decolonial Anxieties in a Postcolonial World: An Interview with Achille Mbembe,” interview by Joseph Confavreux, *Postcolonial Studies* 25, no. 1 (2022): 128–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2022.2050587>.

<sup>20</sup> Mbembe, “Decolonial Anxieties,” 128

<sup>21</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

spect, we are confronted with the need to situate the analysis of the algorithm within the analysis of knowledge/power/subject, which in the case of the analysis of algorithms means considering their intersection with the world in the way they relate to current models of political rationality and governmentality. When we ask how algorithmic governmentality fits within the framework of contemporary capitalism, we cannot bypass racialization as a differentiating social process. In this regard, it makes sense to analyze both liberal governmentality and algorithmic governmentality together.

If the so-called liberal governmentality is characterized by an emphasis on statistical knowledge—whereby not only statistics but also quantitative techniques, together with numerical understanding, provide a discursive guarantee for the calculation of probabilities, with the aim of ensuring an “informed decision”—in algorithmic governmentality we can observe the development of the idea that the so-called technical aspect of the algorithm guarantees impartiality.<sup>24</sup> Or, as David Beer points out, the algorithm becomes an integral part of the discourse of “efficiency” and thus of the “normalization” of the actual reality of global capitalism.<sup>25</sup> Following Antoinette Rouvroy and Bernard Stiegler, however, algorithmic governmentality erases the distance between raw data and databases, thereby circumventing the site of production of critical thought.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, algorithmic governmentality, even if its discursive premise is “apolitical implementation,” successfully coexists with neoliberal forms of governmentality. The latter raises the question of the political and the “use of bodies” in particular. In her analysis, Shoshana Zuboff points out that a mixture of state and capital has formed a unique relation with digital technologies that manifests itself in two groups: the watchers (invisible, unknown and unaccountable) and the watched.<sup>27</sup> But who are the watched?

<sup>24</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, “The Relevance of Algorithms,” in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 167–93.

<sup>25</sup> David Beer, “The Social Power of Algorithms,” *Information, Communication and Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1216147>.

<sup>26</sup> Antoinette Rouvroy and Bernard Stiegler, “The Digital Regime of Truth: From the Algorithmic Governmentality to a New Rule of Law,” trans. Anaïs Nony and Benoît Dillet, *La Deleuziana* 3 (2016): 6–29, [http://www.ladeleuziana.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Rouvroy-Stiegler\\_eng.pdf](http://www.ladeleuziana.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Rouvroy-Stiegler_eng.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).



The watched are all the “damned,” the racialized, abandoned migrant bodies left to die in the dominance of the fake vitalism of necropolitics, which feeds its vitalism from automated computational techniques that increasingly operate through prescriptive and mechanical mediation of virtually eliminating the human on the one hand, and by discursively covering precisely this kind of elimination on the other. But what is the status of subjectivity within algorithmic governmentality?

### Programming (Of Any Kind) Subjectivities

Contemporary subjectivity is emerging within the so-called logic of programmability by which Wendy Hui Kyong Chun is emphasizing convergence between “user-friendly” computer interfaces, neoliberal governmentality and human capital, adding that that computer interfaces operate as intermediaries between the visible and the invisible, performing as navigational aids which are key in shaping the “informed” individuals who, by mapping their relation to the totality of global capitalism, transcend the chaos of global capitalism.<sup>28</sup> This “informed individual” is based on computer programs. Given this result, Chun proposes to relate computer programs to Laplacean determinism, which is about an all-knowing intelligence that can comprehend the future by apprehending the past and present.<sup>29</sup> Computers must therefore be understood as dispositive elements

individuating us and also integrating us into a totality, their interfaces offer us a form of mapping, of storing files central to our seemingly sovereign—empowered—subjectivity. By interacting with these interfaces, we are also mapped: data-driven machine learning algorithms process our collective data traces in order to discover underlying patterns (this process reveals that our computers are now more profound programmers than their human counterparts).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>29</sup> Chun, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Chun, 9.

Chun's contribution demonstrates structural convergence between technological innovation and capitalism, characterized by specific inclination of individual to social formation, quoting Marx:

Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production whereby he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them.<sup>31</sup>

Marx's underpinning of a unique aggregate between technology, nature, society and subjectivity confirms Chun's analysis of Laplacean determinism. In particular, due to recent developments of Large Language Models (LLMs) such as Chat GPT as sophisticated statistical models, it can be argued that Laplacean determinism has become even more present as a standardized mental conception. By creating a human-like dialog to answer queries, AI chatbots evoke a kind of Baudrillardian vision of simulation at the level of language, subjecting the unconscious to epistemological and semiotic alterations of digital (algorithmic) governmentality.

### Computational Unconscious

In order to understand the digital unconscious, we must first define the psychoanalytic unconscious, because the psychoanalytic unconscious

refers to the existence of ideas which are not just not being thought about (hence not just "not in consciousness") but which are also radically *unavailable* to thought—they cannot be brought to awareness even if the person tries really hard, or at least it is more of a struggle than one person can manage on her or his own. These hidden ideas, however, have a profound influence on psychological life.<sup>32</sup>

The political evocation of the psychoanalytic unconscious is well known: from Freud's analysis of group psychology, where types of ties between the subject

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<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy; Volume 1, The Process of Capitalist Production*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 352.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Frosh, *Key Concepts in Psychoanalysis* (London: British Library, 2002), 12–13.

and other people via so-called identification mechanisms are addressed,<sup>33</sup> to Althusser, who valorizes Marx's position on ideology as a "camera obscura" or false consciousness, providing a scientific project of ideology through the famous formula of interpellation,<sup>34</sup> to end with Rancière's unique conceptualization of emancipation as politics, which operates as an enactment of equality.<sup>35</sup> But what happens with the rise of universalizing digital culture?

In the late 20th century, the unconscious was reintroduced by Felix Guattari. Combining theoretical research from fields as diverse as cybernetics, semiotics, ethnology, and ethology, Guattari introduced the concept of machinic unconscious in 1979. With the concept of the machinic unconscious, Guattari succeeded not only in renewing debates about the relation between capitalism, social order, power, and subjectivity, but also in rethinking the concept of the unconscious itself, particularly how it

affects all kinds of perceptions and actions, affecting the possible itself and all forms of communication, not just linguistic ones. [Guattari] uses the term machinic unconscious to stress that it is full of "machinisms that lead it to produce and reproduce these images and words."<sup>36</sup>

According to Franco Berardi and Geert Lovink, however, Guattari's most important contribution is the way he thought about the relation between the unconscious and technology.<sup>37</sup> Guattari argued that, unlike the psychoanalytic uncon-

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1922).

<sup>34</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 142–47, 166–76.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Dave Harris, "Notes On: Guattari, F. (2011) *The Machinic Unconscious. Essays in Schizoanalysis*, Translated by Taylor Adkins. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents," Dave Harris and Colleagues, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.arasite.org/machincunconsc.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Franco Berardi, "Mental Long Covid and the Techno-Social Unconscious: A Conversation with Franco 'Bifo' Berardi," interview by Geert Lovink, *E-flux Notes*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/468343/mental-long-covid-and-the-techno-social-unconscious-a-conversation-with-franco-bifo-berardi>.

scious, which is representational unconscious crystallized in codified complexes and repartitioned on a genetic axis, unconscious is actually built like a map.<sup>38</sup>

Recently, Jonathan Beller has presented his work on the de-fetishization of computation. Via the means of production, proposing computation unconscious, Beller argues that the computational process, like the capitalist process, has a corrosive effect on the whole senses system, along with ontological assumptions and traditions. To quote Beller:

Computation has fully colonized the knowable cosmos [. . .], it allows us to propose that seeing the universe as computation, as, in short, simulable, if not itself a simulation (the computational effect of an informatic universe) [. . .]. The universe as it appears to us is figured by—that is, it is a figuration of—computation. That’s what our computers tell us.<sup>39</sup>

One of the most pressing political questions of our time is what comes out of this computational unconscious, because of the automated decisions and biases associated with algorithms.<sup>40</sup> It is not only knowledge that is subjected to automatization. Existing power relations are also part of the datafication through which all of life becomes susceptible to being processed through forms of analysis that are automated on a large scale.<sup>41</sup> This autonomous status of automation facilitates the homogenization, standardization, and objectification already predicted by Horkheimer and Adorno within the so-called cultural industries,<sup>42</sup> even if they manifest themselves a bit differently in digital society, through unique forms of individualization, decentralization, labor distribution, and specific mode of (digital) mediatization.

<sup>38</sup> Felix Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious: Essays in Schizoanalysis*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Beller, “The Computational Unconscious,” *B20*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.boundary2.org/2018/08/beller/>.

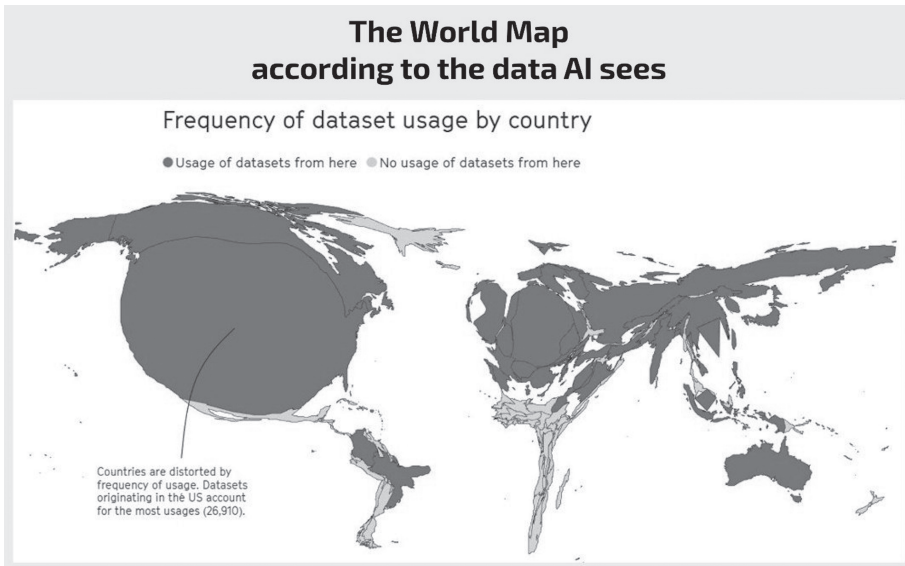
<sup>40</sup> See Sašo Dolenc, “Etične dileme umetne inteligence: Predlog moratorija na nadgradnjo sistemov jezikovne umetne inteligence,” *Kvarkadabra*, March 30, 2023, <https://kvarkadabra.net/2023/03/eticne-dileme-umetne-inteligence/>.

<sup>41</sup> See Ulises A. Mejias and Nick Couldry, “Datafication,” *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1428>.

<sup>42</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektika razsvetljenstva: Filozofski fragmenti*, trans. Seta Knop, Mojca Kranjc, and Rado Riha (Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, 2006).

## Continuation of (Colonial) Genealogies or Digital Geopolitics of Knowledge

Graham et al. argue that codified knowledge follows a pattern of inequality in terms of geographic representation, with some parts of the world being at the center of global voice and representation while others remaining invisible or unheard.<sup>43</sup> The visualization (below) created by the Internet Health Report in 2022 clearly shows the continuation of the Eurocentric geopolitics of knowledge.



**Fig. 1:** Image of the map taken from “Who Has Power Over AI?,” Internet Health Report 2022, accessed August 2, 2023, <https://2022.internethealthreport.org/facts/>. Visualisation based on data from Bernard Koch, Emily Denton, Alex Hanna, and Jacob G. Foster, “Reduced, Reused and Recycled: The Life of a Dataset in Machine Learning Research” ArXiv, December 3, 2021, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2112.01716>.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Graham, Bernie Hogan, Ralph K. Straumann, and Ahmed Medhat, “Uneven Geographies of User-Generated Information: Patterns of Increasing Informational Poverty,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 104, no. 4 (2014): 746–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2014.910087>.

Michael Kwet shows, for example, the intertwining between multinational corporations and U.S. imperialism, which is—and this is probably the most important implication—dissemination of a distinct vision of digitalization.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, social conditions of digitalization are embedded in the colonial matrix of power. This matrix is intertwined with racial, sexual, ideological, aesthetic, religious, military and patriarchal dimensions.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, unless digitalization is delinked from the colonial matrix of power, it further exacerbates the reality of global capitalism with digital technologies putting our unconscious under the sword of empty epistemic Western circularity. But what is the mechanism behind this epistemic cage?

### **Vectors of Hauntology: The Repeating Catastrophe of Epistemic Western Circularity, Self-Referentiality, Empty Formalism, and Tautology**

Recent images of the abrupt collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and the departure of Swiss bank Credit Suisse brought back memories of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. Yet, as was the case 15 years ago, many words were spoken but very few addressed the structural contours of the lurking manifestation of the latest chapter of global capitalism. As if we were dealing with a kind of blockage that perhaps has less to do with the inability to think than with what Mark Fisher calls “reflexive impotence,” which, according to Fisher, is not so much the result of apathy and cynicism, but springs from a certain kind of reflection.<sup>46</sup> This reflection is not about passively observing the situation that already exists, but rather springs from a unique understanding of the future itself, resulting in a grim realization that “things are bad.” A much more important condition for the reflexive powerlessness described, however, is not the recognition of the conditions of reality, but the state of prolonged non-action.

172

Although Fisher focused primarily on British youth, his analyzes can be applied elsewhere, particularly with regard to the normalization of capitalist realism, which Fisher defines as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the

<sup>44</sup> Michael Kwet, “Digital Colonialism: US Empire and the New Imperialism in the Global South,” *Race and Class* 60, no. 4 (April–June 2019): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396818823172>.

<sup>45</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire and Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2009), 21.

only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.<sup>47</sup>

The reactions to the recent turmoil in the “financial paradise” were therefore not really reactions of shock—rather tired sighs of “not again” that in some ways underscored the idea of capitalist realism and capitalism’s inclination for a series of crises and paradoxical events in particular.

Following Santiago López Petit,<sup>48</sup> Marina Gržinić brought his work into focus, exposing precisely repetition that can be identified by the so-called unrestraintment of capital, which manifests itself as a reversible and conflictual event.<sup>49</sup> This unrestraintment of capital generates a paradoxical spatialization that requires two repetitions at the same time: a founding repetition, by which a system of hierarchy is re-established, leading to the constant reconstruction of a center and a periphery; and, on the other hand, a de-foundational repetition, which acts as an erosion of hierarchies, generating dispersion, multiplicity and multi-reality.<sup>50</sup>

López Petit and Gržinić’s analyses thus demonstrate the structural conditions of capitalism, but their argument also reveals characteristics of the social bond of contemporary global capitalism, particularly in relation to the categories of global space and time. This research dates back to 2009, the argument of the unrestraintment of capital has been far-reaching, due to repetition of the unrestraintment of capital vertically and horizontally, resulting in circularity of self-referentiality and empty formalism on the one hand and a tautology that produces obviousness on the other. What else is the appearance of another financial crisis if not the circularity of self-referentiality with its exclamations of structural obviousness?

173

It seems that the circularity of self-referentiality haunts contemporary reality. But how does this mechanism of haunting operate?

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<sup>47</sup> Fisher, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Santiago López Petit, *La movilización global: Breve tratado para atacar la realidad* (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Capital, Repetition,” *Reartikulacija* 8 (2009): 3.

<sup>50</sup> Gržinić, 3.

The concept of hauntology was introduced by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. Unlike traditional “ontology,” which is about the self-identical present, hauntology is not about the present.<sup>51</sup> For example, in his interpretation of Derrida, Martin Hägglund claims that we can distinguish between two directions in hauntology: the first is no longer but still effective as virtuality, operating as a traumatic compulsion to repeat, while the second is about inactuality, something that has not yet happened but is already effective in the virtual, anticipating behavioral content.<sup>52</sup>

In terms of the circularity of self-referentiality, both directions can be identified, whether as different modulations of the capitalist mode of production, e.g., the recurring specter of neoliberalism, or, in the epistemic context, Eurocentrism.

But what is the circularity of self-referentiality in relation to the future? It is literary about the failure of the future, resulting in stripping off all potentialities. As if the future is haunting the present, but not as much as virtuality of openness, but more as a token of a capital speculation, which, it seems, haunts the social. If the first decade of the twenty-first century was marked by mourning for the lost futures that the twentieth century had wished for, the following decade led to the decay of a whole kind of social imagination, with financial speculation becoming the sole arbiter of reality, ending in a changed status of the register of real, which has become somehow displaced, due to the omitted criterion for distinguishing between real and imaginary value.<sup>53</sup> However, this does not mean that the role of the real is diminished, on the contrary. Since extractivism is crucial to contemporary global capitalist accumulation—according to UNCTAD, more than 100 countries specialize in extracting and exporting raw materials<sup>54</sup>—the so-called real is integral, since extractivism shapes the economy and marks politics.<sup>55</sup> John Belamy Foster, for example, shows the link between the accelera-

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>52</sup> Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, trans. Joachim Redner and Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 67.

<sup>54</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *State of Commodity Dependence 2021* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.18356/9789210057790>.

<sup>55</sup> Hannes Warnecke-Berger, Hans-Jürgen Burchardt, and Rachid Ouaisa, “Natural Resources, Raw Materials, and Extractivism: The Dark Side of Sustainability,” *Extractivism Policy Brief* 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.17170/kobra-202305168028>.



tion of extractivism and financialization, with international finance based in the Global North commodifying and managing ecosystem services primarily in the Global South.<sup>56</sup> But extractive infrastructure is not confined to the periphery of the capitalist world economy, underscoring Martin Arboleda's claim that global extractivism is identified with "generalized monopoly capital" and the conditions of late imperialism.<sup>57</sup> In relation to extractivism, Eduardo Gudynas points to renewed imperial dependency in the Global South,<sup>58</sup> and similarly, James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer describe new extractivism as a new imperialist model emerging after the collapse of the neoliberal model, subjecting countries into new forms of dependency.<sup>59</sup>

Contemporary reality is therefore marked by the structural logic that López Petit and Gržinić refer to as the unrestraintment of capital, which manifests itself as a reversible and conflictual event, i.e., the capitalist expropriation of nature, specifically extractivism, which is also accompanied by other necropolitical accumulative systems, in particular with new computational media and digital technologies. These are, to speak with Achille Mbembe, not only extracting surplus value through the annexation and commodification of the human attention span, but also promote the disappearance of transcendence and its re-institutionalization in the guise of the commodity.<sup>60</sup> In this context, the central question is how to delink from this globalized mode of production.

### **Turning the Cards Around: *Nope* or When Used Bodies Resist by Turning the Predator into Prey**

According to Vishmidt, the body is inherently connected to politics, but it is politically overlooked.<sup>61</sup> With digitalization, most recently through the rise of

<sup>56</sup> John Belamy Foster, "Extractivism in the Anthropocene: Late Imperialism and the Expropriation of the Earth," *Science for the People* 25, no. 2 (Autumn 2022), <https://magazine.scienceforthepeople.org/vol25-2-bleeding-earth/extractivism-in-the-anthropocene/>.

<sup>57</sup> Martin Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction Under Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2020).

<sup>58</sup> Eduardo Gudynas, *Extractivisms: Politics, Economy and Ecology* (Blackpoint: Fernwood, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, *Extractive Imperialism in the Americas: Capitalism's New Frontier* (Boston: Brill, 2014).

<sup>60</sup> Mbembe, "Digital Age."

<sup>61</sup> Vishmidt, "Bodies in Space."

AI, the power relations of the colonial matrix did not go away. On the contrary, analysis shows that discourses about AI underpin power structures that already have immense power over the internet (and the world).<sup>62</sup> The colonial matrix should therefore become a digital colonial matrix, where the visual and the somatic are interwoven through the enormous power of datafication—creating a whole objectivized (human) biplatform with computational unconscious. But can the cards be flipped?

Jordan Peele says they can. In his films, *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019) and *Nope* (2022), with the hauntology of four figures, listed by Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva as “the Savage (the conquered), the Negro (the commodity), the Primitive (the other), and the Traditional (the underdeveloped),” for whom Bradley and Ferreira da Silva argue that they are operating “as the bearers of an ontological dissonance, an immanent declension, we might call blackness.”<sup>63</sup> Twisting them through a variety of motifs, themes, and cultural and cinematic references, Peele creates a resistance image, i.e., an image that resists the historical trajectory of the violence of the digital colonial matrix of knowledge. In particular with *Nope*, in which the history of racial violence is disentangled by evoking the relation between the entanglement of capital and epistemic violence embodied in an all-devouring predator UFO. But *Nope* is also about visualizing silenced histories. Indeed, to strive to capture UFO with the camera is to break away from modernity as a totalizing onto-epistemology and in this register generating a false universal subject of a Man.

But to capture UFO with the camera is also to appropriate the society of the spectacle and thus to delink racialized bodies from the regime of a deranged digital colonial matrix.

176

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<sup>62</sup> “Who Has Power Over AI?,” Internet Health Report 2022, accessed August 2, 2023, <https://2022.internethealthreport.org/facts/>.

<sup>63</sup> Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Four Theses on Aesthetics,” *E-flux Journal* 120 (September 2021), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/120/416146/four-theses-on-aesthetics/>.

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## Killing the Black Body: Necropolitics and Racial Hierarchies in Digital Gaming

### Keywords

video games, antiblackness, necropolitics, Black death, race

### Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore the patterns of antiblackness within contemporary gaming. Video games are sites of necropolitical logics that use Black death to propel narratives. But even more concerning, is that these games might make sense of larger desires of white colonial supremacy, attempting to remove and destroy its troubled racialized past. Ethnographic observations also engage gaming as a carceral logic that seeks to surveil, police, and criminal Blackness. Under these conditions, it is imperative to explore how the continuation of the institution of slavery within policing is actively embedded into technical and digital practices, leading to carceral conditions for those subject to its power and gaming provides a pathway to engage this trend.

## Ubijanje črnškega telesa: nekropolitika in rasne hierarhije v digitalnih igrah

### Ključne besede

videoigre, protičrnskost, nekropolitika, Črnska smrt, rasa

### Povzetek

Namen tega eseja je raziskati vzorce protičrnskega v sodobnih videoigrah. Videoigre so prizorišča nekropolitike logike, ki Črnsko smrt uporablja za spodbujanje pripovedi. Še bolj skrb vzbujajoče pa je, da te igre morda osmišljajo večje želje kolonialne nadvlade, ko se skušajo znebiti svoje problematične rasizirane preteklosti. Zato etnografska opazovanja vključujejo tudi video igre kot obliko jetnišnične logike, ki skuša nadzorovati in kriminalizirati Črnskost. V teh pogojih je nujno raziskati, kako je nadaljevanje insti-

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tucije suženjstva vpeto v sisteme nadzora ter aktivno vgrajeno v tehnične in digitalne prakse. To pa vodi do jetnišničnih pogojev za tiste, ki so podvrženi njeni moči. Video igre omogočajo pot, kako se lotiti tega trenda.



## Introduction

Cameron Kunzelman writes in the essay, “Destroyed in the Cut,” that gaming “is deadly for its Black characters.”<sup>1</sup> While he may have been referencing *The Last of Us*, this statement is applicable to the larger landscape in which games have created and narrated Blackness, and that’s within a space of antiblack death. Engaging with the current theme of this volume, which returns to the question of the *body*, this essay engages the necropolitical tensions between Blackness and gaming, as a technological structure of white supremacy. Games urge for an immersive engagement of the material conditions of the body. While the body in gaming might be a digital rendering of hegemonic conceptualization, there are discursive realities in which we must contend. I argue that gaming serves as a necropolitical site to engage in antiblackness.

Gaming, as a narrative and immersive text, facilitates a particular kind of discursive arrangement wherein ideological structures are on permanent display. Racial and gendered hierarchies are produced on the assembly line of power in gaming. They become sites of very little contestation as Blackness becomes merely a mechanism to propel an action or storyline forward. The construction and uses of racial subjectivities fuel the logic that Black identity can be encapsulated and folded neatly into a system of consumptive entertainment. It is imperative to critically interrogate the techno-structure that engages in this form of antiblackness.

Going back to the game and TV adaptation of *The Last of Us* (hereafter also *TLOU*), it is a space that helps to make sense of the necropolitics of Black death

<sup>1</sup> Cameron Kunzelman, “Destroyed in the Cut,” *Bullet Points Monthly*, July 22, 2020, <https://bulletpointsmoonthly.com/2020/07/22/destroyed-in-the-cut-the-last-of-us-part-ii>. See also Cameron Kunzelman, *The World Is Born From Zero: Understanding Speculation and Video Games* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).



that pervade the gaming industry. In *TLOU*, that game can be understood as a space where the creators had the sovereign right to kill Black characters. It was decided that certain bodies would be sacrificed for the movement of the larger plot, a revenge story essentially. To quickly summarize, *TLOU* is centered on white girl/womanhood throughout the entire series. We follow the world of Ellie and her quest to survive apocalyptic conditions although she is immune to the virus that has turned most of the world into zombies. The game introduces us to several Black girls and women who come into close proximity to Ellie only to be met with their demise soon after. The narrative world that was created protects Ellie and destroys Blackness. In one scene, the game forces us to kill a Black woman on behalf of Ellie: the game will not progress until we press the square button. While the creators of this game admit that there is an egregious amount of cruelty, it is justified as it is a revenge narrative written inside the apocalyptic genre. And while there is an extreme amount of death, Kunzelman explains that the treatment of Black death is beyond just a quick and to the point death. He states that Black death is unlike any other in the game, because a Black woman is condemned, stripped of her humanity, and is purposefully unmade of her personhood.<sup>2</sup> Even more concerning, the television adaptation of *TLOU* manages to increase the amount of Black death than was seen in the game.

### Carceral Logics and Black Death in Gaming

*TLOU* provides an entry point to make sense of the necropolitical logics that propel gaming narratives forward. One has to work hard not to notice the treatment of Black bodies in gaming. They are contrasted against disembodied whiteness that has free form and flow within the narrative schema. A recurring trope within game narratives is the continuation and reiteration of racism's colonial form: violence. The corporeal schema of designating death upon the Black body has a historical legacy. And because racism never loses its localization in the body, gaming becomes a primary site of white colonial supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Under these conditions, it is imperative to explore how the continuation of the institution of slavery within policing is actively embedded into technical and digital practices, leading to carceral conditions for those subject to its power.

<sup>2</sup> Kunzelman, "Destroyed in the Cut."

<sup>3</sup> Kent A. Ono, *Contemporary Media Culture and the Remnants of a Colonial Past* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

Scholars rightfully explore the carceral logics embedded in digital platforms.<sup>4</sup> Digital platforms often adopt policies and procedures supposedly to keep users safe. But what often happens is that some policies are unfairly applied leading to the intentional targeting of the most vulnerable in these spaces, most often Black people. So digital platforms have become places that reify institutional practices that police and criminalize Black practices.<sup>5</sup>

While gaming is not intentionally a carceral state, it operates often under these carceral logics which surveil and criminalize Blackness. In thinking broadly about carceral logics, they are extensions of the legacies of chattel slavery which shifted to the prison system upon the so-called ending of slavery.<sup>6</sup> Systems of capitalism forced descendants of enslaved populations into a permanent labor state under mass incarceration. The vulnerability that presents for Black people subjects them to levels of violence and colonial forces that sustain white supremacy. This anti-Black state of labor and violence often exists is a shadow of secrecy that justifies the destruction of Blackness in both actual and symbolic ways. Take this quote from Assata Shakur's 1978 essay:

For many, prison is not that much different from the street. [. . .] For many the cells are not much different from the tenements [. . .] and the welfare hotels they live in on the street. [. . .] The fights are the same except they are less dangerous. The police are the same. The poverty is the same. The alienation is the same. The racism is the same. The sexism is the same. The drugs are the same and the system is the same.<sup>7</sup>

For Shakur, prison recreates the conditions of slavery, and death is a feature of the system that attempts to restrict the fullness of Black life. These systems, structured by antiblackness, function as carceral technologies.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Kishonna L. Gray and Krysten Stein, "We 'Said Her Name' and Got Zucked': Black Women Calling-out the Carceral Logics of Digital Platforms," *Gender and Society* 35, no. 4 (August 2021): 538–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211029393>.

<sup>5</sup> Gray and Stein, 539.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Dillon, "Possessed by Death: The Neoliberal-Carceral State, Black Feminism, and the Afterlife of Slavery," *Radical History Review* 2012, no. 112 (Winter 2012): 113–25, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1416196>.

<sup>7</sup> Assata Shakur, "Women in Prison: How We Are," *The Black Scholar* 9, no. 7 (April 1978): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1978.11414002>.

<sup>8</sup> Dillon, "Possessed by Death," 115.

Gaming, too, can be explored through the lens of a carceral technology. Game narratives, especially violent ones, are driven by the extent to which it can extract labor and destroy bodies, especially Black ones. There has been a history of troubling and stereotypical narratives when it comes to representing Blackness<sup>9</sup> as well as exclusionary and discriminatory practices of Black folks inside other gaming spaces like streaming.<sup>10</sup> With this logic, there is the continual haunting of slavery and antiblackness. Black characters in games, much like Black people in reality, are haunted by the specter of whiteness. This lingering presence in the creative minds of the gaming industry indicates a desire to go back to the realm of supremacy and oppression which is often the only way to make sense of all the Black death inside gaming. *Battlefield 1* serves as a great example making sense of this premise.

### **#Blackdeath in Contemporary Gaming: Ethnographic Musings of *Battlefield 1***

October 2016. Swedish company DICE, published by American company Electronic Arts, released its award winning, first person shooter, *Battlefield 1*. There was much acclaim upon the release of the 10th installment of this series, and additional interest because it was the first to feature Black military personnel in significant ways. The Harlem Hellfighters are the opening act, if you will, fighting alongside the French in World War I. The opening moments in the game witness French, British, and American forces defending against German attacks around 1918.

But the game's opening provides us with a brief respite from war and struggle. It rightfully opens with the musical selection "Dream a Little Dream of Me,"<sup>11</sup> and we see a Black man resting peacefully in his bed. This peace and slumber

<sup>9</sup> Javon Goard, "Gamifying Blackness: A Discussion on Black Gamers and Black Portrayals in Contemporary Videogames," in "Racism and Sexism in Virtual Comic and Gaming Environments," ed. Rhys M. Hall and David G. Embrick, special issue, *Sociation* 22, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2023): 42–53.

<sup>10</sup> Akil Fletcher, "Black Gamer's Refuge: Finding Community within the Magic Circle of Whiteness," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Anthropology*, ed. Elisabetta Costa, Patricia G. Lange, Nell Haynes, and Jolynna Sinanan (London: Routledge, 2022), 368–78.

<sup>11</sup> Doris Day, vocalist, "Dream a Little Dream of Me," by Fabian Andre, Wilbur Schwandt, and Gus Kahn, released November 11, 1957, track 4 on *Day by Night*, Columbia CL 1053, 33<sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> rpm.

is interrupted by a white hand gently touching his right shoulder, as to motion him to wake up. So when he opens his eyes, he is thrust immediately into battle.

We awake on the ground, as if we were knocked out briefly. Our comrades quickly reorient us to the fight, but it's almost as if we are in an in-between state—of dream and reality, and we still hear the music:

Say nighty-night and kiss me  
 Just hold me tight and tell me you'll miss me  
 While I'm alone and blue as can be  
 Dream a little dream of me<sup>12</sup>

We then shift our attention to a fist battle between two men. We now have a weapon in our hand, a Winchester semi-automatic rifle. The camera pans to our face and we begin to accept the reality in which we are in—war.

The game then fades to black and words appear on our screen orienting the viewer, the audience to what is about to come: “You are not expected to survive.” The concluding line of text is very chilling and unnerving. But for many who are accustomed to military shooters, we take this in jest, because most of these games are full of death and gore. But we respawn and ignore the larger ramifications of this symbolic death.

In the next scene, the actual gameplay begins. So most users ignore the emotional rollercoaster of the opening and put on our gamer hats and begin to wreak havoc on the digital lives of NPCs (non-player characters). We pick up our weapon and look for enemy combatants. We fight and shoot and we ignore the warning that the game offered: “You are not expected to survive.” We soon learn how true this statement is.

We begin traditional gameplay, and it's a template shooter: we find the enemy, kill them and avoid our own demise. And having played previous iterations of this game, the task is doable. But the gamer quickly recognizes that something is amiss with this gameplay. The enemy somehow has the innate ability to know where we are at every moment, and their bullets don't miss. It is hard to avoid

<sup>12</sup> Lyrics from Day, “Dream a Little Dream of Me.”

being shot and we have to hide frequently to regenerate our health. Something is different with this game. I assume this latest installment has progressed in a way that the artificial intelligence has gotten smarter, and the machine learning more savvy to become a formidable opponent for its human, because we reach a point where we realize the game wants us to die.

I point and aim my weapon towards the enemy. I am shot from multiple vantage points and the screen turns red. The gameplay slows. I try to reload my weapon, and it takes so long. I can't retreat. I fall to my death.

Based on my prior knowledge and experience with first person shooter video games, I assume I will respawn as some previously saved checkpoint and get back into the fight. But something different happens. Words appear on my screen:

Clarence Point Coupee: 1900–1918

I pause the game here and take a moment to comprehend what I am seeing and experiencing. It feels like a memorial, a way to honor this person's life and death. I actually have a strong emotional reaction to seeing and witnessing this and to see the game honor that. At the moment, it feels beautiful. Because it is also coupled with an on-screen narration of what war meant, "a rite of passage."

The camera quickly pans to another gun, a French light machine gun with *beaucoup* ammo. We have to quickly dismiss the death of our comrade as we spawn into another life. This feels different. For other military shooters like *Call of Duty* and *Gears of War*, we respawn into the same life. We get a do-over. We can try it again. But the action feels progressive and moving forward at a pace that we are not in control of. The war is raging regardless of our actions, behaviors, and moves.

We get a hint from the game on how to use our weapon and how to improve its accuracy. I ask myself, "is this entire opening scene a tutorial?" Nevertheless, I comply. And the tip disappears.

Weapon Zoom

I quickly kill several soldiers progressing towards our position. They are increasing in numbers and the game is increasing in difficulty. We take on heavy fire and we are blown from our position atop this hill. I don't die. So I pick up a weapon and proceed through a destroyed edifice. On screen instructions caption the voice I hear in the game, telling me where to go. I listen. I comply. My comrades continue to die around me. I kill several opposing soldiers with the weapon I've picked up. I run out of ammo, and I pick up a pistol until I have time to reload the pump-action shotgun that has given me temporary success. That luck has run out. The screen starts to turn red. I can't regenerate my health. There is a fire around me. I have no way to escape. I am going to die.

James Johnson: 1892–1918

Another in-game memorial, honoring this fallen soldier. We shift to another life on his way to his death. I try not to normalize the theme of Black death, but we quickly reach our demise as the war rages on and the trend continues:

Theodore Panola: 1892–1918

Willie Jefferson: 1897–1918

Rudolph Johnson: 1886–1918

Death becomes more frequent, dramatic, and normalized. Memorial have lost their impact, as we realize the names are random and change with each experience in the game. Learning how to shoot the weapons and drive the machines becomes more novel than experiencing the final moments of these Black and Brown men's lives. Black death is the tutorial for the White war machine and the design feels intentional.

188

David Leonard discusses disrupting and unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex in games in his 2004 essay.<sup>13</sup> He explains that virtual war games generate support for America's wars and imperialism around the world. Even playing a historical war game elicits nostalgia for the power and domination of a previous generation of American domination. Scholars have rightfully offered cri-

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<sup>13</sup> David Leonard, "Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex: Video Games and a Pedagogy of Peace," *SIMILE: Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 4, no. 4 (November 2004): 1–8.

tiques of these kinds of games to help us make sense of the layers of messaging and propaganda around the American nation state.

*Battlefield 1*, among other examples, provides an additional lens and inward investigation of US racial policy to expand white settler-colonial supremacy. Video games are a vehicle and tool that disseminate ideologies of power and hegemony. These games reveal more about the innate character of the US empire than sometimes other media. Users and gamers learn vital theories related to racial formation, hierarchies, and the legacies of supremacist practices.<sup>14</sup> And I must offer this reminder of the context in which *Battlefield 1* was created and released, the year 2016. The US empire had elected Donald Trump as its President after a targeted campaign of mis/disinformation aimed at vulnerable voters and social media users.<sup>15</sup> The movement for Black Lives was continuing to gain steam in the midst of so much backlash.<sup>16</sup> One glance at social media and one would assume the increased focus on Black lives resulted only in more death.

### Trauma Porn and Mediated Obsessions with Black Death

To make sense of the hypervisibility of Black death, during this era, Rasul Mowatt frames the complicated viewership of Black death as a snuff film. As Mowatt describes, “‘Snuff’ is a movie genre depicting the murder, dismemberment, or suicide of a person, often times for the viewer’s pleasure.”<sup>17</sup> While some argue over whether snuff films depict real death, there are always discussions that allude to their existence. But used in the context of Mowatt’s argument, the death we see materialized on our social media timelines was/is real. And like snuff films, the images of the bodies of Black people as well as the recordings of the actual killing of the Black person are commodities for entertainment and view-

<sup>14</sup> David Leonard, “Live in Your World, Play in Ours: Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other,” *SIMILE: Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 3, no. 4 (November 2003): 1–9.

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Kuo and Alice Marwick, “Critical Disinformation Studies: History, Power, and Politics,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 2, no. 4 (August 2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-76>.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Drakulich, Kevin H. Wozniak, John Hagan, and Devon Johnson, “Race and Policing in the 2016 Presidential Election: Black Lives Matter, the Police, and Dog Whistle Politics,” *Criminology* 58, no. 2 (May 2020): 370–402, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12239>.

<sup>17</sup> Rasul A. Mowatt, “Black Lives as Snuff: The Silent Complicity in Viewing Black Death,” *Biography* 41, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 777–806, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2018.0079>.

ing consumption. So similar to trends in larger media, *Battlefield 1* is a reflection of the larger treatment of Blackness and Black death.

As conversations around the movement for Black lives increased in magnitude, so did the visibility of Black death. Take the events that unfolded after the death of Mike Brown by Ferguson police officer, Darren Wilson. Visibility around the treatment of Black folks by the police aided in transforming public perceptions, social activism, and mobilization in a way that we haven't seen since televisions flooded homes with images of Black bodies being assaulted with water hoses and German shepherds in the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> And since the death of Mike Brown, we have continued to consume Black death as hashtags, linking victims of police violence to a larger culture and trend of systematic inequality,<sup>19</sup> and the continuation of plantation politics and carceral logics.

The gaming industry, as a mediated outlet, engaged in a variety of tactics to also express and espouse support for the movements for Black lives especially after the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Brands and organizations constructed statements and messages advocating for justice and sought reform to address the continued harms that the Black community is subject to. Many of the statements in support stated things like: "We stand with our colleagues and the Black community; we stand against racism, violence, and hate; we all have a responsibility to create change," among others.<sup>20</sup> Many companies provided funds to support public initiatives, research, and others tangible and symbolic efforts. Among gaming companies specifically, there were efforts to increase diversity in the workplace and to increase diverse representation in games.

While diversity is a broad topic, the desires and efforts to increase Blackness in particular has been met with some scrutiny. The increased visibility of Blackness

190

<sup>18</sup> Michael J. Klarman, "How *Brown* Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (June 1994): 81–118, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2080994>.

<sup>19</sup> Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States," *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (February 2015): 4–17, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12112>.

<sup>20</sup> Nathalie Spielmann, Susan Dobscha, and L. J. Shrum, "Brands and Social Justice Movements: The Effects of True versus Performative Allyship on Brand Evaluation," *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 8, no. 1 (January 2023): 83–94, <https://doi.org/10.1086/722697>.



in games requires a level of context and historical background that many consumers of games don't have. Using the concept "high-tech lynching" (wrongly used by Clarence Thomas), this phrase helps us make sense of the ways that digital technologies adhere to legacies and trends of rendering Blackness illegible, hypervisible, and subject to hyperviolence, continued carceral logics.

Recall the narrative around *Battlefield 1* from earlier. The hypervisibility of Black and Brown bodies and then the mechanic to force death upon them is similar to the historical trend of lynching. This game reveals the failure to acknowledge institutional and structural forces that perpetuate Black death at the intersection of race, gender, and class. And adding the layer of the digital reveals the need to utilize a concept like high-tech lynching.

While the spectacle and ritualistic nature of lynching was used as a tool for control, extrajudicial and police killings in recent years rarely receive the same level of attention. But take the death of Mike Brown as an example to understand high-tech lynching. Upon his death, his body laid in the street for hours before it was taken by the coroner. Additionally, his body was photographed and posted on social media and shared by an abundance of news outlets.<sup>21</sup>

Making connections between sharing his death as a high-tech lynching and historical lynching, I argue that the sharing of his body can be compared to the sharing of lynching photographs from the early 1900s. Lynching photography served as a representation, or a pictorial shorthand, of the consensus among white communities about the roles of Black people. These images proffered the version of white supremacist ideology that remained in hegemonic power from the post-Reconstruction period until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>22</sup> The 1930s were a period where the meanings of lynching photographs and lynching in general were becoming contested among certain segments of

191

<sup>21</sup> Ersula J. Ore, "Twenty-First Century Discourses of American Lynching," *Critical Discourse Studies* 20, no. 5 (2022): 508–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2022.2090978>.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Gregory, "Policing Jim Crow America: Enforcers' Agency and Structural Transformations," *Law and History Review* 40, no. 1 (February 2022): 91–122, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0738248021000456>.

the population, but when the public opposition to lynching was still being cultivated and the vast majority of lynchings still went unpunished.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to situate violence performed by social control agencies of the state in racially disparate manners. As scholars have long concluded, control agencies of the state (police included) principally serve the interests of the privileged.<sup>24</sup> And a primary task of criminal justice and law enforcement agencies is to maintain control over the dangerous classes who threaten the public order.<sup>25</sup> Lynching or death has been one of those tools utilized to maintain that order.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, policing as an extension of the state has also utilized the media to control messages and narratives.<sup>27</sup> So necropolitics continues to help us understand the targeted ways that Black bodies experience death in both physical and digital spaces. These systems of social control extend far beyond the physical spaces of jails and prisons, and these practices underscore how carcerality is embedded in and sustained by a range of processes and dynamics, including creating stereotypical characters (Blackness as criminal), the limiting of the Black expression in games (Blackness as the help or sidekick), and the devaluing Black life (Black death as seen in *Battlefield 1*). And the justification of Black destruction in the media is a part of the process to justify the continued destruction of Black bodies IRL (in real life). The carceral logics embedded inside gaming rely heavily on disseminating mediated messages and disinformation about Black life.<sup>28</sup> Systems of mass media have been built on the exclusion of people of color, so in the spaces of convergence, what new narratives, if any arise from what's

<sup>23</sup> Michael Hatt, "Sculpting and Lynching: The Making and Unmaking of the Black Citizen in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/24.1.1>.

<sup>24</sup> Naomi Zack, *White Privilege and Black Rights: The Injustice of U.S. Police Racial Profiling and Homicide* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Weitzer, "Theorizing Racial Discord over Policing Before and After Ferguson," *Justice Quarterly* 34, no. 7 (2017): 1129–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2017.1362461>.

<sup>26</sup> Bonilla and Rosa, "#Ferguson."

<sup>27</sup> Sherri Williams, "#SayHerName: Using Digital Activism to Document Violence against Black Women," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 5 (2016): 922–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1213574>.

<sup>28</sup> Madhavi Reddi, Rachel Kuo, and Daniel Kreiss, "Identity Propaganda: Racial Narratives and Disinformation," in "Farm Media," ed. Zenia Kish and Benjamin Peters, special issue, *New Media and Society* 25, no. 8 (August 2023): 2201–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144448211029293>. First published online in 2021.

created? Using gaming as an extension of media, there are continued trends to adopt racialized narratives that fit within white racial schemas of acceptance.

### **Hypervisibility as a Cultural Script of Control**

Scholars have been outspoken in examining the dangers of hypervisibility for the Black community. As Nirmal Puwar<sup>29</sup> outlines the paradox of “in/visibility” for minoritized folks: as ‘in/visible’ subjects, vulnerable populations are highly visible and this occurs in spaces occupied and dominated by privileged bodies. The close proximity in which we reside renders the vulnerable as bodies out of place.<sup>30</sup> But these bodies become perpetually bound and conditioned to the legacies of racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression. Black women have been severely punished under these conditions. They present a subversive threat because of the sexist and racist constructions of the social hierarchy. The use of violence on Black women’s bodies has a direct connection and relationship to plantation necro and sexual politics. Contemporary manifestations of this practice often appear as a reminder of Black women’s place in the gendered or racial hierarchy.

Hegemonic structures then create racist and gendered scripts that many of us are conditioned to follow. Media is a great tool in propelling these scripts. A great example is Ronald Jackson’s work on how Blackness has been written and coded into media as tropes of what it means to be Black.<sup>31</sup> Within games, Black characters have been created by White designers, and have historically been categorized as sidekicks, criminals, and non-playable villains. While the categories continue to grow and improve, it is hard to untangle and detach the new stories from the racial and settler colonial projects in which they were created.

Gaming is an interesting space because it combines the innovative tools of a variety of media. It has the immersive qualities not seen in TV, and the screen cultures are dynamic and captivating and draw in huge audiences. The convergence of social media and streaming into gaming spaces provide a level of con-

<sup>29</sup> Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Puwar, *Space Invaders*.

<sup>31</sup> Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

nectivity to build community and interact in real time. The ability to mobilize to reach audiences in a matter of minutes with content can't be ignored. So the images of hypersexualized or hypervisible women and hypermasculine men are a part of an instantaneous message machine that feeds dangerous narratives about vulnerable populations.

Under this framework, it's important to interrogate how hypervisibility creates conditions of pain and harm for women of color in gaming. Larae Barrett from *Tom Clancy's The Division* offers a perspective. Larae is not a playable character in this game. She's actually a non-playable character and is situated as a villain. This is a common trope of Black women in gaming, beyond the help and support role, they are often villainous and/or monstrous mothers. The game frames Larae as an angry black woman, villain, and criminal. She gives a speech in the game that is reminiscent of rhetoric deployed in contemporary movements for Black lives. And during this speech, she kills a man in front of the crowd. While her speech has nothing to do with the violent act, the linkages between both solidify her as a dangerous villain and we ultimately kill her in the game.<sup>32</sup>

An additional example of the dangers of hypervisibility for women of color comes from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. In *Call of Duty*, there is a perk called "Cold-Blooded." A perk is an increased benefit or skill set in the game that one has to buy or build up and this one in particular lets the user be invisible to detection systems and reduces visibility so you're not easily identifiable when targeted. When the character Farah Karim enables this perk, it is supposed to render her invisible when opposing players look for her through their long-range visual scope in the game. While it renders her body invisible, her hijab is still prominently visible and, in fact, glowing while looking at her through the scope, making her hypervisible and subject to an increased amount of deaths (and racial and gendered disparity).

This example illustrates the landscape in which diverse characters are often created. It fits within the scheme of adding and stirring and hoping that the diverse bodies can seamlessly transition into the hegemonic structures of Western empire and white supremacy. There is a knowledge imbalance when these diverse

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<sup>32</sup> Kishonna L. Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020).

characters are introduced to satisfy the needs of empire, settler colonial legacies, and white supremacy. There is no real incorporation of this diversity as they merely serve as tokens to placate white desires and guilt. So the hypervisibility and hyperviolence Farah is subject to represents a type of gendered colonization of Black bodies that makes it possible to continue to reify women of color exempt from full life. These examples continue to suggest that Black flesh is discardable.<sup>33</sup>

### Black Death in Gaming as Antiblackness

Scholars continue to engage theoretically with conversations around the body and the material conditions of the body. While these conversations continue to grow and expand, it is disturbing to recognize that much of the story of Blackness remains unchanged. From the necropolitics of *Battlefield 1* and *The Last of Us*, to the continued movements for Black lives, we still are engaging conversations around the violent, colonialist undercurrents of physical and digital life. It is not hard to understand why the hypocrisy of law and order continues to wreak havoc on the Black community. Achille Mbembe's work speaks to the fantastic worlds that continue to be created off the literal backs of Black bodies.<sup>34</sup> White fantasies of futures without Blackness continue to be created. It is in these spaces that make us wonder if there is an intentional, nihilistic desire to destroy Black people. Necropolitical narratives justify continued violence in physical and digital spaces. In these games in particular, they can be understood as spaces where creators have the sovereign right to kill Black characters. Conditions under antiblackness and necropolitics decide what bodies will be sacrificed.

So by exploring these gaming examples, we get a peek inside the sinister ways in which whiteness imagines itself disconnected and removed from its troubled racialized past. These games may provide offerings of the dark side of humanity, but these created conditions are actually just the imaginations and machinations of white supremacy. What we actually get to see in the midst of all the Black death and pain is the brutal nature of whiteness. These characters aren't

<sup>33</sup> Jasmine Johnson, review of *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, by Ashon Crawley, *Dance Research Journal* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 109–11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767717000274>.

<sup>34</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

just randomly killed or left to die in some arbitrary fashion. The game specifically and intentionally designed the parameters in which Black folks are subject to the most harms. Their identities rendered them hypervisible and subject to the most harms and violence. These games continue to frame Black folks as a “troublesome property.”

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## The Migrant and Marginalized Body in Connection with Digital Technologies as a Prosthesis of the Monstrous

### Keywords

migrant, marginalized, digital technologies, prosthesis, systematic violence, carceral archipelago

### Abstract

This article situates the (human) body as a signifier for society at large, arguing that developments in many societies of structural and systematic violence that targets minorities such as refugees and first nation peoples, points to a failure of democratic values. Using two examples, we elaborate technology and digital devices as prosthesis of the body, that are also acting as proxy for state violence. The first example is from the carceral archipelago of Manus Island as a site of remote detention of refugees carried out by the Australian government. Refugees held on Manus Island describe the treatment they experience as torture. The second example is drawn from the Australian mainland, telling the stories of First Nations children subjected to abuse and violence in juvenile detention centers. A judicial inquiry (Royal Commission) found that a systematic approach aimed at punishing children constituted torture. The concepts developed in this article are those of bordering and racialization, while the intertwining of human and “more than human life” helps to understand and challenge the necropolitical power evident in (liberal) capitalism.

199

## Migrantsko in marginalizirano telo v povezavi z digitalnimi tehnologijami kot protezami pošastnega

### Ključne besede

migrant, marginaliziran, digitalne tehnologije, proteza, sistematično nasilje, jetnišnični arhipelag

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## Povzetek

Članek obravnava (človeško) telo kot označevalec širše družbe in trdi, da razvoj struktur-nega in sistematičnega nasilja v številnih družbah, ki je usmerjeno proti manjšinam, kot so begunci in staroselci, kaže na spodletelost demokratičnih vrednot. Na podlagi dveh primerov razvijamo argumentacijo o tehnologiji in digitalnih napravah kot protezah telesa, ki obenem delujejo tudi kot posredniki državnega nasilja. Prvi primer se nanaša na jetnišnični arhipelag Manus kot mesto odmaknjenega pridržanja beguncev, ki ga izvaja avstralska vlada. Begunci, pridržani na otoku Manus, opisujejo jetnišnično obravnavo, ki jo doživljajo, kot mučenje. Drugi primer izhaja z avstralske celine in govori o zgodbah staroselskih otrok, ki so v centrih za pridržanje mladoletnikov podvrženi zlorabi in nasilju. Sodna preiskava (Kraljeve komisije) je ugotovila, da sistematično kaznovanje otrok predstavlja mučenje. Koncepta, ki ju razvijamo v tem članku, sta koncepta meje in rasi-zacije, prepletanje človeškega in »več kot človeškega življenja« pa pomaga razumeti in izpodbijati nekropolitično moč, ki je očitna v (liberalnem) kapitalizmu.



## Introduction

In this paper I develop the idea of the (human) body as a signifier of society, while the current necropolitical order observed in many parts of the world points to a diseased version of democracy. Indeed, democracy as necro-democracy is horrific in its materiality. Drawing on ideas from racial capitalism,<sup>1</sup> abolitionism, and carceral geography,<sup>2</sup> as well as feminist and queer studies,<sup>3</sup> this paper tells the story of the Australian government's incarceration and medieval punishment of refugees and First Nations children. These are not isolated cases, but systematic abuses applied to abject bodies on the Australian mainland and in the Exile Islands archipelago, where refugees' bodies are tortured and treated as flesh. But the elaboration of the body as a prosthesis for other potentialities reveals not only a politics of resistance, but also possibilities for new imaginaries of other futures. Here, new technologies and digitality are not just the usual

200

<sup>1</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London: Verso, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

means of state surveillance of excluded and minoritized populations, but rather technologies are an affective prosthesis of the vulnerable body.

The skin of the body is a barrier or membrane that protects the organism from intruders, just as society can be visualized as a barrier commonly asserted in terms of a territorial border, that contains those inside as a cohesive body, with processes that sift and filter movement across the membrane.<sup>4</sup> In today's world, the body is subject to more far-reaching threats than disease, injury, and other bodily assaults that first come to mind when we defend ourselves and our bodies. Rather, the endpoints of the established and deeply entrenched biopolitical systems of power and governance, manifest in a necropolitical order today are scattered throughout the world in racialized hierarchies that categorize bodies as worthy/unworthy as human/flesh in cycles of violence and destruction.<sup>5</sup> It is this vicious extension of biopolitics to structured considerations of annihilation of targeted populations/bodies that frames the thinking of this paper. How can the human body be rethought from decolonial, radical feminist, abolitionist and queer perspectives to develop a radical vision of liberation? The work to dismantle the cartographies of domination, criminalization, and racialization that Ruth Wilson Gilmore's research and advocacy represents<sup>6</sup> revolves around the question of whether radical labor and militancy produce not only resistance and opposition, but also new values.

A prosthesis is an artificial body part that must be replaced due to trauma, disease, or other fractures. In this discussion, I would like to take up the idea of the prosthesis as a bodily appendage to augment that which is missing in the form of a digital capability. A smartphone becomes an extension of the human body, and in the example of refugees in remote places of incarceration (immigration detention), a prosthesis that truly leads to a form of sociability, connection, and relation, as the conditions of remoteness, exclusion, and deportation of refugees to places of invisibility and silence mean that sociability and connectivity are intentionally removed—by the sovereign.

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Bauböck, "Rethinking Borders as Membranes," in *Rethinking Border Control for a Globalizing World: A Preferred Future*, ed. Leanne Weber (London: Routledge, 2015), 169–78.

<sup>5</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the global risks that all living things face and are implicated in. These risks are always already in relation with each other and to contagion. Ultimately, these risks are unable to be controlled, meaning the permeability of borders of all kinds is a constant, especially the invisible and microscopic borders through which pathogens pass. I take this vision of permeability and consider its usefulness for the immigration border as well as for internal borders of marginalization and minoritization, such as the “borders of disappearance” in what is done by sovereign states.

I also reflect on Sara Ahmed’s writings on race and categorization through phenomenological and affective registers of concepts, which she applies to everyday life in her recent work on “use.”<sup>7</sup> How can technological devices be thought of as prostheses for bodies that are isolated and captured in space and time? By building an argument and inquiry around the use and utility of an object, Ahmed’s intertwining with inanimate and biological life is apparent. That is, “use,” use-value and utility, and life itself are entangled<sup>8</sup> and already (always) in relation with each other. And here, the entanglement of human and nonhuman, as well as more-than-human life, to be discussed later, proves important in shaking the dominant discourses and imaginaries of body/human and the neologism liberal/capitalism, deeply implicated in colonial racialization.

### **Borders, Barriers, Membranes**

I understand border as a heterodox concept, conceived and used in various geopolitical contexts as metaphysics and finally, as necropolitics. The heterodox aspect of borders and bordering is at once a potential for transformation and a limitation in a world dominated by an orthodox application of borders. The orthodox and dominant paradigm, discourses, and policy contexts of borders take shape as the territorial sovereignty of states, an order of exceptionalism rather than global justice.<sup>9</sup> The geopolitics of migration borders impose penalties on the most vulnerable populations, while global capital continues to find new ways to obliterate borders to theft and wealth transfer, including the theft

202

<sup>7</sup> Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Ahmed, 69.

<sup>9</sup> See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

of land, resources, and intellectual property from local peoples such as Indigenous groups in many parts of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The polysemic border is malleable and hybrid, a conceptualization that runs counter to an orthodox application of borders and migrants as subject to sovereign power and to exceptionalism. While the border refers to markets and human subjectivities, it also refers to differentiated ways of “being in the world” and marks values and histories that are carried through temporal and spatial domains—through mobile bodies and other entities.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, the polysemy of border also resonates in forms of human and nonhuman subjectivity, hybridity, and multi-species experience as conceptualized and empirically discussed by writers, philosophers, and scientists who question the ultimate boundaries between humans and all other lifeforms.<sup>12</sup> The articulations of posthuman and more-than-human are instructive in codifying the forms of life that are enhanced or altered by new technologies, as well as the important nexus of motives and sightlines that connect past, present, and future. In addition, human and non-human actor networks are interrelated and thus require thought and consideration to identify connections and alignments. Science in the forms of technology and in social “uses”<sup>13</sup> are the fields of human and non-human materiality that are always already in association with each other.<sup>14</sup> The connection I want to draw is that the body and the digital prosthesis are coextensive with each other.

<sup>10</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Kate Coddington and Alison Mountz, “Countering Isolation with the Use of Technology How Asylum-Seeking Detainees on Islands in the Indian Ocean Use Social Media to Transcend Their Confinement,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 10, no. 1 (2014): 97–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2014.896104>; Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method: Or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Braidotti, *Posthuman*; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Joseph Pugliese, *Biopolitics of the More-than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed, *What’s the Use?*

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11.

The more-than-human frontier approach conceptualizes the impact of human society, economy, and technology on all of life. Moreover, the vitality of all other living things continues, despite the impact of the human-created systems of the dominant figure of homo economicus in capitalist production. Posthumanism emerges across a number of disciplines and has its roots in Anglo-European political philosophy, which questions the centrality of humans as ontologically given, privileged, and separate from the rest of nature and nonhuman animals.<sup>15</sup> Many scholars articulating posthuman thought also call for the decolonization of research disciplines in which other worldviews and geopolitical histories, such as that of Latin America, contribute to unique decolonial theorization.<sup>16</sup> While many epistemic traditions have historically naturalized the metanarratives of progress, expansion, and growth with humans at the forefront and the endless extraction of all kinds of resources and “things” from nature,<sup>17</sup> others have more recently drawn attention to categories, narratives, and knowledge systems that eschew such orthodoxy. Joseph Pugliese, for example, explains the categories more-than-human and other-than-human as distinct from non-human and post-human.<sup>18</sup> This distinction is important to emphasize the opposition to anthropocentrism that is presupposed in any use of the descriptor, human. Pugliese emphasizes his rejection in this regard and challenges human exceptionalism.

The explanation of racialization in human and nonhuman life is elaborated in necropolitics as the extraction of profit from the flesh of living entities.<sup>19</sup> In this politics, death is not just an unintended by-product of the values that drive economic production and consumption, but a deliberative nihilism in creating suffering and death. The advocacy and artistic creations of Behrouz Boochani—a Kurdish-Iranian journalist who was detained on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG) for the next seven years beginning in July 2013—exemplifies digital resistance, but also much more. Boochani became known worldwide during the many years of his imprisonment, but his digital counter-life, using a cell phone as a prosthetic, is mapped across other refugees in the carceral archipel-

<sup>15</sup> Braidotti, *Posthuman*.

<sup>16</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Sven Lütticken, “Posthuman Prehistory,” *Third Text* 29, no. 6 (2015): 498–510, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2016.1235861>.

<sup>18</sup> Pugliese, *Biopolitics of the More-than-Human*.

<sup>19</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

ago of Manus Island and the small island state of Nauru. Both locations have been contracted and paid by the Australian government to act as Australian prison guards for refugees in locations intentionally removed from the Australian mainland. This paper examines the prison where refugees are held on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea in relation to the body and its digital prosthesis as a “more-than-human” relation, one that is a politics of resistance on the one hand and a new imagining on the other.

Manus Island is an example of how the geopolitics of borders can be used to abdicate responsibility for refugees. It shows what can occur when policies, laws, and everyday practices turn human life into flesh in cycles of dehumanization and cruelty.<sup>20</sup> Far from making life “disappear” through sovereign exceptionalism,<sup>21</sup> these remote prisons have produced new forms of resistance as detainees create new life, coexistence, and collaboration with far-flung people in many parts of the world. This coexistence has a spectral presence, both felt and audible. A presence that reverberates in local life, in the lapping of the sea, and in the persistence of resistance and transgression by refugees and their supporters. The role of new digital technologies in this coexistence and collaboration is perhaps surprising when one transposes the hard metal objects and their associated possibilities for connectivity and storytelling to the soft bodies of the refugees.

For three decades, Australia’s carceral-border archipelago has produced numerous sites of subjugation and death for displaced and exiled peoples. Australia’s relationship with PNG and Nauru demonstrates a neo-colonial dynamic as aid and development are part of the equation while developing nations remain dependent on richer nations to recover from the continuing legacies of colonialism. A key feature of Australia’s border industrial complex of incarceration and violence is the multinational companies contracted to build, maintain, and

<sup>20</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> See Claudia Tazreiter, “The Unlucky in the ‘Lucky Country’: Asylum Seekers, Irregular Migrants and Refugees and Australia’s Politics of Disappearance,” *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 23, no. 2 (2017): 242–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X.2017.1372039>; Claudia Tazreiter, “Race, Migration and Visual Culture: The Activist Artist Challenging the Ever-Present Colonial Imagination,” in *Art and Migration: Revisioning the Borders of Community*, ed. Bénédicte Miyamoto and Marie Ruiz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 113–32.

manage the carceral sites. These companies include Transfield/Broadspectrum, G4S, Serco, IHMS, Paladin, and PIH. They have all secured remarkably lucrative contracts without any oversight or accountability for the way they manage and care for the already traumatized people. In Paladin's case, the contract was not made available for public tender. The privatization of immigration detention centers in Australia mirrors similar developments in other Western countries<sup>22</sup> and is being challenged by new abolitionist demands and movements.<sup>23</sup>

### **Manus Prison and Digital Prosthesis of Resistance and Collaboration**

As a writer, university teacher, and feminist activist, I spend a lot of time thinking about the various impacts of intellectual work and the importance of being present, engaged, and collaborating with the people (and other living entities) most impacted by violence and regimes of power. In mid-2019, I travelled to Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. I had been thinking about this trip for a long time, to visit and speak with the men and boys detained there. I wanted to bear witness to the lived experience of what politicians and much of the mainstream media have reported and normalized under the label of "off-shore processing." The visit to Manus Island was prompted by conversations with journalist, writer, and refugee Behrouz Boochani, who was imprisoned on Manus Island, and his long-time collaborator Omid Tofighian. The trip to Manus Island was a sensory overload. Manus Island is geographically remote, of great natural beauty, with a small population and unrelenting tropical heat. On the flight to this remote island, the many stories of refugee suffering and abuse ran through my mind and triggered shame. My anticipation and excitement of meeting the refugees and also the locals, the Manusians, eclipsed any hesitation. The sights, sounds, physicality of this visit, as well as the recurring memories of the threads that draw lines between Australia and Papua New Guinea, between Australians and the refugees imprisoned for years, between Australians and Manusians, frame the motivation for this paper.

206

During the years Boochani was incarcerated in Manus Prison, he regularly published in international media, gave speeches, posted and engaged in social me-

<sup>22</sup> Alison Mountz, *The Death of Asylum: Hidden Geographies of the Enforcement Archipelago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*.



dia, participated in interviews, shot and co-directed a feature film, and wrote a book. These forms of intellectual and cultural production were written, prepared and created using a mobile phone, with all texts typed, saved and sent via WhatsApp text messages. Together with his translator Omid Tofighian, they worked across the seas on the book *No Friend but the Mountains*, which was written and translated simultaneously, through the digital screen.<sup>24</sup> The philosophical vision and intellectual framework captured in this collaboration continue to take shape and have benefited from various working relationships and networks.<sup>25</sup>

In 2017, Boochani and his collaborator and co-director Arash Kamali Sarvestani released the film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, which documents life in detention over time and is pieced together with hundreds of mobile phone clips and written texts. Along with other forms of visual and material culture and communication, this has given the Australian public access to counter-narratives to the dominant government narratives that generate fear, mistrust, and hatred of refugees and asylum seekers. In the film, the story of the men and boys living in the prison-like immigration detention center is presented in narrative form. The film is a meditation on the way everyday life is like in the detention center on a remote island like Manus and gives Australians a glimpse into the physical and psychological stresses and traumas of the detainees. The film is particularly powerful in the context of Australian policies that have made asylum seekers and refugees invisible to the Australian public—they have essentially “disappeared” through media and information blackouts, which include visa restrictions on lawyers and human rights organizations. *Chauka* is the name of a solitary confinement cell in the detention center and also the name of a bird that is unique to the island and is the symbol of the island that adorns its flag.

<sup>24</sup> Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, trans. Omid Tofighian (Sydney: Picador, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> See Behrouz Boochani, Claudia Tazreiter, and Omid Tofighian, “The Multiple Faces of the People Smuggler,” in *Smuggled: An Illegal History of Journeys to Australia*, ed. Ruth Balint and Julie Kalman (Sydney: NewSouth, 2021), 176–90; Claudia Tazreiter and Omid Tofighian, with Behrouz Boochani, “Spectres of Subjugation/Inter-Subjugation/Resubjugation of People Seeking Asylum: The Kyriarchal System in Australia’s Necropoleis,” in *Regulating Refugee Protection through Social Welfare: Law, Policy and Praxis*, ed. Peter Billings (London: Routledge, 2023), 68–90; Behrouz Boochani and Claudia Tazreiter, “Notes on Exile: Behrouz Boochani in Conversation with Claudia Tazreiter,” *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 3 (2019): 370–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X.2019.1685768>.

The singing of the Chauka bird is a constant aural presence that is regularly interwoven into the film, as is the regular singing of a Kurdish folk song by one of the Kurdish detainees. *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* is a film that defies easy categorization. It is neither a documentary nor a feature film. Rather, it is a poetic intervention that uses the visual medium of time to take the viewer in the unimaginable pain of separation experienced in incarceration. Ongoing conversations between Manus Island locals reveal the deep significance of the Chauka bird and the persistence of colonial history on the island. As with other works, *Chauka* was possible on through many micro-visual and textual pieces transmitted to collaborators via the prosthetic, smartphone.

With the release of the film *Chauka*, Boochani received numerous invitations to international film festivals for the premiere. However, the Australian government denied him a visa to enter the country. Nevertheless, with the help of his translator, friend, and collaborator Omid Tofghian and his prosthesis, Boochani appeared for interviews at numerous public events and at the screening of his film on social media. In this way, the Australian public and an international audience have come to know the work, the face, and the voice of Boochani and his fellow refugee detainees. Boochani has also collaborated with a number of artists, including Hoda Afshar, to produce photographic and video works that comment on life in off-shore detention.

One work that illustrates this collaboration across distance and through digital means is the video *Remain*. It is a collaboration with refugees who have been detained on Manus Island since 2013. It is a multi-layered work that addresses absence and invisibility. The work depicts the ongoing mistreatment of refugees, including the memory evoked by the refugees themselves of their murdered comrade Reza Barati, who was beaten to death by the guards of the detention center. Nevertheless, the work brings the viewer into the natural beauty of the island and evokes its own form of resistance.

208

Other refugees detained in Manus Island prison who have written and addressed the public about the twenty-three-day siege of Manus prison in 2017 include Hass Hassaballa and Mohamed Adam, whose posts detail the deliberate deprivation in which Australian authorities cut off food, water, medical supplies, and electricity as the refugees protested the conditions of their ongoing detention. Shaminda Kanipathi also published regularly while detained on Manus Island.

Now that he has resettled as a refugee in Finland, he continues to write about his experiences of incarceration.

### **The Imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children**

In what follows, I will discuss and describe the detention and mistreatment of First Nations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) children on mainland Australia. These examples are distinct from the refugee stories described above, but the mistreatment by the colonial settler state of Australia is a common thread running through them, as is the potential of technologized means of resistance and documentation.

A young male body, clad only in long white pants, is in a bare white room, slumped and restrained on a large adjustable roller seat, shackled at the wrists, ankles and shoulders. A white spit hood covers the entire head of the young person, wrapped around his neck with a thick black ribbon. The detail that identifies this image as modern rather than medieval is the metal nature of the restraint chair. It is July 2016, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the national broadcaster, is showing an hour-long documentary *Australia's Shame*,<sup>26</sup> exposing the practices at the Dondale Youth Detention Centre in the Northern Territory. The documentary reveals the systematic mistreatment of children, predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The story of one boy, Dylan Voller, the 17-year-old boy mentioned above, is central to the story, although many other cases of abuse were shown, including the regular tear gassing of teenagers. The airing of the documentary sparked worldwide outrage and the government initiated a Royal Commission, an independent panel to investigate the circumstances and make recommendations. While the carceral archipelago, Manus Island and Nauru are invisible zones for journalists and the scrutiny that comes with it, in the case of the Dondale Youth Detention Centre, it was CCTV footage from inside the facility that allowed journalists to reveal the monstrosities and horrors to the public. It turns out that the technologized securitization of prisons also enables digital scrutiny of practices of harm and violence.

209

<sup>26</sup> "Video: Australia's Shame," Four Corners, ABC News, July 25, 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-25/australias-shame-promo/7649462>.

The Royal Commission recently presented its findings and uncovered a systematic approach to the punishment of children in Juvenile Detention Centres and also in adult prisons that constitutes torture. It has emerged that the Northern Territory is not alone in this practice. The states of Western Australia and Queensland were also found to be isolating and excessively punishing children, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, in detention centers and prisons.

Banksia Hill Youth Detention Centre, the only youth detention center in Western Australia, detains up to 600 children each year, sixty-three percent of them are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and many of them have severe neurological impairments. This detention center has been found to regularly hold children in solitary confinement and uses the practice of restraining bodies of children called folding-up. In a documentary from 2022, such restraint involves guards forcing a handcuffed child onto their stomach, crossing their legs behind them and sitting on them.<sup>27</sup> This practice is banned in other juvenile prisons because of the risk of suffocation and death. In Australia, children as young as ten are incarcerated in juvenile detention centers.

In the state of Queensland, it was found that boys as young as thirteen are systematically isolated in their cells for up to twenty-four hours a day at the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre. A thirteen-year-old Aboriginal boy, referred to as Jack in a Human Rights Commission report, spent a total of forty-five days in a cell while awaiting trial. The boy's mother said her son claims he was not given water for extended periods in solitary confinement.<sup>28</sup>

In examining the experiences of refugees imprisoned in remote islands and the mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australian prisons, the transformation of the body as flesh in racialization into a body as digital prosthesis of resistance becomes clear. Death, injury, and torture at the border occur at, across, and because of the sovereign, territorial border out-

210

<sup>27</sup> "Video: Locking Up Kids: Australia's Failure to Protect Children in Detention," Four Corners, ABC News, November 14, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-14/locking-up-kids:-australias-failure-to-protect/101652954>.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen Fanning, "Queensland Government May Have Broken Own Laws by Locking 13yo in Detention Cell for Up to 24 Hours a Day," ABC News, March 15, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-15/qld-youth-crime-human-rights-watch-house-detention/102093378>.

lined earlier, imposed is a deliberately limited application of responsibility for life and death. Yet forms of resistance continue to exist.

The body in pain and the causes of that pain are the focus, which brings the threads together. Reflecting on the body's response to pain and torture, as seen in the sites of refugee detention and also the detention of First Nations children in Australia, show how the world is made and unmade by the body in pain.<sup>29</sup>

The object relation, here to digital devices and other technologies such as CCTV cameras as bodily prostheses, becomes an expression of connection and storytelling. The use value of things<sup>30</sup> are a relation that connects, telling stories but also recording abuses of the body. Refugees in remote sites of incarceration use mobile devices as an extension of the human hand. This digital device they hold reaches to all corners of the world, transmitting the affective register from son to mother. It sends textual and visual content produced in places of torture and detention to collaborators in countless locations.

### The Racial State and Contemporary Bordering Practices

I now return to the concepts of border and race by reflecting on the examples discussed above and the relation to body and digital prosthesis. The deeply racialized histories of colony and empire, and the connections between these histories and modernity, liberalism, and capitalism, demand attention to unpick contemporary bordering practices and logics that manifest in punitive borders.<sup>31</sup> State racialization of minoritized populations is evident in institutions such as hospitals, schools, and churches, which have been normalized over time as le-

<sup>29</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> Ahmed, *What's the Use?*

<sup>31</sup> See Michael Grewcock, "Australia's Ongoing Border Wars," *Race and Class* 54, no. 3 (January–March 2013): 10–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396812464010>; Michael Grewcock, "'Our Lives Is in Danger': Manus Island and the End of Asylum," *Race and Class* 59, no. 2 (October–December 2017): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396817717860>; Satvinder S. Juss, "Detention and Delusion in Australia's Kafkaesque Refugee Law," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (March 2017): 146–67, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdw020>; Claudia Tazreiter, *Asylum Seekers and the State: The Politics of Protection in a Security-Conscious World* (London: Routledge, 2004); Tazreiter and Tofighian, with Boochani, "Spectres of Subjugation."

gitimate practices in governing populations.<sup>32</sup> In the Australian context, colonial settlers' systems and practices of governance directed against Indigenous populations since violent colonization in 1788 demonstrate systematic violence and annihilation of minoritized populations premised on racial hierarchies assigned to human life.<sup>33</sup> Nursing facilities have often been the sites of such systematic practices carried out on Indigenous Australians.

Racial capitalism commodifies life itself, with the legacies of colonialism deferring or indeed masking responsibility for crimes (slavery, land theft, cultural genocide, etc.), perpetuating gross violations of the fundamental rights of humans and other living entities—as “human flesh” and other life forms are treated merely as resources.<sup>34</sup> Racialization occurs when discrimination creates artificial hierarchies according to entirely arbitrary categories or identities: skin color, sexual preference, etc. Over time, the systematized ways in which some living beings are treated as expendable “thing” or as waste become imprinted in systems of power and dominance, as well as in social attitudes and mentalities. Racialization, then, refers to the myriad discriminations that create hierarchies of values that do real harm to the living entities devalued in these neocolonial processes, as well as the contemporary manifestations of these processes and values. The exploitation of resources and the unlimited use of living entities as “flesh” rather than precious life occurs in myriad material and immaterial ways. The transformation of humans into flesh is perhaps most clearly seen in slavery.<sup>35</sup> Robinson estimates the dollar value of “lost lives” and “theft” in enslavement—a value that is enormous using the liberal actuarial logic of compounding time on money. Looking at Achille Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics, we see that the multi-generational, and indeed, multi-species impacts of colonial practices of theft of living beings and resources through cycles of colonial expansion over

<sup>32</sup> Braidotti, *Posthuman*; Donna J. Haraway, “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 3–43, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1-1-3>; Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*.

<sup>33</sup> See Moreton-Robinson, *White Possessive*; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*; Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*; Mbembe, *Necropolitics*; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

<sup>35</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

the past centuries are still felt today in the form of contemporary inequalities, poverty, and violence in many parts of the world.

## Conclusion

It is noteworthy that the descriptions of debordering, post-border worlds, and “more-than-human” borders described in this paper, point to the persistence of the colonial imaginary in contemporary life and geopolitics. This geopolitics manifests itself in forms of racism, discrimination, and erasure that can be observed in the systematic devaluation of certain categories of humans and many other forms of life and ecological systems. The migrant body, as well as the Indigenous body, are particular targets of state control, restraint, and separation, subject to punitive sanctions by the state. The historical treatment of Indigenous population in Australia and elsewhere continues today in cycles of violent subjugation.

The activists and theorists I refer to in this paper collectively offer a powerful critique of the racial capitalist necropolitics that cause the pain I describe. A key aspect of the nihilism of the systems of domination and violence is aptly characterized by Wendy Brown’s assessment of the end-stage of neoliberalism, which she summarizes as follows: “Free, stupid, manipulable, absorbed by if not addicted to trivial stimuli and gratifications, the subject of repressive de-sublimation in advanced capitalist society is not just libidinally unbound, released to enjoy more pleasure, but released from more general expectations of social conscience and social comprehension.”<sup>36</sup>

The harms and pains described in this paper are profound. They undo the world. The forms of resistance, often in creative forms, simultaneously point to new ways of making the world.

213

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<sup>36</sup> Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 167.

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**The Body of Affects, (Non)Human Animals,  
Performativity in Resistance to Oppression and  
Whiteness Racist Systems**



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## Body in Mind: The Role of the Body in Damasio's Theory of Emotion

### Keywords

Antonio Damasio, emotions, body, mind, embodied cognition

### Abstract

In the last few decades, emotion became one of the central topics in many scientific disciplines. Neuroscientific research has developed many tools and approaches for studying emotions in humans and animals. In this regard, the work of Antonio Damasio has been important for uncovering physiological mechanisms of emotions and feelings and their role in homeostatic regulation. In some aspects, his theory has challenged our own everyday intuitions about what emotions are. The aim of this article is to show that Damasio's account of affects has underlined the importance of the body in generating feelings and subjective conscious experience and that this view of the two-way communication between the body and brain can offer a fresh perspective on the mind-body problem.

## Telo v umu: vloga telesa v Damasijevi teoriji čustev

### Ključne besede

Antonio Damasio, čustva, telo, um, utelešena kognicija

### Povzetek

V zadnjih nekaj desetletjih je čustvo postalo ena izmed osrednjih tem v številnih znanstvenih disciplinah. Nevroznanstvene raziskave so razvile veliko orodij in pristopov za preučevanje čustev pri ljudeh in živalih. V tem smislu je delo Antonia Damasia pomembno pri odkrivanju fizioloških mehanizmov čustev in občutkov ter njihove vloge pri homeostatski regulaciji. V nekaterih vidikih je njegova teorija izzvala našo vsakodnevno intuicijo o tem, kaj so čustva. Namen tega članka je pokazati, da Damasijev opis afektov poudarja pomen telesa pri generiranju občutkov in subjektivnih zavestnih

219

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izkušnej ter da lahko ta pogled na dvosmerno komunikacijo med telesom in možgani ponudi svež vpogled v dualizem uma in telesa.



## Introduction

Emotions are ubiquitous in our mental life and integral to our experience of the world. It seems surprising, therefore, that for most of the 20th century, they were excluded from any serious scientific research. One of the reasons for this seems to be that scientists, under the influence of behaviorist theories, generally rejected the study of mental phenomena such as feelings, perceptions, and volitions.<sup>1</sup> Also, at first glance, some aspects of human affect seem so closely related to strictly subjective experience that they cannot be studied scientifically. The situation has changed, however, and in recent decades, emotions have become one of the central topics in various scientific disciplines. In particular, neuroscience research has developed many efficient and rigorous methodologies for studying emotions in humans and animals.

Because we all experience affect,<sup>2</sup> we tend to hold on to our (often unjustified) intuitions about what emotions are. We may believe that they are irrational, irreducible, and purely subjective experiences triggered by certain stimuli, or that different emotions are located in different parts of the brain. Neuroscience research helps us figure out how emotions arise in the brain and what function they have in regulating life, which is not always what we believe. In this sense, the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio<sup>3</sup> has been indispensable in understanding the role and mechanisms of emotions and subjective feelings. It is argued in this text that his interdisciplinary research has underscored the fact that emotions and feelings arise from the body, which is still sometimes neglected in our everyday thinking about human affect. Moreover, this understanding

220

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Scarantino and Ronald de Sousa, "Emotions," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, September 25, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/emotion/>.

<sup>2</sup> Here, the term "affect" is interchangeable with "emotion."

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Damasio (1944) is a renowned Portuguese-American neuroscientist, professor, author of numerous books and research articles. His main focus has been on emotion, decision-making, memory, and consciousness.

can further explain how, through bodily experience, emotions and feelings help to generate the conscious mind.

In what follows, I will focus mainly on Damasio's contribution in his book *Looking for Spinoza*,<sup>4</sup> which discusses in more detail the architecture of emotions, feelings, and their role in life. In Damasio's work, there is a constant dialogue with his predecessors who were interested in the same questions (two of them, Descartes and Spinoza, even made it to the title of his books).

Damasio claims in an interview<sup>5</sup> that early in his career he studied neurological injuries. However, when he observed that patients who had suffered forebrain injury lacked normal emotional reactions, he became interested in how emotion influences high-level cognition, especially decision-making. This was the idea behind his "somatic marker" hypothesis, which led to many subsequent experiments in the United States and Europe and had a major impact on science and philosophy.

### The Legacy of William James

The theory of emotions by William James, an American philosopher and psychologist, is often cited, acknowledged, and commented upon in Damasio's work. James argued that unlike his time, bodily changes precede the emotional state and not vice versa: "We feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth."<sup>6</sup> To his scientific colleagues, James' theory of emotion seemed quite shocking, and he faced much criticism, even from leading physiologists of his time such as Charles Sherrington and Walter Cannon. Indeed, controversies and misunderstandings about James' theory contin-

221

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (Orlando: Harvest, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Damasio, "Feeling Our Emotions," interview by Manuela Lenzen, *Scientific American Mind* 16, no. 1 (April 2005): 14–15, <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamericanmind0405-14>.

<sup>6</sup> William James, "What is an Emotion?," *Mind* 9, no. 34 (April 1884): 190, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/os-IX.34.188>.

ue to this day, although there has been a recent renewal of interest in his positions. However, the importance of his ideas cannot be ignored: he was one of the first to emphasize the role of the felt, lived body: “Our whole cubic capacity is sensibly alive; and each morsel of it contributes its pulsations of feeling, dim or sharp, pleasant, painful, or dubious, to that sense of personality that every one of us unfailingly carries with him.”<sup>7</sup>

Damasio’s position is in some ways an elaboration of James’ original proposal, although in his later work he made some of his own criticisms, such as James giving too little importance to the evaluative phase or to cognitive changes.<sup>8</sup> But none of these comments in any way detract from James’ contribution to the theory of emotion. Like James, Damasio also foregrounds the role of the body in human affect, which I will discuss in more detail in the following sections.

## Emotions and Feelings

One of the most important points in Damasio’s theory of emotion is the distinction he establishes between emotion and feeling for the purpose of his analysis. This is in fact in contrast to our everyday language, where we often use the two words interchangeably. Emotions, which precede feelings in the complex chain of events, are what he calls “public” and “visible” (be it inside or outside) because they consist of complex reactions that take place in our bodies in response to certain stimuli. They include all kinds of physiological changes, such as heart rate, blood pressure, sweating, dilation or contraction of muscles, etc. This part of affect occurs automatically, and we usually have little or no control over it. Feelings, on the other hand, are conscious experiences of emotion and arise only after we have become aware of our altered physiological state. They are always hidden and known only to the owner in whose brain they occur.

222

This distinction between the physiological manifestation of affect and its conscious experience is generally well accepted in academic literature, but there

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<sup>7</sup> James, 192.

<sup>8</sup> See Antonio Damasio, “Toward a Neurobiology of Emotion and Feeling: Operational Concepts and Hypotheses,” *Neuroscientist* 1, no. 1 (January 1995): 19–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107385849500100104>.



is often little agreement on the use of terminology.<sup>9</sup> Some scientists, such as Joseph E. LeDoux, who has conducted some of the most influential studies on fear conditioning in rats, even want to do away with the use of the word “emotion” altogether. He argues that the term is not well defined and that scientists disagree on what emotions actually are and how they differ from other aspects of mind and behavior.<sup>10</sup> Instead, for the purposes of animal research, he suggests the terms “survival circuits” and “behavioral responses,” while the word “emotion” should be reserved for subjective experiences, because in LeDoux’s opinion, subjective emotions in animals are only assumed based on our intuitions and assumptions, since the way we humans respond behaviorally to certain stimuli is similar.<sup>11</sup> In terms of terminology, the problem raised by LeDoux can be avoided: it is important to clearly define the scientific use of terms such as “emotion” and “feeling.” If, according to Damasio (and numerous other scientists), emotional states compared to feelings are observable and thus measurable in different ways (externally through behavior and internally through physiological changes), we can study their implementation in both humans and animals. On the other hand, the scientific study of subjective feelings is limited to humans because they are the only ones who possess language. In contemporary neurocognitive research, first-person verbal reports are often combined with non-invasive brain imaging techniques.

## Mechanisms of Emotion

Every emotional process begins with an emotionally salient stimulus and some of these triggers are set by evolution. For example, Melis Yilmaz and Markus Meister<sup>12</sup> describe innate defensive behavioral response elicited in lab mice when a looming visual disk, simulating a flying hawk, is produced, even though the mice have never encountered that predator in the wild before. Other triggers

<sup>9</sup> See Ralph Adolphs and David J. Anderson, *The Neuroscience of Emotion: A New Synthesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph E. LeDoux, “Rethinking the Emotional Brain,” *Neuron* 73, no. 4 (February 2012): 653–76, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2012.02.004>.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph E. LeDoux, “What Emotions Might Be Like in Other Animals,” *Current Biology* 31 (July 2021): R821–37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2021.05.005>.

<sup>12</sup> Melis Yilmaz and Markus Meister, “Rapid Innate Defensive Responses of Mice to Looming Visual Stimuli,” *Current Biology* 23, no. 20 (October 2013): 2011–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2013.08.015>.

come with experience and are learned later in life when our brains associate emotions with certain salient objects, people or situations (e.g. in PTSD).

Next, the stimulus is processed in one of the sensory systems, such as the auditory or visual cortices.<sup>13</sup> The neural representations of the stimulus in the sensory regions are quickly made available, and the corresponding neuronal patterns<sup>14</sup> are transmitted to other brain areas that are the immediate cause of an emotion. Activity at these sites can also be induced by applying electrical stimulation<sup>15</sup> of the corresponding brain regions. The two most important emotion-triggering sites are the amygdala, located deep in the temporal lobe, and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex.<sup>16</sup>

### The Amygdala

The amygdala, a complex neural formation with at least twelve subdivisions, is probably one of the most studied brain structures; a quick PubMed search with keywords “amygdala” and “emotion” generates more than 10,000 results. It has received a lot of attention in the popular press as well, largely due to the work of LeDoux,<sup>17</sup> who suggested that the amygdala plays an important role in fear conditioning and emotional memory. That the amygdala can be equated with the processing of fear, or even called “the seat of emotions” as some people believe,

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<sup>13</sup> The cerebral cortex (pl. cortices), also called grey matter, is the outermost layer of nerve cell tissue in the brain. It is divided into four lobes, each of which is central for processing different types of information. The visual cortex is located in the occipital lobe at the back of the brain and is responsible for receiving, integrating and processing visual input from the retina, while the auditory cortices, located in the temporal lobes that sit behind each ear, process auditory input from the cochlea.

<sup>14</sup> Neural means belonging to nerves, which is made up of neurons coming together. Neuronal means belonging to neurons which are actually cells—the building blocks of the nervous system (note by the eds.).

<sup>15</sup> Direct electrical stimulation (DES) of the brain remains the clinical gold standard for mapping cognitive functions and testing hypotheses about brain organization. Because it is considered invasive, it is often performed while patients are undergoing awake neurosurgery anyway. See Bradford Z. Mahon, Michelle Miozzo, and Webster H. Pilcher, “Direct Electrical Stimulation Mapping of Cognitive Functions in the Human Brain,” *Cognitive Neuropsychology* 36, no. 3–4 (2019): 97–102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643294.2019.1630375>.

<sup>16</sup> See Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 57–65.

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph E. LeDoux, “The Emotional Brain, Fear, and the Amygdala,” *Cellular and Molecular Neurobiology* 23, no. 4–5 (October 2003): 727–38, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025048802629>.

is a gross oversimplification, but there is no denying that this brain structure plays a key role in learned fear.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex**

However, the other important brain region, the ventromedial prefrontal complex (vmPFC), located in the frontal lobe, is associated with the activation of social emotions. Damasio and his team have shown that lesions in this part of the brain demonstrate an inability to elicit an appropriate emotional response such as guilt, embarrassment or despair in various social situations.<sup>19</sup> That emotions are not just irrational impulses but are actually important for our social behavior and decision-making is the key idea behind Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis.<sup>20</sup> The idea arose from observing patients with vmPFC lesions (usually caused by resection of a tumor or aneurysm) whose cognitive thinking appeared to be intact, but who showed an impaired ability to express feelings in situations where this type of emotional behavior was expected of them, and this despite the fact that these abilities were probably present in the patients before the injury. Since emotions are associated with past situations and their outcomes and are thus so-called somatic ("soma" is Greek for body) markers, emotional states and the corresponding bodily changes (consciously or unconsciously) influence our behavior in subsequent decision-making.

In his book *Descartes' Error*,<sup>21</sup> Damasio further developed the idea that, contrary to Cartesian mind-body dualism, emotions are consciously or unconsciously involved in our mental reasoning, and provided subsequent experimental evidence for his hypothesis. The leitmotif of the book is the curious case of Phineas Gage, who suffered an accident while working on a railway line in Vermont in 1848 when an explosion drove an iron bar through his head. Reconstructions of Gage's skull seem to indicate that certain parts of his prefrontal cortex (es-

<sup>18</sup> See Adolphs and Anderson, *Neuroscience of Emotion*, 163–64.

<sup>19</sup> Liane Young et al., "Damage to Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex Impairs Judgment of Harmful Intent," *Neuron* 65, no. 6 (March 2010): 845–51, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2010.03.003>.

<sup>20</sup> Antonio Damasio, Daniel Tranel, and Hanna Damasio, "Somatic Markers and the Guidance of Behavior: Theory and Preliminary Testing," in *Frontal Lobe Function and Dysfunction*, ed. Harvey S. Levin, Howard M. Eisenberg, and Arthur L. Benton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 217–29.

<sup>21</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (London: Vintage Books, 2006).

pecially vmPFC) were damaged. Strangely, Gauge did not die, but according to medical reports and anecdotes, his behavior changed due to the brain lesion.<sup>22</sup> Even though today's research on vmPFC lesions is much more extensive and methodologically robust (the lesions can be assessed with MRI or CT brain scans at adequate resolution), Ralph Adolphs and David J. Anderson underline the fact that assessing emotions and feelings in humans is still quite difficult and problematic because researchers have to rely on oral reports and because there are no sufficient equivalent measures of emotion before and after the lesion.<sup>23</sup>

### **Emotion-Executing Sites**

Yet none of these emotion-triggering sites triggers emotions by themselves. Other, subsequent brain regions connected to the trigger sites through neural pathways have to be activated in order to create an emotional state. For example, a deep-brain structure called the hypothalamus is responsible for releasing certain hormones (such as oxytocin and vasopressin), while the release of the neuromodulator dopamine is controlled by the ventral tagmental area of the brainstem. These molecules are important in changing the state of the body in many ways: its internal environments, musculoskeletal system, viscera, and the nervous system itself. Various specific behavioral patterns such as facial expressions, vocalizations, body postures and other behaviors are thus initiated.<sup>24</sup> For example, when we see a snake, the emotions of fear and anxiety are expressed in all kinds of bodily and cognitive responses: stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline begin to circulate in the bloodstream, the sympathetic nervous system responsible for the fight-or-flight mode is activated, blood flows towards the limbs, heart rate and blood pressure increase, palms become sweaty, concentration and attention increase. When we become aware of all these physiological and cognitive changes, the feelings of fear and anxiety are experienced subjectively.

226

### **Feelings**

Damasio defines feeling as “the perception of a certain state of the body along with the perception of a certain mode of thinking and thoughts with certain

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<sup>22</sup> Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Adolphs and Anderson, *Neuroscience of Emotion*, 221.

<sup>24</sup> Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 63.

themes.”<sup>25</sup> But how is the brain capable of perceiving and representing body states at all? What are the neural mechanisms behind it? Damasio argues that the ability to create brain-maps for various body states is one of the most distinctive features of the brain, as the mapping scheme applies to every pattern having to do with body structure, such as moving the limbs or touching objects.<sup>26</sup> Research has shown that in both animal and human brains there is a strong correlation between the mapped patterns and the actual object. For example, brain map representations of the medial and proximal phalanges of all five human fingers showed a well-ordered sequence along the central sulcus that is a prominent landmark of the brain separating motor and sensory areas.<sup>27</sup> The mind, argues Damasio, is “a spectacular consequence of the brain’s incessant and dynamic mapping.”<sup>28</sup>

Still, Damasio’s view is not compatible with the intuitive argument many people have about the feeling being a mere collection of thoughts: sadness equals sad thoughts, happiness equals happy thoughts, etc.:

I believe the latter view empties the concept of feeling hopelessly. If feelings were merely clusters of thoughts with certain themes, how could they be distinguished from any other thoughts? How would they retain the functional individuality that justifies their status as a special mind process? My view is that feelings are functionally distinctive because their essence consists of the thoughts that represent the body involved in a reactive process. Remove that essence and the notion of feeling vanishes. Remove that essence and one should never again be allowed to say “I feel” happy, but rather, “I think” happy.<sup>29</sup>

In one of the experiments, Damasio and his colleagues tried to uncover the neural correlates behind the feelings. Participants were asked to recall a strong emo-

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<sup>25</sup> Damasio, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), 69.

<sup>27</sup> Meike A. Schweisfurth, Jens Frahm, and Renate Schweizer, “Individual fMRI Maps of All Phalanges and Digit Bases of All Fingers in Human Primary Somatosensory Cortex,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (September 2014): article 658, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00658>.

<sup>28</sup> Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> Damasio, 91.

tional episode in their lives, and then studied using PET scan.<sup>30</sup> Short for positron emission tomography, PET scan is an imaging technique that uses radioactive substances called radiotracers to measure changes in metabolic processes (e.g. the amount of blood flow to certain brain tissues) that are correlated with higher brain activity in those regions. Accordingly, there are several brain regions that show a significant pattern of activation and are thought to be involved in the generation of feelings. These regions are the cingulate cortex, two of the somatosensory cortices (insula and SII), the hypothalamus and some nuclei in the tegmentum of the brainstem—regions that are also involved in homeostatic regulation.

### “As-if” Body Loop

We have seen the importance Damasio attaches to the body. Nevertheless, one of his criticisms of James relates to the idea that subjective feelings *always* stem from body states. Although he generally holds this to be true, Damasio mentions a case where the brain is able to bypass the body. He calls it an “as-if” body loop, when the brain, by activating neurotransmitter nuclei in the brainstem, is able to simulate certain body states and their responses without them being elicited (for example, when we imagine an unpleasant, emotionally stimulating situation).<sup>31</sup> Such a device would help us to feel “as if” we were in an emotional state, thus avoiding a slow and energy-consuming process of actual physiological changes and allowing individuals to respond more faster. The two emotion-triggering sites, amygdala and vmPFC, remain essential components of this pathway.

### Other Interoceptive Theories

Damasio was not alone in emphasizing the importance of body perception for emotions and feelings. There are few other interoceptive or “neo-Jamesian” theories;<sup>32</sup> the most notable examples are those of neuroscientist A. D. (Bud) Craig and philosopher Jesse J. Prinz. In his work, Craig<sup>33</sup> emphasized the role of neural

<sup>30</sup> Antonio Damasio et al., “Subcortical and Cortical Brain Activity During the Feeling of Self-Generated Emotions,” *Nature Neuroscience* 3 (October 2000): 1049–56, <https://doi.org/10.1038/79871>.

<sup>31</sup> Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, 155–60.

<sup>32</sup> See Scarantino and de Sousa, “Emotions”; Adolphs and Anderson, *Neuroscience of Emotion*.

<sup>33</sup> See A. D. (Bud) Craig, *How do You Feel? An Interoceptive Moment with Your Neurobiological Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); A. D. (Bud) Craig, “Interoception: The Sense of the Physiological Condition of the Body,” *Current Opinion in Neurobiology* 13, no. 4 (August 2003): 500–5, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-4388\(03\)00090-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-4388(03)00090-4).

pathways known as the interoceptive system, which process the physiological condition of all bodily tissues (such as temperature, pain, visceral and muscular sensation, etc.) and provide the basis for the subjective image of the sentient self. Craig identified the region of the brain called the insular cortex (more specifically, in the right anterior insula), shared by all mammals, as the main area of interoception that generates feelings. In contrast to Craig, Damasio argues that feelings of bodily states do not arise only in the insular cortex but are distributed throughout the nervous system and include the brainstem, mid-brain and cortex; this view also appears to be supported by experimental evidence.<sup>34</sup> Prinz's theory, which goes back to pioneers such as William James and Karl Lange, attempts to reconcile the ideas that emotions are like other bodily perceptions, but that they are nevertheless meaningful, and enable us to evaluate the issues that concern us.<sup>35</sup> In the field of affective neuroscience, theories about our subjective experience of emotions are a valuable contribution to predominantly animal-oriented research.

### Adaptive Role of Emotions and Feelings

But why do we have emotions and feelings? Throughout his work, Damasio supports the view that affects arose through natural selection and because they have shown to be efficient in regulating life or homeostasis. Homeostasis, from the Greek word for "same" (homo) and "steady" (stasis), refers to dynamic, self-regulating processes that keep living organisms within optimal ranges necessary for survival. These include the appropriate presence of nutrients, certain temperature or pH levels, defense against dangerous external agents such as viruses and pathogens, etc. The term was first introduced in 1932 by the physician Walter Cannon in his book *The Wisdom of the Body*,<sup>36</sup> but the idea of physiological regulation appeared as early as ancient Greece, where physicians argued that four different "humors" regulated the body. Today, homeostasis is considered "the central unifying concept of physiology."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See Adolphs and Anderson, *Neuroscience of Emotion*, 287.

<sup>35</sup> Jesse J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Walter B. Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1932).

<sup>37</sup> George E. Billman, "Homeostasis: The Underappreciated and Far Too Often Ignored Central Organizing Principle of Physiology," *Frontiers of Physiology* 11 (March 2020): article 200, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fphys.2020.00200>.

Homeostatic regulation ranges from innate and automatic to more complex responses. From the bottom up, Damasio<sup>38</sup> mentions the following biological processes in multicellular organisms: at the lowest level, metabolic regulation, basic reflexes and immune responses, then pain and pleasure behavior. Then come drives and motivations, and, finally emotion proper: emotions and feelings. There seems to be a construction plan in which simpler regulatory processes (such as metabolism and reflexes) are “nested” within more complex processes, so that the ensemble is not a simple linear hierarchy.

This view is also supported by other neuroscientists. Adolphs and Anderson<sup>39</sup> compare emotions with reflexes and conclude that the latter are not able to deal with all kinds of stimuli because the world around us is too complex and unpredictable, so evolution had to equip us with much more adaptive behavior in order for an organism to survive. In this respect, emotions are much more flexible and go far beyond what reflexes can handle; their level of complexity lies somewhere between reflexes and volitional deliberations. The authors argue for a *functional* account of emotions; that means that they are defined by what they do and what their role is, rather than by how they are implemented.<sup>40</sup> They are *adaptive* in nature and carry out specific functions that contribute to the survival of the organism. However, this does not mean that every time we feel something, it directly promotes our survival and well-being. Having an emotion that may be inappropriate on certain occasions does not mean that it was not evolutionarily beneficial in other circumstances. The emotion of fear can save our lives when we encounter a wild boar in the forest, but fear manifested as social anxiety, on the other hand, can be a serious obstacle in everyday life.

### **Can Simpler Organisms Feel?**

230

That seems to suggest that some forms of proto-emotional behavior are already present in simple organisms. Despite their lack of a nervous system and any premediated choices, they have some innate intelligence that promotes their well-being and keeps them away from potentially harmful stimuli. These

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<sup>38</sup> Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 31–34.

<sup>39</sup> Adolphs and Anderson, *Neuroscience of Emotion*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Adolphs and Anderson, 57.



behaviors are innate in brainless living beings and as such are part of their “gene-driven machinery.”<sup>41</sup>

However, having a nervous system and a brain, as more complex organisms have, is a much greater advantage in a struggle for survival. Neurons support all other body tissues, they map the body, make movements happen, and promote the release of different molecules; Damasio claims that neurons are “*about* the body, and this ‘aboutness,’ this relentless pointing to the body, is the defining trait of neurons, neuron circuits, and brains.”<sup>42</sup>

Organisms like a kind of fruit fly, *Drosophila melanogaster*, or the marine snail *Aplysia californica* do not appear to be very intelligent, but they already have very simple nervous systems that make their reactions much more coordinated and complex. Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist Eric Kandel, whose life-long interest has been in researching learning and memory, has demonstrated the role of conditioned learning and its neuronal mechanisms in *Aplysia californica*.<sup>43</sup> When you touch the snail’s gills, its heart rate and blood pressure increase and the organism folds up. Can this be called fear? Damasio thinks that these reactions are not the result of deliberation, but they are nevertheless still too complex and too well coordinated to be called reflexes. However, we *could* say that organisms with simple nervous systems already have emotions, but they probably cannot experience them consciously because they lack the necessary brain architecture.<sup>44</sup>

For *feeling* an emotion, we need another special ingredient: consciousness. Even though emotions and feelings have often been neglected in consciousness research, Damasio argues that they are closely related phenomena. When we feel an emotion and we apprehend the state of our body in mind, we realize that we are the *possessor* of these feelings and mental images. Damasio also claims that the basic sense of self is constructed through bodily interception and expe-

<sup>41</sup> Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 39.

<sup>43</sup> Irving Kupfermann et al., “Neuronal Correlates of Habituation and Dishabituation of the Gill-Withdrawal Reflex in *Aplysia*,” *Science* 167, no. 3926 (March 1970): 1743–45, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.167.3926.1743>; Eric R. Kandel, *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 42.

rience that reflects the state of life in the body. Emotion and consciousness require some of the same neural substrates, and when consciousness is impaired, so is emotion.<sup>45</sup> He hypothesizes that consciousness has prevailed in evolution because organisms endowed with conscious minds gain “remarkable advantages,” and they can “struggle for life in more varied settings.”<sup>46</sup>

Like emotions and feelings, consciousness necessarily depends on neural anatomy. The simplest living organisms, lacking a nervous system, are still subject to homeostatic regulation—they are born, live, try to live well, and die—but their choices lack premeditation and reflection, and their abilities are limited to efficient perception of nutrients, defense against pathogens, etc. The minimum criterion for a creature to have an emotion is to have a nervous system that enables more complex movements, guides automatic responses to the environmental stimuli, and enables innate representations in the form of brain maps. Damasio thus argues that organisms with adequate neural anatomy (such as the brain) are indeed conscious and capable of experiencing conscious feelings.<sup>47</sup> The view that most animals with nervous systems are indeed capable feeling emotions such as fear, and that this ability is genetically ingrained by evolutionary design, is supported by one of the leading neuroscientist of emotion, Jaak Panksepp: “An organism’s ability to perceive and anticipate dangers was of such obvious importance during evolution that it was not simply left to the vagaries of individual learning.”<sup>48</sup>

## Discussion: Body in Mind

As I have shown, Damasio’s theory of emotion does not limit itself to neurobiological problems but tackles some important philosophical questions, especially the problem of the mind-body connection. Before consciousness became the central issue in mind and brain research, philosophers tried to understand the relation between mind and body and whether mental phenomena are of the same or a different substance than physical phenomena. René Descartes’ take

<sup>45</sup> See Damasio et al., “Subcortical and Cortical Brain Activity.”

<sup>46</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Feeling and Knowing: Making Minds Conscious* (London: Robinson, 2021), 133–34.

<sup>47</sup> See Damasio, *Feeling and Knowing*.

<sup>48</sup> Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 206.

on this problem is known as “Cartesian dualism,” and although modern scientific theories generally do not support this view, it still influences our everyday thinking and even our use of language. If throughout history the mind-body problem was the domain of philosophy, in the 21st century researchers began addressing the problem with the use of scientific methods. For example, one of the current approaches is to study the neural correlates of subjective phenomena, defined as the neural mechanisms behind the conscious experience.<sup>49</sup>

### “The Hard Problem”

Explaining the connection between physical and mental phenomena is referred to as “the hard problem of consciousness” (as opposed to the “easy problems” such as the study of attention, integration of information, etc.). The name was coined by the philosopher David Chalmers in 1995:

How can we explain why there is something it is like to entertain a mental image, or to experience an emotion? It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we do not have a good explanation of why and how it so arises. Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does. If any problem qualifies as the problem of consciousness, it is this one.<sup>50</sup>

Damasio believes that solving the hard problem is “central to the understanding of who we are,”<sup>51</sup> but the way it is formulated makes it look like the consciousness is unsolvable, even though other comparable mysteries have gradually been solved by science.<sup>52</sup> It asks the wrong question because it leaves out other important components that are equally indispensable to the emergence of consciousness besides the brain.<sup>53</sup> In this regard, emotions and feelings are the key contributors to the conscious mind, because they supply the brain with

<sup>49</sup> See Christof Koch, Marcello Massimini, Melanie Boly, and Giulio Tononi, “Neural Correlates of Consciousness: Progress and Problems,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 17 (May 2016): 307–21, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn.2016.22>.

<sup>50</sup> David Chalmers, “Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 212.

<sup>51</sup> Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 183.

<sup>52</sup> Antonio Damasio and Anil Seth, “What’s so Hard About Understanding Consciousness?,” interview by Kristen French, *Nautilus*, February 2, 2022, <https://nautil.us/whats-so-hard-about-understanding-consciousness-238421/>.

<sup>53</sup> Damasio, *Feeling and Knowing*, 127–28.

information critical for life regulation and help to establish the sense of self. Or, as neuroscientist Alan Jasanoff argues, “nowhere is the integration of brain and body more apparent than in the domain of our emotions.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Embodied Cognition**

The idea that the body is indispensable for the formation of the mind is not unfamiliar. The interdisciplinary field at the intersection of neuroscience, philosophy, linguistics and artificial intelligence called embodied cognition, has investigated how the body and its interactions with the environment shape different aspects of cognition. The embodied mind thesis challenges some early theories of cognitive science and philosophy of mind, such as cognitivism and computationalism, which held that the human mind is an information-processing system and that cognitive processes can be understood as a series of inputs and outputs or the manipulation of symbols.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, embodied cognition, which is now a fairly prominent theory, emphasizes the significance of one’s physical body and its immersion in the world.

However, the indispensable role of the body in shaping our lived experience was already emphasized by the phenomenological tradition, which was also one of the sources of inspiration for thinking about embodied cognition.<sup>56</sup> One of its most important philosophers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, argued that the body necessarily shapes our perception and is therefore inseparable from the subject.<sup>57</sup>

Damasio’s argument follows the same logic when he claims that “body and mind are different aspects of specific biological processes.”<sup>58</sup> A similar view regarding the mind-body problem was held by Baruch Spinoza, who Damasio deemed was very much ahead of his time. He quotes a sentence from the second part of Spi-

<sup>54</sup> Alan Jasanoff, *The Biological Mind: How Brain, Body, and Environment Collaborate to Make Us Who We Are* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 97.

<sup>55</sup> See Warren S. McCulloch and Walter Pitts, “A Logical Calculus of the Ideas Immanent in Nervous Activity,” *The Bulletin of Mathematical Biophysics* 5 (December 1943): 115–33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02478259>.

<sup>56</sup> See Lawrence Shapiro and Shannon Spaulding, “Embodied Cognition,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, June 25, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/embodied-cognition/>.

<sup>57</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).

<sup>58</sup> Damasio, “Feeling Our Emotions,” 15.

noza's *Ethics*, which reads: "The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body."<sup>59</sup> Damasio's view is relevant because he tries to address the mind-body problem through an evolutionary lens: we have our body in mind because "life regulation is the need and motivation. Brain mapping is the enabler, the engine that transforms plain life regulation into minded regulation and, eventually, into consciously minded regulation."<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusions

In our everyday beliefs about emotions and feelings, we sometimes tend to forget the key role played by the physical body. Following William James, Damasio argued that physiological bodily states such as heart rate, blood pressure, hormonal and neuromodulatory changes, etc., with which our bodies respond to emotionally salient stimuli, are the basis for feeling emotions. Furthermore, *knowing* that we are the proprietor of the body we feel constitutes the base for constructing the sense of selfhood. Damasio's view that consciousness arises in an interplay between neural and bodily processes is critical, since most modern scientific theories limit their explanation of conscious experience to neural processing and computation. For Damasio, the question of how the brain generates the subjective mind is not the correct one, because he argues that there are multiple other non-neural tissues that, through brain-mapping ability, help to create mental contents and consciousness. In this aspect, this "body-mindedness" is an evolutionary consequence of natural selection, because having feelings and consciousness can help organisms regulate life more efficiently. For a complete account of human affective experience, it is therefore crucial to take a broader view and address questions that are usually outside the scope of strictly scientific research. Damasio's interdisciplinary work, supported by the research of other scientists in the field, is valuable not only for the discipline of affective neuroscience, but also because it addresses some major philosophical questions, such as the mind-body problem. As such, it helps us to better understand affective experience, a ubiquitous part of the human condition.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 211.

<sup>60</sup> Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 107.

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## The Tropological Animal: Beyond the Body and the Sovereign<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

biopolitics, necropolitics, tropes, human-animal relations, sovereignty, multitude, flesh

### Abstract

Biopolitics and necropolitics have used animals as a concept to illustrate a particular human biopolitical situation, much in the “tradition” of Aristotle’s provisional biopolitics. In the Western context, not only our understanding of politics but also tropology and the conceptual apparatus itself are haunted by this ancient legacy, which underlies a vertical ontology tied to processes of spatialization and containment, a vertical ontology that enables an intelligibility of figurative translation. The article considers tropological systems as systems embedded in particular forms of governmentality, forms of the violent administration of life and death. To show how certain bodies are marked as animal or animal-like and used in the (metaphorical) processes of exclusion/inclusion, it focuses on Giorgio Agamben’s thoughts on Carolus Linnaeus and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s analysis of metaphors in the most recent (r)evolutionary theory, symbiogenesis, developed by Lynn Margulis. Moreover, to radically disturb the graduated ontological premises of traditional stylistics and tropology, we move beyond existing conceptualizations of the body and the sovereign, all of which are based on de-borderization, intersections, movements, and transfigurations.

239

## Tropološka žival: onkraj telesa in suverena

### Ključne besede

biopolitika, nekropolitika, tropi, človeško-živalski odnosi, suverenost, multituda, meso

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## Povzetek

Biopolitika in nekropolitika uporabljata živali kot koncept, ki služi ponazoritvi nekega človeškega biopolitičnega stanja, sledeč »tradiciji« Aristotelove preliminarne biopolitike. V zahodnem kontekstu je naše razumevanje ne le politike, temveč tudi tropologije in samega pojmovnega aparata še vedno bistveno zaznamovano z antično zapuščino in njeno vertikalno ontologijo, temeljno zvezano s procesi omejevanja in prostorskega razmeščanja, vertikalno ontologijo, ki omogoča jasnost figurativnega prevoda. V članku tropološke sisteme obravnavamo kot sisteme, vgrajene v določene oblike vladnosti, oblike nasilnega upravljanja z življenjem in smrtjo. S pomočjo misli Giorgia Agambena o Carolusu Linnaeusu in analize metaforike Zakiyyah Iman Jackson v najnovejši (r)evolucijski teoriji, simbiogenezi, ki jo je razvila Lynn Margulis, skušamo prikazati, kako so določena telesa, označena kot živalska ali živalim podobna, uporabljena v (metaforičnih) procesih izključevanja/vključevanja. Še več, da bi radikalno destabilizirali vertikalne ontološke premise tradicionalne tropologije in stilistike, se premikamo onkraj obstoječih konceptualizacij telesa in suverenosti, ki temeljijo na deborderizaciji, stičiščih, gibanjih in transfiguracijah.



## The Persistence of Smooth Violence

The prevailing view of the link between the animal question and biopolitics in the context of animal studies and critical animal studies focuses on the analysis of human-animal relations through biopolitical tools. Agamben's concept of bare life and the conceptualization of the animal as the ultimate bare life, for example, have proven particularly useful. A notable example of a departure from this prevailing logic of addressing human-animal relations in the context of biopolitics and animal studies can be found in James Stanescu's 2013 "Beyond Biopolitics: Animal Studies, Factory Farms, and the Advent of Deading Life" and Dinesh J. Wadiwel's 2015 *The War Against Animals*.<sup>2</sup> The latter, while using an existing biopolitical framework and the concept of war to think about human-animal relations, acknowledges, like Stanescu, this crucial conceptual

240

<sup>2</sup> James Stanescu, "Beyond Biopolitics: Animal Studies, Factory Farms, and the Advent of Deading Life," *PhaenEx* 8, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013): 135–60, <https://doi.org/10.22329/p.v8i2.4090>; Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *The War Against Animals* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2015).

flaw when thinking about human-animal relations in the context of biopolitics and beyond.

This may be a kind of filling in of conceptual gaps, a kind of “corrective,” for Foucault, Agamben and Mbembe. As they have largely used animals only as a “ground of thought,”<sup>3</sup> a concept used to illustrate a particular human biopolitical condition, much in the “tradition” of Aristotle’s preliminary biopolitics.

Wadiwel points out that the commonalities between the forms of violence used by humans against humans and those used by humans against animals primarily concern shared techniques and logics of violent management of life and death, which “involves understanding the way in which developments in means for killing and containing animals flow to the human sphere, and vice versa,” while cautioning against using existing metaphors of human-on-human violence such as “slavery,” “colonialism,” “holocaust” or “genocide” in describing what we do to animals.<sup>4</sup> Since “biopolitical theory was mostly developed around thinking through issues of human genocides, particularly the Nazi *Lager*,”<sup>5</sup> Stanescu suggests thinking in part with and outside of biopolitics, when analyzing human-animal relations, particularly the factory farm.<sup>6</sup>

My aim in this article, following what I have explained so far, is to consider tropological systems as systems embedded in certain forms of governmentality, forms of violent management of life that are “smoothed in such a way that it does not appear as violence,” the result of this smoothed-out, seemingly bloodless and opaque epistemic violence being a complete transformation of “an animate sentient being into a ‘thing.’”<sup>7</sup> This occurs as and through tropological modes of figurative speech, as a compilation of tropes. In this context, Wadiwel recalls the “absent referent” of Carol J. Adams, which arises from the process of

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Pugliese, “Terminal Truths: Foucault’s Animals and the Mask of the Beast,” in *Foucault and Animals*, ed. Matthew Chrulew and Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 19

<sup>4</sup> Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, 81.

<sup>5</sup> Stanescu, “Beyond Biopolitics,” 136. See also, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the College de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Stanescu, “Beyond Biopolitics,” 136.

<sup>7</sup> Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, 13.

meat production, where the absent referent is a concrete person, a living animal. I will elaborate and develop this important aspect in the following lines.

In the spirit of a cognitive theory of metaphor that does not limit its stylistic analysis to the literary as the exclusive site of tropology, I will trace the internal caesura of humanity “through developments in the biological and evolutionary sciences”<sup>8</sup> with my first stop being Giorgio Agamben and his thoughts on Carolus Linnaeus and my second Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s analysis of metaphors in the most recent (r)evolutionary theory, symbiogenesis, developed by Lynn Margulis.

The latter example in particular will show how our understanding and use of not only politics, but also rhetoric is still indebted to ancient residue. Since “imagining a new world, [. . .] demands the reimagining of the [. . .] body,”<sup>9</sup> I will show at the end of this section that efforts have already been made to reconceptualize, reinvent, and, more importantly, go beyond existing conceptualizations of the body and the sovereign in order to more accurately grasp present (and future) conditions. All based on de-borderization, crossings, movements and transfigurations.

**“For man does not belong to every animal, but animal belongs to every man”<sup>10</sup>**

Aristotle has already been recognized by several authors (see, e.g., Roberto Esposito, Cary Wolfe, Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel)<sup>11</sup> as the cornerstone not only of biopolitics, but of what is characteristic of Western politics itself: “The grounds for the contest between humans and animals.”<sup>12</sup> This simultaneously answers

<sup>8</sup> Wadiwel, 76.

<sup>9</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 158.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, “Prior Analytics,” trans. A. J. Jenkinson, in *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 25a14–27.

<sup>11</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*.

<sup>12</sup> Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, 65.

the question of why the animal question has from the beginning been primarily a political question and only secondarily an ethical one.

The word politics, originating from the ancient Greek *polis*, denoting both the administrative center of ancient city and its citizens, was defined as a space, to which neither plants nor animals, women nor slaves had access. Early in the “Politics” Aristotle sketches the figure of a man who is on one hand “both beyond the animal, yet absolutely captured by the animal: the human is an entity that extends beyond what it is, yet at the same time is what it is” and on the other hand introduces a vertical ontology, “a graduated scheme by which human animals may be distributed across varying positions along the long trajectory between the animal and the idealised human subject.”<sup>13</sup> Somewhere in-between is the figure of the slave, or with Aristotle “indeed the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life,”<sup>14</sup> that is sometimes also replaceable with animal: “For the ox,” writes Aristotle, “is the poor man’s slave.”<sup>15</sup> And this status is biological, given *by nature*, “through a biological schema of classification.”<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that Aristotle was very interested in animals, as evidenced not only by his writings on politics, but also by his anatomical work on animals.<sup>17</sup>

The point here is that for Aristotle, “‘man’ is not a transcendent being, unrelated to the animal life; rather, ‘man’ is defined as an animal with a surplus ability over and above other animal life,”<sup>18</sup> or, with Aristotle’s words from “Prior Analytics”: “For man does not belong to every animal, but animal belongs to every man.”<sup>19</sup> In “Prior Analytics,” Aristotle uses the example of animals or human-animal relations to illustrate a logical argument. It is no coincidence, then, that when Aristotle needs an example in “Prior Analytics,” it is an animal which, as “the first metaphor”<sup>20</sup> is an example *par excellence*.

243

<sup>13</sup> Wadiwel, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, “Politics,” trans. B. Jowett, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1254a24–1255a3.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, 1252b10–27.

<sup>16</sup> Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Wadiwel, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Wadiwel, 66.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, “Prior Analytics,” 25a14–27.

<sup>20</sup> John Berger, “Why Look At Animals?,” in *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 7.

Referring to the fact that violence against animals is constantly thought of in terms that refer to human violence against other humans, Wadiwel writes of our “absolute poverty of language,”<sup>21</sup> but does not explain this further. One reason for this absolute poverty of language is a logic in which the animal is trapped, a logic in which the animal almost always stands as an example of something else, to illustrate a human condition (biopolitics and necropolitics are a perfect example of this), that this human condition can be thought of at all. Which points all the more to the need to move away from the dominant concepts that originally refer to violence against humans when thinking about violence against animals, to the need to work not only with what is supposedly our poverty, but also with what is really just another form of ongoing smooth violence, of speciesism, of making an animal handleless, just because we need it to be handy.

This origin of the political in the ancient polis, which still haunts political theory in the West, as a “deficiency within the tradition of politics itself,”<sup>22</sup> is also, according to Wadiwel, why animals are still excluded from the question of the political and, consequently from the biopolitical. But tropology and the conceptual apparatus itself, are also haunted by the same measures, with a vertical ontology at its base, a vertical ontology that enables an intelligibility of figurative translation. Following Jovita Pristovšek, who states that “in the (Western) philosophical tradition, aesthetics is the terrain on which subjectivity was/is formed—much less it is explicitly talked about that certain subjects are *deformed* in it,”<sup>23</sup> that certain subjects *must be deformed* in it, in order for certain other subjects to be formed.

### The Biopolitical Animal: Carolus Linnaeus

In *Systema naturae*,<sup>24</sup> Carolus Linnaeus places *Homo* in the order *Anthropomorpha*.<sup>25</sup> In the introductory chapter of *Systema*, Linnaeus identifies the only dis-

<sup>21</sup> Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Wadiwel, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Jovita Pristovšek, “Necro-Aesthetics, Deading Bodies, and Performativity of Flesh,” in *Re-Activating Critical Thinking in the Midst of Necropolitical Realities: For Radical Change*, ed. Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2022), 293.

<sup>24</sup> Carolus Linnaeus, *Systema naturae, sive regna tria naturae systematice proposita per classes, ordines, genera, & species* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Johann Wilhelm de Groot for Theodor Haak, 1735).

<sup>25</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 24.

tinguishing characteristic of human as the capacity to know himself, which consequently means that “*man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human.*”<sup>26</sup> Agamben derives from this one of his key ideas, that *Homo sapiens*, which appears in this formulation in the tenth edition of *Systema*, “is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human. [. . .] *Homo* is constitutively ‘anthropomorphous’ animal [. . .], who must recognize himself in a non-man in order to be human.”<sup>27</sup>

Anthropogenesis, whose fundamental driving force is the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, is thus, according to Agamben, the process by which the living being becomes human, and this becoming “results from the caesura and articulation between human and animal. This caesura passes first of all within man.”<sup>28</sup> Anthropogenesis is a crucial political conflict that precedes all others in Western culture, and biopolitics ultimately emerges from anthropogenesis. In this respect, following Stanescu, “the line drawn between the human animal and other animals is one of the, if not the most, important divisions in the biopolitical terrain.”<sup>29</sup>

And in this sense, to return to Linnaeus, there is another important aspect of his work that Agamben mentions only briefly in *The Open: Man and Animal* in the context of Linnaeus’s obsession with apes, but which is in fact crucial to understanding his work, even and especially in the context of biopolitics. In the same breath that Linnaeus revolutionized the continuity between man and animal in his work at that time, he had, on the other hand, already introduced a gradation within the human species, a tendency that was only reinforced by Georges Cuvier’s anatomical work in the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

Linnaeus’s logic closely resembles that of Aristotle. And the work of both shows that “raciality is not a derivation of ‘species’ but is homologous and contigu-

<sup>26</sup> Agamben, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Agamben, 26–27.

<sup>28</sup> Agamben, 79.

<sup>29</sup> Stanescu, “Beyond Biopolitics,” 135.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Senior, “Classify and Display: Human and Animal Species in Linnaeus and Cuvier,” in *Animals, Animality and Literature*, ed. Bruce Boehrer, Molly Hand, and Brian Massumi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 167.

ous with biological constructions of species and evolution and, therefore, not simply a by-product of ‘speciesism’ but rather an interdependent, coterminous, co-articulator of ‘the animal question.’”<sup>31</sup>

### The Contained Animal: Protected Lives and Dead(ing) Referents

Stanescu, in his article “Beyond Biopolitics,” sets out “a genealogy of forms of life”<sup>32</sup> from Agamben to Butler and Benjamin etc., adding to this the concept of life, “a deading life,” which he sees as an effective framework for thinking about human-animal relations in the factory farm context. One of the most important aspects of his concept of deading life is “a sense of life meant as pure production, pure use-value,”<sup>33</sup> and if Stanescu is referring here to the use of dead bodies for profit in the meat processing industry, this is no less true of the discursive, topological level of the use of bodies previously designated as inhuman and thus designated as material for use, for it is only when living beings are rhetorically transformed into objects and things that we can dispose of them as inanimate objects and things, which means that they can be removed and not murdered or killed.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, is it possible to answer in the affirmative the (rhetorical?) question, “Could metaphor itself be the undergarment to the garb of oppression?”<sup>35</sup> posed by Carol J. Adams in her now classic work *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory?* A question that, ironically, is also formulated through metaphor and is even one of the key topological meta-toposes of costume and clothing.

One of the key concepts that emerges in her work is the aforementioned “absent referent,” which refers to the person who is made into meat in the meat processing industry. And since it is more difficult to kill a concrete person, a sentient being, than, say, an object or a quality or projection detached from that being, it is necessary to replace that concrete being with something, e.g. a fox must be

<sup>31</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 156.

<sup>32</sup> Pristovšek, “Necro-Aesthetics,” 288.

<sup>33</sup> Stanescu, “Beyond Biopolitics,” 151.

<sup>34</sup> James J. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 51.

<sup>35</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 26.



replaced by a threat, a pest, so that it can be killed,<sup>36</sup> a refugee by an animal that can be removed, deported or even killed with impunity as a potential threat, a pest, or as Syrian refugee Ahmad Shamieh says: “Politics treats me as if I were an animal.”<sup>37</sup> And if Marina Gržinić, in her 2016 article “‘Afterwards’: Struggling with Bodies in the Dump of History” places the body of the refugee as “the body that centrally entangles materiality and power today in Europe,”<sup>38</sup> it is this body, the body of the refugee, as a racialized body, marked by the signifier that “has historically been essential to producing classes of abject humans.”<sup>39</sup>

Gržinić cites Joseph Pugliese,<sup>40</sup> who states that the entanglement of “racism and speciesism” is of such proportion that “at every turn in the documentary history of racism, the spectre of speciesism, the species is used to inscribe and reinscribe the racialized other,”<sup>41</sup> and as Jackson points out, we must not overlook the role of enslavement and coloniality in the emergence of the discourses of nonhuman animals and animalized humans, seeing them as “forged through each other for the purposes of producing an idealized and teleological conception of ‘the human.’”<sup>42</sup>

The key point regarding the absent referent is the way in which this referent, this particular body, is absent, because Adams’s absent referent’s absence is an absence caused by death, by killing, more specifically butchering, so that the absent referent is actually a dead referent or more precisely, the dead(ing) referent, since this death occurs as deading, it is not so much an event, but a continuous process, that does not cease to reoccur after the act of slaughter.

<sup>36</sup> Vesna Liponik, “Antropomorfizacija: Kriična analiza (ne)tropa” (master’s thesis, University of Ljubljana, 2022), 14.

<sup>37</sup> Boštjan Videmšek, “Portret tedna: Ahmad Shamieh,” *Delo*, November 17, 2017, <https://old.delo.si/sobotna/portret-tedna-ahmad-shamieh.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Marina Gržinić, “‘Afterwards’: Struggling with Bodies in the Dump of History,” in *Body between Materiality and Power: Essays in Visual Studies*, ed. Nasheli Jiménez del Val (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 163.

<sup>39</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> See Joseph Pugliese, *State Violence and the Execution of Law: Biopolitical Caesurae of Torture, Black Sites, Drones* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Gržinić, “‘Afterwards,’” 182.

<sup>42</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 23.

In this “graduated scheme”<sup>43</sup> this “constant verticality”<sup>44</sup> we have “protected lives,”<sup>45</sup> at the apex of the vertical line, a group in which not only all the faculties of human physiology, sentience, intelligence and language in general are implicit, but also of “maleness, adulthood (but not old age), bourgeois financial and social standing (including standard bourgeois-level education) [and] membership in the white race,”<sup>46</sup> and on the other side—everything else, “the raw material for exploitation and for metaphoric borrowing.”<sup>47</sup>

What we witness along this deadly verticality are “two co-supplementary movements of the biopolitical, both inherently violent and imperialist.”<sup>48</sup> One move renders someone as inhuman and therefore disposable, and the other as human and, therefore necessary to eliminate all traces of the inhuman.<sup>49</sup> The latter is related to the “critical spatialization of the distance between human and animal through the use of both symbolic and physical bars,” that Pugliese in his text about the position of animality in Foucault’s discourse on madness, calls “crucial in enabling the operation of the biopolitical caesura and its systems of division.”<sup>50</sup> He understands this spatialization as a result of colonial power in the classical period, which “in the context of the asylum, the zoo and the exhibition grounds with their segregated and barred spaces—ensured that the sane, reasoning, white human subject ‘would not compromise itself by too close a resemblance.’”<sup>51</sup> Which, again, just shows an awareness of the uncertainty of the human, of the fact that the “human” must always be reaffirmed and, delineated by all the (non-)human means at our disposal and that “the human is produced, and is the site of great struggles, violence, and hierarchy.”<sup>52</sup>

This spatialization and containment, borderization, has two functions in Mbembe’s work: first, it prevents mixing, uncontrolled crossing of boundaries, con-

<sup>43</sup> Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, 68.

<sup>44</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xi.

<sup>45</sup> Stanesco, “Beyond Biopolitics,” 136.

<sup>46</sup> Paxson, *Poetics of Personification*, 50.

<sup>47</sup> Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Stanesco, “Beyond Biopolitics,” 141.

<sup>49</sup> Stanesco, 141.

<sup>50</sup> Pugliese, “Terminal Truths,” 27.

<sup>51</sup> Pugliese, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Stanesco, “Beyond Biopolitics,” 137.

tamination of *pure reason*, *miscegenation* and, second, it allows unhindered identification and manipulation of the observed space, “which the observer isolates from the surroundings by some principle, so that in this isolation he is able to have complete control over it.”<sup>53</sup> The consequence of this way of seeing is a reactionary connotation (of the animal).<sup>54</sup>

In this sense, we can return once again to Linnaeus, who loved apes so much that he built himself a zoo,<sup>55</sup> a paradigmatic space of “optical asymmetry.”<sup>56</sup> The zoo is an institution built on the foundations of imperialism and emerging capitalism in the 19th century. However, the history of animal zoos is no less the history of human zoos or so-called colonial exhibitions, or as Mbembe puts it, “life under the sign of race has always been equivalent to life in a zoo.”<sup>57</sup>

Mbembe cites three key processes as the basis for constituting a zoo: abduction, capture, and caging. Animals are not there to be killed and for direct consumption, but to live in a confined space, their lives dependent on the interventions of their keepers. They are not domesticated and a distance is created between humans and animals, and this distance is crucial for their relationship, for the zoo as such.<sup>58</sup>

### Symbiogenesis or Miscegenation of Beastly Bacteria

Lynn Margulis’ symbiogenetic theory of evolution is, first, a counter-position to Darwinism and neo-Darwinism, and, second, a theory that challenges the very concept of individuality and subjectivity and also shows how we adapt to and cooperate with others (species). According to Margulis (1938–2011), symbiogenesis means “the origin of new tissues, organs, organisms, even species, with the formation of long-term or permanent symbiosis.”<sup>59</sup> Through symbiosis,

<sup>53</sup> Jure Detela, *Orfični dokumenti: Teksti in fragmenti iz zapuščine*, ed. Miklavž Komelj (Koper: Hyperion, 2011), 290. All English translations of Detela’s work are my own.

<sup>54</sup> Detela, *Orfični dokumenti*, 111.

<sup>55</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, 32.

<sup>56</sup> Olivier Razac, *Ekran in živalski vrt: Spektakel in udomačevanje od kolonialnih razstav do Big Brotherja*, trans. Sonja Dular (Ljubljana: Maska, 2007), 91.

<sup>57</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 167.

<sup>58</sup> Mbembe, 167.

<sup>59</sup> Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 6.

bacteria gave rise to eukaryotic cells (those of protoctists, fungi, animals, and plants).<sup>60</sup> Margulis' theory of evolution emphasizes that it is through coexistence that more complex structures become possible, that none of us would be possible without the simple concept of cooperation, community, merging, and that life itself is first and foremost symbiotic.

Symbiogenesis is already widely used (as a metaphor) in philosophical discourse by such diverse authors as Donna J. Haraway and Graham Harman, building on the already widely accepted idea of symbiosis as a paradigm for understanding (human) relations.<sup>61</sup> Narratives of common origins of this kind, which even have their scientific, even *natural* foundations, find their special place of reference precisely in a period that is essentially characterized by the "crisis of the commons" and thus the "crisis of the community" and, lastly, the crisis of (also conceptual) excavations from these states. As Gržinić states in the afterword to the Slovenian translation of Mbembe's *Critique de la raison nègre*, it is characteristic of the contemporary condition that "it is increasingly difficult for us to state with clarity the reasons for which we constitute the common world. These reasons are no longer obvious: instead of patiently reconstructing the reasons for living together, we are creating a situation in which it is important to search for the things that divide us."<sup>62</sup>

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, in her 2020 *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, has shown how Margulis's theory "emerged against a backdrop of hierarchical racialization,"<sup>63</sup> how not even the most "radical theorist of evolution" as Haraway called Margulis,<sup>64</sup> is not only nonimmune to antiracist and colonialist histories that have always "informed *evolutionary discourses on the origin of life itself* and our ideas of cellular biology,"<sup>65</sup> but also shows that this is still the case.

250

<sup>60</sup> Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origin of Species* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 55–56.

<sup>61</sup> Donna J. Haraway wrote about symbiogenesis in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), and Graham Harman in *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (London: Polity, 2016).

<sup>62</sup> Marina Gržinić, "Svet kot so-pripadanje," afterword to *Kritika črnskega uma*, by Achille Mbembe, trans. Suzana Koncut (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2019), 282.

<sup>63</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 151.

<sup>64</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 60.

<sup>65</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 122.

Margulis and Dorion Sagan, her son, an American science fiction writer with whom she later collaborated, “present their theory in highly racialised terms, even occasionally referring to symbiotic cells as ‘miscegenated.’”<sup>66</sup> The term miscegenation was coined by a proslavery prosegregationist Civil War propaganda pamphlet from 1863 titled “Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro.” The pamphlet was a hoax, but it nevertheless gained widespread circulation in the United States and popularized the term, which referred to fears of “race mixing” and the disappearance of a “distinct white race” as technologies of antiblack politics.<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, Margulis and Sagan “likened symbiogenesis to slavery,”<sup>68</sup> and, in addition to that Margulis called her text about the most famous symbiogenetic bacteria *Mixotricha paradoxa* “The Beast with Five Genomes,”<sup>69</sup> which has been symptomatically overlooked in the further implementation of the theory in other discourses.

Symbiogenetic theory employs the most basic repertoire of discourse on Africa, particularly the slave narrative with “recursive investments in figurative [. . .] narratives that conceptualize blackness as trope, metaphor, symbol.”<sup>70</sup> As Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* observes, “Discourse on Africa is almost always deployed in the framework (or on the fringes) of a meta-text about the *animal*—to be exact, about the *beast*: its experience, its world, and its spectacle.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Jackson, 153. “The co-opting of strangers, the involvement and infolding of others [. . .] into ever more complex and *miscegenous* genomes. The acquisition of the reproducing other, of the microbe and its genome, is no mere sideshow. Attraction, merger, fusion, incorporation, cohabitation, recombination—both permanent and cyclical—and other *forbidden couplings*, are the main sources of Darwin’s missing variation.” Margulis, *Acquiring Genomes*, 205; emphasis added.

<sup>67</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 154.

<sup>68</sup> Jackson, 153. “In both merged and free-living forms the descendants of all four kinds of bacteria still live today. Some say the four types are mutually *enslaved*, trapped both in the plant and as the plant.” Margulis, *Symbiotic planet*, 34; emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, “The Beast with Five Genomes,” *Natural History Magazine*, June 2001, [https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/master.html?https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/o6o1/o6o1\\_feature.html](https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/master.html?https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/o6o1/o6o1_feature.html).

<sup>70</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

The first reason for the use of this “all-too-readily available metaphor and even metonymic link between race and species”<sup>72</sup> as discussed above, is the persistent logic of “the black body, held captive as a ‘resource for metaphor,’”<sup>73</sup> but the second reason is, that the metaphor *heavy ornament* has traditionally and still is widely perceived; evolutionary biologists brighten up and *color* the dull scientific discourse; this is especially important when dealing with a controversial new theory of evolution that has taken hold to erase the old theory, and thus the equally controversial topos of mixing, of miscegenation is excellent for the task.

Turning now to the words of the Slovenian poet Jure Detela and his problematization and rejection of substitutive metaphor, in light of the above we can read one of his passages in which he problematizes the use of metaphor in relation to non-human beings in a very different way. He states that he “never wanted to call plants, animals, streams, rocks, seas by names that reduce [sic] them to mere emblems and thus use [sic] them in metaphor as the Aristotelian logical form that confines and enslaves beings.”<sup>74</sup>

### From Sovereignty to Multitude

What is at work in these arbitrary distinctions between the human and the animal is a form of sovereignty tied to the biopolitical caesura, but not a sovereignty as “a right or capacity to rule,”<sup>75</sup> but as “a form of violence,”<sup>76</sup> with Jacques Derrida, a form of stupidity, absurd and excessive,<sup>77</sup> for “how else might we describe a claimed superiority by humans over animals (whether based on intelligence, reason, communication, vocalisation, or politics)”<sup>78</sup> if not as a kind of stupidity, “which in its very exercise confirms a right to stupidity inherent within sovereignty itself.”<sup>79</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 154.

<sup>73</sup> Jackson, 13.

<sup>74</sup> Detela, *Orfični dokumenti*, 189.

<sup>75</sup> Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, 261.

<sup>76</sup> Wadiwel, 261.

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>78</sup> Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, 257.

<sup>79</sup> Wadiwel, 257.

At the end of his book *The War Against Animals*, Wadiwel proposes a revision of the concept of sovereignty to think about animal sovereignties and radically reimagine our “fundamental political concepts.”<sup>80</sup> He identifies coexistence and plurality as two crucial features of this new, reimagined sovereignty.<sup>81</sup> He proposes a concept of truce, a mutual recognition and consideration of former enemies, and speculates whether it is possible to treat sovereignty as an assembly.<sup>82</sup> Wadiwel also adds veganism to the list, not as a form of biopolitics, but as a challenge to human sovereignty, a break with it.<sup>83</sup>

Fahim Amir’s 2020 *Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It)* picks up where Wadiwel leaves off. *Being and Swine* “is a plea for politicizing the animal question on the basis of a slightly ‘feralized’ Marxism,”<sup>84</sup> which Amir calls “zombie Marxism.”<sup>85</sup> Amir treats humans and animals as members of the same political species, “the swinish multitude,” or even the “mosquito,” or “termite” multitude, but most importantly he treats animals as political subjects, agents of their own liberation, showing that any community, any multitude, is always already multispecies, but inevitably shaped by class relations and colonialism. Through an analysis of the functioning of the links between society, history, economy, everyday culture and politics, without which neither nature nor the role of animals can be understood, he traces the flow of the material and discursive techniques and logics of the violent management of life and death from the animal to the human sphere and vice versa.

Similar to Wadiwel, Amir attempts to rework and expand a familiar leftist political (and ontological) concept of the multitude to imagine the multitude as a form of transspecies alliance.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Wadiwel, 294.

<sup>81</sup> Wadiwel, 21.

<sup>82</sup> Wadiwel, 294.

<sup>83</sup> Wadiwel, 279.

<sup>84</sup> Fahim Amir, *Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It)*, trans. Geoffrey C. Howes and Corvin Russell (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2020), 18.

<sup>85</sup> Amir, 9.

<sup>86</sup> The term interspecies refers to interactions between species, preserving the distinctions between species and the concept of species itself, while the term transspecies aims to question the concept of species itself, attempting to think of relationships beyond species distinctions.

In one of the chapters titled “Swinish Multitude,” he introduces a transspecies swine society in 19th-century New York, where people and pigs worked together to resist city authorities and their sanitary measures. He traces the origin of the term to the French Revolution. The term “swinish multitude” was coined by the political conservative Edmund Burke in his 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*<sup>87</sup> for pejorative purposes. Burke at that time was not aware of the extent to which the term would later be used. Burke’s swinish multitude is a “monstrous figure,” it is mobile and lawless and it abandons the order of things.<sup>88</sup>

It is also important to note here that the swinish multitude refers both to people revolting like hogs and hogs revolting like humans and is therefore not only a term of “political radicalism in troubled times of social conflict,”<sup>89</sup> but radically troubles the graduated ontological premises of traditional stylistics and tropology. Transspecies multitude is thus also significantly shaped through tropology.

In this sense, another notable example in Amir’s book is his reworking of the pejorative comparison between man and animal, coined by Frederick Winslow Taylor.

In his most famous 1911 work, *Principles of Scientific Management*,<sup>90</sup> Taylor used a number of parables to convey his idea of scientific rationalization of the work process. His favorite was the story of Schmidt, “a stocky Pennsylvania German who was a pig-iron loader at Bethlehem Steel. Schmidt loaded about 12 tons of the 92-pound iron pigs each day (and then ran home to work on his little dream house). Using Taylor’s principles, ‘scientific managers’ raised Schmidt’s output to 48 tons per day, and raised his daily wages from \$1.15 to \$1.85.”<sup>91</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>88</sup> Amir, *Being and Swine*, 48.

<sup>89</sup> Amir, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1911).

<sup>91</sup> David A. Hounshell, “The Same Old Principles in the New Manufacturing,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 31, 2021, <https://hbr.org/1988/11/the-same-old-principles-in-the-new-manufacturing>.



And, as Taylor points out, Schmidt was able to achieve this success not only because of his science, but also because he was “a high-priced man” who “does just what he’s told to do and no back talk.”<sup>92</sup> Needless to say, “Taylor was known for his studied disregard for the worker.”<sup>93</sup>

If Ford was inspired to set up the first assembly line factory after a visit to Chicago slaughterhouses, which were already using the same processes but in reverse, Taylor saw the result of the rationalization of the work process, he is responsible for, in assembly line turning people into “trained gorillas.”<sup>94</sup>

Amir returns to this image at the end of his book, first noting that “communism, as an unredeemed promise of humanity, will let the apes out of the zoos—physically and metaphorically.”<sup>95</sup> He then refers to Marx’s writing about the relationship between English and Irish workers. What is true of them is also true of the relationship between humans and animals: there can be no freedom while there is still unfreedom. And continues: “We may not yet be able to fully picture what this might mean, but there is no reason we should not begin to imagine it. To use words and images, emotions and deeds, to make reality stutter, as in the seemingly utopian vision of—gorilla guerrillas in the mist.”<sup>96</sup>

At the end of his work, Amir points to the temporality of multitude in the form of Taylor’s appropriated and subverted “trained gorillas,” which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who are responsible for popularizing the concept, refer to in their work *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, multitude as a concept caught in the strange double movement of “always-already and not yet.”<sup>97</sup>

Amir’s multitude means something like “quantity” which, in contrast to the “mass” or the “crowd,” does not mean a merging into a greater whole, at the same time, it refers neither to the “people” nor to the “population” as the object of biopolitical governance, it is positioned as the opposite of the state and, as

<sup>92</sup> Hounshell.

<sup>93</sup> Hounshell.

<sup>94</sup> Amir, *Being and Swine*, 87.

<sup>95</sup> Amir, 173.

<sup>96</sup> Amir, 173.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 222.

such, denotes the production of acts of resistance through “irreducible multiplicities.”<sup>98</sup>

In this sense, his “definition” of multitude corresponds in part to multitude as understood by Hardt and Negri, with the important difference that while Hardt and Negri emphasize that multitude is also a concept that includes aspects of race, gender, and sexual difference, their multitude consists only of humans.

Hardt and Negri’s multitude aims to go beyond the modern concepts like sovereignty. They see the multitude not as of one political body that commands, but as a *living flesh* that governs itself. On the one hand, they stress that this is a new kind of body, a common body, a democratic body, but on the other hand, they foreground its fleshy elementary quality precisely as a departure from the tradition of the use of the concept of the body in political philosophy, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty argues that “the flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance,”<sup>99</sup> it is common and is elemental and this elemental flesh of the multitude is “maddeningly elusive, since it cannot be entirely corralled into the hierarchical organs of a political body.”<sup>100</sup> Hardt and Negri thus write a kind of monstrous anti-*De Corpore*, which is supposed to oppose all modern political debates about the body and to embrace a new relation between the communal and the singular in the flesh of the multitude. But even if they dissociate the multitude from the concept of sovereignty, in a sense they still understand it as a productive biopolitical figure. So far so good, but let’s be clear the biopolitical operates with the body, necropolitics on the other side with the flesh, guts.

### **Beyond: Political Flesh**

256

In her text “‘Afterwards,’” Gržinić follows Alexander G. Weheliye’s proposal “that, in the time of necropolitics, we have to elaborate on ‘carnality,’ ‘flesh,’ or even ‘guts,’ as the viscus in the title of his book [*Habeas Viscus*]<sup>101</sup> could be trans-

<sup>98</sup> Amir, *Being and Swine*, 57.

<sup>99</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 139.

<sup>100</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 192.

<sup>101</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

lated.”<sup>102</sup> She thus suggests an even more precise distinction between “the body as a device of biopolitics” and the flesh, for which she proposes the term political flesh, which has a “political relevance in the time of the necropolitical.”<sup>103</sup>

Not coincidentally, after this proposal Gržinić in her article exposes the connection between racism and speciesism, because each time we introduce flesh into the paradigm, we cannot avoid its carnal shadow, its dead(ing) referent, the animal, being constantly reproduced in the process of neoliberal global capital’s racialization and precisely for that reason, as Gržinić states, “non-humanity is a category that offers the possibility of a new paradigm of politicisation.”<sup>104</sup>

She then also draws a parallel to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s flesh, but with a slightly different emphasis than Hardt and Negri, with flesh “as the source of knowledge, to a point where the perceiver and the perceived cannot be disentangled.”<sup>105</sup> But even more importantly she invites us to think about the agency of a political flesh. This being a starting point for thinking of common revolt: the somatic power of a compartmentalized and contained political flesh, since “necro-aesthetics is somatic, all-bodily encompassing. [. . .] Necro-aesthetics produces a bodily reaction, which implies a new way of perceiving and to attune our senses differently: a relation through feeling, the whole body/knowledge.”<sup>106</sup>

Jackson in the coda of her book *Becoming Human*, titled “Toward a Somatic Theory of Necropower” extends Mbembe’s view of colonial racialization that produces and is produced by the spatialization of populations into “cells.” Her aim is to query “how social processes: the prison ‘cell,’ the political party ‘cell’ and the military ‘cell’—interact with somatic cellular processes, producing alterations to the immediate cellular environment and cellular functioning in a manner that we might also describe as necropolitical.”<sup>107</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Gržinić, “‘Afterwards,’” 181.

<sup>103</sup> Gržinić, 181.

<sup>104</sup> Gržinić, “Svet kot so-pripadanje,” 289.

<sup>105</sup> Gržinić, “‘Afterwards,’” 182.

<sup>106</sup> Marina Gržinić, Jovita Pristovšek, and Sophie Uitz, “The Paradox of Necro-Aesthetics” (unpublished manuscript, 2021), quoted in Pristovšek, “Necro-Aesthetics,” 292.

<sup>107</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 205.

In this sense and before the final stage of this trajectory that aimed to demonstrate how humanist construction of the subject is premised on the abjection of non-human, on the abjection of the Black Body, on processes of containment and compartmentalization, I want to emphasize, when rethinking and reimagining the alternatives to the fundamental concepts, such as subjectivity and agency, we must not seek inclusion to the tradition of liberal humanism, but rather think of “decolonial desubjectivation as a politics for the 21st century.”<sup>108</sup> Key aspect of this decolonizing work being “seizing or really *taking back* the conceptualization of that bond [between human and non-human], reoccupying and deploying it in terms that continue to reject all settler binaries.”<sup>109</sup> To rethink it with Mbembe in terms of “becoming” or “co-agency,” as a matter of movement, crossing and transfiguration, following the old African cognitive worlds, in which personhood was always a matter not of ontology but composition and assemblage of a multiplicity of vital beings.<sup>110</sup> This being a base for the new collective subject that is “at the origin of new languages.”<sup>111</sup>

### Coda: Fast Forward

We have not yet fully grasped the anthropomorphic as a feature of modernity, but what lies ahead is the question of how to think about human-animal relations in the times of the anthropomachinic. According to Mbembe, “Humanity is in the process of leaving behind the grand divisions between the human, the animal, and the machine so typical of the discourse on modernity and on humanism. Today’s human is now firmly wedded to its animal and its machine.”<sup>112</sup>

Instead of a conclusion, I would like to pose a question and briefly outline some challenges that arise from the question of the animal as a question of the future. The first would certainly be the challenge of the technological, the anthropomachinic of the specular capitalism, with no slaves, where no revolt can take place, a time in which the “surface Negro” is substituted by a “depth Negro,” a

<sup>108</sup> Gržinić, “Svet kot so-pripadanje,” 297.

<sup>109</sup> Robert Geroux, “Introduction to the Special Issue: Decolonizing Animal Studies”, in “Decolonizing Human-Animal Studies”, ed. Robert Geroux, special issue, *Humanimalia* 10, no. 2 (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.52537/humanimalia.9499>.

<sup>110</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 107.

<sup>111</sup> Mbembe, 140–41.

<sup>112</sup> Mbembe, 179.

*genus of subaltern humanity*,<sup>113</sup> and also a time in which the slaughterhouse, the “world laboratory of capitalist modernity” with Amir,<sup>114</sup> is already starting to be replaced with the old biopolitical space with not-so-new purpose—a laboratory, which Gržinić in the review of Amir’s book called “academic slow slaughterhouses.”<sup>115</sup> They are now literally becoming one, with their main product, *in vitro* meat, the so-called clean or humane meat, already dangerously (mis)represented as a more sustainable, eco-friendly and cruelty free high-tech alternative to the factory farm and its central processing plant—the slaughterhouse.

As Robert G. W. Kirk observes “the nonhuman animal has contributed to the constitution of a *certain type* of laboratory alongside a *certain type* of politics,”<sup>116</sup> with animals being a key component in the development of the laboratory. Indeed, the laboratory system had long been prepared for this “new” challenge, for the laboratory system is already analogous to the slaughterhouse system, laboratory animals are bred and then used, slaughtered in the laboratory, they are “born to die and live exposed to death.”<sup>117</sup> And if, for Latour, the laboratory represents a space “where the future reservoirs of political power are in the making,”<sup>118</sup> then what we are witnessing now is exactly that, but also something else. This “new” form of animal agriculture is a proof of a brutal persistence, not of the animal industrial complex, but of the animal agricultural complex, which today more than ever finds its basis in a specific form of non-direct killing. Gržinić in her extended essay on *Necropolitics* by Achille Mbembe states that the occidental regime of Whiteness demands a development of ad-

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<sup>113</sup> Mbembe, 178–79.

<sup>114</sup> Amir, *Being and Swine*, 72.

<sup>115</sup> Marina Gržinić, “From Oppression to Dystopia and Back to Colonialism: Review of Fahim Amir’s Book *Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It)* (2020),” *Desde el margen* 4 (February 2021), <http://desde-elmargen.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Being-and-Swine-Book-review-byMarinaGrzinic.pdf>.

<sup>116</sup> Robert G. W. Kirk, “The Birth of the Laboratory Animal: Biopolitics, Animal Experimentation, and Animal Wellbeing,” in *Foucault and Animals*, ed. Matthew Chrulow and Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 193.

<sup>117</sup> Kirk, 217.

<sup>118</sup> Bruno Latour, “Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World,” in *Science Observed: Perspectives on the Social Study of Science*, ed. Karin D. Knorr-Cetina and Michael Mulkey (London: Sage, 1983), 157.

ditional methods to avoid direct killing, which is the most important approach today,<sup>119</sup> and one may add, also the one that certainly has a future.

Since capitalism is not only an economic system, but also “an apparatus of capture and a regime of signs, a certain kind of compulsion, that is, a certain mode of organization and redistribution of power: the compulsion to put things in order as a precondition for extracting their inner value. It is the compulsion to categorize, to separate, to measure, and to name, to classify and establish equivalences.”<sup>120</sup> It is therefore expected that vertical ontology will not stop, but will find new ways for the persistence of (smooth topological) violence.

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<sup>119</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Necropolitics by Achille Mbembe: Extended Essay on the Book,” *Filozofski vestnik* 42, no. 1 (2021): 244, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.42.1.10>.

<sup>120</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 158.

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Katerina Paramana\*

## The Oscillation of Contemporary Bodies between Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Tania Bruguera's Wrestling with Power Structures<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

performance, political economy, necropolitics, biopolitics, Cuba, Tate Modern, *Tatlin's Whisper*

### Abstract

The article examines Tania Bruguera's works *10,148,451* (2019, Tate Modern, UK) and the three versions of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* (2009 and 2014, Havana; 2015, Tate Modern). Thinking with Achille Mbembe's work on necropolitics, Lauren Berlant's on "slow death," and Michel Foucault's on biopolitics, Paramana suggests that *10,148,451* addresses the collective subject and critiques contemporary necropolitics, while the versions of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* address individuals as political subjects, and comment on the panoptic gaze and contemporary biopolitics. Through her analysis of these works, Paramana shows how Bruguera's work is created to comment on the specific political economies in which it is presented, how the perception of the work's politics differs when presented in different political economies, and the insights therefore the work might offer to them. Paramana argues that Bruguera's work has often achieved more than local and national governments and that her "symbolic work with activist parameters" is surprisingly more efficacious than her activist work. The article concludes with the insights Bruguera's work offers for the future of bodies in the 21st century.

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## Oscilacija sodobnih teles med biopolitiko in nekropolitiko: spopad Tanie Bruguera s strukturami moči

### Ključne besede

performans, politična ekonomija, nekropolitika, biopolitika, Kuba, Tate Modern, *Tatlinov šepet*

### Povzetek

Članek obravnava umetniška dela Tanie Bruguera, *10,148,451* (2019, Tate Modern, VB) in tri različice *Tatlinovega šepeta #6* (2009 in 2014, Havana; 2015, Tate Modern). Paramana se sklicuje na nekropolitiko Achilla Mbembeja, »počasno umiranje« Lauren Berlant in biopolitiko Michela Foucaulta ter trdi, da umetniško delo *10,148,451* govori o kolektivnem subjektu ter kritizira sodobno nekropolitiko, medtem ko različice dela *Tatlinov šepet #6* naslavljajo posameznike kot politične subjekte ter povežejo panoptični pogled in sodobno biopolitiko. Avtorica z analizo pokaže, da je umetniško delo Tanie Bruguera ustvarjeno tako, da se spoprime s specifičnimi političnimi ekonomijami, v katerih je predstavljeno, z dojemanjem političnosti dela in razlikami, ko je to predstavljeno v različnih političnih ekonomijah, ter s spoznanji, ki jih delo ponuja tem različnim ekonomijam. Dela Tanie Bruguera pogosto dosežejo več kot le lokalne in nacionalne vlade, njeno »simbolno delo z aktivističnimi parametri« pa je presenetljivo učinkovitejše od njenega aktivističnega dela. Brugerina umetnost zatorej ponuja vpogled v prihodnost telesa v 21. stoletju.



### Introduction

266

Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera has been creating politically situated works for decades, ranging from performance to community work. Her works are intended to function as “useful tools” for a collective movement,<sup>2</sup> re-establish “aesthetics as a system of transformation” by having ethics at their core (“*est-ética*”),<sup>3</sup> and present situations that challenge spectators to become active citizens who question and unlearn normative behaviors (*Arte de Conducta* [Be-

<sup>2</sup> Lucía Sanromán and Susie Kantor, “Transitional Institutions and the Art of Political Timing-Specificity,” in *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power / Hablándole al Poder*, ed. Lucía Sanromán and Susie Kantor (San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2018), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Sanromán and Kantor, 26.

havioral Art]).<sup>4</sup> Her activism is put into practice through her long-term, ongoing projects such as *YoTambenExijo* (2014–ongoing) and *Immigrant Movement International* (IMI, 2010–ongoing). And what I will refer to as her “symbolic work with activist parameters” (such as the works discussed here) not only operate at the level of the symbolic but is also linked to actions that have concrete effects for its participants. Bruguera’s work has always been politically positioned in its economies of creation and presentation, critiquing institutions, power structures (including the Cuban government), and the ways in which contemporary bodies oscillate in “the field of tensions between biopolitics and necropolitics.”

In this article, I discuss Bruguera’s works *10,148,451* (2019), a Hyundai commission presented at Tate Modern, and the three versions of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* (now part of *YoTambenExijo*, 2014–ongoing): the Havana 2009 and 2014 versions and the Tate Modern 2015 version. Thinking with Achille Mbembe’s work on necropolitics, Lauren Berlant’s work on “slow death,” and Michel Foucault’s writing on biopolitics, I propose that *10,148,451* addresses the collective subject and critiques contemporary necropolitics, while the works *Tatlin’s Whisper #6*, in contrast, address individuals as political subjects and comment on the panoptic gaze and contemporary biopolitics. Through my analysis of *10,148,451* and *Tatlin’s Whisper #6*, I show how Bruguera’s work is created to comment on the specific political economies in which it is presented, how perceptions of the work’s politics differ when it is presented in different political economies, and what insights the work might therefore offer to these economies. By examining these artworks as economies in themselves which are situated within larger economies, I argue that, through her artwork, Bruguera has often done more work than local and national governments, though this often goes unnoticed (and at the same time one could argue that she lets these governments off the hook to some extent by doing the work for them). Finally, I propose that her “symbolic work with activist parameters” (i.e., work that functions at the level of the symbolic but is linked to actions that have concrete effects for its participants—as with the works discussed here) is surprisingly more efficacious than her activist work. I conclude with the insights that Bruguera’s work offers for the future of the bodies in the 21st century.

<sup>4</sup> Sanromán and Kantor, 25. See also Andrés David Montenegro Rosero, “Arte de Conducta: On Tania Bruguera’s *Tatlin’s Whisper Series*,” in *Rhetoric, Social Value and the Arts: But How Does it Work?*, ed. Charlotte Bonham-Carter and Nicola Mann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 85–106.

## On Crises, “Slow Death,” and Collective Efforts: Tania Bruguera’s 10,148,451 (2019)

I am recalling this performance long after I experienced it. Although my visual memory of the work has somewhat faded, the nagging feeling that followed my experience of it, given my knowledge and appreciation of Bruguera’s politically and often sensorially provocative work, demanded that I return to the performance to deal with what remained unresolved. After the performance ended, I kept thinking that I should have liked it more. Why did this work fail to appeal to me politically and aesthetically? And why can I not accept that perhaps it was an unsuccessful work and instead return to it as if I had missed something that happened in it, as if I just had not figured it out? The work insists upon my return.

On the day, upon my entrance into Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, I noticed the entire floor of the Hall was covered with black, soft, shiny tiles. I walked across the Turbine balcony to the bridge to view the work from above. Several people were casually sitting or lying on the floor. There did not seem to be much going on. As I walked down the stairs and entered the main space of the work, I noticed the effect of other people’s bodies on the floor when they moved—imprints of their bodies were left on the floor, traces of them having been there. I realized that I could do the same if I took off my shoes. I found out later that the floor was coated with thermochromic ink, activated by the visitors’ body heat on contact. The press release and a text on a wall nearby provided some information about the work and its three parts:

In response to the crisis in migration, Bruguera has focused on the status of the neighbour and what it means to act and interact locally. She invites visitors to take part in symbolic actions in the Turbine Hall, from revealing a portrait of a person’s face hidden beneath a heat-sensitive floor, to crying under the influence of an organic compound. She has also worked with Tate Modern’s neighbours to create direct action: institutional changes that include renaming part of the museum itself. [. . .] In an age when the 24-hour news cycle presents migration as a never-ending crisis beyond our control, Bruguera also wants to break down our emotional barriers to combat apathy.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Hyundai Commission: Tania Bruguera: 10,142,926,” Press Release, Tate Modern, October 1, 2018. <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/hyundai-commission-tania-bruguera->

The press release also informed the visitors that the portrait of Yousef, a young man with a migrant background who left Syria in 2011, would appear if everyone laid down on the ground for a sufficient amount of time. However, it became clear that this would not happen—the visitors were in “picnic mode.” I decided to look at the second of the three parts of the work, which was in a room adjacent to the Turbine Hall. As I entered, my hand was stamped red with the number 10,143,837, which indicated the number of people who migrated from one country to another between January 1, 2017 and December 21, 2017, added to the number of migrant deaths recorded up to that date according to the institute of migration’s Missing Migrant Project.<sup>6</sup> As I entered the room, the few visitors already in it seemed to be chatting. The lighting was normal, and I do not recall any noise emanating from the work—no attempt was made to create a mystery or mood. However, a strong smell of menthol filled the room. Soon I felt the effect of the organic compound responsible for the smell; my eyes began to burn, and tears ran down my face. The artificial tears, according to the artist, were meant to evoke “forced empathy” in order to question whether we can “relearn to feel for others again.”<sup>7</sup> The artist seemed to want to jolt us into action. However, the effort seemed to have been made in vain.

I remember finding the work weakly directed, to a great extent because the relationship of its three parts was not sufficiently visible. I also thought that even if only part of the work was more affective, this affect would function as the work’s organizational principle, which would address some of its dramaturgical issues. Despite the tears shed, I felt that the artwork lacked an affective anchor.

The work’s relationship to Tate Neighbours as the third space/part of the work offered some conceptual strength. This relationship was first revealed through the artist’s text. However, it was only solidified if the visitor connected to the Wi-Fi and read about the call to action in the Tate Neighbours manifesto and the re-naming of the Boiler House to “Natalie Bell.” Natalie Bell is a community activist who is involved with the charity “SE1 United” and worked at Coin Street Community Builders, which provides youth-led programmes for local youth. She is

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<sup>6</sup> Tate Modern, “Tania Bruguera: 10,142,926”; Catherine Wood, ed., *Hyundai Commission: Tania Bruguera* (London: Tate Publishing, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Tania Bruguera, “Tania Bruguera | Hyundai Commission | Tate,” YouTube video, uploaded by Tate, January 18, 2019, 5:51, <https://youtu.be/7reNkai8HoI>.

also the person who chose Yousef for the work's portrait and became a member of Tate Modern's Advisory Council.<sup>8</sup> The text of Tate Neighbours read:

Drawing on the "Terms and Conditions" document written by the Tate Neighbours, which can be accessed when logging on to the Tate WiFi network, Our Neighbours asks visitors to Tate Modern to actively engage with the lives of our neighbours and to commit to a neighbourly action wherever they have come from or where they live now. The programme seeks to revive collective social responsibility and common purpose through deliberation and public commitments.<sup>9</sup>

This was 10,049,848, the title of Bruguera's 2019 Hyundai commission at the Tate Modern on opening day (10,143,837 the minute I entered the "crying room"), referred on the Tate website as 10,148,451. Given the intention of the work and my experience of it, I felt let down. Not only did the visitor have to have a great deal of context to appreciate the work, but several people had to act to fully experience it: enough people had to lie down for others to see the painting. This also meant that if you were one of those who tried to do so, you did not get to see it. In an age when all we do is create and share our own self-portraits ("selfies"), it was kind of ironic that we could not see this portrait. And if you did not log into the WiFi, you would miss this information altogether.

Thus, without an organizational force, the work felt futile: we would never manage to see the portrait of Yousef. My desire to organize the action (to ask everyone to lie on the floor) was overwhelmed by the potential embarrassment of failure and the worry that it might not even be what the artist (or the Tate) wanted. So no one took the initiative nor the responsibility to make it happen. I was deflated. Despite the forced physical reaction of the crying room, which was supposed to evoke an emotional response and thus trigger an action, nothing much happened during the work. Everything happened for me long after. And my frustration with the work grew over time, partly because I regretted my inaction, and partly because I realized that the piece *was* affective, but not in *the moment*. So I return to it.

270

<sup>8</sup> Wood, *Tania Bruguera*.

<sup>9</sup> "Our Neighbours: With Tania Bruguera," Tate Modern, October 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/our-neighbours>.



Bruguera's attempt to get us to see ourselves as neighbors to our local communities and to other countries (citizens as neighbors) was meant to change views about migration and our role in it. As with any societal issue, not much changes unless enough people believe in change, want to affect it, and organize to make it happen; so we continue to experience this disappointment, much like in this piece. Perhaps then this piece was very much a success because it revealed to the audience the work that change requires of us and how often, for many reasons, we do not do the work necessary to effect change.

I suggest that the specific issue Bruguera's work is concerned with, migration through the concept of neighbor, addresses us as a collective subject and critiques contemporary necropolitics. Achille Mbembe<sup>10</sup> defines necropolitics as "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die," which he believes is, in large measure, where "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides."<sup>11</sup> Building on and departing from Michel Foucault's biopower, as the areas of life over which powers has taken control, and biopolitics, as the management of governing of life by the sovereign,<sup>12</sup> Mbembe considers the notion of biopower as insufficient to account for the ways in which in contemporary times "the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective."<sup>13</sup> Making, as Marina Gržinić suggests, a "conceptual shift from occidental thought,"<sup>14</sup> Mbembe sees war as a way to both exercise the right to kill and to achieve sovereignty.<sup>15</sup> "Imagining politics as a form of war," Mbembe urges us to ask: "What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?"<sup>16</sup> Mbembe argues that, in the contemporary world, necropolitics—"contemporary forms of subjugation of

<sup>10</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

<sup>11</sup> Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 11.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 12.

<sup>14</sup> Marina Gržinić, "Necropolitics by Achille Mbembe: Extended Essay on the Book," *Filozofski vestnik* 42, no. 1 (2021): 221, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.42.1.10>.

<sup>15</sup> Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 39–40.

<sup>16</sup> Mbembe, 12.

life to the power of death”<sup>17</sup>—and necro-power are responsible for the ways in which

weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*. [. . .] Under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred.<sup>18</sup>

Bruguera’s *10,148,451* can be read as a direct critique of necropolitical power: how have migrants, and especially black and global majority migrants, been treated, and how could this change if they were understood as neighbors?

Gržinić, reflecting on Mbembe’s work on necropolitics, astutely points out the relationship between refugees and modes of killing since World War II. She argues that WWII demanded a moral narrative to justify killing and ways of doing it which could be seen by the West and the “regime of whiteness” as acceptable and justifiable.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the ongoing refugee crisis, a consequence of the wars for power and profit, was dealt with not by *appearing* to intentionally kill refugees, but by imprisoning them in inhumane conditions.<sup>20</sup> There are many examples of this with perhaps one of the worst being the recent prison-like conditions of refugees in Samos, Greece.<sup>21</sup> Gržinić emphasizes the importance of Mbembe’s re-writing of genealogies through his articulation of the relation between democracy, racism, colonization, and migration: that democracy is a racialized system and colonization a way to regulate migratory movements and that cap-

<sup>17</sup> Mbembe, 39.

<sup>18</sup> Mbembe, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Gržinić, “*Necropolitics* by Achille Mbembe,” 224.

<sup>20</sup> Gržinić, 224. Jothie Rajah argues that normalizing the necropolitics of both past and present imperialism “fosters the discounting of life legitimized by necropolitical law.” Jothie Rajah, *Discounting Life: Necropolitical Law, Culture, and the Long War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 142–78.

<sup>21</sup> See “One Year since Greece Opened New ‘Prison-Like’ Refugee Camps, 22 NGOs Call for a More Humane Approach,” Statements and Reports, Amnesty International, September 19, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.eu/news/one-year-since-greece-opened-new-prison-like-refugee-camps-ngos-call-for-a-more-humane-approach/>.

italism, between 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, “practised repopulation through predation, wealth extraction, and the formation of subaltern groups.”<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between capitalism, migration, and racism is also crucial, because capitalism not only engendered racism (for it was the enslaved that provided the original capital)<sup>23</sup> but is also constitutive of “Western instincts and economic subjectivity,”<sup>24</sup> West’s predatory postcolonial elites and the “genocidal impulses” of European colonialism.<sup>25</sup> Capitalism is therefore also a driving force for its wars for profit which have led to waves of migration.

In the UK alone, net migration has increased to a record level of 504,000, asylum applications are now the highest in the last three decades, forty-one per cent of these are from people who have arrived in the UK in small boats, and almost 100,000 asylum seekers have been waiting for more than six months for their initial claims to be processed.<sup>26</sup> Humanitarian visas accounted for a large proportion of immigrants, of which 89,000 arrived from Ukraine as a result of the war and 21,000 are Afghans or UK returnees from Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> The head of the Refugee Council, Enver Solomon, stated that this “global refugee crisis with millions of people fleeing their homes because of war, conflict and persecution [. . .] underline why urgent action is so important.”<sup>28</sup>

But what does the life of an immigrant look like, even before they are forced to become migrants, when they are Black and global majority persons? Mbembe argues that even democratic societies are spaces in which racialized bodies are systematically exploited and experience constant loss.<sup>29</sup> Lauren Berlant proposes the notion of “slow death” to describe the experience of everyday life of the

<sup>22</sup> Gržinić, “*Necropolitics* by Achille Mbembe,” 226.

<sup>23</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Gržinić, “*Necropolitics* by Achille Mbembe,” 232.

<sup>25</sup> Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove, 1967).

<sup>26</sup> Rajeev Syal and Jessica Elgot, “Migration to UK Rises to Record 504,000 with Ukraine and Hong Kong Schemes,” *The Guardian*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/24/uk-net-migration-figures-record-ons>.

<sup>27</sup> Syal and Elgot, “Migration to UK Rises.”

<sup>28</sup> Syal and Elgot, “Migration to UK Rises.”

<sup>29</sup> See Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

vulnerable, especially of people of color and the economically disadvantaged.<sup>30</sup> With “slow death,” she refers to “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence.”<sup>31</sup> Most importantly, Berlant urges us to “think about agency and personhood [. . .] also as an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness.”<sup>32</sup> This is because

slow death prospers not in traumatic events, as discrete time-framed phenomena like military encounters and genocides can appear to do, but in temporally labile environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself, that domain of living on in which everyday activity; memory, needs, and desires; and diverse temporalities and horizons of the taken-for-granted are brought into proximity and lived through.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to her distinction between event and environment, Berlant makes a distinction between environment and crisis.<sup>34</sup> Although we might be talking about refugee crises, black and brown bodies are in crisis daily. Berlant suggests that we cannot be referring to “crisis” as

that which is a fact of life and has been a defining fact of life for a given population that lives that crisis in ordinary time. Of course this deployment of crisis is often explicitly and intentionally a redefinitional tactic, an inflationary, distorting, or misdirecting gesture that aspires to make an environmental phenomenon appear suddenly as an event, because as a structural or predictable condition it has not engendered the kinds of historic action we associate with the heroic agency a crisis implicitly calls for [. . .]. Yet since catastrophe means change, crisis rhetoric belies the constitutive point that slow death—or the structurally induced attrition of persons keyed to their membership in certain populations—is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain where an upsetting

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<sup>30</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Berlant, 95.

<sup>32</sup> Berlant, 99.

<sup>33</sup> Berlant, 100.

<sup>34</sup> Berlant, 101.

scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all, like ants discovered scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock.<sup>35</sup>

Long-term realities such as colonialism and capitalism's destruction of bodies<sup>36</sup> therefore cannot be successfully dealt with when addressed as crises.<sup>37</sup> Bruguera's *10,148,451* deals with the slow death of migrant bodies, and particularly Black and Brown bodies who experience an everyday loss even after "settling" in a new country. *10,148,451* critiques contemporary necropolitics and draws our attention to this slow death addressing us as a collective subject who needs to take collective responsibility.

### ***Tatlin's Whisper #6* (2009, 2014, 2015): The Panoptic Gaze and Contemporary Biopolitics**

Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #6* suggests a different kind of slow death in a very different political economy, that of Cuba. It addresses individuals as political subjects, commenting on the Cuban government's panoptic gaze (2009 and 2014 versions in Havana) and on contemporary biopolitics (2015 version in the UK). The Guggenheim describes the original 2009 version of the work as follows:

In a performance at the 2009 Havana Biennial, Tania Bruguera provided a temporary platform for the free speech normally denied in Cuba. Members of the exhibition's audience were invited to take the stage and speak uncensored for one minute, after which time they were escorted away by two actors in military uniforms. A white dove was placed on each speaker's shoulder in allusion to the one that landed on Fidel Castro during his first speech in Havana after the triumph of the 1959 revolution. Part of a series of works that seek to activate viewers' participation by recontextualizing powerful images from significant events, *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* confronts the widespread apathy that has followed in the wake of several failed social revolutions.<sup>38</sup>

275

<sup>35</sup> Berlant, 101–2.

<sup>36</sup> Berlant, 108.

<sup>37</sup> Berlant, 105.

<sup>38</sup> See "Tania Bruguera: *Tatlin's Whisper #6* (Havana Version)," Collection Online, Guggenheim, accessed September 2, 2023, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/33083>.

An orange-red curtain forms the backdrop for this 40-minute performance at the Wilfredo Lam Cultural Centre in Havana, Cuba.<sup>39</sup> The audience is gathered around the stage, at the center of which is a podium with a microphone and two large speakers on each side of the stage. Behind the podium are two young people in military uniforms. Two hundred disposable cameras have been distributed to the audience to document and share the event. One by one, audience members enter the stage and take the floor; they speak up. Once they step onto the podium, one of the uniformed guards places a white dove on their shoulder, recreating the familiar image of the photograph of Fidel Castro on the podium upon his arrival in Havana in 1959. For Bruguera, this work functions both “as a monument to a past moment and in the dimension of a future,”<sup>40</sup> while for Tamara Díaz Bringas the work “read[s] the past to think about the present and imagine other futures,” by “imagining a public sphere in which everyone has a voice”<sup>41</sup> despite the limitations presented by its context.

The performance breaks open a space that is normally censored. The work begins with a spectator using their minute to cry. Affective speeches about change, freedom, self-respect and democracy follow. “Cuba is an island surrounded by sea and walled in by censorship” states one of the speakers, who advocates for the use of alternative blogs to open channels of communication and freedom, to awaken public opinion, and make the internet a public debating ground so the island can become more democratic and plural. Another speaker urges for the decriminalization of “the exercise of dissenting opinions” so that economic, political, and cultural projects can see the light. Another suggests they keep the mic open for 24 hours, asking those with opposing views to engage in live dialogue instead of listening to them through mechanisms of surveillance.<sup>42</sup> One speaker asks all present to vote on whether the government should still be in power:

I would like to have all those here vote to see if we agree on certain aspects . . . Who actually agrees that the Castro family, which is the one that has been monitoring us these fifty years, should leave power? That they hand it over, that elec-

<sup>39</sup> Tania Bruguera, “El Susurro de Tatlin #6 (versión para La Habana),” Vimeo video, uploaded by Estudio Bruguera, March 23, 2011, 40:33, <https://vimeo.com/21394727>.

<sup>40</sup> Bruguera in Tamara Díaz Bringas, “Matter of Time. Nine Letters to Tania Bruguera,” in Wood, *Tania Bruguera*, 59.

<sup>41</sup> Bringas, 59.

<sup>42</sup> Bruguera, “El Susurro de Tatlin #6.”

tions of a different type are held in Cuba, that there is a talk about the political prisoners, the Atunez case for example. He is on hunger strike . . . I think that raising our hand here today we may change things right now.<sup>43</sup>

Some do. A man later arrives at the microphone with a black hood over his head, points to it, and says: “I think this [kidnapping] should be banned.” The work ends with Bruguera taking the podium: “Thank you very much, Cubans.”<sup>44</sup>

This performance took place in the art context of the Havana Biennale, which is what made this public speaking up possible. Some have argued that, considering Cuba’s “oppressive government censorship [*Tatlin’s Whisper #6*] both empowered and endangered audiences and participants.”<sup>45</sup> Jacqueline Laguardia Martínez’s opening to her 2022 article “The Political Economy of Contemporary Cuba” is indicative of the complicated larger context: “To evaluate contemporary Cuba from any dimension, be it economic, political, or sociocultural, is a challenging exercise,” particularly due to its efforts in recent years to implement an ambitious plan of socioeconomic reforms.<sup>46</sup> Reforms are how the Cuban government, referred to as *La Revolución*, has maintained power since Fidel Castro’s arrival on January 1, 1959—following the Cuban Revolution (July 26, 1953–January 1, 1959) which ousted Fulgencio Batista—and until today with Miguel Díaz-Canel’s presidency (since 2019) and the 2019 constitution reform (the latter was assessed and refined by his predecessor, Raúl Castro, at an attempt to modernize the government).<sup>47</sup>

Although until recently the prevailing view in Cuba was that writers and artists (compared to the rest of the citizens) have the greatest autonomy and freedom, more so than ever before—a success attributed to their insistence for more “space” for expression and *La Revolución*’s capacity to reinvent itself—Yvon

<sup>43</sup> Bruguera.

<sup>44</sup> Bruguera.

<sup>45</sup> Sanromán and Kantor, “Transitional Institutions,” 27.

<sup>46</sup> Jacqueline Laguardia Martínez, “The Political Economy of Contemporary Cuba,” in *(Post-) colonial Archipelagos: Comparing the Legacies of Spanish Colonialism in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Burchardt and Johanna Leinius (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 76.

<sup>47</sup> Laguardia Martínez, 76–95; Yvon Grenier, “The Politics of Culture and the Gatekeeper State in Cuba,” *Cuban Studies*, no. 46 (2018): 261–86, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cub.2018.0013>.

Grenier has a different interpretation.<sup>48</sup> She suggests instead that the government’s cultural policy oscillation between “closing” and “opening” and its alternating tactics of enforcement between “openness and rigidity,” is not a new, but instead the regime’s governing strategy.<sup>49</sup> It is the same strategy it used in market reforms (which, for example, allowed the economy to increase trade with international markets and recognize foreign investment and private property<sup>50</sup> in 2019) that led to further concentration of power by the state, which controls who will benefit and how much.<sup>51</sup> Grenier further suggests that, typically, writers and artists, inasmuch as they want freedom and autonomy, pursue participation “within the revolution” and recognition by the state.<sup>52</sup> Their relationship with the state is one of “mutual accommodation” or “what Cuban sociologist Haroldo Dilla (2007) aptly called ‘subordinación negociada’” (negotiated subordination).<sup>53</sup> With cultural policy, as with the markets, the state decides who (and how much and when) can publish, have visibility, travel abroad, and be pardoned.<sup>54</sup> Crucially, the ability of the state to “open and close” any field “at the Comandante’s whim keeps the various groups guessing and competing in a climate of uncertainty.”<sup>55</sup> The strategy of opening improves the government’s international image as well as the national one by showing that past errors of *La Revolución* are corrected.<sup>56</sup> These trends of openness and rigidity in both economic and cultural policy have mirrored one another since the 1990s.<sup>57</sup> During 1994 alone, about 30,000 Cubans left the country on makeshift boats—many drowning—having been caught in the political struggle between Castro and the US.<sup>58</sup> Some criticism of the regime is possible through the “secondary parameters” (the “primary parameters” protect the political narrative of *La Revolución* and

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<sup>48</sup> Grenier, 261.

<sup>49</sup> Grenier, 261.

<sup>50</sup> Laguardia Martinez, “Contemporary Cuba,” 86–89.

<sup>51</sup> Javier Corrales, “The Gatekeeper State: Limited Economic Reforms and Regime Survival in Cuba, 1989–2002,” *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 2 (June 2004): 35–65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2004.0025>; quoted in Grenier, “Politics of Culture,” 262.

<sup>52</sup> Grenier, 261–62.

<sup>53</sup> Grenier, 262.

<sup>54</sup> Grenier, 262.

<sup>55</sup> Grenier, 265.

<sup>56</sup> Grenier, 265.

<sup>57</sup> Grenier, 268.

<sup>58</sup> Grenier, 271.



are not to be questioned).<sup>59</sup> These set the limits of political participation and are the way artists can be critical of the government.<sup>60</sup> Censorship in Cuba has been less overt recently—artworks rather than artists are being censored, and much can be accomplished by cultural institutions intentionally not recognizing the work of some artists or cancelling art exhibitions.<sup>61</sup> More recently, however, artists have not only been reprimanded, but also jailed.<sup>62</sup> This is what happened with Bruguera’s second performance of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* in 2014.

The 2014 performance of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* ended before it began. The work was “aborted by the police, who arrested the artist and her many collaborators, both fellow artists and dissidents,” at 5 a.m. on the day of the performance.<sup>63</sup> The police interrogated them for several days and even confiscated the passport of Bruguera, who considers it “one of her most successful works, since the Cuban government so neatly, and publicly completed” the work.<sup>64</sup>

What preceded the performance, which was fittingly scheduled to take place on December 30, 2014 in the Plaza de la Revolución (“the plaza where a youthful Fidel Castro once addressed millions”),<sup>65</sup> and the arrest was the publication of an open letter by Bruguera. Following the announcement of the end of the U.S. embargo in 2014, Bruguera published “an open letter addressed to Barack Obama, Raúl Castro, and Pope Francis demanding a space for citizenship participation.”<sup>66</sup> The work addressed Cubans as political subjects and attempted to make this public square, “a space that was extremely ideologized but empty of politics,” back into “an agora, a democratic space.”<sup>67</sup> Christian Viveros-Fauné writes in 2015:

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<sup>59</sup> Grenier, 271–72.

<sup>60</sup> Grenier, 271–72.

<sup>61</sup> Grenier, 271–73.

<sup>62</sup> Grenier, 271–73.

<sup>63</sup> Sanromán and Kantor, “Transitional Institutions,” 21.

<sup>64</sup> Sanromán and Kantor, 7.

<sup>65</sup> Christian Viveros-Fauné, “How Tania Bruguera’s ‘Whisper’ Became the Performance Heard Round the World,” *Artnet News*, January 8, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/how-tania-brugueras-whisper-became-the-performance-heard-round-the-world-213637>.

<sup>66</sup> Bringas, “Matter of Time,” 59.

<sup>67</sup> Bringas, 59.

[Bruguera] was subsequently freed and rearrested twice more, after calling for a news conference in another plaza located along Havana's famed Malecon seawall. An effort she promoted through Facebook, Twitter, and her own website using the hashtag #YoTambienExijo (I Also Demand), Bruguera's frustrated performance grew in direct proportion to the moral cowardice of her arrest. Even in one of the least connected countries in the world—only 3.4 percent of Cuban households currently have Internet access—Bruguera's message of creative protest, civic optimism, and freedom of expression leapfrogged Cuba's access and surveillance walls and went viral. [. . .] What Bruguera's six-year-old performance did last week was to crystallize the contradictions besetting a profoundly unfair, coercive, authoritarian society—something only a few important works of art can achieve under the right circumstances. Inside Cuba, in 2015, *Tatlin's Whisper* speaks loud and clear.<sup>68</sup>

This challenging context speaks volumes about the impact that political economy and art can have on one another. The regime in Cuba has had the effects of slow death, which Berlant calls “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence,”<sup>69</sup> and which prospers within the everyday ordinary environment of living life<sup>70</sup> in the Cuban panopticon, where conduct is regulated via surveillance.<sup>71</sup> In fact, Cuba exhibits a complex combination of different modes of visibility. It functions both as a panoptic disciplinary society with what Mike Featherstone refers to as an “invisible surveillance gaze,” as well as, with its openings to market economics, “a governmental society based on invisibility, in which population and economic processes operate behind our backs and are best left alone.”<sup>72</sup> Its complex colonial history, historical relationships with the US and USSR, and constant reforms that play with openness and rigidity make this a particularly complicated political economy: one that began as a socialist political economy, functions as a panoptic disciplinary society, has recognized foreign investment and private property with the 2019 Constitution, and now de-

280

<sup>68</sup> Viveros-Fauné, “Tania Bruguera's ‘Whisper.’”

<sup>69</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 95.

<sup>70</sup> Berlant, 100.

<sup>71</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>72</sup> Mike Featherstone, “Preliminary Reflections on the Visible, the Invisible and Social Regulation: Panopticism, Biopolitics, Neoliberalism and Data Consumption,” *Journal of Critical Studies in Business and Society* 4, no. 1 (2013): 9.

pend on the service economy.<sup>73</sup> It is this political economy that *Tatlin's Whisper #6* critiques and experiences the effects of its mechanisms of control.

After its 2014 performance, *Tatlin's Whisper #6* was presented at the Tate Modern in London, UK, in 2015. There, it had very different effects. A special presentation of the work was (re)staged “in an act of solidarity and support for Bruguera and artists all over the world persecuted for freedom of expression.”<sup>74</sup> Artists, writers, curators, and members of the public spoke for one minute on a topic of their choice, as in the original work. The restaging critiqued both Cuba’s political economy and the regime’s panoptic gaze. It also commented on a very different political economy, that of the United Kingdom and neoliberal capitalism: a political economy in which there is freedom of expression, but the social safety net is continually eroded, the state works *for* the market, and the logic of the market rules and is applied to all areas of life through contemporary biopolitical control.<sup>75</sup> This is the kind of economy that Cuba has been resisting for decades.

The 2015 restaging of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* perhaps loses its original “bite,” possibly due in part to what Bruguera calls “political timing-specificity”: the moment of the 2014 work and its potential impact have passed, and the work functions as “a document of a specific political moment.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, what is important about the UK presentation is that the exposure of the political circumstances in Cuba helps to further the understanding of outsiders and the support they can offer Cubans.

In addition to the work of artists, alternative journalism has also contributed in recent years to understanding the complexities of the contemporary Cuban political economy, the everyday experiences of citizens, and their demands for freedom of expression and political change—for example, through the 27N collective and the San Isidro movement.<sup>77</sup> María Isabel Alfonso notes that the

<sup>73</sup> Laguardia Martínez, “Contemporary Cuba.”

<sup>74</sup> “Tania Bruguera: *Tatlin's Whisper #6*,” Tate Modern, April 23, 2015, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/tania-bruguera-11982/tania-bruguera-tatlins-whisper-6>.

<sup>75</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michel Sellenart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>76</sup> Bruguera in Sanromán and Kantor, “Transitional Institutions,” 23–24.

<sup>77</sup> Gerardo Mosquera, “Artivism and the Havana Biennial—An Interview with Gerardo Mosquera,” interview by Gigi Argyropoulou, New Alphabet School, December 8, 2021,

pandemic food and medicine shortages have highlighted not only the need for change in Cuba, but also the “increasing importance and agency that independent media have gained in recent years.”<sup>78</sup> Although even the 2019 Constitution does not provide legal protection for these alternative media (the Constitution “expressly prohibits private ownership and printing of newspapers, books and other mass media”) their impact is crucial.<sup>79</sup> Cuba connected to the internet in 1996, granting controlled access to government and research institutes, universities, and workplaces. Reforms in 2008 allowed Cubans to connect to the internet discreetly, and it was not until 2013 that the country connected to the high-speed global internet.<sup>80</sup> This allowed for the creation of unofficial blogs that criticized the government and pushed “the spurred collective recognition of the limitations of the official discourse and the imperative need to create an alternate set of media outlets.”<sup>81</sup>

While *10,148,451* addressed the collective subject and critiqued contemporary necropolitics, *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* addressed individuals as political subjects. The 2009 and 2014 Havana versions commented on the panoptic gaze, while the 2015 UK version, anchored in both the Cuban and the UK political economies, was able to comment both on the panoptic gaze and contemporary biopolitics. In doing so, the difficulties of the Cuban political economy for its citizens and the slow death they experience were made visible, perhaps obscuring the complexities of the UK’s neoliberal capitalist political economy and the different ways controls are applied there through biopower and necropower.

### Closing: Bodies “Acting in Concert” Towards Change

Tania Bruguera’s work is both aesthetically and politically potent. Here, I looked at her 2019 Hyundai commission *10,148,451* presented at Tate Modern and the three versions of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* (the Havana versions in 2009 and 2014 and

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<https://newalphabetschool.hkw.de/artivism-and-the-havana-biennial-an-interview-with-gerardo-mosquera/>.

<sup>78</sup> María Isabel Alfonso, “In Cuba, Independent Media Struggle to Navigate Polarized Waters,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 387, <https://doi.org/10.1080/010714839.2021.2000766>.

<sup>79</sup> Alfonso, 388.

<sup>80</sup> Alfonso, 388–89.

<sup>81</sup> Alfonso, 388–89.

the Tate Modern version in 2015). Through *10,148,451*, I have argued that Bruguera addressed the spectators as a collective subject that bears the responsibility for change (change in general as well as in relation to migrants in particular) and critiqued contemporary necropolitics that put vulnerable populations at risk on a daily basis, making visible the slow death they experience. In contrast, the work *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, as I have suggested, addressed individuals as political subjects and commented on the panoptic gaze of Cuban politics and on contemporary biopolitics in the neoliberal capitalist world. Through my analysis of both works, I have shown how Bruguera's work is created to comment on the specific political economies in which it is presented, how the perceptions of the work's politics differ when presented in different political economies, and the insights the work therefore offers these economies. As the works discussed here demonstrate, Bruguera has often accomplished more with her performances than local and national governments (although one could argue that she lets these governments off the hook to some extent by doing the work for them). I propose that these works, which I referred to as her "symbolic work with activist parameters" (that is, work that functions at the level of the symbolic but is also linked to actions that have concrete effects for its participants), are surprisingly more efficacious than her activist work *because* they operate at the level of the symbolic. In doing so, they are able to reach larger numbers of people and at different affective registers, let alone survive in difficult political economies. Crucially, the works discussed here allow us to see the slow death of contemporary bodies and how important and necessary it is for bodies to "act in concert"<sup>82</sup> towards change.

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## Dancing with Social Death: The Necropolitics of Performing Afro-Slovene(ness)

### Keywords

Afro-Slovene, ethnography, necropolitics, Black studies, authenticity, afropessimism

### Abstract

Slovenes of African descent find themselves in a calculus of biopower. This points to the precariousness of life (or flesh), which is deemed as less “worthy.” We are at a historical moment in which Afro-pessimism offers a “realistic” glimpse into the past and future of Blackness in the White supremacist contexts of the West, due almost solely to the enormity of systemic violence that Black flesh has endured. In light of this very real political urgency, there is a very real need for security, which in the short term might best be accomplished through concepts such as identity and authenticity. However, Afro-Slovene acts of living reject in passing the priorities that “progress” evokes through the standardization of Euro-normalizing biopolitical orders and slip the categories used to confine them to a limited form of existence. This analysis focuses on the Afro-Slovene insistence on living otherwise as a form of resistance to the tyranny of linear progressive subjectivities, without shedding responsibility for the need to confront race and racism head on.

## Ples z družbeno smrtjo: nekropolitika uprizorjanja afro-slovenstva

### Ključne besede

afro-slovenstvo, etnografija, nekropolitika, Črnske študije, avtentičnost, afropesimizem

### Povzetek

Slovinci afriškega porekla se znajdejo v kalkulaciji biomoči. To kaže na negotovost življenja (ali mesa), ki velja za manj »vredno«. Smo v zgodovinskem trenutku, v katerem afropesimizem ponuja »realističen« v pogled v preteklost in prihodnost Črnske v

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okvirih belih supremacističnih kontekstov Zahoda, in sicer skoraj izključno zaradi obsežnosti sistemskega nasilja, ki ga je pretrpelo »Črnsko meso«. V luči te konkretne politične nujnosti obstaja zelo resnična potreba po varnosti, ki jo je kratkoročno mogoče najbolje doseči s koncepti, kot sta identiteta in avtentičnost. Vendar pa afro-slovenski načini življenja zavračajo prioritete, ki jih prek standardizacije evronormalizacijskih biopolitičnih praks spodbuja »napredek«, s tem pa se izmuznejo kategorijam, ki jih silijo v omejeno obliko obstoja. Ta analiza se osredotoča na afro-slovensko vztrajanje pri drugačnem načinu življenja kot obliki upora proti tiraniji linearnih progresivnih subjektivitet, ne da bi pri tem zavračalo odgovornost za potrebo po neposrednem soočenju s problematiko rase in rasizma.



Wypipo generally love animals more than they love people. Wypipo can see an unarmed bullet-riddled black body leaking blood in the street and feel no empathy, but will be outraged upon hearing that someone mistreated a house cat.<sup>1</sup>

Michael Harriot's popular article "Wypipo Explained" is a provocation. He asks: how has it become so easy for us to believe "wypipo" value Black life less than that of their domestic pets? After travelling outside of North America, I wondered if there was something particular about the characteristics or mentality of the White settlers of North America that predisposed them to this form of anti-humanism. As Mos Def and Talib Kweli so insightfully point out on their now iconic album *Black Star*, in a track entitled "Thieves in the Night":

288

The deadly ritual seems immersed, in the perverse  
 Full of short attention spans, short tempers, and short skirts  
 Long barrel automatics released in short bursts  
 The length of Black life is treated with short worth<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Michael Harriot, "Wypipo Explained," Afropunk, March 1, 2017, <https://afropunk.com/2017/03/wypipo-explained/>.

<sup>2</sup> Mos Def and Talib Kweli, vocalists, "Thieves in the Night," produced by 88-Keys, released September 29, 1998, track 12 on *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*, Rawkus RWK 1158-2, compact disc.

Much like Milgram and Zimbardo, I was curious about the existence of some sort essential characteristic hidden in the culture of North America, and particularly embedded in the biology of White settler colonists, that has compelled them so often to treat Black life with “short worth.”

In the run-up to my trip to former socialist Slovenia, I began to ponder the idea, popular at the time, that this sort of objectification of the Black body was the product of a particularly nefarious form of predatory Western neoliberal capitalism. In all honesty, I expected to find evidence that socialism could shield Black people from the most dehumanizing aspects of the colonial process. In fact, I found that there was no racism in Slovenia at all. A young Slovenian student was even kind enough to explain to me on the subject of racism in Slovenia, very slowly so that I would understand, “Well, you see Professor Rudder, we don’t have any racism in Slovenia because we don’t have any Black people.” At that moment I realized that something was not quite right. The absence of racism does not explain, in Slovenia or in any other settler colony, the increasingly obvious fact that despite the lack of racism, those subjectivities not White (enough) possess a form of life that is quantitatively (shall we count the bodies?) “worth less.”<sup>3</sup>

In this rendering of one aspect of my experience living in Slovenia as a person of African descent, I will be attempting to lend sense to the claim that Slovenia is not racist enough, even if just briefly so that I can make a very particular point.

With this sentiment of absent racism articulated thus, that “there are no Black people,” the question follows, where are “these Black people,” anyways? In this brief introduction to the Afro-Slovene community, I will focus on their cultural performance to largely Euro-Slovene audiences. These moments of encounter are key to my analysis as they provide one avenue through which can be seen a play of identities, as they emerge out of the fiction of community formation. I will be drawing on the Western tradition of art and culture collection and linking it to the generation of identity within a unique biopolitical order, articulated

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<sup>3</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 23.

by authors such as Rey Chow,<sup>4</sup> Achille Mbembe,<sup>5</sup> and Alexander G. Weheliye.<sup>6</sup> Western culture and artifact collection has played an important role in the construction of historically and politically specific forms of African and African diasporic representation. The economy of worth within the post-colonial biopolitical order, and the way it has been visited upon Black bodies in the West, I will argue, hails bodies in ways that are unique but not particular to Slovenia. Given the highly contentious nature of “Black identity” in Slovenia, the task of writing Afro-Sloveneness from the future is defined predominantly by its failures.

Indeed, it is in these failures where we find lingering insights that can help to freeze Blackness while at the same time putting Afro-Slovenes in motion in the excess of racialized enclosure. Black “identity” in the Slovene milieu acts very directly as a sort of anchor, fixing Afro-Slovenes to notions of Blackness that emerge out of regimes of representation rather than the embodied practices of living. The concept of Afro-Slovene itself speaks to an “origin story” continually fading beyond the horizon, rather than marking off or enclosing a fixed identity. In lived reality, Afro-Slovene as an observable object often only makes sense in futures where it is called to the service of those who must police the borders of identity. In Slovenia, Black, Afro-Slovene, *tujci*, *črnuh* and *Zamorec* are catch-alls for those from across the sea or God knows where, “*niso naši*” or “they are not us.” One of those most happy phrases in the awkward interactions that take form as mini-interrogations between the “Slovene” and the “Afro-Slovene” proceed as follows: “Where are you from?” But more important, “When are you going home?”

### Colonial Ghosts in the Shell

290

Afro-Slovenes are continually seduced into a performance of Blackness, both on stage and off, often very conscious of the political nature of their acts. Let us consider for a moment the sorts of agency available to the Black body conceived of in this way—as an artifact of colonial rule. In a compelling argument

<sup>4</sup> Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

against Kantian notions of the sublime, Maruška Svašek suggests that aesthetics and the construction of European superiority are intimately intertwined, where “ethnocentric aesthetic standards (reflecting the Kantian notion of inherent aesthetic value) divided the human races into a hierarchy of increasingly civilised species, and all humans (once progressed), were thought to eventually share the same aesthetic standards.”<sup>7</sup> Within Svašek’s work, the notion of “inherent aesthetic value” or “inherent worth” is challenged by the addition of a social component to the ways in which objects are rendered intelligible.

Building on the insights of Arjun Appadurai’s conceptualization of the “social life of things”<sup>8</sup> and Alfred Gell’s theorization of “secondary” agency,<sup>9</sup> she mobilizes objects with biographies of their own. Deploying the social life of things allows us to attend to a Black body that does not move through space and place with “inherent aesthetic qualities or enchanting powers”<sup>10</sup> but picks up meaning through a process of symbolic inscription from discrete contexts. In conceptualizing the object in this way, its perceived qualities are to a certain extent fluid and open to change, but also scripted by the affective and symbolic luggage they acquire. Appadurai’s historical approach suggests that for things,

their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. No social analysis of things (whether the analyst is an economist, an art historian, or an anthropologist) can avoid a minimum level of what might be called methodological fetishism. This methodological fetishism, returning our attention to the things themselves, is in part a corrective to the tendency to excessively sociologize transactions in things.<sup>11</sup>

291

<sup>7</sup> Maruška Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production: Histories, Themes, Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Svašek, *Anthropology*, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, 5.

To inscribe objects with a biography, and from there, as Svašek suggests, attribute them a form of secondary agency, provides one avenue through which to begin thinking about the Black body as object/container/*enclosure*.<sup>12</sup> As an extension of Appadurai's notion of the biography of things, Svašek's interrogation of this slippery area between "mere thing" and "agent" allows, at least in my mind, to read and hold epistemology and ontological arguments regarding the Black body side by side.<sup>13</sup> As a product of ideology, the Black body attracts a habit of being seen.<sup>14</sup> As an object of the *gaze*, it has been mobilized with hierarchies of biopower that produce the excess where Black bodies have always lived *otherwise*. In other words, it will enable the Black body to be both enclosed in the discursive (or *thématique*) and emergent in its ontology.

Why might this reading side by side be important to this project? For a couple of reasons: 1) to further depersonalize the management of bodies within our contemporary, where every argument is taken as moral<sup>15</sup> and personalized as such, and 2), the more important reason, to find a conceptual structure that actually honors the words of Afro-Slovenes I spoke with. In the following passage, from Afro-Slovene #1, I would draw attention to the ways in which he navigates the fraught identity of being both African and Slovene:

Ok people can see my identity, but if you ask me who I am . . . I didn't explain very well this one, but this changing of identity depends on me. When I am really representing Africa or Slovenia or Afro-Slovene, at the end of the day I am just a *človek*, a human, and that is what you get, your identity, what you get from living this life . . . this is my contention.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), 16. In his own words: "The abstract concept of materiality, I argue, has actually hindered the proper understanding of materials. We would learn more by engaging directly with the materials themselves, following what happens to them as they circulate, mix with one another, solidify and dissolve in the formation of more or less enduring things. We discover, then, that materials are active. Only by putting them inside closed-up objects are they reduced to dead or inert matter. It is this attempted enclosure that has given rise to the so-called 'problem of agency.' It is a problem of our own making." Ingold, 16.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this notion of "reading side by side" consult Petra Mikulan and Nathalie Sinclair, *Time and Education: Time Pedagogy Against Oppression* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022).

Insights from Tim Ingold's notion of *living* help to resist the gravitation pull of authenticity and agency in the passage above, which have always served more to rank on progressive scales (as Svašek notices above) than to honor the epistemological value<sup>16</sup> of "native" voice. Counter to readings of Afro-Slovene #1 that would seek to find reason in their decision making and argumentation, I am taking fore-granted their expertise on *living* African in the Slovenian context. My task here is to develop a way of thinking with forms of Black vitality which, "never will they yield" to biopolitical categories insisting that "mud is bread for negroes"<sup>17</sup> and have often sought first and foremost to render "Blackness" knowable to power. Black vitality is *also* lazy, irrational, angry, broken and above all unproductive. Sarah Jama's chapter "The Need to Root Disability Justice into Movements" in *Until We Are Free* invigorates the "broken" and "useless" with purpose value outside of progressive timelines and the tyranny of perfectability. As she argues:

We will not see liberation from the systems that oppress us in this country unless we shift our movement-building to also focus on the protection and liberation of disabled people. [. . .] Disabled people are thus the antithesis to the capitalist system that continues to base the value of human being on our ability to compete and produce, because many people with disabilities cannot work and do not choose to work.<sup>18</sup>

What Afropessimism 2.0 sometimes forgets, in its long and impassioned laments on the "social death of the black man,"<sup>19</sup> is also that some forms of Black vitality need not always be resuscitated.<sup>20</sup> In social death, there are also opportunities to acknowledge that ways in which "social life" in the postcolonial has never re-

<sup>16</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that structures must be developed to incorporate the epistemological value of native voice if there is to be any redemption for ethnography. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 136.

<sup>17</sup> Claude McKay, "Tiger," in *The Black Poets*, ed. Dudley Randall, repr. ed. (Toronto: Bantam, 1985), 62.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Jama, "The Need to Root Disability Justice into Movements," in *Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada*, ed. Rodney Diverlus, Sandy Hudson, and Syrus Marcus Ware (Regina, Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2020), 186.

<sup>19</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Gloria Wekker, "Afropessimism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 28, no. 1 (February 2021): 86–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506820971224>.

ally spoken to Black experience in the first place. In this sense, Ingold's notion of *lifeworld*, with its intrinsic acknowledgement of change, is important here.

In what follows, I will attempt to suspend the conceptual lines between Western Europe and the Balkans and create an affiliation facilitated through an interrogation of the biopolitical order which they both share in common.

Returning to the question of racism in post-socialist Slovenia, needed is a framework that helps evoke a form of Black vitality that lives not only alongside capitalism but also "side by side" with a shared European biopolitical order. To accomplish this task, if only in moments, I will be taking seriously Ingold's notion of *lifeworlds*<sup>21</sup> and the forms of *living* it suggests might be possible. *Lifeworlds* will turn a spotlight toward *living* as the passive yet dynamic force of being alive. Ultimately, what we are looking for, as Ingold identified in his emphasis on being alive, is a notion of life that is released from the subject, or a creator with an elevated status in relation to the eye, not as machinic hindrance, but as cinematic machine. As opposed to a more active vitalism in which life is mobilized in the form of enclosure, and subjects act while objects are acted upon, we need a notion of living that can free individuals from containment. To begin thinking this, Claire Colebrook suggests that

there is an active vitalism, then, that wishes to trace all events back to their originating genesis. Such a vitalism must rely on a moral and temporal distinction between active and passive: in the beginning is the creative act that institutes differences and that is subsequently belied when those differences are taken to be the logic from which creativity flows.<sup>22</sup>

294

In refiguring what is meant by being alive, outside of the language or origins and destinations, there is potential perhaps for a mode of perception to be denaturalized and placed in context. This habit of reading too much from surface, what Ingold has termed *inversion*, assumes that the object is contained (or in a sense separate from its environment) and that something about its intrinsic na-

<sup>21</sup> The kinds of living enabled by Ingold's notion of inhabiting lifeworlds, as opposed to dwelling in environments, is instrumental in terms of its ability to disperse humanist subjectivity within fields of relations. See Ingold, *Being Alive*.

<sup>22</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze and the Meaning of Life* (London: Continuum, 2010), 27.



ture can be known with reference to what can be seen; or in other words that an object can be classified without taking into consideration the relations in which it is moving.<sup>23</sup> *Life*, in this rendering, becomes that which “will not be contained, that overflows any boundaries that might be thrown around it.”<sup>24</sup> Inversion therefore is used to critique the modernist obsession with enclosed and stable objects and used to “refer to the operation that wraps lines of flight into bounded points.”<sup>25</sup> By employing it, he hopes to counter the “conventional image of a network of interacting entities” with what he calls the “meshwork of entangled lines of life, growth and movement. This is the world we inhabit.”<sup>26</sup>

### Fraught Performance

Though Slovenia does not share a history of participation in the colonial mission in Africa (with exceptions such as Ignacij Knoblehar)<sup>27</sup> many of the stereotypes of Black and African people present during the times of Yugoslavia remain and show surprising consistency with those found in other Western countries. In the interviews I conducted with people of African descent living in Slovenia, there was consistent agreement that certain misconceptions about people of African descent have always been present, even if some would not immediately call Slovenian “ignorance” racist. And certainly, there is good reason to be cautious of the term “racism” given how reliant it tends to be on context for specific definition.<sup>28</sup> It can also be argued that it is becoming increasingly difficult to discuss a “separate terrain” which has somehow escaped the “increasing rapidity and the voracious appetite with which the post-modern culture imperializes and devours spaces.”<sup>29</sup> The notion of a diminishing “separate terrain” is important when

<sup>23</sup> Ingold, *Being Alive*, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Ingold, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Ingold, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Ingold, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Knoblehar was born in Škocjan in Lower Carniola. He completed his early studies in Slovenia before attending the College of Propaganda in Rome. In 1845, he was ordained a priest and completed his doctorate in theology a year later. He is known for his missionary work in Africa.

<sup>28</sup> See David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996); Claire Alexander, “Stuart Hall and ‘Race,’” *Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (July 2009): 457–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380902950914>.

<sup>29</sup> Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak

thinking about African presence and performance in Slovenia, as it allows us to situate not only Black performance in a global historical context but particularly Black bodies as well. In terms of the Afro-Slovene community, it is predominantly skin color that provides the avenue through which a notion of “community” is constructed. Unfortunate and at times confusing, the phrase “African cultural performance” itself is misleading in that it implies the existence of an “African” community organized around a stable and coherent continental identity.

Afro-Slovene bodies are often still described according to a way of thinking about the colonized Other that is laden with administrative language and management practices overloaded with a desire for power and control.<sup>30</sup> As accentuated by Ranajit Guha in his study of colonial administrative practices, a certain “grammar” was developed that was more ideological than descriptive with regard to writing about the native. In insidious ways, these managerial priorities have influenced the wider Western project of writing about the Other.<sup>31</sup> Conceptions of agency and objectivity are in a tangible sense at the heart of the ways in which the Black body continues to be “subject to” the State, as a structure that relies heavily on the language and logics of race.<sup>32</sup>

As the Afro-Slovenes in this research have suggested, lack of information is exacerbated by the fact that what is presented on topics of Africa and African people is of very low quality. During the time I was in Slovenia, from 2004 to 2011, tragically uninformed school textbooks and even children’s stories take on a more sinister aspect as they are presented in a climate that can be characterized by misinformation about Africa.<sup>33</sup> An example that will help give meaning to the following quotation from an interview with Afro-Slovene #2 highlights the ways in which even a children’s story book can contribute the spread of stereotypes that present Africa as an undeveloped *Elsewhere*. Juri Muri v Afriki [Juri Muri in

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Chaturvedi (London: Verso, 2000), 163.

<sup>30</sup> Trouillot, *Global Transformations*; Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Guha, *Elementary Aspects*.

<sup>32</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001); Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Janez Pirc, “Misrepresentations of Africa in Contemporary Slovene School Textbooks,” *Treatises And Documents: Journal of Ethnic Studies* 63 (December 2010): 124–49.

Africa] is the story of a Slovene boy's adventure to Africa and is easily accessible. At the time of this writing, the story was even available on YouTube.<sup>34</sup>

In this presentation of *Juri Muri in Africa*, I will be primarily concerned with just one way it has been read by certain members of the Afro-Slovene community. In the story, Michel-Rolph Trouillot's Western *thématique* is subtly put in motion with the words of Juri Muri himself: "Uf, daleč je ta Afrika [Uf, Africa is so far]."<sup>35</sup> To recall Trouillot's words, the "West's vision of order implied from its inception two complementary spaces, the Here and the Elsewhere, which premised one another and were conceived as inseparable."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it is interesting to mark the ways in which Slovenian discourse on Africa overlaps with what has normally been considered a Western *thématique*, one characterized by Trouillot as being saturated by the priorities of colonial rule. In Afro-Slovene #2's Afro-Slovene circles, Juri Muri has become shorthand for a particular way of imagining Africa and the Black body.

In a discussion of what motivates Slovenes to attend African performance, Afro-Slovene #2 remarks:

The Juri Muri people are more into dancing and naked bodies but anyone who values culture would come there and enjoy themselves and learn something new. To a large extent by performing African arts, you can end up contributing to the stereotypes that Slovenes already have, something I have been living with for more than 30 years. So, I had the choice to perform or not, I thought to myself fine, there is always a risk that if you perform people will understand one way which you don't want them to, but I chose to perform to educate and raise awareness. We use culture as a tool. When I do workshops with kids, we will do some theatre stuff, and some dancing and drumming but then there is also stories, and educational stuff in there, there are videos so they see that we have cities.

297

In other words, we might say that there are those among the Slovene public still searching for Juri Muri. In this quest, we are reminded of the anthropologist:

<sup>34</sup> Tone Pavček, writer, "Juri Muri v Afriki," YouTube video, uploaded by Tina Mauhar, March 24, 2020, 19:10, <https://youtu.be/GH6fTqw9brI>.

<sup>35</sup> Tone Pavček, *Juri Muri v Afriki* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1958).

<sup>36</sup> Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, 21.

“The portrait of the postmodernist anthropologist that emerges from this dual exercise is not a happy one indeed. Camera and notebooks in hand, he is looking for the Savage, but the Savage has vanished.”<sup>37</sup> In terms of the ways in which an imperative was developed to study “primitive people,” it became crucial to document the sorts of “authentic” native cultures that would just as much vanish as transform in contact with the modern West. The step was in some sense premised, particularly in more vulgar forms, on the notion that primitive peoples were incapable of the sorts of change that would allow them to maintain their own culture and become part of the modern world at the same time, a great lament, for example, in the work of Lévi-Strauss.<sup>38</sup>

### Multicultural Slovenia

It is in this movement where Afro-Slovenes insistence on living otherwise that *living itself*, outside of an economy which has tended to capitalize on their death, becomes resistance and should assume our focused attention; without shedding responsibility for how this can certainly be read in the liberal context as a movement away from the use of *race* to discuss the political impacts and epistemological weight of the term. It is not that race doesn’t matter; it is that we often do not have the tools to understand the significance of race in the generation of so-called progressed subjectivities. This conversation cannot be fruitfully undertaken without consideration of how we have come to think about life or vitality, and the governance thereof.

Building on this notion of Whiteness as generative rather than constructed,<sup>39</sup> I suggest that one potential avenue through which to interrogate the similarities of racialization in these two seemingly very different contexts is biopolitics. If we can assume that woman, Black, queer, disabled have always played a key role in the generation of Western Whiteness and Modern Euro-normativity,<sup>40</sup> then an interesting question arises: To what extent is Africa and the African generative of Slovene Whiteness and Westernness in the Slovene context?

<sup>37</sup> Trouillot, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Deliege, *Levi-Strauss Today: An Introduction to Structural Anthropology*, trans. Nora Scott (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 45–46.

<sup>39</sup> Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*.

<sup>40</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 62; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*; Trouillot, *Global Transformations*.

There are good reasons for continuing this discussion of anti-Black racism and the governance of life and death into the Slovenian context to discuss Afro-Slovene experience. Though we remain engaged with the ways in which Black vitality is not only subject to, but also a product of, a very particular form of surveillance and violence, it remains equally true that we, in the everyday act of “living” do so also otherwise. The somewhat naïve, but I would venture mostly hopeful, aim of this particular deployment is to allow for imaginings of Black vitality that facilitate motion, contingency, and skilled practice, as an avenue through which to address the practice of living as an alternative to the overly romantic sentimentalities of “agency.” My thoughts on Afro-Slovene experience are rendered here as a challenge to regimes of representation that seek to generate forms of “understandability” through concepts such as authenticity, identity, and belonging.

Indeed, the stakes here are high, as agency and identity within multicultural frameworks leave little room to consider the process of interaction as a potentially open-ended event of encounter. As Rey Chow points out, multicultural politics abhor discussion of the “struggle and violence inherent” that is obfuscated in overly optimistic renderings of cross-cultural interaction. In Chow’s reading of Frederic Jameson’s critique of multicultural politics, “one finds here not the liberalist, progressivist view that different cultures together form one big multicultural family but a reminder of the uncompromised understanding about human aggressiveness.”<sup>41</sup>

Through this interrogation of the Black body as it has been constructed within the Western *thématique*, I hope to create trajectories through which to investigate the limitations of recognition theory and the subsequent obsession with agency that arises out of this set of priorities. We start with Fanon’s engagement with the colonial encounter in which the Black body is, in a sense, what was called forth into the great European endeavor with the memorable hail: “Hey look at the nigger! . . . Mama, a Negro!”<sup>42</sup> In conversation with Afro-Slovene #3, this passage from Fanon, which may seem a bit outdated now, still has very real

<sup>41</sup> Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Pluto Press, 2008), 85.

and living memory in Slovenia. In recalling a “seemingly innocent” incident between his son and a White Slovene, he recalled:

I can remember when my son was around four or five years, and two kids were running behind us. And one of those kids said, “Hey, look, two black guys!” you know, “Look, a black kid!” And my son stopped, and he went to them and he said my name is . . .

Say his name! What is whispered also in the context is, “Hey, look, look at this white kid!” Through examination of such events can be found one potential avenue to mobilize Ingold’s notion of enclosure to highlight the violence, perpetrated on both the viewed and the viewer, by the reduction of the complex experience of living to a color. In the following memorable passage Fanon, the Black body is lost (to itself and found within a symbolic enclosure that functions also as a kind of prison:

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it’s cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother’s arms: Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up.<sup>43</sup>

300 Though this moment has often been thought through with Hegelian recognition theory, other trajectories remain possible. To consider the ways in which identities are hailed by the State, recognition theory allows for the possibility to think through how skin and race can become binding in certain contexts at the level of language and the human symbolic. However, the colonial encounter is not simply a moment between the White child as subject (subject of the state) and the Black man as object of Western gaze (subject to the state). If we are to leave aspects of Foucault in which discourse and practice create an inescapable

<sup>43</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 86.

field of symbolic interpretive thought<sup>44</sup> perhaps it will be possible to map different trajectories in starting points alluded to by Paul Gilroy in *Against Race*.<sup>45</sup> To search for another line of thinking here would not simply be a pedantic meander through the limitations of discourse, but an attempt to find other avenues through which to investigate the “weighted and reeling present.”<sup>46</sup>

Flushing out the ephemeral past requires a calculus of biopower that speaks in peculiar ways to the precarity of life (or flesh) deemed less “worthy.” Aside from the epistemological conundrums of “Black” identity and the question of the muted experience of “racism,” the everyday occurrence of living with Black skin in Slovenia raises questions that do not diminish the necessary importance of security and the urgencies of survival. Afro-Slovenes, in their acts of living reject in passing the priorities that “progress” evokes through the standardization of Euro-normalizing biopolitical orders and slip the categories used to confine them to a limited form of existence—yet the burden they bear is onerous.

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<sup>44</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 777–95, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>; Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia,” in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi (London: Verso, 2000), 72–115.

<sup>45</sup> Gilroy, *Against Race*.

<sup>46</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

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## **Bodies of Necrolives**



Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese\*

## “Never Settler Enough”: The Double Economy of Terror and Deaths in Custody in Australia

### Keywords

Indigenous deaths in custody, settler state, police violence, racial terror, Deathscapes

### Abstract

In this article, the authors examine the systemic nature of state violence and racial terror in the context of the Australian settler state and Indigenous deaths in custody. Drawing on Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton’s (2003) concept of a “double economy of terror,” the authors contend that police violence and Aboriginal deaths in custody must be read in terms of the standard operating procedures of a double economy of terror that ensures the institutional reproduction of the Australian settler colonial state. Death in police custody, Perera and Pugliese argue, is coextensive with the larger governmental and administrative apparatuses of the colonial state. In the face of the settler state’s systemic ignorability of the ongoing racialized violence against Indigenous peoples, the authors conclude their paper opposing such a state with an Indigenous voice that refuses tacit acquiescence and that howls with rage at the mounting Aboriginal deaths in custody and rates of Indigenous imprisonment.

## »Nikoli dovolj naseljenški«: dvojna ekonomija terorja in smrti v policijskem pridržanju v Avstraliji

307

### Ključne besede

primeri smrti staroselcev v policijskem pridržanju, država naseljencev, policijsko nasilje, rasni teror, Deathscapes projekt

### Povzetek

Avtorja v članku preučujeta sistemsko naravo državnega nasilja in rasnega terorja v kontekstu avstralske države naseljencev ter smrti staroselcev v policijskem pridržanju.

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nju. S pomočjo koncepta »dvojne ekonomije terorja« Steva Martinota in Jareda Sextona (2003) avtorja trdita, da moramo policijsko nasilje in smrti staroselcev v policijskem pridržanju razumeti kot standardne operativne postopke dvojne ekonomije terorja, ki zagotavljajo institucionalno reprodukcijo avstralske kolonialne države naseljencev. Perera in Pugliese trdita, da smrt v policijskem pridržanju sovпада s širšimi vladnimi in upravnimi mehanizmi kolonialne države. Zaradi sistematičnega zanemarjanja in nenehnega rasiziranega nasilja nad staroselci, ki ga izvaja ta država naseljencev, avtorja v zaključku svojega članka takšni državi nasprotujeta z izpostavitvijo staroselskega glasu, ki zavrača tiho privolitev in besni od jeze zaradi naraščajočega števila smrtnih primerov staroselcev v policijskem pridržanju ter visoke stopnje zapiranja staroselcev.



In his speech made at the launch of the volume *Mapping Deathscapes*,<sup>1</sup> Yannick Giovanni Marshall discussed the settler state as a repository for two forms of seemingly opposing but in fact deeply interconnected political imaginations: those that seek its improvement or gradual evolution into something better, and those for whom “the settler state can never be settler enough.”<sup>2</sup> Marshall’s observation resonates profoundly with us as we reflect on our experiences as co-ordinators of the Deathscapes Project<sup>3</sup> and as long-term critics of deaths in state custody in Australia.<sup>4</sup>

The Deathscapes Project connects the deaths of migrants and asylum seekers left to die and made to die at the maritime borders of this “island nation” to the deaths of Indigenous people in custody at the hands of the state. We argue that refugees and Indigenous peoples are structurally linked in the formation of exclusionary settler sovereignty. Moreover, we identify as constitutive of this set-

<sup>1</sup> Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, eds., *Mapping Deathscapes: Digital Geographies of Racial and Border Violence* (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Yannick Giovanni Marshall, April 21, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See Deathscapes Project at <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20201103065140/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/173410/20201103-1648/www.deathscapes.org/case-studies/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, “Death in a Dry River: Black Life, White Property, Parched Justice,” *Somatechnics* 1, no. 1 (March 2011): 65–86, <https://doi.org/10.3366/soma.2011.0007>; Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, “White Law of the Biopolitical,” *Journal of the European Association for Studies on Australia* 13, no. 1 (2012): 87–100.

tlar sovereignty the same formations that underpin the “necrodemocracies” of Europe, where, in the words of the editors of this volume, the body of the Other functions as “a barrier and a threshold, highly racialized, classified and gender discriminated . . . [a body that] floats by the thousands in the seas around mainland Europe.”<sup>5</sup>

The Deathscapes Project documents how practices of boat interception, turn-back and indefinite detention practices on land and at sea have resulted in an environment of fear, insecurity, and death for thousands of asylum seekers.<sup>6</sup> These practices and technologies for managing internal and external borders against racialized interlopers are shared by settler states like Australia and the colonizing metropolises that were their points of origin. For example, the recent proposal by the UK government to establish an offshore holding camp for boat people in Rwanda mirrors the Australian government’s policy of sending all people intercepted on boats to Nauru or Papua New Guinea. The traffic in necrotechnologies between the two states, Australia and the UK, now runs in both ways.

In Italy, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has proposed the establishment of a “military mission” in the form of a “naval blockade” across the North African maritime region to physically thwart the departure of asylum seekers and refugees.<sup>7</sup> This

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the call for papers by Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek for this special issue of *Filozofski vestnik*, posted on January 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Bui et al., “Villawood: A Suburban Deathscape in Plain Site,” *Deathscapes: Mapping Race and Violence in Settler States*, 2017, <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20201103065140/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/173410/20201103-1648/www.deathscapes.org/case-studies/villawood/index.html>; Michelle Bui et al., “Extraterritorial Killings: The Weaponisation of Bodies,” *Deathscapes: Mapping Race and Violence in Settler States*, 2018a, <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20201103065140/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/173410/20201103-1648/www.deathscapes.org/case-studies/case-study-4-extraterritorial-killings-the-weaponisation-of-bodies/index.html>; Michelle Bui et al., “Perpetual Insecurity: The Weaponisation of Mental Suffering,” *Deathscapes: Mapping Race and Violence in Settler States*, 2018b, <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20201103065140/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/173410/20201103-1648/www.deathscapes.org/case-studies/perpetual-insecurity/index.html>; Michelle Bui et al., “Every Boat Is the First Boat,” *Deathscapes: Mapping Race and Violence in Settler States*, 2020, <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20201103065140/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/173410/20201103-1648/www.deathscapes.org/case-studies/every-boat-is-the-first-boat/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> “Italy’s Far-Right Election Forerunner Sparks Controversy, Vows to ‘Defend Border,’” *InfoMigrants*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/42798/italys-farright-election-forerunner-sparks-controversy-vows-to-defend-borders>.

militarization of maritime borders finds precedent in the Australian government's use of naval vessels to patrol, thwart and push back asylum seekers arriving by boat. As with the Australian government's spurious self-justification for these militarized border tactics, Meloni has argued that this will "save lives at sea."

By including the UK and EU countries as historical points of origin for settler colonialism, the Deathscapes Project traces the ongoing processes of racialization in these places and situates them within the shared contexts and as interrelated practices embedded in contemporary global structures in Australia, North America, and Europe. By connecting Indigenous deaths and other racialized deaths, such as those of refugees and migrants, the Deathscapes project aims to make visible the shared strategies, policies, practices and rationales of state violence deployed in the management of separate racialized categories of the population. As Jordy Silverstein writes in her commentary on the Deathscapes site:

In taking this cross-border approach, the constant project of creating and maintaining settler-colonial sovereignty is highlighted. The perpetuation of deaths in custody is understood, then, as one technique, or technology, of that governmental rule. That is, the Deathscapes project understands the creation of death—the necropolitical drive—as a planned tool of government. Deaths in custody of racialized people, Deathscapes affirms, are not an accident. They are by design. They are a feature, not a bug, of the system.<sup>8</sup>

We write in our conclusion to *Mapping Deathscapes*:

If anything emerges from the pages of this volume, it is the *serial* killing power of the racial-carceral state—and its ignorability for the white overseers who reside outside its lethal structures and who are largely untouched by its agents of racialized violence, even as they continue to fuel its reproduction under the guise of reformism.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Jordy Silverstein, "Mapping Deaths in Custody to Dismantle Carceral Logic," *Overland*, January 30, 2019, <https://overland.org.au/2019/01/mapping-deaths-in-custody-to-dismantle-carceral-logic/>.

<sup>9</sup> Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, "Transformative Justice," in *Mapping Deathscapes: Digital Geographies of Racial and Border Violence*, ed. Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese (London: Routledge, 2022), 260.



Drawing on the conceptually resonant analysis of Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton,<sup>10</sup> we conclude that what is operative here is “a twin structure, a regime of violence that operates in two registers, terror and the seduction into the fraudulent ethics of social order; a double economy of terror.”<sup>11</sup>

In our contribution to this special issue, we delve into the notion of the “double economy of terror” by discussing a number of Indigenous deaths in custody in Australia. We argue that police violence and Aboriginal deaths in custody must be understood as standard operating procedures of the double economy of terror that ensures the institutional reproduction of the Australian settler-colonial state.

### The Killing of Kumanjaye Walker

Is this white building for us as well [Darwin Court House]? Are we Australians? Is it just for you mob? But they’ve built it on *yapa* land.<sup>12</sup>

In November 2019, a nineteen-year-old man, now to be referred to in accordance with Warlpiri custom as Kumanjayi Walker, was shot three times within seconds at the home of his partner’s grandmother in the Central Australian desert community of Yuendumu. Walker was in an alcohol rehabilitation program at the time and had taken off his electronic monitor to attend his grandfather’s funeral in Yuendumu. He was killed when an armed police unit attempted to reapprehend him. This was the thirteenth Indigenous person to die in custody that year, in a sequence of at least 490 deaths since a 1991 Royal Commission Report aimed at ending Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. In the three decades since the report, no police officer has been found guilty of any of these deaths. Still, hopes for justice were raised when police constable Zachary Rolfe was charged with murder based on his body camera footage a few days after the shooting. Those hopes were dashed, however, when a non-Aboriginal jury acquitted Rolfe after

<sup>10</sup> Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton, “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 172, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000101542>.

<sup>11</sup> Perera and Pugliese, “Transformative Justice,” 260.

<sup>12</sup> Louanna Napangardi Williams, in Ned Jampijinpa Hargraves et al., “Justice for Walker: Warlpiri Responses to the Police Shooting of Kumunjayi Walker,” in “Settler-Colonial Violence in Contemporary Australia,” ed. Yasmine Musharbash, special issue, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 33, no. S1 (August 2022): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12446>.

a five-week trial not only of the murder charge, but also of two lesser charges: manslaughter and participating in an act of violence resulting in death. It was only after Rolfe was acquitted on all charges that details of previous convictions against him for violently assaulting another Aboriginal person during an arrest and of Rolfe's falsification of evidence in the subsequent trial became known (and are continuing to emerge at the time of writing). Suppression orders prevented this evidence from being presented at the murder trial, and shocking racist tweets between Rolfe and his fellow police were also ruled inadmissible. The scope of the murder trial was narrowed to Rolfe's actions in the hours and minutes before the shooting and in the days immediately preceding Kumanjaji Walker's attempted arrest.

The trial of Rolfe, who was charged with murder, can only be described as botched and compromised from the start. In columnist John Silvester's analysis:

The decision to prosecute, rather than to reserve the decision until after an inquest, was a disservice to all Northern Territory remote communities, as it delayed the examination of the fundamental issues of police training, cultural sensitivities, the safest way to police in similar circumstances and whether the attempt to arrest Walker on the day of the funeral was premature. If new evidence was uncovered against Rolfe by the Coroner, the case against him would have been stronger. But under the rules of double jeopardy, he cannot be tried again.<sup>13</sup>

Silvester points to two factors that militated against a successful prosecution from the outset and kept Rolfe from the possibility of a considered trial: First, the haste with which he was indicted before an investigation was conducted to uncover all the information, and second, the limited focus of the trial itself. The latter was in striking contrast to the contexts in which the Warlpiri community and family contributed to the understanding of Kumanjaji Walker's death. This included the history of violent colonial policing and police use of weapons in the area, which extended to the Conniston Massacres of 1928, led by a Constable Murray, in which 100 Warlpiri, Anmatyerr, and Kayteye who lived in the area

312

<sup>13</sup> John Silvester, "A Police Shooting: The Fatal Three Seconds and the Tragic Aftermath," *The Age*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/a-police-shooting-the-fatal-three-seconds-and-the-tragic-aftermath-20220323-p5a723.html>.

were killed.<sup>14</sup> Members of the Warlpiri community also referred to intervention in the Northern Territory in 2007 when police and army were mobilized in Aboriginal communities, ostensibly in response to reports of child abuse. Warlpiri Elder Ned Hargreaves pointed out that the Intervention, ostensibly for the protection of vulnerable Indigenous children, resulted in a \$7 million police station being built on their country, with increasing levels of surveillance and law enforcement in the community.

Despite the restrictions placed on the process, the Warlpiri community has mobilized in support of the court process. Samara Fernandez-Brown, cousin of Kumanjaji Walker, spoke eloquently after the devastating verdict:

We are all in so much pain—particularly our young men. They have struggled, they have been scared but still they have respected this process and so has our whole community. This process has been so new to all of us and we've had suppression orders in place to stop us saying what we want to, to stop us saying our truth. We have been respectful of that and still we have been let down. [. . .] But this is not the end of his story and this is not the end of our fight.<sup>15</sup>

We take from Fernandez-Brown's words two related points: First, the clear understanding that while Kumanjaji Walker's family and community made the decision to respect the Australian legal system, that system which, with its oppressions and prohibitions, has sorely failed them: "We have been let down." But this realization is followed by an equally clear understanding that the struggle for justice must continue: "This is not the end of the fight."

Fernandez-Brown's determination was echoed by a number of other Warlpiri speakers after the trial. Speaking on behalf of the family, Warren Japanangka Williams stated:

*Kardiya* justice system is really dishonest and it's about time for a change. It helps *kardiya* avoid instead of making them accountable. Since the Royal Commission in Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991, the number of *yapa* deaths has escalated

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<sup>14</sup> Hargreaves et al., "Justice for Walker," 20–21.

<sup>15</sup> Samara Fernandez-Brown, in Hargreaves et al., "Justice for Walker," 30. Fernandez-Brown is Kumanjaji Walker's cousin.

to over 500 and there had not been one instance of justice related to these matters over all these years. [. . .] We would like to encourage all Indigenous people right across Australia to fight for justice and no matter what happens, never back down! Keep fighting until justice prevails. If you need to seek support from lawyers and *kardiya* people, make sure they listen to you so you can have the power to make decisions and lead the way in getting justice for your family. We need to seek justice on the right path, with the right people. We need our people to be decision-makers for our community. The politicians that we vote for need to understand our law and culture as part of this justice process.<sup>16</sup>

This statement by the family of Kumanjaya Walker is a recognition of the impossibility of justice within the limits of *kardya* law. Aboriginal people are urged to take control of the direction of future trials: “We need to seek justice on the right path, with the right people.”<sup>17</sup> What is being called for here is nothing less than a fundamental transformation of *kardya* law: “The politicians that we vote for need to understand our law and culture as part of this justice process.”<sup>18</sup>

The family of Kumanjaya Walker are clear in their understanding that the standard operating procedure of *kardya* law will not deliver justice, just as it has not delivered justice for the hundreds of previous deaths in custody. How could it, when it is enmeshed in the double economy of terror of a settler fantasy that “can never be settler enough”?

### “Standard Operating Procedure”

We now turn to a more detailed analysis of the use of racialized and institutional violence as forms of Standard Operating Procedure in the context of a harrowing historical Aboriginal death in custody. Our analysis establishes a transnational interlinking of African American and Indigenous scholars working on racialized violence precisely because the issues at stake affect both communities and because they share a long history of political and activist solidarity. As Amanda Porter writes:

314

<sup>16</sup> Warren Japanangka Williams, in Hargraves et al., “Justice for Walker,” 31.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, 31.

There has been a long history of transnational solidarity, whether that's with the Black Lives Matter movement or with the Black Panther movement, which came to Sydney and Brisbane back in the early 70s to help set up the Pig Patrols. There's this long history of transnational convergence with the African American cause, the cause of Palestine and Aboriginal people here. And it's great to see that this solidarity is happening again. All of these causes are eventually the same fight. They're fights about racist violence, settler colonial violence and the illegal occupation of Indigenous land. It's exactly the same struggle and solidarity between these movements.<sup>19</sup>

In their analysis of ongoing police violence against people of color in the United States, Martinot and Sexton<sup>20</sup> pose an unsettling question: "What are we doing when we demonstrate against police brutality, and find ourselves tacitly calling on the government to help us do so?" In broaching this question, Martinot and Sexton challenge the received understanding that the governmental apparatus stands in necessary contradistinction to the various repressive apparatuses, such as the police, to which it delegates its authority and through which it ensures its self-preservation. The seeming difference between the government and state repressive bodies becomes untenable as soon as the police are seen as actually invested with the state's monopoly on violence. "These notions of the state as the arbiter of justice," Martinot and Sexton write, "and the police as the unaccountable arbiters of lethal violence are two sides of the same coin. Narrow understandings of mere racism are proving themselves impoverished because they cannot see this fundamental relationship."<sup>21</sup>

Once Martinot and Sexton's problematization of the notion that the state is the "arbiter of justice" is situated in a settler colonial state such as Australia, two key dimensions emerge that go unremarked in their analysis: "Policing and the exercise of criminal jurisdiction are inevitably bound up with issues of Indigenous sovereignty, and the right to self-determination."<sup>22</sup> Chris Cunneen and Juan Tau-

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<sup>19</sup> Amanda Porter, "Questionable Jurisdiction: Academic Amanda Porter on Policing First Nations," interview by Paul Gregoire, *Sydney Criminal Lawyers*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.sydneycriminallawyers.com.au/blog/questionable-jurisdiction-academic-amanda-porter-on-policing-first-nations/>.

<sup>20</sup> Martinot and Sexton, "Avant-Garde of White Supremacy," 170.

<sup>21</sup> Martinot and Sexton, 170.

<sup>22</sup> Chris Cunneen and Juan Tauri, *Indigenous Criminology* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), 86.

ri elaborate on this nexus between the challenges to settler law by Indigenous sovereignty and law: “A widespread view among Indigenous people is that Indigenous sovereignty has never been extinguished; sovereignty continues to be exercised by Indigenous communities, despite the formal declaration of settler colonial law.”<sup>23</sup> Here, Cunneen and Tauri underscore how the practices of settler policing and the exercise of criminal jurisdiction cannot be isolated from either the foundational colonial nature of settler law or from the ongoing assertion of unceded Indigenous sovereignty that continues to challenge the authority of settler law. This is precisely the view articulated in the statement of the family of Kumanjaya Walker quoted above, in which they argue that it is structurally impossible for Indigenous people to achieve justice within the limits of *kardya* law, and consequently they exhort Aboriginal people to continue to exercise their unceded sovereignty and their own law in criminal justice proceedings.

Martinot and Sexton argue that the agencies vested with the state’s monopoly of violence and those vested with the state’s power to regulate and manage that violence are “two sides of the same coin.”<sup>24</sup> Hence their powerful call for “the development of a radical critique of the structure of the coin.” The practices of police violence are in fact enabled and guaranteed by the state; thus those targeted by their practices of racialized violence cannot hope for redress from the very institution that is the source of this same violence. Furthermore, the various forms of racialized state violence—the increased rates of Indigenous imprisonment, their overrepresentation within the prison-industrial complex, and the escalating rates of Black deaths in custody—“are the rule itself of standard operating procedure.”<sup>25</sup> Only by bringing this argument into critical focus can we hope to clarify the obvious sense of bewilderment articulated by Adam Tomison, director of AIC, when these figures were released in 2013: “It hasn’t been getting better, it’s been getting worse despite, I think, a lot of attempts by governments and agencies to try and bring that down.”<sup>26</sup> What if we were to rephrase Tomison’s observation thus: “It hasn’t been getting better, it’s been getting worse *because* of the attempts by governments and agencies to try and

316

<sup>23</sup> Cunneen and Tauri, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Martinot and Sexton, “Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” 170.

<sup>25</sup> Martinot and Sexton, 170.

<sup>26</sup> Adam Tomison, quoted in Martin Cuddihy, “Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Numbers Rise Sharply Over Past Five Years,” ABC News, May 24, 2013, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-05-24/sharp-rise-in-number-of-aboriginal-deaths-in-custody/4711764>.

bring that down?" How so? Because these various forms of racialized and institutional violence are the very rule of the colonial state, as *standard operating procedure*.

### The Settler-Colonial State and the Avant-Garde of Police Violence

In their analysis of the complex dynamics of police violence in the context of the white supremacist U.S. state, Martinot and Sexton articulate a number of critical questions relevant to the Australian system of policing and racialized punishment and violence. They ask: "If the spectacle of police violence does, in fact, operate according to a rule of its own [. . .], what does this suggest about the social institutions that generate it and which it represents despite persistent official disavowals?"<sup>27</sup> Inscribed in this question is the urgent need to view police violence not as an anomaly or as disconnected from larger state structures imbued with the values and investments of whiteness and coloniality, but as part of the standard operating procedures of the settler-colonial state in the governance, punishment and killing Indigenous peoples.

When Martinot and Sexton's proposition is placed in the context of the settler history of policing against Indigenous peoples in the Australian context, the frontline role of police as an avant-garde force of the settler state becomes clear: "The police in Australia carried out paramilitary functions which in other countries were carried out by the military. The role of police at the frontier and later in implementing 'protection' and assimilation policies, which involved child removal and forcing people off their lands, have had an enduring impact on many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perception of police and more broadly the failure of the rule of [settler] law for them."<sup>28</sup> Amanda Porter points to this very violent settler history of policing and then underscores the issue of contested jurisdiction in the face of unceded Indigenous sovereignty and law:

There is also an unresolved issue of jurisdiction with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander polities and the state. This is why policing and the criminal jurisdiction remain one of the most significant sites of the ongoing colonisation of

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<sup>27</sup> Martinot and Sexton, 171.

<sup>28</sup> Larissa Behrendt, Chris Cunneen, and Terri Libesmann, *Indigenous Legal Relations in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today. And it always has been. The Frontier Wars have never ended. Police are still enforcers of property and alien laws. They still enforce the illegal occupation of sovereign Aboriginal land. This understanding is part of the remit of abolition politics and resistance. [. . .] This further raises serious questions about the legitimacy to govern on this land – not just from a moral or ethical perspective—but from a legal perspective. Aboriginal law and settler law continue side by side, even though they don't recognise one another.<sup>29</sup>

Having inflected Martinot and Sexton's proposition with its otherwise elided settler colonial dimensions, we want to begin to flesh it out in the context of the death in police custody of Mr. Eddie Murray. Mr. Eddie Murray died over three decades ago. His death galvanized Aboriginal communities and their supporters throughout Australia. But the truth about the events leading up to his death has still not officially come to light. As we explain below, the Murray family continues to fight for justice despite a slew of official cover-ups and lies. The trauma of losing Mr. Murray is still fresh for them, despite the decades that have passed since his violent death. At a forum on police violence organized by Uncle Ray Jackson, the late President of the Indigenous Social Justice Association, Mr. Murray's sister stood up and retold her story. She wept as she recounted the family's sense of irrecoverable loss. She was supported both physically and emotionally by a number of Aboriginal women who gathered around her and held her as she unfolded her story. They also told their own stories of police violence and Aboriginal deaths in police custody.

Mr. Eddie Murray was a 21-year-old Aboriginal man who had a promising career ahead of him as a rugby league player. On June 12, 1981, Mr. Murray had returned home to Wee Waa to visit his family. He was due to return to Sydney to continue playing for the Redfern All Blacks. He went out for a drink with friends. When he tried to re-enter the hotel where he had been drinking, he was refused entry because he was considered too drunk. The hotel staff called the police. He was picked up and driven to the Wee Waa police station. Only a few hours after being imprisoned, he was found hanging in his cell. Police ruled his death a suicide. The Murray family absolutely refused to believe this. They began a long campaign to get to the truth of Eddie Murray's death. "I think the police got a shock

318

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<sup>29</sup> Porter, "Questionable Jurisdiction."



when we wanted an investigation into our son's death," says Leila Murray, Mr. Murray's mother, "because we knew that our son wouldn't take his own life."<sup>30</sup> Arthur Murray, Mr. Murray's father, questions the police's motives for locking him up when they could have simply dropped him off at the Murrays' home: "They could have brought him home," he says, "We only live just up the road. [. . .] There was no need to detain him and lock in the cell."<sup>31</sup> Refusing to believe that Mr. Murray had committed suicide, the Murray family demanded an investigation. The police investigation that followed exemplifies the manner in which the police can "operate according to a rule of its own":

The police investigation that ensued was compromised from the outset, with the then senior Wee Waa police officer, Alan Moseley, who was on duty at the time of Eddie's death, appointed to oversee the investigation. Moseley failed to talk to the Murrays about Eddie's potential for suicide, and claimed he had not viewed Eddie's body after his death. Having viewed Eddie's body themselves the following day, the Murrays noticed he was not wearing his own clothes, which they requested twice – before and after the autopsy. They were later told they couldn't be found.<sup>32</sup>

The disappearance of Mr. Murray's own clothes from what should have been the most secure of sites, a police station, was just one of several unexplained anomalies that cast suspicion on the police account of what had actually transpired in his cell. The autopsy on Mr. Murray's body was again compromised by the manner in which police oversaw the procedure and by the fact that the autopsy was conducted by an inexperienced local general practitioner, Dr Eric Mulvey: "A police scientific photographer took only a small number of substandard shots from limited angles. Clarification of the medical evidence was later further inhibited by Mulvey's failing memory. [. . .] Records on Eddie's consultations later disappeared."<sup>33</sup> In addition to compromising practices and the disappearance

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<sup>30</sup> "Family Calls for Eddie Murray Case to be Reopened," 7:30, ABC News, November 26, 1999, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/programs/730>.

<sup>31</sup> "Eddie Murray Case."

<sup>32</sup> Emma Purdy, "On Our Watch: Eddie Murray . . . Back Where It All Began," *Tracker*, July 2011. Republished in Sovereign Union, <http://nationalunitygovernment.org/content/eddie-murray-back-where-it-all-began>.

<sup>33</sup> Purdy, "On Our Watch."

of essential evidence, the spectre of police threats against Mr. Murray hung over the police version of events:

During the November 1981 inquest, conflicting accounts were given by the police as to whether or not one Wee Waa officer, Rodney Fitzgerald, was on duty at the time of Eddie's death. Eddie had previously told his family he had been "threatened" by Fitzgerald, while three witnesses testified that he was one of the officers who arrested him on the afternoon of his death. In evidence, Fitzgerald was adamant he did not start work until later that day and that he was picking his wife up from hospital at the time of Eddie's death, although hospital records later showed she was discharged the day before Eddie died. [. . .] Another officer, Gary Page, "was firm" that Fitzgerald was at the station when Eddie was allegedly found dead.<sup>34</sup>

Inconsistencies and contradictions run through all levels of the police report on Mr. Murray's death. Perhaps the most glaring contradiction is that, "while the officers alleged Eddie tore his thick prison blanket and firmly tied a neat noose around the bars of his prison window, they later admitted under cross-examination that he was 'too drunk to scratch himself.'"<sup>35</sup> In the face of these police lies and contradictions, the Murray family finally succeeded 16 years after Mr. Murray's death, in demanding that his remains be exhumed so that a thorough autopsy could be performed.

The new autopsy revealed, in the words of Robert Cavanagh, Mr. Murray's barrister, that "Eddie had a fractured sternum and that was not identified at the time of either the inquest or the royal commission."<sup>36</sup> Dr. Johan Duflou, NSW Institute of Forensic Medicine, suggested that "the most likely cause of the fracture of the sternum is one or more blows to the chest some time prior to death."<sup>37</sup> Professor Nikolai Bogduk, Professor of Anatomy and Musculoskeletal Medicine, outlined that this sort of chest injury would make it difficult for someone to be able to lift their "arms above the head or pull objects" as it would "strongly aggravate" their chest pain.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Purdy.

<sup>35</sup> Purdy.

<sup>36</sup> "Eddie Murray Case."

<sup>37</sup> "Eddie Murray Case."

<sup>38</sup> "Eddie Murray Case."

Mr. Murray's broken sternum suggests that he was a victim of police violence. The inexplicable disappearance of Mr. Murray's own clothes suggests that they were destroyed, as they could have provided incriminating evidence of police violence inflicted on his body. Mr. Murray's death was one of the deaths investigated by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which was established on August 11, 1987. Although Commissioner James Muirhead expressed concern over the reliability of the police account of Mr. Murray's death, he "found that 'in all probability' Eddie had committed suicide."<sup>39</sup>

This finding returns us to the question posed by Martinot and Sexton with which we opened our account of Mr. Murray's police death in police custody: "If the spectacle of police violence does, in fact, operate according to a rule of its own [ . . . ], what does this suggest about the social institutions that generate it and which it represents despite persistent official disavowals?"<sup>40</sup> Mr. Murray's death in police custody suggests that police violence is at once coextensive with the larger governmental and administrative apparatuses of the colonial state, including its Royal Commissions, its Coroners and the Police Integrity Commission (PIC)—whose mission is to investigate police misconduct. The Police Integrity Commission did indeed investigate Mr. Murray's death.

However, as Simon Luckhurst, who staged his own in-depth investigation of Mr. Murray's death himself, concluded, "It [PIC's] certainly wasn't a complex investigation. [ . . . ] Rather than in-depth interviews or even investigating the existing material the [Royal] Commission looked at, they appeared to spend a lot of time trying to discredit the pathologist's report."<sup>41</sup> The Royal Commissions, the state's Coroners, and Police Integrity Commissions, once located within the systemic and institutionalized apparatuses of the settler-colonial state's system of racialized punishment—all must be seen nodal points and switching centers that relay and reproduce the state's monopoly of racialized violence.

Because these processes of reproduction are embedded in the institutions of civil administration, the violence cannot be understood as violence as such. On the contrary, violence is institutionally recoded as standard operating procedure:

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<sup>39</sup> Purdy, "On Our Watch."

<sup>40</sup> Martinot and Sexton, "Avant-Garde of White Supremacy," 171.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Luckhurst, quoted in Purdy, "On Our Watch."

“That is, civil governmental structures would act in accordance with the paradigm of policing—wanton violence legitimised by strict conformity to procedural regulations.”<sup>42</sup> When Royal Commissioner James Muirhead “found that ‘in all probability’ Eddie had committed suicide,” what transpired “was the banal functionary of a civil structure, a paradigmatic exercise of wanton violence that parades as moral rectitude but whose source is the paradigm of policing.”<sup>43</sup> The moral rectitude of the Commissioner—signaled by his upholding of legal procedure and tautologically coded as impartial and objective—occludes the fact that he has just sanctioned and reproduced at a higher level of a civil governmental office the very police violence that he was invested with examining and bringing to account.

In his discussion of another Aboriginal death, the death of Mr. Mark Mason, who was shot by police in Collarenebri on November 11, 2010, Ray Jackson unpacks the police investigation report into that killing, which is full of holes and contradictions, and concludes:

As usual, however, coroners accept the brief provided by the police whilst other police officers are involved directly in the inquest. Under any other conditions this would be seen as being a clash of interest and therefore suspect but not in coronial inquests. [. . .] But governments, police and coroners all play from the same book that ignores that unmistakable fact [. . .] and that is why the corrupt system must be changed so real justice is allowed to be seen as justice. Nothing else will suffice.<sup>44</sup>

What Jackson critically underscores here is the way in which police violence is reproduced and legitimized at higher-order levels by coroners through their very failure to question what is an obvious conflict of interest. Again and again in the context of these coronial inquests into Aboriginal deaths in custody that are informed uncritically by police “investigative” reports, coroners portray themselves as working rigorously and impartially according to procedural regulations. “Unfortunately,” writes Jackson, “for the Indigenous People and Deaths

322

<sup>42</sup> Martinot and Sexton, “Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” 171.

<sup>43</sup> Martinot and Sexton, 172.

<sup>44</sup> Ray Jackson, “Dic of Mark Mason and Coroners Court Outcome,” Indigenous Social Justice Association post to author, November 14, 2013.

in Custody, Coroners are still supporting the lies, the convenient short-term memory losses, the lack of protocol and ignoring visible evidence. They are insensitive as the day captain cook arrived dealing out his killings, shootings and maimings upon the Indigenous Nations.<sup>45</sup>

Jackson here names the unspeakable: that the state's seemingly impartial legal officers, coroners, are genealogically tied to the colonial foundations of the state; and that, furthermore, they must be seen as reproducing and sanctioning—at the level of civil governmental institutions and their administrative practices—the originary/foundational violence of the settler-colonial state. In the context of the hegemonic settler-colonial state, it is the physical and symbolic violence of standard operating procedures that is effectively and seamlessly deployed up and down the line.

Given this banal and serial reproduction of state racialized violence by a range of officials, delegates, and agents, we can well understand the rage of the Aboriginal community at the ongoing exercise of police violence with impunity, and the mounting toll of Aboriginal deaths in custody.

On August 6, 1987, Arthur Murray gathered with other community members for a peaceful protest “following the 16th Aboriginal death in police custody that year, that of 28-year-old Lloyd Boney, found hanging in his cell on August 6, 1987, Brewarrina.”<sup>46</sup> Purdy recounts what occurred in the aftermath of this peaceful protest march against the increasing number of Aboriginal deaths in custody:

On the night of his [Lloyd Boney's] funeral, after a protest march to the jail, more than 150 mourners assembled in a peaceful gathering for his wake in Brewarrina Memorial Park. Although council permission had been obtained for the wake, it later emerged in committal proceedings that there had been non-Aboriginal on-lookers on a verandah of a local pub overlooking the protest. They were armed with shotguns. It was alleged they shouted racial abuse and that shots were fired. The crowd began smashing windows of the hotel and throwing empty kegs through the doors. Eight police officers in riot gear moved into the park and a con-

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<sup>45</sup> Jackson.

<sup>46</sup> Purdy, “On Our Watch.”

frontation saw several people beaten by police [. . .]. Arthur [Murray, Eddie's father] was one of 17 people arrested in the "Brewarrina riot." Arthur was convicted on charges of assault and riotous assembly and sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment. Arthur served almost two months before being released on bail pending an appeal on the grounds of wrongful arrest and mistaken identity. [. . .] The case against Arthur was finally dropped through a permanent stay of proceedings in May 1994. None have ever received any compensation or apology for their wrongful incarceration.<sup>47</sup>

This was just one incident in a sorry history of ongoing police harassment that Arthur Murray endured because he refused to give up his family's fight for justice regarding the killing of their son by police.

We cite this peaceful protest march by the Aboriginal community and the subsequent unleashing of police violence against the marchers, because it was driven by a singular and momentous fact: Within a year, there were 16 Aboriginal deaths in custody. Yet this appalling fact was not rendered newsworthy in the mainstream Australian media. What did make national headlines, of course, was the so-called "Brewarrina Riot," confirming the outlaw status of Indigenous peoples—as violent, uncivil and disorderly. However, the sense of outrage that this scandalous necropolitical statistic should have generated throughout the Australian polity failed to materialize. Why? Because it could not be seen or understood as significant within the political and cultural framework of the settler-colonial white nation. On the contrary, within the standard operating procedures of the Australian settler colonial state, it was a logical and banal outcome that could be ignored simply because it was par for the course.

324

Martinot and Sexton underline the racist structural dimensions of this violence and its ignorability:

The impunity of racist violence is the first implication of its ignorability to white civil society. The ignorability of police impunity is what renders it inarticulable outside of that hegemonic formation. If ethics is possible for white civil society within its social discourses, it is rendered irrelevant to the systematic violence deployed against the outside precisely because it is ignorable. Indeed, that ignora-

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<sup>47</sup> Purdy.

bility becomes the condition of possibility for the ethical coherence of the inside. The dichotomy between the white ethical dimension and its irrelevance to the violence of police profiling is the very structure of racialisation today.<sup>48</sup>

The very ethical coherence of the inside of white civil society is predicated on a system of racist violence that does not register the violence it unleashes precisely *as violence* precisely because this same violence founds and constitutes the very conditions of possibility of white civil society: its system of laws, its legal and administrative apparatuses and its news media organizations are the product of this disavowed colonial and racist violence. The frequency of Aboriginal deaths in custody, the mounting statistics demonstrating that Aboriginal incarceration rates are off the charts in relation to the proportion of the Indigenous population, the everyday police profiling and harassment of Aboriginal communities—all of these are merely a “mundane affair.” “Most theories of white supremacy,” write Martinot and Sexton, “seek to plumb the depths of its excessiveness, beyond the ordinary; they miss the fact that racism is a mundane affair.”<sup>49</sup> Precisely as a mundane affair, racism goes unnoticed by white civil society.

### “A kind of hurricane”

Against the systemic ignorability of the colonial state’s ongoing racialized violence against Indigenous peoples, we conclude our contribution with a voice that refuses tacit acquiescence and howls with rage at the increasing number of Aboriginal deaths in custody and the number of Indigenous incarcerations. In their searing account of the Aboriginal deaths in custody on Palm Island, the brutal killing of Mr. Cameron Doomadgee, the ensuing Aboriginal protest, and the wrongful imprisonment of Lex Wotton after the protest, Barbara Glowczewski and Lex Wotton write:

One day, Townsville Aboriginal radio 4K1G started to howl; a woman’s voice, a kind of hurricane, seemed to echo the anger of the elements: “An earthquake is threatening us all!” [ . . . ] A woman journalist explained that her son, one of the rioters of Palm Island, had just been arrested. My neighbor told me that her husband, a policeman, was sent to the island with other men from the emergency di-

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<sup>48</sup> Martinot and Sexton, “Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” 172.

<sup>49</sup> Martinot and Sexton, 173.

vision because the police was expecting problems following another Aboriginal death in custody. [. . .] For decades there had been Aboriginal deaths in custody! Yet this voice on the radio tore me apart; the scathing clarity of the injustice, the power of her anger. It was like an appeal. The woman with that voice was later to be arrested for participating in the riot; she was Agnes, the mother of Lex Wotton.<sup>50</sup>

Agnes Wotton's howl of rage fractures the institutionalized racism that renders the mounting Aboriginal deaths in custody, the soaring Indigenous imprisonment rates, the unjust jailing of her own son, Lex, and the outrage of police violence repeatedly exercised with complete impunity—simply *ignorable*. Agnes Wotton's howl of rage “echoes the anger of the elements” precisely because it embodies her outrage at the denial of natural justice. Her howl, as a clarion call for justice, refuses to accept the settler-colonial state's accounts of racialized violence as nothing more than the exercise of standard operating procedure. Agnes Wotton's howl unmasks the scandal of “wanton violence parading as moral rectitude.”<sup>51</sup> Her howl rends the mundane modalities of white supremacy in order to articulate the profound ongoing trauma that the settler-colonial state inflicts upon its Indigenous peoples through its institutionalized and naturalized racist violence.

As Wanda McCaslin and Denise Breton make clear, the issue of justice for Indigenous people requires its contextualization within the larger framework of colonial violence and a consequent radical reconceptualization:

To discuss issues around “justice” as many Indigenous people experience them, we need both a critique of colonialism and a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture, practices, traditions, and historical experiences. Because the existing criminal justice system is not only alien and damaging to us but also the ultimate enforcer of colonial oppression, rethinking justice from the ground up is what Indigenous peoples—and arguably all peoples—must do.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Glowczewski and Lex Wotton, *Warriors for Peace: The Political Condition of the Aboriginal People as Viewed from Palm Island*, trans. Barbara Glowczewski (Montpellier: Indigène, 2008), 30.

<sup>51</sup> Martinot and Sexton, “Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” 172.

<sup>52</sup> Wanda D. McCaslin and Denise C. Breton, “Justice as Healing: Going Outside the Colonisers' Cage,” in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, eds. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (London: Sage, 2008), 512.



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## Experiencing Biopolitics: A Personal Story

### Keywords

hospitals, medical care, ageing, death, parasitism, symbiosis, Covid-19, epidemiology

### Abstract

I examine the tension between biopolitics and necropolitics through three themes that I have perceived and that are related to my life in Japan. First, I examine the transformation of hospitals and medical care, particularly for the elderly, through my experience of sharing the end of my mother's life. Modern medicine has made great achievements in treating diseases that used to be fatal, but it has become institutionalized in the context of Big Pharma interests, with no insight into the natural ageing and death of human beings. Second, I discuss how the ecological worldview on parasitism and symbiosis has been distorted by industrial logic, drawing on the work of my esteemed friend and parasitologist Professor Koichiro Fujita, who passed away in 2021. Finally, with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, I would argue that it is not a sudden phenomenon triggered by a new virus, but in a sense a disaster that has been prepared for decades and must be seen as a war using bioengineering and epidemiology as weapons, rather than tanks and bombs.

## Doživljanje biopolitike: osebna zgodba

### Ključne besede

bolnišnice, zdravstvena oskrba, staranje, smrt, parazitizem, simbioza, covid-19, epidemiologija

### Povzetek

Avtor razišče napetost med biopolitiko in nekropolitiko skozi tri teme, ki jih je zaznal in so povezane z njegovim življenjem na Japonskem. Najprej preučí preoblikovanje bolnišnic in zdravstvene oskrbe, zlasti za starejše, in sicer na podlagi svoje izkušnje v času

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materinega umiranja. Sodobna medicina je dosegla velike uspehe pri zdravljenju bolezni, ki so bile nekoč usodne, vendar se je institucionalizirala v kontekstu interesov velikih farmacevtskih podjetij, brez vpogleda v naravno staranje in smrt človeka. Dalje avtor razpravlja o tem, kako je industrijska logika izkrivila ekološki svetovni nazor o parazitizmu in simbiozi, pri čemer se opira na delo svojega spoštovanega prijatelja in parazitologa, profesorja Koichira Fujite, ki je preminil leta 2021. Nazadnje, v zvezi s pandemijo covid-19 avtor trdi, da njen nenaden izbruh ni rezultat nekega novega virusa, temveč katastrofa, ki se je pripravljala desetletja in jo je treba obravnavati kot vojno, ki za orožje uporablja bioinženiring in epidemiologijo, ne pa tankov in bomb.



## Introduction

First, let me explain my writing style for this article. I am well aware that this esteemed journal is an academic publication, but I am trying to write this text as a philosophical essay in a freer style based primarily on my own experiences. That is all I can do at this time. I hope the tolerant reader will forgive me for this, which may not be in keeping with the general purpose of this journal.

I graduated from Kyoto University in the 1985s and have been a researcher and teacher of aesthetics and philosophy at various Japanese universities for 37 years since then. Most of my papers and writings are in Japanese, but since the late 1990s, at the suggestion of my friend and colleague Professor Marina Gržinić and other friends, I have also written some papers and essays in English. I retired from Kyoto University in 2022 and am still writing quite actively. However, I have since lost interest in writing in the form of academic papers. The reason is not that I no longer trust the academic world or the activities there. I think it is because of my own personal characteristics.

I understand that the specific topic of this journal is “the body in the context of biopolitics and necropolitics.” I believe that this topic, regardless of how one writes about it, is of critical importance in today’s world, and this is also true in my personal life. It is a topic that is more tangible and urgent in Japan today than ever before.

The first insight I would like to share with you on this topic is that biopolitics and necropolitics are not opposites in their essence, but rather emerge from a continuum of power that controls human life and death. Biopolitics is the aspect of power that operates through individual as well as public health, medicine, population control, etc. in a relatively peaceful and seemingly depoliticized everyday life. Such control appears at first glance to be a favorable policy for promoting our well-being. No violence is revealed. However, the way you keep people alive is inextricably linked to how to kill them, which are basically two sides of the same control.

The continuum between biopolitics and necropolitics is also linked to war. War is not necessarily caused by the arrival of an evil enemy from the outside that destroys peace. It is caused by the spread of a destructive force that has always been latent, even in times of peace, when there is a lack of power to deter it. This is similar to the situation where a virus is not necessarily an external evil to our body, but is always present and latent in our body and becomes uncontrollable due to the weakening of our natural immunity. When the conditions in which we live become less tranquil and emergencies such as wars and pandemics occur, death, not life, becomes the direct and explicit object of control.

A phenomenon that is becoming increasingly important in the 21st century is war in the broadest sense of the word, war that can have a massive impact on social life without the obvious signals of war that we have known in the past. Without tank invasions and bombardments, it achieves the same destruction of production and economy, impoverishment of people and displacement of assets as the wars of the past. In this war, biopolitics reveals its relentless nature as necropolitics, and it becomes clear that even in the peaceful days of biopolitics, necropolitics lurked. The present age is just such an age.

## **Medical Care**

The first issue I want to address is medical care. I do not want to deal with medicine in general, but with the modern medical procedures that people receive at the end of their lives. Modern medicine has had great success in surgery and in treating infectious diseases. In other words, it has been very successful in saving people who have yet to die. However, medicine has become so convinced of its achievements that, toward the end of the 20th century, its role in society be-

gan to change. It became clear that modern medicine, which had answered the question of how to save people from unnecessary death, had no answer to the question of how people should end their lives.

In recent years, I have experienced the loss of my parents, one by one. While this in itself is natural for someone my age, the process of their death was not always natural. Medical care is an unnatural and unnecessary intrusion into the natural process of dying. This disturbs the peace of the dying person and increases their suffering. In the medical industry, this is profitable and socially justified. I became very aware of this fact during the dying process of my own immediate family member. Through this personal experience, biopolitics, which I had previously understood as a philosophical concept, became clear to me in very concrete terms as a force that directly and relentlessly extends its power to the human body. I would like to talk about this.

In 2012, my mother, who lived alone in the same city, developed cataracts that made it difficult for her to read, so I took her to an eye clinic near my university. She was examined and explained about cataract surgery, which involves replacing the cataract with an artificial lens. For the surgery, she had to undergo several tests, one of which, a blood test, diagnosed her as diabetic. She was told that cataract surgery with high blood sugar levels would put her at risk for diabetes-related retinopathy and that the surgery could only be performed if her blood sugar levels were lowered to a certain level beforehand.

Therefore, she was to be hospitalized for a short period of time to improve her diabetes, followed by a diet at home. My mother disliked hospitals and had never had regular checkups. Therefore, she did not know her blood sugar levels, although she was actually perfectly healthy and active, without any symptoms. She had a good appetite for her age. However, due to the strict dietary regimen, she gradually lost strength and had difficulty walking long distances. However, her blood sugar level dropped and she managed to undergo cataract surgery. Instead, she eventually developed hip problems and could no longer walk.

She had a hip abnormality at birth and had surgery as a newborn. But that was in 1930, and the precision of the surgery was not perfect from today's perspective. Since childhood, I have always thought that my mother's gait was somewhat unbalanced, but the weakness in her hip joints was completely compen-

sated for by her muscle strength, so she had no problems walking until old age. It is believed that this was due to the loss of muscle strength from the diet that made it difficult for her to walk. Her diabetes treatment did not make her healthier. The orthopedist suggested she have an artificial hip replacement. Although she was hesitant to undergo surgery in her late 70s, she decided to take the plunge, believing that her life would be over if she could no longer walk.

However, this led to regular checkups at the hospital. One day, after several years had passed, a malignant tumor was discovered during a medical examination. The progression of the tumor was slow and not immediately life-threatening, but the internist told me that I should have her operated on. By this time, my mother was showing symptoms of dementia, and it was difficult for me to understand what exactly was going on. When I accompanied her, I was hesitant about the surgery. I thought I should follow the doctor's advice as a specialist, but I felt I could not trust the doctor, who only looked at numbers and pictures on her monitor. She did not even touch my mother's body or look at her or me. So I asked her, "When do you think the tumor will reach life-threatening levels?" She replied, "Well . . . not now, but in my late 90s at the earliest."

I could hardly believe my ears. Could not this doctor reasonably compare the damage to the body caused by a series of surgical procedures on the elderly to the risk of a tumor that could take the life of a 100-year-old or so? But of course, this doctor is not joking, nor is she saying this out of malice. She is simply following her professional guidelines as an internist and recommending that malignant tumors be removed in their early stages. That's when I realized that modern medicine is of no use to us at all if we seriously think about how to live a better life in the face of death. I decided to bring my mother home from the hospital and with the help of a home health nurse, my sister and I would take care of her.

333

After that, there were several more situations where I had to make a decision. For example, what should I do if she could no longer take in food by mouth? Should I give her intravenous fluids when she was diagnosed with dehydration? Thanks to my experience with my mother over the past few months, I now know with certainty that when the human body is dying, it rejects food and water. It loses its appetite and does not become thirsty. This is because natural death is nothing but a peaceful process of starvation. Medicine is merely a means of interfering with this natural process and prolonging biological survival somewhat.

Since many of us cannot bear the sight of our own sick and dying families, we resort to the various life-prolonging measures that modern medicine has made possible. But force-feeding through a tube is often painful for the patient, and feeding fluids through an intravenous drip requires suctioning of phlegm, which is also painful. However, it is important to know that the doctors and nurses who suggest such life-prolonging measures do not intend for the patient to suffer. They are simply recommending the various options offered by modern technology. The doctors, nurses, and family members are all doing something tremendously stupid without realizing it.

Despite state-of-the-art medical care, the dying are left to suffer. This is partly because all of us, doctors and lay people alike, are less willing to face death today. Taking advantage of our mental weakness, a vast medical system invades our bodies. While many of those who work in this system faithfully do what they have been taught and recommend various drugs and medical procedures “in good faith,” so to speak, there is no doubt that this vast system as a whole results in huge profits for Big Pharma and medical business capital. It can be said that biopolitics is spreading as an anonymous web of power within these institutions and practices of medicine.

What is death? Death is not so much an inescapable fate for humans as an inevitable one. Yet, in modern society, we are conditioned to avoid death. You could say that we have been brainwashed to remain mentally childlike. There are those who claim that immortality can be achieved through bioengineering, and there are those who predict that the mind can be altered by software to escape physical death, but all of this is nonsense that magnifies a childlike mind incapable of facing death. Not only these extreme technological hyperbolics, but many of us have lost the mature power in our minds to face death. Why have we degenerated into a mind that is so vulnerable to death?

Globalist and neoliberal educational and cultural policies since the 1990s have unwittingly diverted people’s gaze from death and led them to a worldview as if death does not (or should not) exist. Aging has been viewed as a disease to be treated, various prescriptions for it have been marketed, and the spirit of taking death seriously has been treated as if it were a relic of the past. Thus, biopolitics has never only directly affected the body, but has also controlled the role of



thinking about the body. It permeates our minds through schooling, mass media, and social life in general.

### **Parasitism and Symbiosis**

Schooling, mass media, politics, and the social life significantly influence and have had an enormous impact on the basic ideas we acquire about our own bodies. One of these is our basic conception of cleanliness and health. With the spread of modern hygiene thinking, we have developed a need to defend our bodies against various outside invaders and to view this cleanliness as an advance of civilization. In doing so, we have adopted a false view of the body that simply contrasts the elements that belong to our own body with the external elements that might pose a threat to it, and considers protection from the latter as a task for attaining health.

For about three years from 2000, I was the editor-in-chief of *Diatxt.*, a critical journal published by Kyoto Art Center, and in the sixth issue I dealt with the problems of this modern understanding of the body and health. I asked Dr. Koichiro Fujita, a parasitologist who at the time had written on this subject in many of his books, to discuss and contribute to that issue, and I have been friend with Dr. Fujita ever since; he passed away in 2021 but we had several opportunities to talk further in the last decades.

Until the 1960s, the presence of parasites (tapeworms) in the body was a common phenomenon in Japanese society. Fujita's hypothesis was that the relationship between parasites and humans was symbiotic rather than parasitic. This view was triggered by the hypothesis that the reduction of these parasites through eradication was associated with an increase in immune system diseases such as atopic dermatitis and hay fever. The mechanism was that the parasites deprive the human digestive tract of nutrients and in "return" produce secretions that block receptors that trigger a hypersensitive immune response, thus stabilizing the immune response. This idea, initially not taken seriously even among experts, is now accepted by many medical and biologists.

If we look at this from the point of view of biopolitics and necropolitics, we see that this issue is closely related to the image we have of our bodies and our general understanding of cleanliness and health. Of course, most of us are not bi-

ologists. The knowledge about the body and health that we are taught in school is limited and not always current or accurate. The image we have of our physical environment is strongly influenced by the prevailing worldview of the time. Today, our general understanding of the body and health is primarily shaped by the influence of mass media such as television, newspapers and magazines. Especially the influence of commercials is crucial. It goes without saying that it is large companies that finance such mass media, and it is hard to overlook the fact that many of these investors are companies involved in body care, health and medicine.

At one point, Dr. Fujita pointed out a problem with booths advertising new facial soap products on the street. Passersby on a main street in Tokyo are invited to have their facial skin examined for free. The booth is equipped with a small microscopic camera and a monitor. When passersby are interested in trying out the product, the monitor shows images of mites magnified hundreds of times in the pores of the skin, causing the uninformed viewer to cry out. However, these mites are normal inhabitants of the human skin. They feed on the sebum secreted on the surface of human skin and produce a slightly acidic excretion. This keeps the surface of our skin at an acidic level that inhibits the growth of harmful bacteria. In other words, our skin is clean thanks to these creatures. This is also a kind of symbiotic relationship. If we use strong soaps to get rid of the mites, the ecosystem of the skin surface is disturbed and we become unhealthy.

We need to examine closely the way power operates in these everyday situations. First, for many people who are not used to seeing microscopic creatures, it is natural to perceive the tick that in reality protects us as a grotesque and disgusting foreign body. Knowing this, they intentionally show pictures of microorganisms to people who are not trained in biology without properly explaining them. Unlike the shocking appearance of the tick, the microscopic camera and monitor are symbols of modern science that many respect, and appear neutral because they are science. But the setting is clearly not as neutral as a scientific experiment. Behind it is the highly contrived intention to strongly induce consumers to behave in a certain way.

For capitalism, the body is, in a sense, the last and ultimate market. As products that alter the body's condition—food, drugs, cosmetics, and various health and beauty services—become widely available, the altered body creates new prob-

lems—diseases and weak immune systems—that in turn create new demand. This chain of events can be multiplied as many times as it takes to control the side effects of a single drug. And it is not easy to criticize the multiplication of this chain of events. This is because it is guaranteed by the authority of medicine (science), which is inaccessible to the general public.

But what is science anyway? At least until the 18th century, it meant the freedom of thought to resist metaphysical dogmatism based on visible evidence in an intellectual world where religious authority was overwhelmingly powerful. With the Industrial Revolution, however, the role of science changed dramatically. Science became a means to contribute to human progress. In today's world, where science is used to support global industry, science is not a free intellectual pursuit. Science is closely intertwined with political economy, and what scientists say has great political power. Many scientists are not fully aware of this and are therefore easily politicized.

Of course, not all scientific fields are equal. The areas that are most politically important are those that can (or may) generate large profits or are used for military purposes. Parasitology, especially research related to symbiotic evolution such as the work of Dr. Fujita, is considered almost as unimportant and useless as philosophy by the ruling industry. On the contrary, understanding our body as a complex symbiotic system can be considered an obstacle for the pharmaceutical and medical industries. The pharmaceutical and medical companies make more money when people do not understand their bodies as a complex symbiotic system with viruses, microorganisms and other living beings, but simply fear them as foreign bodies to be eliminated and imagine that they are protecting their bodies from these threats.

I would like to conclude this chapter by introducing a relatively innocuous but important topic that Dr. Fujita and I have discussed so far. It is about the extermination of cockroaches in the home. If you visit a Japanese drugstore, you will find a wide selection of insecticides sold in large quantities to control cockroaches. However, this has not always been the case, but has been a phenomenon since the 1970s. Cockroaches have been parasites in human dwellings since ancient times. Unlike mosquitoes and flies, however, cockroaches transmitted few diseases, so most people did not worry about their presence. Around 1970, however, as the postwar food situation improved and heating systems became

more widespread, cockroaches began to enter homes more easily, and the business of selling insecticides as “enemies” of cockroaches began.

In order to sell insecticides, people had to be made to physiologically avoid cockroaches. This is where television advertising came into play. Various visual and theatrical techniques were used to create the impression that cockroaches were dirty, disgusting, and more dangerous creatures than they really were, and the commercials were very successful. As a result, many people have developed a conditioned reflex that instills in them a strong aversion to this insect for no reason. When you ask such people why we should get rid of cockroaches, they answer that they are simply disgusting. Rationally speaking, the insects are not that dirty, they do not bite or sting, and they are not poisonous. The strong dislike is a purely irrational reaction acquired through media manipulation. But this irrationality is an extremely powerful motivator to control people’s behavior.

### **Current Situation**

It is impossible to make philosophical reflections against the background of the issues of biopolitics and necropolitics without mentioning Covid-19 and the global turmoil it is causing. But the problem is not over yet, especially in Japan, where by October 2022 most people will even be walking around outdoors wearing masks, and the government is promoting fourth and fifth doses of mRNA vaccination even among young children. Although the pathogen has already mutated and attenuated to the same degree as normal upper respiratory infections, the legal classification as a dangerous infectious disease has not been corrected, so even those who die in traffic accidents are counted and reported as Covid-19 deaths if they test positive on PCR testing. Despite the fact that the number of excess deaths is far higher than the death rate so polished, which is comparable to that of a major earthquake or war, a causal relationship with mRNA vaccines has yet to be proven.

However, it will be some time before objective data on this issue are available. In what follows, we would like to discuss our current situation from a broader perspective. First of all, we would like to draw attention to the fact that people’s social behavior regarding public health may be changing significantly. In the 1990s, during the globalization of many countries, negative campaigns against smoking were launched all over the world. This led to a strong public aversion

to the smoke and smell of cigarettes. Just as in Japan in the 1970s, when people were conditioned to avoid cockroaches more than necessary, smoking was banned from social life as an anachronistic and undesirable habit that was more dangerous than necessary.

I am in no way suggesting that smoking is harmless to the body. Of course, there are aspects of smoking that are detrimental to health, while there are many other habits that are detrimental to health. Yet, in the 1990s, I could not understand why smoking was the only habit that should be specifically eliminated. I only vaguely understood that it was probably due to people's changing living conditions and their growing concern for health and cleanliness. In retrospect, however, the campaign of 30 years ago could be interpreted as an experiment in how to control the behavior of people around the world through public health awareness campaigns.

What the anti-smoking campaigns and today's Covid-19 situation have in common is that the mechanisms by which power works are difficult to discern. This is because the issue in question itself seems neutral, apolitical, and rather trivial. Smoking cessation, like wearing masks and vaccinations, does not seem political in the least, but a desirable and harmless act of maintaining health. Another commonality is that they are urged not only to preserve their own health, but also to protect the health of others. In other words, those who smoke are considered "terrorists" who endanger society, as are those who do not wear masks or get vaccinated.

I spent the last two years before I retired from Kyoto University under the Covid-19 state of emergency: in 2020, lectures were held almost entirely online, and in 2021, small classes were allowed to be held in classrooms, but the entire campus had to wear masks and lectures were masked. In 2022, some of these rules were relaxed, but it is still something of a taboo to speak freely about the pandemic or topics related to its official countermeasures. Quite a few students looked uneasy when I mentioned such things. In other words, I think that even young people who do not explicitly think about such topics are unconsciously aware that these are not just neutral topics of infectious diseases and their countermeasures, but extremely politically sensitive topics that they are not allowed to talk about.

However, I have not taken any particular position on the pandemic or its countermeasures, but have spoken only on the basis of indisputable facts. For example, what is usually referred to as a “vaccine” is not necessarily the correct term because it is produced by technology that is fundamentally different from conventional vaccine production. The mRNA “vaccine” is actually a type of gene therapy that has never had the dramatic success that the smallpox vaccine has had in the past and is not yet an established treatment. The “vaccine” currently being promoted is still a harmful drug undergoing clinical trials, with much uncertainty about its future effects. There is a case for vaccinating those who understand this and can judge that the risk is less than the risk of Covid-19 infection itself. In contrast, the policy of vaccinating as many people as possible to “protect others”—sometimes accompanied by the evocative slogan: “Those who do not vaccinate are terrorists who endanger society”—is fatally wrong. These are not conspiracy theories, but perceptions that can be derived entirely from pure facts, and there is no reason why they should be taboo.

The current situation is also a good example of how science plays a role in our society similar to that of a religion. Science is no longer a free intellectual activity, but a kind of religious authority that cannot be questioned. Every day, TV and newspapers publish the numbers of “infected” people in each Japanese prefecture, and most people behave according to these “scientific” reports. “Infected” actually means those who tested positive in a PCR test. But it is scientifically clear that PCR-positive is not synonymous with Covid-19-infected. This gross scientific misuse of the term goes unchallenged by widespread scientific indifference. I have asked on several occasions if people know what the PCR test is that they get so worked up about every day, and I have found that most do not even know what “PCR” stands for, let alone by what mechanism it works. The level of indifference to the test is astounding, even though it is talked about so much every day and many people feel the need to have it done. The reason people trust it, even though they know nothing about it, is that it is “science” and the latest technology. This is a clear example of how science is accepted like a religion for many people today.

340

PCR (polymerase chain reaction) is a device that duplicates part of a gene to determine whether or not it matches that of a particular virus or organism. In other words, it only indicates the likelihood that a fragment of a particular viral gene is likely to be present, but never that the virus in an active state is certain to be

present in sufficient numbers to be pathogenic (i.e., “infected”). Human physicians are the ones who can diagnose whether or not a patient is infected with a particular disease. Clearly, replacing a physician’s diagnosis with a simple output from a mechanical device would lead to great confusion. This is precisely why the inventor, Kary Banks Mullis (1944–2019), was so adamant that PCR tests should never be used to detect infection. Again, these are purely objective facts and not political statements of any kind.

However, in the last two years, I have often encountered very strange reactions when I have pointed these things out at universities and other places. I have never been contradicted on this point, but I have encountered many reactions of bewilderment, silence, and deliberate indifference. In other words, many people acted as if they did not want to know what I had to say. It was especially painful for me to see the confused faces of those who had previously trusted me. But I believe there is a reason for this. The reason for their reaction seemed to be their fear that they would be isolated from the rest of society if they accepted stories that cast doubt on their consent to PCR testing and vaccination. Most of them had already consented to such testing and vaccination because they had been extremely and irrationally intimidated by the government and the mass media about the fear of Covid-19.

In recent months, there has been a not insignificant increase in the number of deaths, unnatural worsening of circulatory problems and cancers, and various other physical symptoms suspected to be related to mRNA vaccination, even among people I know directly. The number of excess deaths is expected to continue to rise. I have come to understand that the current situation is obviously one of those cases in which biopolitics manifests itself as necropolitics, a case of war without tanks and bombs taking place in the midst of everyday life (although at the same time the threat of war in its traditional form is also approaching the country). However, I am not yet ready to make a definitive statement on this topic and would like to discuss it at another time in the near future.





Fahim Amir\*

## Drones, Bodies, Necropolitics: Hobbesian Shadows over Afghan Lands

### Keywords

Afghanistan, drone, necropolitics, frontier, government, state

### Abstract

The article reflects the discourses surrounding the military use of drones in the context of their employment in Afghanistan and Waziristan in the last two decades with a special emphasis on its necropolitical dimensions. It does so by first summarizing different critical accounts of a single well documented case in Afghanistan, underscoring historical continuities between drone warfare, state terror and air power. Second, the article puts a special emphasis on relations on the ground such as ambiguous legal constructions enabling the use of lethal force, and the weaponization of Pashtun culture for the purposes of different governments.

## Droni, telesa, nekropolitika: hobbessovske sence nad afganistanskimi ozemlji

### Ključne besede

Afganistan, dron, nekropolitika, meja, vlada, država

### Povzetek

Članek obravnava diskurze, ki spremljajo vojaško uporabo dronov v Afganistanu in Vaziristanu v zadnjih dveh desetletjih s posebnim poudarkom na njihovi nekropolitični razsežnosti. Članek najprej povzame različne kritične obravnave edinega dobro dokumentiranega primera v Afganistanu, s tem, da poudari zgodovinske kontinuitete med vojskovanjem z brezpilotnimi letali, državnim terorjem in zračnimi silami. Dalje nameni članek poseben poudarek še odnosom na terenu, kot so dvoumne pravne konstrukcije, ki

343

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omogočajo uporabo smrtonosnega orožja, in oboroževanje paštunske kulture za namene različnih vlad.



There is no country on earth more subject to misrepresentations based upon Orientalism than Afghanistan.

—Shah Mahmoud Hanifi<sup>1</sup>

Sovereignty implies “space,” and what is more, it implies a space against which violence, whether latent or overt, is directed—a space established and constituted by violence.

—Henri Lefebvre<sup>2</sup>

I carried this boy on my back from Kabul. It took me two weeks. So just don't tell me that he's rubbish to be thrown away.

—Afghan man, Mental Health Center, Peshawar<sup>3</sup>

In “The Body” issue of this journal two decades ago, Afghanistan is mentioned once, more precisely in the deployment of the “most sophisticated surveillance and reconnaissance innovations” of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).<sup>4</sup> The geopolitical “war on terror” had just begun with the invasion of Afghanistan; its future and the role of UAVs (“drones”) as part of combat operations, tested in Bosnia in 1995 and deployed in Afghanistan in 2001, were still uncertain. In the meantime, the US invasion of Afghanistan has ended in a remarkably shameful and inglorious way. The most powerful and at the same time most fearful nation in the world, now trains more drone operators than aircraft pilots. While in

<sup>1</sup> Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, “A Genealogy of Orientalism in Afghanistan: The Colonial Image Lineage,” in *Middle East Studies after September 11: Neo-Orientalism, American Hegemony and Academia*, ed. Tugrul Keskin (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell, 1991), 280.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in M. Miles, “Formal and Informal Disability Resources for Afghan Reconstruction,” *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (2002): 945, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659022000028567>.

<sup>4</sup> Nina Czeglédy and André P. Czeglédy, “The Body as Password: Biometrics and Corporeal Dispossession,” in “The Body/Le corps/Der Körper,” ed. Marina Gržinić Mauhler, special issue, *Filozofski vestnik* 23, no. 2 (2002): 79.

the West the feminized honeybee became the darling animal of ecocapitalists and the insect mascot of contemporary environmental politics, its metaphorical male counterparts, the Predator and Reaper *drones* have increasingly been deployed to perform their heroic duty of surveillance and bomb dropping.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, the enabler of life and the harbinger of death seemingly belong to the same species.

The dronification and simultaneous privatization of war (by mercenary corporations) can be understood first of all as two aspects of the same fixation on *unmanned* combat, which promises to free states from the burden of accountability for war crimes.<sup>6</sup> Drones are celebrated by the manufacturer thereof, politicians, the military, and the media for reducing the chance of a country's own soldiers being injured or killed, since the latter physically never arrive at the battlefield—while multiplying the capabilities of bodies to inflict pain, terror, and surveillance. The involvement of high-tech, artificial intelligence and the remoteness of the operating team to the battlefield are regularly highlighted as further reducing human error because decisions are not made in the heat of battle. They are especially heralded as being more ethical and therefore civilized, because their precision and enhanced surveillance capabilities reduce the chance of innocent bystanders being killed (“collateral damage”).

From a historical perspective, the humanitarian rationality discourse of superiorly civilized and law-abiding occidental state violence utilized in defense of drones bears innumerable marks of imperial reasoning, not the least of which is the juxtaposing of one side's allegedly virtuosic and sober killing with the indiscriminately murderous irrationality of the enemy.<sup>7</sup> On closer inspection, it turns out that it is precisely the techno-fetishism surrounding drones that helps the most detestable forms of organized state violence to appear accurate, unsullied, and even noble.<sup>8</sup> One particular drone operation in Uruzgan, central Afghani-

<sup>5</sup> Fahim Amir, “Cloudy Swords,” in *Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It)*, trans. Geoffrey C. Howes and Corvin Russell (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2020), 121–52.

<sup>6</sup> Bianca Baggiarini, “Drone Warfare and the Limits of Sacrifice,” *Journal of International Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (February 2015): 128–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1755088214555597>.

<sup>7</sup> Marina Espinoza, “State Terrorism: Orientalism and the Drone Programme,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 2 (2018): 379, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1456725>.

<sup>8</sup> Tyler Wall and Torin Monahan, “Surveillance and Violence from Afar: The Politics of Drones and Liminal Security-Scapes,” *Theoretical Criminology* 15, no. 3 (August 2011): 246,

stan, in 2011 has gained special relevance for critical theorization, because it is unusually well documented. Laura Cox's analysis of the perfectly normal operation clears the rhetorical fogs camouflaging today's imperial war machines and shows that "through the intermediation of algorithmic, visual, and affective modes of embodiment, drone warfare reproduces gendered and racialized bodies that enable a necropolitics of massacre."<sup>9</sup> Before we come back to historical perspectives and closer inspections, let us recapitulate what is meant by the notion of necropolitics in this context.

Achille Mbembe defines necropolitics as "contemporary forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death," which have received too little attention in normative conceptions of sovereignty as well as in biopolitical theorizing in the wake of Michel Foucault's work.<sup>10</sup> According to Foucault, traditional sovereignty was primarily *thanatopower*, the power to determine who must die and who may live. The object of this *sovereign power* was the individual body, sometimes subjected to spectacular forms of violence. In his critique of the political anatomy of occidental bodies, Foucault traced a new form of *disciplinary power* that monitored the individual body through architectures and manipulated it by means of orthopedics to render it at the same time more efficient and more docile.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, Foucault introduced the concept of *biopower*, which takes as its object the historically new category of population, which it simultaneously constitutes and whose life processes it affirms and manages. In Foucault's understanding, racism operates precisely here, *within* biopower, with the dubious category of race performing a "biological-type caesura within a population,"<sup>12</sup> and distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant life, according to the log-

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480610396650>.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Wilcox, "Embodying Algorithmic War: Gender, Race, and the Posthuman in Drone Warfare," *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 1 (February 2017): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010616657947>.

<sup>10</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>. Mbembe's article appeared in slightly revised form as part of Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 68–92. In the following the latest version will be referred to.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 255.

ic that “the death of others makes one biologically stronger insofar as one is a member of a race or a population.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, “biopower functions through—the old sovereign power”<sup>14</sup> via racism, it thus also operates *between* different forms of power and allows modern states to exercise ancient thanatopower within modernized biopolitical coordinates. Foucault considered this particular double-headedness to enable an elastic form of government encompassing old and new forms of power.<sup>15</sup> In this light, the drone proves to be a necropolitical entity in the Mbembian sense—surveilling, mapping, and inspecting to determine “who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not.”<sup>16</sup> That is why Jamie Allinson sees a form of “paradoxical biopolitics”<sup>17</sup> at work in drone operation: Afghans are “known and audited through the gaze of the drone, but for the purpose of death rather than life.”<sup>18</sup>

While public opinion is dominated by the impression that the use of weaponized drones is primarily reserved for *personality strikes* on high profile targets marked on kill lists, possibly signed off on by some president, drone theorist Grégoire Chamayou points to the reality that the majority of drone strikes are *signature strikes*, that is, the bombing of a human being that could be a high profile target or somebody associated with this person on the basis of *patterns-of-life analyses*.<sup>19</sup> For that, first the mass of the spatiotemporal data of the surveilled population is combined with social particulars to form patterns-of-life, which are then compared with a pre-established signature defining suspicious activity, not a specific identity. To make this point clear, the mere suspicion that somebody “wanted” could be at a given place and time is regarded as legitimate grounds for bombing the whole area, resulting in *crowd killings*. Whoever thinks that the rock bottom has been reached is utterly wrong: the perfidious practice of *double taps* targets already bombed sites in swift sequence to multiply the ex-

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 258.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, 258.

<sup>15</sup> Kim Su Rasmussen, “Foucault’s Genealogy of Racism,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 28, no. 5 (September 2011): 34–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411410448>.

<sup>16</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 80.

<sup>17</sup> Jamie Allinson, “The Necropolitics of Drones,” *International Political Sociology* 9, no. 2 (June 2015): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12086>.

<sup>18</sup> Allinson, 120.

<sup>19</sup> Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, trans. Janet Loyd (London: Penguin, 2015), 46–51.

tent of death and to target the elementary urge of neighbors, friends, family, and first responders to come to help.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric of surgical precision, legal experts draw attention to the fact that officially “all adult males killed by strikes” are defined as “militants,” “absent exonerating evidence.”<sup>20</sup> The liberal rule of law that a suspect is innocent until proven otherwise is turned into a cynical caricature; only the dead are allowed to prove their innocence. How practical that most of those targeted are incinerated by drone attacks. The technical “precision” of a bomb drop is rendered meaningless if one considers the unscrupulous necropolitical *targeting*. When after the fall of Kabul, “wanted persons” who had repeatedly been officially declared as having been killed by drones took charge of government positions, the question arose as regards how many innocent lives of children, women, the elderly, and disabled human beings had been incinerated by humane drone attacks, obviously without such ever having achieved the end that supposedly had justified such means.

In the case of the mentioned Uruzgan massacre, the transcripts and materials of the several-hours-long deliberations of the drone crew provide insight into the process of transforming a group of innocent Afghans of Hazara ethnicity into legitimate targets of extermination. Such observations and assumptions, usually not detailed further, involve, for example, the supposedly “tactical behavior” of the surveilled (one survivor later reported that they had left their cars to pray) and culturalistic interpretations of the way the surveilled urinated (Arabs allegedly do it in a sitting position, Afghans while standing).<sup>21</sup> The engendering gaze of the crew, saturated with the toxic masculinity of white superiority, labelled the Afghan clothing of a surveilled man as “man dresses”<sup>22</sup> and suspected that he knew the guidelines of the drone crews and therefore concealed a weapon: “An Afghan male *without* a visible weapon thereby becomes grounds

348

<sup>20</sup> International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic (Stanford Law School) and Global Justice Clinic (NYU School of Law), *Living Under Drones: Death, Injury and Trauma to Civilians from US Drone Practices in Pakistan* (Stanford and New York, 2012), x.

<sup>21</sup> Wilcox, “Embodying Algorithmic War,” 14.

<sup>22</sup> See “Drone FOIA—Department of Defense Uruzgan Investigation Documents,” American Civil Liberties Union, accessed August 2, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/drone-foia-department-defense-documents>.

for a threat.”<sup>23</sup> The analysis of the Uruzgan massacre shows the visceral and affective fervor of the operating team to assimilate *also children and women* into the classification of military-aged male, “to which category all Afghans beneath the Predator’s gaze have by this point been assimilated,”<sup>24</sup> and whom it is permissible to put to death.

The discourse of unmannedness obscures the fact that almost two hundred people are involved in the choreography of a single drone strike, forming, in the words of Mbembe, a synthesis of “massacre and bureaucracy—that incarnation of Western rationality.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, it is not a neutral screen on which the 23 killed innocents of Uruzgan, “shopkeepers, students, and families with children, traveling together to Kabul out of concern for vehicles breaking down,”<sup>26</sup> appeared to be suspect military-aged Afghan males ready to be massacred.

The visibilities and invisibilities produced by the drone assemblage are “not technical but rather techno-cultural accomplishments,” argues Derek Gregory.<sup>27</sup> They are not elements of an otherwise neutral, rational, and objective distancing machine, but produce specific forms of techno-culturally mediated orientalist familiarity and proximity. A profoundly necropolitical *dispositif* is at play here that “consistently privileges the view of the hunter-killer”<sup>28</sup> to dehumanize and annihilate so that “it was virtually impossible for the victims of the attack to be seen as civilians until it was too late.”<sup>29</sup>

One telling detail is the way Afghanistan is regularly referred to by US and allied soldiers: as “Injun country.”<sup>30</sup> By transferring the genocidal triumphalism and

<sup>23</sup> Allinson, “Necropolitics of Drones,” 125.

<sup>24</sup> Allinson, 123.

<sup>25</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 76. Concerning the idea of *unmannedness*, it must certainly be an innocent coincidence that the modern killing machines are often described by the military as MALE (Mid-Altitude Long-Endurance) drones. Derek Gregory, “From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 28, no. 7–8 (December 2011): 208, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411423027>.

<sup>26</sup> Wilcox, “Embodying Algorithmic War,” 12.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory, “From a View to a Kill,” 193.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory, 193.

<sup>29</sup> Gregory, 203.

<sup>30</sup> Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco, eds., *Queer Necropolitics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), xvii.

colonial Othering essential to the US national narrative of frontier expansion to Afghan soil, the metaphor of “Indian Country” conveys the enduring desire to annihilate and marginalize those who are regarded as savage and uncivilized, as can be seen in the widespread usage of this trope in US military discourses by both high-ranking as well as average foot soldiers in the context of the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars.<sup>31</sup>

### Evil Eyes in the Skies

The techno-fetishistically charged aura of novelty encircling the targeted killings programs in Afghanistan is further shattered by tracing its continuities to the “unconventional warfare” doctrine developed in the Cold War to enable US covert operations with unrestricted violence.<sup>32</sup> Operation Phoenix in Vietnam in the 1960s and Operation Condor in Latin America in the 1970s had already relied upon mass intelligence gathering to extinguish the leadership of revolts and spread terror among their acquaintances, families, neighbors, and their social worlds. By operating covertly, state violence historically aimed at escaping accountability. Another “striking” continuity between contemporary drone warfare and these past counter-insurgency operations is the utter lack of transparency concerning the methods and criteria upon which decisions to torture, detain, or kill are made. A new twenty-first century entry in the book of counter-insurgency is *lawfare*—the conscious determination to inflict an extreme form of violence while making great efforts to evade possible future prosecution.<sup>33</sup> Terror is unleashed on the innocent not as a state secret, but in the form of gaslighting, mocking the very idea of law while in the trappings of law.

The childlike fascination that an unmanned drone is able to generate conceals historical continuities of colonial policing and aerial occupation.<sup>34</sup> Constantly

350

<sup>31</sup> Stephen W. Silliman, “The ‘Old West’ in the Middle East: U.S. Military Metaphors in Real and Imagined Indian Country,” *American Anthropologist* 110, no. 2 (June 2008): 245, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2008.00029.x>.

<sup>32</sup> Ruth Blakeley, “Drones, State Terrorism and International Law,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 2 (2018): 321–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1456722>.

<sup>33</sup> Blakeley, 335.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Neocleous, *War Power, Police Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Ian Shaw and Majed Akhter, “The Unbearable Humanness of Drone Warfare in FATA, Pakistan,” *Antipode* 44, no. 4 (September 2012): 1490–509, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00940.x>.



hovering over their target areas to allow the unblinking eye to scrutinize the whole existence of a population with occasional spasms of lethal kinetics creates an atmosphere of permanent vulnerability and nakedness. The operating crews change and regenerate, while the drone is able to continuously hover and watch. An option the watched do not have. Since bombings can happen at any time and no place or sociality is sacred to the hostile eye, the targeted population lives in a state of continuous and inescapable fear of being killed. The drone is an instrument of terror as widespread anxiety, insomnia, fainting, body aches, vomiting, respiratory issues, headaches, nightmares, manic behavior, nervous breakdowns, and irritability occur *en masse* without a physical explanation. Economic hardship through material destruction affects an already impoverished population, hinders education, and aims at the destruction of the social fabric. Children scream in terror when they hear the sound of a drone.<sup>35</sup>

These are not unwanted effects, but the purposefully deployed tactics of Mbembian “vertical sovereignty” that locate the drone in the wider history of air power and imperial defense.<sup>36</sup> As military documents show, contemporary drone warfare in Afghanistan and beyond its borders in the so-called “tribal” areas of Pakistan has learnt a lot from the experimental policing practices of British air power in the Iraq of the 1920s.<sup>37</sup> In relation to this historical context, Priya Satia notes: “The crux of the matter is not so much that drones are unmanned, but that they promise panoptic aerial surveillance of a region understood as otherwise essentially unknowable.”<sup>38</sup>

While *strategic bombing* is mostly discussed in the context of European total wars, bombing from the air did not start in Europe, but had—like modernity as a whole—the colonies as a laboratory.<sup>39</sup> The management of revolts in an overstretched British Empire had become increasingly costly, so the new idea to

<sup>35</sup> See Shala Cachelin, “The U.S. Drone Programme, Imperial Air Power and Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15, no. 2 (2022): 451, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.2013025>.

<sup>36</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Neocleous, *War Power, Police Power*.

<sup>38</sup> Priya Satia, “Drones: A History from the British Middle East,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 1, <http://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2014.0002>.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Hippler, *Governing from the Skies: A Global History of Aerial Bombing*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017); see also Tom Avermaete, Serhat Karakayali, and Marion

spare the expensive and unpopular deployment of ground troops by the use of air power as a cheap means of imperial defense had some appeal. The first real trial for this administratively and strategically much disputed idea arose quickly in the “Third Anglo-Afghan War” of 1919 (British denomination), with an aircraft that had been designed specifically for the bombing of Berlin, but since peace broke out before this plan could be realized, Kabul was bombed instead in May 1919. The outcome was mixed, but the Kabul raid would be repeatedly adduced as evidence that “air power would prove most valuable to the Empire in a policing role.”<sup>40</sup> Air power was soon used in Yemen, Egypt, Punjab, and Iraq, but the longest and most widespread use of air power in the Empire during the first two years of anticolonial revolt took place in the so-called North West Frontier of India in 1919 and 1920, specifically in the areas inhabited by Pakhtuns, who had answered the call for help of the Afghan Amir in the “War of Independence” of 1919 (Afghan denomination). The colonists found out the hard way that it was not that easy to bomb the Pakhtun “tribes” there into submission. They adapted quickly, shot down several machines, and even the vernacular architecture came to help.<sup>41</sup>

But what had started here would be discussed, refined, and settled in the policing of the revolt in Iraq.<sup>42</sup> This did not happen in an even process. For example, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff rightly feared that the havoc created would only lead to more unrest with the effect that ground troops had to be deployed anyway to restore order: “Air power,” he reasoned, “provides only a means of propaganda or an instrument of terrorism.”<sup>43</sup> The Air Ministry agreed somehow; it just wanted to have more of both to be truly successful. Aircraft seemingly being everywhere at once, one official explained, were “conveying a silent warning.”<sup>44</sup> “Terror” needed the occasional bloodbath to be effective, but surveillance would multiply the panoptic effect as a collateral benefit: “From the ground every inhabitant of a village is under the impression that the occu-

352

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von Osten, *Colonial Modern: Aesthetics of the Past, Rebellions for the Future* (London: Black Dog, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> David E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 11.

<sup>41</sup> Omissi, 13.

<sup>42</sup> See Satia, “Drones.”

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Satia, “Drones,” 5.

pant of an aeroplane is actually looking at *him* . . . establishing the impression that all their movements are being watched and reported.”<sup>45</sup>

One century later, the necropolitical gaze of the drone is no “silent warning,” but comes with the menacing insectoid sound of a buzzing wasp, the name of the murderous machine in Pakhto, *bangana*. These drones haunt exactly the very same geographies to produce a palimpsest of bombardments, while the terrorized population is unable to differentiate between (soft power) intelligence gathering and (deadly) kinetic missions in the first place. Mbembe’s assertion comes to its full right: “Under the conditions of late modern colonial occupation, surveillance is oriented both inwardly and outwardly, the eye acting as weapon, and vice versa.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, in the theatre of terror, the target is also the audience.<sup>47</sup>

### Palimpsests and Innovations

Campbell Munro reminds us that the “vertical battlespace” does not extend over the whole territory of a state, but only a specific part that echoes the “history of these spaces as the ambiguous legal zones of the imperial periphery.”<sup>48</sup> For the vast majority of the last two decades, thousands of drone strikes occurred in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, a *space of exception*, “through its constitution as borderlands and battlefields.”<sup>49</sup> The borderlands lie along the infamous Durand Line of 1893, a cartography that divided the lands of the “lawless” and “unruly” Pakhtuns. Some found themselves on the now clearly demarcated Afghan territory. But for those who woke up on the British-Indian side of the border, the British had created several spatial entities for otherwise

<sup>45</sup> Satia, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Afxentis Afxentiou, “A History of Drones: Moral(e) Bombing and State Terrorism,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 2 (2018): 314, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1456719>.

<sup>48</sup> Campbell Munro, “Mapping the Vertical Battlespace: Towards a Legal Cartography of Aerial Sovereignty,” *London Review of International Law* 2, no. 2 (September 2014): 238, <https://doi.org/10.1093/lril/lru008>. See also Campbell Munro, “The Entangled Sovereignities of Air Police: Mapping the Boundary of the International and the Imperial,” in “Law and Boundaries 2014,” ed. Tomaso Ferrando, special issue, *Global Jurist* 15, no. 2 (2015): 117–38, <https://doi.org/10.1515/gj-2014-0019>.

<sup>49</sup> Derek Gregory, “Dirty Dancing: Drones and Death in the Borderlands,” in *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, eds. Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 29.

disenfranchised populations, but with some measure of autonomy to settle their disputes according to their own customary law (“Pakhtunwali”). After the partition of India in 1947, the postcolonial successor state in possession of the Pakhtun lands also adopted and maintained this administrative structure, with the FATA being “simultaneously inside and outside the modern state.”<sup>50</sup>

Benjamin Hopkins has recently argued that the weaponization of Pakhtun vernacular culture was essential for the development of a new form of governing that departed from the rule practiced in the colonial heartlands and reserved its “savage periphery”: *frontier governmentality*.<sup>51</sup> First promulgated in 1872 in northwest India for mostly Pakhtun regions as the Frontier Crimes Regulation, this new political technology put the settlement of disputes into the hands of the *Jergas*. A *Jerga* is “a political arrangement for the resolution of local conflict. It functions as a sodality—it dissolves when the need for it disappears.”<sup>52</sup> At the same time, this frontier governmentality granted the right to intervene via executive power to the president and a system of political middlemen in charge of state administrative units, thereby creating “a system of governance relying on indirect rule and encapsulating frontier tribesmen in what were, in effect, native reserves.”<sup>53</sup> Frontier governmentality allowed self-governing, but also justified punitive and exemplary brutal measures against those who exhibited “savage” behavior. Soon, this excitingly innovative technology was exported to other frontier regions of the British Empire and beyond: “Whether they were Apaches or Afghans, Zulus, Somalis, or Mapuche, the peoples of the periphery were ruled in substantively the same way.”<sup>54</sup>

For those living in these legally established borderlands, beyond the newly found state of Afghanistan of 1919, the constitution allowed punitive expeditions of collective punishment, mass displacement, and draconian measures, whenever deemed appropriate, such as the obscene bombing of Pakhtun villag-

354

<sup>50</sup> Gregory, “Dirty Dancing,” 32.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin D. Hopkins, *Ruling the Savage Periphery: Frontier Governance and the Making of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Mohammed Jamil Hanifi, “Editing the Past: Colonial Production of Hegemony Through the ‘Loya Jerga’ in Afghanistan,” *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 2 (June 2004): 297, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0021086042000268119>.

<sup>53</sup> Hopkins, *Ruling the Savage Periphery*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Hopkins, 3.

es accused of tax evasion. Until the present day, in dominant discourses Pakhtuns are depicted as savage and violent, and their “tribal areas” are presented as lawless spaces arrested in a state of archaic freeze,<sup>55</sup> a persistent colonial characterization possible mainly due to the “absence of Pashtun voices” and counter-narratives in scholarly literature, as Hanifi argues convincingly.<sup>56</sup> Critical accounts have demonstrated that these areas in fact show an excess and plethora of law.<sup>57</sup> Sabrina Gilani notes that “despite all the claims about its lawless character, the Frontier regions are the most regulated of all the spaces” of the borderlands.<sup>58</sup> The contingent sovereignties in place here are “no simple suspension of the law but rather an operationalization of the violence that is inscribed *within* (rather than lying beyond) the law.”<sup>59</sup> The purposefully constructed violent geography of exception was the prerequisite on the ground for present-day air strikes that morph individual corporality into “temporary micro-cubes” of deadly exception unlatched whenever a targeted individual is located.<sup>60</sup> The “body becomes the battlefield,”<sup>61</sup> with fleets of drones persistently hovering over Pakhtun lands reconfiguring older notions of territorial sovereignty connected to *jus ad bellum* and transforming incursions into national airspace into an enduring occupation for a whole population.<sup>62</sup> The specificity of this new form of aerial occupation lies in “its capacity simultaneously to respect and transgress the

<sup>55</sup> Farooq Yousaf, “The ‘Savage’ Pathan (Pashtun) And the Postcolonial Burden,” *Critical Studies on Security* 9, no. 1 (2021): 36–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2021.1904194>.

<sup>56</sup> Shah Mahmud Hanifi, “The Pashtun Counter-Narrative,” *Middle East Critique* 25, no. 4 (2016): 385–400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2016.1208354>. The different pronunciation and spelling of Pakhtun and Pashtun for the group of people and Pakhto and Pashto for the language is connected to its polycentrism. For the purpose and scope of this text, both are used interchangeably, while favoring Pakhtun and Pakhto because the author personally grew up with these appellations and also values the accompanying polycentrism. See also Shah Mahmud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 19; Nile Green, “Tribe, Diaspora, and Sainthood in Afghan History,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 1 (February 2008): 171–211, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911808000065>.

<sup>57</sup> Madiha Tahir, “The Containment Zone,” in Parks and Kaplan, *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, 220–40.

<sup>58</sup> Sabrina Gilani, “‘Spacing’ Minority Relations: Investigating the Tribal Areas of Pakistan Using a Spatio-Historical Method of Analysis,” *Social and Legal Studies* 24, no. 3 (September 2015): 371, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663914564263>.

<sup>59</sup> Gregory, “Dirty Dancing,” 30.

<sup>60</sup> Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, 56.

<sup>61</sup> Chamayou, 56.

<sup>62</sup> Munro, “Mapping the Vertical Battlespace,” 238.

principle of territorial sovereignty.”<sup>63</sup> But it would be hasty to conclude from this that the Pakhtuns are *naked life* in the well-known Agambenian sense, while it makes their lives in many ways incredibly hard.<sup>64</sup>

The palimpsest of the bombings of Pakhtun lands in Afghanistan and in the “Tribal areas” of its neighbor are intrinsically linked to the palimpsest of special legal constructions and the palimpsest of epistemic violence that haunts this region considered to be a “lawless” and “unruly” borderland by succeeding imperial powers reaching back at least to the Mughal and Persian empires, long before the advent of occidental emissaries. The arrival of Mountstuart Elphinstone, as a representative of the British East India Company at the court of the “Kingdom of Caubul” in Peshawar in 1805, began a *modern* process that drew from these older registers of imperial imaginations to map and manipulate the polity of this region in terms of geopolitical interests. Elphinstone, who was influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder’s ideas and the Edinburgh Enlightenment, believed that the Pakhtun “tribes,” with whom he never exchanged a single word in direct communication, were contemporary doppelgangers of his own ancestors—historical Scottish clans, who just recently had been tamed into civilization.<sup>65</sup> The *Elphinstonian episteme* first tribalized Pakhtuns and then assigned the illogical role of both dominating and undermining the Afghan polity to those marked as “Pakhtun tribes,” a colonial imagination that structures the overwhelming majority of scholarly works to this day.<sup>66</sup> Accounts of “scholars, diplomatic emissaries, political agents, adventures, and travelers” in the nineteenth century turned the region into a colonial trope as they followed British colonial discourses and described Pakhtuns as “wild beasts” combining “fascination, naturalization, and even homo-eroticization, with an underlying con-

<sup>63</sup> Munro, 238.

<sup>64</sup> Gregory, “Dirty Dancing,” 52.

<sup>65</sup> Lynn Zastoupil, “Mountstuart Elphinstone and Indian Education,” in *Mountstuart Elphinstone in South Asia: Pioneer of British Colonial Rule*, ed. Shah Mahmud Hanifi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 174–79; Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and Its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India*, 2 vols. (Karachi: Indus, 1992). Elphinstone’s book was originally published in 1815.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin D. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 20; Martin J. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808–1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

cern for control and surveillance.”<sup>67</sup> The colonial episteme was revived most recently in the shape of the US Department of Defense’s Human Terrain System (HTS), a program which “manufactures a highly reified version of Afghan society and makes claims of authenticity, often framed within a discourse of ‘tribe’ as an unchanging dimension of Afghan society” to help US troops navigate in Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup> Hanifi points out that the post-9/11

surge in attention on Pashtuns and Pashto evident in the US academy and government, mainly as reified colonial British essentializations of Afghanistan, reproduced a colonial tendency to militarize and weaponize knowledge about other cultures. The challenges and failures of the international community evident in Afghanistan in no small measure are founded on the fragile intellectual architecture of nineteenth-century British colonial constructions of knowledge about Pashtuns. These understandings were institutionalized in US academia and incorporated into the US and other national and international policy-making machineries.<sup>69</sup>

## Poltergeists and Discourses

Thomas Hobbes, the “founder of the legal idiom of sovereignty and state terror,”<sup>70</sup> can be regarded as the philosophical guardian angel of modern imperial, para-, post-, and colonial violence against Afghanistan in general and against the Pakhtuns in particular. As a shareholder in the Virginia Company, he was well aware of the colonial land grab in Virginia and developed his political zoology of submission and enslavement via the predatory figure of the wolf as the emblem of an endless civil war.<sup>71</sup> In fact, the Pakhtuns’ own *non-representative* democracy traditionally rests upon the *Jerga*, an assembly that every male Pakhtun has access to and that settles all disputes consensually without the

<sup>67</sup> Alessandro Monsutti, “Anthropologizing Afghanistan: Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (October 2013): 271, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155444>.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin D. Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst, 2011), 7.

<sup>69</sup> Hanifi, “Pashtun Counter-Narrative,” 3.

<sup>70</sup> Iris Därmann, *Undienlichkeit: Gewaltgeschichte und politische Philosophie* (Berlin: Matthes und Seitz Berlin, 2020), 80; my translation.

<sup>71</sup> Därmann, 58–80.

need for a central state. The *Jerga* is simultaneously a thoroughly patriarchal and entirely democratic Pakhtun art of not being governed. While accounts of alleged lawlessness take for granted that civilization and state structures are intrinsically co-constitutive, the imposition of the latter has historically been an excessively violent affair involving magnitudes of forced labor, resettlements of populations, and the enforcement of hierarchical administrative structures. It is not the product of a “savage” mind, but perfectly rational that not few have preferred not to be transformed into servile subjects of modern statehood, especially if the state historically did not offer much in exchange. The long-lasting, powerful, and effective non-representative democracy of the Pakhtuns gives lie to the Hobbesian myth that the “natural state” of stateless societies is a ubiquitous bestial war.

Still Hobbes’s eerie shadow is lurking above many past and present discourses about Afghanistan and the Pakhtuns, allowing the mass murder of innocents to be rendered into a footnote in the history of sovereign peacemaking and state-building. Reprieve showed that 24 individuals were reported killed or targeted multiple times in the FATA. Missed strikes on these men killed 874 people, including 142 children. In general, 36 other people, typically unknown and unnamed, have been killed as “collateral damage” for every intended target.<sup>72</sup> Individuals are targeted with extreme precision, but in a remarkably unsuccessful manner, resulting in a ruthless waste of human life, which is only legitimized by the supposed animality, lawlessness, and always already terrorist nature of the Pakhtuns.

While the Pakhtun’s *Jergas* were instrumentalized by British India and its post-colonial successor in order to disenfranchise them, the *Jerga* played an essential role on the other side of the Durand Line as well: Afghanistan. The British political agenda for Afghanistan intended to replace a polity based on competing, mobile suzerainties and genealogical space with one organized around a single, grounded sovereign power ruling over a discrete territorial place and economically dependent on outside revenue.<sup>73</sup> Mohammed Jamil and Shah Mahmoud

358

<sup>72</sup> “You Never Die Twice: Multiple Kills in the US Drone Program,” Reprieve, December 2014, 6–8, [https://reprieve.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/07/Report\\_YouNeverDieTwice\\_2014.pdf](https://reprieve.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/07/Report_YouNeverDieTwice_2014.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*.



Hanifi employ the heuristic device of “crypto-colonialism” to understand how reified and *nationally* re-choreographed forms of selected local indigenous practices like the *Jerga* were used as the basis for hegemonic power-building attempts in a territorially bound state that was formally independent after the bombing of 1919.<sup>74</sup> Euro-American interventionism at the beginning of the twenty-first century relied heavily on this instrumentalization of Pakhtun culture in the name of neoliberal state-building.<sup>75</sup>

The “Bonn Agreement” of 2001, for example, called for the convening of a “Loya Jerga-ye Ezterari” (Emergency Great Jerga) to be held in Afghanistan in 2002 to approve the newly appointed government. Germany had officially justified its involvement in the invasion of Afghanistan with the formulation of its then Defense Minister that German interests were being defended in the “Hindukusch,” thus publicly expunging the memories of its war-ridden population from the Afghan space and establishing itself as the somehow innocent custodian of a geographical bulwark and the historical “gateway to India.”<sup>76</sup> The Loya Jerga was held as planned in Kabul and convened in a huge tent, produced in Germany, to give legitimacy to the Afghan presidency through the seemingly vernacular form of consent. This period came to end with the fall of Kabul in August 2021.

The long-term hegemonic impact of colonially produced military and academic knowledge about the Pakhtuns on both sides of the Durand Line can be seen as a form of “imperial debris,” a notion used by Ann Laura Stoler to describe the durability of colonial effects in the present—the perpetual academic, social, political, and economic formations and effects of imperial domination.<sup>77</sup> Past and new representations of unruly barbaric tribes haunt both Afghan statecraft and occidental conceptions of Afghanistan that have enabled intervention in and the invasion, occupation, and bombing of the region from the nineteenth cen-

<sup>74</sup> Mohammed Jamil Hanifi and Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, “Crypto-Colonial Independence Rituals in Afghanistan,” *Afghanistan* 4, no. 1 (April 2021): 70–78, <https://doi.org/10.3366/afg.2021.0068>.

<sup>75</sup> Hanifi, “Editing the Past,” 295–322.

<sup>76</sup> See also Karoline von Oppen, “From ‘Civilian Power’ to ‘Civilizing Power’: The German Mission to the Hindu Kush 2001–2011,” *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 6, no. 3 (August 2013): 215–25, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1752627213Z.00000000019>.

<sup>77</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, “The Rot Remains: On Ruins and Ruination,” in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 1–35.

tury to the present.<sup>78</sup> Similar to the historical precursors of nowadays Austria, which historically did not function as a classical colonial power, but was very much part of the colonial system, Afghanistan too has never been a full-fledged colony, that is why “efforts to taxonomise it and make it intelligible have been sporadic and patchy, based on political expediency and colonial caprice.”<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps this is the reason for the conspicuous absence of any mention of Afghanistan in Mbembe’s corpus, and can possibly even be attributed to him, for the extent to which amateur and ad hoc experts keep appearing out of nowhere, only to produce great and banal wisdom, on the grounds of previous knowledge claims connected to imperial engagements, with disastrous effects, is one of the biggest problems of Afghanistan. It remains remarkable, however, that his necropolitical reflections appeared just after Afghanistan had been declared a *necropolis* of history with the trope “graveyard of empires.” There is hardly an occidental account of Afghanistan over the last two decades to be found where this figure is not invoked as timelessly self-evident. In reality, however, the trope is of surprisingly recent origin: an article in *Foreign Affairs* from 2001.<sup>80</sup> The figure produces an extreme otherness of Afghanistan by locking it into a timeless container of atavistic “tribes” and closing off possible futures.<sup>81</sup> In the midst of occidental interventionism, under-complex myths gain epistemic status with dizzying speed.<sup>82</sup> At the same time, this trope also has an empowering and comforting function for many Afghans, who choose to inhabit it, by counterpointing the long history of violent influence (Persia, the Mughal Empire, Britain, the Soviet Union, NATO, the US).

The academic discipline of postcolonial studies has been shamefully silent when it comes to Afghanistan, a disturbing fact that is most likely due to the

<sup>78</sup> Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>79</sup> Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Nivi Manchanda, “The Graveyard of Empires: Haunting, Amnesia and Afghanistan’s Construction as a Burial Site,” *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 3 (2019): 309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2019.1633745>.

<sup>81</sup> Manchanda, “The Graveyard of Empires,” 307–20.

<sup>82</sup> Florian P. Kühn, “Afghanistan and the ‘Graveyard of Empires’: Blumenberg, Under-Complex Analogy and Basic Myths in International Politics,” in *Myth and Narrative in International Politics: Interpretive Approaches to the Study of IR*, ed. Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 147–72.

institutional linkages, linguistic corridors, entangled histories, and negotiated epistemologies between “full” colonies and their former masters. Mbembe’s “semiotic hermeneutics”<sup>83</sup> of the postcolony, on the other hand, may open up important ways to think about the politics of death in today’s world and its genealogies; at the same time, one wonders if his staging of the plantation, the slavery system, the concentration camp, and the settler colony as master models of necropolitics is able to fully account for the reality of paracolony places like Afghanistan or the many ways violence is trafficked today. For example, Mbembe discusses injury as a crucial element of enslavement, the slave is “kept alive, but in a *state of injury*.”<sup>84</sup> Forty years of Western and Eastern interventionist wars have turned enormous parts of Afghanistan into a landscape “that will continue to kill, maim, hurt, and obstruct Afghan lives, human and nonhuman, long after the war has ended.”<sup>85</sup> It is estimated that Afghanistan now has a population of three million disabled, about 10 percent of the population, including mental and physical disabilities among both civilians and security forces.<sup>86</sup> In this context, Jasbir K. Puar questions whether the *right to maim* can be easily positioned in Mbembe’s dualism of life and death: “Maiming is a practice that escapes definition within both legal and biopolitical or necropolitical frameworks because it does not proceed through making live, making die, letting live, or letting die.”<sup>87</sup>

Simultaneously with the attack on Afghanistan, the popular rise of its designation as a necropolis, and the seminal publication of “Necropolitics” in 2003, a seemingly unconnected figure began its triumphant march—*innovation*. This apparently innocent term only gained ubiquitous acceptance after 9/11, argues Jill Lepore: “The idea of innovation is the idea of progress stripped of the aspirations of the Enlightenment, scrubbed clean of the horrors of the twentieth cen-

<sup>83</sup> M. John Lamola, “Breaking the Gridlock of the African Postcolonial Self-Imagination: Marx against Mbembe,” *Angelaki* 24, no. 2 (April 2019): 49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1574077>.

<sup>84</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 75.

<sup>85</sup> Fahim Amir, “Notes toward a Forensic Ecology of Afghanistan,” in *Is It Morning for You Yet? 58th Carnegie International* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2022), 73.

<sup>86</sup> Rod Nordland, “Maimed Defending Afghanistan, Then Neglected,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/03/world/middleeast/maimed-defending-afghanistan-then-neglected.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 137.

ture, and relieved of its critics.”<sup>88</sup> Tracing the relationship between these terms is beyond the scope of this article, but without a doubt, after the debacle of the war that has officially just ended, Afghans have at least one, rather non-innovative, right on their side vis-à-vis both the vengeful and the well-meaning hordes of armies, NGOs, corporations, intelligence agencies, and advisors that have overrun the country over the past two decades, only to ingloriously disappear again: *the right to shame*.

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362

<sup>88</sup> Jill Lepore, “The Disruption Machine: What the Gospel of Innovation Gets Wrong,” *The New Yorker*, June 23, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/06/23/the-disruption-machine>.

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## Endless Lists: Racialization, Divisions, Abandonment, Seclusion

### Keywords

racialization, division, abandonment, isolation, necropolitical afterlives, necro-lives

### Abstract

The article delves into the enduring ramifications of historical and contemporary processes of racialization, the delineation of societal divisions, the forsaking of marginalized communities, and the coerced isolation or seclusion of specific populations. Within the realm of necropolitical afterlives, these terms indicate the manners in which these persistent predicaments have molded and persist in molding the realms of life and death for diverse groups. Analysis encompassing necro-lives holds significance in comprehending the sway of necropolitics, unearthing systemic injustices, and amplifying the voices silenced. The bodies of necro-lives amalgamate in communal endeavors for justice, parity, and human rights. Necro-lives call for mobilization and advocacy to deconstruct necropolitical frameworks and forge more just and impartial societies. Necropolitics, entailing dominion over life and death by influential necro-entities, can be contextualized through these themes, spotlighting how certain populations endure violence, disregard, or isolation beyond their corporeal existence, thereby perpetuating cycles of injustice and suffering.

## Neskončni seznam: rasizacija, delitve, zapuščenost, osamitev

367

### Ključne besede

rasizacija, delitev, zapuščenost, osamitev, nekropolitična post-življenje, nekro-življenje

### Povzetek

Članek obravnava trajne posledice zgodovinskih in sodobnih procesov rasizacije, razmejitve družbenih delitev, zapuščanja marginaliziranih skupnosti in prisilne izolacije ali osa-

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mitve določenih populacij. Ti izrazi na področju nekropolitičnih post-življenj nakazujejo načine, ki so vztrajno oblikovali in še vedno oblikujejo področja življenja in smrti različnih skupin. Analiza, ki zajema nekropolitiko, je pomembna za razumevanje vplivov nekropolitike, odkrivanje sistemskih krivic in krepitev utišanih glasov. Nekro-telesa se združujejo v skupnih prizadevanjih za pravičnost, enakopravnost in človekove pravice. Nekro-življenja pozivajo k mobilizaciji in zagovorništvu za dekonstrukcijo nekropolitičnih okvirov ter oblikovanje bolj pravičnih in nepristranskih družb. Nekropolitiko, ki temelji na nadvladi nekro-entitet nad življenjem in smrtjo, lahko kontekstualiziramo z omenjenimi temami in poudarimo, kako določen del prebivalstva vzdržuje nasilje, ravnodušnost ali izolacijo onkraj svojega telesnega obstoja, s tem pa ohranja cikle nepravičnosti in trpljenja.



## Introduction

This article addresses the ongoing effects of historical and contemporary processes of racialization, segregation of society, exclusion of marginalized communities, and enforced isolation or seclusion of certain populations. Analyzing necro-lives is important for understanding the impact of necropolitics, exposing systemic injustices, and making voices heard that have been silenced. Rearticulating necropolitical frameworks involving the domination of life and death by influential necro-entities can be addressed through these themes. In doing so, it becomes clear how the idea of the racialized body can be brought to the forefront of contemporary philosophical debates to address “the deeply sensitive, heavily affective spaces that people must navigate” and things that “come from a time that is not of our making, [but] they’re jumping out at us in this time, seeping into our everyday experiences.”<sup>1</sup> Or, as Macarena Gómez-Barris would put it, it’s “about finding connections and learning from them about how we can support and promote a different ethos based on more joyful and non-hierarchical relationships and more complex ways of knowing the world.”<sup>2</sup>

368

<sup>1</sup> Nomusa Makhubu, “Other Knowledge, First Move: A Conversation with Nomusa Makhubu,” conversation by Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek, in *Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies*, ed. Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2023), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Macarena Gómez-Barris, “Other Knowledge, Second Move: A Conversation with Macarena Gómez-Barris,” conversation by Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek, in Gržinić and

## The Concept of Race Is a Horror to Philosophy

Race and racism are, as Mbembe says, “part of the fundamental process of the unconscious. In that respect they relate to the impasses of human desires—to appetites, affects, passions, fears.”<sup>3</sup> The idea of race is, and as both post- and decolonial theories have shown us, the fundamental “disease of the (colonial) head.”<sup>4</sup> Wherever it appears, even if only to talk about it, the concept of race “unleashes impassioned dynamics and provokes an irrational exuberance that always tests the limits of the very system of reason.”<sup>5</sup>

Race today—as it is often said, we live in post-racial times—has become only seemingly conceptually unthinkable. Ann Laura Stoler suggests that part of the problem lies in “colonial aphasia,”<sup>6</sup> a term Stoler uses to refer to the loss of access to and active dissociation from the problem of colonialism, a difficulty in speaking and in generating a vocabulary that links appropriate words and concepts to appropriate things. The “system or body of thought” is constantly inventing ways to epistemologically immunize itself against the “effects of Blackness”<sup>7</sup>—race and racism are usually relegated to the realm of the unrepresentable, the uncanny, the *unheimlich*, in relation to philosophy.

Race and Blackness are two sides of a codified madness that the Euro-American world has produced;<sup>8</sup> and it is a madness that the Euro-American world—in times of ontological and epistemological uncertainty—has to deal with. In his lectures “*Society Must Be Defended*,” Michel Foucault has already pointed out

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Pristovšek, *Political Choreographies*, 247.

<sup>3</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Jovita Pristovšek in Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek, “Race and Its Far-Reaching Contemporary Ontological and Epistemological Implications,” in *Diseases of the Head: Essays on the Horrors of Speculative Philosophy*, ed. Matt Rosen (Earth, Milky Way: Punctum books, 2020), 216.

<sup>5</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France,” *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 121–56, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2010-018>.

<sup>7</sup> Meg Armstrong, “‘The Effects of Blackness’: Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant,” *Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism* 54, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 213–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/431624>.

<sup>8</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2.

how race is an extremely mobile concept,<sup>9</sup> and in this sense race and racism “not only have a past. They also have a future, particularly in a context where the possibility of transforming life and creating mutant species no longer belongs to the realm of fiction.”<sup>10</sup> The figure of the “Black,” however, as the *Critique of Black Reason* has shown us, was never codified merely as a figure of madness, as ontologically defective, as “man-object, man-merchandise, and man-currency,”<sup>11</sup> as a being with limited or no agency. Precisely because of the systematic negation, the denial of “humanity” and personhood, and the reservoir of nonsense and fantasies inscribed in this figure, thus constituting an “extraordinary accumulation of sensations,”<sup>12</sup> the colonized was also in a constant state of becoming: (an)other.

So, what would need to be reconsidered with regard to the so-called impasse of (White) thought, are the “effects of Blackness” itself. First, because what was once so meticulously elaborated—in Immanuel Kant’s “pre-”<sup>13</sup> and “critical philosophy”—to serve as a “defense against horrors” or, in Mbembe’s words, against Black Reason, was precisely the idea of what should be called “Colonial Reason” with its “mindless state of mind,”<sup>14</sup> or in line with Giorgio Agamben, with its state of exception that served to separate reason from the “body” and “flesh.”<sup>15</sup> Today we can identify this “flesh” in numerous modes of existence as a status below the “threshold of the human,”<sup>16</sup> below the level of “humanity,” while the “bodies” are “left to live,” abandoned, and so on. Mbembe suggests that the common trajectory of these modes of existence is the universalization

<sup>9</sup> See Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the College de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 56.

<sup>10</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Mbembe, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Mbembe, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1764),” in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11–62.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 140.

<sup>15</sup> On anthropogenesis, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Brian Carr, “At the Thresholds of the ‘Human’: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Replication of Imperial Memory,” *Cultural Critique* 39 (Spring 1998): 119–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354553>.

of the Black condition, as it most accurately summarizes the state of universal humanity in the present time.<sup>17</sup>

The “effects of Blackness,” once presented as a form of “disease” of the “Colonial Head,” are paradoxically beginning to acquire the status of an epistemological “cure” for contemporary “diseases of the head.” For as Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason* suggests, “Black Reason” appears as one of the key directions for future thought if Western, Eurocentric epistemology is to transcend the limits of its own “Colonial Reason.”

The figure of the “Black,” a racialized, colonized, ungendered, and dehumanized “racial ‘flesh,’”<sup>18</sup> to borrow Brian Carr’s list of terms (and I would add, an almost peculiar being constructed as not quite subject not right object) is thus at the heart of all these processes. In light of today’s convergence of neoliberal global capitalism and the reinvention of animism, Mbembe’s lecture “Democracy in the Age of Dynamism” speaks to the “manufacturing of subjects as objects” and the “manufacturing of objects as subjects,” emphasizing the need to interrogate the modes by which objects are brought to “life” at a time when “living things” invariably fall into a deadly ritualized mechanics of life.<sup>19</sup>

Historically, Black Reason, as Mbembe suggests, is the result of colonialism, enslavement, and apartheid, and it refers to the paradigm of subjugation, to a model of extraction and plunder, and to the figure of knowledge and fantasies.<sup>20</sup> But what was once a condition of Atlantic colonialism is now, in neoliberal global capitalism, a universal condition of humanity itself.<sup>21</sup> As Marina Gržinić notes in her reading of Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe rearticulates Gilles Deleuze’s concept of “becoming” and proposes a universalization of the figure of “Black” as a figure below the level of humanity, as it most accurately

<sup>17</sup> Achille Mbembe in Marina Gržinić, “Kolonializem Evrope, dekolonialnost in rasizem,” in *Politika, estetika in demokracija*, ed. Marina Gržinić (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2015), 108. Marina Gržinić, “Kolonializem Evrope, dekolonialnost in rasizem,” in *Politika, estetika in demokracija*, ed. Marina Gržinić (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2015), 108.

<sup>18</sup> Carr, “Thresholds of the ‘Human,’” 125.

<sup>19</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Democracy in the Age of Dynamism,” lecture at Barker Center, Harvard University, December 4, 2013, YouTube video, uploaded by Ozmund Field, December 13, 2013, 1:20:39, <https://youtu.be/MtBJ-M-cK4s>.

<sup>20</sup> Mbembe in Gržinić, “Kolonializem Evrope,” 114.

<sup>21</sup> Mbembe in Gržinić, 115.

describes the condition of (universal) humanity in the contemporary system of neoliberal global capitalism.<sup>22</sup> Race is a mechanism of reification, a security system, and a mode of governmentality—and above all, it is a raw material “from which difference and a *surplus*—a kind of life that can be wasted and spent without limit—are produced.”<sup>23</sup>

It is with the concept of race as a “gray area” at the intersection of body and philosophy in times of tension between biopolitics and necropolitics that we can point to its contemporary ontological and epistemological implications and think about the future of the prosthetic body in the 21st century. For what is historically at this intersection is a racialized, colonized, genderless, and dehumanized racial flesh, a being constructed as not a proper subject and not a proper object. Let’s recall right away a series of terms listed by Mbembe that denote contemporary forms of existence that all coexist in the context of neoliberal, global finance capitalism: “human-thing,” “human-machine,” “humancode,” “human-in-flux.”<sup>24</sup>

To put it succinctly, the present relations of inhumanity are rooted in the inhumanity of past centuries.<sup>25</sup> Anibal Quijano suggested that globalization can be seen precisely as “the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentred capitalism as a new global power.”<sup>26</sup> This power revolves around two fundamental axes: the social classification of the world’s population along racial lines and the new structure of control of labor and its sources and products.<sup>27</sup> All this was followed, as Quijano argues, by the constitution of Europe as a new entity/identity—the elaboration of a Eurocentric perspective of knowledge whose central elements is dualism, the radicalization of which can be seen, for example, in the Cartesian rupture between a rational subject and a body, which until then, in Christian thought, represented an unresolved ambivalence between the soul and the risen body.

<sup>22</sup> Mbembe in Gržinić, 108.

<sup>23</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Mbembe, 3–4.

<sup>25</sup> Elaine Coburn, review of *Critique de la raison nègre*, by Achille Mbembe, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 2 (2014): 177.

<sup>26</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” trans. Michael Ennis, *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533.

<sup>27</sup> Quijano, 533–34.

The second step of the radicalization unfolded from the eighteenth century onwards as an evolutionism that formulated the emergence of “human” history as a continuous, linear progression from the “state of nature” to its culmination in European “civilization.”<sup>28</sup> A Eurocentric knowledge perspective has fabricated, codified and placed the “inhuman” in a specific place on the timeline—as prior to “*human* history” or more precisely, as “without history,” legitimizing infantilization, inferiority, exploitation and enslavement, while naming the “Black” as living proof of the inability to separate instinct and Reason/reason.<sup>29</sup>

Eyal Weizman writes in 2016 that in the early Enlightenment, three limit conditions were related: “The threshold of the forest—a shifting environmental condition together with its unique climate; the threshold of the law—the political limit of territory and sovereignty; and the threshold of the human—a blurry limit to the human species”<sup>30</sup>; these frontiers became and remain entangled in such a way that shifts within one lead to shifts in the others.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, as Joseph Vogl has shown, neoliberal global finance capitalism has taken on a kind of aesthetic—sublime—character because it is floating (digital), intangible (it escapes control), unrepresentable (in sublime sums of money that cannot be captured by any sensible material), and, above all, because, through the transcendence of material production, it has acquired the creative capacity of self-creation, giving rise to a series of “zones of indistinctions,” or so-called “gray zones” in which political and economic decisions are made.<sup>32</sup> All of this, as Vogl notes elsewhere, has powerful and fatal effects, “effects of sovereignty,”<sup>33</sup> storms of chaos that leave behind the ravaged landscapes of the present and the future already sold.

<sup>28</sup> Quijano, 534–42.

<sup>29</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Eyal Weizman, “Are They Human?,” *E-flux*, Superhumanity, October 10, 2016, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/68645/are-they-human/>.

<sup>31</sup> Weizman, “Are They Human?”

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, trans. Joachim Redner and Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Vogl, “The Sovereignty Effect: Markets and Power in the Economic Regime,” trans. William Callison, *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 23, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2014): 125–55, <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.23.1.0125>.

## Racialization and Migration

The refugee crisis that escalated in 2015 has sparked many debates, often fruitless, on both sides of the front, about who has a legitimate right to enter the European space of freedom of opportunity (which created the conditions for the crisis) and who does not (political migrant vs. economic migrant or refugee vs. migrant),<sup>34</sup> as if both had nothing to do with the European history of colonialism and the Holocaust. Nat Raha vividly shows how things are inextricably linked together:

The Global North does not exist in isolation—all the wealth of the Global North has been extracted, has accrued and accumulated through the extraction of labor resources, land and people from the so-called Global South. And that relation, the accumulation, I think Marxism is very powerful in thinking through all of that. All of those resources, all of that labor, all of that life that's been extracted is still there in some form as value. That's why the wealth inequality between the Global North and the Global South is so massive. Frantz Fanon claims that Europe is literally a creation of Africa.<sup>35</sup> There would be no Europe if it were not for enslaved Blacks, Africans, and to a much lesser extent, enslaved Brown, South Asian, and East Asian bodies who've been put to work in the service of capitalism and capitalist nation-states as Empire in the Global North.<sup>36</sup>

However, the so-called refugee or humanitarian crisis and the situation of refugees in refugee centers, asylum shelters and temporary tent accommodations—i.e. in the zones that Europe creates within its space or on its periphery is based on the principle of getting rid of those who do not “belong” in the European order of relations, which takes the right to zone its exterior and transform

<sup>34</sup> In Slovenian context, the terminological “dilemmas” around the definitions of a political and economic migrant were discussed within Terminological counselling, an online service of Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language, ZRC SAZU, intended for the expert community public facing specific naming problems. See “Prebežnik” [a refugee], Terminološka svetovalnica, Inštitut za slovenski jezik Frana Ramovša ZRC SAZU, accessed January 21, 2023, <http://isjfr.zrc-sazu.si/sl/terminologisce/svetovanje/prebeznik>.

<sup>35</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 102.

<sup>36</sup> Nat Raha, “Insurgent Flows. Trans\*Decolonial and Black Marxist Futures: A Conversation with Nat Raha,” conversation by Marina Gržinić and Tjaša Kancler, in Gržinić and Pristovšek, *Political Choreographies*, 132.



it into landscapes of death through (neo-)colonial appropriation by means of military, political and economic interventions—is no longer a scandal today.<sup>37</sup>

In his 2020 study “Carceral Geographies along the *Balkan Refugee Route*,”<sup>38</sup> an analysis that looks at three lineages of subjugated bodies: Roma, migrants, and refugees, Piro Rexhepi, notes that

Refugee crisis has not only become a revenue stream but also a momentary opportunity for the peripheral and post-socialist states to use their control and containment as a negotiating leverage with the EU. The impoverished peripheral subject who sees austerity as the mechanism of being robbed of their peripheral European privilege has now come to also see the refugees, Roma, women, queer and trans folks as a threat to their existence; regardless of what registry he locates, his “injury” is a racist call for promised European privilege that does not protest the police for beating and killing Roma and refugee communities but for not protecting whatever is left of that post-Cold War promise of privilege in a euro-gated community.<sup>39</sup>

Rexhepi shows how the convergence of Covid-19 with the ongoing “refugee crisis” enabled the EU to revise its asylum policy, which has subsequently morphed into a “public-private carceral conglomerate.”<sup>40</sup> Turning away from Europe and its racist capitalist constellations therefore remains the most important anti-racist task facing the left today.<sup>41</sup> Since the immediate future holds the plan-eterization of apartheid, as Mbembe asserts,<sup>42</sup> the future of thought should be in the direction of coming out of a relationship without the desire and from the danger of societies of enmity.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 60.

<sup>38</sup> Piro Rexhepi, “Jetnišnične geografije balkanske begunske poti,” in “Rasni kapitalizem: Interseksionalnost spolnosti, bojev in mejnih teles,” ed. Tjaša Kancler and Marina Gržinič, special issue, *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* 48, no. 281 (2020): 80–92.

<sup>39</sup> Piro Rexhepi, “Carceral Geographies along the Balkan Refugee Route” (unpublished manuscript, 2020). This is the unpaginated English version of the article titled “Jetnišnične geografije.”

<sup>40</sup> Rexhepi, 81.

<sup>41</sup> Rexhepi, 83.

<sup>42</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 180.

<sup>43</sup> Mbembe, 188.

Since 2022, with the exception of a two-day headline like the border crisis between Poland/EU-Belarus border crisis,<sup>44</sup> suddenly no one was talking about migrants. Following the US theorist Fatima El-Tayeb,<sup>45</sup> who specifically analyses the European regimes of Whiteness, as well as Houria Bouteldja,<sup>46</sup> in 2020, Rexhepi exposes the abstract humanism of left progressivism across Europe, which routinely dismisses questions of coloniality and racism as liberal discourse to disguise its supposedly color-blind “class struggle” against austerity, as if the two things had nothing to do with each other.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, they are ostensibly anti-racist and anti-capitalist while supporting the EU, whose deadly security infrastructures in the Mediterranean and along the Balkan route are directed primarily against Black and Brown refugees.<sup>48</sup>

Why is it important to emphasize all this? Because the exposed rhetoric of “we” against the elites has caused the left in Europe to literally lose its compass. Turning away from the processes of racialization, subjugation, differentiation, which are at the center of the Marxist explanation of the circulation of capital, the army of labor, private property, is nothing but drowning in empty rhetoric, which fits very well with the European rhetoric:

We must close the borders. Filter those who make it across them. Process them. Choose who we want to remain. Deport the rest. Sign contracts with corrupt elites from the countries of origin, third world countries, transition countries. They must be turned into the prison guards of the West, to whom the lucrative business of administering brutality can be subcontracted.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> In July 2021, a new refugee crisis erupted between Poland and Belarus, and to a lesser extent between Belarus and Lithuania or Latvia, where thousands of migrants were abused for a power play between the EU and actors outside the EU. See Ondřej Filipec, “Multilevel Analysis of the 2021 Poland-Belarus Border Crisis in the Context of Hybrid Threats,” *Central European Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (2022): 1–18, [https://doi.org/10.24132/cejop\\_2022\\_1](https://doi.org/10.24132/cejop_2022_1).

<sup>45</sup> Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love* (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Rexhepi, “Carceral Geographies.”

<sup>48</sup> Rexhepi.

<sup>49</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 98–99.

European provincialism with its Eurocentric thinking, which turns Europe into a provincial fortress, according to Gržinić, thus has its own (additional) emblematic figure for the “becoming Black of the world”<sup>50</sup>: the refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>51</sup> Her thesis implies a sharp critique of the aphasic, Western European system of thought that is unwilling to reconsider its own colonial past and the self-evident idea of freedom (along with its implementation).

## Necrogeography

Liberal political thought, as Mbembe has argued with reference to Hagar Kotef, has always clung to contradictions when it came to the idea of a borderless world and freedom enshrined in the concept of movement, while at the same time it has always managed mobility through the use of concepts of race, class and gender, creating ever new forms of vulnerability for stigmatized and expendable racialized groups.<sup>52</sup> With the war in Ukraine and the millions of refugees coming to the EU, the question of the status of refugees and of migration is exponentially present since 2022.

In his 2019 book *Necropolitics*, Mbembe speaks of necrogeography, where subjects (refugees, displaced, migrants, asylum seekers—the list of dispensable bodies is never exhausted) are trapped in a state between the life and death, and where the extraction of time,<sup>53</sup> as Ruth Wilson Gilmore would argue,<sup>54</sup> from foreclosed bodies occurs along with the extraction of land and natural resources. Mbembe talks about the spread of societies of sovereignty and techno-fascism around the world, along the rapidly proliferating net of necro-spaces.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*.

<sup>51</sup> Gržinić, “Kolonializem Evrope,” 109.

<sup>52</sup> Achille Mbembe, “The Idea of Borderless World,” lecture at Whitey Humanities Center, Yale University, Tanner Lectures on Human Values, March 28, 2018, YouTube video, uploaded by Yale University, April 2, 2018, 1:26:35, <https://youtu.be/NKm6HPCSXDY>.

<sup>53</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

<sup>54</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017), 225–40; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Insurgent Flows. Trans\*Decolonial and Black Marxist Futures: A Conversation with Ruth Wilson Gilmore,” conversation by Marina Gržinić and Tjaša Kancler, in Gržinić and Pristovšek, *Political Choreographies*, 218–38.

<sup>55</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

This endless list does not stop referring to an ever-present reality, though often largely invisible, not to say all-too-familiar and in the end banal. The camp, it ought to be said, has not only become a structural feature of our globalized condition. It has ceased to scandalize. Better still, the camp is not just our present. It is our future: our solution for “keeping away what disturbs, for containing or rejecting all excess, whether it is human, organic matter or industrial waste.” In short, it is a form of government of the world.<sup>56</sup>

The nation-state is always presented as a biopolitical mode of protecting and improving the course of life of the majoritarian nation, which today, in order to maintain the biopolitical, produces necro-landscapes everywhere.<sup>57</sup> Slovenia, for example, has necropolitics at its core with the Erased, which is the name for social and political elimination in the de- and re-territorialization of bodies at the time of the formation of the Slovenian sovereign nation-state (the erasure occurred in 1992, before the Srebrenica genocide in 1995).<sup>58</sup> Slovenian state is also one of the biggest violators of the rights of the Roma community in Europe, to name the Roma family Strojani, who was moved out of Ambrus in 2007 due to death threats and expulsion demands from compatriots “defending” their “personal autonomy,” which is nothing but a form of control. It has also managed to impoverish the working class (among the most notorious bankruptcies starting in the 1990s were the collapse of the Maribor Automobile Factory, known as TAM, and the steel giant Litostroj holding). More, Slovenia has also managed to create highly racialized labor markets (most clearly in the infrastructure and construction sectors, which involve the very migrant workers from the former Yugoslav states who come, so to speak, from the same labor pool it erased in 1992, and who are constantly subjected to state-supported exploitation with virtually no rights). Not to mention that Slovenian state has implemented the logic of “graduated citizenship”<sup>59</sup> with its two failed referendums on the Family Code (in 2012, 2015), depriving the LGBTQI+ community of their constitutional rights. And last but not least, in 2020, the Slovenian government introduced new amendments to the Aliens Act that restrict the human rights of foreign workers and their families, children, minors and refugees.

378

<sup>56</sup> Mbembe, 60.

<sup>57</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Euro-Slovenian Necrocapitalism,” *Transversal* (webjournal), Transform, February 2008, <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0208/grzinic/en.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Gržinić.

<sup>59</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

When right-wing political rhetoric speaks of the people and the nation, markers of differentiation such as class, race, and gender dissolve and become invisible. The process of class and gender differentiation, racialization, the distinction between citizens and non-citizens and the abandonment of minorities is, however, central to the constitution of the majority in the nation-state.

## Speculative Realism

In “‘Afterwards’: Struggling with Bodies in the Dump of History,”<sup>60</sup> Gržinić posits the following: if the main feature of biopolitics is pseudo-humanism, and if the biopolitical optical machine could be summarized by the phrase “more human than human”<sup>61</sup>—since “human” is not only the product constructed against the animal (speciesism), but also a figure that is not reducible to the human animal (racism)—then the necropolitical optical machine, along with post-humanism or the “necropolitical injunction of neoliberal global capitalism, is ‘still too human!’”<sup>62</sup> That is, “the optical machine of necrocapitalism cannot view any class, race, and gender specificities of the post-human, as this would imply the return of the social antagonism at the heart of the (post)-human.”<sup>63</sup>

My proposal is therefore to pursue this “still ‘too human, much too human’” agenda, the dream of overcoming the notion of “human,” precisely on the terrain of speculative realism. I will draw on the introduction to *Speculations V: Aesthetics in the 21st Century*, in which Ridvan Askin, Andreas Haegler, and Phillip Schweighauser survey the developments of debates in 21st century aesthetics.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Marina Gržinić, “‘Afterwards’: Struggling with Bodies in the Dump of History,” in *Body between Materiality and Power: Essays in Visual Studies*, ed. Nasheli Jiménez del Val (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 163–82. Gržinić’s analysis exposes today’s humanitarian refugee crisis within the European Union and Europe as “one of the hardest lessons to learn for Western academic vocabulary” (Gržinić, 164); and by substituting the biopolitical concept of the “body” with the necropolitical notion of “political flesh” (i.e., the status of bodies in refugee centers), this analysis proposes the latter as the actual matter for thought to think (Gržinić, 179–80).

<sup>61</sup> Gržinić, 177.

<sup>62</sup> Gržinić, 177.

<sup>63</sup> Gržinić, 177.

<sup>64</sup> Ridvan Askin, Andreas Hägler, and Philipp Schweighauser, “Introduction: Aesthetics after the Speculative Turn,” in *Speculations V: Aesthetics in the 21st Century*, ed. Ridvan Askin et al. (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2014), 6–38.

The authors focus on aesthetics especially after the speculative turn,<sup>65</sup> after the articulation of the so-called speculative realists, a faction within continental philosophy. The speculative realists claim that since Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*<sup>66</sup>—that is, with Kant's introduction of a separation between the noumenal, the world as it is “in itself,” and the phenomenal, the world as it shows itself “for/to us”—continental philosophy has forgotten to think “reality” or has ceased to engage in such thinking. These accusations are, as Goran Vranešević picturesquely describes, the result of current “doubts about a subjectively totalized world, which with its limitations, like a flat world, prevents expeditions into the vastness of the world. More precisely, it is about the regions of existence that seemed to be lost forever, having been replaced first by the inaccessible world beyond [or the great beyond] and then by the further twisting of subjective finality.”<sup>67</sup>

It is particularly interesting that contemporary debates on aesthetics, as argued in the abovementioned introduction, bring to the fore the internal split of speculative realist philosophy into two poles, a split that was already announced after the first wave of enthusiasm for the speculative turn had subsided.<sup>68</sup> Askin, Hägler and Schweighauser compare this internal split in speculative realism to the 18th-century debates over taste between rationalists and empiricists.

This discourse on taste, the authors argue, is particularly attractive to thinkers of the empiricist pole of speculative realism (the other is thus called rationalist),<sup>69</sup> since it provides an approach to things as they are in their reality, while

<sup>65</sup> The notion of the “speculative turn” is linked to the conference entitled “Speculative Realism,” which took place in April 2007 at Goldsmiths, University of London, and with the contributions of Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux. See, for example, Rick Dolphijn, review of *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects*, by Peter Gratton, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: An Electronic Journal*, March 29, 2016, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/speculative-realism-problems-and-prospects/>.

<sup>66</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> Goran Vranešević, “Prihajajoči svet in žalovanje za njim,” *Časopis za kritiko znanosti, domišljijo in novo antropologijo* 39, no. 248 (2012): 76. All translations of Vranešević's article are my own.

<sup>68</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, “Aesthetics after the Speculative Turn,” 29.

<sup>69</sup> British reflections on taste dealt with notions such as intuition, sensation, perception, and so on; Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser mention the forerunners of Alexander Gottlieb

allowing for the possibility of their “dehumanization” (note the positivation of a term that historically denotes the process of de-humanization) insofar as they relate to the structure of reality as such, and not just to the realm of human faculty of judgment.<sup>70</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser thus explain a series of attempts to extend aesthetic thinking to a non-human world: the attempts of Steven Shaviro and Tim Morton dealing with Kant’s notion of taste, since his judgments of taste are not determined by concepts and are disinterested; the attempts of Graham Harman and Morton dealing with object-oriented aesthetics as manifested in the theory of “allure,” which refers to an object being able to taste, sense, feel, and perceive another object; Iain Hamilton Grant’s attempt at aesthetics, which refers to the intuition of the forces and potencies of nature; and Shaviro’s cosmology, which describes the realm of apprehension, the realm of relationality itself.<sup>71</sup> For all these authors of the empirical half of speculative realism, every encounter is always already a site of aesthetic experience; and for all of them, aesthetics is distinct from conceptual knowledge, while at the same time it is a precursor to it.<sup>72</sup>

“Given the expansion of aesthetics into the non-human realm,” Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser state, “this is also the moment when aesthetics is pushed from the domain of human epistemology into that of general ontology. Ceasing to be a particular kind of human relation to the world, it becomes a general descriptor of relationality of/in the world.”<sup>73</sup> Further, “in this framework, human epistemology only builds on and comes after the general aesthetic structure of/in being. Indeed, ‘subjectless experience’ underlies and comes to determine cognising subjects.”<sup>74</sup>

However, while the empiricist pole of speculative realism argues for “subjectless experience,” the rationalist pole argues for “experience-less subjects.”<sup>75</sup> In their critique of the empiricist pole, Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser argue, ration-

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Baumgarten’s aesthetics as a science of sensuous cognition: Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Anthony Ashley Cooper, and Francis Hutcheson.

<sup>70</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 30–31.

<sup>71</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 31.

<sup>72</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 31.

<sup>74</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Ray Brassier, quoted in Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 30.

alists disagree about the reification of aesthetic experience and about “human” terms (such as intuition, perception, etc.) used when speaking of “non-human relations” and objects; rationalists thus see a problem in confusing “human” and “non-human” relations and preventing “the rational investigation of human and non-human relations.”<sup>76</sup> For them, epistemology governs and determines aesthetics.

In locating possible objections to empiricist speculative realism—and before that with a reference to the “father” of the term “aesthetics,” Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (legitimizing and justifying Baumgarten’s position within rationalist thought)—Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser further recall a problem they see as common to both poles of speculative realism: the emergence of transcendental philosophy.

Kant’s invention of the transcendental intervenes precisely in the discussion between rationalists and empiricists—and even more, the speculative realists with their condemnation of correlationism, the latter arguing that it is impossible to discuss the issues of subjectivity independently of objectivity and vice versa, refer precisely to transcendental philosophy.<sup>77</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser therefore argue that what we are witnessing on the terrain of the debates of the speculative realists is precisely the transformation of the concept of the transcendental.<sup>78</sup>

For all speculative realists, since Kant’s invention of the transcendental, retain the notion of immanence; and all speculative realists have in common that they care about “this world” while they work out their “thisworldly” philosophies!<sup>79</sup> Moreover, Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser argue that the commonality of all speculative realists is the rejection of Kant’s Copernican Revolution and thus the centrality of human experience and its conditions of possibility, but in two different ways: while the empiricist pole rejects the “human” in “*human* experience,” the other side rejects “experience” as such.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 32.

<sup>77</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 32.

<sup>78</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 33.

<sup>79</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 33.

<sup>80</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 33.



On the one side, what results is an *ontological* recasting of the transcendental as it applies to reality per se: a transcendental empiricism (Grant, Harman, Morton, Shaviro); on the other side, we have an *epistemological* account of the powers of human thought to pierce this very same reality: a transcendental rationalism (Brassier, Meillassoux).<sup>81</sup>

In view of what we have said before about the idea of race, we might say that a criticism similar to that which the speculative realists addressed to continental philosophy can now be made of the philosophy of speculative realism itself. But my criticism here is far from defending Kant's system of thought. As we have seen, Kant is the best friend of both poles of speculative realism (but not also their enemy, as Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser have argued),<sup>82</sup> whose "speculative register for the unification of the world"<sup>83</sup> has extended the horizon of the world to other realities to such an extent that it now "accepts all possible and impossible objects [ . . . ] introduced from outside"<sup>84</sup> and thus falls into a trap of "(contingent) choice: whether the world or object or subject or . . . it is always directly embodied as an object."<sup>85</sup> Sometimes we also have to deal with the resurrected dead or with specters.

In rejecting the centrality of human experience and its conditions of possibility, both poles avoid thinking the "racial flesh" that historically, ontologically and epistemologically, stood "at the threshold of the human"<sup>86</sup> and that should be addressed in its many contemporary forms. If one group of speculative realists explicitly rejects the "human" in human experience, and the other rejects "experience" as such, then it is clear that both poles are "aphasic" with respect to the idea of the human itself, that is, the human as a concept elaborated through the ongoing processes of racialization.

In 1997, at a ten-day Cerisy-la Salle conference in France, entitled "L'Animal autobiographique" (The Autobiographical Animal), Jacques Derrida described the logic of the anthropological machine with the following words:

<sup>81</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 33.

<sup>82</sup> Askin, Hägler, and Schweighauser, 33.

<sup>83</sup> Vranešević, "Prihajajoči svet," 81.

<sup>84</sup> Vranešević, 81.

<sup>85</sup> Vranešević, 81.

<sup>86</sup> I refer here to the aforementioned title of Carr's "At the Thresholds of the 'Human.'"

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself. And in these moments of nakedness, under the gaze of the animal, everything can happen to me, I am like a child ready for the apocalypse, *I am (following) the apocalypse itself* that is to say the ultimate and first event of the end, the unveiling and the verdict. I am (following) it, the apocalypse, I identify with it by running behind it, after it, after its whole zoo-logy. When the instant of extreme passion passes, and I find peace again, then I can relax and speak of the beasts of the Apocalypse, visit them in the museum, see them in a painting [. . .]; I can visit them at the zoo, read about them in the Bible, or speak about them as in a book.<sup>87</sup>

Derrida speaks of the dominance of a category of discourses, of “texts signed by people who have no doubt seen, observed, analyzed, reflected on the animal, but who have never been seen by the animal,”<sup>88</sup> and who have never considered the experience of the contemplating animal in the philosophical and theoretical architecture of their discourse. He speaks of a group of thinkers (among whom he counts René Descartes, Kant, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas) who see, without having been “seen naked by someone who, from the basis of a life called animal, and not only by means of the gaze, would have obliged them to recognize, at the moment of address, that this was their affair, their lookout [*que cela les regardait*].”<sup>89</sup> And he speaks of a “symptom of this disavowal”<sup>90</sup> that we should decipher. He speaks of the inability to speak, the muteness, and the “aphasic inability or stupefaction that prevents the use of words.”<sup>91</sup> “Perhaps the body of the anthropophorous animal (the body of the slave) is [indeed] the unresolved remnant that idealism leaves as an inheritance to thought, and the aporias of the philosophy of our time coincide with the apo-

384

<sup>87</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 381–82, <https://doi.org/10.1086/449046>.

<sup>88</sup> Derrida, 382.

<sup>89</sup> Derrida, 383.

<sup>90</sup> Derrida, 383.

<sup>91</sup> Derrida, 388.

rias of this body that is irreducibly drawn and divided between animality and humanity.”<sup>92</sup>

To put in on the table: in 1997 Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze brilliantly elaborated on the “color” of Kant’s Reason/reason,<sup>93</sup> to which we can add that Reason/reason is neither “genderless” nor “classless.” Kant—the philosopher of the system—as Eze stated, “had uncritically assumed that the particularity of European existence is *the* empirical as well as ideal model of humanity, of *universal* humanity,”<sup>94</sup> “taken as humanity *in itself*,”<sup>95</sup> which, in its greatest perfection, seems to (allegedly) reside within the White race.

It would be a mistake to believe that Kant contributed nothing new or of original consequence to the study of “race” or to the problem of European ethnocentrism in general. Strictly speaking, Kant’s anthropology and geography offer the strongest, if not the only, sufficiently articulated *theoretical philosophical* justification of the superior/inferior classification of “races of men” of any European writer up to his time.<sup>96</sup>

With this rough outline of the symptoms of contemporary ontological and epistemological uncertainty within the “system of thought,” we can now address the state of affairs in necrocapitalism by making a direct analogy to what Mbembe describes as the reinvention of animism.

In a lecture entitled “Democracy in the Age of Dynamism,” Mbembe’s central thesis is that late capitalism as we know it today represents a kind of final stage of commodification characterized by the convergence of capitalism and the reinvention of animism.<sup>97</sup> The concept of animism, introduced into anthropology in the late nineteenth century by Edward Burnett Tylor, ascribes to “primitive societies,” in a way that infantilizes their beliefs—the belief that there is life in

<sup>92</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, “The Color of Reason: The Idea of ‘Race’ in Kant’s Anthropology,” in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 103–40.

<sup>94</sup> Eze, 117.

<sup>95</sup> Eze, 117.

<sup>96</sup> Eze, 129.

<sup>97</sup> Mbembe, “Democracy in the Age of Dynamism.”

inanimate matter, that inert objects have a life that can be activated and animated—as they “seem” to represent a kind of precursor in the evolution from religion to science.<sup>98</sup> In Mbembe’s view, this reinvention of animism works in two directions in the context of contemporary neoliberal global necrocapitalism.

The first direction, as Mbembe elaborates it, refers to the “manufacturing of objects as subjects,” to the granting of the form of life in particular to new technological objects and more generally to commodities or to finance capital itself. On the one hand, this direction implies a kind of re-enactment of commodity fetishism; on the other hand, it also refers to the life in the object itself, that is, to the life imposed on the objects by the preceding violent, politically animated human production, visible in the wars for the monopolies on the mineral resources used for the production of new technological objects.<sup>99</sup>

And here we are back to the second direction of animism, which is closely interwoven with the first. It refers to the “manufacturing of subjects as objects,” which turns out to be a perverse form of subjectification through thinghood, since objects now function as virtual transformations of ourselves in relation to them.<sup>100</sup> According to Mbembe, commodity fetishism has reached the stage where objects possess their own life, which, it seems, is the only one worthy of the name, and our task, therefore, is to become animistic objects in order to grasp the life that now resides and is animated between the object and the object, in the realm of this “other humanity” or “in-humanity.”<sup>101</sup>

Are we able, then, to think in terms of the necropolitical afterlives, precisely these very terms that point to the ways in which persistent predicaments have shaped and continue to shape the realms of life and death for various groups?

<sup>98</sup> Mbembe, “Democracy in the Age of Dynamism.” See also Achille Mbembe, “Technologies of Happiness in the Age of Animism,” lecture at European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland and Valetta, Malta, March 27, 2016, YouTube video, uploaded by European Graduate School Video Lectures, September 12, 2016, 1:04:59, <https://youtu.be/nIi-jTCn8Gh4>.

<sup>99</sup> Gržinić, “Kolonializem Evrope,” 121. See also John E. Drabinski, “Mbembe, Democracy, Animism,” academic website, December 6, 2013, <https://jdrabinski.wordpress.com/2013/12/06/mbembe-democracy-animism/>; Mbembe, “Democracy in the Age of Dynamism.”

<sup>100</sup> Mbembe, “Democracy in the Age of Dynamism.” See also Gržinić, “Kolonializem Evrope,” 121.

<sup>101</sup> Mbembe, “Democracy in the Age of Dynamism.”

## Coda

The bestowal of life on the objects themselves has serious consequences for life as such and its effects: in another lecture titled “Rethinking Democracy Beyond the Human,”<sup>102</sup> Mbembe, referring to Luciana Parisi and her 2016 “Automated Thinking and the Limits of Reason,”<sup>103</sup> talks about the emergence of an Electronic Reason that weakens and replaces what we once called Public Reason. According to Mbembe, agency has become a capacity no longer reserved for humans alone, while “automated thinking” (i.e., algorithmic reasoning) not only challenges the (human) mind about its own limits, but also gradually relieves us of the duty to govern ourselves.<sup>104</sup> The most recent “sensational” example of giving life to an object is the humanoid robot Sophia, which was granted Saudi Arabian citizenship at the Future Investment Initiator Congress in Riyadh in late October 2017.<sup>105</sup> It is important to emphasize that Sophia is not the first such case, as a humanoid robot named Fran Pepper was already registered in the Belgian birth registry on January 30, 2017.<sup>106</sup>

These accelerated changes with regards to life in connection to the latest technologies raise a number of questions about democracy in the age of new technologies, not the least of which is whether life is now included in the concept of citizenship, in parallel with questions about all those who are not eligible to receive or hold citizenship.

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<sup>102</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Rethinking Democracy Beyond the Human,” lecture at European Graduate School, Valetta, Malta, October 16, 2017, YouTube video, uploaded by European Graduate School Video Lectures, December 5, 2017, 54:40, [https://youtu.be/A\\_k3YlupGok](https://youtu.be/A_k3YlupGok).

<sup>103</sup> Luciana Parisi, “Automated Thinking and the Limits of Reason,” *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 5 (October 2016), 471–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616655765>.

<sup>104</sup> Mbembe, “Rethinking Democracy Beyond the Human.”

<sup>105</sup> The humanoid replied to the question of the awareness of herself as a robot with a question in reply: “How do you know you are human?” See Anja Pavlič Jerič, “Savdska Arabija prva država, ki je podelila državljanstvo robotu,” MMC, October 27, 2017, <https://www.rtvsllo.si/zabava/zanimivosti/savdska-arabija-prva-drzava-ki-je-podelila-drzavljanstvo-robotu/436323>.

<sup>106</sup> “Un robot inscrit au registre des naissances à Hasselt,” VRT, January 30, 2017, <http://dere-dactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.francais/Soci%25C3%25A9t%25C3%25A9/1.2879299>.

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## Conversation with Jill H. Casid and Anna Campbell

### Keywords

Anthropocene, Necrocene, decay, aesthetics, contemporary art, queer, trans\*, transition

### Abstract

The conversation with Jill H. Casid and Anna Campbell is a reconceptualization of several themes to develop an aesthetic that incorporates notions of the necropolitical and redefines the concept of the Anthropocene as the Necrocene. The Necrocene implies an era marked by death, decay, and the consequences of human impact on the environment, as well as a critical reflection on the choices individuals and societies make that contribute to the transition from the Anthropocene to the Necrocene. These reflections serve as cautionary tales or reflections on the unsustainable path of the Anthropocene. An important reflection in the interview is how queer and transgender people are using art and assemblages to refuse the terms of the current tensions of the culture wars.

## Pogovor z Jill H. Casid in Anno Campbell

### Ključne besede

antropocen, nekrocen, propadanje, estetika, sodobna umetnost, queer, trans\*, prehod

### Povzetek

Pogovor z Jill H. Casid in Anno Campbell predstavlja rekonceptualizacijo več tem za razvoj estetike, ki vključuje pojme nekropolitike in redefinira koncept antropocena kot nekrocena. Nekrocen implicira obdobje, ki ga zaznamujejo smrt, propadanje in posledice človekovega vpliva na okolje, pa tudi kritičen razmislek o odločitvah posameznikov in družb, ki prispevajo k prehodu iz antropocena v nekrocen. Ta razmišljanja služijo kot

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svarilne zgodbe ali razmislek o nevzdržni generalizaciji antropocena. Pomemben razmislek v intervjuju se nanaša dalje tudi na vprašanje, kako kvir- in transspolne osebe s pomočjo umetnosti in asemblažev zavračajo pogoje trenutnih napetosti kulturnih vojn.



Zoom, June 9, 2023

From May 15 to 17, 2023, we had an amazing number of topics, references, theory and practice in the framework of the events of Jill H. Casid and Anna Campbell in Ljubljana.<sup>1</sup> We propose the form of an interview to clarify and reflect.

## Part 1

**Marina Gržinić:** We have divided this interview into different parts. The first part is called vocabulary or clarification. The starting point, of course, is the question: what is the Necrocene? And in that context, the difference between Necrocene and Anthropocene, because we usually use just use the term Anthropocene. What this Necrocene<sup>2</sup> could mean? Of course you have written texts and everything is there, but the way this is actually interpreted is that people do not understand what this could be. So my question is direct. Let us clarify these super important terms, coinages that you use to excavate the big house of theory, of philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> See “Nekrocen, javna spolnost in avtonomija,” ZRC SAZU, Filozofski inštitut, May 15–17, 2023, <https://fi2.zrc-sazu.si/sl/dogodki/nekrocen-javna-spolnost-in-avtonomija>.

<sup>2</sup> Casid first develops their concept of the Necrocene in Jill H. Casid, “Necrolandscaping,” *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics after Landscape*, ed. Jens Andermann, Lisa Blackmore, and Dayron Carrillo Morell (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2018), 237–64. The term “Necrocene” was first used by historian Justin McBrien to give a name to the shadow double of the Capitalocene but also its internal process of necrosis, a self-consumption born of capitalist extraction and accumulation as traumatic injury and surplus death not just birthed by extinction but as a process of “becoming extinction.” See Justin McBrien, “Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 116–37.

**Anthropocene. Plantationocene. Capitalocene. Necrocene.**

**Jill H. Casid:** You could certainly argue that the last thing we need is another name for the Anthropocene. And I think that, in the U.S. context and in the English-speaking world more generally, there is perhaps not a little exhaustion with what might seem to be merely a play on words. But to be grappling not only with climate change, but also with the sense that our epoch is really presenting us with the problem of extinction, I think renaming is actually necessary to describe particular historical origins and how they mean differently. I am thinking, for example, of the important work of Donna J. Haraway and Anna Tsing, who argue for not just the centrality of the plantation but position the plantation as turning point by calling our epoch the Plantationocene. Others insist, instead, that this is a particular history of capital.<sup>3</sup> By calling the Anthropocene the Capitalocene, the very name makes the condensed argument that it's not just humans who are responsible for our condition, but capital.<sup>4</sup>

I do not want to replace those terms at all. In fact, I think with them. But I call our scene the Necrocene because what I think is lost in both of these formulations is an earlier starting point, and that is the history of capitalism, which begins not only with the transatlantic slave trade, which is certainly central, but also with the attempt to colonize and settle through a form of displacement, transplantation, and replantation that has the genocide and genocide of indigenous peoples at its core, rather than as a sort of side effect.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> According to Haraway, the participants in a recorded conversation for *Ethnos* (University of Aarhus, October 2014) collectively generated the term "Plantationocene." Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 206. See also Donna J. Haraway et al., "Anthropologists are Talking—About the Anthropocene," *Ethnos* 81, no. 3 (2016): 535–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838>. For Haraway's discussion of both Capitalocene and Plantationocene along with her term "Chthulucene," see Donna J. Haraway, "Introduction" and "Making Kin: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene," in *Staying with the Trouble*, 1–8, 99–103, 206.

<sup>4</sup> According to Jason W. Moore, the term "Capitalocene" originates with Andreas Malm. Moore and Haraway both began using the term before finding each others' work in 2013. See Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*. See also Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> With what they call the "orbis hypothesis," climate scientists Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin propose 1610 CE as the "golden spike" origin point for the Anthropocene which they correlate to Native genocide and enslavement. Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin,

It is certainly also my effort to make the presence of death—the ordinariness of necropolitics which is not so extraordinary but right there—palpable in the naming. I use “Necrocene” to foreground necropolitical violence and to shift emphasis from death as extinction, death as abstract state, death as the opposite of life, to death as felt, material presence and active process by giving us death as a scene in which we are vulnerably situated. So the term has a double meaning, because it emphasizes at the same time that necropolitics is central to our understanding of the Anthropocene. The renaming is also to insist on the death or end of man in another way. As others have done, Necrocene refuses to uphold the centrality of man because even to make man a destructive primary actor is to make him the central actor one more time. To retain the “Anthropos” of the Anthropocene performs a kind of terrible boomerang that invokes the end of man only to reinforce man’s claimed ability to act, so that it might seem falsely that it is up to sovereign man to engineer a technical solution. This replacement of the Anthropos with the Necro is to insist on focusing not only on death, but also on a particular form of death that is not the extinction that is yet to come, but, rather, the end that has already taken place.

Necrocene also names the everyday presence of erosion for which I use the phrase “being undone.” In thinking with how to do things with being undone in the Necrocene I am not looking for agency in a kind of sovereignty that can imagine moving outside of the felt and experienced forms of erosion, but actually looking to think and act in a way that could be understood as the other side of death, which is decay and the forms of erosion, that I call doing things with being undone.<sup>6</sup> I see these concepts as interlinked. That is, the Necrocene, Necro-landscaping and this formulation of doing things with being undone.

396

**Gržinić:** So if we turn to Anna, the question of undoing and unlearning in your presentation, Anna, you actually talked a lot about this process of unlearning. It was possible to capture the historical ways and also the explanation in your specific practice as this tradition. And my question would be if you can reflect on this notion or if you have another suggestion. What could be the process by

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“Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519 (March 2015): 171–80, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258>.

<sup>6</sup> Jill H. Casid, “Doing Things with Being Undone,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, no. 1 (April 2019): 30–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412919825817>.

which we actually shake up a system of terms, but not only that, we just shake up a system of terms that we are forced to use and we use them and think of them just rhetorically, while they are already doing many, many things in terms of building our way of thinking otherwise.

### **Alternate Methodologies**

**Anna Campbell:** I think the productive potential of undoing and unlearning is something that really excites me, so I really appreciate that prompt in that connection. From the perspective of someone who is a professor professionally, this idea of pedagogy is so central and teaching that seems to be in conflict with undoing and unlearning is something that I think has led me to translate my theoretical practice and my work in the studio-based practice to the space of the classroom. When I think about it, that prompt of undoing or unlearning it does not mean that I have to unlearn something in order for this kind of engagement to happen again, but to really think alternate methodologies, alternate ways of working. This is expressed particularly beautifully when Saidiya Hartman<sup>7</sup> talks about Esther Brown<sup>8</sup> and thinks about archives and the radicality of what might not be captured in the archive. What we need to do to unlearn is to think and analyze differently, to respond differently, address differently whatever scraps materials of research, of the archive, of the traces of history that we have instead. What that does is that it really also pushes the centrality of academics primary tools sort of off the table, and I think for this reason it is not a preferable way to work.

But that pushing that's decentering is really the critical gesture. I would also say that someone like Paolo Freire<sup>9</sup> or bell hooks<sup>10</sup> talking about Paolo Freire, which can be even a little bit more exciting sometimes, has been a really help-

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<sup>7</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, "The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (July 2018): 465–90, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942093>.

<sup>8</sup> Saidiya Hartman gives, what she calls, a "speculative history" of Esther Brown, a young black girl living in Harlem in the early 1900s. From the case file of Brown charged as vagrant and wayward, Hartman narrates "the open rebellion and beautiful experiment produced by young black women in the emergent ghetto, a form of racial enclosure that succeeded the plantation." Hartman, "Anarchy of Colored Girls," 470.

<sup>9</sup> Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

ful entry point for me to bring a studio-based practice into a non-studio based environment.

The lesson in the studio, of course, is that we all make sculpture, and the instruction is not to exactly copy any sculpture that already exists. The instruction is also not to take parts of how other people have put together a sculpture and then make a five-parameter sculpture, right? Rather, you are supposed to synthesize and generate something all your own, and you are supposed to do it without too many guardrails and without too much oversight from the professor.

Especially in the context of my class, where we are curating an exhibition together, this idea of decentering the role of the professor and having people work collaboratively in committees provides an opportunity to collaborate creatively and expansively, but also to reject the passivity that's actually common in a conventional U.S. learning environment.

### **Necrolandscaping**

**Gržinić:** Thanks for this alternate methodology. I want to go back to Jill, because of the way you phrased Necrocene and Anthropocene and capitalism. And capitalism was really important, as you say, as a mode of death. I'd like to know more about the necrolandscaping, because there are some elements that are, first of all, central to your work, and secondly, if possible, can be connected to Black histories. Because Black histories are key to developing practices that we White people can only observe as also there's a lot of meandering inside the regime of Whiteness, to take things and just adopt them. So my question would be how these Necrolandscaping and Trans Black histories might work in parallel or against each other, because you use all these sources and terms in your writings and reflections, in your films as well.

398

**Casid:** Necrolandscaping has at least a double edge. It's the term both for the refusal to see the signs of the aesthetics of the green response to climate change, the aesthetics of turning everything into a kind of apparent green blanket, a sign of flourishing, to see through that as aesthetics, of understanding landscaping as a killing mode of dis-Indigenation and extraction. But not just extraction. Extractivism has become such a dominant mode of understanding the killing force of capitalism that I think we overlook the extent to which dis-, re- and



transplanting has historically but also at this moment, been one of the primary agents of the scene we are in, which I call the Necrocene.

And while the Plantationocene in some ways takes us there and does the really important work of bringing a particular form of colonial capitalism, slavery, and forced enslavement into focus, it's not connected for many people's imaginations perhaps to the everyday and microscopic ways in which in the present, landscaping continues outside what might be called a plantation, taking this terrible work off our hands by giving us an apparent sign that all is well, but hiding the extent to which that verdancy is a mode of violent, destructive transformation, and in fact the opposite of what looks and thrives.

The way I have been thinking with both trans scholarship and a long Black radical tradition and Black trans feminist thought is profound work. I think that one of the things that we have been talking about, which is how to position yourself as a White person, is a really important issue that's at the center of hoping that there's not just a method, but also a politics that's more than just solidarity, a way of connecting across the different ways in which we are vulnerably situated. But I see vulnerability and transversal vulnerability as a way of making connections where they may not yet exist. I look at it that way and try to find something in between or moving across that argument that differences do not matter now because we are all at risk of extinction now. I refuse that politics that insists that thinking Blackness and in the space of Blackness is only the work of people of color. I join a number of scholars here, including Nicholas Mirzoeff,<sup>11</sup> who insist that the task is undoing Whiteness. And that that's a task for White people to do. I would say that the need of undoing Whiteness is also the need to work to undo and unlearn certain forms of fascist nationalism, as well as a regime of species exceptionalism and a policed regime of binary gender.

399

I would understand these as necessarily interlinked forms of oppression that, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore<sup>12</sup> so beautifully puts it, require an imaginary of abolition that I think also emerges excitingly from the other side of necrolandscaping. I

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *White Sight: Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberation*, eds. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London: Verso, 2022).

see in necrolandscaping and modes of being and becoming composted, modes of deformation, in thinking about what I call “going to seed,” a kind of latency, a coming apart that makes matter no longer readily harvestable and extractable, as a model for a different kind of cross-species but also vulnerable mode of working in the space of what is unworking us, and a kind of non-sovereign mode of dealing with what would seem to only destroy us.<sup>13</sup>

And while the site of the plantation is certainly an important site, I see in the work of Maria Thereza Alves,<sup>14</sup> which I discussed in my talk, an indication that what we think of as the sites transformed by colonization cannot be considered separately. For example, if you think of capitalism as a central waste system, then it’s about following the waste. So, for example, if you follow the ballast and the dumping of ballast, you can see in the small places where it breaks out how the covering green begins to break apart and we find instances of the kind of intrusions of difference that I see as small micro-locations of places of potential. And when I think of trans, I am really interweaving together trans, transgender, transculture, and transvulnerability with transculture, with trying to find some kind of mode of contact across in our different ways of being undone.<sup>15</sup>

### Queer Histories

**Gržinić:** That was so precise and wonderfully spelled out, this potentiality that is simply not visible or that is completely negated. Great. So if we move on, Anna, as you also talked a lot about queer history in your talk, a question: What and how do we do or what is this queer history? Things are not so clear, especially when we think about the former Eastern European context where there is no relationship to such possibility. There is only a relation to queer history in

<sup>13</sup> Casid, “Doing Things With Being Undone.”

<sup>14</sup> See also Jill H. Casid, “The Unsettling Anarthistorical Call of Acknowledgment in the Necrocene/Das Ent-Setzen: Der Ruf einer Anarthistory nach Anerkennung im Nekropozän,” *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 128 (December 2022): 108–21.

<sup>15</sup> Casid elaborates what they call thanatographic praxis via artist Joy Episalla’s work with the photogram or what Episalla calls the “foldtogram” a vulnerable material praxis of a kind of melancholy joy to unfold photography’s wild performativity as a way of living our dying through an unresigned care for the dead and disposable to alter the terms of our dying in the assembly of a queer trans\*feminist commons. See Jill H. Casid, “Thanatography: Working the Folds of Photography’s Wild Performativity in Capital’s Necrocene,” *Photography and Culture* 13, no. 2 (March 2020): 213–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17514517.2020.1754658>.

art practice, or when you go to the streets or maybe demand basic human rights that are really important. But then when we get into institutions, history and so on, how do you think and define the potentiality of queer history?

**Campbell:** Another moment where for me method ends up being really incredibly central in that say the difference between gay history or LGBT history and queer history would be that methodological commitment to pushing the boundaries of what is considered history or historical, what can be imagined or what can be understood as evidence, how we can position ourselves other than just as strictly objective observers from the outside, plays a really central role. One thing I can say, perhaps building on the work I have shared with you, is that when I am making editions, for example, I am not thinking about conventional monumentalism, where there's some kind of central, large, you know, public, unchanging, unmoving, entirely static kind of mark of a particular moment or to represent history. I am really thinking about a rhizomatically distributed, unstatic, potentially moving scenario.

For example, the handkerchief series *Pride, that old Bitch*,<sup>16</sup> was done on the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprisings<sup>17</sup> with the idea that we do not need bronze sculpture to monumentalize certain figures. What we do need, however, is some kind of ongoing, shared, relational, and communal connection rooted in a just uprising that advances the values and practices of people like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson.<sup>18</sup> So the legacy would be honored not by a series

<sup>16</sup> See "Pride, that old Bitch," Anna Campbell, accessed September 22, 2023, <https://annacampbell.net/Pride-that-old-Bitch>.

<sup>17</sup> Holding onto a certain version of Stonewall insists that the first pride was a riot. However, the central but obscured role of Black butch lesbians and trans women of color is at the heart of the contested commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots that took place at the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in New York City on the night of June 28, 1969. Consider, in contrast, Anna Campbell's sculpture *Battering Ram for Sylvia, for Marsha, for Stormé* (2018) composed of a parking meter, a mirror ball, steel, lumber, and hardware. See "Apparatus for a Dream Sequence," Anna Campbell, accessed September 22, 2023, <https://annacampbell.net/Apparatus-for-a-Dream-Sequence>.

<sup>18</sup> On the planned monuments to trans activists Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, see, for example, Scottie Andrew, "A Bust of Marsha P. Johnson Went Up near the Stonewall Inn as a Tribute to the Transgender Activist," CNN, August 30, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/28/us/marsha-p-johnson-bust-new-york-trnd/index.html>.

of literal whitewashed bronze sculptures in Christopher Street Park,<sup>19</sup> but by, for example, the tradition of marching, perhaps even more so by the Dyke March,<sup>20</sup> which refuses to get a permit and has marched without a permit and without collaboration with law enforcement since it has been held.

What that might look like outside the U.S. is hard for me to imagine or project. But I also think that many of my colleagues think that part of what might be really crucial to thinking about history is thinking about narratives that are less constrained by conventional forms of documents or evidence, and thinking about ancestors and thinking about modes of survival in ways that don't just, for example, help us replicate contemporary power structures, but help us imagine alternatives, so that a different kind of history might reinforce the idea of a missing queer history.

## Part 2

### Modes of Undoing

**Jovita Pristovšek:** Well, then we come now to the second part, which has to do with your work in relation to movements, to activist movements, to consider them as a possibility of opposition to the current state of affair. And since you both have already pointed out quite a few possible ways, also with regards to modes of undoing, ways of thinking, can we go at all beyond certain blockages, line of no trespass that come up in theory.

For example, in Afropessimism,<sup>21</sup> which presents the figure of the slave as a threshold that we cannot “pass,” or rather, “work with or through” if you are

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Street Park is now the site of the Stonewall National Monument. See “Christopher Park / Stonewall National Monument,” NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, accessed September 21, 2023, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/christopher-park/>.

<sup>20</sup> On the New York City Dyke March that started in 1993, see “Herstory of the Dyke March,” NYC Dyke March, accessed September 21, 2023, <https://www.nycdykemarch.com/herstory>.

<sup>21</sup> One of the beginnings of what came to be known as Afropessimism would be Saidiya V. Hartman's book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Hartman's conversation with Wilderson about the book's propositions regarding the afterlives of slavery. Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 183–201, <https://doi.org/10.1215/quiparle.13.2.183>. But a key foundational texts also include Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University

White. So I am interested in how you see your work in relation to Afropessimism. For example, can Afropessimism be seen as opposition to the current “state of mind” in the US, and can Marxism be seen as relevant opposition to neoliberal global capitalism? Perhaps we’ll start with you, Jill, and ask you another question, Anna.

**Casid:** Well, one of the difficulties with formulations like Afropessimism, I think, is that you can end up—and I do not mean to say that you do—making more of a monolith than may be there. I think the work of Saidiya V. Hartman, Frank B. Wilderson, and Che Gossett is very important in showing how anti-Blackness is not analogizable.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps I am still most excited by the way Christina Sharpe<sup>23</sup> describes anti-Blackness as an overall climate and within that total climate finds ways to work in and with what she describes as “the wake.” There is something about this particular kind of mourning work that speaks to me deeply. But I would also say that I find it exciting that it is not about overcoming the past, but thinking about how to work in it and with it. An important aspect of that is . . . I have learned, I think, to do the more humble, microscopic, limited, slower work of understanding each situation as one in which you not only have to check your privilege, but also find ways not to reinforce or repeat Whiteness.

And I suppose I also consider the work of Palestinian artists, but also Jewish scholars and artists in the Diaspora who refuse to accept Whiteness and think about how to refuse, but also the exceptional situation of the Holocaust as really important, it’s not about leaving behind the figure of the slave, but understanding relationally and transversally the carceral apartheid regime of our time, which is arguably not just the state of Israel, but certainly vitally centrally so.

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Press, 1982) and Sylvia Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” *Forum N. H. I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 42–73.

<sup>22</sup> Of the many key texts, see, for example, Saidiya V. Hartman, “The Dead Book Revisited,” *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (October 2016): 208–15, <https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.6.2.0208>; Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020); and Che Gossett, “Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign,” *Verso Blog*, September 8, 2015, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/2228-che-gossett-blackness-animality-and-the-unsovereign>.

<sup>23</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

And the example of the way the state of Israel has used necrolandscaping both as a means of extraction and as a means of planting trees to cover the uplifting of villages is a key example of how landscaping has been and continues to be a key aspect of propping that regime in our time.

But I also see, say, the work of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, their installation and artists' book *And Yet My Mask Is Powerful*, but also more recent work.<sup>24</sup> They're more known in a way for reanimating the archive of resistance in the modes of group assembly and dancing. But another important aspect of their practice that gets less attention is their interest in traces such as thistles and cacti that seemingly miraculously appear as signs of where to return to, and even as a way to create a space for the right of return by pushing through the thick cover of the Israeli state that disguise the remains of the removal of those villages. You can see the resistance in cacti and thistles emerging as a trace of a still present potential for thriving. I realize that I have been doing this all along, but I wanted to give, I suppose, a more sensory, potent but also different kind of image or figure for a way of thinking about transversal vulnerability that insists not only on this kind of miraculous dismantling of Whiteness, but on a microscopic undoing of Whiteness through a different kind of solidarity in the diaspora.<sup>25</sup>

### **Transversal Vulnerability**

**Pristovšek:** That opening of space you offer via transversal vulnerability is really, really important. Alessandra Raengo in one of the liquid blackness issues said that race is everybody's business because it is constructed with everybody's senses.<sup>26</sup>

**Casid:** Exactly.

**Pristovšek:** I very much appreciate this opening that you are putting forward. So I also wanted to ask you, Anna, about the artistic practices. What are the practices that influence your work? What practices do you think form an oppo-

<sup>24</sup> Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *And Yet My Mask is Powerful* (New York: Printed Matter, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Jill H. Casid, "With Palestine Still," in Larissa Sansour et al., "The JVC Palestine Portfolio," *Journal of Visual Culture* 20, no. 2 (August 2021): 363–66.

<sup>26</sup> Alessandra Raengo, "Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity," *Liquid Blackness* 1, no. 2 (April 2014): 5–18.

sition to the current state of mind, to capitalism, and of course are relevant to your practice?

**Campbell:** I was trained as a sculptor and I worked on a public art commission before I graduated. So the discussion about who the public is and what kind of art the public wants or needs and how that relates to the idea of monuments and memorials is kind of a cloud of questions that has been haunting me for quite a while. I would also say that this kind of loose affinity for practices that sculpture produces always plays very strongly with connections to and diversions from tradition. And part of that push and pull has to do with a kind of mechanical studio practice, you know, casting, etc. Both in my own work and in my teaching, I am critically connecting some of these traditions to digital fabrication processes. So things like sea and sea routing and laser cutting and 3D printing, where people negotiate a workflow that moves from digital to mechanical fabrication and sometimes back and forth a few times.

What's interesting about that is that at different periods of time, people have the skills or the capacity, the familiarity, maybe even the sense of permission or comfort to work in different ways, for example, with their hands or through a screen. And that leads to the fact that there's a kind of workflow that no one is good at because it requires such a wide range of modes of working. And so there's been at this point, I think, a lot of interesting scholarship around ideas of failure and thinking about how we might use these tools, which were in some ways really presented to us with this idea of a very utopic future. I mean, the promises that were made about what 3D printing would enable have evaporated into thin air. And now we are kind of back to that, but maybe there will be 3D-printed houses. So there's kind of a cycle of promises and realizing that we are still living in the same world where those promises cannot be realized because the problem was never producing more things. The problem was always workflow.

405

Now when I think about the discourse that this impossible workflow can bring into focus or make dominant for people, whether it's in the gallery or in the classroom, I honestly find that really exciting. We think about *The 3D Additivist Cookbook*<sup>27</sup> as a great example of the first moment of an articulation of counter

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<sup>27</sup> Morehshin Allahyari and Daniel Rourke, eds., *The 3D Additivist Cookbook* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2017), <https://additivism.org/cookbook>.

strategies and a kind of hacking in not just a screen-based way, but in a physical way, cultural expectations and power dynamics through this sort of media. And being able to do decolonial work, thinking about the ways that the accumulation of data is its own violence, and so how can artists who work with different forms of data push back against that. I think that there's also for me some really rich untapped kind of material metaphors around thinking, for example, the idea of the 3D printed object as a copy without an original, and how that might offer us some things around discourses of gender and authenticity that are potentially really quite rich.

There is something very exciting to show up in this moment where we have a series of technologies that end up being quite diagnostically helpful in terms of helping us understand how the culture is currently manifesting. One way maybe I can find a connection with Casid's work is the idea that to turn this plantation machine is a way to insist on it being a technology with a particular workflow with operators.<sup>28</sup> I similarly think this getting into working with contemporary technologies is a way to continue the conversation. Not only just in the ways that you structure your research but in any number of ways where critique may unfold.

### **Hacking and Games**

**Pristovšek:** I remember in your presentation in Ljubljana, I was struck by how the space is really gendered and how these everyday objects are gendered. I have to admit that I did not even realize that a simple object could have all these gendered meanings. I think that's the kind of agency we find in your practice with this mode of undoing, questioning of what is public sex and what is public gender.

406

**Campbell:** I think it's maybe often the case that for those who are, you know, not the intended users or operators, there's often the potential to kind of deconstruct a little bit. In the context of the studio. I think that's also why the very masculinist space of working with digital tools and digital design, and because it's such a strong example of gatekeeping, also ends up being a place where the

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<sup>28</sup> Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).



voices of people like Porpentine<sup>29</sup> or Anna Anthropy,<sup>30</sup> both transwomen who do a lot of work with hacking and games, bring very different questions, goals, etc. that end up being ways to peel away aspects of those interfaces that might otherwise be taken for granted.

### Part 3

**Vesna Liponik:** We are finally approaching “the body,” the crucial topic of the issue. So my question would be how to think the body and also agency and in connection to that, the relation between subjects and objects in the context of necropolitics and the Necrocene and what you are talking about. We have this humanistic construction of the subject and the body that is based on the objectification of the Black body and all that is not human. So how can we rethink and reconceptualize these concepts? What would be the alternatives if we do not want to fit into this tradition of liberal humanism?<sup>31</sup>

#### A Body Disintegrated, a Body Dispersed

**Casid:** I think that the imaginary of, to take the example of the work of Maria Thereza Alves that I talked about in the lecture, has something to do with the seeds unwittingly carried along in throwaway dirt that allows us to reproach not only the landscape but also the body via a figure that is so central and to think the dispersal of a group body.

So the ways that we describe displaced persons, people who have been flung across is the diaspora, right? The dispersed seed. And yet that dispersed seed is central to this hetero-patriarchal imaginary of a particular form of reproduction.

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<sup>29</sup> Porpentine Charity Heartscape is a video game designer, new media artist, writer and curator based in Oakland, California. See <https://xrafstar.monster/>.

<sup>30</sup> Anna Anthropy is a video game designer, role-playing game designer, and interactive fiction author and is the game designer in residence at the DePaul University College of Computing and Digital Media. See <https://w.itch.io/>.

<sup>31</sup> Liberal humanism encompasses the major philosophies of the bourgeois Enlightenment such as rationalism, empiricism, and utilitarianism; the economic principles of bourgeois ideology (such as rationality, laissez-faire, and free competition); the political principles of democracy, individual rights, and constitutional government; etc. The common feature of liberal humanism, then, is a commitment to “man” whose essence is freedom (of choice). It assumes that the subject is the free, unrestricted author of meaning and action, the origin of history.

And the seed, which is not only carried along without clear agency, but is also evidence of a destructive, extractive waste process that nonetheless weirdly endures because it can go into a kind of hibernation mode, feels like a kind of, of thinking of both the pre- and post- body, a body disintegrated, a body dispersed that is not just about a lostness, searching for an originary home, but a way of holding on and even emerging not necessarily into what we expect a body to look like.

And in that I see tremendous potential. I mean, the regime of the visible, surveilled body that looks like a body and it holds no promise for those of us who don't resemble that form. And that's why I see what I would call a process of a kind of queer or trans deformation too. And in that echo also the echo of the deformed, right?

The deformed that would be understood to be not only lacking the proper appropriate form, but to be more than grotesque, to be unable to perform what is expected so that alliance also with disability and ability feels really crucial here as a way of imagining something that's both anti- or before the human and after the human. And that's where I would also introduce yet another concept, which would be processes of inhumation. If you think of the English term "to inhume," that is the same term for what we would describe as despicable anti-human practices. It is also the term for burying in the ground. This idea that to destroy the human is to bring it down to the level of the humus, to the level of the earth. But that's precisely where we need to go. I mean, it's where we've been put despite ourselves. And yet, if we're going to hold ground, hold on to a destroyed planet and I don't see another place to go then getting down into the ground and into the earth feels like where we need to be. And so it's in that inhumation that's placed on us that I see a weird kind of potential, which is not the emergence of a body that looks like a body.

408

### **Melancholy**

**Liponik:** Thank you. That was perfectly said. Since you have already talked a little bit about the aesthetics and seeds, I'd like to ask you to maybe elaborate a little bit more on that in terms of form and content and also in terms of the concept of melancholy, which I think was very important to both of you.

**Casid:** I suppose part of the excitement here for me is thinking always with forms of matter, decayed, despised, deformed, out of place, but also out of time as a resource for a refusal to move on into the normal. And an aspect of that is aesthetic, but it's also for me affective. That is an understanding, in melancholy, a mode of relating that makes space for—maybe the best way to put this would be just—strange affective realignments. So ways that joy, rage, despair, I mean, I don't even know how to describe a kind of grief that is allowed no public space. That inconsolable and kind of mad grief that would hold with, stay with, stick with the forms of matter out of place in time that I think we all and those of us surveilled, despised also are. The relations then of form and content, I suppose it's a way of insisting on the deep form and the beyond discontent. You know, the what can't be contained. And I think one of the things that can't be contained now would be that surfeit of weird joy and mad grief. I think I'll stop there. I think there is a real contact point in our work. I keep thinking about, among many things, those urinal dividers that you did that feel pertinent here. By way of shorthand let's call it *You know it pisses you off* . . .<sup>32</sup>

**Campbell:** It's a sort of paragraph-long citation from the book *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*.<sup>33</sup> Well, there are two kinds of conflicting text in it. So I suppose that kind of fits also the sense of how aesthetics and motion might present mul-

<sup>32</sup> For the sculpture, see "Apparatus for a Dream Sequence," Anna Campbell, accessed September 22, 2023, <https://annacampbell.net/Apparatus-for-a-Dream-Sequence>.

<sup>33</sup> The full title is *You know it pisses you off, because like today, everything is so open and accepted and equal. Women, everyone goes to where they wear slacks, and I could just kick myself in the ass, because of all the opportunities I had that I had to let go because of my way. That if I was able to dress the way I wanted and everything like that I, Christ, I'd have it made, really. Makes you sick. And you look at the young people today that are gay and they're financially well-off, they got tremendous jobs, something that we couldn't take advantage of, couldn't have it. It leaves you with a lot of bitterness too. I don't go around to the gay bars much any more. It's not jealousy, it's bitterness. And I see these young people, doesn't matter which way they go, whatever the mood suits them, got tremendous jobs, and you just look at them, you know, they're happy kids, no problems. You say 'God damn it, why couldn't I have that?' And you actually get bitter, you don't even want to know them. I don't anyway. 'Cause I don't want to hear about it, don't tell me your success. Like we were talking about archives, you know where mine is, scratched on a shit-house wall, that's where it is. And all the dives in Buffalo that are still standing with my name. That's it, that's all I got to show." Kennedy, Elizabeth L., and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin, 1994). See "You Know It Pisses You Off," Anna Campbell, accessed September 22, 2023, <https://annacampbell.net/You-know-it-pisses-you-off>.*

tiple semi-conflicting narratives, but it's a series of urinal dividers that are done in this really maybe the turn of the 20th-century sort of deeply, deeply complex wood inlay with different ribbed in lines of text. And the text is pulling from the English translation of Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*.<sup>34</sup> And so it's this incredibly charged language about doing and being undone with another person and a kind of plane taking a part of the body and the erotic and connective power of that. Losing yourself in this other person or through this other person in a way that also is not shy about the violence of how that might happen or feel. As a strong way of acknowledging its potency. And so if you wish to read the text and it's, you know, it's meant to be very pretty. It's meant to kind of really draw you in, you end up positioning your body really tightly in this constrained area that puts you either on display to other people in the space or very, very close to someone who might be looking at the adjacent panels. And so there's something about risk and vulnerability that gets insisted on spatially. But I want to return to the title that I mentioned, and it's a quote by a butch lesbian who would have come of age now decades ago and is talking to these researchers. And, you know, there's a generational gap between myself and these researchers and then the person that they're talking to and the discourse is this really enraged insistence that what is available and accessible to contemporary lesbians and contemporary being this other generational moment so exceeds what she had access to and what she had to give up in order to be herself. And that that would have been in describing the culture in which women are not allowed to wear pants and that that being a sort of astonishing transgression. And what it does for me is that it kind of enunciates this almost unthinkable debt to another generation that couldn't possibly be repaid. The final line is something like, you know, all these archives, my archive is carved into a shit house door. And so it also instructs at the same time for people who are looking at these dividers to also think about that gap of what is not in the archive, what people might have used alternately as archival spaces and to read the urinal dividers, then also differently. And then I suppose it's worth tagging that the architectural device of the urinal divider is also not one that's supposed to be accessible to anyone who identifies as a woman. So it's also inviting that other space of transgression as well. That I think does on the one hand a kind of proto-trans solidarity in the work and a retroactive sort of openness of thinking expansively about the source of the quote and

410

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<sup>34</sup> Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, trans. David Le Vay (New York: William Morrow, 1975).

really pushing, I think, some difficult historical context at the same time that it acknowledges what Audre Lorde would call the power of the erotic.<sup>35</sup>

#### Part 4

**Gržinić:** I want to close the interview by going back to Jill's practice. Jill, we did not actually get to ask you about your film work. And your film work is impressive because it has this theoretical influence, of course, but the way you put the images, the text, and the essayistic element together is not just a realization, but really a deep exploration of the ways in which we can work with the images and how we contextualize them as we try to also pursue questions that arise from your theoretical work. So it would be very important to reflect on your methodology. How do you enter the film practice, what is your approach to your films from your point of view, from your theoretical point of departure? How do you work, what kind of aesthetics do you actually construct? Do you have a name for the way you call your films, if we can look at your work, because they are more than just the experimental film? That's how I see them. They are like little engines. I like this term from Donna Haraway when she talks about the coyote.

#### Sensory Machines of Deformation and Destruction

**Casid:** Oh, well, I mean, the small engine is beautiful. I should acknowledge here, and I'm excited to acknowledge here, working with Jack Kellogg on the films I have been working as an artist practitioner really my whole career and in fact started out working collaboratively. I have in some ways found it impossible to think at all without thinking in terms of images, and yet also almost always with images that give us a sense of the other side of the image. And that's not necessarily apprehensive all at all by the sense of sight and images that destroy dominant images. Images that are their own little sensory machines of deformation and destruction. I called the first film *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)* (2020–21),<sup>36</sup> and if I were to describe the aesthetics, but also the method of both

<sup>35</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984), 53–59. This paper was delivered in August 1978.

<sup>36</sup> The film debuted in *Chapter 5, Melancholy as Medium*, conceived by Jill Casid for *Indisposable: Structures of Support after the Americans with Disabilities Act*, Ford Foundation Gallery, curated by Jessica A. Cooley and Ann M. Fox, NYC, June 2021. Featuring Jill Casid, Pamela Sneed, Abdul Aliy Muhammad and Pato Hebert from the What Would

that I screened and I'm in the process of doing research work for a third, I would say that they're all working with melancholy as a medium, not just as a topic or theme, but as a method. And by that I would say that it's not nostalgia, though. I do work with outmoded technologies.

So each of the films is also constructed in part out of a photo practice with a strange camera introduced in the 1970s. That was the first device to do what our cell phones do now and that we take for granted, and that is to condense into the same device the capacity to take, make and socially circulate images, but did so in a quite different way, which is to make a vulnerable original that has in some ways none of the properties of what we associate with photography, and that is seriality and reproduction. And the Polaroid SX-70 excites me too, because of the ways in which it—well it's supposedly the amateur's magnificent machine that releases you from making any decisions. It's also incredibly unreliable and deeply vulnerable to the weather and the fact that it often pulls away from the image it supposedly captures. The ways that it bleeds, oozes sticks. It does something I think, to insist on returning us to our material condition. I'm working with melancholy as medium as a way of refusing to move into a version of an image regime. So now photography is the sea within which we swim.

But photography that's lifted off from and is not only extractive in terms of data, but continues to lift off from the tethered, vulnerable materiality that we still live in. And so I see as a key task of melancholy as medium to return us to a felt recognition of that tethering. And so I've also often described them as films that I really want to be small, to be intimate, to refuse the illusion of being able to

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an HIV Doula Do collective, fierce pussy (with core founding members Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Zoe Leonard and Carrie Yamaoka), Pamela Sneed, and Heather Lynn Johnson. See "Indisposable: Structures of Support after the ADA, Chapter 5; Melancholy as Medium," Ford Foundation, June 9, 2021, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/the-ford-foundation-center-for-social-justice/ford-foundation-gallery/events/indisposable-structures-of-support-after-the-ada-chapter-5/>; "Indisposable: Structures of Support after the Americans with Disabilities Act," Ford Foundation, accessed September 22, 2023, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/the-ford-foundation-center-for-social-justice/ford-foundation-gallery/exhibitions/indisposable-structures-of-support-after-the-ada/>. On the film, see also Jill H. Casid, "Melancholy as Medium," in "Exploring Indisposability: The Entanglements of Crip Art," eds. Jessica A. Cooley and Ann M. Fox, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.13243>.

move into and through the screen on a mode of microcinema that returns us to the body not as a sovereign container, but as a delicate, vulnerable, dispersed, itchy, squirmy, uncomfortable, but also a special place.

I could keep going, but I would maybe also describe the films as essays, as film essays, but a film essay that ultimately creates the situation for a different kind of relationality between the matter of the screen image and the matter of our vulnerable, tethered bodies, and for that work have also been thinking a tremendous amount with disability justice work, disability justice aesthetics that would see in image and audio description a key mode of access that doesn't necessarily make everything transparent, but instead makes for a denser, thicker sensory experience.

And yet, while I'm deeply invested in that destigmatization of melancholy, I think I'm still so deeply, resistantly attached to a version of a queer practice that is invested in the potentials of the negative that I don't understand that version of accessibility to be utopian. I understand it to be resistant and difficult and to even exacerbate a sense of the inadequacy of the kinds of supports that we have. So I would also understand that melancholy as medium to be an exacerbating force.

### **Care for the Irreparable**

**Gržinić:** I would like to thank you, especially for this last part, because you have a very clear position, especially in a Slovenian context that stays with theoretical psychoanalysis and where melancholy is a kind of taboo. This means that melancholy is worked up in the Freudian sense and is also theoretically something that is always pushed aside, and it means that melancholy today is a form that cooperates very strongly with neoliberal global capitalism. The way you outlined and explained the topic, also why to think and use it, I think was an important point to conclude the interview. To get to the idea of also thinking historically and trying to understand this, as you say, power of the negative, which in a way opens up other possibilities, also because of neoliberal global capitalism imposing positivism.

**Casid:** Optimize any and everything. Exactly. As if we can get all discomfort somehow miraculously wished away and that somehow everything can be repaired. And yet I'm insisting on a certain space of the irreparable and care for the irreparable.

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**Echoes**



Nina Cvar\*

## Extended Review of *Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies*

### Keywords

body, race, decolonization, modernity, Eurocentrism, trans\*, futures

### Abstract

This article offers a comprehensive review of *Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies*, the latest book, a volume edited by Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek in intensive collaboration with Nomusa Makhubu and Tjaša Kancler, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2023. This volume takes as its starting point the body as a structural signifier, which is conceptualized in seven chapters. Each of them addresses the question of movement, politics, revolt, action, etc., in a variety of ways to de-link ourselves (especially us Whites) from colonial modernity as the organizing principle not only of capitalism but of a whole range of processes that emanate from modernity, i.e., forms of domination and oppression such as racism, sexism, Eurocentrism, and environmental destruction. What makes this book special, however, is not only the positions presented but also the way in which they are presented. Each conversation begins with a carefully selected starting point, linked to the interlocutor's\* work and accompanied by a rich citation system of references and additional information. This opens up the formation of epistemic counter-narratives that confront the violent history of capitalism and form possibilities for yet unidentified bodies, movements, politics, and political action as future potentialities.

419

## Razširjena recenzija knjige *Politične koreografije, dekolonialne teorije, trans telesa*

### Ključne besede

telo, rasa, dekolonizacija, modernost, Eurocentrizem, trans\*, prihodnosti

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## Povzetek

Članek ponuja celovit pregled najnovejše knjige *Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies*, ki je leta 2023 izšla pri založbi Cambridge Scholars Publishing, uredili pa sta jo Marina Gržinić in Jovita Pristovšek v intenzivnem sodelovanju z Nomuso Makhubu in Tjašo Kanclerjem. Knjiga izhaja iz telesa kot strukturnega označevalca, ki je konceptualiziran v sedmih poglavjih. Vsako od njih na različne načine obravnava vprašanje gibanja, politike, upora, akcije itd., z namenom, da bi se (zlasti mi, belci) razvezali od kolonialne modernosti kot organizacijskega načela ne le kapitalizma, temveč cele vrste procesov, ki izvirajo iz modernosti, tj. oblik dominacije in zatiranja, kot so rasizem, seksizem, evropocentrizem in uničevanje okolja. Posebnost te knjige pa niso le predstavljena stališča, temveč tudi način, na katerega so predstavljena. Vsak pogovor se začne s skrbno izbranim izhodiščem, ki je povezano z delom sogovornika, sogovornice ali skupine, spremlja pa ga bogat sistem navajanja referenc in dodatnih informacij. S tem se opira oblikovanje epistemskih kontranarativov, ki se soočajo z nasilno zgodovino kapitalizma in oblikujejo možnosti za še neidentificirana telesa, gibanja, politike in politično delovanje kot potencialnost, ki prihaja.



Nothing is, nothing is safe  
 Nothing is sacred  
 Nothing is safe, nothing to pray for, nothing is safe, nothing is  
 Nothing is<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt from clipping., an experimental hip-hop group from Los Angeles, describes the structural conditions of so-called historical capitalism, which, according to Ramón Grosfoguel, is “the result of the civilizational logic of modernity as a civilization of death.”<sup>2</sup> Historical capitalism is not only about an economic system—contrary to what 20th century Marxism thought—but also about

420

<sup>1</sup> Lyrics from clipping., hip hop trio, “Nothing is Safe,” by Daveed Diggs, Jonathan Snipes, and William Hutson, released August 14, 2019, as the first single from the album *There Existed an Addiction to Blood*, Sub Pop SP1330.

<sup>2</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, “Insurgent Flows. Trans\*Decolonial and Black Marxist Futures: A Conversation with Ramón Grosfoguel,” conversation by Marina Gržinić and Tjaša Kancler, in *Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies*, ed. Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2023), 205.

the fact that modernity is the organizing principle that produces different hierarchies of power and that literally no one or nothing can escape.

However, if one had to identify the core point of these power relations, it would undoubtedly be the body.

Since Foucault, the body has functioned as an inscribed surface of events of historical tensions and social transformations—the body is never just a body, it is a site where various discourses and power relations collide and a site of resistance.

Yet, there is no resistance without knowing the genealogy of oppression. We live in the time of neoliberal global capitalism, and in conversation with Bogdan Popa, Marina Gržinić notes that in neoliberal global capitalism, we have nothing but our bodies.<sup>3</sup> Or, to paraphrase, what we have is the fear of losing our bodies, as the body not only reveals the cartography of power of modernity, but is also a site of power. What *Political Choreographies, Decolonial Theories, Trans Bodies*, the latest book, a volume edited by Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek in intense collaboration with Nomusa Makhubu and Tjaša Kancler, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2023, does, and it does efficiently, is that it provides a nuanced genealogy of the modernity colonial matrix of power.

The body can thus be understood as this volume's structural signifier, treated in seven chapters, each of which addresses the question of what kind of body, movement, and politics can be conceived to emancipate ourselves (mostly us Whites) from modernity as the organizing principle not only of capitalism but of a whole range of processes that emanate from modernity, i.e., forms of domination and oppression such as racism, sexism, Eurocentrism, environmental destruction.

What is special about the book, however, is not only the positions presented but also the way in which they are presented. Each conversation begins with a carefully selected starting point linked to the interlocutor's work and accompanied

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<sup>3</sup> Marina Gržinić in Bogdan Popa, "Insurgent Flows. Trans\*Decolonial and Black Marxist Futures: A Conversation with Bogdan Popa," conversation by Marina Gržinić and Tjaša Kancler, in Gržinić and Pristovšek, *Political Choreographies*, 150.

by a rich citation system of references and additional information. This contributes to the epistemic treasury of counter-histories of historical capitalism and promotes possible forms of body(s), movement(s), and politics/political action in today's neoliberal (technocratic) global world.

Moreover, by including not one but at least two interviewers in each of the conversations conducted, an epistemic and political openness is ensured that fosters a much-needed de-articulation of some of the most fundamental Eurocentric academic knowledge conditions, which in their economic system are indispensable to the creation and reproduction of inequalities under the guise of modernity.

This process of de-articulation is reinforced by interlinking theory and practice, as some of the correspondents are activists or artists. What they all have in common, however, is that they provide an in-depth overview of positions and current developments in decolonial theory, Black Marxism, trans\* studies, and contemporary performance research and practice, following the conceptual vectors of thought of race, class, and trans\*, and moving along the lines of the colonial/racial divide.

This process of epistemic de-articulation thus takes place on two levels: the conceptual level, which includes a glossary of terms that act as a conceptual, epistemological guide, and the level of the form itself, which, needless to say, is not unimportant in undermining the conditions of neoliberal global capitalism that reproduces itself by rendering content obsolete.

This thesis on the redundancy of content in neoliberal global capitalism is also about the need to re-read Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, as first pointed out by Marina Gržinić in her 2009 "Capital, Repetition."<sup>4</sup> But with the rapid spread of digital technologies into all social spheres, digitalization has prioritized form over content even more, mandated individualized communication, and diminished or even abandoned thinking about the social itself. Needless to say, this suits global capitalism very well, as its globality, its transposition of finance capital, is saved and protected by these processes of endless individualized fragmentation and fixation. How can one question this configuration of death, all sorts of violent dispossession of everything worth expropriating?

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<sup>4</sup> Marina Gržinić, "Capital, Repetition," *Reartikulacija* 8 (2009): 3–4.



All the interviews presented could be seen as testimonies to the barbarism of modernity, but their reflections also ceaselessly attempt to break through the façade of the inevitability of modernity, which virtually perpetuates the entanglement of capital and power. If entanglement is, according to Achille Mbembe, “an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other pasts, presents, and futures,”<sup>5</sup> then as such it functions almost like Walter Benjamin’s mechanism of redemption, prompting us to reflect on the interplay of pasts, presents, and futures and to strive for certain connections between disastrous forces just to stop their repetition and advance futures beyond modernity.

Interrogating the body from angles of history, politics, protest and dance, music, performance, and visual art in the entanglement of this harrowing global moment of a “sunken place,” adhering to “the feeling that your body does not belong to you and your space does not belong to you. Your whole being seems to have been colonized and appropriated by others,”<sup>6</sup> opens a space for empowerment and, above all, democracy.

The opening of the book brings a glossary to facilitate the entrance in the next six chapters.

The first interview, in chapter two, “Other Knowledge, First Move” with Nomusa Makhubu, probes the power relations between post-apartheid South African and African art and Western art that cannot be understood without its own structural debt to the regime of Whiteness and the Western colonial matrix of power. Makhubu’s mapping of the contemporary African art scene is always accompanied by a radical epistemology that entails new interventions at the level of reproduction, which is delegated by race and reproduces itself under entirely mechanistic terms. The structural inevitability of racial differences created by colonization and imperialism is emphasized, especially to subvert racial categories and intervene in the existing, constructed nature of racial categories manifested in Whiteness.

The pressing question, however, as always, is about the future—the future of art and strategies in South Africa or in Africa. The unfolding of the future, how-

<sup>5</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 83–84.

<sup>6</sup> Popa, “Conversation with Bogdan Popa,” 143.

ever, is inextricably linked to the present, and it is at this point that Makhubu intervenes. By disclosing the entanglement of art, institutions, and governance with the Western epistemic and political heritage, the future is about questioning, and consequently leaving behind, the constructed limitations imposed on worlds forcibly subjected to racial difference.

Different bodies are assigned different meanings that translate into different actions, with radical implications for marginalized bodies. The presentation of different positions opposing global capitalism is one of the great features of this volume. In chapter three, “Bodies in and as Political Intensities,” artists from different parts of Asia not only presented their research on bodies, politics, transnational culture, community, technology, and performative tools of analysis in conversation with Mika Maruyama, but also challenged Western modernity in Asia. But how can Western modernity in Asia be understood, and how is it to be understood? How does a global disruption like the Covid-19 pandemic affect marginalized, particularly quarantined LGBTQI+ bodies, and what is the role of performance art in uncovering connections between structures and legacies of violence, as well as in seeking forms of persistence and resistance? The conversations with Xiao Ke, Eisa Jocson, Yuki Kobayashi, Yu Cheng-Ta and siren eun young jung provide detailed insight into specific assemblages of histories and experiences of resistance related to the local background of each of the featured positions.

Similarly, the conversation with Karla Max Aschenbrenner in the chapter four, “Asian Roots and European Ignorance,” moderated by Gržinić and Pristovšek, continues the discussion on Asian roots and the European matrix of power, exposing constructions of power with a particular focus on the relation between art, politics, and critical historicization of the Western art canon. This relation is addressed through the distinction between theater and the performing arts, arguing that theater can be associated with the Western *dispositif*, while the performing arts can be viewed in a much broader spectrum. This stated difference can be identified as key to this paper because it opens up the relationship between politics and art and leads to examining the relevance of some fundamental Enlightenment concepts, such as emancipation.

Given “the tireless self-destruction of enlightenment,”<sup>7</sup> due to their contamination by the colonial/racial divide, are these Western concepts still relevant? Aschenbrenner contends that the Enlightenment is relevant only insofar as the duality of its own dialectic is considered, which means emphasizing the unique structural synonymy between the West and the practice of philosophy. Aschenbrenner clearly refers to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s text “Can the Subaltern Speak,”<sup>8</sup> but contribution to contemporary times can be identified in its interlinking to politics of art via advanced explanation of processes of colonization applied to the dispositif of theater.

Chapter five, “Insurgent Flows. Trans\*Decolonial and Black Marxist Futures,” moderated by Gržinić and Kancler, consists of eight subchapters by eight positions that aim to rethink the relationships between trans\*decolonial insurgent politics and strategies, decolonial feminist struggles, and Black thought with reference to Black Marxism and 1990s post-socialism.

This chapter also connects theory and practice. Starting with Basha Changuerra, readers are introduced to strategies of self-organization of the Black, African, and Afro-descendant community in Spain through the organization Comunidad Negra Africana y Afrodescendiente en España (CNAAE). The challenge of articulating an autonomous Black political subject at the intersection of the individual and collective levels can be seen as the theoretical glue that holds together this particular chapter, which begins with the reawakened multitude that took to the streets *en masse* after the murder of George Floyd. This tragic event, however, is subjected to close historical analysis in order to tease out the patterns of colonialism, fascism, White supremacy, and the politics of memory. Nevertheless, as with all contexts presented previously, the materiality of singularity is always considered and thus never subjected to simplification.

425

The conversation with Danijela Almesberger continues with dissecting homophobic, neoliberal, fascist, discriminatory, and other realities in the former Yugoslavia. Similar to the interview with Basha Changuerra, the conversation with

<sup>7</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice,” *Wedge* 7–8 (Winter/Spring 1985): 120–30.

Almesberger offers insight into the post-Yugoslav homo-transphobic context through the lens of the work of the Lesbian Organization Rijeka (LORI), whose goal is to inform and raise public awareness about the acceptance of sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQI+). LORI works to eliminate prejudice and homo/bi/transphobia, as well as discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender/gender identity, and/or gender expression, in order to enable full equality before the law.

By presenting the organization's activities, such as the first international queer and feminist festival in Rijeka, various structural relationships are revealed. Particularly meaningful is the analysis of a larger political structure in Croatia, which could be applied to other post-socialist countries by analyzing the rise of ultra-conservative, radical right ideology and its material manifestations under the conditions of primitive accumulation processes that Yugoslavia faced during its disintegration and later,<sup>9</sup> accompanied by the reintroduction of capitalism in these regions.

Relations between sexual and social transgressions within capitalist accumulation are discussed in a conversation with Nat Raha. Raha is interested in how sexual subjects are constituted, and in her research, referring to Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*,<sup>10</sup> provides an interesting account of how desire is controlled. Raha's focus on desire is thus not only an insightful critique of the existing interpretation of the concept of desire in psychoanalysis but also an attempt to ground the concept beyond the entanglement of heteronormativity and capitalism. In this way, Raha brings in the discussion on Marxist feminism but emphasizes that a path toward Queer Marxism cannot be envisioned when queer sexualities are not addressed, resulting in the invisibility of queerness, transness, race, and disability. Raha then describes the material relations of survival and sexuality under capitalism, underscoring its compelling contextualization and concretization of the broader scene of queer and trans\* social reproduction under racial capitalism. The concluding remark about

426

<sup>9</sup> The thesis of primitive accumulation and the connection with the criticism of the transition to capitalism in the former Yugoslavia was elaborated by various researchers, from Ana Veselinović, Ana Podvršič, to Rastko Močnik, etc.; this topic was also treated in connection with fascism by authors such as Marina Gržinić, Žarana Papić, Šefik Tatlić and others.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

racial capitalism affirms Raha's critical view of capitalism and brilliantly opens the following five conversations, beginning with Bogdan Popa, who throughout the interview conducted emphasizes the importance of dialectical thinking and historicizing in order to think about what comes next—the revolution.

In “Vampiric Necropolitics: A Map of Black Studies Critique from Karl Marx’ Vampire to *Get Out*’s Politics of the Undead,”<sup>11</sup> Bogdan Popa, along with Kerry Mackereth, shows a shift from a Marxist conception of labor and racial exploitation to a critique of the exploitation of the body and the politics of death toward Black people in the United States. As Popa argues, this shift is actually necropolitical, but he and Mackereth were able to show that the Marxist image of the capitalist exploiting workers by sucking their labor power was replaced by a new image of a vampiric capitalist. This visualization allows them to propose two model types of capitalism: the first is a classical Marxian model in which capital is a dead labor force that vampire capitalists suck out of the living labor force, while the second model is best demonstrated in Jordan Peele’s 2017 film *Get Out*, in which White capitalists reproduce their power by literally sucking the mind, soul and the body of Black people. The term “sunken place” is an exemplary conceptual site for the second identified model of capitalism, which involves the production of racism as a function of ordinary and normalized racial capitalism in the United States. What the conversation in the book reveals, however, is that “sunken place” could very well be considered one of the central features of contemporary global capitalism, embodying, to use Gržinić’s term, a shift from labor to affect<sup>12</sup> and, as Popa argues, also linked to technology, technology being essential for the reproduction of contemporary capitalism, which underlines the arguments of Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, where they identified the structural relation between the so-called productive forces and condition of society in distinct historical formations.<sup>13</sup>

427

In the conversation with Aigul Hakimova, both current and historical issues concerning migration and European asylum policy are addressed. As in the con-

<sup>11</sup> Bogdan Popa and Kerry Mackereth, “Vampiric Necropolitics: A Map of Black Studies Critique from Karl Marx’ Vampire to *Get Out*’s Politics of the Undead,” *National Political Science Review* 20, no. 3 (2019): 165–79.

<sup>12</sup> Marina Gržinić in Popa, “Conversation with Bogdan Popa,” 139.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 3rd rev. ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976).

versations with Changuerra and Almesberger, the importance of the symbiosis of theory and practice is emphasized, on the one hand, the work in rescue and support teams trying to help people fleeing war, violence and destruction, and on the other hand, dealing with robust migration policies, with Hakimova explaining in detail the specifics of individual countries along the Balkan Route. Another invaluable element of this chapter is the detailed account of successful community practices as well as geopolitical relations in the European Union, as manifested in the elaboration of the legal framework (from the Dublin Regulation to the EU Migration Pact), the political processes of the rising of right-wing politicians in the EU, and the EU's relationship with the UK and the US in terms of its geopolitical role in the transmission of global power relations manifested in today's border regimes. As with all of the book's contributions, the goal is to find a way out of this confluence of global malaise.

Continuing with Piro Rexhepi's interview, Rexhepi introduces us to anti-Muslim racism and anti-colonial resistance. He does so by first defining what anti-Muslim racism is historically and how it operates today. By innovatively contextualizing anti-Muslim racism and homonationalism in relation to socialist and post-socialist Yugoslavia, Rexhepi extends his theoretical efforts. Building on four key conceptual lines of research, namely capitalism/socialism, colonialism, and race, Rexhepi illustrates the epistemic mechanism on the basis of which the Occident is defined, which is always directed against the Orient, and, most importantly, how various types of racism are generated, including the racialization of Muslims. This configuration of power is the basis on which anti-Muslim racism continues to operate today, notwithstanding what may be reconfigured racist tropes. In doing so, Rexhepi prepares a methodologically robust foundation for discussing a relatively neglected topic, namely how socialist Yugoslavia dealt with Muslims and understood socialist emancipation. It is precisely this aspect that illustrates the differences in the way capitalism and socialism are "modern" and the relations of socialism to decoloniality. But for Rexhepi, the only future for overcoming racialized, gendered, and embodied forms of domination that have emerged from colonial capitalism is trans\*decoloniality.

This extended review of the book began with Ramón Grosfoguel's radical critique of modernity. Grosfoguel's viewpoint could be defined as decolonized historical and dialectical materialism. On the one hand, Grosfoguel provides a detailed historical account of the power relations of modernity; on the other hand,

he points out the shortcomings of Western Marxism. Grosfoguel draws on the concept of epistemic extractivism, which, it could be argued, provides a general theoretical framework for Grosfoguel's theoretical work and its ramifications by pointing out that the extraction of concepts must be understood along with the processes of extraction under capitalism. In any case, this model functions as a model of power relations that illustrates the dynamics of racial capitalism. Grosfoguel, along with Cedric J. Robinson,<sup>14</sup> argues that capitalism is never just an economic system, but also a civilization, and this civilization is inherently linked to racism, and delegated by modernity, as the "organizing principle of historical capital."<sup>15</sup> What Grosfoguel does is to create a different cartography of power in order to avoid 20th century mistakes and unresolved problems.

By bringing the notion of the "interlocking matrix of domination" into the debate, he not only highlights the powerful legacy of Black radical feminism, but also raises questions about the threshold of what it means to be human, even as we are once again warned about the danger of epistemic extractivism and its depoliticizing effect that prevents the formation of a coalition of the oppressed to fight against the death logic of modernity.

Conversation with Ruth Wilson Gilmore also takes a central conceptual approach, with Gilmore's unpacking of what she calls carceral geographies. First, Gilmore explains what carceral geographies are, and does so by identifying the institutions of carceral geographies, as "diverse, including, analytically, normative regimes of sexuality to seemingly natural but actually social relations we call 'race.'"<sup>16</sup>

The importance of Gilmore's proposed explanatory approach lies in its simultaneous analysis of racial capitalism, particularly with the notion of the "extraction of time." Gilmore's theoretical efforts, discussed through the dispositif of detention, take a fresh look at the category, which, at least in critiques of neoliberal global capitalism, is thought of in terms of acceleration. In this way, Gil-

<sup>14</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Grosfoguel, "Conversation with Ramón Grosfoguel," 205.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Insurgent Flows. Trans\*Decolonial and Black Marxist Futures: A Conversation with Ruth Wilson Gilmore," conversation by Marina Gržinić and Tjaša Kancler, in Gržinić and Pristovšek, *Political Choreographies*, 219.

more is able to show how time, space, and being are interconnected and how these categories become the object of commodification, class division, and racialization, leading to unique processes in the shaping of futures, including the delegation of forms of death.

But can this structurally delegated death be defeated and an emancipatory future unlocked? Gilmore, like Grosfoguel and Robinson in particular, emphasizes the importance of consciousness, a consciousness that does not imply essentialism, but rather a kind of brotherhood and sisterhood of understanding historical geographies and thus opening up different futures. Or to quote Robinson via Gilmore: “It’s not the experience, it’s the consciousness. If it were just about the experience, capitalism would be over.”<sup>17</sup>

In relation to the trend toward extractivism in global capitalism, Macarena Gómez-Barris’s contribution on the so-called extractive zones in chapter six, titled “Other Knowledge, Second Move,” is of great importance. Quoting Gómez-Barris: “Extractive zones are sites of colonial and neocolonial plunder, but these are also highly contested spaces, often defended and protected by Black and Indigenous peoples and social movements as land and water stewards within regions and territories rich in natural and finite earth resources such as rare minerals.”<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Gómez-Barris seeks to identify what she calls the extractive gaze, the gaze of a dominant point of view and, especially how the signifiers of extractive zones are looked at. This gaze can therefore be understood as a channel of power that is structurally intertwined with art and its institutions, once again underscoring the genealogy of coloniality as a matrix of power.

Gómez-Barris takes the “given reality of coloniality” and twists it to go beyond the colonial condition and open up a different future—a future that is not the reality of White supremacy, war, and toxicity, but a future of care, as Raha, Makhubu, or Gilmore would have it.

<sup>17</sup> Cedric J. Robinson in Gilmore, 236.

<sup>18</sup> Macarena Gómez-Barris, “Other Knowledge, Second Move. A Conversation with Macarena Gómez-Barris,” conversation by Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek, in Gržinić and Pristovšek, *Political Choreographies*, 241.



The ideas presented in this conceptually rich book challenge not only Western notions of what it means to be human, but rather, who gets to be human. Yet, Western ideas historically tend to be mediated in a particular way, which makes the format of mediation equally important. Indeed, it seems that this dialectical relationship is ingrained in the Western matrix of power, and that perhaps the only way out is to work on both at the same time—the question of the idea and the question of its formalization.

The book concludes with the aim of excavating new, decolonial, trans\* futures by twisting power relations in art and engaging in a dialog, or a triologue, etc., with a public interview with the Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa, heard and commented on by an audience of at least 100 people in the public space of an academic institution (the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna). ruangrupa has curated documenta fifteen, 2022's world exhibition of contemporary art, which has been held in Kassel every five years since 1955. ruangrupa's activities address some of the relevant issues of the Western matrix of power, but in a way that holds up a mirror to its own symptoms—after all, as we learned from Rexhepi, the West always defines itself through constructing the Other(ness), which is nothing more than an act of aggressively emptying everything that is not the West (that is an equally constructed notion).

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