PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY

WOUNDED OBJECTS: MEXICAN AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS OF DISPOSABLE LIFE

SUSAN ANTEBI UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

In this article, I consider visual and textual figurations of wounding, disability and death and their impact on the recognizability and valorization of human lives. I attend to transformed perceptions of temporal continuity and qualifications of the lifespan through select documents from Mexico and the US-Mexico borderlands. The analysis centers on what I call the wounded object, appearing through a violent cross-section of the living and the dead, the human and the artifact, suspending the divide between singular identity and uncountable anonymity. Following an introduction of the concept of the wounded object, my discussion continues with an analysis of the function of wounded objects through statistical renditions of mortality rates compiled by the Mexican government, as in other global contexts in the COVID-19 era. Here, "co-morbidities" such as diabetes and heart disease violently pre-assign some bodies to deceased status, even as multiple, layered factors shape the conditions of such human disposability, while also blurring relations of causality linking conditions to outcomes. I then turn to an image from a contemporary lithograph by Linda Lucia Santana referencing the famed mid-19th-century Mexican borderlands outlaw and lynching victim, Joaquin Murrieta. I offer this work as a mode of representation that frames the racialized body through performed gestures of spectacularity and anonymity, the one and the many, evoking the wounded object and its denunciation of violent injustice.

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The juxtaposition of these disparate references, from tables of numbers to a lithograph, underscores the simultaneously tangible and abstract qualities of wounding, and the malleability of the wounded object, a concept that attends to ambivalent transitions between flesh and inanimate matter. In each instance, wounding confounds the distance between the specificity and the anonymity of the body, between human life and remains, as well as between the violence occurring in the here and now, and the ambivalence of events that may have already happened or not yet taken place. My theory of such objects, rather than seeking to enliven matter, pays attention to the perception of life in proximity to death. This approach is motivated in part by a sense that a new materialist privileging of the liveliness of matter, while useful to our understanding of the agency of non-human objects, risks blurring over human inequalities that condition access to liveliness as unbounded flourishing.[1] The role of the wounded object—its action and effect—instead is to demand attention to an unequally distributed human disposability, and to the suspension of death in life. In this sense, the wounded object in its performative function makes imperative our critical witnessing of asymmetrical mortality.

The example of statistics in COVID times suggests a biopolitical technology of power, in which the tangible aspects of the deaths and the making-disposable of population sectors are largely obscured through the proliferation of data. In contrast, the graphic depiction of wounding and death in the lithograph implies the work of a prior mode of sovereign power through the explicit violence of the spectacle, the targeted killing of individuals.[2] In a related sense, if numbers and graphs tend to enact distance from the deaths and wounding to which they refer, the use of artistic representation may sharpen our critical response to a specific infliction of violence. Yet attention to the role of wounded objects in both cases shows how the biopolitical and the sovereign—or the anonymous and the identified—may blur into one another, as these ableist and racist technologies of power collapse disability and death into a common terrain of predetermined devaluation. In other words, while the use of statistical data performs an obscuring of the processes by which some population sectors are marked as disposable, the lithograph instead performs a direct and explicit encounter with historical and ongoing violence. Yet in each case, the performative work of the wounded object also entails drawing critical attention to the shared spaces of human devaluation, by turns obscured and explicit, tangible and abstract.

I would like to offer a brief explanation of my concept of the wounded object here, recognizing that in doing so, I participate in a performative gesture, in two ways. First, in a more general and obvious sense, the explicit introduction of a concept, one that claims to be new, serves as both the birthing of that concept and the staging of its importance. Second, because the wounded object tends to move between the tangible and the abstract, the singular and the multiple, the living and the dead, sometimes blurring the lines between categories, some readers will object that this phenomenon is not an object at all. In insisting on the wounded object's existence and by giving it a name, I underscore forms of violence that are no less real for being difficult to define and capture. The wounded object as a concept in turn performs through acts of denunciation, allowing us to critically witness connections between seemingly disparate forms and representations of violence, between the anonymous and the named.

The wounded object is not a dead body or a partial fragment of human remains, nor is it simply a thing that has been damaged. It is instead the evocation of a violent present tense, troubled in its divide between singularity and multiplicity, and between living being and inanimate matter. It is here but cannot be claimed. Perhaps what appears of this object is a past or future wounding, the evidence of what has been or will be, for the wounded object also troubles distinctions between times of wounding—whether postponed, anticipated or present. Wounds and scars convey a tension between violence and denunciation, or trauma and resistance, as well as between life and death, marking the blurred divide between what has just happened and its future repetition. Through such uncertainties, the wounded object reveals violence and the critical witnessing of violence as a disruption to chronological history (Antebi 2021, 192–196). [3] The temporal ambivalence of the wound or scar also suggests the structure of performance, in the sense of its repeating gestures towards prior rehearsals or future reenactments (Caruth 1995).

The ephemeral and ungraspable quality of the wounded object makes it difficult to define as a concept, which adds to its threatening or disturbing quality, while also allowing it to move between diverse manifestations, from those in which it seems to adhere to a specific body, to more abstract evocations of the effects of violence. Rather than presenting itself as a singular, materially tangible thing, the wounded object abides in the relationships it evokes between observable phenomena or other objects, both human and non-human, and particularly in the violent or painful causalities it makes visible. As a concept, the wounded object alludes as well to aspects of Timothy Morton's (2013) theory of hyperobjects, in the sense of such objects' interobjectivity and their viscosity, or adherence to what they touch. Wounded objects similarly announce themselves through in-betweenness and transitional states and are difficult to grasp.

The observation of statistical data, encompassing the numerical representation of human populations, offers a possibly counter-intuitive approach to the concept of the wounded object, given the abstract quality of such renditions. While the use of statistics exemplifies biopolitical understandings of relationships between states, markets, populations, and individuals, my reading here expands to consider the particularity of affective responses to numbers, and the uncertain movement between tangible and abstract renditions of human life (Mader 2007). The history of statistics shares an intimate relationship to that of eugenics, and by extension to the measurement of human bodies, and physical and cognitive capacities, generally geared toward the goal of the minimization of error—understood here as both error in measurement and error as deviation from normalcy (Hacking 2014). In this sense, attention to statistics necessarily encompasses a proximity to the body, and to historical or ongoing efforts to measure it. In her 2021 book, *Sostener la mirada*, Karina Marín posits a direct relationship between statistics, in its documentation of differences through data, and the regime of the visual; the data are something we can visualize, or are typically rendered in visual formats to make them easier to grasp and digest, in the same way that disability has historically been defined and shaped through a politics of visibility, determining which bodies should appear, and how they should appear (Marín 2021, 8). We can therefore imagine statistics as a nexus through which embodiment and its spectrum of deviations, standards, and ideals make their appearance, combining visual and abstract renditions in a singular form.

The notion of transparency is often evoked as a goal and advantage of statistical data, with the suggestion that fully visible and accessible data work to combat violence and impunity. This is the case in the Mexican context over the past two decades, in particular, where a series of transparency laws and initiatives have emerged, in part as a response to increases in rates of homicides, femicides and disappearances, most of which remain unsolved (Cortés Ontiveros 2005). In some instances, the numbers themselves become a source of fascination, encapsulating the missing evidence of bodies or other facts to be uncovered. This was the case in an internationally compelling story, picked up by a number of major US newspapers. Two mathematicians in Mexico City studied the discrepancy between numbers of officially reported deaths from COVID-19, and the much higher number found by the group Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad. In May of 2020, the group counted 4,577 possible COVID deaths in Mexico City, which was three times the official number (Sheridan 2021). [4] Using an algorithm on civil registry websites, the mathematicians were able to calculate the specific number of 'excess' deaths. By early March 2021, the Mexican government ultimately confirmed an excess of 444,722 nationwide (Sheridan 2021; Despeghel and Romero Zavala 2020). In discussion pieces on this story, circulating in venues from *Nexos* to the *Washington Post*, the plot hinges on the revelation of a number, or series of numbers, and whether these numbers will remain available or hidden from public view. The role of numbers here becomes central to the reader's affective response to the story, without which it would not be a story at all. In this tense equation, what is at stake is not only the answer to the question of how many, but how the disparity between different answers to that question suggests a graded approach to the issue of proximity to death, and hence the relative disposability of certain population sectors. In this particular rendition of biopolitics as a real-time unfolding of partial access to data, the wounded object emerges through the numbers' failure to inspire confidence in their accuracy, and points to their insufficiency, of what they cannot show. Within this setting, numbers are both the damaged residue of incomplete evidence, and an always-expanding, comprehensive tabulation of deaths and diagnoses. The wounded object adheres to a visible number, as if to momentarily inhabit its location on the page or the screen. This is not to say that humans or bodies have been reduced to numbers, as is sometimes argued. Instead, the digits congeal their own scene of violence by encompassing an ongoing oscillation between the lively and deathly qualities of the bodies they conjure.

Recent scholarship notes that prior to the pandemic, Mexico had already seen a reduction in life expectancy, due to increases in homicides over the past two decades, along with increases in cases of diabetes and heart disease, adding that such radical statistical changes are due to "*circunstancias altamente anómalas*" such as war or the collapse of a health care system (Laurell 2020, 967–68). The context of these shifts is important, since it underscores a kind of layering of conditions of disposability. The notion of "*vidas desechables*" (disposable lives), familiar in the context of disability studies, as in analyses of debility or slow death, works here not because of a single condition or category, but generally through multiple, sometimes indeterminate factors that accumulate on top of each other (Puar 2017; Berlant 2007). This accumulation of factors then allows for the violent biopolitical representation of some bodies as already marked for death. The designation of a "pre-existing condition," which is sometimes classified as a "co-morbidity" when a person develops acute illness, partially encapsulates this idea, so that those with any such condition fall into the category

of expected deaths, perhaps even while they are still alive. However, if multiple conditions, including racialization, socioeconomic status, and health factors, are layered together, and if these are presented in terms of the population or collective, rather than as individual cases, it becomes difficult to say which condition produces another, or which 'layered disposability,' determines subsequent outcomes for individuals or populations. The numbers tell this story, while also gesturing repeatedly to what they cannot contain, what is not yet known because of a current lack of data, but also what exceeds the quantitative tools of epidemiology. This is not to suggest that we simply need to uncover the "real" faces beneath the depersonalization of numbers. Instead, it is worth paying attention to the way we respond to the numbers themselves, and the way their layering performs an uncertain logic of proliferating differences, with proximity to death as the promise of a way of being counted.

Statistical data, as in the example of documentation of excess deaths, visualized as graphs or columns of numbers, offer a commonplace, though perhaps not intuitively apparent, format for what I have called the wounded object, combining the specific and the multiple, along with a temporal fusion that brings the fact of death as singular instant into a continuous, unending present. In these instances, the abstraction of a numerical rendition of lives and deaths defines the wounded object in its performance of distance from tangible violence. It is nonetheless this ambivalent distance, or apparent obscuring, that at the same time paradoxically requires our critical attention as witnesses to the absence of the counted and the uncounted.

In contrast, I turn now to a more graphic example, even at the risk of preempting the concept of the wounded object through an overly fleshly specificity. The picture I have in mind is a lithograph created by the artist Linda Lucia Santana. It is part of a series documenting renowned figures of Mexican and border history, images of folk heroes and their corresponding *corridos* (Santana 2013). In this case, the picture refers to Joaquín Murrieta, a Mexican miner, and victim of lynching at the hands of California rangers in the mid-19th century.[5] The image shows two jars on a table, and beside them a skull. One jar holds a human head labeled "Joaquín Murrieta" and the other, a hand labeled "three-fingered Jack." In the background, a small flag of the Republic of California is visible on the wall. The caption to the picture reads, "Joaquín Murrieta-Society of California Pioneers, C. 1904." Perhaps this image is derived from a drawing found among archival papers, as the caption suggests; Santana's work is characterized by careful, even photographic attention to detail, framing and repeating the act of historical preservation, making it new. Her lithographs and drawings, images and texts, hover between performance and archive, confounding the role of the spectator before documents that are, and are not, historically fixed, akin to wounds themselves insistent in their present tense.[6]

Murrieta has come to occupy a fraught position, suspended between violently inflicted notoriety and a form of extended, collective anonymity that is common with victims of lynching, but also with those of other extra-judicial modes of "disappearance." This is in part because of the mythification and uncertainty surrounding Murrieta's identity, through which he was associated with the racialized stereotype of the Mexican "bandit" (Leal 1995, 2–3). The tension between the one and the many hence bridges the 19th- to early 20th-Century lynchings of the US south and borderlands

and the present-day impunity through which both named individuals and countless thousands are disappeared or killed. In the 21st-century context, unsolved homicides and disappearances have proliferated in Mexico, primarily within a racialized and economically precarious demographic, in which the numbers of the dead or disappeared supersede their individual names. Yet cases such as the 2014 disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teacher's College and subsequent protests and investigation underscore the divide between the specificity of some names and faces, and the sheer quantity of other victims.

As Ken Gonzales-Day writes of lynchings in the US Southwest, and of the archival sources through which they may be accessed, the stereotypical staging of many lynching photographs and postcards, and the ephemeral quality of archival images, sometimes replaced by copy prints of reduced quality, contribute to the erasure of historical specificity, and of individual names and stories. Over time, details fade away, and only a few generic or stereotypical narratives can be preserved (Gonzales-Day 2006, 117–119). As a legendary figure, celebrated in a number of works for his alleged bravery and resistance to Anglo oppression and exploitation, Murrieta nonetheless emblematizes the erasure of other, uncountable Californios, and in doing so begins to paradoxically perform his own erasure.

Visual still renditions of the effects of violence, as in the case of Santana's work, offer one approach to the dilemma of the wounded object, capturing the frozen quality of an unchangeable present tense as well as the blurred suture between identity and anonymity. The intentional artistry of the image does not function to reveal the "facts" of the case in a complete or transparent fashion, but rather gestures towards a history of obfuscations and revelations, in which answers to questions about the violent event are promised, postponed, and sometimes partially delivered. The graphic quality of such work in its depiction of border history and human remains conveys a visceral cruelty to the viewer, inciting engagement and response. In Santana's lithograph of the staged remains of Joaquín Murrieta and his accomplice, the wounded object seems to emerge in an obvious fashion, allowing viewers a sense of direct access to the scene of a crime that repeats through its restagings. The performance of an encounter with a notoriously violent historical event nevertheless repeats the impossibility of accounting for Murrieta, his body, and the other bodies this image evokes.

As in the case of statistical data, the artistic rendition also displays the quandary of death in life. The image freezes partial human forms, as if in a collection or cabinet of curiosities, while the inclusion of the skull suggests a reference to the genre of *vanitas* painting, with its grim reminder to viewers of the transience of life (Zimmerman 2019). This rendition, however, challenges the conventionally universal message of the *vanitas* image, by marking its scene as particular to a racialized borderlands community, its history and repetitions. The singularity of the image and of Murrieta's story at once signals an excess, that of other uncounted, unnamed racialized victims. Returning now to the numerical documentation of deaths, this time with the lithograph in mind, we may notice that here too the deathly residue around certain numbers—those higher or lower than expected, or incommensurate with what they purport to represent—stems from a distinction of excess. And it is this excess, although a numerical abstraction, that highlights the presence of

those whose biopolitical conditions of made-disposability, layered through the categories of socio-economic status, age, racialization, and comorbidities, may have classified them as already dead.

The wounded object as I have described it here necessarily resists attempts at absolute definition or classification. As a concept, it suggests the ephemeral and the in-between, shifting from distanced to direct evocations of violent acts and their effects. Our difficulty in approaching the wounded object may stem from this ambivalent quality, as we may be uncertain whether we are perceiving an object, its residue, or the absence it signals; if we wish to make such distinctions, the wounded object nonetheless supersedes them. In this reading I have intentionally juxtaposed two distinct moments as examples of wounded objects, a 21st-century statistical rendition of "excess" deaths and a lithograph displaying body parts of 19th-century murder victims. While these examples focus on Mexico and the Mexico-US borderlands, the concept of the wounded object they illustrate is applicable to numerous other sites and to a globalized production of unequally distributed violence. Placed together, the wounded objects I have foregrounded here perform a simultaneous blurring and clarification of the death that saturates everyday life for some bodies and communities, while leaving others relatively intact. The performance, in each case, entails a marking of the distance between the viewer and the human disposability she witnesses. The wounded object signals the imperative to continue to traverse that distance.

Notes

[1] The notion of the liveliness of matter has become familiar through a growing body of new materialist and posthumanist scholarship. See for example Bennett (2010); Chen (2012); Coole and Frost (2010); Alaimo (2010). For critiques of Bennett, see Povinelli (2016) and Lemke (2018).

[2] The standard source for this distinction between the sovereign and the biopolitical is Foucault (2003).

[3] These observations also borrow from Deleuze (1990).

[4] Note that the group, Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, and its founder, Claudio X. González Guajardo have been extensively accused of corrupt practices including tax evasion, unethical conflicts of interest, and of targeted attacks on the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. See for example Delgado Gómez (2023).

[5] The story of Murrieta includes an extensive range of artistic responses and documentation of events, many combining fictional and non-fictional intentions, or confounding the two. Examples include Rollin Ridge (1854); Valadez (2016); Nuñez (2006); and Neruda (1967).

[6] The observation on performance and archive derives from Preston (2018).

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Biography

Susan Antebi's research focuses on disability and corporeality in the contexts of contemporary and 20th-century Mexican cultural production. Her most recent book is *Embodied Archive: Disability in Post-Revolutionary Mexican Cultural Production* (U of Michigan Press, 2021). She is also the author of *Carnal Inscriptions: Spanish American Narratives of Corporeal Difference and Disability* (Palgrave-Macmillan 2009). Her co-edited volumes include *Libre Acceso: Latin American Literature and Film through Disability Studies*, with Beth Jörgensen, (SUNY, 2016); and *The Matter of Disability: Materiality, Biopolitics, Crip Affect*, with David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (U of Michigan Press, 2019). Her work has been funded by a SSHRC Insight Grant and a Chancellor Jackman Faculty Research Fellowship. Her current research projects centre on eugenic legacies in contemporary Mexico and the Americas, and on disability and the paranormal in literature and spectacle.