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THE POLITICS OF THE DEAD BODY

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Dedicated to the memory of Professor Selamawit Terrefe, a contributor to this special issue.

We are dedicating this special section of "The Politics of the Dead Body" to our admired colleague and brilliant contributor, Professor Selamawit Terrefe, known to us as Sally, whose untimely death last year we are still grieving. Dr. Terrefe was a renown scholar of global Black comparative literary, visual, and cultural studies and the leading critical theorist in putting Afro-pessimism, psychoanalysis, and anti-Black violence studies in conversation with each other. We mourn their loss and we are grateful for having crossed paths with Dr. Terrefe, however briefly. We hope to honor Dr. Terrefe's life by continuing to engage their scholarship and by combatting anti-Black violence in all its forms. Dr. Terrefe will be forever missed.

Introduction

There are dead bodies, in the plural rather than in the singular. These are bodies whose losses are forced not to count, for counting them is part of what we do to re-member them, to restitute membership to them, to consider them as part of the people and no longer simply as bodies. For these bodies, death is a tensed adjective. The racialized political structures under which they are forced to live subject them to conditions "that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (Mbembe 2003, 40), making them vulnerable to "premature death" (Gilmore 2007, 28), and further coercing them to a "slow death" (Berlant 2007) before re-animating them into the "social death" (Patterson 1982) to which they continue to be subjected in the "aftermath of slavery" (Hartman

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2008, 6). Racial capitalism's logics of accumulation and its war machines dismember these bodies in the two senses of the term: by denying them equal membership in a political community that could otherwise recognize them as equally capable of natality and mortality, and by structurally "debilitating" them to such an extent that not even their coerced incapacitation is legible as disability (Puar 2017). Consequently, death is no longer in the future. Death cannot be simply anticipated as that inescapable event that can give authenticity to Being's existence in the form expected by the notion of "being-towards-death" (Heidegger 2001). Nor is death simply in the past. Death cannot be that principle (death-drive) that, in striving for libidinal satisfaction, is lethally bounded to the "most universal endeavor of all living substance—namely the return to the quiescence of the inorganic world" (Freud 1955, 62). Forced to live in constant proximity to violent death, death loses its eventuality.

Israel's genocide of Palestinians in Gaza can be "live-streamed," yet members of the academic community who speak against normalizing it are more likely to be disciplined and criminalized by university administrators than they are to see those administrators join the divestment and boycott campaigns Palestinians and their allies are urgently calling for to save their lives (Quinn 2024). Considered by scientists as climate change's point of no return, the Amazon rainforest can burn while the murder of Indigenous peoples' leaders fighting against extractive industries, logging, and cattle raising in the Amazon increases (Amazon 2024). The Black Lives Matter movement takes massively to the streets to confront the forced insignificance of Black peoples' deaths; yet every year, the US reaches yet another peak in the state-sanctioned killings of Black people (Mapping Police Violence 2024). The militarization of borders in the Global North forces migrants to die by the thousands when trying to cross them, yet those trying to save their lives are more likely to be incarcerated than those borders to be abolished for proving murderous (International Organization for Migration 2024).

To name this deadly reality as *a* politically transformable reality rather than "reality as such" means refusing its coerced naturalization. All the papers collected in this special section of *With the Dead*, titled "The Politics of the Dead Body," speak to the possibility of that refusal. Turning to the murder of Indigenous peoples, buried in unmarked graves beneath the residential schools they were coerced to attend in Canada and the United States from the late 19th to the late 20th centuries, Kevin Bruyneel introduces the concept of *necro-indigeneity*. As Bruyneel argues, necro-indigeneity refers to "the settler colonial presumption of Indigenous death that is not premature, as if it is forthcoming, but rather as death that is already enacted and buried in the past, thereby now an after-thought or barely thought of at all, unmarked and thus unremarkable to the settler eye." Meditating on what it means to witness the statistical rendition of "co-morbidities" that proleptically assign death to diabetic bodies, and a contemporary lithograph depicting the skull of nineteenth-century Mexican outlaw, Joaquín Murrieta, Susan Antebi introduces the concept of the *wounded object*. Wounded objects are, she elaborates, objects that demand our "attention to an unequally distributed human disposability, and to the suspension of death in life." Complicating Chinua Achebe's critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Caroline Rooney returns to the concept of *radical evil,* questioning Hannah Arendt's preference for "the banality of evil" in confronting the coloniality of genocide. Radical rather than banal evil captures, for Rooney,

Conrad's consideration of "genocidal colonialism as something that [cannot] be divorced from lofty idealist European philosophy as if colonialism were a mere atypical aberration." Meditating on the spectacularized death of twenty-two-year-old Pateh Sabally, a vulnerable immigrant from Gambia who drowns in one of Venice's canals, and on the misinterpretation of the attempted murder of Adesech Sadik, an Ethiopian domestic worker in Kuwait City accused of attempting suicide when found hanging from the window of the seventh floor of her place of employment, Selamawit Terrefe introduces antiblackness and white supremacy as the *urbild* of politics. For in forcing blackness to embody the nothingness of the psychoanalytic *Real*, out of which the Being of non-blackness coheres in a symbolically mediated order, blackness "can neither be the antagonist alternative of the political, nor agonist of nothingness." Finally, Osman Balkan reads in the public mourning of three commemorative art projects—*Die Toten kommen* (The Dead Are Coming), *Asmat* (Names), and *The List*—a distinctively political form of *grief activism*. For in grieving the otherwise ungrievable losses of thousands of migrants, these art projects refuse the power granted to militarized borders to carve the edges of the human.

The politics of the dead body

The five essays included here ask about the shattered worlds dead bodies evoke, the streams of violence they expose, as well as the urgent responses that the encounter with the figure of the corpse generates. Under consideration here is not just a 'dead body' or a disintegrating corpse but, more precisely, a brutally 'killed body,' a 'forcibly disappeared body,' a 'let to die body,' and a Black corpse whose ontological existence is persistently and permanently negated. In this sense, the politics of the dead body necessarily implicates the actions—and inactions—of the living, the political institutions we have developed over the years, our relations to the human and non-human world, and our hopes for the future. Considering the politics of the dead body is, therefore, imperative in the present context, given the growing sense of political decay felt across the world and fueled by the intensification of warfare ideology, militarism, and global white supremacy.

By drawing attention to the 'politics of the dead body,' we hope to emphasize the ways in which untimely, preventable, and politically induced deaths, to borrow from Judith Butler's analyses on precarity (Butler 2009), inform ongoing struggles. These struggles reclaim speech and action to change how we govern ourselves and those most impacted by settler colonialism, global racial capitalism, heteronormative patriarchy, contemporary slavery, and white supremacist anti-blackness. The politics of the dead body, hence, entails tracing the different ways in which the living mobilize—collectively, affectively, materially, or expressively—alongside the many (irreparable) deaths to build livable futures premised upon a vision of "radical care as a foundation for a better world" (Hall and Silver 2020).

Whereas Katherine Verdery famously stated that "corpses don't talk much on their own" (Verdery 2000, 29), the essays included in this special section suggest otherwise. The dead body's materiality harbors agency. And agency, as the essays curated in this special section suggest, denotes a capacity to produce certain effects or incite action. Dead bodies, "though lacking intentionality, nevertheless possess social, [political], and mnemonic agency" (Young and Light 2012, 138), one

that moves us to make demands in their name as witnessed in war, ecological catastrophes, pandemics, and forced migration, to name a few examples.

The dead body's capacity to inform social, political, and artistic action is shown in Balkan's consideration of how asylum seekers who lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea while attempting to reach Europe have triggered several performative interventions aiming to dismantle "the global border regime." For instance, the "hunted images" of Alan Kurdi, the two-year-old Syrian child who drowned alongside his mother, Balkan shows, "elicited a short-lived shift in public debates about Europe's so-called 'migration crisis.'" Bruyneel's insightful discussion of the afterlives of *terra nullius* illustrates how the remains of Indigenous children presumed to run away from the premises of the Kamloops residential school in British Columbia sparked searches by the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc and other First Nations to locate them. By so doing, Bruyneel states, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc "countered colonial erasure" and "the logic of necro-indigeneity." Antebi considers how the "excess" of deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico and contemporary cases of unsolved homicides and forced disappearance that have proliferated in recent decades provide the occasion to develop new theoretical instruments to compel a critical witnessing of ongoing violence and differentially assigned disposability. Rooney's revaluation of Achebe's critique of Conrad's novella considers the notion of "theatrical testimony" as a literary device capable of attesting to the atrocities committed through genocide, "re-establishing the inheritances and lines of transmission that genocidal perpetrators have sought to violently occlude." The question of the dead body's agency, however, is complicated by Terrefe's insightful reflection on the Black corpse's immateriality, which they show does not lend itself easily to any considerations of agency given that the very notion of "political agency" is premised upon the (non)existence of Black life. If agency can at all be considered in relation to the Black corpse, Terrefe locates it in "the profundity and profanity of thought."

Counter-Aesthetics of the Dead

In the compartmentalized world of colonialism, says Frantz Fanon, "the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure" (Fanon 2005, 5). By that, Fanon means that the unequal distribution of life and death is not hidden but manifest in the material conditions of the city, such that whereas the colonist's sector is "built to last," signifying settler futurity, the native's is made "famished," there "you die anywhere, from anything" (Fanon 2005, 4). There is a clear overlap between material distributions of livable and unlivable conditions under regimes of apartheid and their aesthetic expression. But, as Fanon's own anticolonial writings in Algeria demonstrate, the material evidence of such unequal distribution is insufficient to render the hegemonic power relations enforcing it politically revisable. For, as Butler rightly asked in another context, when seeking to trouble the lethal effects of compulsive heteronormativity's gender dimorphism, "seeing" bodies, whether dead or alive, is not the answer for "*what are the categories through which one sees?*" (Butler 2006, xxiv, emphasis in original). There is always an aesthetic frame; nobody "sees" without a frame, and not all frames enable vision.

If philosophy can be understood as the activity that produces and studies the categories that make up the frames with which we see and performance philosophy as the activity that studies *how* these categories are produced and do their work, the politics of performance philosophy might be understood as the activity that studies the relations of power among rival bodies of categories, and the rival modes of their production. To publicly say: "It's not war, it's genocide; it's not eviction, it's ethnic cleansing; it's not a conflict, it's settler colonialism," and to say it without protections, risking one's public intelligibility or even one's life depending on one's positionality and context, is to perform philosophy in that double rival modality. The politics of performance philosophy, then, are not exhausted in refusing the naturalization of certain frames, even if it often takes that form (what connects performance philosophy to the labor of critique). Its politics can also take the form of offering alternative frames (what connects it to utopian or prefigurative thinking) and, more importantly, today, of refusing the frames that present themselves as alternatives. The essays collected here perform philosophy politically in all these ways but excel at the last one.

Expanding on what Yellowknives Dene political theorist Glen Sean Coulthard critiques as the colonial "politics of recognition," Bruyneel demonstrates how the performatively uncertain apology of the Vatican for the genocidal role played by the Church reproduces, rather than redresses, the settler colonial frame of erasure at work since the doctrine of discovery. Terrefe speaks of the *poetics* of the Black corpse to: on the one hand, expose the libidinal capaciousness of a white supremacist frame to distribute the sensible such that it can demand unrestrained enjoyment at the consumption of Black peoples' death and, on the other hand, articulates in the refusal of these bodies to docilely embody such nothingness a kind of politics beyond politics, poetic in the more radically inventive way that goes beyond the pitfalls of humanism. In Cennetoğlu's *The List*, Yimer's *Asmat* (Names), and CPB's *The Dead Are Coming*, Balkan shows that migrant lives are publicly grieved against a political system that demands their abandonment. Such grief, Balkan argues, refuses the "territorially bounded conceptions of solidarity" implicit in the normalization of this border regime, enacting "a more expansive idea of the We." Attentive to the performative power of wounded objects to simultaneously blur and clarify "the death that saturates everyday life for some bodies and communities," Antebi meditates on their ambivalence. Resting there, she shows that the symbolic violence that statistics and lithographs otherwise innocently archive not only replays this violence but registers that which exceeds the frame. Finally, Rooney's postcolonial critique of Hegel's philosophical fetishism discerns a structure of plagiarism in the production of the aesthetic categories fueling both the genocide that Belgians perpetrated in Congo and the one Israel currently perpetrates in Gaza. Plagiarism is the presentation of the other's knowledge as one's own through an erasure of the appropriative act. Plagiarism, then, connects philosophical fetishism and colonial genocide in so far as settlers proceed to erase the indigenous peoples of the land that they want to appropriate to present themselves as the original inhabitants.

Loss, Grief, and Mourning

The agency of the dead body also lies in its capacity to generate strong feelings and emotions, even among those who are not in close proximity. The dead body often evokes an overwhelming sense

of grief and loss. Yet, in death, as in life, bodies do not enjoy the same social or political standing. In fact, existing inequalities follow the body to the death, even if, in some cases, such distinctions can be altered over time. But when bodies do not die a natural death but are deliberately killed, disappeared, erased, abandoned, or utterly negated, implicit is also the expectation that the living severs their allegiances and affective attachments to them. In this sense, what makes the dead body a necessary site for political reflection is the fact that existing power relations and socio-political structures of domination dictate which dead bodies constitute an irreparable loss and which ones do not.

As Butler argues, ungrievable lives "cannot be mourned because [they have] never lived, that is, [they have] never counted as a life at all" (Butler 2009, 38). To count them is to dispute who has the power to determine who can be mourned and who can be denied affection and sympathy. In this sense, the performative function of the corpse conveys something about the social and political marginalization that racialized, feminized, impoverished, and debilitated bodies experience in life such that their death—or murder—is not seen as a public loss and "do[es] not unleash an ethical crisis because these persons' bodies and the territories they inhabit always-already signify violence" (Ferreira da Silva 2009, 121). How, then, are emotions and affects mobilized to remember the dead and redefine them as a public loss—instead of viewing them as threats to be eliminated at all costs—when dominant discourses, entrenched structures of inequality, and ontological divisions command forgetting? What aesthetic forms do these emotions and affects take when frames of war are ready to disqualify them?

Rooney's unequivocal response is that a proper answer to genocide "is rightly to insist on the mourning and memorialization of those who have been killed," for, as Cristina Rivera Garza reminds us, mourning is "the psychological and social process through which the loss of another is publicly and privately recognized" (Garza 2020, 59). Here, too, the dead body is invested with mnemonic agency in the form of commanding remembrance and influencing our collective memory. Significantly, mnemonic agency is not just connected to one's capacity to remember but also shapes how we remember. For all these reasons, the dead body becomes "a vehicle for [affective] remembrance" and commemoration (Young and Light 2012, 137). To remember the dead body is, then, to:

perform kinship against membership's exclusionary borders;

abolish the boundaries of the cemetery so that all the dead can be equally counted;

communalize the distribution of radical care;

reinforce our community with the ancestors.

To remember the dead body is to reconsider the future as the actualization of all those emancipatory possibilities currently buried underneath a single version of the real.

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Biographies

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