



# Bare & Myriadic Death: Necro-Subjection and the Pandemic Era

NICOLE GRIMALDI

New York University

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KING. Tell me Surgeon, shall I live?  
SURGEON. Alas my Lord, the wound is dangerous,  
For you are stricken with a poisoned knife.  
KING. A poisoned knife? what, shall the French king dye,  
Wounded and poisoned, both at once?  
EPERNOUNE. O that that damned villaine were alive againe,  
That we might torture him with some new found death.  
BARTUS. He died a death too good, the devill of hell  
Torture his wicked soule.

(Christopher Marlowe, *Massacre at Paris*, sc. xxii, ll. 73-81)

## Insufficient Death

In the last scene of Christopher Marlowe's Elizabethan drama *Massacre at Paris* (1593), a play documenting the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572 that transpired during the Wars of Religion between French Catholics and the Protestant Huguenots and its aftermath, King Henry III of France is stabbed by a devoted friar of the Catholic League, who is permitted entry to the court despite his suspicious demeanor. The King mistakenly declares: "our Friars are holy men, / And will not offer violence to their King" (2008: sc. xxii, ll. 23-4). A scene of dual death plays itself out: the King is stabbed by the friar and kills him in turn, but may himself perish. The surgeon is called; he tells the company that the friar's sword has been laced with poison. Alas, if not by the first stroke of death, the King shall surely die by poison. In the space between the first mark and the final fact of death, a theatrical space opens wherein death is deferred, and the locus of sovereignty is thrown into brief crisis before the will-be-dead but not-yet-dead King abruptly thrusts the then-Huguenot noble Navarre into the role of future monarch, ensuring a legitimate succession. Once King Henry's death is confirmed, his attendants regret that they cannot kill the wicked friar again: they wish to kill him more painfully, to punish him with methods proportionate to the injury he has inflicted on the King and the fate of the throne: "Ah, had your highnes let him live, / We might have punished him



for his deserts” (sc. xxii, ll. 45-6). The friar’s rapid death is deemed too qualitatively weak to encapsulate the punishment he deserves. This friar-figure is a threat to the social order, a peril to the right of kings, a menace to the security of the state, and an endangerment to the rite of succession. He thus should be “punisht,” “tortur[ed] [...] with some new found death.”<sup>1</sup> Marlowe here provides us with a picture of insufficient death—wherein simple and direct death, death without suffering or set example, is *not enough*. But what, in this instance, would be appropriately worse than death? How does one determine a death qualitatively proportionate to the crime that necessitates it, and how do different deaths meet or fall short of the retributive standard one’s harm necessitates?

This scene has long interested me because it succinctly exemplifies what this brief study will move to flesh out: the multifarious nature and the diversification of death, the way death is doled out, to what ends, alongside what rationale, upon which subjects, and, crucially, death as it relates both to early modern sovereignty (as exemplified in the Marlowe excerpt) as well as our current neoliberal conjuncture in particular—wherein death can be read in a number of ways, including as a form of value begetting profit. As sociologist Fatmir Haskaj argues, “death as a source of value marks a new space in capital that exceeds the former limits identified under modernity” (2018: 1149). The commodification of death can be seen as either a complication of or departure from bio- and necro-power. In any case, life amid such “necroeconomies” requires a more nuanced account of death and its multiple configurations to better account for how economies of life and death are operable today.

To this end, I first present an articulation of what I call *bare death*—a concept connected to but also meaningfully distinct from Agamben’s *bare life* [*la nuda vita*]—which works as a conceptual horizon to better account for death’s multiplicity, the way death has grown highly politicized and is visibly and invisibly instantiated in ways not equivalent or reducible to complete biological cessation. Proceeding from the insights of scholars like Mbembe, who directs our attention toward populations relegated to the status of the “living dead” (2019: 92); Orlando Paterson, who delineates the conception of “social death” experienced in life (1982: 38-9); and black feminist scholars such as Saidiya Hartman and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, who focus on necropower as “nomadic, traveling with black(ened) subjects even when they are able to transgress geopolitical-spatialized borders” (Jackson 2020: 205), I ask how we might think death-in-life in a robust sense that accounts for these necro-conditions in a way that simultaneously attends to both the collective “death-worlds” in which we live and that Mbembe

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<sup>1</sup> While the real-life aftermath of the King’s murder lies beyond the play’s purview, history fittingly indicates that the body of the assassin, Jacques Clément, was indeed later quartered and burned at the stake. His crime led French diarist and collector Pierre de L’Estoile to efface an engraved portrait of Clément in his scrapbook history of the Wars of Religion by satirically anagrammatizing “Frère Jacques Clément” as “C’est l’enfer qui m’a créé” (“It is hell that created me”). See Hamilton 2016.



identifies, as well as what Gilberto Rosas calls “necro-subjectivities,” subjects “who regularly face the horror of death” and so are born in and out of violent relations with power (Mbembe 2019: 92; Rosas 2019: 313). I ask how bare death works as a horizontal or limiting term to think variegated death in this late modern capitalist milieu (working to connect bio- and necro-power to sovereignty and neoliberalist economy after thinkers like Foucault, Haskaj, and Lopez and Gillespie). Lastly, taking up an urgent contemporary tract, I consider how bare death and what I call *myriadic death* (the perpetual subjection to non-lethal deaths) become useful conceptual implements to consider the current COVID-19 pandemic—a “death-world” that, I will argue, encodes diffuse threats of death that are not wholly subordinateable by human efforts to order that death. The current pandemic escapes the complete eclipse of sovereign power as disseminated by disparately destructive and contingently interacting biopolitical and necropolitical regimes, indifferently scrambling existing systems in a way that humans can only partially control.

## Bare Death

Before drawing out the theme of death as a degreed phenomenon, we must qualify the use of “bare death,” as it strikes us as a sister-term to Agamben’s *bare life*, while it should be importantly distinguished.

Agamben begins his elaboration of bare life with a classical distinction made by the Greeks, namely Aristotle, between *zoē*—“the simple fact of living common to all living beings” and *bios*—“the form or way of living proper to an individual or group” (1998: 1).<sup>2</sup> Semantically distinct for the Greeks, the terms *zoē* and *bios* draw a distinction between mere (or sheer) life and life that is qualified politically. *Bios* is expressly political, the forms of life one cultivates in striving for the “good life,” and *zoē* is “simple natural life,” which is “excluded from the polis in the strict sense” (2). However, this important classical distinction has been lost in the modern political era, argues Agamben. Indeed, “[e]very attempt to rethink the political space of the West must begin with the clear awareness that we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between *zoē* and *bios*” (187). Rather, modern politics defines itself by an aversion to *zoē*—there is no sense that there is, to quote Aristotle, “some kind of good in the mere fact of living itself” (1920: 1278b, 23-31). And yet, *zoē* is nonetheless still implicated in the political realm by virtue of its exclusion. Bare life is therefore related to *zoē* but also

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<sup>2</sup> James Gordon Finlayson, in a 2010 paper, argues that the distinction Agamben outlines between *bios* and *zoē* is not found in Aristotle. Rather, Finlayson argues that Agamben bases his views on the assertions of Arendt and Foucault, which are “also unfounded” (2010: 97). See also Borisonik/Beresňak 2012.



crucially distinct from it (while Agamben at points conflates the two, as do many of his commentators).

Bare life is thus most simply put as “the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the polis” and signals the foundational political event of modernity. It appears at the point when the natural life of *zoē* is exposed to political violence, to sovereign violence—it is life as exposed to death, stripped of its political significance. The inclusion of *zoē* (as bare life) within the political does not imply its integration with political life—rather, it is a non-incorporable remainder and an ongoing target of sovereign violence. The ancient Roman figure of *homo sacer* (a life that can be killed but not sacrificed) becomes Agamben’s preferred way to exemplify and explore the conditions of bare life. An analysis of *homo sacer*, in her many guises, works to “uncover an originary *political* structure” by exploring the figures of the banned, the excluded, the expendable, the unsacrificeable, the outlawed—those who persist in an exclusive-inclusive relationship to sovereign power and who are necessary for establishing the limits (physical and ideological) of the state (74). Tom Frost calls this process “the biopolitical creation of human detritus”—the generation of expendable lives that can be killed with impunity (2019: 157). Agamben to some degree follows Foucault in asking why biological life becomes the target of sovereign power. However, his way of asking is to explore why and how the “production of bare life” reveals itself to be the “originary activity of sovereignty”—and he focuses on this process’ involvement with juridico-institutional models (conceptions of sovereignty and the state in particular), including how this ancient process begins long before the era of biopower within which we identify it (1998: 83). While Foucault oscillates between claiming that biopower “supplanted the old power of death” embodied by sovereign right and that the former fused with the latter, Agamben insists that biopolitics has existed since and is bound up with the beginning of western sovereignty as characterized by the structure of the exception that informs it (Foucault 1978: 140; Agamben 1998: 7). For Agamben, the politicized body is always at once a “biopolitical body” and bare life (188).

In some ways, pointing out that the biopoliticization of bodies precedes Foucault’s temporalization isn’t a novel insight. Feminist scholars have for some time insisted that we look also to the family and its perpetuation as biopolitically informed; social reproduction and the division of sexual labor has been persistently policed throughout history, and has therefore always involved the sovereign management of particular bodies (prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Foucault sees biopolitics begin to emerge [1978: 138]). Silvia Federici has long stressed the curtailment and control of women’s labor in both the private and public spheres, recently identifying the “state’s appropriation of women’s bodies and their reproductive capacity” as the beginning of human resource regulation—“its first ‘biopolitical’ intervention, in the Foucauldian sense of the word” (2019: 17). Scholars have various accounts of biopolitical emergence—as tied to



economic liberalism, colonialism, Darwinism, and so on (Collier 2011; Weheliye 2014; Tarizzo 2017). Kyla Schuller, in *The Biopolitics of Feeling* (2018), explains how binary sex differentiation historically worked to underscore conceptions of civility. Racialized subjects were often unsexed and non-differentiated—resulting in an active exclusion from the *bios*-phere that helped legitimate the disqualification of particular sexed and raced bodies from political rights and, more broadly, from political life. Her account nicely exhibits both sides of the biopolitical coin—biopower as both actively intervening in processes of sexual and racial differentiation to better “create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower,” or else tactically *not* intervening in spheres of reproduction and bodily management—thereby writing biological divisions into the human species, or else de-personifying populations to better permit their treatment as a non-individuated “mass” (Foucault 1997: 255).

Returning to bare life, we might quibble with Agamben’s rendering of this concept and whether the reduction of someone to such a form of life can ever be truly enacted, even if attempted. Furthermore, we might see the distinction between biological and political life as senseless from the outset—one cannot resist quoting William E. Connolly on the subject:

[Agamben] reflects a classical liberal [...] assumption that there was a time when politics was restricted to public life and biocultural life was kept in the private realm. What a joke. Every way of life involves the infusion of norms, judgments, and standards into the affective life of participants at both private and public levels. (2007: 29)

Of course, this critique misses that Agamben begins with such distinctions in order to elucidate what he calls “the zone of indistinction” that characterizes the state of exception—he works ultimately to complicate the neatness of these terms’ separation (1998: 181). The purely biological—*zoē*—is, after all, inaccessible to us. We can dispute whether it can exist at all, but it has a principally negative and conceptual function in Agamben. Bare life is itself both biological and political, even if one’s reduction to it amounts to variously violent forms of political exclusion. Nevertheless, Connolly’s point is well-taken. Agamben today invokes bare life frequently and often reductively, as when, upon the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, he argued that “the epidemic has shown, beyond any possible doubt, that humanity no longer believes in anything but bare existence” (2020: 1). We will return to this below. In any case, I do not wish to advance Agamben’s particular conception of bare life in relation to what I am positing as “bare death,” except perhaps to say that if the production of bare life is the action of sovereignty, then the foreclosure of bare death is also the action of sovereign power.

The concept of bare death works to acknowledge that death is visibly and invisibly instantiated in ways not equivalent or reducible to complete biological cessation. This



takes to heart the Foucauldian point that “killing” “do[es] not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (1997: 256). Bare death also takes to heart what Achille Mbembe calls the status of the “living dead,” endured by political subjects exposed to destructive forms of social existence or “*death worlds*” but who continue to live, and what Orlando Patterson calls “social death,” an outwardly discernible and reinforced form of natal alienation that he considers in relation to enslaved peoples in particular (Mbembe 2003: 40; Patterson 1982: 8). Bare death is the pre-political (not asocial) category of death, against which we can understand politicized life in relation to politicized death. If Agamben is correct that biopolitics “is at least as old as the sovereign exception,” then upon entry into the political, the body is already always subjected to and mediated by techniques of bio- and necro-power—a purely biological death as divorced from political forces is impossible (1998: 6). As soon as a society can “work on the body”—that is, direct energy or resources toward slowing or expediting death, toward engineering and disseminating variegated forms of life and death, death is no longer a purely biological phenomenon. Death is political, and bare death exists only as a limiting term, a long-foregone idea—a recognition that there was a time when peoples’ deaths were organized more by the needs of the anatomical body, albeit socially construed, than by political technologies inflicted upon that body. Death, like life, has been a social ordeal throughout human history. However, if we take the Foucauldian thesis seriously—that the “threshold of modernity” is crossed at the point when the biological processes that characterize the life of human beings become central to political decision-making, when the ancient sovereign right to take life becomes the power “to foster life or disallow it to the point of death”, combined with Mbembe’s assertion that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides [...] in the power and the capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die”—it is clear that the transition from merely social to properly political death has long been affirmed (Foucault 1978: 143; Mbembe 2019: 67). Naturally, this definition preserves a rather Arendtian distinction between the social and what we might think about as the properly “political.” Agamben routes this distinction through Aristotle’s definition of man as a *politikon zoon*—and thus locates our understanding of the political proper and its distinction from the social as beginning with the origins of western political thought, as if this settles the matter (3). There are other potentially less problematic ways to conceive of this distinction. There are good reasons, too, to do away with it altogether. The point here, however, is that depoliticized death (even if we understand it as illusive or oxymoronic) is useful conceptually for understanding death today, as politicized and politicizeable to variable degrees.

Similar to the way *zoē* continues to act as an operable theoretical category in being exiled from the *bios*-sphere, therefore only appearing in the guise of bare life (politicized *zoē*)—I consider bare death a similarly ungainable but necessary criterion against which



to understand politicized death. When biological life is made political, its management becomes a problem for sovereign power. Foucault argues that “for millennia man remained [...] a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence,” however, the human has also been for millennia a *dying* animal with the additional capacity for politicized death (1978: 143). We now are beings for whom death, like life, cannot be non-political—therefore, death similarly becomes a problem for sovereign power, as necropolitical scholars have argued for the past two decades. Politics calls not only our existence as living beings, but our existence as dying beings into question. As political technologies continue to operate on death in variable and highly differential ways, we see an intensification and diversification in forms of death available to us—this signals the movement away from bare to multi-subjugating, politicized death.

The discussion of bare death provides a backdrop against which to think the multiple deaths endured as a political subject. Why is mere death, as we saw in Marlowe’s play, sudden death that falls short of its appropriate politicization, death that *merely* kills, so often not enough to ensure the security of and control over populations? What is the relationship of extravagant, excessive, or minimalized death to the spectacle or subtle operation of sovereign power? These questions continue to unpack, in contemporary climes, the movement from the spectacle of sovereign exaction, including theatrical torture and public execution, to the insidious forms of power that dole out death in often indirect and less visible but not un-targeted ways.

This analytical and critical trajectory is consistent with and in some ways continues the work of Foucault, who charts out these “trace[s] of ‘torture’” as they diffuse and perforate state operations and institutions, giving way to indiscriminate and targeted forms of punishment or neglect operating within and between social, economic, and political registers (1995: 16). This examination, like the work of many contemporary necropolitical scholars, takes for granted (after Foucault) that truth regimes, the specific orders of knowledge/truth operating in a given episteme (which often serve to justify violence and extermination at the level of individual and population), are not objective or discovered but produced, sustained, valorized, adapted, enacted, and regulated via political mechanisms—and that without these, “power cannot be exercised” (Foucault 1997: 24). My contribution here is to develop novel conceptual tools better equipped to dissect the bio- and necropolitical techniques that govern our contemporary milieu. Throughout this process, I also aim to radically challenge Foucault’s claim that “[d]eath is outside the power relationship” (1997: 248). Once power becomes decreasingly about the right to take life and becomes the right to “intervene to make live,” Foucault argues that “death becomes, insofar as it is the end of life, the term, the limit, or the end of power” (248). Foucault’s distinction between mortality, over which we have control, and death, over which we have none—the point at which the individual retreats and “escapes all power”—is one that will be troubled here. We have already discussed death



as inevitably political and politicized. The examples below will proceed by exploring the value of thinking different forms of death *in life* and the way that death can be managed to both haunt the living and disgrace the dead.

The discussion of bare death is thus a stepping stone to thinking about what I term *myriadic death*: perpetual subjection to non-lethal deaths, while illuminating *degreed death*: how different types of death, differentially distributed, afford more or less control over populations. Where once sovereign power killed or not, it now often kills incrementally, in ways that do not amount to wholesale physical demise. This takes for granted that biological subsistence does not guarantee us what Judith Butler calls a “livable life,” nor does biological termination signal the only life-loss available to us (Butler 2022: 1). Life persistently labors under the threat of loss, divestment, and death.

### **Necro-Subjection**

Gilberto Rosas advances the concept of “necro-subjection” to explore how subordinating individual subjects to the politics of death “generates, penetrates, and produces psychic and somatic effects” (2018: 304-5). However, his ethnographic analysis works in particular to illuminate how particular subjects—namely Mexican asylum seekers at the U.S. border—are forced to participate in and perpetuate the racial logics of late liberalism in order to gain legal entry and protection to the asylum country. Rosas explains that it is only in telling the admission authorities a tale of rape, murder, pillage, and of terrorism of a state against its own people or of one people upon another that these asylum-seeking subjects fleeing their homelands have the opportunity to cross borders, survive, and be left to live. This process of “making dead,” or rhetorically invoking death in order to reduce one’s literal exposure to death, is described as follows: “I make dead to let live. I affirm imperial as late liberal common sense. Liberalism demands that testimony is rife with the monstrous, the racist and gendered imperialist projections about Mexicans” (309). To “make dead” in Rosas’s sense entails the replication of racist and imperialist imaginaries because such appeals often provide the only lines of flight for death-subjected individuals to escape injurious circumstances. Both the experts testifying on behalf of asylum seekers and the asylum seekers themselves are forced to summon the pernicious specters: “the rapists... the murderers... the drug-lords”—“weaponized machismo and its corollary[,] victimized femininity” to ensure asylum-seekers are seen as deviating from the monstrous “norm” of their local community, evidencing their marked proselytization or else their status as Other to the Othered. Such necessitated narratives of violence make possible the division of lives into the *killable* and the *keepable*—such immutable categories help to “articulate a caesura between worthy and unworthy life,” legitimating a rigid



proceduralism in determining immigrant admission or rejection while securing the moralistic high-ground of asylum-granting nations (311).

Rosas's study provides a way to think about the different forms of death-subjection often entailed in the pursuit of a livable life. Indeed, sustaining biological life does not necessarily incidence any life beyond bare life. Asylum-seeking migrants may, in being granted entrance to a new country, simply be exchanging one form of necropolitical exposure for another such that their "life" is still riddled with death—such that their life is still socially death-ridden, unqualified, and exploited. Subjection to death by cartel violence may well hasten literal death sooner than subjection to death by the thousand "smaller" cuts of structural racism, forced unemployment, language discrimination, maltreatment, poor health care, restrictive housing contracts and loans, educational inequity, criminal injustice, etc.—but the violent "slow death" of the latter may well result in a life of living death that some would prefer literal death over (Berlant 2007: 754).

Rosas defines necro-subjects as "those who are made—and who make themselves—dead—in order to live" (305). We can conjure countless other examples that evince necro-subjection as "making dead to live" (while we can debate whether Rosas's example of Mexican migrants make *themselves* dead, or their criminalized counterparts dead—or whether both types of death elliptically inhere in the project of *being left to live*). "Making dead to live" in Rosas's sense is not the only way to think the plurality of necro-subjects and the various levels of agency available to them.

In August 2010, the small Congolese village of Luvungi (population of 2,000) was invaded and occupied by a renegade Rwandan militia. Over the course of four days, the occupation resulted in the largest case of mass rape ever reported in eastern Congo (the official U.N. report put the number of rape survivors at 387) (McCune 2017). There was international outrage about the event, more press than the conflict-torn region had ever seen. Aid workers, journalists, and reporters hastened to Luvungi to publicize the story and provide relief. Eventually, it was reported that the number of cases had been preponderantly exaggerated. As aid flooded in, the cases of reported rape increased. This is a testament to Rosas's point about marshalling the "specter of rape, again and again" in order to mobilize racialized subjectivities in ways ingestible to democratic Western states (2018: 309). International aid was so fixated on attending to sexual violence (despite the general need for economic investment, medical funding, war relief, etc.) that one of the only ways the Congolese people could receive foreign aid was to claim they or a woman in their family had been sexually violated. Dorothea Hilhorst describes the campaign to garner attention around the prominence of sexual violence in the Congo as resulting in an international "hype": "characterized by a media frenzy, [and] an eagerness by non-governmental organizations" to tokenize the conflict, while



producing a “reductionist, singularly focused storyline” to better drum up donations (2009: S81). By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, “the DRC had become almost synonymous with conflict-related rape”—even the United Nations’ special representative on sexual violence in conflict, dubbed the country the “rape capital of the world” in 2010 (BBC 2010). Hilhorst and Douma explain that sexual violence is spoken about in the Congo as a “*fond de commerce*”—a source of business. They write: “when there were so many programs for sexually violated women, it was almost impossible for a woman to engage in a program without hinting at the fact” that she had suffered sexual trauma—and in saying she had, opportunities were made available to her that she may never have had otherwise: microcredit, vocational training, farm equipment, seeds, school funding, community savings programs (S80). Creating master narratives regarding sexual violence has been one of the only ways for NGOs to garner funds for the DRC, as other pressing issues do not generate the same indignation and charity.

While we should underscore that instances of sexual violence are frequent in the region, women in this instance (as well as the leaders in the towns and villages in which they lived) understandably perpetuated the rape crisis and its imageries in order that they could “live,” in Rosas’s sense. Women in this dialogue make death again and again in order to be provided the sustenance and means to live. The women and purveyors of the surviving post-invasion state were forced to doubly victimize pre-existing victims, such that their vulnerability was more legible to the humanitarian forces (in effect developing more death out of the many manufactured negative “forms” to which they had been exposed), utilizing the blueprints or traces of necro-power to generate and reproduce victimhood.

This example complicates Rosas’s picture of necro-subjection by both illustrating the agential power of the necro-subjected, while recognizing that such agency is itself borne out of a deeply constrained subject position. Necro-subjects in this case were able to intercede, seize, and reformulate the means of subjugation they generally endure in order to spur unexpected forms of socio-political empowerment (yielding ameliorative effects both material and immaterial) in their death-making. The Luvungi women are necro-subjects who here “theorize with horror”, to quote Rosas, taking advantage of racist presumption, instrumentalizing colonial and neocolonial logics, and stoking fantasies of securitization in order to expand the channels of provisions that cannot come unless the terms of exploitation map onto a particular Western and imperialist logic (fluent in feminized victimhood and masculinized, hecatombian war-mongering), which facilitates the activation of the *civilized-savior—uncivilized-saved* nexus upon which humanitarian aid in this late-modern liberalist moment relies and has arguably always relied (2018: 312). In effect, these necro-subjects seize the materials generated



through the labor of humanitarian organizations, subverting the latter's perpetuated narratives by adhering fallaciously to them.

It is important to recognize that the making of death in order to live, as in the examples above, is not the only avenue for thinking necro-subjection. There are also those who, in enduring myriadic death, desire to die. Why should life always be the desired outcome of the necro-subjected? We might think here of voluntary euthanasia, now legal in Colombia, Canada, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. There are also instances of prisoners advocating for an expedited execution in countries that uphold capital punishment.

A prominent example of the latter is Scott Dozier, a man on death row in a Nevada prison, who was scheduled to be the first inmate in the state and possibly the country to be euthanized by the opioid fentanyl (VICE 2019). Dozier's execution was deferred twice. In 2017, a judge stayed the execution, uncertain if the euthanizing drug, paralytic cisatracurium, would mask signs of Dozier's suffering. In July 2018, another judge halted Dozier's scheduled execution because a pharmaceutical company sued Nevada, demanding the state discontinue the use of one of the company's drugs in a lethal-injection combination (Abumrad 2016). Suspecting potential suicide, the prison placed Dozier on suicide watch—in isolation, in a cold, poorly-lit cell with minimal clothes, without time-passing activities, no visitors, and no access to legal counsel or mental health specialists. He claims putting him in isolation “tortur[ed] and punish[ed]” him mentally, deferred death being here an acute form of living death. Dozier advocated for his own execution, which was in part delayed for so long because activists were working to systematically prove that illegitimate, non-FDA approved drugs were administered in U.S. executions without drugmakers' knowledge of what the drugs were used for. Dozier took legal action against the state of Nevada, saying he did not “want to be dead [...] [but] would rather be dead than in prison” (VICE 2019). He committed suicide before he could be executed. Dozier was reduced to bare life in being deprived basic rights, which resulted in an overwhelming desire to die—a will-to-death instead of life. Dozier is a variation on Rosas's necro-subject: one for whom biological death is a release from death-in-life brought on by intersecting technologies of power and interstitial oversights by power, which contribute to 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,” of which prisons are exemplary (Mbembe 2003: 40).

We can recall here, too, the self-immolations that took place during the Arab Spring—localized responses to large-scale socio-political unrest. Take the famous example of Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor who became a catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring resistance against autocratic Middle Eastern



regimes more largely, who set himself on fire outside the Sidi Bouzid provincial headquarters in response to perpetual harassment and the confiscation of his goods inflicted on him regularly by municipal agents of the state (Abouzeid 2011). Mistreated since his youth and made to withstand perpetual theft and humiliation, Bouazizi, already one of the living dead, brazenly subjects himself to death in a way that exceeds his life-long exposure to it. This excess results in him *making* death (not just enduring it) via self-inflicted physical harm not undergone in order to live, but in order to hasten biological destruction. He refuses life in order to die—after being made repeatedly socially dead, after being disfranchised economically, and after being rendered a perennial political casualty of constituting and constituted police power, he opts for self-destruction, a death to end all myriadic death.

Rosas calls necro-subjection “the material subjugation of certain lives [...] situated socially, materially, discursively, and ideologically closer and closer to death”—and he loosely points here to what I wish to insist upon: that death is gradated, variously intense and intensifying (2018: 318). We have begun here to unspool forms of subjectivity that necro-subjection can conceptually contain, which drives home the importance of a proliferation of ethnographic analyses to grasp the myriadic forms of necro-subjection and how such subjection comes into contact with differential social, cultural, and political realities. A number of black and feminist scholars have contributed meaningfully to our understanding of necro-subjection by “beginning with the body”—unravelling how biopower and its attendant disciplinary mechanisms target and act upon individuated life. We might think here of Saidiya Hartman’s project in *Scenes of Subjection* to “emphasiz[e] the disciplinary, punitive, and normalizing individuation [...] and to consider the fashioning of individuality” by looking to forms of subjection as intermingled with “biopolitical imperatives” (1997: 130, 159). Hortense Spillers’ distinction between body and flesh, the latter of which is produced by “calculated” violence, provides a distinction that illuminates the line between human and non-human—those in the throes of “social death” and others who are born into life—a logic that has not waned post-slavery but remains fundamental to the “ruling episteme” (1987: 68). Page DuBois theorizes the body of the enslaved person as an extractive site from which truth can be produced (1991). Zakiyyah Iman Jackson responds to Mbembe’s “spatialized” reading of necropower, which she argues compartmentalizes death and life into geographic zones (thereby privileging “the colonial modality”) (2020: 204-5). Instead, Jackson accounts for the body’s movement through space and time, its traversing of the “blurred” conditions Mbembe identifies “between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom” that are created under necropolitical regimes (Mbembe 2019: 92). She does so by drawing on black feminist theories of subjection, racial and gender violence, and the body to deepen our understanding of these interacting dynamics. Treating the nomadic body negotiating convergent axes of power/knowledge better accounts for subjectivities made and



unmade under the threat of death, those that suffer myriadic death. These thinkers treat the body in both its material and immaterial enmeshment, as both a docile surface and productive site, as a locus for the production of disciplinary violence and deterrence as well as composing in its amassment the “critical mass” of the population to which biopower is applied and through which it is circulated.

In diversifying the category of necro-subjects minimally here, I would briefly gesture to other forms of necro-subjection, all of which could well command their own sustained analyses. Crucial here would be forms of insufficient deaths, disappeared deaths, and erasure. In the Marlowe example, we saw a desire to exact greater suffering on the murderous friar. While the King’s death was elongated, such that he could name his successor, the friar’s was deemed overly expedited: the attendants opine that he ought to be “punisht,” “tortur[ed] [...] with some new found death” (sc. xxii 79, ll. 46). What Foucault calls the “economy [...] of putative power” is here considered faulty, sabotaged, anemic in its failure to level spectacle against criminality, to outdo it (2008: 65). The punishment could not generate the surplus terror required to apportion appropriate sovereign revenge. In Marlowe, however, the aides only opine regarding a desire for overkill. Historical atrocities actually perform this desire, with its annals of corpse defacement and destruction practices. Overkill or an appetite to inflict death that extends beyond the surface of life upon which it can be applied also manifests not only in the defilement of corpses, but in the *disappearing* of corpses—which denies death, memorial, and ceremonial rituals to families and communities while occluding the conditions of death, foreclosing political and legal recourse or accountability, and eradicating the corporeal site of empirical and temporal residues, which diminishes the disappeared’s “phenomenological relation to the earth” (Feldman 2015: 187). Inflicting repeated death on the dead is also a way to inflict death on the living.

The U.S. Border Patrol policy entitled “Prevention Through Deterrence,” passed by the Clinton administration in 1994, strategically fortified Mexican-U.S. urban border crossing territories in order to force migrants to traverse the Arizona desert, where the brutal conditions and lack of access to water and other resources began to kill migrants by the thousands. Tens of thousands have been reported missing since the 90s that are assumed to have succumbed in the desert to heat exhaustion, dehydration, hypothermia, injury, attack by humans or animals. If found, “the disappeared turn up in detention centers, in morgues or skeletonized on the desert floor,” treated as “strange deposits plunged into cruel stupor” or “impassive bits of bone”—but many human remains are never found or remain unidentifiable, such that the mass disappearances cannot conclusively result in a positive death count (Feldman 2015: 187; Mbembe 2019: 87). The policy suspends the dead by purgatorializing them, never graduating their disappearance to the level of death due to a juridico-legal loophole that permits death to go on without a recognition that the dead have died. The desert-bodies are usually



completely skeletonized by wild animals such as vultures and coyotes, bones dispersed across vast distances, disappearing the bodies while eliminating the U.S. border patrol's need to account for them, effectively permitting the country to uphold the deterrence policy by virtue of the deaths' invisibility to the public.

The Arizona desert has become another Devil's Triangle, where mass death literally goes to die, while the lack of public visibility means the conditions of death are occluded and repressed, or else accidentalized, ejected into an extra-legal area of abandonment. Disappearance here is technologized and ensured via militaristic strategization. Death's processing is de-mediated, de-politicized, and in turn positive forms of grieving that make death processable by families and communities are foreclosed.

This is happening also with the many cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women who disappear off Native Reserves—many of their cases are ignored, mishandled, or eschewed on the basis of frequency of foul-play and criminality involved, which police forces deem helplessly epidemic even while their own mishandling of cases contributes to the problem. The term “Highway of Tears” was coined in 1998, attributed to the 720-kilometre (450 mi) corridor of Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert, British Columbia, Canada, where a series of murders and disappearances of Indigenous women have occurred since 1970.<sup>3</sup> In October 2015, the Information and Privacy Commissioner of British Columbia, Elizabeth Denham, published a 65-page report outlining how B.C. government officials had “triple deleted” emails related to the Highway of Tears (Denham 2015). The Highway of Tears is a localized terrain of invisibilized murder that has become increasingly publicized: it has managed to break out into public view despite the province's continued death-minimalizing regime—but it is only one of the visible symptoms (one of the only symptoms permitted to rise to the level of visibility) of the mass-murder of Indigenous women that continues throughout the country and which is consistently deprived, with most cases being termed “disappearances,” which permits the provinces to forego or close investigations that require heady investment at the level of resources and police power.

The recent unearthing of unmarked graves outside Indigenous residential schools across Canada similarly exhibits the disappearing of lives deemed expendable by the state. The deceased children (whose numbers are in the thousands) are literally uncountable, and identification procedures will take years to complete, where they are even possible. Many Indigenous peoples have known about these graves for some time, but it is only since renewed attention to this matter took hold starting in May 2021

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<sup>3</sup> The name is a reference to the “Trail of Tears,” the result of Andrew Jackson's Indian removal policy, where in 1838-39, the Cherokee nation was exiled from their lands to the east of the Mississippi River and forced to migrate to an area in present-day Oklahoma. The Cherokee people call this journey the “Trail of Tears,” because of its devastating effects—migrants endured hunger, exhaustion, and disease in being forced to march. Over 4,000 of 15,000 Cherokees died. See Ehle 1997).



(when an anthropologist discovered a mass grave at Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia) that demands for accountability and reparations began to gain traction. The diffuse grief of Indigenous communities regarding the profoundly inhumane treatment, the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of children, and the disappearing of lives in residential schools, ongoing for decades, is only now moving into the larger public's purview—a development that required making insidious and tactical state violence starkly visible to the general public such that this appalling national legacy could no longer be diminished or ignored.

These are merely a few present-day examples illustrating how the disappearance of bodies is the result of politicized powers that inflict further death on necro-subjects by denying death (enforcing disappearance) and sustaining the conditions for death's propagation by de-valuing or re-valuing particular deaths as Other-deaths, further cleaving apart the categories of “worthy” and “unworthy” life and intensifying through negligence the political insouciance surrounding such deaths.

Here I flag a potential criticism about the use of the term “death” to apply to drastic forms of dispossession and the undue exposure to acute necropolitical regimes. Why call such impoverished forms of life “death,” and not merely *bare life*, violated, expendable, and unprotected forms of life lived under the threat of death? Is the event of biological death cheapened or somehow problematically demystified by thinking death-in-life? Why not follow scholars like Johan Galtung or Banu Bargu who see particular forms of “structural violence” (enduring violence without end), or “necropolitical violence” as more suitable descriptions for how to think exposure to state violence in our contemporary times?<sup>4</sup>

The decision to speak in terms of “death” and not simply “necropolitical violence” is a political one—a way to emphasize the acute pressures, the life-taking force of living under radically repressive and life-limiting regimes. Such a designation acknowledges and leaves space for the analysis of the varied forms of life and the disproportionate threat of death political subjects operate and endure under. If we consider death a preclusion of rich and diverse forms of life, a depotentialization that limits and oppresses individuals and populations, we are better equipped to grasp the contours of

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<sup>4</sup> In Banu Bargu's definition, *necropolitical violence* has a particular valence, as it “refers to an ensemble of diverse practices that target the dead as a surrogate for, and means of targeting the living”. Such violent practices “discipline and subdue the living through the surrogation of the dead” (2016). While Bargu thinks of necropolitical violence as violence done *to* the dead and the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, thinks of “structural violence” as conditions that impair human life, inflicting psychological and bodily damage—both are thinkable by way of myriadic death in the sense presented here. My definition of “necropolitical violence” is not, after Bargu, violence “which takes as its object the realm of the dead,” but rather the forms of myriadic death experienced by living necro-subjects, although my account is inclusive of the forms of death that can continue post-death, targeting both the dead as well as their survivors. See Galtung 1975 as well as 1990 (which discusses the cultural legitimization of particular forms of violence).



the zombification of the living, of living death. To view death as an ultimate “dead end,” or to assume with Foucault that “[d]eath is beyond the reach of power” and therefore that biopower controls mortality but not death, is to miss the fact that we are in a time within which we are radically alienated from both *zoē* as well as *bare death* as parts of a cyclical, de-politicized, principally biological continuum in which we might find pleasure and meaning. While the Greeks may have seen the character of basic biological life as inherently a gift, as “a source of some well-being and natural delight” even if one “must endure much suffering” and death as an inevitable and irresistible form of passage or finale—these conceptions have been powerfully rewrought as meaning has attached firmly to politicized life and death, and as we have terminally drifted from the basic, animal experience of life and death (Foucault 1997: 248; Aristotle 1920: 1278b 28-30).

Against Epicurus, who writes in *Principle Doctrines* that death “is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing to us” and against Bataille’s claim that, as immanent and inseparable from one’s being, “[d]eath has no meaning,” we are compelled to think precisely this: the meaning of death when it is not believed to disappear at the point of imponderable excess, but as multiply existent and as manifested within the scope of life, as endured throughout life, and as observable in its myriadic forms of subjection to death (Epicurus 1994: 2; Bataille 1997: 196). Therefore, it is not that death “is nothing” because it “invades everything without giving rise to any resistance,” as Bataille claims—it is precisely that thinking living death is a critical and reflexive way to consider the variegated conditions under which life labors (211). Death is often a passageway not resulting in nothingness, extra-negativity, or afterlife—but to another bout of life, livable or not. Thinking resistance and death is a dual procedure: it is to attend to the *repressive force of death*, the top-down structural burdens imposed on political subjects and the resulting resistance endured by them as well as the *reactive force that resists death*, insurgent forms of political struggle that respond in kind to the threat of death.

## **Necroliberalism**

Foucault argues that “the right to decide life and death”—the spectacle of punitive exaction wherein the sovereign can take life or let live (which renders the subject “neutral,” without the right to life or death except through the mediative power of the sovereign)—came to be complemented by a new right in the nineteenth century—the sovereign power to “foster life or disallow it to the point of death” through intersecting disciplinary and regulatory biopolitical processes that “penetrate the social body in its totality” (1978: 135, 138; 2003: 87). According to some theorists, this situation has arguably advanced to an even bleaker stage—whereby the economic extraction of value



actually relies on a diversity of deaths to generate surplus value through the destruction of lives whose welfare has been abandoned by the state. Subjection to myriadic death, besides preserving differential exposure to death (cutting, as always, along racial, gender, class, and geographic lines) thus takes on an accelerated status in our neoliberalist era: as a new frontier of economic subjugation (Haskaj 2018); as an intensification of necro-capitalist militarized power that functions by way of violence and dispossession (Banerjee 2006); as well as as an axis of interpersonal acculturation, whereby the prominence of necroeconomic implements and the disproportionate exposure of subjects to such forms of death is culturally normalized and accepted.

Fatmir Haskaj argues compellingly that while biopower was an operative framework throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the goal of governmental regimes was to optimize life (while we should emphasize that such an outlook did not ameliorate life for all), there is a notable shift in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, when death, not just life and its productive labor, becomes “a quantum of value,” calculable and manageable, due to the extension of the logic of capital under neoliberalism. When the dominant mode of activity driving market forces is the intensification of biopolitical control over life to better inflict death, we are in the throes of a “necroeconomy” that profits by way of death as a commodity in itself, rather than death as collateral damage resulting from the exertion of labor expended in the production of commodities (2018: 1149-50). Theorists have concertedly tracked the refinement of biopower and its disciplinary arrangements involving permanent control via surveillance, micro-incursions or coercions, and other mechanisms of power “superimposed on the processes of production” that Foucault describes but, crucially, alongside the rise and evolution of capitalism and capitalist governmentality (Hardt/Negri 2001; Clough/Willse 2011; Barkan 2009) (Foucault 2003: 88). The two have culminated not only in necropolitical turmoil but what Mbembe has called “necroliberalism”—an era within which “the logic of sacrifice” becomes not only a political logic but an economic one, a driving force at the heart of today’s neoliberalist machinations (Bercito 2020). Deleuze’s remarks about the post-institutional nature of the society of control combined with Hardt and Negri’s insight that biopower aims not only to control human life but to extract surplus value from human life, leads Haskaj to posit that in the necroeconomic neoliberalist epoch, the society of control operates by way of crushing, decentralized economic realities—with debt as our prison and “capitalism our church” (2018: 1158).

In some ways, scholars of necroeconomy and necroliberalism take up a question that persists regarding how one pairs Foucault’s analysis of the population as standardized mass under biopower with neoliberalism as a governing rationality, which, according to Wendy Brown has “transmogrifie[d] every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves” (2015: 10). How is neoliberal bio- and necropower an acceleration, intensification, or permutation of the liberalist truth regime and how does



biopower continue the work of disciplining and managing bodily life as well as subjecting bodies and populations to variegated regimes of death in today's context? The relationship between neoliberalism and bio/necropolitics is touched on in Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics*, but the text ultimately focuses more on economic liberalism and neoliberalism—how “the overall exercise of political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy”—rather than explicitly tackling how biopolitics transforms under neoliberal forms of governance (2008: 131). This intersection thus invites more interpretive analytical work. Reading against the claim that neoliberal hegemony has put an end to the biopolitical era (Ojakangas 2005) is instead to claim that the technologies of the latter are reorganized and bolstered by but still operable in this advanced capitalist worldscape (it is also to affirm the persistence of forms of sovereign power and technologies of discipline as together creating novel power assemblages under current economic conditions).

As Eve Darian-Smith writes, the logics of capitalism have today shifted such that it is no longer simply the case that certain populations are viewed as expendable, but that they are “in fact only valuable when dead” (2021: 62). While she admits that necroeconomies are prevalent in so-called “failed states’ of the global south,” societies in the global north—even if not experiencing the Nixonian “slow violence’ of neocolonialism and the racialized exploitation of people and natural resources” that has disproportionately impacted populations in Africa, Asia, and Central and South America—nonetheless can be viewed through the lens of necroeconomy (66). She provides the example of the opioid epidemic in the United States to illustrate the population’s complicity and ultimate disinterest in the facilitated deaths that encircle us, when “death economies” target poor, rural populations no longer deemed worthy of protection, often seen as economically non-productive due to employment scarcity in the hardest-hit regions. COVID-19 can similarly be seen as facilitating the logic of “dying for the economy” (62). The vaccine patents have kept vaccines out of the developing world and ensured rich countries could remain zones of cultivated life rather than abandoned sites of dejection. The sacrifice of vulnerable front line workers has helped to keep the economy functioning, a sacrifice considered by many to be both practical and inevitable. Retirement and assisted living homes housing society’s “least productive” members from a purely economic standpoint have remained radically underprotected—becoming zones of carceral isolation, outbreak, and surplus death. As Lopez and Gillespie write:

Under capitalist logics, a differential hierarchy operates in which some bodies and lives must die so that others may live and flourish. The “economies of death” as a framework draws attention to the destructive nature of capitalism, the breaking down of living bodies for labor, commodity extraction, and the accumulation of capital. (2015: 179)



Such a reading stresses the importance of capitalist economy and its rationalizing logics as central to the necropolitical order. As Haskaj argues. “death [is] not [...] a side effect of biopower, capitalism, or globalization, but integral to its formation, expansion, and maintenance” (2018: 1161). These populations (which he calls the “necretariat”) are neither excessive nor residual—they are central to the economic order, their labor power is simply located in their dying rather than their lively productive activity. Haskaj cites genocides and ethnic cleansing regimes as well as generalized (enforced) poverty as productive industries founded on quantification and value-extraction, premised on death. We can think too about environmental destruction and the multi-species devastation this enables being knowingly propagated such that the drive to unyielding economic growth—what historian Julie Livingston calls “self-devouring growth”—can go on unencumbered and such that the global north can have continued unmitigated access to consumerist indulgences (Livingston 2019: 1).

While we can discuss the functioning of diffuse necroeconomies flourishing because of the propensity to produce profit through death, we must also consider the way that, particularly in privileged parts of the globe, the individual alienation from *zoē* as well as from bare death, one’s sense that they are entitled to pursue the “good life” and, indeed, a “good death,” play into predominant forms of social acculturation, relational arrangements and behaviors. This is such that parts of the population least subject to the politics of death—least considered “necro-subjects” in the sense we’ve been discussing here (as disposed to forms of bodily violence and/or acute forms of psychic traumatization)—understand themselves to be experiencing bundled deaths: educative death, romantic death, spiritual death, social death, the death of loss, professional death. This may produce problems for theorizing myriadic death and necro-subjection. In some ways, such attributions become relative, and therefore politicized—although in some ways this is fitting given that here we are discussing the politicized nature of life and death, politicized yet again in deciphering what constitutes abandoned or rejected life vs. “cultivated” life. These distinctions turn both on *who we consider a subject*—as well as *to which living conditions we attribute the status of death-in-life* or living death, necessarily triangulated through the subjects’ experience of those circumstances as either debilitating or manageable, or some variation thereof. There is a relative, cultural, and inter-personal component here that necessarily impacts the way we think necro-subjection and myriadic death. The vast increase in depression and suicide in the rich west is emblematic of the growing sense that death has become diffuse, impacting even those subjects who are considerably more protected from the duress of bare life. Rather than the division into the killable and the keepable, as viewed from the massified level of population and its variant geopolitical dynamics, the individuated politics around living death may well find voice in the rhetoric of the disenfranchised vs. the privileged and the different standards and expectations at play in conceptualizing myriadic death in one cultural milieu or another. While I prefer to focus on forms of death akin to those I



have raised here, it is worth noting that such conceptualizations are vulnerable to cooption. Haskaj argues that “[d]eath-subjects are in direct contrast to the neoliberal consumer and it is this contrast that reifies the direct centrality of death-subjects to a neoliberal order” (2018: 1161). While he may be right that the dead and dying elsewhere in the world serve as reminders of the privileges enjoyed by select populations particularly in the global north, it is important to recall that within rich countries there are many abandoned populations who replicate within that state the global necroeconomic dynamics that Haskaj illuminates.

### COVID-19 as “Death World”

Alas, we have begun to enter the discussion at which I have been driving: the COVID-19 era as *death-world*, thought across both empirical and metaphorical registers. It is a surprise to no one that under our current circumstances, with the omnipresence of death having been foisted upon us all more visibly, I am not the first to think about the relationship between COVID-19 and necropolitics. However, I want to employ the concepts of bare death and myriadic death to better consider the nuances of the current COVID-19 pandemic—a death-world that, I argue, encodes diffuse threats of death that are not wholly subordinateable by human efforts to order it.

Mbembe defines death-world as “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*” (2003: 40). The current pandemic has seen the burgeoning of a number of unique forms of social existence, or at least has amended the predominant forms of social existence in a number of places, with lockdowns, travel restrictions, enforced distance, and mask mandates in many parts of the world. As a rapid and fatal intrusion on social life, the pandemic has made death hyper-visible even as particular deaths have been veiled or diminished by the wave of fatalities that has come to rationalize them. While many of the social transformations in light of the pandemic have been initiated by the response of governments (their power over life and death is not effaced), the situation demands a recognition of forces that escape the mechanisms of sovereign power as disseminated by disparately destructive and contingently interacting biopolitical and necropolitical regimes, even as these regimes work to order the resulting disaster.

At least two predicaments of our modern moment exemplify the constraint on bio- and necropolitical power to order them—the COVID-19 breakout, our focus here, as well as the rapid escalation of unwieldy environmental events linked to anthropogenic climate change. In the latter case, we are becoming more aware of our subjection to chaotic and unheeding planetary power, indifferently scrambling existing systems in a



way that human beings can only partially control. It has always been the case that the machinations of human civilization have unfurled against the backdrop of mutable planetary conditions. However, when those conditions are reasonably stable, our recognition of their power recedes. In this distinct moment of the Anthropocene (if we permit the term to pass here without the uproarious scrutiny under which it usually labors—simply to point out an undeniable moment of climatic convergence irrespective of how we socialize, politicize, critique, and distribute blame by way of our nominal disputes about the term itself), we are becoming aware that our species and those species with whom we share our terrestrial home are increasingly at the mercy of shifting environmental conditions and the crises that, for us, such shifts portend. Of course, it would be mendacious not to recognize the culmination of human forces in particular that have contributed to our present climatic precarity—rampant industrialism, the burning of fossil fuels, overconsumption, mass deforestation, harmful agricultural practices, and so on. However, what has become clear is the loosening ability of human societies to manage the effects in ways that align with the deeply-grooved channels of power as wrought and policed in our contemporary era. While we can speculate about whether climate change will force a massive overhaul in how the global economy functions or whether capitalist enterprise will engineer wildly profitable technologies to better treat environmental crises, environmental calamity is nevertheless an unruly fact of our current moment that cannot be wholly tamped down by the incisive levers of human organization or innovation.

Naturally, the COVID-19 pandemic is similarly not strictly the making of environmental conditions that exceed us. Human activity cannot be downplayed in facilitating not only the creation of the virus itself but its rapid spread, while environmental forces not only impact how the virus was likely to have started, but continue to exercise power over how the virus spreads, mutates, and physically infects the body. In our context, environmental forces (in the case of COVID-19) or planetary power (in the case of acute climate disruption) cannot be thought apart from human commingling with that power. We are running up against disruptions to the devised order that supersede the terrestrial exercise of political and social power (local or global), while capturing both. Indeed, the capitalist class has found a way to proceed and profit massively due to the current conditions, as the avenues for consumption have narrowed and the crash of global stock markets precipitated billionaires betting handsomely on eventual recovery. Necrospeculation, defined by Kris Manjapra and Beverley Skeggs as “the ability to turn destruction into profit and produce new capitalist value,” can be seen in the enriching of the billionaire capitalist class as the pandemic has waged on, accumulating its dead as economies weaken, all while a billionaire like Jeff Bezos increased his wealth by more than half (to the tune of \$203 billion) and Elon Musk saw his wealth increase ten-fold since March 2020, reaching \$294 billion by the end of the first 20 months of the pandemic (Skeggs 2021: 124; Manjapra 2019; Neate 2020).



Skeggs argues that the history of necrospeculation, thanatocracy (“the enactment of mass and organized killing”), and the historical social-sexual division of labor have all come to bear upon this pandemic—these racial, class, and gender legacies (all of which evince the “relationship between property, accumulation, and disposable people” [2021: 124]) have found new iterations in the COVID-19 era.

While billionaires have benefitted, governments have been overwhelmed, as the death-world forged in this instance persistently escapes the complete management by sovereign power. The virus is effectively violating the human infrastructure designed to dole out disregard and just deserts in ways respectful to the existent capitalist order by effecting broad swathes of the population and crossing racial and class lines (though of course conditions are worse in already vulnerable communities). Beyond devastating the global economy, which relies on a willing, productive, and healthy workforce—the novel coronavirus pandemic has sown forms of death in places presumed to be impervious. Nikhil Pandhi gestures to the susceptibility of the privileged in discussing India’s second wave, remarking that “India’s second wave of COVID-19 is visibly vanquishing even India’s middle and upper-middle classes and castes. [...] On an unprecedented scale, today’s viral necropolitics is impacting the privileged thereby producing particular health crises for India’s entitled citizenry (and netizenry)” (2021). The sort of personal privilege that has entitled select individuals to “health in life (indeed, even dignity in death)” has been eroded in a number of places where the toll of the pandemic has begun to reveal glaring insufficiencies in the public service and health care infrastructure. The less acute forms of death being experienced by those forced to stay inside, unable to socialize, feeling useless without absorption into a labor force, or else feeling profound economic precarity (in some cases for the first time)—these are in no way novel or unique forms of death. These are pre-existing forms of death newly distributed across populations as a planetary event not immediately masterable by human technologies comes into contact with existing (and often already-compromised) socio-politico-economic systems, creating what is in some ways a disconcertingly democratizing situation where unexpected or unplanned-for forms of death have begun to impact those in power in ways historically reserved for the most disempowered.

While I here consider the COVID-19 pandemic as a death-world, it is important to keep the insight of McIntyre and Nast abreast, which recognizes the interpenetration and co-reliance of what they term the “necropolis” (the “space of negation and the socially dead,” wherein surplus populations have been disregarded in ways that tracks with “reproductive racial politics”) and the “biopolis” (the polis that relies on the administration of life to prop up the modern nation-state) (2011: 1467). While geographically distinct (the former tending to describe regions where populations are stagnant, displaced, less developed, and ruled by violence—and the latter those regions subsidized by the “racialized negation” of the necropolis, often wealthy regions ruled via



consent), the two “constitute a spatial dialectical unity” and share histories of accumulation, racialization, violence, and resistance (2011: 1467-75). McIntyre and Nast’s speculation that “neoliberal capitalism [will] collapse any spatial distinction between biopolis and necropolis, invaginating exploitation’s spatial ordering to produce a necro(bio)polis of global proportions” has been expedited by the COVID-19 crisis (1468). This necro(bio)polis is found among industrialized super-economies as well as those nations traditionally cut off from the global economy. The pandemic has been an instance within which “the boundaries between the necropolis and the biopolis [have] dissolve[d],” such that “biopolitical spaces become annexed to the necropolis with unprecedented rapidity” and “the biopolis itself becomes a site of accumulation through dispossession” (1480-81).

A death pledge underwrites our society—the implicit pledge undergirding the social contract that implies that some must suffer and die such that others can live and thrive. This is the prevailing logic not only of neoliberal capitalism, although people make alarmist claims for the unique horror of our current conjuncture. In fact, this logic runs through the epochs preceding, and, evidenced once more by this pandemic, we are left with a sense of the persistence of history rather than our departure from it. As Judith Butler writes, “[t]he virus alone does not discriminate, but we humans surely do, formed and animated as we are by the interlocking powers of nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and capitalism” (2020). Written early in the pandemic, Butler already anticipates “the rapidity with which radical inequality, nationalism, and capitalist exploitation [will] find ways to reproduce and strengthen themselves within the pandemic zones” and predicts that the population will be divided in light of the circumstances, yet again, into the killable and the keepable—those worthy of protection and those who will have to endure, or die, without it.

If the end of capitalism is indeed more difficult to envision than the end of the world, the death of the economy has impelled more fear in a lot of instances than mass death itself, and a sacrificial logic has seized the former in defense of the latter. This evinces the prioritization of *bios*—the forms of life we have developed and the governing logics to which we have attached—over the desire to protect life for its own sake. This was perhaps never so striking as when the U.S. Republican lieutenant governor from Texas, Dan Patrick, claimed in 2020, shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began, that seniors like himself would be willing to risk death to circumvent the economy’s collapse: “No one reached out to me and said, ‘As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that America loves for its children and grandchildren?’ And if that is the exchange, I’m all in.” (Sonmez 2020)

Crucial to this analysis is how the threat to the individual body culminates in the derailing of the political body, the dismantling of socio-economic business as usual. How



have sovereign powers tried to gain control over this pandemic? To what extent have they failed? The usual powers of sovereignty, including the ability to deploy extra-legal force to de-escalate situations has been on display.<sup>5</sup> However, in what ways has sovereign power—understood as still active, if reconfigured, under the overarching political rationality of our neoliberal regime—failed to order the pandemic’s elusive operations, which are largely non-susceptible to prevailing economic and national logics? I do not mean to argue that we are entering a post-sovereign age, as sovereign power is very much operating—indeed, fighting to stay operative—in moments of planetary or virological upheaval. Wainwright and Mann, in *Climate Leviathan*, argue that we are entering a moment of *planetary sovereignty*—which anticipates that the state of exception in the era of acute climate disaster will be declared by a collection of powers “in the name of preserving life on Earth,” who will determine the measures to be taken and the sacrifices that ought to be made in the name of preservation (2018: 15). In other words, biopolitics and necropolitics as usual, except oriented to the problem of species extinction and environmental protection. We might think of the pandemic as arousing a similar response—biopolitics and necropolitics as usual, except oriented to the problem of pandemic-related death—although this has happened largely through the workings of individual states and in a less internationally integrated way than the kind of regulative climate body Wright and Mann eventually envision. In any case, I am pointing out something different here in invoking the planetary in relation to climate change or in the case of the pandemic, the virosphere.<sup>6</sup> Less interesting to me is the power erected and structured in response to this crisis than the way former modes of power—especially those that control the administration or disallowance of life—are being broken by not-exclusively-human powers that are vying for prominence in this particular historical moment. Environmental production in this case has ramifications so torrential and immediate that it begins to short-circuit the imperatives of social and economic production.

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<sup>5</sup> This invocation of sovereignty is in keeping with Agamben’s, who follows Schmitt in presenting a theory of sovereign power founded on the structure of exception: “[s]overeign is he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 1985: 5). The sovereign thus has the ability to suspend the law at will and establish a state of exception wherein particular laws or rules cease to apply. Schmitt insists that the exception is more illustrative than the rule it suspends, as it illustrates the robust nature of sovereign power: the sovereign decides what is incorporated into and what is ejected from the political sphere. Agamben also follows Benjamin by taking to a further extreme the primacy of the exception that Schmitt emphasized, when he claims that the state of exception identified by Schmitt (in which the law is suspended by the sovereign) has in modern western states become the rule (1998: 9). Because the production of bare life is the activity of sovereignty and therefore an originary political ingredient, its production is not the exception but the norm. Wainwright and Mann argue that sovereignty is “inherently and paradoxically contingent, historically specific and yet seemingly transhistorical” (2018: 20).

<sup>6</sup> Scientists understand the “virosphere” as the areas of earth where viruses exist or that are affected by viruses. While the virosphere is impacted by human and animal activity, the virosphere in the case of COVID-19 has come to affect the majority of the populated world. Here, the virosphere begets the death-world by facilitating forms of social existence “in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*,” provided they manage to avoid wholesale death at the hands of the virus (Mbembe 2003: 40).



## Myriadic Death & the Pandemic Era

Talking about our pandemic universe as a “death-world” is one way to acknowledge the surplus of global deaths as related to the pandemic, the life-limiting regulations it has enforced, and the socially-isolating ways of life it has endorsed. On the other hand, such a designation threatens to obscure the many forms of myriadic death being experienced—and their radical non-commensurateness. While some have quarantined comfortably, working from home and thereby minimizing their risk of exposure, others have lived in crowded living quarters, have no access to vaccines, suffer from poor or non-existent medical care, and are expected to continue the essential work that keeps the impaired economy functioning. We must ask why the response to this pandemic has dwarfed the response to so many health emergencies of the past, as the answer lays bare the dynamic political, social, and biological stakes at play here. The outpour in response to this crisis is, for some critics, an outsized reaction given the more sweeping endemics or pandemics of the past and present (including suicide, addiction, famine, etc.). This is because COVID-19, all else being equal (which it isn’t), is much less deciphering: it doesn’t obey systems of established power. It attacks the rich and powerful with the same vigor that it attacks the vulnerable, the troubled, and the poor. And so it demands the attention of all, the action of all, as all are rendered potential victims. As Jean-Luc Nancy points out, death “which we have tried to export with wars, famines and devastation” is the virus’s companion, journeying everywhere with it—various forms of death await any and all of us at every turn (many of which directly relate to the subtraction from or paralysis of valued forms of life) (2020: 65). We are now committed to embracing myriadic forms of social, economic, and political death in order to avert literal, non-discriminating death *en masse*.

The calamity which here threatens *all* human investment is not merely a political conflict between powerful and exploited factions, although it throws these divisions into sharp relief because the most privileged are the first saved and even a global pandemic or wholesale biospheric collapse won’t change this fundamental inequality as understood in human terms.<sup>7</sup> And yet, the threat of unrelegatable environmental production is existential, not merely sociological, and the battle against it is waged not merely on political grounds but for the purpose of general, multi-species survival. Even if we concede that capitalism is a distinctively cunning and endlessly incorporative social formation capable of containing acute socio-political shifts and reasserting familiarly exploitative structures of power, it may be that the great challenge to this economic status quo is an external threat of planetary or virological proportions. And in

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<sup>7</sup> Unless, of course, the infrastructures that protect privilege—that administer life in a selective fashion—themselves begin to break down. The post-apocalyptic HBO show *Station Eleven* (2021) imagines a much more deadly global pandemic—one in which the whole of human civilization is wrecked by death and survival is mostly dictated by chance rather than privilege.



many ways, this virological disruption provides a way to think about what future perpetual climatic disturbance will look like—once the events signaling climate change become more frequent and more haphazardly distributed, once climate disaster is itself elevated to the level of global pandemic.

Whether the pandemic reveals an even tighter knot between the biological and the political at the core of all political conflict, as Roberto Esposito claims; whether it exceeds in nuanced and complicated ways the strictures of biopolitical formulations as Nancy argues; whether its greatest threat is the expansion, normalization, and continuation of governmental exception and control as Agamben warns; or whether rituals of exception in COVID times are not only conspiratorial state efforts but also necessary adjustments for the sake of social protection and longevity as Dwivedi and Mohan claim—the pandemic offers a paradigm (now stretching to encompass the globe) within which to consider the fusion and stratification of death, ever-exacerbating and with inestimable effects (Agamben 2020; Dwivedi/Mohan 2021). COVID-19 as nebulous death-world or -web forces us to ask about the complicated interplay between the psychic, social, and planetary in relation to death, but also, in its global overwhelming of health care capabilities, it has forced us to consider medico-ethical questions about how we wish to die, who to let die, the politics of sacrifice, and the value of “dying well.” Some deaths in this crisis have been made hypervisible—plucked up against the backdrop of proliferant death to be mourned more intensely—thousands of other deaths have been minimalized, made invisible, occasionally not even reflected in the death toll numbers. Thousands of people have died alone, without access to life-saving resources or else with access to them, but in vain. Corpses have been stored, left, burned, abandoned; communities and families have been unable to dictate the terms of funeral rituals, body collection and storage, or corporeal disposal.

Above, I located myriadic death in particular figures. However, the creation of death-worlds that confer on the living the conditions of death (understood spectrally and multiply), inflicted through occasionally spectacular and often “molecular” forms of terror, are not always limited to particular or localized necro-subjects (Mbembe 2019: 26). Death-worlds are often experienced collectively, as a form of joint trauma (latent or express) that informs communities. This understanding of collective, spatial trauma—what geographer Rachel Pain calls “geotrauma”—draws on theories of trauma which understand trauma as “collective, spatial, and material (instead of individual, temporal and linguistic)” (Pain 2020: 974; Rothberg 2008: 228). And yet, shared death-worlds may be entered into by necro-subjects already laboring under diffuse forms of individual death-in-life, indeed those exposed to death-worlds that pre-existed this pandemic. Others, who have been permitted to live, encouraged in their living by virtue of being deemed “grievable” or keepable, may well be experiencing their most acute forms of living death throughout the course of the pandemic. It remains to be seen if the



collective COVID-19 consciousness that has been developing will lead to greater global solidarity or more incisive ideological division. In some ways, we are living through death in a way that forges by force and grief a global community, or a “pandemic generation.”

Indeed many, like Laterza and Römer, hope that “the truly global, albeit highly uneven, dimension of this pandemic might lift the veil of false consciousness that has so far separated the North from the South, the West from ‘the rest’” by forcing those living comfortably in predominantly the global north to experience what perpetual precarity, and the threat of death, feels like (2020). And yet, there are many who claim the pandemic is hastening a form of socialization that civilization was already moving towards pre-pandemic: one of increased isolation and individualism, one governed by technological mediation (especially one in which biotechnologies gain considerable power), one where disciplinary and surveillance technologies get expanded under the auspices of essential protection, one where the sacrifice of a multitude of lives is considered inevitable. Ideological wars wage on regarding the proper role of governments in managing citizens and the forms of political life, or *bios*, which should be safeguarded despite the threat of death. Can community be built by virtue of shared connection to the COVID-19 death world, this event that grounds or informs a generation, which has forged a shared language that has penetrated every household, such as the viral spread of the words for deadly variants, such as “delta” and “omicron”?

My effort here has in part been to point out that the structure of exception and its deployment is not only a distinct biopolitical weapon exercised for the purposes of political tyranny but a much more insipid, invasive, and fluid process. There are different paradigms of exception operating that complicate blanket demonization of any one instituted exception, especially in unprecedented times. As Dwivedi and Mohan put it, “there are only exceptions today,” which shatters the myth of normalcy and the conscious departure from it (2021: 32). Exceptions may well prove necessary, protective, ameliorative of life conditions more largely. Or perhaps Tony Sandset is right to see the pandemic as giving rise not to an expansion of the state of exception as Agamben claims, but rather to a normalized “state of acceptance,” wherein “the necropolitics of global health inequality is driven not by a perpetual state of emergency, but by a state of chronic acceptance” that some will die over others and necropolitical zones will continue to be produced “wherein people are exposed to conditions not conducive to living but ‘slow death’” (2021: 1411-13). Bio- and necropolitical theory provide useful ways to unpack the nexus of political power and its disciplinary arsenal exercised over life and death. However, our world proffers ever-evolving complications that overflow the generalized insights of any one philosophy, in places rendering the prevailing models wildly inadequate. Regimes of power are not only manipulating but manipulable, which is why we must continue to calibrate our analyses of necropolitics



and the forms of death devised and suffered under it to better confront existent formations of power as well as to better formulate our responses to them.

In some ways, the appeal of bare death becomes clearer from the position of a death-world in which the departure from bare death—our entrance into politicized death as bound up with tentacular networks of power, privilege, and in this moment, environmental contingencies over which we have limited control—has meant even more opportunity for death understood myriadically. In light of this crisis, death and life are seen in shifting and spectral terms. As a species that has long understood “dying well” as the necessary capstone of a life well-lived, it becomes clear that the residues of political power persist past our biological life. The expectation that having lived well should enable dying well reveals a classist presumption that living successfully, appropriately, productively, and prosperously ought to guarantee you the right to dignity in death—to a breathing machine, to sufficient medical care, to contact with family and friends when on death’s doorstep, to a burial and funeral at which people gather in your honor after death. The countless modifications to bare death mean that death is always about more than a mere event, an expiration, a termination. Death is not the point of irreversible destruction to the individual or the ultimate expenditure of sovereign power. Death is often slowly distributed, differential, a culmination of small exterminations of variously lived lives within any given life. This is why death must be understood in a scalar fashion—why death is intensifying gradation, not unthinkable excess. Foucault’s claim that death is the limit of biopower therefore must be deconstructed, since power works in, on, and beyond death—it works on the living, on the corpses yielded by or disappeared in death, and in the continued death-making that is inflicted on diverse communities of necro-subjects.

## Conclusion

I have here advanced terminologies that broaden and complicate our understanding of death as mere biological cessation—death as a form of punishment and reclamation, a site of dispossession and agency, and most importantly, a state often suffered throughout life and still susceptible to political power even after we reach our biological end. Such a recasting allows us to better understand the constellations of power and deprivation within which all bodies are entwined, and to make sense of our death-infused global moment. Our departure from bare death, and the myriadization of death thought through a necroeconomic lens and in relation to death-worlds sheds light on the COVID-19 crisis. In an interview, Mbembe was asked if after the pandemic, humans will be the same as before. His response: “What this pandemic reveals, if we take it seriously, is that our history on earth is not guaranteed. [...] The fact that it’s plausible that life will continue without us is the key theme of this century” (Bercito 2020). We have talked



here about whether human life can live through a barrage of deaths. We have not considered whether life, which is not and has never been exclusive to the human, may well live beyond us—beyond the bounds of complete human death. Bridging this gap is perhaps our next and most urgent step.

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