

**19 August 2020**

**The Irish Museum of Modern Art International Summer School 2020: On Statecraft.**

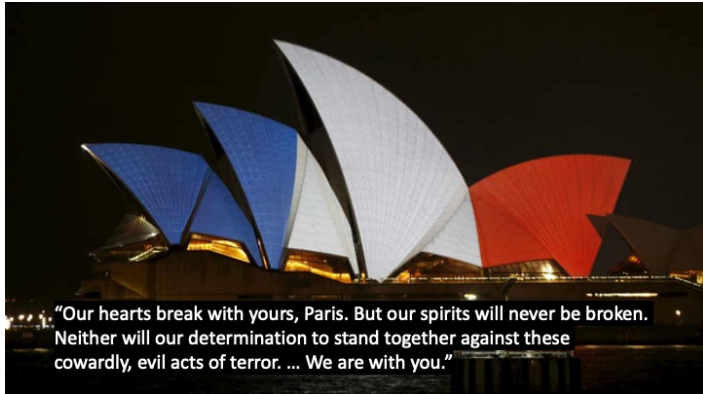
**Public Talk (Speaker's Notes)**

## SLIDE 1 Fanon Quote

“Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them.”

Frantz Fanon (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*.

## SLIDE 2 Paris Sydney Opera House



### Preamble

The screen shows an image of the Sydney opera house illuminated in the colours of the French flag. This act of solidarity was proffered from Australia, and broadcast half way round the world, to Paris, in November 2015 after the distressing slaughter of crowds of people by armed men operating in the name of “Islamic State.” The solidarity proposed in this gesture is highly selective. Unexpected sudden violent death in Paris requires an act of symbolic solidarity in a way that many other sudden violent deaths do not. Those other deaths are somehow to be expected. Violent deaths in North Pakistan, in Afghanistan, in Yemen, in Chad, in Nigeria, in Mexico, in Brazil, in India... such sudden violent deaths visited upon unarmed, non-combatant civilians do not require a symbolic act of solidarity. That’s what happens in those places. Its somehow all to be expected there, and “‘We’ are most certainly *not* standing with ‘them.’”

## SLIDE 3

### It's Not Just Paris: From Nigeria to Egypt, 10 of 2015's Worst Terrorist Attacks

A look at some of 2015's deadliest terrorist attacks.

BY HESHA ALBERT | NOVEMBER 18, 2015, 4:56 PM



Last Friday, Islamic State terrorists carried out a series of coordinated attacks in Paris that killed at least 130 people, causing a global outpouring of outrage and sympathy. The strikes highlighted a disturbing and dramatic increase in the number of large-scale terrorist attacks — and raised uncomfortable questions about why some deaths receive so little attention from Western media.

#### Number of Times more than 100 People were Killed by Terrorist Attacks on a Single Day in a Single Country, 2000-2014

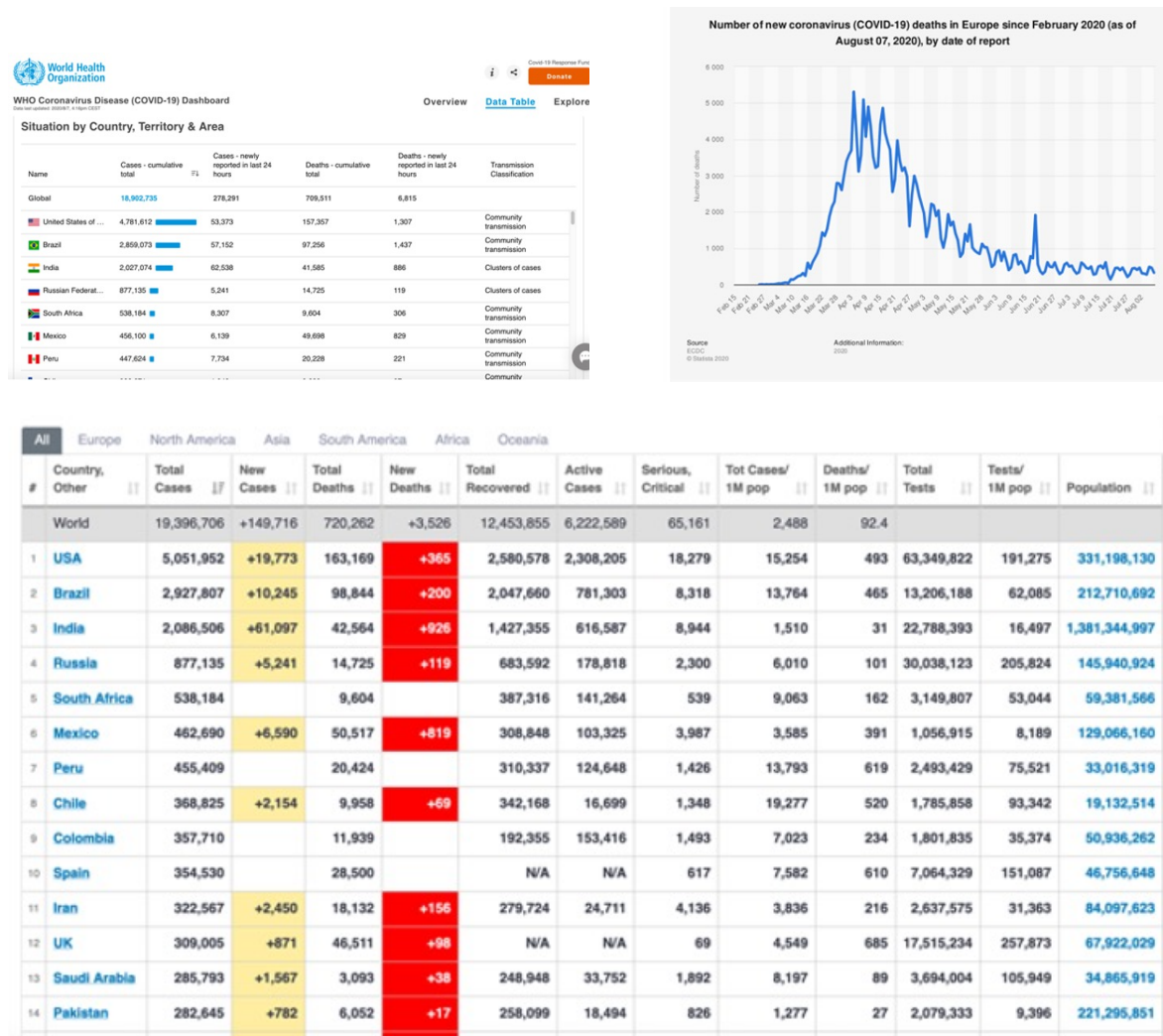
Iraq	29
Nigeria	13
Pakistan	6
India	4
Syria	4
Nepal	3
Afghanistan	2
Angola	2
Russia	2
Sudan	2
Yemen	2
Central African Republic	1
Chad	1
China	1
Colombia	1
Democratic Republic of the Congo	1
Indonesia	1
Philippines	1
Somalia	1
South Sudan	1
Spain	1
Sri Lanka	1
Uganda	1
Ukraine	1
United States	1

Source: Global Terrorism Database

This next screen shows a news item on the US American platform *Foreign Policy*. It questions the calibration of outrage and sympathy in the mediascape, by pointing to other atrocities in 2015 that break the one hundred mark in the body count.

While the first image speaks to the intrinsically racialized political imaginary that finds certain violent deaths grievable, and other violent deaths unremarkable; this second screen speaks to the intrinsic comparability, or logic of equivalence, that abstraction makes easy. In this case, it is the abstraction of desperate, painful, bloody, world-destroying deaths into a simple numerical indicé: 120 here, 270 there, not quite 100 there.

## SLIDE 4, 5, 6



These next images, are samples of recent media graphics and tables, giving us the tally of COVID19 tests, infections, fatalities and recoveries. Here the numerical cataloguing of the dead appears to have become a way of speaking truth to power. They have become synchronized with the news cycle. “We”—those of us in the media’s path of address—monitor the plague together, the rise and fall of the numbers determining how far we can drive, whether we will go to school again, and who are the good guys and who are the bad guys in the story...

## SLIDE 7,

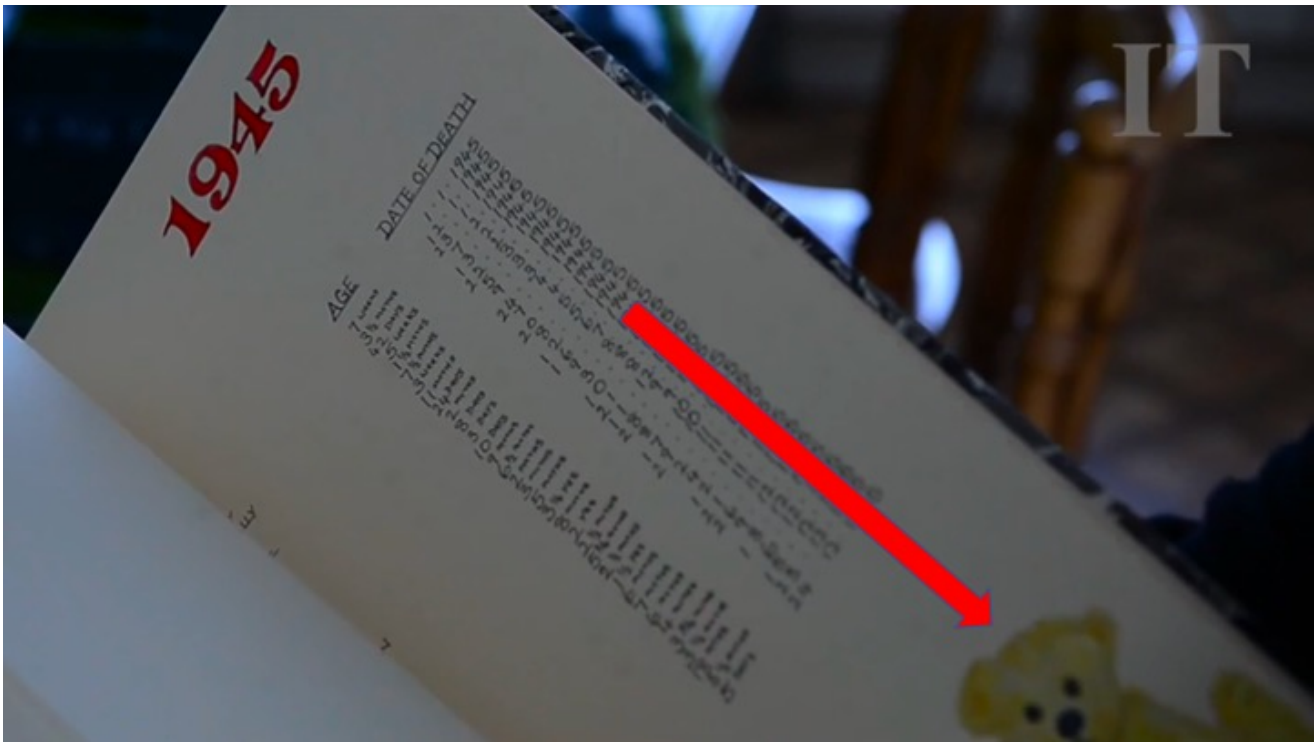


The following images are taken from an Irish Times online video interview with the wonderful Catherine Corless. She is the public historian who did what the historians of our great universities, built upon their proud Jesuit or Royal foundations, apparently could not be arsed to do. She researched the deaths of the infants caught up in the state's delegated apparatuses of confinement, the infants caught up in the decades long war against the young poor waged by church, state and civil society in concert. Infants caught in institutions of a kind we might now call “direct provision” —Of course today the *bons secours* have been replaced by something like *Securicor*. In the interview Corless is challenged by the journalist, do you really believe there are 800 dead babies buried on the site? Corless responds without missing a beat: “would it be less of a problem if it was only 10 or 20?”

## SLIDE 8,

Date of Death	Age	Cause of Death	
22/08/1925	2 Months	Anaemia since birth	none
23/09/1925	3 1/2 Months	Meningitis (2 days)	none
18/10/1925	3 Months	Debility from birth	none
06/12/1925	6 Months	Intestinal Tuberculosis	none
25/12/1925	11 Months	Bronchitis (3 Months)	none
26/12/1925	1 Year	Syncope coming from natural causes	none
04/11/1925	4 Weeks	Congenital Syphilis	none
05/03/1926	6 Months	Gastritis (14 days)	none
09/03/1926	2 1/2 Months	Measles (7 days)	none
05/04/1926	3 Years and 3 Months	Measles (5 days) Meningitis	none
	6 1/2 years	Measles (10 days) Gastritis (2 days)	none
08/04/1926	3 years	Measles (2 days)	none
15/04/1926	1 1/2 years	Debility from birth	none
18/04/1926	1 Year	Measles (8 days)	none

On the table in front of the historian are papers that carry the lists of the dead: One can just about see the headings on the array of data: Date of Death; Age; Cause of Death, and hand written in the side a short note indicating “none” against each entry. Presumably this is to identify that no site or circumstance of burial appears to be recorded.



In this next image from the same interview we see what appears to be Catherine Corless's original hand-written record, listing the dead infants from the Tuam Mother and Baby Home by year. The page is ornamented by the image of a child's teddy bear. The poignancy of this small private gesture of care, suggests an act of imaginative being with, and caring for the dead: These dead abandoned and ungrieved by the state, by the church and by civil society.

With these images, I am trying to indicate something of the potency and the treachery of the body count. Because it is a way to re-organize the world, and even on occasion to show the injustice that already structures the world, the body count is powerful. Because it is also the means to abstract death away from the living, and to play a game of comparative atrocity, the body count is treacherous. Its powers betray us into the hands of some grim accountancy, the ledger books of the unthinking.



## SLIDES 11,12,13

**A generall Bill for this present year,**  
**ending the 19 of December 1665. according to**  
**the Report made to the KINGS most Excellent Majesty.**  
 By the Company of Parish Clerks of London, &c.

Parish	Parish	Parish	Parish
St Albans Woodstreet	St Clements Eastcheap	St Margaret Mole	St Michael Cornhill
St Allhallows Earking	St Dunstons Backchurch	St Margaret New Fish	St Michael Crooked Lane
St Allhallows Borehithe	St Dunstons East	St Margaret Pattens	St Michael Quench
St Allhallows Great	St Edmunds Lombard	St Mary Abchurch	St Michael Que ne
St Allhallows Hood	St Ethelburga	St Mary Aldermanbury	St Michael Royal
St Allhallows Little	St Faiths	St Mary Abington	St Michael Woodstreet
St Allhallows Lombard	St Fosters	St Mary le Bow	St Mildred Breadstreet
St Allhallows Staining	St Gabriel Fenchurch	St Mary Bochim	St Mildred Poultry
St Allhallows the Wall	St George Botolph	St Mary Colclough	St Nicholas Acon
St Alphage	St Gregorys by Pauls	St Mary Hill	St Nicholas Coleaby
St Andrew Hubbard	St Helens	St Mary Monmouth	St Nicholas Olives
St Andrew Undershaft	St James Duke place	St Mary Somerset	St Olaves Hartstreet
St Andrew Wardrobe	St James Garththorpe	St Mary Stuyvesant	St Olaves Jewry
St Anne Aldersgate	St John Bapt	St Mary Woolchurch	St Olaves Southwiche
St Anne Blackefriars	St John Evangelist	St Mary Woolnoth	St Olaves Southwiche
St Antholms Parson	St John Zacharie	St Martin Aemongst	St Olaves Southwiche
St Antholms Parson	St Katherine Coleman	St Martin Ludgate	St Olaves Southwiche
St Barthol Exchange	St Katherine Clerken	St Martin Organs	St Olaves Southwiche
St Bennet Tranch	St Lawrence Jewry	St Martin Outwich	St Olaves Southwiche
St Bennet Tranch	St Lawrence Poultry	St Martin Vintry	St Olaves Southwiche
St Bennet Tranch	St Lawrence Poultry	St Martin Vintry	St Olaves Southwiche

**Weekly Bill of Mortality for the City and Suburbs of**  
**DUBLIN: Ending the 4th of March, 1753.**

Bapt.	Bur.	Bur.	Bapt.
00 St. Patrick's	01	00 Christ-Church	00
00 St. Audeon's	10	00 St. Michael's	00
02 St. Andrew's	07	03 St. Michans	03
03 St. Anne's	01	03 St. Mary's	02
04 St. Bridges's	03	00 St. Marks	02
10 St. Catherine's	01	03 St. Nicholas-within	00
French	02	07 St. Nicholas-without	01
0 St. George's	01	03 St. Peter's and Kevins	02
01 St. James's	05	15 St. Paul's	09
00 St. John's	00	01 St. Warborough's	04
00 St. Luke's	03	00 St. Thomas	02

Of the Dileases and Caluities this Week.

Aged	Jaundice
01	01
00	00

**Births and Burials in the City of Philadelphia,**  
**for the Month of January.**

Chu. of England.	Presbyterians.
Males Christned, 2	2
Females Christned, 1	0
Males Buried, 2	1
Females Buried, 0	0

**People called Quakers.**

Males Born,	Females,	In all
Males Buried, 4.	Females, 30	In all 7.

**Buried in the Strangers Burying-Ground, 2:**  
**Negroes, None.**

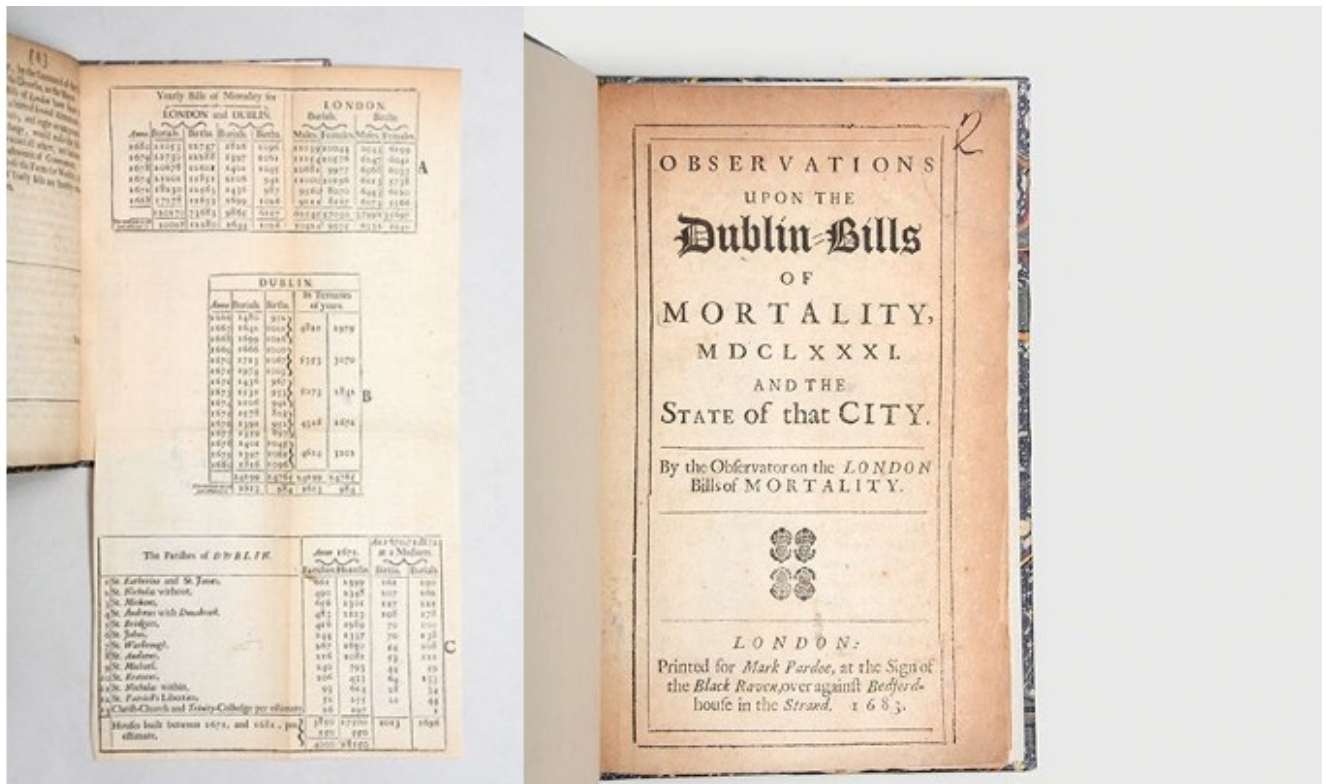
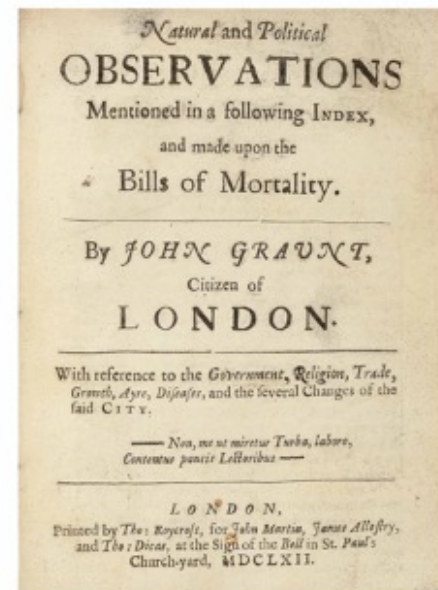
The American  
 Weekly  
 Mercury  
 Jan 30 - Feb 6  
 1722

These next three images are what are known as 'Bills of Mortality', they are printed reports summarizing numbers of burials: The first is from London and covers the year 1665; the second is from Dublin and covers a week in 1753; and the third is an item published within a newspaper from Philadelphia, and covers the first week in February 1722.

# **THE TABLE OF CASUALTIES.**

The Years of our Lord

Year	1689	1690	1691	1692	1693	1694	1695	1696	1697	1698	1699	1700	1701	1702	1703	1704	1705	1706	1707	1708	1709	1710	1711	1712	1713	1714	1715	1716	1717	1718	1719	1720	1721	1722	1723	1724	1725	1726	1727	1728	1729	1730	1731	1732	1733	1734	1735	1736	1737	1738	1739	1740	1741	1742	1743	1744	1745	1746	1747	1748	1749	1750	1751	1752	1753	1754	1755	1756	1757	1758	1759	1760	1761	1762	1763	1764	1765	1766	1767	1768	1769	1770	1771	1772	1773	1774	1775	1776	1777	1778	1779	1780	1781	1782	1783	1784	1785	1786	1787	1788	1789	1790	1791	1792	1793	1794	1795	1796	1797	1798	1799	1800																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																		
Abolition, and Billions	117	120	123	126	129	132	135	138	141	144	147	150	153	156	159	162	165	168	171	174	177	180	183	186	189	192	195	198	201	204	207	210	213	216	219	222	225	228	231	234	237	240	243	246	249	252	255	258	261	264	267	270	273	276	279	282	285	288	291	294	297	300	303	306	309	312	315	318	321	324	327	330	333	336	339	342	345	348	351	354	357	360	363	366	369	372	375	378	381	384	387	390	393	396	399	402	405	408	411	414	417	420	423	426	429	432	435	438	441	444	447	450	453	456	459	462	465	468	471	474	477	480	483	486	489	492	495	498	501	504	507	510	513	516	519	522	525	528	531	534	537	540	543	546	549	552	555	558	561	564	567	570	573	576	579	582	585	588	591	594	597	600	603	606	609	612	615	618	621	624	627	630	633	636	639	642	645	648	651	654	657	660	663	666	669	672	675	678	681	684	687	690	693	696	699	702	705	708	711	714	717	720	723	726	729	732	735	738	741	744	747	750	753	756	759	762	765	768	771	774	777	780	783	786	789	792	795	798	801	804	807	810	813	816	819	822	825	828	831	834	837	840	843	846	849	852	855	858	861	864	867	870	873	876	879	882	885	888	891	894	897	900	903	906	909	912	915	918	921	924	927	930	933	936	939	942	945	948	951	954	957	960	963	966	969	972	975	978	981	984	987	990	993	996	999	1002	1005	1008	1011	1014	1017	1020	1023	1026	1029	1032	1035	1038	1041	1044	1047	1050	1053	1056	1059	1062	1065	1068	1071	1074	1077	1080	1083	1086	1089	1092	1095	1098	1101	1104	1107	1110	1113	1116	1119	1122	1125	1128	1131	1134	1137	1140	1143	1146	1149	1152	1155	1158	1161	1164	1167	1170	1173	1176	1179	1182	1185	1188	1191	1194	1197	1200	1203	1206	1209	1212	1215	1218	1221	1224	1227	1230	1233	1236	1239	1242	1245	1248	1251	1254	1257	1260	1263	1266	1269	1272	1275	1278	1281	1284	1287	1290	1293	1296	1299	1302	1305	1308	1311	1314	1317	1320	1323	1326	1329	1332	1335	1338	1341	1344	1347	1350	1353	1356	1359	1362	1365	1368	1371	1374	1377	1380	1383	1386	1389	1392	1395	1398	1401	1404	1407	1410	1413	1416	1419	1422	1425	1428	1431	1434	1437	1440	1443	1446	1449	1452	1455	1458	1461	1464	1467	1470	1473	1476	1479	1482	1485	1488	1491	1494	1497	1500	1503	1506	1509	1512	1515	1518	1521	1524	1527	1530	1533	1536	1539	1542	1545	1548	1551	1554	1557	1560	1563	1566	1569	1572	1575	1578	1581	1584	1587	1590	1593	1596	1599	1602	1605	1608	1611	1614	1617	1620	1623	1626	1629	1632	1635	1638	1641	1644	1647	1650	1653	1656	1659	1662	1665	1668	1671	1674	1677	1680	1683	1686	1689	1692	1695	1698	1701	1704	1707	1710	1713	1716	1719	1722	1725	1728	1731	1734	1737	1740	1743	1746	1749	1752	1755	1758	1761	1764	1767	1770	1773	1776	1779	1782	1785	1788	1791	1794	1797	1800
Abolition, and Billions	117	120	123	126	129	132	135	138	141	144	147	150	153	156	159	162	165	168	171	174	177	180	183	186	189	192	195	198	201	204	207	210	213	216	219	222	225	228	231	234	237	240	243	246	249	252	255	258	261	264	267	270	273	276	279	282	285	288	291	294	297	300	303	306	309	312	315	318	321	324	327	330	333	336	339	342	345	348	351	354	357	360	363	366	369	372	375	378	381	384	387	390	393	396	399	402	405	408	411	414	417	420	423	426	429	432	435	438	441	444	447	450	453	456	459	462	465	468	471	474	477	480	483	486	489	492	495	498	501	504	507	510	513	516	519	522	525	528	531	534	537	540	543	546	549	552	555	558	561	564	567	570	573	576	579	582	585	588	591	594	597	600	603	606	609	612	615	618	621	624	627	630	633	636	639	642	645	648	651	654	657	660	663	666	669	672	675	678	681	684	687	690	693	696	699	702	705	708	711	714	717	720	723	726	729	732	735	738	741	744	747	750	753	756	759	762	765	768	771	774	777	780	783	786	789	792	795	798	801	804	807	810	813	816	819	822	825	828	831	834	837	840	843	846	849	852	855	858	861	864	867	870	873	876	879	882	885	888	891	894	897	900	903	906	909	912	915	918	921	924	927	930	933	936	939	942	945	948	951	954	957	960	963	966	969	972	975	978	981	984	987	990	993	996	999	1002	1005	1008	1011	1014	1017	1020	1023	1026	1029	1032	1035	1038	1041	1044	1047	1050	1053	1056	1059	1062	1065	1068	1071	1074	1077	1080	1083	1086	1089	1092	1095	1098	1101	1104	1107	1110	1113	1116	1119	1122	1125	1128	1131	1134	1137	1140	1143	1146	1149	1152	1155	1158	1161	1164	1167	1170	1173	1176	1179	1182	1185	1188	1191	1194	1197	1200	1203	1206	1209	1212	1215	1218	1221	1224	1227	1230	1233	1236	1239	1242	1245	1248	1251	1254	1257	1260	1263	1266	1269	1272	1275	1278	1281	1284	1287	1290	1293	1296	1299	1302	1305	1308	1311	1314	1317	1320	1323	1326	1329	1332	1335	1338	1341	1344	1347	1350	1353	1356	1359	1362	1365	1368	1371	1374	1377	1380	1383	1386	1389	1392	1395	1398	1401	1404	1407	1410	1413	1416	1419	1422	1425	1428	1431	1434	1437	1440	1443	1446	1449	1452	1455	1458	1461	1464	1467	1470	1473	1476	1479	1482	1485	1488	1491	1494	1497	1500	1503	1506	1509	1512	1515	1518	1521	1524	1527	1530	1533	1536	1539	1542	1545	1548	1551	1554	1557	1560	1563	1566	1569	1572	1575	1578	1581	1584	1587	1590	1593	1596	1599	1602	1605	1608	1611	1614	1617	1620	1623	1626	1629	1632	1635	1638	1641	1644	1647	1650	1653	1656	1659	1662	1665	1668	1671	1674	1677	1680	1683	1686	1689	1692	1695	1698	1701	1704	1707	1710	1713	1716	1719	1722	1725	1728	1731	1734	1737	1740	1743	1746	1749	1752	1755	1758	1761	1764	1767	1770	1773	1776	1779	1782	1785	1788	1791	1794	1797	1800
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Lastly, we have two related books published in the late 17<sup>th</sup> C. that took the Bills of Mortality and aggregated their data to produce Observations on the regularities of population change, epidemics, and so forth. I am placing these images here, as citations are normally placed at the head of an essay, and the title of that essay is:

## Body Counts: Scenes from the Political Life of the Dead

Through this essay, I want to share with you an ongoing research project that operates under the heading of “political community with the dead.” In order to introduce this research topic, I am going to consider the practice of the body count, the enumeration and listing of the dead. Along the way, I will try to introduce and problematize some key terms that have come to dominate (in the last forty years or so) the discussion of the politics of death, namely biopolitics and necropolitics. This means that at times, I will give highly compressed accounts of theoretical positions in order to advance the argument. Furthermore, in addressing these themes, I am speaking as an artist and an art theorist rather than as a political theorist, cultural historian, demographer, anthropologist or philosopher: even though, I draw upon all of these disciplines in what follows. Hopefully we can revisit, in the discussion afterwards, any ideas that get mishandled because of too hasty a compression or any themes that get unfairly treated due to lack of expertise in the various disciplines set in play.

The key point of departure here is to first propose that there is an ambivalent positioning of the dead with respect to the imagining of political community within colonial-modernity. Firstly, however, I should explain the use of this doubled-term “colonial-modernity.” It is used as a means to avoid suggesting that European modernity is a self-contained narrative of a self-sufficient Europe unfolding itself from itself. It places the colonial project as integral to the instigation of modernity. This is a way of speaking that is in part informed by the work of Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, María Lugones and others working under the rubric of “modernity/(de)coloniality” or the “decolonial.”<sup>1</sup>

Having signaled the use of this term colonial modernity, the key point then is to assert that: There is an ambivalent positioning of the dead with respect to the imagining of political community within colonial-modernity. Where do the dead fit and what role do they have assigned to them within the political order?

On the one hand, we have the absolute exclusion of the dead. A classic example of this exclusion is pronounced by one of the USAmerican founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson. In his correspondence with James Madison, Jefferson offers one of the most succinct and rhetorically sharpened exclusions of the dead from community with the living. He writes: “I set out on this ground, which I



suppose to be self evident, 'that the earth belongs in usufruct<sup>2</sup> to the living': that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it. [...] The earth belongs always to the living generation."<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson combines the "principle that the earth belongs to the living, and not to the dead" with a little statistical arithmetic to arrive at the assertion that the state should not contract a debt requiring longer than nineteen years of indebtedness. This is because—for Jefferson—the dead cannot bind the living, because one generation cannot mortgage the next. (*So much for late 18<sup>th</sup> C. founding fathers, someone obviously forgot to tell them about the bank guarantee.*)

On the other hand, the dead seem to have been accorded a formidable claim upon the living in another foundational context. "*IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.*"

So which is it? Are the dead our fellows in having some claim upon the world, or are they consigned to a zone of exclusion where they matter not?

Well, first let me be clear that this talk of community with the dead is not necessarily to propose a conversation about ghosts, spirits, lost souls, revenants and spectres. This is not, in the first instance, specified as a question of the supernatural as such. Rather, this is to propose a question about how the dead are accommodated within the sense of political community that the social order produces and operates. Within the imaginary of political community, how are the dead positioned? What agency are they accorded?

My working hypothesis has been that within the political imaginary of colonial-modernity the dead are accorded a residual role that pertains to the idea of a persistence postmortem of the self-possessed individual, but that otherwise there is a systemic move to exclude the dead as non-beings, as non-existents. Most especially, the dead as a collectivity, as a constituency are excluded from the political order. This is not to ignore the symbolic invocation of the great and honorable dead and so

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<sup>2</sup> *usus*, the right to use or enjoy a thing possessed, *fructus*, the right to derive profit from a thing possessed and *abusus*, the right to alienate the thing possessed. That this exclusion of the dead from property rights (from "usufruct") is also an exclusion from political community is partly bound up with the knotted history of the liberal political imaginary, whereby property ownership is construed as the condition of entry into political entitlement and civic personhood.

<sup>3</sup> This is taken from a letter by Jefferson to Madison dated 6 September 1789. *Thomas Jefferson to James Madison Volume 15: 27 March 1789 to 30 November 1789* (Princeton University Press, 1958), 392-8

forth in civil ritual, but to focus on the way the dead as a *collective subject* are disappeared from the scene of political life.

This theme of the exclusion of the dead and the dying has been addressed very often and in many varied ways. From Norbert Elias's *The Loneliness of the Dying*, to Foucault's reflections on the privatisation of death and its displacement from public meaning with the rise of what he terms biopolitics. This specific aspect of exclusion-the dead as a collectivity without agency nor standing as political partners in the present-is partly obscured by the presence of a rich and varied imaginary of the supernatural, the undead, the spectral and the haunted. A ghoulish and uncanny crew of the undead that now loiter and gather in the dark corridors of critical social theory, almost as much as they crowd the plotlines of Netflix and Hollywood. From Avery Gordon's (1997) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* to Zuzanna Dziuban's (2020) *The "Spectral Turn": Jewish Ghosts in the Polish Post-Holocaust Imaginaire*, there is a rich and varied literature comprising what some have dubbed the "spectral turn."

This is not to say that the political imaginaries of haunting are of no interest to this inquiry. It is rather to ask that it might be possible to explore a political imaginary of the dead without starting from, or prioritizing, the Gothic imaginary as paradigmatic. *(Need to elaborate more why the caution on the spectral etc.)*

Proposing that there is a radical exclusion of the dead from political community within colonial-modernity is not the same as saying that there is an evacuation of the dead completely from the imaginary. It is to point to a particular kind of operation that makes of those who have have lived, but are now dead, a politically inconsequential community. The Jeffersonian source is important as it is suggestive of the links between the exclusion of the dead from property rights and the genocidal projects of settler-colonialism. The fantasy of total erasure and expropriation of the native—those defined by the being born to the land/territory—that co-exists with the need to extract value from native life.

*(For another day: This mode of exclusion of the dead might be usefully correlated with the ways in which the condition of slavery has been described as a mode of "social death." This is the image of death as passing over toward or fully into non-existence.)*

At this point of course many objections must arise. Not least among these objections might be that one could say ... *“Well, now hang on a minute there. Sure, what have we all been doing for the last six months but witnessing our political discourse being driven day in day out by the tallies of the newly dead? Is it not, precisely, a particular collectivity of the dead gathered within the sharp digits of the body count, that has dominated our public life since the early Spring?”*

And yes, of course, each day we seem to ask and answer a question about this collectivity of the dead, a question that summons the dead into the terms of a simple abstraction: *“What is their number? How many?”* This in turn becomes a challenge to the established powers. Our newly dead have prompted us to declare: *“Here are so many dead! Where is the state? What has it done? What has it left undone? Are we, the living, in danger?”*

Is this not then a clear example of the collective agency of the dead? That they are counted and this body count becomes the way to speak truth to power?

At first blush, I am inclined to answer “yes”: Yes, this gives us clear evidence of the political saliency of the dead, collected under a number and placed upon a timeline. However, upon reflection, I then want also to answer “no”: No, because in this abstraction of the newly dead as the body count, there is simply another dimension of that move in colonial-modernity to exclude the community of the dead from the political. We merely accord them a place as a fluctuating value in a time series. It is the event of their death that we own in these body counts. What’s left to them is to simply be dead. And to be dead it would seem is quite simply *not to be at all*.

However, to ground this response—that the body count is the (paradoxical) articulation of the disconnection of the dead—requires some digression. So please bear with me a little as we go down the rabbit hole of the state and its transactions upon the dead. (make connection to Agamben’s “excluded through inclusion” / “inclusive exclusion”)





## Coroner Regrets

On the screen are images from an art installation and book project entitled *Coroner Regrets* by Amanda Ralph. This work was first exhibited in Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin in 1999 and subsequently travelled to Derry and New York. It is both a devastatingly simple and a highly complex project. It is the result of an eighteen-month research project in the late 1990s by the artist. She was prompted by a newspaper item, with the discrete headline “Coroner Regrets” that noted how the coroner had expressed dismay at yet another fatality occurring within an epidemic of heroin-related deaths in Dublin. Intrigued by this fragment of low-priority news, Ralph began attending at the Coroner's Court, listening to the cases that were reviewed there. Though open to the public, the attendance at the Court was generally limited to members of the Gardaí; people intimately connected with the deceased; people directly witness to the circumstances of the death; legal and medical representatives; and occasional journalists.

Throughout the period of her research, at the end of each day's attendance at the inquests, Ralph made a written record of her recollection of what had transpired in the Court. Her precise and unsentimental prose was then recorded read aloud by two skilled actors—Ronan Wilmot and Ena May—who *voiced* the text in an affectively reduced and matter of fact tone. The visual register of the work shows the flotsam and jetsam that litter the liffey waters, while this audio register unfolds in flat unemotional terms a kind of secular litany of the dead. Each death narrated in the Coroner's court is re-narrated, disclosing the circumstances of a death and the circumstances of that death's capture in the apparatus of the state.

The coroners' court is a public institution that the British Empire bequeathed to the Irish state, and one that had undergone a significant change over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as part of a wider transformation of government. Ian Burney in his work of the early 1990s described the transformation of this institution which had originally staked its truth production on the coroner's and the jury's direct access to the dead body. Burney writes of “the unsettled interaction between procedural, epistemological, and professional claims made upon a privileged object of inquiry: the dead body.” He argues that the successful 19<sup>th</sup> C. campaign to restrict the jury's view of the body was essentially a debate about “the proper relation between expert and public knowledge.” He concludes that: “By purging the dead body of its connection to the inquest's public features, the English medical community anticipated a fundamentally transformed investigative mechanism, one better equipped to carry out an interrogation of the dead in the interest of both medicine and the

public.” And so, the dead body was displaced and in its stead was installed a knot of juridical and medical discourse that claimed to organize the truth of this death, its meaning and its public consequence.

Burnet’s focus is the form of the coroners’ inquest in England, however, the same lines of development are to be seen in Ireland: A recent report on the Coroner service in Ireland notes that: “The Coroners Act, 1881 took a more scientific approach and insisted on the qualification of being either a duly qualified medical practitioner, barrister or solicitor” in order to function in the role of coroner, whereas previously the key requirement for eligibility was to be a property owner.

The Coroner’s Court may be understood as part of a wider network of institutions and practices whereby the state manages life and death. The court’s task is to establish the meaning of the dead body that is thrown up in the tidal daily wash of the city’s life. Specifically, sudden and unexpected deaths need to be accounted for in terms of possible epidemic, possible wrong doing, or other possible dangers to the population of the city. The inquest establishes what the death means, and how it is to be captured within the accountancy of government.

## **Biopolitics**

Almost half a century ago, in the course of his lectures in the mid-1970s at the College de France, Michel Foucault famously elaborated the terms biopower and biopolitics to describe the ways in which modern government had taken on a new object and task of governance in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> C.: i.e., the management of collective life and population health. According to Foucault’s analysis, this biopolitical focus on actively cultivating the life of the population became a pervasive aspect of the European social order in the 19<sup>th</sup> C. Foucault further asserted that in the 20<sup>th</sup> C., the Nazi state had taken the tasks of biopolitics to a logical terminus in two grand destructive drives: On the one hand, liquidizing entire populations in the name of caring for and protecting the life of the pure German population, and on the other hand, exposing that same German population itself to vast accumulations of death in the name of proving itself to be life worthy of living. Foucault underlined on occasion the way the governmental task of managing the life and health of population (*biopolitics*) had as its integral dimension a shadow face the capacity to liquidize vast numbers and to expose people *en masse* to death (*thanatopolitics*): the politics of death as the always present flipside of the politics of life.

The analysis of biopolitics that Foucault proposed has been a huge intellectual success. It has grown to a very extensive literature across the writing of history, philosophy, political, literary and cultural theory and so forth. Arguably, in its success the analysis of historically contingent changes in techniques and practices of government has been transformed into a philosophical and philological discourse on the genealogy of concepts and terms. At times some aspects of this discourse on biopolitics have made themselves somewhat remote from the empirical mappings of techniques and practices that underpin the initial formulation of biopolitics. While this expansion and extension of the discourse on biopolitics has greatly enriched the analysis and debate, it has also risked abandoning the situated and engaged analysis of power and its resistances, that Foucault's activist scholarship espoused.

Staying with the question of the biopolitical at the register of practices and techniques of governance, the Coroner's Court is just one of the institutional measures to process and arrange death within the larger apparatus for managing life. Already, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the techniques of counting christenings and counting burials had emerged as a means to map an object that came to be called "population" by Francis Bacon, so setting a new term upon its journey.

The USAmerican literary scholar Molly Farrell in her book of (2016) *Counting Bodies: Population in Colonial American Writing*, notes the ways in which the abstraction of population emerges in the colonial Atlantic World of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> C. She cites the French legal philosopher Jean Bodin's 1576 *Six Books of the Commonwealth* and Giovanni Botero's 1588 *The Greatness of Cities*. She tracks the way these early modern political and legal theorists called for the counting of people, both as a means to ensure the wellbeing of the city/state; and as a means for the considered use of colonization in the effective husbandry of the life of the city. When Francis Bacon, under the influence of Bodin and Botero, elaborated his own colonial visions and coined the new term "population," in 1612, he did so in a country that had long practiced the counting of baptisms and burials. This indirect census of (Anglican) births and deaths was a technique of a reorganizing government that built upon the infrastructure of the parish church system. The Guild of the Parish Clerks received a Royally assigned task, inaugurated under the reformation monarchy of King Henry the 8<sup>th</sup>, to compile the *Bills of Mortality*, aggregating the data from the Parish Registers into a list of the dead and the causes of death, that was printed in weekly, seasonal and annual aggregations. This - already in the 16<sup>th</sup> C. - was an especially important measure in the monitoring of the threat of plague and deciding upon the need, or not, to move the seat of government from London to Oxford.

In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> C. John Graunt, a London businessman published his *Observations on the Bills of Mortality*. Graunt's *Observations* effected the beginning of several new practices, among them demography, epidemiology and the drafting of life tables (showing the likelihood of death for a given age group) – these life tables would become a fundamental technique for the insurance industry. Incidentally, it is to this same analysis of the *Bills of Mortality* that Jefferson appealed when calculating how long an elected government could take on a debt, and in the process announced that the dead have no claim upon the earth.

William Petty, the architect of the Down survey, author of *The Political Anatomy of Ireland* and instrument of the Cromwellian Plantation of Ireland, was a close associate and patron of Graunt. Petty later provided the *Observations on the Bills of Mortality* for the City of Dublin, in 1683. I mention this by way of indicating the co-emergence of techniques of state surveillance on population and the assessment of the aggregate wealth of the realm within the colonial project. As Ted McCormick notes in his book on *William Petty And the Ambitions of Political Arithmetic*, Petty's published essays continued "what Graunt had begun, establishing population as an object of knowledge, susceptible to measurement and subject to graspable regularities" construed as "natural laws."<sup>4</sup>

Petty's new *Political Arithmetic* was an accountancy system for abstracting people and property into a systematic catalogue of wealth. An important precursor of this political arithmetic, as Farrell and many others have pointed out, is the counting of the enslaved African bodies of the Black Atlantic. Farrell writes:

The slave trade, especially, instituted a system that normalized the counting of human bodies. When Europeans forced Africans to labor on enormously profitable Caribbean plantations—plantations that constituted the economic engine for Atlantic colonialism—colonial economics morphed seamlessly into social engineering. Long before Britain passed the census bill in 1800, or the newly created United States instituted its first census in 1790, merchants on slave ships tracked and enumerated people kidnapped and deported across the Atlantic in the service of someone else's wealth. Through this economy, slaves, indentured servants, indigenous people, sailors, traders, bookkeepers,

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<sup>4</sup> p. 288



insurers, and plantation owners all became accustomed to viewing human bodies as numbers in a ledger

In an often quoted, and sometimes misconstrued passage from his *Political Anatomy of Ireland*, where he attempts to calculate the cost of the Irish rebellion and subsequent war (1641–52) in monetary terms, Petty claims:

The value of people, Men, Women, and Children in England, some have computed to be about 70 l. (pound) per Head, one with another. But if you value the people who have been destroyed in Ireland as Slaves and Negroes are usually rated, viz., at about 15 l. (pound) one with another; Men being sold for 25 l. (pound), Children for 5 l. (pound); the value of people lost will be about 10 (million)3(hundred and) 35,000 (pounds)

### **Why bother?**

So, at this point one might want to ask: “Well, what is the point of this digression then? Why have we gone down the rabbit hole of the emergent biopolitical accountancy of the living and the dead?”

My hope here is to establish that one aspect of the genealogy of the body count is within the biopolitical technology that takes the life of population as its target. It is also to establish that abstraction of the dead into the body count is part of a wider process of abstraction and enumeration that pertains both to the development of statistical governance and to the mercantilist calculation of profit and loss.

It may also be worth noting here an observation made by (Regula Argast, Corinna R. Unger, and Alexandra Widmer) the editors of the (2016) *Critical Reader on 20<sup>th</sup> Century Population Thinking*. They claim that while Foucault in his work on governmentality gave consideration to the “economic aspects of population politics,” this is “something often overlooked in the narrow focus on his theory of biopower.” They further argue that:

The link between population and national economy becomes obvious in the affiliation or subordination of statistical offices to economic state institutions or ministries, like the Statistical Office in Germany, which was subordinated to the Ministry of Economy, or the United States Census Bureau, which is part of the United States Department of Commerce

The elaboration of the political arithmetic that is the ancestor of the great 19<sup>th</sup> century statistical apparatuses of government also suggests something of the colonial-modern matrix of biopolitics. This question of the colonial sources of biopolitics is important for many reasons. It touches upon the need or not for a new analytic of power to explain contemporary forms of extreme and surpassing violence.

## Necropolitics

Achille Mbembe's challenge to Eurocentric metropolitan accounts of biopolitics, in his extremely influential essay of (2003) "Necropolitics", is premised on the claim that Foucault's analytic of biopower cannot account for the extreme violence and total enmity that characterizes the slave plantation, the colony, the postcolony and the many death-worlds from Gaza to Guantanamo that characterize the global contemporary's division into zones of being and non-being, zones of life and zones of living-death.

Mbembe frames his analysis of necropolitics under the influence of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* project and in critical dialogue with Carl Schmitt's paradigms of the state of exception and the state of siege. Foundational for his work is Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial relations and the rigid dichotomies of the settler-colonial spaces. Mbembe does not quite define necropolitics in an explicit formulation, but rather he rehearses a series of conceptual themes and devices from an eclectic range of philosophical sources. He itemizes a series of historical and contemporary scenes of violence, destruction and terror including slavery, the colony, the Gulf wars, and the endless war on terror. The overall rhetorical effect of the accumulation of philosophical themes and scenes of terror is the sense that biopolitics is not adequate to the task of describing the absolute murderousness of contemporary warfare, torture, colonial occupation, and proliferating death-worlds.

In spite of its enormous success, I want to suggest that there is something unresolved in Mbembe's text. The terms biopolitics and necropolitics are deployed obliquely and prismatically, allowing a variety of themes to be projected and filtered through them. They are without clear delimitation except in as much as it appears: **(i)** that both biopolitics and necropolitics are understood as moments within the complex of sovereign power; **(ii)** that sovereign power is not posited as monolithic; and **(iii)** that necropolitics pertains to "forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" and the construction of abject terror and unlivable life / living death.

In citing the colonial moments in the genealogy of biopolitical techniques and practices, I am questioning the precise grounds for the additive concept of necropolitics, a supplement to the theory of sovereign power and the theory of biopower: If we read biopolitics as already inscribed with intrinsic genocidal and thanato-political drives, there is the potential for conceptual redundancy.

Mbembe's necropolitics—following Agamben—tends toward the elaboration of a philosophical concept or theme that is then proposed as the paradigmatic frame, the matrix that engenders multiple regimes of death-power, producing realms of the living dead from South African apartheid to the death-worlds that unfold beneath the drone strikes of total endless pervasive war. But of course, Mbembe is correct to demand a corrective to the Eurocentric analyses of sovereign power and of biopower, right to demand that the slave ship, the slave plantation, the colony and all these death spaces of colonial-modernity be placed centrally within any analysis and history of the present. (We might add to this list of spaces, that of the fort also, this is the fort as thematized in the work of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney and across Black studies.) As Mbembe asserts “in modern philosophical thought and European political practice and imaginary, the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law and where ‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a ‘war without end.’”

It is worth remembering at this point that Foucault's task in the 1975-76 lecture series (“Society Must Be Defended”) where he first extensively formulates biopolitics, is an analysis of a discourse on war and the political. Foucault examines how war was used as “an analyzer”<sup>5</sup> of history and social relations in a discourse that he describes as avowing that it is “war that presided over the birth of states... war is the cipher of peace. It divides the entire social body, and it does so on a permanent basis. It puts all of us on one side or another.”

Rather than push further on this question about the relations of a politics that cultivates life with a politics that produces death-worlds, perhaps we should return to where we began: What is at stake in the current regime of the body count? How does this appeal to the themes of biopolitics and necropolitics pertain to the question of political community with the dead?

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<sup>5</sup> Note the translated term in the source

## Back to the Dead

The distribution of the chances to live or die, reckoned along local and global axes, has been daily iterated in graphs, charts, percentages, and logarithmic scales. The body count has functioned as the driver of news cycles and as an affective horror-entertainment spectacle out of which to fabricate imaginaries of safety.

The body count has also operated as a powerful means to index the relative success and failure of various states and powers. Against the debasement and refusals of scientific discourses by authoritarian populists in several different parts of the world, the body count has seemed rhetorically potent as a “naked truth.”

Even when counting techniques are a matter of contestation, the possibility of the unassailable pristine number, epitomizing the totality of the sick and the dead has retained a powerful hold. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on racialized and impoverished bodies has again been used as evidence of structural racisms and systemic inequities, as if what was lacked was evidence.

However, it may also be that for the first time a widespread de-naturalization of these systemic inequities has gained wide traction within global circuits of communication. In place of the capitalist Christian evangelical’s “for the poor you will always have with you in the land,” there is now the consistent assertion that the distribution of impoverished, devalued, and unlivable life and death is the logic and achievement of specific humans, not of nature or of gods or of a virus. The analyses of biopolitics/ necropolitics seek to give an account of how the processes of managing life determine the logic of such distributions.

I am proposing both the potency, and also the risks and the limitations of the body count, as a tactic of speaking quantity to power. My treatment of the body count is part of an entry point into how the collectivity of the dead might count otherwise within the assemblies of the living.

This is not something that I am anywhere near being able to propose. But there are some lines of development that might be suggestive.

One of these is to revisit the question of the dead body as a materiality that is also a site for producing fundamental imaginaries of being. Attending to the dead body as a way of avoiding the absolute equivalence between death and non-existence. Attending to the current centrality of human remains in the disputes about European ethnographic collections and the hordes of skulls and body parts expropriated from colonized peoples. But also attending to the dead body as a site of de-individuation. The boundaries of individuation can so completely collapse in the death process: As Eva Domanska expresses it drawing on the language of forensics: “Soil systems process cadavers as ‘just’ another form of organic matter; it is the human perspective that makes them a particularly special form of such material.” This brings me to a second consideration which is to consider that the collectivity of the dead may not be the collectivity of the



*human* dead? What if the question of the dead were to be approached as a question of both the non-human, more-than-human dead? The third line of development is to consider the different ways in which the spectrum of living / non-living entities is differently constructed and lived by different social orders.

Finally, there is a key methodological clarification that needs to be pursued, which is this appeal to the theme of the political imaginary, which so far has been used in a relatively imprecise and loose fashion, but which requires some careful unpacking. While I am invoking a partly constructivist approach to the imaginary – i.e., the imaginary as the condition of possibility of experience, as that which gives us access to the world. I am also moving in the direction of a post-representational notion of the imaginary as a matter of materiality and immanence – rather than the play of representation or any residual dichotomy of mind and matter.

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