Introduction

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Ranging from the tragic to the sublime to the subatomic, the articles in this Fall issue of Theory & Event are engaged with questions of scale, location, and embodiment. Exploring the mortal and ordinary reality of our bodies, some essays analyze how new technologies have shifted the scope and scale of our politics, while others explore long histories of resistance. From restaurants and comedy clubs, to the sounds of ragtime and the shouts of the chorus, each of these essays showcases the perils and possibilities of democracy, power, and subjectivity across the spaces of everyday life—with arguments and interventions that deepen our understandings of the scale and scope of crisis, possibility, and political power.

Jack Black and Jim Cherrington’s “Posthuman to Inhuman: mHealth Technologies and the Digital Health Assemblage” examines the digitalization of health and illness through the human/nonhuman assemblages created out of new technologies. Challenging posthuman accounts, which argue that new mobile health technologies such as Fitbit and Apple Watch dissolve the uniqueness of the human into an abstract object, he argues that these digital health assemblages robustly recenter the subject through their focus on individualized knowledge. Using psychoanalytic frameworks, Black and Cherrington argue that mHealth technologies reveal the “inhuman otherness” always at the core of human subjectivity.

Charles Lee’s “Ethnic Restaurants, Immigrant Lives, and Elastic Citizenship in Neoliberal Times” focuses on the role of ethnic restaurants in developing what he calls “elastic citizenship.” Through fieldwork in Asian restaurants in California, he argues that ethnic restaurants create circuitous paths for immigrants in the United States to begin to feel like they are citizens, regardless of formal or juridical status. Naming restaurants mundane and nonradical, Lee also shows how they allow immigrants to procure some essentials of citizenship, including a series of improvised rights like “rights to enterprise, work, consumption, residency, contribution, affective inclusion, biological wellbeing, and sociocultural belonging that are essential to their survival and wellbeing in this larger, embodied context of their citizenship life.” The type of improvised citizenship constituted in ethnic restaurants elastically reconceive the strategic field of citizenship contestation in neoliberal times.
In “On the Sublime and Beautiful: Edmund Burke, Ottobah Cugoano, and Reverberations of Eighteenth-Century Racial Aesthetics,” Tacuma Peters examines the relationship between eighteenth-century aesthetics and slavery. Peters situates Burke’s theories of the sublime and beautiful within his conservative political treatises on white authority, showing not only how he racialized beauty in ways that justified possession of Black women but that his ostensible anti-slavery views in his political texts were more about reforming yet maintaining Black slavery. By contrast, Cugoano’s theories challenge the connection between sublimity and white authority, and make space for aesthetic forms that undo aesthetic justifications for Black slavery. In Peters’ words, Cugoano’s aesthetic theories of Black beauty “sought to undermine connections between Blackness and slavery, appearance and human difference, and abolish the institution entirely.”

In “Theses on the Philosophy of Survival,” Adam Stern examines Walter Benjamin’s writing on the figures of the victor and the angel to meditate on survival in the twentieth century. Stern argues that Benjamin positions the survivor of history to be the figure of the historian, and that this inaugurates a trend of survivor-historian figures in continental writers from Maurice Blanchot to Hannah Arendt to W.G. Sebald. For Stern, “the survivor of history is always the ambivalent trace of an intractable dilemma: the victor and the angel,” in which writings on survivor historians always bear ambivalent and dialectical relationships to oppression, destruction, rule, and revolution.

Manu Samnotra’s “‘To become like a particle of dust’: Dignity as a Gandhian Practice” explores how the Gandhian account of dignity departs from the dignity-rights nexus, offering readers an ethically and politically charged interpretation of human dignity. Analyzing how liberal accounts of dignity are braided into a rights-discourse grounded in the dignity of individuals, Gandhian dignity is premised instead on service to the proximate and concrete Other. Nested within an ethic of embodied vulnerability, dignity in a Gandhian vein urges engagement in what Samnotra calls “experiments in proximate living.” Rejecting state intervention to protect rights, in a Gandhian account, we become dignified when we share life and space with the most socially, economically, and politically vulnerable.

In “The Subatomic Person: A New Ontology of Big Data,” Stefan Kehlenbach explores how big data has created a new idea of personhood—the subatomic individual. Unlike earlier conceptions of the individual, big data pushes to make individuals smaller and smaller. Understood as the building block of predictive metrics, subatomic persons are broken up into component parts and their identities more and more determined by tiny pieces of data. Stripped of meaningful context and history, the new subatomic person exists only as a mechanism
for data analytics, caught in a perpetual present, absent any sense of past or future.

Exploring how grief and rage can orient our bodies toward justice and change, Danielle Hanley’s “Choreographing Affective Solidarity: The Choral Politics of Responding to Loss” offers an affective reading of Greek tragedy in conversation with the political thought of Sara Ahmed, Audre Lorde, and Saidiya Hartman. Illustrating the importance of the Corinthian women in Euripides’ Medea alongside Hartman’s chorus of black virtuosity, Hanley reveals how embodied movement and intimate practices of freedom can be understood as sites of affective circulation and solidarity.

In “James Weldon Johnson’s Democracy Rag,” Daniel Henry expands accounts of democratic fugitivity by exploring the ways in which African American democratic thought has engaged fugitivity as an aesthetic politics amid impasse. Turning to Johnson’s work, Henry invites us to consider how Johnson’s approach to democratic fugitivity as also an aesthetic politics—less an act of collective self-determination than a series of communicative acts aimed at contesting white supremacy and expanding a public’s political imagination. Attentive to how Jim Crow’s domination politics foreclosed avenues of communication, for Johnson, art was “the plane on which all men are more willing to meet and stand with us.” Developing what he called “art approach to the race question,” Henry shows Johnson navigating competing aims amid aesthetic practices that were both fugitive and democratic, inspired by ragtime’s controversial syncopated rhythms.

In “Navigating the ‘Darkness’: Trans and Feminist Comedy Against Ideology,” Alena Wolflink illustrates the political possibilities that emerge when marginalized and denigrated populations turn to comedy as a resource for challenging oppressive ideologies. Turning to the comedy and satire of trans YouTube activist Natalie Wynn and feminist science fiction writer Joanna Russ, Wolflink describes the practice of “dark comedy” as survival tactic that also offers a source of comedic richness. In contrast to treating marginalized populations as cheap punchlines, dark comedy engages the fullness of one’s humanity, undermining oppressive structures, creating new spaces of agency and generating unexpected sites and stories of pleasure.

This issue concludes with three reviews. William Callison reviews Neil Val Py’s Futilitarianism: Neoliberalism and the Production of Uselessness. Siddhant Issar reviews Kevin Bruyneel’s Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States. And Scott Ritner reviews Mara van der Lugt’s Dark Matters Pessimism and the Problem of Suffering and David Theo Goldberg’s Dread Facing Futureless Futures.