The Cost of Living | On Pandemic Politics and Protests

In this world, there are two things without voice: the rich man’s sins and the beggar’s death.
—Persian proverb

Just before our first lockdown, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mayor of Canada’s capital city tweeted a screenshot of an internal email to City Council written by Dr. Vera Etches, the chief medical officer at Ottawa Public Health.¹ In her memo to elected representatives, she emphasized the need for the public to stay at home and to practice social distancing: “We each need to do our part to ensure that our healthcare providers do not have to choose between who lives and who dies.” No doubt Dr. Etches was mindful of the harrowing life-and-death choices that some Italian doctors had faced during the worst of Italy’s first pandemic wave. Later that day, however, when her text was published as an official statement on the Public Health website, Dr. Etches’s rather blunt sentence was amended to the following: “We each need to do our part to ensure that our healthcare providers have the capacity to provide life saving measures for all, and to care for the most vulnerable people.”² It would seem that, in official terms at least, some things are unspeakable because they touch on something the public cannot or should not hear: death. And, in the place of death, we must hear instead words chosen from a biopolitical lexicon: “capacity,” “life saving,” “measures,” and “vulnerable people.”

In her internal memo, Dr. Etches had named death and ascribed to her reader (and herself, “we”) a kind of linguistic agency, or perhaps even a sovereignty, over the transitivity of death, and indeed, the transitive vectors of the virus itself. But in the amended public statement, if the virus remains communicable death does not. Biopolitical discourses privilege the life that is made—preserved and prolonged—while silently repudiating any agency over the deaths of those it lets die. Death becomes almost intransitive, unvoiced and unspeakable, presumably
non-agentic. It is no longer a question of responsibility for death or for the choice “between who lives and who dies”; now the agency is focused on “making live” in biopolitical terms. If “we each need to do our part,” the referentiality of the “we” may well have shifted from the internal memo to the public statement. And while the implicit “they”—“our healthcare providers”—are named once again, they now appear in the context of a systemic “capacity” for “life saving measures,” referring to wider biopolitical and biomedical systems, and only indirectly to anyone’s personal responsibility. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how “we,” as individuals, could assume responsibility for such complex systems. This “we” is unreconstructed and presumably names a liberal subject, self-possessed and in the first-person, whether singular or plural.

Biopolitically, the life-and-death relation is impersonal, mediated by a vast regulatory apparatus comprising laws and policing, public policies, public health mechanisms, biomedical technologies, economies, and bureaucracies. “Life” arises in this nexus as part of a political economy focused on data-driven forecasts, statistical estimates, measures, capacities, and profiling: socio-biometrics that inform security mechanisms intended to optimize, to protect, and to prolong biological life. The apparatus targets—in order to manage, to regulate, and to administrate—particular “populations” or “masses” with an efficient generality, rather than individuals in their unique and sometimes shambolic singularity. These “populations” are typically defined in biological terms, and in the third-person plural, “they”—artifacts constituted by confirmed diagnoses and risk-factors, such as potential exposure due to recent travel, the presentation of symptoms, as well as through quantified hierarchies of biological susceptibility, from preexisting medical conditions and comorbidities to someone’s age.

This chapter homes in on the “we” and its shifting referent and agency (mine, yours, ours, theirs) to problematize our claim on those biopolitical paradigms in which we have been claimed in advance. Globally, in the response to COVID-19 there have been sweeping biopolitical measures to “flatten the curve,” such as face-covering bylaws and shelter-in-place orders intended to contain those who might be silent (asymptomatic) vectors. In the early days, this terminology quickly became widespread and embraced as the truth of transmission and risk, our new reality and social lexicon, our new immunological identity. But not quite. To be sure, a sizable and vocal minority rejects public health messaging as overblown or views the pandemic itself as a political hoax and fake news, even a “liberal” or Communist or “deep state” conspiracy. What is the relation of the “we” to those among us who protest public health protocols—lockdowns, facemasks, physical
distancing, and eventually, vaccines—and who ostensibly resist biopolitics but who end up reduplicating its lethal effects, exposing to death those among us who are disproportionately susceptible or at-risk? To what extent is this resistance a form of violence, or terror?

In this context, biopolitics is both the medicalization of politics and the politicization of medicine. This is not to suggest that biopolitical and biomedical discourses are prima facie untrue or that ongoing public health measures have been unwarranted. A criticism is not a critique. And while it is important that we continue to criticize the many egregious state responses to COVID-19 (including falsehoods and flagrant lies), a critique of biopolitics would shine light on the underlying powers, pretexts, and preconceptions that drive these responses and inform their popular uptake—or resistance—alike. A critique would seek to understand their moral and rhetorical conditions of possibility, the powers by which they propagate, and the ways these are mobilized to silence and suppress the deaths of those we (will) have let die. The compass of this “we” is central to any critique—“who speaks?”—and to any assignation of agency, real or imagined. This chapter thus makes no definitive claims about pandemics or political protests. After all, these are nothing without human transmissions. And so, this chapter turns back on us—those agents who transmit and who resist, whether willfully or haplessly—to call into question our self-givenness and the persuasive force of our speech/acts.

Setting aside our concrete criticisms, one way into a rhetorical art of critique is to ask, What can be said, in this moment, and perhaps more importantly, what can’t be said? And relatedly, what can we hear and what can’t quite be heard? These correlated questions are themselves critical because a biopolitical “commonsense” organizes the scene of political speech and belonging, almost imperceptibly circumscribing in advance our communicative repertoire—the words, ideas, decrees, and attendant responsibilities that will be transmissible, persuasive, and that will order human will and behavior. Written in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the pre-vaccine late summer of 2020, this chapter addresses the (bio)political problem of this moment. It demonstrates how the biopolitical apparatus operates almost anonymously in its vast and pan-demological powers.

Unlike sovereign or repressive powers, biopolitics is not centralized or top-down; it is widespread, diffuse, and incorporated as part of our ethos, where “life itself” is the sacred (but no less biophysiological) object and objective, the means and the ends, of state power. And as I discuss below, it is all too easy in
this moment to hear neoliberal voices hailing a liberal political subject who is
the vital link (we are told) in the value chains of global capital. These strident
voices—which also invoke a “we”—call for us to reopen the economy, COVID-
19 infections notwithstanding. In this din, it is hardly considered ironic that the
global transactional flows of contagion are coextensive with economic capital.
Both, together, are increasingly virtual and invisible to the naked eye, even as
they seize on bodies and cause visible devastation, sometimes unto death. If we
act with enlightened self-interest (we are told) and if only we have faith in the
invisible hand of the “free” market economy, we will ensure the greatest good for
the greatest number, an equitable distribution of health and wealth. This is
nonsense, of course, and as this book’s case studies demonstrate, the state-
sanctioned power to make live is never far from its unspeakable counterpart,
the power to let die. Biopolitics is nothing if not a sacrificial economy. Some
will—and some must—die in order that others may live: a condition of relational
vulnerability or precarity that is structurally produced and inequitably distrib-
uted. Here, it does not make sense to speak of responsibility as individual choice,
of the rights or obligations of a liberal political subject. Perhaps this was always
so, but the reality is now pressing in from all sides.

And yet, biopolitics is a deceptively salutary narrative. Hailing us, it promises
life tomorrow through the technologies of today, projecting into counterfactual
futures whose spectral deaths, if hearkened, return to haunt the present moment.
The life that is promised never ceases to announce itself in a discursive frenzy at
once socializing, moralizing, materializing, and militarizing—albeit unevenly
and unpredictably across the differentiated populations that are seized, identified,
mobilized. To be sure, for many the available means of “making live” selfishly
appeal to individual self-interest and, understandably, one’s desire for self-
preservation. And as I argue throughout, the ruse of biopolitics, its unwitting
agent, is the liberal individual—the “I”—fed by a delusional sense of rationality,
autonomy, and entitled agency, which together belie the fact that we are nonau-
tonomous beings, tethered inexorably to others, human and nonhuman, and to
a planet in geopolitical and ecological crisis. At the same time, the voices of those
we let die are seldom heard. If they speak, it is to be spoken (of) in the third
person, as “they,” and not in and from the first-person address of an “I” or a “we.”
Ghostly, they reside and resound on the other side of the pious project that makes
live: those who belong to the masses or (sub)populations exposed to increased
situational vulnerabilities that are more likely to be pathogenic.
In the COVID-19 pandemic, workers who face the greatest risk of exposure include cashiers and grocery store employees, warehouse workers and meat packers, janitors, nurses, personal care workers, maids, and teachers, among others—many now suddenly deemed “essential” workers and “heroes,” even as a considerable number of them continue to subsist below the poverty line.¹ Indeed, a heightened risk of exposure is too often destined for those who already carry in their bodies an increased risk of premature death, as if History and Nature had conspired in the design of a foolproof eugenics program. As we know, poverty and socioeconomic status are powerful social determinants of health comparable to traditional clinical risk-factors. And the pandemic has certainly exacerbated widespread poverty and devastation, especially for those whose lives and livelihoods were already precarious. In the United States circa 2020, for example, 60 percent of earners are financially worse off than they were before the recession of 2008–9 and have no “wealth buffer” to weather another financial crisis. And ironically, the very institutions—governmental and corporate—responsible for this inequity and recently so very vocal in “our” need to protect human life are the same institutions that have failed to provide adequate personal protective equipment to workers, exposing them to disease and untimely death. It’s an old story. Vulnerable yet “essential” populations are often stratified by class, ethno-racial identity, gender, and sometimes citizenship status and ability to access health care services. Life’s order is subtended by a normative structural, impersonal, and ritual violence. For death and dispossession are no less “essential” to the livingness of biopolitical life, where death is euphemized as collateral damages, negative externalities, or sometimes as opportunity costs. We—or “they”—must be kept alive in order to die a slow death, as Lauren Berlant has called it. “They” are afforded only “lateral agencies” that kill in the exercise of minor, negligible freedoms “in a zone of ordinari-ness.”⁴ Human resources. Human capital. But is a prolonged life by slow death a better “choice” because it permits prolonged consumption?

In this dark light, the COVID-19 pandemic offers a rare occasion for a critique of biopolitics, and the chance to expose life-and-death powers that are normally clandestine in their operation. “We each need to do our part to ensure that our healthcare providers do not have to choose between who lives and who dies.” In its barely perceptible gesture, soon expunged, Dr. Etches’s unedited statement had the courage to name death and, briefly, to problematize human agency and identity in a way that epidemiological statistics on COVID-19 deaths fail to do (they read like a ticker tape—factual but unreal). If we were able to hear in this
moment, it was as if death spoke, rather than life itself. The statement conscripts the reader rhetorically: I am asked to imagine myself as responsible for the harrowing life-and-death choices that health care providers will be forced to make in the event that coronavirus transmissions remain unchecked and our health care system is stretched beyond capacity. But sovereign agency and responsibility are something of a ruse here. After all, these difficult decisions are made every day, and not just in times of pandemic crisis or states of emergency. More critically, then, Dr. Etches’s memo invites us to think beyond individual responsibility, and to reflect on what responsibility and agency could mean in the context of a public good. What is our personal relation to an impersonal system with inbuilt constraints, limited structural capacities, and even ritual violence? This system operates, in our names, as a regulatory apparatus that makes live anonymously, with structural decisions executed largely in our absence. But by naming death, we are perhaps fleetingly made aware that letting die has been part of our unspoken moral and medical (and economic) calculus all along.

If this word is avowed only to be disavowed in revision, if death is unnamed and unnamable in the official public statement, its transitivity is nevertheless secreted in the long shadows of our biopolitical lexicon, threatening to irrupt on the scene, much as we saw in media images of Lombardy, Italy, when caravans of military trucks were deployed to remove the coffins of COVID-19 victims, whose sheer numbers had overwhelmed the hospital morgues and cemeteries. In the end, the biopolitical “life” that is promised is at best affirmed without assurance, for life ultimately holds no final or definitive meaning in the absence of death. Death, even unspoken, is always the impossible possibility to which all are destined. And this is perhaps a lesson in what we prefer neither to say nor to hear. Apart from our rituals—many of which have been suspended in the pandemic—we remain unprepared to attend to the dead, to hear a cry, or to interpret that cry as a meaningful address communicating pain and loss, for this would make of us its aversive addressees.

On What We Can(not) Hear

Language cannot get any purchase until it carves up the unity of experience: my pain, spoken by a sovereign “I” imagined to name it, to possess it. Ludwig Wittgenstein has remarked that “the verbal expression of pain replaces [ersetzt] crying, it does not describe it.”5 In other words, the cry of pain is neither a description,
an observation, nor a report that takes place in language. Rather, the cry is “forced from us.” And its signification should be immediately recognizable. Maurice Blanchot phrases it somewhat differently: “The cry tends to exceed all language, even if it lends itself to recuperation as language effect.” In our pandemic moment, it seems there are some constellations of voices and cries that we remain unable to hear. Any effectual recuperation, any verbal expression, remains still largely uncomposed in the writing of our unfolding disaster. Blanchot: “If I say: the disaster keeps watch [veille], it is not in order to give a subject to the vigil [à la veille]; it is to say: the wake [la veille] does not occur under the sidereal sky.” Less as disaster’s vigil than as a cry, then, I write these pages in solidarity with the dead: with those who (will) have been destined to die, and whose deaths (will) have been language-effects too: with those who—to borrow a turn of phrase from Antonin Artaud—(will) have been “suicided by society.” From disaster’s structural, impersonal, and ritual violence an absence would cry forth, would speak. Blanchot once again: “When the subject becomes absence, the absence of the subject, or dying as subject, subverts the whole sequence of existence, causes time to take leave of its order, opens life to its passivity, exposing it to the unknown, to the stranger—to the friendship that never is declared.” Under our own skies, with disaster keeping watch, I wonder, and hope. What unstructured solidarities and undeclared friendships will gather to write or to speak, in care of deaths unnamed, in and from a fragile “we”?

Drowning out death’s hues and cries, other voices have risen up instead. Occupying once-credible positions of power, they refuse to be silenced. Reflecting on death as ritual language-effect, I offer a few uncomposed excerpts—roiling sound bites—from the violent timeline that marked the early days of American pandemic disaster. In a March 23, 2020, segment of Fox News, lieutenant governor of Texas Dan Patrick was among the first to advocate a speedy return to work for Americans, many of whom found themselves under recent state or local government orders to shelter-in-place. Patrick asked his older viewers, “As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?” To this he answered, “I’m all-in” — a wager wherein the economy of sacrificial exchange is preferable to presumably short-term losses in the American market economy. Evidently, some lives are expendable, of lesser value than others, and this valuation itself is a patriotic duty. Patrick’s sentiments were echoed by Glenn Beck, the popular conservative commentator, who on March 24 declared, “I would rather have my children stay home and all of us who are over fifty go in and keep
this economy going and working, even if we all get sick, I would rather die than kill the country. ‘Cause it’s not the economy that’s dying, it’s the country.” With these hymns, we are meant to accept a kind of economic nationalism, a nation that is no more and none other than its “free” economy. Somewhat later, on May 4, New Jersey governor Chris Christie stated on CNN that we must reopen the economy despite what would certainly result in a higher rate of mortality from COVID-19. “The American people have gone through significant death before,” he said, citing World Wars I and II as examples. “We’ve gone through it and we’ve survived it. We sacrificed those lives.” One wonders if Christie imagined the possibility that he, too, could become a sick or sacrificial lamb?

In a Collège de France lecture on biopolitics, Michel Foucault raises the singular specter of “an absolutely racist State, an absolutely murderous State, and an absolutely suicidal State.” These converge, he suggests, when “the field of the life [that the State] manages, protects, guarantees, and cultivates in biological terms [is] absolutely coextensive with the sovereign right to kill anyone, meaning not only other people, but also its own people.” It’s a peculiar moment in Foucault’s oeuvre because elsewhere he repeatedly argues that, since at least the early nineteenth century, sovereign power has gradually been supplanted by biopolitical power, and we have shifted both ideologically and technologically from a disciplinary anatomo-politics that individualizes toward a biopolitics that massifies and seizes on the “life” of particular human populations. In his brief discussion here, however, these two forms of power—the sovereign right to “take life or let live” and the biopolitical power to “make live and let die”—are superimposed: “That is where this mechanism inscribed in the workings of the modern State leads.”

Foucault will ask, “How, under these conditions, is it possible for a political power to kill, to call for deaths, to demand deaths, to give the order to kill, and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death?” To answer this question on the “suicidal state,” in a rarer moment still Foucault turns to the concept of racism, characterizing it as the “basic mechanism” of modern state power. Racism, he writes, is “a way of establishing a biological-type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain.” This establishes a transactional economy wherein race and racism inform “biological” decisions over who will be made to live and who will be allowed to die—a racial hygiene that eliminates the enemy race within and thus regenerates one’s own, that cleanses and purifies. The logic is simple: “As more and more of our number die, the race to which we belong will become all the purer.” The state thus becomes
suicidal by deploying a racism that is “not a truly ethnic racism, but racism of the evolutionist kind, biological racism.” In other words, this is not an “ordinary racism” that is “bound up with mentalities, ideologies, or the lies of power”; rather, it is “bound up with the technique of power, with the technology of power.” In this, Foucault is describing the Third Reich, and he claims, “Of course, Nazism alone took the play between the sovereign right to kill and the mechanisms of biopower to this paroxysmal point.”

Foucault offers striking instances of Nazi scorched earth dogma turned back on the German Volk themselves.

Despite the judicious scholarly criticism of Foucault’s problematic treatment of race, in our context we might venture that Foucault was in part correct in his brief treatment of “biological racism” (I offer an extended critique of this concept in chapter 4). And yet, we must hasten to offer a qualification: while COVID-19 indeed occasions a biological racism, this is perhaps only by virtue of the long history of “ethnic” or “ordinary” racism that is coextensive with the techniques and technologies of power that are in this moment being extended, retooled, and operationalized for application in what appears to be a biological domain organized by “endemic” inequities and vulnerabilities. Race, after all, is a sociohistorical and biopolitical process, a performative effect—something that is done, rather than something that is. In the words of Kendall Thomas, “We are ‘raced’ through a constellation of practices that construct and control racial subjectivities.”

One part of this constellation is the biologization of race, something that is done but that is taken, by sleight of hand, as something that is.

Contingently, and with care, we must insist that the histories and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color are diversiform and incommensurable with the instantiations of “biological racism.” The state has proven perennially indifferent to the sociocultural and racialized realities of these lived lives. Their differences are effaced in the name of life itself (“All Lives Matter!”), while some lives nevertheless remain exchangeable according to the differential embodiments and economies (something that “is”) that the state exposes and exploits (something that is done). From the earliest hours of our pandemic present the state was already poised to mobilize—passively, to be sure, and in the name of a virus—the terrorizing principles, the vicious animus, of historical racist oppression for use elsewhere, a sham biologism rewritten into the “real,” effectively redrawing the battle lines in the march toward a new civil war. The state’s enduring strategies of systemic ethno-racial oppression together with a resurgent alt-white/right nationalism are all too easily mapped onto biosocial vulnerabilities, this time in the name of a natural or providential biological order.
The infrastructures of systemic violence are architectonic. Who will get a ventilator or hospital bed when demand outstrips supply? Some version of utilitarianism will prevail in triage protocols, the same old “utility”—ostensibly biologized—of lives informed by neo-Malthusian economies and histories of net “value,” “worth,” and “acceptable” (or even “necessary”) losses. The protocol is familiar and demonstrates the extent to which we are willing to cede to and apply an economic framework to calculate the worth of a human life. It is dressed in clinical garb to lend an air of impartial, presumably colorblind authority. And of course, hospitals are not the only sites of triage; segregation and the hierarchization of “value” are quotidian occurrences. Here, Hurricanes Katrina or Maria might offer object lessons in the differential calculus of (racialized) lives that (don’t) matter. Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism remains resonant: “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death.”

In the suicidal state epitomized by a Trump rally, some may find a caustic irony—and take cynical flight—in the specter of a “biological” racism coming home, in some instances, to infect proud racists themselves. We have arrived at a new paroxysmal point of state biopower, an ostensibly world-historical animus that Trump’s presidency has courted, and his court has presided over. For a long time, of course, plagues and pogroms have gone hand in hand. This time, however, it would seem that the pogrom is providential: it is the plague and acts in the name of a tiny virus. Our daily delivery unto slow death has been accelerated—no longer a slow surrender to poverty, microplastics, toxic pesticides, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate crisis. COVID-19 is the perfect pretext for a pogrom that needs little oversight once in motion. It is autogenous, and it will suffice merely to do too little for too long—a fact amply evidenced by infection rates and body counts circa 2020. The toll will be greatest among those who are elderly, poor, unemployed, incarcerated, homeless, disabled, marginalized, racialized, without health insurance, or with preexisting medical conditions. Many will be permitted to perish as a tribute—nay, as paean—to the national economy.

The rhetoric of sacrifice verges on the militaristic. It is murderous, but indirectly and biopolitically, in the passive voice of letting die. “Language-effect” is not a recognized cause of death. And not least, of course, COVID-19 exacerbates existing biosocial inequities and vulnerabilities—so much so that one is tempted to personify the virus and assign to it a certain malicious agency and intent: it exploits precisely these inequities and vulnerabilities, further replicating the very conditions of American poverty and plutocracy. In Jacques Derrida’s terms, “There
are historical and political ‘situations’ whose terror operates, so to speak, as if by itself, as the simple result of some apparatus, because of the relations of force in place, without anyone, any conscious subject, any person, any ‘I,’ being really conscious of it or feeling itself responsible for it.”

How should “we” (presumably good liberals) situate ourselves in relation to this apparatus, and wage a critique on its conditions of possibility, when we, too, form part of these conditions and seem ill equipped to do little more than self-righteously criticize?

In his early writings on the pandemic, Giorgio Agamben quickly averred that the Italian response to the crisis was “disproportionate” and represented yet another instance of the “state of exception” as an increasingly normal paradigm of government: “It is almost as if with terrorism exhausted as a cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext for scaling them up beyond any limitation.” In a text published some days later, he would clarify: “Our society no longer believes in anything but bare life. It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything—the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions—to the danger of getting sick.”

Agamben’s statements have been met with spirited criticism, but in the American context it is perhaps more fitting to ask, Isn’t the American state already founded, historically and economically, on the mobilization of bare life? How else might we reckon the enormous wealth and plutocratic power generated by the Atlantic Slave Trade, premised on the dispossession and differential fungibility—the exchangeability—of human lives for personal profit and “national” economy? “Getting sick” or dying is a foregone conclusion, and secondary to economic interests (that have never been equally shared anyway).

If in this context we search for the “pretext” of the state of exception or bare life, we need look no further than the socioeconomic and political legacy of slavery and the terror that has followed, undead, in its wake. State biopower is not quite (as Agamben argues) the exercise of a sovereign exception so much as a vast and diffuse apparatus that presides over a sacrificial economy that is not—and has never been—for or by “the People.” In recent decades, these conditions have been intensified under neoliberalism (or some will say “optimized”), where government’s role has been radically reduced to the administration of the economy (corporate tax cuts, bailouts, market interests). Today, individuals are left on their own, many isolated, some still sheltering-in-place, and forced to imagine mortal illness, life and death—and not just for this moment, but across the future waves of epidemic, and the murderous memes and militias that will surely attend them. Revising
Agamben’s statement, we might say that some of us are disposed to sacrifice practically everything—not for the danger of getting sick but for the risk of losing a long-standing social order purchased on privilege, plutocracy, and (social) death.

A depraved president, incapable of expressing either comfort or mercy, announced without irony on March 18, 2020, that he had deployed the US Naval hospital ships Comfort and Mercy to house American patients “offshore.” By April 2, in New York, the one-thousand-bed Comfort was comforting just twenty patients. Three years ago, the same Comfort was deployed to Puerto Rico to offer medical assistance to victims of Hurricane Maria. In that natural disaster the ship admitted, on average, a mere six patients per day. And some ten years ago, the Comfort had been deployed to Haiti following a catastrophic earthquake near Port-au-Prince. Christina Sharpe’s critical reading of the American response in Haiti gains added poignancy as we shuttle between epicenters, from earthquake to hurricane to pandemic. Homing in on the Comfort’s administrative and ethnographic gaze, Sharpe presents as evidence a ghostly photograph of a gravely injured young Haitian girl: “Affixed to her forehead is a piece of transparent tape with the word Ship written on it.” In Sharpe’s reading, “Ship” is both material and metaphor in the afterlives of slavery and in the conveyances of disaster: “Is Ship a proper name? A destination? An imperative? . . . Is Ship a reminder and/or remainder of the Middle Passage, of the difference between life and death?” Cold comfort for Black “cargo,” containerized, in the “wake” of slave ships, migrant ships, military ships. Turning to the Comfort, she writes:

We should pause . . . on the name and provenance of the ship . . . “US,” “military,” “comfort,” and “allopathic medicine”—each and together being terms whose connection in the lives and on the bodies of Black people everywhere and anywhere on the globe—warrant at least a deep suspicion if not outright alarm: from those experiments on board the floating laboratory of the slave (and migrant) ship, to J. Marion Sims’s surgical experiments conducted without anesthesia on enslaved women; to the outbreaks of cholera in Haiti introduced by UN troops; to experiments with mustard gas on US Black soldiers in World War II to produce an “ideal chemical soldier”; to the Tuskegee and Guatemala syphilis experiments and their ripple effects; to the dubious origins and responses to the crisis of Ebola; to the ongoing practice of forced sterilization; to recent studies that show again and again that Black people in the United States receive inferior health care because they are believed to feel less pain.26
The inaudible cries and afterlives of these evils have now begun to find themselves transcribed on the mortal bodies of those who, now fungible for reasons other than just the color of their skin (though surely that, too, still), will be exchanged “for keeping the America that all America loves.” Is this a lesson we are capable of hearing?

In his testimony to the US Senate on May 12, 2020, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, a beleaguered Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, issued the stark warning that reopening America’s economy too soon would result in “needless suffering and death.” Dr. Fauci was already being sidelined by the Trump administration and many in power simply refused to listen: rates of infection and death climbed exponentially in some parts of the country. But after all, the definition of “needless”—and its opposite, “necessary”—will differ depending on who you ask, and much the same holds true for measures of “suffering.” These are slippery and age-old terms, sometimes even personified. Necessity was known to the ancient Greeks as the goddess Ananke, who dictated the fates of gods and human beings alike. She sometimes appears alongside the goddess Bia, a word that means force, power, or violence. And at first glance, those among us who blithely ignore public health orders or more defiantly protest government lockdown and facemask orders seem to inhabit such a mythological world, animated by fate and the specter of violence. For them, reopening the economy is demanded as a necessity, or is claimed as a Constitutional right, along with the freedom of movement, assembly, and religious worship, as Trump’s Supreme Court would soon affirm (pandemic deaths be damned!). For them, the state’s management of the crisis is seen as little more than a crisis of state management, where state intervention is deemed unnecessary and unwelcome, highly suspect or even “socialist.”

Throughout the spring and summer months of 2020 we were bombarded with media images from many major US cities depicting militia-style vigilantes, some with assault weapons, occupying state buildings and claiming to defend their “rights” and “liberties,” spurred by Trump tweets goading them to “LIBERATE MICHIGAN” and “LIBERATE MINNESOTA.” We have witnessed anti-lockdown and anti-facemask protests in the United States and, indeed, worldwide. From my perspective in the North American context, it’s difficult to determine the extent to which local protests are driven by politics, ideology, or necessity. Organized on social media platforms and some funded by conservative groups (at least one, in Michigan, with apparent ties to a devout member of Trump’s soulless administration), the protesters present as a ragtag collection of radicalized libertarians, Trump supporters, Second Amendment “defenders,” anti-vaxxers,
conspiracy theorists, and anti-globalists. Despite their differences, protesters do seem united in their singular will to tempt fate, to assume risk—or more accurately, to force others more vulnerable than them to assume it, as if by necessity. 29

These spectacles have made it difficult to conduct reasoned debate over how we should navigate between the demands—and collateral damages—of the competing claims for public health and economic health, for lives and livelihoods. In other words, when communities begin to see sustained downward trends on their epidemiological curves, how will they know the right moment to reopen, and at what cost? And conversely, when there is a resurgent wave of infections, what will suffice to close things back down again? The metrics have been as inconsistent as their application, and we have had to factor in mental health and the human need for sociality. Nevertheless, even the most progressive democratic governments must admit a tolerable threshold of death—an acceptable loss of human life—as a result of reopening their economies. A few deaths might be called “unfortunate,” perhaps “inevitable,” but at what threshold do otherwise preventable deaths become too many to accept? If we knew these numbers, I suspect we’d find them shockingly high (as a society, we seem to tolerate repeated school shootings, “thoughts and prayers” notwithstanding). But there is little doubt that someone, somewhere, is crunching these numbers and quietly considering the voting public’s levels of tolerance to death. It is a balancing act. But for all the talk of life’s “pricelessness,” every life does have a price, and some are valued more than others. This is the morbid calculus of an actuarial “science” as much as a political wager. The threshold will depend in part on who dies and who counts. If this is macabre it is also quotidian. It’s just that these sacrificial economies are typically more discreet than they are in the time of COVID-19. It’s just that the locus of power, its structural, impersonal, and ritual violence, has become unstructured, and for many, deeply personal, and worth the increased risk of protesting or simply ignoring public health orders.

In an interview published on April 8, 2020, Pope Francis remarked, “We’re realizing that all our thinking, like it or not, has been shaped around the economy. In the world of finance it has seemed normal to sacrifice [people], to practice a politics of the throwaway culture, from the beginning to the end of life.” 30 The moral bankruptcy, it would seem, is not simply our shortage of PPE and medical personnel, or even our godlessness. Rather, our vocabulary is morally bankrupt, and as a consequence, our imagination and capacity to think and to act otherwise. What would it mean if our thinking and, indeed, the very terms by which to
think have been colonized by economic vocabularies, metaphors, and idioms? In the fierce competition of crises—between public health and economic health—it would mean that we could not objectively navigate between them. The very terms by which to navigate would impose their bias. To speak of economic “health” is itself a misuse of words and a mixed metaphor. But we barely bat an eye, even though we know that the economy is not a biological entity, and a “healthy” economy is always achieved by the suffering, ill health, or death of human beings. Such is the law of capital accumulation, the poisonous “freedom” of free markets. Again, these calculations are not new, it’s just that they become less covert in the time of COVID-19. Our “throwaway culture,” as Pope Francis called it, is usually discreet and anonymous, part of a global financial system and worldview. For example, we seldom consider the value of our own lives in relation to those rendered precarious or who are maimed and killed as a result of our nation’s lucrative foreign arms deals, pharmaceutical testing, or child sweatshop labor. Closer to home, we might consider the implicit “value” ascribed to the poor, the homeless, Indigenous communities or People of Color, prisoners, and those in long-term care facilities. The precarity of other human lives is the hidden “utility” that props up the apparent value of our own.

But then what, after all, is the “utility” of a human life? And what, the “utility” of a virus? To test the survival of the fittest among us, to test our collective will, or our compassion and care for others? On these terms the virus, too, might resemble a god. It is perhaps fitting that Ananke and Bia, necessity and violence, go hand in hand.

The protesters, much like the virus, have something of value to teach us—not so much for what they say as for the animus they do not quite articulate in words. Yes, the protesters are a ragtag lot; they have no manifesto and do not speak in one voice. Some are surely misinformed, believe in conspiracy theories, or mistrust the science. Others may gesture to a fundamentalist religious faith, claim Constitutional “rights,” or despise state power, while still others are perhaps simply reckless or selfish for any number of reasons—deniers who may not even deny the science but narcissistically deny that they themselves have a moral responsibility for others. And a radical fringe undoubtedly militates for the overthrow of the state and would hasten the “boogaloo”—a slang term twisted and appropriated by the alt-white/right signaling the coming civil war, a race war to be waged, this time, with the providential help of a virus that exploits biological and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The protests, then, expose the fault lines where the collision of biologic and economic crises erupt as a social crisis that has been
simmering for generations. The mythological “fates” and “necessities” of protesters, their saber-rattling and neo-tribalism, share much with the worldview of religious fundamentalists, anti-vaxxers, and a swath of libertarians and far-right extremists who locate their faith elsewhere. They seem committed to other gods or demons, are distrustful of evidence-based science and medicine, and are fearful of state power. And arguably, they have wielded considerable influence over the hastened reopening of the economy in many jurisdictions. This has resulted in otherwise preventable (yet presumably “patriotic”) suffering and death.

To be sure, the protestors do not offer a critique of biopolitical onto-logics or neoliberal economies—but they ought to occasion one. Instead, however, the liberal establishment is quick to scorn and to criticize, sometimes with fear, loathing, or self-righteous censoriousness. But a critique ought instead to turn our gaze inward and might discomfit us rather than reproduce and rhetorically validate what we already think we know. In some respects, the protestors’ mythological worldview courting fate and violence almost parodies the cool efficiencies of our biopolitical state, which for so long has in its own right enshrined the ageist, ableist, racist, and economic rhetorics of “tolerable” suffering and death as a matter of (neo)liberal public policy. We, good liberals, are complicit in such structural, impersonal, and ritual violence, as much as we might disavow it in the name of life itself. How different are we really? The protestors parody our hidden economies of “utility” and sacrifice, putting them on obscene display. If we manage not to stop up our ears, we might for a moment hear our own hypocrisies echoed in these scenes. And we might find the courage to submit our own preconceptions and vocabularies to critique—to question what seems “natural” and “just,” and to ask why these are neither fated nor necessary.

Thanatopolitics

What can we say of (or to) those who protest public health orders, refuse to wear facemasks, attend large gatherings (beaches, bars, parties, synagogues, mega-churches, etc.), and generally behave as if everything is “normal”? COVID-19 is both a virological and socio-behavioral malady. The examples of these “types” and their discourses—in some cases parroting rogue state “authorities”—are legion across the mainstream media. I need not reproduce it here. We know it, and we know, too, the standard lines of reproach and public shaming, along with the moral outrage and righteous indignation directed at these “covididiots” whose
self-proclaimed “liberties” do, in fact, encroach on others’ right to life. Their diversity notwithstanding, they nevertheless demonstrate at least three common—and interrelated—features. First, their struggle is foremost a matter of resistance, typically directed against powers perceived to be false or odious. Second, this resistance is expressed as—and iteratively shores up—their individual identity and will, or even their “sovereignty,” as they arrogate to themselves (liberal) “rights” and “freedoms.” In this, they seek to reclaim a sense of agency fashioned as a perverse “right to life.” And third, if death should come for them, that death (imagined to be unlikely) will be perceived as divinely willed or fated. In these ways, we might say that they are the embodiment and logical fulfilment of a liberal order the apotheosis of which is neoliberal biopolitics.

They are extremists or radicalized, we might say, although many conceive of themselves as the true patriots—and in a sense this is correct: they enshrine in their identity the values of self-possessed (indeed, mercenary) individualism, life, personal liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And yet paradoxically, as I suggested above, they end up reproducing and enacting the very logics of neoliberal biopolitics—its sacrificial economies, its ruse of individual sovereignty and free choice, its routine disavowal of death, and its impassioned valorization of “life itself.” They are, ironically, agents of an order they imagine themselves as resisting. Most of these people, I suspect, are not “suicidal” and don’t intend to cause harm to others, to infect or to kill, to weaponize their bodies: if these are the consequences of their actions, they amount to accidental or aleatory effects. We might even call them accidental terrorists. And to be clear, I’m not particularly sympathetic toward them, but nor am I sympathetic toward the moralizing and self-righteous good liberals (myself among them) who rush to condemn but who also end up unwitting agents of neoliberal biopolitics, whether in our demands for more laws and enhanced law enforcement, or more passively, by acting as the cultural conduits of normative state discourse and its language-effects. In this respect, good liberals are the new conservatives, while good conservatives increasingly cleave to a phantasmatic nostalgia for pre-liberal and pre-modern forms of governance enacted as illiberalism, neo-feudalism, or even political theology. How, then, might we on the Left suspend our impulse to scorn and to criticize—perhaps even despite our own pain, identity, politics—in order to rethink resistance outside of biopolitical logics, and without further implicating ourselves in them or reaffirming them unwittingly? In other words, how might we critically disaffirm biopolitics, disclaim its claim over us, without quite capitulating to and recirculating its tropes?
Some fifteen years ago, in an essay on what I called “thanatopolitics,” I made an early and clumsy attempt to navigate this paradox. I used “thanatopolitics” mindful that I was using an existing term in a new way. When Giorgio Agamben uses the term (albeit rarely), he intends only to signal the deathly, reverse face of biopolitics: “biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics,” he writes, as if to suggest that biopolitics is not always constitutively tied to death. Roberto Esposito follows suit: “The Nazi experience represents the culmination of biopolitics . . . absolutely indistinct from its reversal into thanatopolitics.” And Foucault, too, uses the term in a similar vein (but more rarely still): “The reverse of biopolitics is thanatopolitics.” In hindsight, I might have done well to choose a less freighted word! In my formulation, thanatopolitics was intended to offer a critical response to biopolitical life, where the deaths of those we let die would at times become a productive (rather than privative) power and would “speak” in order to expose and disrupt biopolitical logics from within. As Foucault teaches us, discourse is productive, and I had hoped to contest the biopolitical production of “life” by imagining those it lets die and silences in death as staging their own productive counter-discourse that would expose the biopolitical ruse.

Too hastily, I characterized thanatopolitics as a “resistance” to biopolitics. This was mistaken. As I argue above, resistance is not quite thanatopolitical because it often succeeds only in shoring up and reproducing the biopower it ostensibly resists. In this book, I argue instead for an understanding of thanatopolitics in and as disaffirmation—a response brought home in the productive rhetorics of dead speech, sometimes lyrical and apostrophic, spoken neither in sovereign grammars nor in the normative and teleological embrace of “logical” content or epistemic closure. To disaffirm, in response, is to have hearkened those we (will) have let die a biopolitical death carried out precisely in the execution of teleology and logic. If the dead make a claim on us, our response shouldn’t simply usurp that claim, domesticate it, possess and reclaim it, in the language of logic and life itself.

For me, then, thanatopolitics is not the reversal or inversion of inherently “affirmative” rhetorics, for the affirmation of making live is unreconstructed and always linked, however clandestinely, to letting die. The active-passive binary calls for deconstruction. Moreover, in emphasizing the productive, critical valences of thanatopolitics, I also wished to distinguish my use from Achille Mbembe’s signal use of “necropolitics” in a postcolonial African context. I nevertheless take a great deal of inspiration from Mbembe, who issues the following challenge for postcolonial studies: “We need to go beyond the binary categories used in standard
interpretations of domination, such as resistance vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony, totalization vs. detotalization.\textsuperscript{41} Mbembe exhorts us “to discuss the status of death-as-such or, more precisely, of death’s life or the life of death.”\textsuperscript{42} Through thanatopolitics, I had hoped, we might find that the repudiated life of death opens a critical space between conventional (logical) antinomies. Finally, in my own formulation of thanatopolitics I preferred the invocation of Thanatos, whose cultural (and psychoanalytic) counterpart is typically Eros. These terms suggest a topos distinct from the more “clinical” and corporeal connotations of necro- and bio-, which infect and inflect biopolitics. Again, a disaffirmation of biopolitics should not reduplicate its normative tropes and tendencies but should arrive, instead, from another order of discourse, beyond mere corporeal life and death, and beyond the epistemic remit of our words’ work.

In this early “thanatopolitics” essay I staged a discussion on deaths classified as either suicides or sacrifices—a distinction that ultimately says more about one’s (living) positionality and perspective than about these particular deaths themselves. I invoked what is perhaps the most reviled and extreme figure of resistance: the suicide terrorist. And I insisted, as I do throughout this book, on the interconnectedness, often elided, between making live and letting die, and on the gradual “disqualification” of death in our culture. In Foucault’s terms, “it is now not so much sex as death that is the object of a taboo.”\textsuperscript{43} This taboo was clear to me in 2004–5, as I was writing my earlier essay. The Second Palestinian Intifada (2000–2005) had received a great deal of media attention in the United States, particularly its suicide bombing missions. The United States itself had recently been the target of Islamist suicide terror attacks, and while the deaths of September 11, 2001, were meticulously counted and variously (repeatedly) invoked, there was still “no time for mourning,” as Barbara Biesecker rightly argued.\textsuperscript{44} Offered a Manichean choice at the time, we were either with President George W. Bush or with “the terrorists.” And so we went to war. In official terms, Americans were said to “value life,” whereas the terrorists did not. “Life” in America was being rhetorically rewritten by the “culture of life,”\textsuperscript{45} as Bush repeatedly called it. This rhetoric was highly militarized, and its ethos extended into other nominally civilian domains—medical, juridical, political, technological, economic. In truth, however, under the guise of “freedom” we were subject to the progressive surveillance and militarization of public culture as the new norm—a permanent state of emergency and a disaster capitalism compelling (and outsourcing) mass death.
My interest here remains focused on the relative unspeakability of death, and the rhetorical intransitivity of letting die, which is eclipsed by the biopolitical transitivity of making live. If the death of the suicide terrorist hardly counts as a death (for “us”), this figure is nonetheless widely invoked in the training and desensitization (also a recruitment and radicalization) of Western military personnel. Specifically, on the intransitivity of death, I invoke my early essay on thanatopolitics in the context of the current pandemic, for the global War on Terror is the enduring legacy under which the pandemic plays out, rhetorically, on the home front. The pandemic, too, is a “war” against an “invisible enemy” (in Trump’s terms). The trope of invisibility also recalls Cold War rhetorics retooled and redeployed in the global War on Terror, and now once again against a new Chinese communist enemy—a “Chinese virus,” the “kung flu”—that (we are told) threatens to destroy the American way of life. And the invisible threat extends, in Republican Party propaganda, to “fake news” outlets as well as to “radical” or “socialist” liberals who have apparently infiltrated the Democratic Party. When a threat is invisible, it is easily displaced, much in the way that the Pentagon diverted $1 billion in bailout funds—intended to “prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus”—toward military materiel instead.46

The long-standing economies of sacrifice that are conjured—now in the many forms of resistance to public health orders, scientific elites, globalists, the fakestream media, bluepilled libtards and normies, facemasks and social distancing—have weaponized lives and resulted in widespread illness and death, particularly across vulnerable and marginalized populations whose lives were discounted to begin with. To resist an invisible enemy can easily turn you into one, whether as suicide or as heroic freedom fighter (again, terms relative to one’s point of view, self-identity, and source of information). Resistance can terrorize, even if it doesn’t warrant the official label of “terrorism.” As Derrida has asked, in a distinctly Foucauldian vein, “Does terrorism have to work only through death? Can’t one terrorize without killing? And does killing necessarily mean putting to death? Isn’t it also ‘letting die’? Can’t ‘letting die,’ ‘not wanting to know that one is letting others die’—hundreds of millions of human beings, from hunger, AIDS, lack of medical treatment, and so on—also be part of a ‘more or less’ conscious and deliberate terrorist strategy?”47 Of course, “not wanting to know” and knowing are two different, yet related, epistemic commitments. Thanatopolitics, as I imagined it, would surface this knowing as an ontological commitment, where it might find a political voice to declare—in words and
Suicide by Society

Suicide terrorism has been widely decried as an act of “asymmetrical warfare.” In one telling instance, the “asymmetry” of the suicidal act de guerre was invoked following mass hunger strikes (met with force-feeding) and three detainee suicides at Guantánamo Bay in 2006. The military commander of the camp, Rear Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., said of the suicides, “They are smart, they are creative, they are committed. They have no regard for life, neither ours nor their own. I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us.” His message was clear: “we” are the true victims of these suicides and “we”—whose regard for life is apparently beyond reproach—are justified if we have no regard for these lives, either because they do not count as life or because their purported disregard for life disqualifies them in this, “our,” regard. There is no hint of irony in his words, and no acknowledgment that asymmetry could be measured otherwise, whether racially, socioeconomically, technologically, geopolitically, in military prowess and resources, or even in a nation’s willful hostility or rapacity. But these systemic asymmetries apparently pale in comparison to the “asymmetrical” act of taking one’s own life.

The ostensible transitivity and sovereignty of the suicidal act is not only a sin against God across the Abrahamic religious traditions, it also profoundly disrupts the secular-sacred of biopolitical life and making live. As Jacqueline Rose has remarked, “Dropping cluster bombs from the air is somehow deemed, by Western leaders at least, to be morally superior. . . . Why dying with your victim should be seen as a greater sin than saving yourself is unclear.” We are meant to believe that those who drop bombs do so because of their morally superior regard for life. “Suicide bombing kills far fewer people than conventional warfare,” Rose reasons. “The reactions it provokes must, therefore, reside somewhere other than in the number of the dead.” And indeed, terror is less about the number than the means—a sudden and visceral irruption of death into our everyday places of life-making. Cluster bombs often strike similar places, of course, but our death-making is at-a-distance, meant to be shrouded in the intransitivity of letting die, mediated by Hollywood heroism, and coded in the fictive “proportionality” and

deeds—that we are unable to continue to live in the shadows of silence, unable to condone a violence committed in the name of our own lives.
“necessity” of war. To say that suicide terrorists target civilians, and then to reason that this “justifies” our horror, is disingenuous. All war does just this: it kills civilians, physically and psychically, socially and economically. In World War II, Allied forces dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan and countless firebombs on Germany and Japan, massacring hundreds of thousands of civilians. These particular acts of war often occasion a discourse of “necessity” and some utilitarian calculus by which such preemptive killing would ultimately save more lives than those incinerated. More recently, in the global War on Terror, we might consider American military adventures post-9/11 in Iraq and Afghanistan (and beyond), each with its own terrorist insurgents, and each calling for progressively preemptive counterinsurgency tactics, US state-sanctioned murder (and in some cases bodily desecration), extraordinary rendition, and torture (euphemistically, “prisoner abuse”), at least some of which escaped military censorship to expose quotidian abominations at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, and countless American “black sites” around the world. This haunted me and still does.

The rich man’s sins and the beggar’s death are related by more than their coincident voicelessness; they are interdependent in the silent bargain known as the cost of living. The shameless human carnage caused by the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq (self-righteous, and with no more than a phantasmatic casus belli), the enormous civilian death toll, and the suffering of those left alive, is widely documented but never officially acknowledged in America as a crime against humanity. In 2006, The Lancet reported the Iraqi body count (“excess deaths”) at 654,965; more recently, in 2015, the international organization Physicians for Social Responsibility placed the number “conservatively” at one million and did not hesitate to qualify the US military adventure as genocidal. And so, long after the celebrated disposal of Osama bin Laden’s (invisible) remains, Americans remain under the bloody legacy of ongoing Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO budget in 2020 = $71.5 billion), including Enduring Activities, that the global War on Terror is said to necessitate, its violence meted out in the logics of “preemption” and “self-defense.” In the war of these asymmetries figured as sites of “vital,” “humanitarian,” and purportedly “surgical” interventions, we have developed highly lethal autonomous weapons systems—drones, smart bombs, et cetera—that are remotely and algorithmically driven and powered by complex networks supported by satellites and publicly traded commercial industries. This delivery unto death is highly mediated, sanitized, and gamified. What imaginable resistance could emerge from within such a vast neoliberal-biopolitical apparatus that operates as if by its own (highly profitable) inertia? What, if not something horrific and unimaginable?
Reading media reports of suicide terrorism, over the years I became increasingly preoccupied with the steadily growing number of suicides among Western military personnel, who, it seemed to me, are themselves ultimately also the victims of missions that killed other human beings in the service of a delusional world-historical cause. I followed these stories and began to gather an archive of soldiers’ suicide notes, typically published in fragmentary form, in news stories, on blogs, or tucked away in Reddit feeds. I have many in my archive, but they are each exceptional because publishing them contravenes a Department of Defense Directive stating that all members of the military, including “retired and separated Service members, former DoD employees and contractors, and non-active duty members of the Reserve Components[,] will use the DoD prepublication review process to ensure that information they intend to release to the public does not compromise national security as required by their nondisclosure agreements.”

The dead, of course, cannot submit their words for prepublication review, and the nondisclosure agreement (Standard Form 312) is binding “during the time I am granted access to classified information, and at all times thereafter” (my emphasis). The interests of “national security” hide a multitude of sins in patriotic perpetuity—sins often unjustly ascribed to persons who take their own lives, but whose last words and final acts frequently betray the structural, impersonal, and ritual violence of a system that kills by letting die, and then (as their loved ones frequently attest) lets die once again when life becomes unlivable for those soldiers who come home bearing war’s “invisible” scars.

Selecting from some suicide notes that have been verified and are in the public domain, I offer just a few words from these dying dead voices, seldom heard:

“I had once thought that I could leave with my thirteen dead: the thirteen who kept me from sleeping, who assaulted my psyche in my modes of consciousness. They became legion. I thought back to all the missions I had witnessed. I couldn’t believe the numbers. I felt like my soul had fled and I knew my judgment would be damnation. But I was still there. . . . In the hospital, my dead stood in judgment of me in my nightmares.” (A letter from a remote sensor operator)

“Time’s finally up. . . . I am not a good person, I have done bad things. I have taken lives, now it’s time to take mine.” (A veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom)

“The simple truth is this: During my first deployment, I was made to participate in things, the enormity of which is hard to describe. War crimes,
crimes against humanity. Though I did not participate willingly, and made what I thought was my best effort to stop these events, there are some things that a person simply can not [sic] come back from. . . . To force me to do these things and then participate in the ensuing coverup is more than any government has the right to demand. Then, the same government has turned around and abandoned me.” (A veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom who describes his suicide as a “mercy killing”)

These voices tell a story of overwhelming moral injury, and a truth that is otherwise silenced by military propaganda and “patriotism.” I hate my archive, it sickens me, but I feel that it dishonors these voices to stop up my ears. In their agonies, in their fraught resistance, they invite us to think beyond individual responsibility, to reflect on the “we” and what responsibility and agency could mean as a public good. I have no grounds to dispute these soldiers’ documented behavioral health diagnoses, including PTSD (in 2017 this officially included just 50.8 percent of all US military suicides). I would note, however, that the posthumous psychiatrization of such acts tends to reinscribe these individuals into a biopolitical order, effectively robbing them of the very resistance to which their last words—and their deaths—often attest. Compare the words of Saeed, a twenty-one-year-old Palestinian: “In honesty, if life is like this, and work is like this, death is more honourable.”

Suffering and death are visceral, notwithstanding a politics of “necessity.” And what of honor?

Suicide terrorists and Western military suicides: I paratactically place these figures of repudiated death and resistance alongside those who, in the warring asymmetries of COVID-19, also variously resist an invisible enemy. This includes those who have been infected by the virus and whose resistance might be fought as a personal medical crisis, as well as those who resist state and public health protocols, who protest, who refuse to wear facemasks, and are thus potential agents of contagion and, in some cases, themselves become infected and will demand health care. I do not equate these figures of resistance nor do I suggest their contexts are commensurable. They are not. And yet, it will not do to categorize these casualties as either “ours” or “theirs,” according to the patriotic economies of war. They speak to and of a death that we’d prefer remain unspeakable—a death (to recall Blanchot) that “subverts the whole sequence of existence, causes time to take leave of its order, opens life to its passivity, exposing it to the unknown, to the stranger.” If we bracket, for a moment, questions of individual intent (for as I’ve argued, such liberal agency is unreconstructed and uncertain), at a
community level it becomes difficult to distinguish the enemy terrorist from the Western soldier from COVID-19’s accidental terrorists: strangers to us, their lives are weaponized and convey an unknown threat, exposing life—ours and theirs, too—to its passivity. How much does it matter if needless suffering and death are immediate or highly mediated through techno-military or capitalist or bio-social networks? Death need not be highly wrought.

In our unending wars of purported “symmetry,” “proportionality,” and “necessity”—now indispensable to the national economy—it is vexing to distinguish the terrorist from the freedom fighter. In an effort to exalt the latter, we struggle in vain to locate a liberal-humanist agency—a purity of intent, an identity, a desire to make live—that in spite of it all is nevertheless implicated in the covert agencies of intransitive death-warranting. As Talal Asad has noted, “However much we try to distinguish between morally good and morally evil ways of killing, our attempts are beset with contradictions, and these contradictions remain a fragile part of our modern subjectivity.”

These extreme examples shed light on the institutionalized and normalized failure of otherwise “progressive,” “enlightened,” or “tolerant” good liberals to associate our livingness with the dispossession and death of others who (will) have been suicided by our society. Might these deaths not attest to a strange “life of death,” as Mbembe puts it—lives already negated, whether as unlivable or unsurvivable? What is the agency of letting die here, this quiet power to disavow certain lives, to count them as already dead, as destined for death, and to disavow (yet again, and still) their deaths as deaths?

“Terrorism,” Asad writes, “is an epistemological object in modern society.” And while the terrorist is “dismissed as being essentially part of a nonmodern, nonliberal culture,” Asad points out that terror—however (re)mediated or (re)framed—is integral to liberal subjectivities as well. We tend to treat both as epistemological objects, including the soldier suicide and those who variously defy and protest COVID-19 protocols. We attempt to understand them, too, by advancing knowledge claims, and yet our epistemological objectivity—transitive in its grasp on those subjects of violence—fails to comprehend the ontological claim, the “life of death,” that consumes them. Indeed, those who resist often reclaim a lost sense of agency through the intransitivity of their pain and suffering that is then transitively redirected through acts of violence and self-harm. In an earlier exploration of pain and agency, Asad offered a critique of “romanticized” notions of resistance and moral agency, which, he argued, carry the false assumption “that power is external to and repressive of the agent, that it’s subjects’ him, and that nevertheless the agent as ‘active subject’ has both the desire to
oppose power and the responsibility to become more powerful.” Romanticized notions of agency—“self-empowerment,” “individualism”—are invoked, he argued, in order to advance a “triumphalist” vision of history, much as we saw above across our various figures of resistance. This promised life to-come, this triumphant futurity, is the salutary ruse of biopolitics, but there is something harrowing in the ways that the intransitivity of letting die is not only secreted in the biopolitical apparatus, but is at times willfully mobilized as a transitive death-making, however mediated or indirect.

Postscript

At the time of writing, American deaths due to COVID-19 already far surpass the combined deaths of every war since World War II (including the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the War in Afghanistan, and the Iraq War). Given the state’s pandemic rhetorics of war, its calls for “patriotism” and “sacrifice,” we might feel galled that, over the course of Trump’s presidency, there was little to no state reverence for the dead and dying, no celebration of the heroic dead (as in times of war), no official moments of silence, no public rituals of recognition or mourning. On the contrary, Trump’s White House succeeded in fueling the pandemic with its botched response, disinformation, and a maskless super-spreader president who touted a drug proven not to work, suggested injecting household disinfectants, and promoted a witch doctor who believes in the pathogenic effects of demon sperm. It was all singularly surreal, seemingly unstoppable, a satyricon come to life. And as for death? Trump summed it up coolly: “It is what it is.” “Live and Let Die”—the Guns N’ Roses song blasted during the president’s summer 2020 campaign stops in Arizona and again in Ohio. At least this merciless spectacle had the virtue of a certain honesty, however grim.

And yet, it is far easier for me to criticize the state’s hypocrisies and biopolitical crimes than to reckon, in my grief, with my sentimentalizing desire for the state’s sovereignty in these moments, my yearning for leaders who might mirror my own commitments and affects. I feel powerless to interrogate my own compulsions. My narcissistic desire is tempting, but the romanticized promise of resistance and moral rectitude risks turning my disaffirmation into the triumphalist terror of sovereign grammars and “master” tropes. Is this who “we” are? Instead, I turn away from the spectacle. I come closer to home: that is where disaster
strikes. Life opens to its passivity. Time takes leave of its order. A cry, but not just: a call. Attending to the dead, alongside those left behind, we may stumble into spaces where the state is ultimately senseless and irrelevant. For, in anguished moments, together, we have held discreet vigils for those we have lost, sought solace in makeshift rituals of mourning, in summoned strangers, perhaps, or in undeclared friendships, and, for now, community among our dead.