“Tomorrow belongs to those who can hear it coming.”
— Bowie, cited in D. Buckley (2015, 64)

“The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.”

While the Arena occupation was going on in the late summer of 1976, among the offerings showing in West German, and possibly also Austrian, cinemas was David Bowie’s screen debut in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976, dir. Nicholas Roeg). The film follows the misadventures of Thomas Jerome Newton, an alien who comes to earth in search of water for his dying planet, uses his advanced technology to amass the necessary wealth to ship water back to his planet but in the process falls victim to corporate intrigue and his own weaknesses. As he attempts to flee on his spaceship, he is outed as an alien and ends up an incarcera-
ated alcoholic. The story resonated with Bowie as it came at the end of his drug-addled American period, after which he fled for the healing anonymity and productivity of Berlin. As Dene October notes in his reading of what he calls the Bowie-Newton matrix, “[p]laying the role had a profound effect upon him, one he felt more intensely than with his other characters, like he was outering ‘a spirit within’ […], an identity that crystalized in the artwork to the albums *Station to Station* and *Low*, re-emerged in the Thin White Duke, and again, much later, in work that reflects back on his life” (October 2019, 107).

When a liver cancer diagnosis forced him to confront the certainty of death, Bowie chose to revisit the unhappy, immortal alien he had so uncannily embodied in the 1970s, who had wanted to die but could not. *Lazarus*, his first and only musical, on which he collaborated with Irish playwright Enda Walsh, picks up the story where the film left off, finds a derelict, gin-soaked Newton in his Manhattan apartment slowly going out of his mind and follows his interactions with a number of characters who may or may not be figments of his imagination. Its debut on December 7, 2015, in the New York Theater Workshop in New York’s East Village, was Bowie’s last public appearance before his death the following month, on January 10, 2016, two days after his sixty-ninth birthday.

To the great surprise of many, including *Lazarus’s* German translator Peter Torberg, it has not been on English-language stages but rather on German-language ones that *Lazarus* has taken off. Of the first dozen productions of *Lazarus*, only the first two, in New York and London, were not in German. After playing in New York until January 20, 2016 and at London’s King Cross Theatre from November 8, 2016 to January 22, 2017,² *Lazarus* saw its German premiere on February 3, 2018 at the

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² One of the London performances was filmed and screened for one night only in New York on May 2, 2018.
Schauspielhaus in Düsseldorf, with its Austrian one following on May 9, 2018 in Vienna’s Volkstheater.³

Unlike the New York and London productions, in both of which Dexter star Michael C. Hall played Newton and which were “exact replicas” of Bowie’s vision,⁴ the only thing the German-language productions have in common is that they are based on Torberg’s translation. Otherwise, each is entirely its own entity, featuring its own concept, direction, and cast.⁵ As the reading in this chapter reveals, the Viennese Lazarus, directed by Miloš Lolić and with an almost unrecognizably youthful Günter Franzmeier as Newton, radically distinguishes itself from both the Anglophone original and its Germanophone counterparts, as is appropriate to its place of performance.

Vienna’s Volkstheater was co-founded in 1889 by the writer Ludwig Anzensgruber and the industrialist Felix Fischer with the explicitly counterhegemonic mission of providing alternative offerings to both the imperial and music-oriented commercial theaters. After tracing the Volkstheater’s history as a revolutionary place for “the people,” I turn in this chapter to the colorfully postmodernist yet deadly serious distinctiveness

³ Further premiers followed on June 9, 2018 in the Theater am Goetheplatz in Bremen, September 27, 2018 in the Großer Saal Musiktheater in Linz, November 17, 2018 in the SchauSpielHaus Hamburg, February 2, 2019 at the Staatstheater Nürnberg, May 18, 2019 in the Theater Bielefeld, June 6, 2019 in the Schauspielhaus Leipzig, and June 15, 2019 in the Deutsches Theater Göttingen. It also began to spread both within and outside Europe, with the Norwegian premier in Oslo on May 11, 2019, an Anglophone stint at the Arts Centre in Melbourne from May 18 to June 9, 2019, the Danish premier at the gala opening of the Aarhus Festuge summer festival on August 30, 2019, and the Dutch premiere on October 13, 2019 at the DeLaMar Theater in Amsterdam. At the time of writing, more German productions are set to open at the Kampa-Halle Minden on March 31, 2020 and the Musik- und Kongresshalle Lübeck on April 1, 2020.

⁴ Producer Robert Fox claimed that “[i]t’s absolutely as he wanted it. It’s absolutely as he saw it, […] What we did in London was an exact replica of what he saw, and what he approved. We wouldn’t change that” (von Aue 2018).

⁵ The director of the Melbourne production, Michael Kantor, boasted in a similar spirit that “[t]his isn’t some pre-made production we bought off the shelf from New York, like The Lion King” (Lallo 2019).
of its *Lazarus* production and the contribution it made to the ensemble’s repertoire at a critical time in the theater’s history. I show how its unique interpretation of the necropolitical tensions inherent in the work, which underscore the violence in American culture, supports a feminist revisiting of sadism and the decoupling of it from masochism *pace* Deleuze’s argument in *Coldness and Cruelty*. The Viennese *Lazarus* helps us answer to the fundamental questions the musical and its afterlife pose: why, as he lay dying, did Bowie choose to return to the character of Newton, and why has that return resonated so much in the Germanophone sphere?

**Vienna’s Volkstheater**

The “Deutsches Volkstheater” was established at a formative moment in Viennese socio-cultural history, as key work by Marion Linhardt and W.E. Yates details. After six decades of relative institutional stability, Vienna and its cultural institutions transformed markedly in the last third of the nineteenth century:

The rapid expansion of the city from about 500,000 by 1860 to nearly 750,000 by 1885 (over a million, counting the districts outside the city boundaries which would be incorporated in 1891) and over 1,600,000 by the end of the century; the increase both of the urban bourgeoisie and of the working class, in a city where mass poverty had already become a problem by 1848; the rise of nationalism that followed the Treaty of Prague and the constitution of December 1867; the growth of anti-Semitism; the financial crash of 1873 — all these factors colour the theatre history of the period. (Yates 2008, 51)

That history tells of the effects of a shifting, expanding demographic on the growth of the city’s theatrical offerings:

[A]s Vienna underwent rapid expansion in the last third of the nineteenth century, the Viennese theatre scene caught
Up with developments that had taken place decades before in the much larger metropolitan cities of Paris and London: instead of attracting a more or less homogeneous audience that was rooted in local traditions, the Volkstheater [popular, commercial theatres] became dependent on a heterogeneous cross-section of the urban population, a collection of anonymous spectators from very different backgrounds. (Linhardt 2008, 69)

Up until the replacement of the glacis, the former military fortification that protectively encircled the first district, by the Ringstrasse, which began in 1859, Vienna “basically had five professional theatres: two court theatres and three commercial ones” (Yates 2008, 52). The latter — the Theater in der Josefstadt, the Theater in der Leopoldstadt, which became the Carltheater, and the Theater an der Wien — were all outside the old walled centre. While what was then still called the k.k. Hof-Burgtheater was relocating from the Michaelerplatz to a prestigious new position across the burgeoning Ringstrasse from the City Hall and the University, where it officially opened in 1888, new theaters were opening mostly in the Vorstadt outside the ring. Joining the Harmonie-Theater in the ninth district in the Wasagasse, which opened in 1866; the Etablissement Ronacher, in the central Seilerstätte, which opened in 1888; the Raimundtheater in the sixth district, which opened in 1893; the Kaiserjubiläums-Stadttheater in what is now the Volksoper, which opened in 1898 and was originally a “notorious ‘Aryan theatre’”; and the multi-media complex Venedig in Wien [Venice in Vienna] in the Prater in 1895 (ibid., 52); the Deutsches Volks theater opened in 1889 on the other side of the glacis, next to what had been the royal stables, which is now the Museumsquartier.

These new theaters had to accommodate their repertoire to the audiences finding their way to them. As Linhardt documents in Residenzstadt und Metropole [Imperial Capital and Metropolis], her “immensely informative examination of the structure of the theatre scene from 1858 to 1918,” the period saw a dramatic revolution in taste in favor of operetta so that “by 1910 the total
seating capacity of theatres staging operetta in Vienna was four times greater than that available for spoken theatre” (ibid., 52). Spoken theater, too, struggled to accommodate the “considerable increase in foreign influence on the repertoire,” which “was being recast as a conflictual relationship” between the Alt-Wien [Old Vienna] of the Vormärz period before the revolutions of 1848 and the beginnings of modernism (Linhardt 2008, 70–72).6

As befitting its name and the didactic impulses of co-founder Anzengruber (Yates 2008, 60–61), the Deutsches Volks theater entered the fray with the mission of providing as wide a spectrum of the population as possible with as wide a variety of plays as possible. To that end, its repertoire ranged from the classics and the type of comic folk plays Anzensgruber had become known for modern realism, and it was built with a capacity of 1901—1401 seats and 500 standing places—the largest in the German-speaking realm at the time.7

Over the course of its history, the Volkstheater has pursued a mission of providing affordable entertainment while maintaining a reputation for daring, revolutionary productions.8 In the interwar period it became known for its highly controversial modern repertoire of such works as Hermann Bahr’s Die Stimme [The Voice], Hans Müller’s Die Flamme [The Flame], and

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6 This conflict helps to explain the slump the Theater in der Josefstadt experienced during this era: “in the period between 1865 and 1899 it went through eleven directors or lessees, and it speaks volumes that on the current [2008] website of the Theater in der Josefstadt under the heading ‘Historisches’ [Historical Information] there is a gap between 1860 and 1899” (Linhardt 2008, 71).

7 Over the years, its size has shrunk. The damage it suffered during World War II brought it down to 1539 and renovations in 1980-1981 to 1148. Its current capacity is 832, making it the second largest theater in Vienna and the third largest in the German-speaking realm. (“Volkstheater (Wien)” 2018).

8 To mark its 100th anniversary, Evelyn Schreiner’s 100 Jahre Volkstheater. Theater. Zeit. Geschichte [100 Years of the Volkstheater: Theater, Time, History] was published in 1989. It has become a standard work and made possible excellent online resources, such as the “Volkstheater” entry on the Wien Geschichte Wiki and the German Wikipedia entry. The information in this section has been compiled from these sources.
Arthur Schnitzler’s *Professor Bernhardi* and *Reigen* [*La Ronde*]. It also featured prestigious guest performances by a who’s who of the Berlin theatrical world, such as Fritzi Massary, Asta Nielsen, Elisabeth Bergner, Adele Sandrock, Curt Goetz, Heinz Rühmann, Conrad Veidt, Fritz Kortner, Paul Wegener, and Emile Jannings starring in Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Fuhrmann Henschel* [*Drayman Henschel*]. Rudolph Beer, who served as Director from 1924 to 1932, was even able to secure Moscow’s Kammertheater under the direction of Alexander Tairoff to perform *Giroflé-Girofla*. During the Nazi period, the Volkstheater daringly offered theatrical resistance in performances of George Bernard Shaw’s *St. Joan* and Ferdinand Raimund’s *Der Diamant des Geisterkönigs* [*The Ghost-King’s Diamond*]. Director Walter Bruno Iltz, who had already crossed swords with the Nazis during his decade as General Director of Düsseldorf’s public stages from 1927–37 and been denied membership in the party due to his “liberal-Marxist attitude,” used the theater to protect vulnerable actors and artists.

After the war, the theater continued with its revolutionary modern repertoire. Despite the fact it was in the American sector, it put on neglected Russian dramatists, such as Alexander Ostrovsky, Ivan Turgenev and Anatoly Lunacharsky. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1955, it came to be called “the bravest theater in Vienna” for featuring the work of contemporary playwrights such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Sean O’Casey, Jean Cocteau, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, Jean Anouilh, John Osborne, James Baldwin, Heinar Kipphardt, Friedrich Durrenmatt, Max Frisch, and Václav Havel. It was the theater that in 1963 put an end to the decade-long, Burgtheater-led “Brecht Boycott,” during which works by the playwright, who had been granted Austrian citizenship by the provincial Salzburg government in 1950 and who died in East Berlin in 1956, were discouraged from being staged anywhere in Vienna. It was also the

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9 Well-known writers Friedrich Torberg and Hans Weigel prominently advocated against Brecht due to his communist ties. For example, in a speech
first theater in Vienna to hire a woman as its general director, Emmy Werner, in 1988.

The second woman to serve as the Volkstheater’s general director, Anna Badora, originally came to Vienna from Krakow in 1979 to study directing at the Max Reinhardt Seminar, the first woman ever to do so. After having staged Emilia Galotti at the Volkstheater during Emmy Werner’s tenure, she worked as an assistant and freelance director at a number of German theaters in Cologne, Basel, Essen, Ulm, Munich, and Darmstadt. Badora was then contracted in Mainz for five years as Director of Acting, and in Düsseldorf and Graz for ten years each as General Director before coming to the Volkstheater in 2015. It was on Badora’s watch that Lazarus premiered on May 9, 2018, three months after the German-language premier in Düsseldorf.10

Badora’s five-year, unrenewed term at the Volkstheater proved highly contentious. Upon arriving, she replaced all but four of the ensemble’s actors with ones she brought with her from Graz and heaped an enormous workload on them—in her first season the repertoire featured the work of seventeen directors from nine different countries (“18 Neue Schauspieler

10 As coincidence would have it, just as Badora had previously worked in Düsseldorf, the director of the Düsseldorf performance, Mattias Hartmann, had worked in Vienna at the Burgtheater from 2009–14, leaving under the shadow of a financial scandal.

entitled “Soll man Brecht im Westen spielen?” [“Should one perform Brecht in the West?”], which was printed in Der Monat (1961), Torberg declared that “Bertolt Brecht, daran ist nicht zu rütteln, war ein Anhänger der kommunistischen Diktatur. Er war ihr im vollen, ursprünglichen Sinn des Wortes verschrieben, er hat sein Werk und seine Person — die sich so wenig voneinander trennen lassen, wie sein Werk sich in einen künstlerischen und in einen politischen Teil aufspalten ließ — restlos und vorsätzlich in den Dienst der kommunistischen Sache gestellt, und er hat für diese Sache Propaganda gemacht, wo immer er konnte. [“There can be no denying that Bertold Brecht was a supporter of the communist dictatorship. He was committed to it in the full, original sense of the word. He put his life and his work, which are as hard to separate as the artistic and political parts of his work, intentionally and completely at the service of the communist mission, and he propagated for it wherever he could”] (Torberg).
am Volkstheater” 2015). Lazarus director Miloš Lolić is a typical example. From Serbia, where he studied at the Belgrade University of Performing Arts before making a career on the German-speaking stages of Europe, Lolić won a Nestroy Prize, Austria’s top theater award, in 2012 for best upcoming director for the production he staged at the Volkstheater of Magic Afternoon by Wolfgang Bauer, one of Austria’s most important modern dramatists. Lolić also won the Volkstheater’s Dorothea Neff Prize in 2018 for best production of the season for his Lazarus production. Another director Badora commissioned was Christine Eder, who did the revival of the Proletenpassion for werk x that was discussed in the previous chapter. At the Volkstheater, Eder has directed a number of didactic musicals in the Proletenpassion’s spirit: Alles Walzer, alles brennt. Eine Untergangsrevue [Everything’s Burning, Let’s Waltz: An Apocalyptic Musical Revue] in the 2016–17 season, Jura Soyfer’s Der Lechner Edi schaut ins Paradies [Journey to Paradise] in 2017–18, and Verteidigung der Demokratie [Defending Democracy], a musical about Hans Kelsen and the Austrian constitution in 2018–19.

That Badora favoured conceptual, experimental productions can also be seen in her own staging of Der Kaufmann von Venedig [The Merchant of Venice] in the 2018–19 season. At the beginning of each performance, the audience was asked to vote for the actor who would play Shylock that evening by clapping as loudly as they could for their choice, which was measured by an applause meter. The three choices were a typical twenty-first-century businessman-banker, a woman, and a small-statured Jewish man of orthodox appearance. All three actors had to be prepared to play both Shylock and a number of supporting roles. At the performance I attended the orthodox Jew was the top choice of an audience made up of mostly elderly women.

Attendance and profitability fell rather dramatically during Badora’s term, especially in comparison with the Theater in der Josefstadt, with its similar proximity to the Burgtheater — both are a mere ten-minute walk away from Vienna’s main stage on the Ring. In addition, as noted in the previous chapter on the Proletenpassion, the number of politically engaged smaller
theaters in Vienna was rising in response to the ongoing political chaos, and the audience for these productions, while keen, is neither as large nor as lucrative as the aging conservative crowd that supports tradition-rich offerings. As Schmidt has argued, a better strategy than competing with other stages would be to attract new audiences:


[The Volkstheater, together with the mid-sized theaters and the independent scene, would be precisely the right place to attract new strata of audiences: young people, a migrant audience, bourgeois bohemians, those who like to go out, and — last but very much not least — the politically minded.] (V. Schmidt 2019)

The *Lazarus* production was very much in this spirit, selling well to a younger and more diverse audience than usual, and not only in Vienna. The Düsseldorf production has been described as “einer der spärlichen Quotenkracher der deutschen Theatersaison wurde” [“one of the few hits of the German theater season”] (Sichrovsky 2018).

Vienna’s Necropolitical Staging of *Lazarus*

It would be a mistake, however, to write the Viennese *Lazarus* off as mere audience-bait. Irrespective of its being extended another season in Vienna, not atypical for a Germanophone *Lazarus*, Lolić’s production offers keen insights into the life-and-death thematic of Bowie’s musical unavailable elsewhere. As this reading demonstrates, it not only calls for but stresses the timeliness of a reconsideration of sadomasochism along the lines theorized by Gilles Deleuze.
In conceptualizing an appropriate space between life and death for the Volkstheater’s staging of *Lazarus*, set designer Wolfgang Menardi let himself be inspired by the taxidermied specimens in the nearby Natural History Museum and created a psychedelic menagerie to house his hallucinating hero. Instead of anything recognizably rocket-like, a form that featured prominently in the Anglo-American, Amsterdam, Düsseldorf, and Hamburg stagings, Menardi designed a towering contraption of asymmetrical, glass cases and placed it at the center of a double revolving stage. Around it were a number of spaced-apart, upright screens and mirrors capable of revolving and refracting light so that the stage glowed in the colors of the rainbow as its middle revolved in one direction, its outside in the other, and its reflective contents all on their own. The staging thus conceptually mirrored Newton’s confused state, while affording him, and the others in the cast, the possibility of stepping off the revolving stage and having a respite from the maelstrom. In littering the stage with specimens of exotic animals—a polar bear, moose, sheep, monkey, seal, turtle, ostrich, snakes, and some unidentifiable birds, along with a large swordfish loomingly suspended overhead to complete the effect—the production emphasized the play’s concentration on life and death. The radiant neon of the costumes and lighting pulsed with vital, life-giving forces, amplifying the energy of the music, while the taxidermied animals gazed out at the audience with their dead eyes, reproachfully posing the question of who had had the right to take their life. More forcefully than either the Linz production’s choice of a morgue setting, Nuremberg’s of a railway station waiting room, Leipzig’s deconstructed cabaret, Bielefeld’s abstract hospital-bed constructions, Bremen’s even more abstract rising and falling black stairs, or Göttingen’s tinselly, water-logged cocktail lounge, the Vienna production drew attention not to the transitory nature of life and the desirability of carpe noctem but to the actual, physical taking of it.

That the play’s central theme is not dying, but killing can be seen in the character of Valentine. This “mass murderer” (Bowie and Walsh 2017, viii) comes from the fourth cut on *The Next*
Day, in which Bowie poked fun at the commercialization of Valentine’s Day’s perversion of love by making Valentine a pathetic killer with “a tiny face” and “scrawny hands,” who has “sold his soul” and told the narrator that “the teachers and the football stars” were “who’s to go.” Lazarus sets Valentine against Newton’s immortality. Even though Newton claims he wants to die and lives accordingly in the addictive, self-destructive manner consumption-oriented, capitalist culture encourages and thrives on, the musical makes clear that there is also a part of him that values life and wants to hang on to it for as long as possible. What Valentine has to do, therefore, is to get Newton to kill himself or rather to kill what is keeping him alive, namely, hope. That is what is shown to bind Newton to life on earth and what he needs to free himself from so that he can embrace death heroically, if just for one day. Only after Valentine has convinced Newton to kill his last hope, embodied in the person of the Girl, can Newton declare that he is “done with this life.” Only then, after they sing a re-versioned “Heroes” that ends with Newton singing the final line “[j]ust for one day” by himself, does the Girl leave, and “Newton finds rest” (ibid., 63).

Most productions of Lazarus stage this deliberately ambiguous ending in a way that fosters hope. Düsseldorf has Newton lifting off to the stars in his spaceship; Bremen has him climbing a white ladder; Leipzig has him looking out over the stage from the bridge of the set’s deconstructed cabaret contraption; Linz has him standing triumphantly at center stage with his arms raised; Göttingen has him contentedly reclining against a grand piano; and even in the Nürnberg production, which shows him expiring very slowly, this happens with him lying on his back with his head resting on the lap of the Girl. In Vienna, in contrast, Franzmeier teeters off the revolving stage to the front of the stage, where he sings “[j]ust for one” and then collapses as the lights go out, leaving the audience to fill in the final “day.” Rather than suggesting any type of otherworldly continuation, this heart-stopping finale makes an extraordinary impact, confronting audiences with the reality of death as an unavoidable end and provoking them to reflect on the experience. What will
one see when one looks death in the face? What will that face look like? How much will that depend on one’s demographic markers, such as race, class, and gender? And where will one find oneself—bandaged in a hospital bed connected to “life-support” the way Bowie appeared in the video for “Lazarus”? Will one stare into the cold-blooded eyes of an unfeeling or desperately disturbed individual? Will one be packed into a cattle car and carted off to a camp? Will one capsize on a small, overcrowded raft in the middle of the Mediterranean because “civilized” nations refused to harbor either those vessels or any that dared to rescue them?

The Vienna production thus makes explicit the underlying locational critique in Bowie and Walsh’s play that other, more hope-oriented productions do not acknowledge, namely, the historical journey that the musical performance charts from a world that looked up to the America of the American Dream, which prided itself on offering an empathetic welcome to poor immigrants dreaming of a better life they are more than willing to work for, to a world dominated by “Amerika” of the “tortured brow,” which, as the lyrics of “Life on Mars?” have it, is no longer a place of dreams but of nightmares—“Micky Mouse has grown up a cow.” This Amerika is infamous for having produced an ultra-violent, gun-worshipping, racist, xenophobic, homophobic culture exported throughout the world via popular culture. The third song in Lazarus, “This Is Not America,” reminds the musical’s audiences of what America had once stood for, namely, “The New Colossus” at whose “sea-washed, sunset gates [...] A mighty woman with a torch” named “Mother of Exiles” stood, from whose “beacon-hand/ Glows world-wide welcome” and who so notably cries “With silent lips, ‘Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me: / I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” These iconic lines, which are imprinted on the base of the Statue of Liberty and are included at the end of both the printed book of the original Lazarus (ibid., 65) as well as the program of the Vienna production, were written in 1883 by Emma Lazarus
as part of a fundraising effort for the statue project. As Yasmin Sabina Khan tells us, Lazarus was at the time “involved in aiding refugees to New York who had fled anti-Semitic pogroms in eastern Europe. These refugees were forced to live in conditions that the wealthy Lazarus had never experienced. She saw a way to express her empathy for these refugees in terms of the statue” (Khan 2010, 165–66).

A dozen songs later, the hopeful future Emma Lazarus had worked hard to make possible is also a thing of the past, and together with Newton we find ourselves distressingly mired in the present. According to Tony Visconti, “Valentine’s Day” was inspired by “a spate of high school shootings in America” (October 2019, 110), a spate that has in the meantime spread to malls, nightclubs, mosques, and even food festivals (Winton et al. 2019). The year of the song’s release on *The Next Day* saw the birth of a grassroots response to the latest headline-grabbing form of killing “made in the USA,” namely, that of young black men by white police officers. The year 2013 was the year #BlackLivesMatter started after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Florida teen Trayvon Martin. Because of the too many shootings since then, the movement has taken on international proportions, with branches in Australia, Canada and the UK that point to the settler colonial foundation of the phenomenon it opposes.

*Lazarus* as Necropolitical Sovereignty: Decoupling Sadism from Masochism

The violent taking of life is what necropolitics is all about. As Achille Mbembe introduced it in an influential article in *Public Culture*, necropolitics is “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003, 11). There has been

... growing interest in the necropolitical as a tool to make sense of the symbiotic co-presence of life and death, manifested
ever more clearly in the cleavages between rich and poor, citizens and non-citizens (and those who can be stripped of citizenship); the culturally, morally, economically valuable and the pathological; queer subjects invited into life and queerly abjected populations marked for death. (Haritaworn et al. 2014, 2)

As Sunera Thobani points out in her prologue to the groundbreaking 2014 volume on Queer Necropolitics, however, “it is wise to remember that sovereignty is not abstract. It has a particular name, a face, an address, a geographical coordinate. Its face is white, it remains housed in white bodies, it is located in Westernity” (Thobani 2014, xvii). From that perspective, Bowie’s return to Newton in Lazarus can be seen as a concretizing of sovereignty in that the face, address, and location he gave it rubs our noses in the contemporary order of things. Given that the original literary character of Newton presaged the billionaire CEOs of media-tech empires, Newton’s Manhattan apartment on Second Avenue is appropriately in the belly of the financial beast, a heart of darkness 2.0. The entire play is rooted in the apartment, from the initial visit of Newton’s friend Michael to Valentine’s finagling of his way in after he has dispatched with Michael and Ben, precipitating Newton’s end. The apartment is Newton’s lair in every sense of the word, something Valentine calls attention to in getting Newton to commit an act of violence there that horrifies Newton and something the Viennese staging underscores by littering the stage with exotic animals.

Newton’s desperate final act of violence stands in stark contrast to Valentine’s sadistic modus operandi. Not only does Valentine pick a fight with Michael before offing him, he also “aggressively holds ELLY against the wall. It looks like he’s going to strangle her” and terrifies Newton when he “suddenly strikes

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11 Michael’s fate is left somewhat ambiguous — he is described as “slumped opposite VALENTINE — dead” but once Valentine starts singing “Love is Lost,” he “suddenly gets up — his shirt bloody — and leaves the apartment” (Bowie and Walsh 2017, 20),
BEN in the stomach hard with the knife,” after which he “grabs
BEN by the hair and drags him ‘outside’” (Bowie and Walsh 2017,
52). While Vienna’s Valentine, played by Christoph Rothen-
buchner, was not as aggressively violent as his counterpart in
Leipzig, played by Dirk Lange, whose Village People costume
was a match for the bravado with which he played the role, or
as elegantly evil as André Kaczmarszyk’s raven-winged demon
in Düsseldorf, the Vienna production nonetheless made clear
the character’s brutality, something by no means to be taken for
granted. In Göttingen, Daniel Mühe played Valentine as sweetly
angelic, and the audience could be forgiven for not recognizing
he was supposed to be a serial killer. In rejecting the spectacle of
sadistic, necropolitical power that Bowie and Walsh’s text con-
fronts us with in the character of Valentine, Göttingen turned
the play into a liberal fable with a focus on dying and not killing.

What the original play-text insists on, however, and what in
contrast to Göttingen the Vienna production does not deny, is
that there are characters who derive pleasure from achieving
mastery over others. As the song “Valentine’s Day” puts it, they
enjoy having “all the world […] under [their] heels.” Much has
been made over the years of Bowie’s flirtation with fascism in
the 1970s. Yet, as Brooker underscores in the patient reading he
performs in Forever Stardust of Bowie’s whiteness, it was not
the case that Bowie was being racist in adopting the character
of the Thin White Duke. Rather, by performing an exaggerated
whiteness, he was drawing attention to racializing tendencies,
not ascribing to them himself (Brooker 2017, 101–3). The vio-
lence staged in Lazarus can be read in a similar fashion. The play
refigures death as a deliberate killing of life and, in case we are
not paying attention, it underscores this shift by making one of
the protagonists a serial killer who not only deliberately kills life,
and clearly takes pleasure in doing so, but also brings Newton
to the point he is able to commit such an act, albeit without the
pleasure.

The difference between the quality of the stabbings that Val-
entine and Newton commit points to the need for caution in
theorizing sadism in works in which Bowie was involved. While
it may be correct that, as Rosalind Galt argues, Bowie’s film “performances are most resonant when his oddity centers a queerly disoriented textual system” and that his “success as an actor comes in some measure from his ability to select directors who could harness and amplify these qualities,” one should not jump to the conclusion that “another crucial aspect of his queer performance [is]: his play with sadomasochistic erotics” (Galt 2018, 131). Productions of Lazarus vary considerably in this regard, with Leipzig’s featuring the most graphic sadomasochistic erotics thus far. But Vienna’s would seem to be alone in taking the position that the suffering and violent taking of life in Lazarus have nothing to do with masochism but are solely a matter of sadism. It is tempting, for example, to stage Newton’s household assistant Elly as masochistic. She is stuck in an unfulfilling marriage and undergoes an identity crisis in which she feels she is being taken over by Newton’s desire for his old love, Mary Lou. But rather than following her husband off stage after telling him, “[y]ou need someone easier. Someone better,” as the script calls for — it reads “ZACH leaves — ELLY follows” (Bowie and Walsh 2017, 53) — , the Viennese Elly, played by Isabella Knöll, does an Ibsenesque Nora and goes her own way.

This feminist-inspired rejection of masochism is in keeping with Nancy J. Holland’s explicating of what Gilles Deleuze has to say to battered women. Building on Deleuze’s Coldness and Cruelty, Holland spells out the gendered implications of uncoupling masochism from sadism theoretically by showing “how the three themes of consent, pleasure, and victimization are interwoven in the traditional account of what is called sadomasochism” (Holland 1993, 16). In these traditional accounts, Freud’s and Sartre’s in particular, “the tacit assumption” is “that the subject of this discourse is always male and that, by extension, those involved are equal partners” (ibid., 19). Such an assumption, which one notes applies to the powerful, white, male characters Bowie plays in Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence and Labyrinth that Galt analyzes, “allows theory to ignore consent descriptively and to assume it normatively, that is, to see all victimization here as voluntary and limited” (ibid., 19). Rather than
blaming the victim as a co-creator of her own unconsciously desired misfortune, Holland encourages us to question the consensuality of Elly’s situation, something the Viennese production takes to a logical, emancipated conclusion.

In separating sadism from masochism, the production also encourages an appreciation of how Deleuze’s characterization of the sadist as “an apathetic, classical, rationalist lecturer who would negate reality” (ibid., 20) grows more relevant with every passing day that our reality is negated by rationalists uninterested in anything but their own sadistic satisfactions. Similarly his parallel description of the masochist as “a romantic, mythopoetic educator who would suspend reality (suspense is as central to masochistic eroticism as pain — just as reiteration is vital to sadism)” (ibid., 20) offers a diagnosis of those on the Left who have proven helpless in the face of sadism and who need to recognize that they do not, in fact, control the fantasy. It is only by refusing to suspend reality, which is to say by consciously acknowledging and rejecting their desire for the optimism Lauren Berlant has so masterfully explicated as cruel, that they stand a chance of preventing the mechanical reiteration of violence essential for the sadists’ satisfaction.

Vienna’s resolute staging of Lazarus reveals a sophisticated comprehension of both sides of the problematic to which Deleuze drew theoretical attention. In comparing the urtexts by Sade and Sacher-Masoch, he noted a key conceptual difference between the two psychic phenomena: in masochism, “the contractual nature of the relationship also means that ultimately the ‘victim’ (the passive masochist) controls the fantasy” and the fantasy ends when Wanda ceases to play along, whereas “it

12 At the time of writing, an op-ed made this point using exactly this language: “I and many Americans are in a state of stunned disbelief that this is who we have become. A culture’s values trickle from the top down, and what’s trickling down from Trump and his oligarch friends is the idea that cold-blooded cruelty to the weak and defenseless is not only justified but energizing and exciting. A turn-on” (Prose 2019).

13 It is (perhaps appropriately?) painful for me to realize the implications of this division for work done in my part of the academy.
is quite clear in Sade that not only does sadism require an unwilling victim, but the death of that victim does not destroy it” (Holland 1993, 19–20). In refusing to sugar-coat the ending of Lazarus while at the same time retaining the original’s distinction between Newton’s anguished and Valentine’s euphoric expressions of violence, the Viennese production demonstrates its understanding of the conceptual distance between fantasy and reality. Even if one wants to anthropomorphize the human condition as being in a contractual relation with a grim reaper, it is a sadistic rather than a masochistic relation in that there is no way for us to control the fantasy after our deaths; on the contrary, our deaths are necessary for its prolongation. Hence the rage Newton expresses in “Killing a Little Time,” one of the four songs Bowie wrote explicitly for the musical. This gut-wrenching song expresses the violence and pain of dying, “the rage in [him]” as he falls, chokes, fades, and experiences himself as “a broken line.”

When confronted with having to die, then, it was just like Bowie to stage that confrontation in a way that held up a mirror to it that we could look into and reflect on death and the implications of how all it can come about.14 But it was also just like Vienna to stage the musical in a way that paid homage to Bowie’s playful, postmodernist performativity while at the same time showing how Bowie used his final work to flip the question from “why must we die?” to “why do people kill?” as well as “why doesn’t it bother people to live in such a way that others die?” Recognizing that Bowie’s final work involved a confrontation with a death drive he suddenly felt he understood the full extent of, Vienna’s Volkstheater produced a Lazarus worthy of the theater’s long tradition of radical politics. Coming away utterly moved by a staging of necropolitical power as the sadistic spectacle it is speaks to the ensemble’s range and the enormous talents that made the production a reality.

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14 As Brooker reminds us, mirror images are a common motif in Bowie’s work, while “clones, doubles, twins (or triplets) and alter egos” are also recurring features (Brooker 2017, 177).