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The Slow Intimacy of Necropolitics

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ABSTRACT

Human beings seem to have a fascination with pictures of death or what can be called 'necrovoyeurism'. Circulating pictures of dead bodies has become easier with the use of social media. Necropolitics or the politics of death relates to the careless treatment of the lives of the marginalised, destitute and the ones without voice, the precariat. In late modernity one of the shadow sides of democracy is necropolitics, using processes of social exclusion and devaluing the lives of the poor and the ones in need through the desire to 'keep them out' – to curb mobility through the brutality of borders that often leads to death. This article concerns itself with the slow intimacy of necropolitics – how, through looking at pictures of death and redistributing them by retweeting, appropriating, decontextualising and recontextualising them we slowly become acquainted with the intimacy of death that may prevent an authentic empathy or desire to change the conditions of the marginalised.

Keywords: necropolitics, intimacy, migration, Mbembe, social media, xenophobia

INTRODUCTION

Lauren Berlant in her special issue on intimacy for the journal *Critical Inquiry* has written the following:

> To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way… Yet … the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. (1998: 281)

Thus, intimacy is a story shared about oneself and others – radiating from the private to the public.

Bodies when they are alive are full of action, movement, warm to the touch, and mysterious in many ways. Dead bodies are motionless, inactive, cold, expressing a vulnerability that is only visible after death. It is this incomprehensible loss of what may have been active minutes before that we cannot fathom, and this unknowingness has led Judith Butler (2008: 30) to ask 'What is in the Other that I have lost?' 'And that makes us come undone'.

We are surrounded by precarious life on a daily basis in South Africa – the homeless, the jobless, the hopeless, the ones struggling with the pain of mere survival, or what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life' – a life where the sovereign (the state) does not protect certain people through its laws, but let them live in a state of exception where the law does not apply to them. In many ways these are the people who are considered 'surplus people' who are not absorbed as citizens, but who are viewed as a burden on the nation state. They make claims on our humanity, leading Judith Butler (2004: 20) to ask 'Who counts as human?', 'Whose lives count as lives'? And what makes for a 'grievable life'?

Given long histories of colonial dispossession and rampant inequality, bare life often goes unnoticed in the post-colony. I want to turn my lens away from the periphery to the empire, to those leaky borders of Europe where the periphery meets the centre. Nowhere are the discarded lives of the surplus people more visible through media exposure (television, newspapers, social media, etc.) than in the border regimes of Europe. Frontex (The European Border and Coast Guard Agency that protects the borders of EU and Schengen countries) and Mare Nostrum (created by the Italian government to protect the Strait of Sicily) control border crossings and operate in a military fashion, prioritising borders rather than human lives. It is a military operation in a closed economy of brutality (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2022). The operations of Frontex have increased the death toll in a war against migrants,

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making the dead suffer a double indignity. They die unidentified and faceless, and nameless people are buried in mass graves. Under the onslaught of millions of Syrians and migrants from North Africa the border regimes have become harsher, more violent and less forgiving of trespass.

According to the Deaths at the Borders Database[1] 3,188 people died attempting to reach Europe between 1990 and 2013.[2] However, these numbers have increased dramatically since the Arab Spring, and especially because of the devastating ongoing war in Syria. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that 29,000 people died migrating to Europe since 2014. Between 2021 and 2022 alone there were 5,684 deaths.[3]

But these border regimes have also made us intimately acquainted with the deaths of migrants. For us who live on the southern tip of Africa these deaths remain abstract and viewed as mediated media images in newspapers, on television, and social media. We are well acquainted with the overcrowded boats of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. We have seen the seascapes of horror, but always in a mediated fashion.

See **Image 1** here
https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=578842681&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056ZA1056&sxsrf=AM9HkKluiRSEUXkmb6y_C02d7UAOnfPiXA:1698938589720&q=leaky+boats+crossing+the+mediterranean&tbm=isch&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjnk4q5z6WCAxWqRvEDHQuaCKUQ0pQJegQICBAB&biw=1280&bih=595&dpr=1.5#imgrc=slRyXy4wrZFCqM

I want to reflect on the intimacy of looking at the bodies of the dead. It is a story of vulnerability, precariousness and failed empathy. As Berlant (1998: 285) argues –

> [I]ntimacy does not necessarily occupy the space of convention – it can be portable, and unattached to concrete space. In this sense the online space is a relative new place for creating intimacy at a distance. But spaces are produced relationally and people can return to them repeatedly – to produce something that is not history in its ordinary, memorable or valorized sense.

This is not always positive. I frame this article in the context of what Achille Mbembe (2003) calls necropolitics. Mbembe argues that 'becoming a (political) subject therefore supposes upholding the work of death' through the calculus of race/racism, through the biopolitical power of who is going to be let live, or to let die or be killed? In the economy of biopower resides the decision about the distribution of death. Maurice Stierl (2016: 174) argues that death-inducing violence underpins the contemporary European border regime. Bodies, found or unfound, identified or unidentified, speak of police and border guard brutality, necropolitical violence, of mental and physical abuse experienced in detention. It also speaks of push-backs at sea and forcible deportations, of abandonment and the failure to render assistance when in need, even of policies that redirect human movement or that foreclose the very ability to move and escape in the first place, rendering millions bound to local conditions of hardship (e.g., 'The Jungle' in Calais in France is an example of a refugee camp, housing about 10,000 migrants from where they want to cross to the UK, but are not allowed. Many stayed there for years despite daily evictions and harassment by French authorities. It has now been demolished)[4].

The question here is whether we, through our constant exposure to death, develop a care ethic to those who are othered. Do we develop true empathy, do we build solidarity through what Stierl (2016) calls 'grief activism' that can form communities in the face of violent necropolitics, or do we watch with horror or outrage, do we retweet it, post it in online spaces, such as Facebook and Instagram? Do we fetishise it? All the while feeling helpless to do anything or never contemplating doing something in the face of a global catastrophe.

I start with the story of Alan Kurdi, the two-year-old Syrian boy who washed up on a beach in Bodrum in Turkey in 2015, showing how a global audience consumed this image of death. The photo was taken by the Turkish photographer, Nilüfer Demir, who has been documenting the migrant crisis in Europe.

See **Image 2** here
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alan_Kurdi#/media/File:Alan_Kurdi_lifeless_body.jpg

This image became iconic in terms of the outpouring of grief and sympathy. Under the hashtag #HumanityWashedAshore it was shared to 20 million people in just 3 hours, creating contemporary affective

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[1] Death at the Border Data Base is linked to the Human Costs of Border Control project of the Free University of Amsterdam, monitoring numbers of Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain and Gibraltar.

[2] https://research.vu.nl/en/datasets/deaths-at-the-borders-database (Accessed 2 October 2022).

[3] https://www.iom.int/news/more-5000-deaths-recorded-european-migration-routes-2021-iom (Accessed 4 August 2023).

[4] Life, Death and Limbo in the Calais 'Jungle' – Five Years after its Demolition [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/02/life-death-and-limbo-in-the-calais-jungle-five-years-after-its-demolition] (Accessed 2 October 2023).

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networks in the context of public bereavement (Papailias, 2019: 1057). The emotions connected to this image was grief, compassion, sadness and calls for political solutions to the refugee crisis in Europe. There was an appropriation of this image through its viral spread. Appropriation is the personification of an icon through processes of decontextualisation and recontextualisation, implying that the image is taken out of its original setting and fitted into a new setting (Mortensen, 2017: 1143-1146). The image was reproduced through imitation, satirisation, memefication and copying. This translation into new contexts also created new discursive fields and sites of contestation, especially around the treatment of Muslim refugees – paradoxically are they a threat of terror or are they themselves vulnerable to suffering and despair? As Mortensen's research shows 1,634 images of Alan Kurdi were shared under #HumanityWashedAshore, of which 40% were appropriations.

See **Image 3** here
https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=578828967&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056ZA1056&sxsrf=AM9HkKl26VhhLgUAT69UAuOEzFs-HyTJZw:1698936565204&q=%23Humanitywashedashore&tbm=isch&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjRyNvzx6WCAxUIVvEDHWfNAeUQ0pQJegQICRAB&biw=1280&bih=595&dpr=1.5#imgrc=qeURUn141LYQeM

Nicole Itano that oversees the creative work of 'Save the Children' said the following when she saw the picture:

> I've thought a lot about why that image really resonated. For years now, we've been seeing incredibly graphic images coming out of Syria and they haven't galvanised public response in the way this has. Part of what touched people about this picture is that it is shocking but it isn't graphic. He isn't maimed, he isn't bloodied, he looks like he could be sleeping except for the context.[5]

The most popular reproduced image that circulated in the first three days was that of Kurdi lying in his bed, safe at home where death cannot touch him.

See **Image 4** here
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/This-image-of-sleeping-Aylan-Kurdi-was-created-by-the-Turkish-artist-Omer-Tosun-and-was_fig1_327404914

The second most popular one was the sand sculpture of Kurdi with the words 'shame shame shame'. This circulated 47 times (Papailias, 2019: 1643). No captions were added, making it open ended and decontextualised, so that general feelings of solidarity were evoked.

The image of Kurdi was also politicised through putting him in the middle of the grandiose assembly tables of the United Nations and the Arab Leagues (shared 25 times), or as a birthday cake for the kids of Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad – showing the lack of empathy for drowning Syrian citizens (P1152).

See **Image 5** here
https://www.google.com/search?q=Alan+Kurdi+as+birthday+cake&tbm=isch&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056ZA1056&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjk8ejWy6WCAxXhFxAIHcElCSkQBXoECAEQSg&biw=1263&bih=595#imgrc=HEWqJ1kWR86puM

See **Image 6** here
https://www.google.com/search?q=Alan+Kurdi+as+birthday+cake&tbm=isch&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056ZA1056&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjk8ejWy6WCAxXhFxAIHcElCSkQBXoECAEQSg&biw=1263&bih=595#imgrc=wnMU8EdkP4ivbM

Ai Weiwei, the controversial dissident Chinese artist imitated Alan Kurdi's death by literally and metaphorically inserting himself into the picture, causing many to say that this was distasteful and insensitive, but then continue to do it as well. Many people on beaches assumed the same pose in solidarity with Kurdi, wearing the same colour clothes.

See **Image 7** here
https://edition.cnn.com/style/gallery/ai-weiwei-aylan-kurdi-syria/index.html

Kurdi is the ideal victim because he is an innocent child. He is innocent of motives attributed to adult migrants such as potential terrorism or becoming a drain on social welfare systems.

[5] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34150419 (Accessed 11 August 2023).

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Geboers (2019) argues that there are different ways of observing suffering – emotional, critical and self-reflexive. There is the sufferer and the one seeing the suffering. The sufferer is constructed as the 'suffering other'. What makes the difference in how the suffering is understood is whether the other is like us or unlike us. The reworking of the Kurdi image were illustrations of reversing the tragedy. The aestheticisation of images in the media morally and emotionally insulated viewers from suffering. What we are confronted with is the Western view of the human (in its binaries – self and other, rational and emotional) solidarity is constructed on grounds that the other is like us (Geboers, 2019). Sanitised aesthetics give way to emotions of the viewer rather than rationality that will help us make a decision about why we should act. People stage their own reactions and share emotions through 'liking' tweets or posts – leading to a global politics of pity. Personalisation is easier if the victim is like us, through emotional outpouring and self-reflexivity the tragedy becomes internalised, and makes the personalisation easier, losing the voices of the original victims. In the politics of pity emotions and sentiment are mediated through the pictures (Geboers, 2019: 5-6).

Olesen (2018: 660) calls this memetic (memes) protests. It leads to the production of a massive dispersed corporeal network (Papailias, 2019: 1048). Through processes of memefication, Kurdi's death was not observed but reproduced in the necropolitics of the dispossessed subject – producing them as the living dead of the global precariat that is an indictment of the claims of a post-racial Europe. Kurdi is the spectre that haunts the hospitable and neoliberal Europe, or what Papailias (2019: 1052) calls spectropolitics, which is blurring the boundaries between presence and absence, life and death, self and other in a way that haunts the observer. Kurdi's ghost is a hauntology because the spectrality is linked to relationality – the ghost appears to the living and in that sense is has an 'unkillable' quality.

For Papailias corpse images are marked by fundamental ambivalence of the human/ inhuman, of culture/nature, absence/presence in being both material and spectral, abject and sacred. The liminal status of the corpse illuminates the transition of the human to nonhuman with the vulnerability of the abandoned corpse as evidence of harm and grievability. These images are folded into the necropolitics of biopower that produce death on the borders of Europe and it highlights the global power relations producing carceral states and inhuman states of existence. For Papailias (2019: 1052/3) spectropolitics exposes the mediated living/dead meets biopolitics/necropolitics to highlight the global power relations that dispossess subjects, producing death in life. She argues that memetic moments replace rational debate with weeping emotionalism, through processes of forwarding, commenting and remediating the image that has become decontextualised for communities of depoliticised affectivities. What do viewers have in common with Alan Kurdi? Most did not share anything with Kurdi, no country, religion or culture, but established a relationship through their children – the idea that this could have been my child. In some pictures Kurdi has angel wings, giving Christian imagery to a Muslim child. The idea of Kurdi became a performance that was repeatedly re-enacted in a production of intimacy, of witnesses participating in affective communities. It takes the private mourning into the public and in some cases turn it into a public spectacle.

See **Image 8** here
https://www.google.com/search?q=Kurdi+as+an+angel&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwiqvLbSyKWCAxViDhAIHQeWAzUQ2-cCegQIABAA&oq=Kurdi+as+an+angel&gs_lcp=CgNpbWcQAzoECCMQJzoECAAQHjoFCAAQgAQ6BggAEAgQHjoHCAAQGBCABFDmCViFU2D2VWgIcAB4AIABsAGIAZESkgEEMzYuMpgBAKABAaoBC2d3cy13aXotaW1nwAEB&sclient=img&ei=u7dDZeryMeKcwPAPh6yOqAM&bih=595&biw=1280&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056ZA1056#imgrc=5Yq7wSHqxYq7KM

As Papailias (2019) argues the Kurdi image that will-not-go-away challenges the dominant media images of the living refugees as nonpolitical subjects of humanitarian compassion who with their demands for political rights are captured by the hashtag #HumanityWashedAshore. The phantasmic apparition, the ghost of Kurdi is a constant reminder to us, the witnesses, of how non-citizens are deprived of the protection of the law, how they are entered into bare life of the state of exception.

What we observe here is the present absence of death. Death did not leave traces of a brutal end, just a motionless little body washed up on the beach. It obscures the history of the very violent war in Syria that is the cause of migration and that caused Kurdi's death. It does not demand from onlookers to account for their response to the Syrian war. It makes no demands on their conscience about empathy for other types of migrants.

THE INTIMACY OF NECROPOLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa also has leaky borders, but its leaky borders are not controlled at the border, but in the interior, not by faceless agencies that visit invisible violence of biopower on the other, but by physical violence from citizens themselves. If we turn the lens back to South Africa what are the images of its xenophobic necropolitics that

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circulate? Rather than the present absence of dead bodies we have the present presence of death inducing violence. While these images have circulated in the media, they are not met with sympathy and compassion. They do not inspire memefication and copying, because it confirms the other as other with which we do not have anything in common. The personification through which we can decontextualise and recontextualise does not take place, also because of the nature of the photos. It is hard to look at them. The victims of xenophobic violence in South Africa are not the ideal victims because of their perceived threat, regardless of the fact that they are Africans from other African countries. This is why xenophobia is also called Afrophobia in South Africa.

Physical violence is present in these pictures that reinscribes colonial tropes of the barbaric and uncivilised. As Akpome (2023) points out about the documentary film, *It will be Chaos* (2018)*,* that attempts to humanise refugees by tracing the survival of a Syrian and an African (Eritrean) refugee, is the stark contrast between how the journey of the Syrian and the African refugee is portrayed. The first time the audience encounters black African asylum seekers is through a crane delivering hundreds of caskets of drowned African refugees. The first encounter with the black African refugee is through the corpse. As he states:

> [T]he numbering of the caskets marks them … as an anonymous mass and the palpable stench of putrefaction [officials holding their noses] is capable of arousing repulsion and shock in the audience.

This is not the same for the Syrian refugee, who is described in a family context, having lost his middle-class lifestyle, through which he is humanised. Akpome (2023: 113) argues that the film shows the black African refugee in the European imagination – as outsiders and different to Europeans, either as vulnerable or dangerous outsiders.

Image 9 shows South Africans gearing up to fight foreign nationals. The killing of foreign nationals is a regular occurrence in South Africa, usually accompanied by a discourse of 'stealing our jobs and stealing our women'. In 2008[6] xenophobic violence killed 62 people, injured 1,700 and displaced 100,000 foreign nationals in South Africa[7]. The brutality meted out on the bodies of foreign nationals can be traced in the photos taken of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave from Mozambique. Due to the gruesome nature of the photos I will not reproduce them here, but the photos show Nhamuave being set alight and burned to death (causing him to be dubbed 'burning man') with onlookers doing nothing to help him.

The South African government's expectation is that foreign nationals have to integrate into society. Refugees are not housed in tents or separated from South African citizens. Many are economic migrants. Since many foreign nationals are poor, they have to integrate in the poorest of the poor South African communities where there is already a struggle around scarce resources. This often leads to violent conflict between South African citizens and foreign nationals.

The present presence of death inflicting mob violence in photos does not encourage compassion, grief activism or a desire to help a vulnerable other, but rather it enforces 'othering processes'. The Kurdi image is surrounded by lapping water that has a soothing connotation – that is one reason why onlookers may not consider the picture of Kurdi as one of a violent death. But fire has an all-consuming connotation. It may cleanse, but it leaves devastation in its wake. What remains is unrecognisable as once human.

See **Image 9** here
https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/article_image/xenoviolence.jpg

It is not possible to aestheticise these pictures so that they can emotionally and mentally insulate the viewer from the presence of death as in the case of the photo of Alan Kurdi. How much of this violent treatment of Africans a can be traced back to violent colonial histories of exclusion that makes violence instrumental for keepings others in their place, where bodies become the border to be policed?

Viewers engagement with the Kurdi photo may stem from variety of reasons, as Danewid (in Papailias, 2019: 1061) argues that:

> Critics charged that the emphasis on common human vulnerability to pain, suffering, and loss buttresses 'white innocence' about colonial histories, state racism, and contemporary geopolitical complicities that produce such deaths, with self-congratulatory, naive hospitality taking the place of structural reform, acknowledgement of historical responsibility and restitution.

Different dynamics are at work in the case of Afrophobia.

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[6] See also S. Hassim and T. Kupe (eds). (2008). *Go Home or Die Here: Violence, xenophobia and the reinvention of difference in South Africa.* Wits University Press. Photos by Alon Skuy.

[7] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/21/documenting-violence-against-migrants-in-south-africa-a-photo-essay (Accessed 11 August 2023).

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When I presented this paper at the 'Slow Intimacy' conference I gave a trigger warning before I showed the audience the South African pictures (including that of Nhamuave). The response was multi-layered – most members of the audience did not feel upset about the images of Alan Kurdi, but black members of the audience were upset that I would show grotesque images of black bodies (although xenophobic violence against white migrants who are generally from the moneyed classes, not the precariat, is rare). They asked me if I would show similar images of white bodies. There was a deep consciousness of colonial violence, its framing of black bodies and its legacy in present day South Africa.

Mbembe (2002) argues that victimisation locates the continuities of colonialism in the minds of the people. The colonised internalised psychological subjugation and in their support of false myths and stereotypes of Africans cannot escape their own bondage. As Thakur (2011) argues:

> … any absence of such sympathy and familiarity can be attributed to the stereotypes about 'African foreigners' in the South African public space. The media under the garb of neutral reporting caricatures Africans and reproduces the Western negative imagery of Africa. Africa, in South African media, is portrayed as 'poverty stricken', 'war-torn', 'barbaric', 'diseased' and 'rotten' …. The migrants, who seem to be fleeing in 'hordes', like animals, into 'Fortress South Africa' bring the African curse onto a 'relatively developed', 'progressive', democratic', in short un-African, South Africa.

The above quote illustrates the difference between being a spectator of images versus being a witness, bearing testimony to atrocities that implies a relationality with the other (Papailias, 2019: 159). The photos of xenophobic violence in South Africa do not disrupt processes of othering so that onlookers can bear witness to injustice, rather it reproduces the African as other, as 'beyond the pale'. It does not build affective communities where embodied practices of care are exercised. This relates to Christina Sharpe's analysis of black bodies as expendable and replaceable in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Black lives are always framed by the proximity to death. For Sharpe in the wake of slavery the ship has a symbolic meaning through which the value of contemporary black lives in current global conditions is determined. Thousands of black Africans have died crossing the Mediterranean Sea in leaky ships/boats. Boats that are sometimes pushed back to sea, causing the inevitability of death at sea, resembling the slave's death at sea. The ships facilitate black subjugation and expendability.

The question remains whether the photo a dead two-year-old African boy would have been consumed in the same way as the photo of a Syrian boy, with outpourings of grief and the desire to care. Okoth (2018: 3) calls this 'the incommensurability of blackness and the vocabulary of care'. These images and these violent deaths do not conform to Butler's notion of 'death as a transformative practice'. Rather it traps the African subject in preconceived ideas.

CONCLUSION

The pictures that we have seen circulating made us intimately acquainted with death. It is the slow intimacy of necropolitics. Butler (2004) tells us to make grief itself into a resource for politics is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. For her grief is a basis for political community.

It is uncertain if Butler is right about this. To what extent does the decontextualisation and the recontextualisation of imagery become about ourselves, and absolve ourselves from the necropolitics of migration? This is not about moral spectatorship, but insulating ourselves from larger global forces over which we have no control and so we become immune to the living death of marginalised and socially excluded people. We become intimately acquainted with death at a distance. These photos have the potential to also make us blind to contemporary necropolitics. Do we observe death or do we reproduce it?

In the South African context, the photography of xenophobic violence reinforces colonial portrayals of uncivilised Africans who mete out vigilante justice on a regular basis. It also produces racial polarisation, reactionary notions of nationalism, and the fear of physical violence from the other, rather than inspiring an ethic of care for the vulnerable other.

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