

# INTRODUCTION: DEATH AND THE CONTEMPORARY

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*Georgina Colby*

This double issue of *New Formations* addresses death in contemporary culture from a number of interdisciplinary and international perspectives. Since Michel Foucault aligned the ‘power of sovereignty’ with the disqualification of death in his 1975 essay ‘Society Must be Defended’, death has been at the forefront of biopolitical and geopolitical debates.<sup>1</sup> Through a contemporary lens Achille Mbembe, writing in 2003, stated that the expression of sovereignty ultimately resides ‘in the capacity to dictate who may live and who may die’.<sup>2</sup> Yet Mbembe’s necropolitics also questions the sufficiency of biopolitics to account for the question of death and sovereignty in the twenty-first century. This themed issue extends Mbembe’s challenge by taking up the complex, often contentious subject of death in present-day culture as it is thought, and as it operates, within and beyond biopolitics. In bringing together articles from scholars across the fields of politics, law, philosophy, and literature, the issue interrogates the conceptual status of death in biopolitical discourse by considering emerging post-biopolitical and post-human contexts.

Foucault understood the status of death in 1975 as ‘something to be hidden away’ (*Society*, p68). With twenty-first century global conditions, death as a subject has become more visible, imbricated with, and paramount to ideas of the postcolonial, necroeconomics, the necropolitical, and ethical and legal debates surrounding the right-to-die. At the same time, new technologies of warfare in the ‘War on Terror’ have meant that death has acquired new forms, through modes of violence that often annihilate the body. Such forms of death challenge traditional ritualisations of death and render death increasingly invisible. The issue intervenes at the intersection of biopolitical and post-biopolitical fields of knowledge, entering current debates on critical social and political issues such as euthanasia, the death penalty, and contemporary geopolitics. A number of the essays collected in the volume examine new forms of geopolitical violence, reveal unacknowledged states of exception, and engage with liminal states of death created by medical advances. These articles are brought into a transdisciplinary dialogue with studies that explore the way in which contemporary visual art and literature offer new ways of representing death and emerging bio-medical phenomena. The issue places bioethical questions in relation to critical cultural developments and socio-historical events: the Syrian Civil War; the deaths of detainees in Guantánamo Bay; the shooting of Trayvon Martin and the #BlackLivesMatter campaign; Hurricane Katrina; the use of drones in contemporary warfare; and the Anthropocene. The essays in the collection also situate contemporary issues surrounding death within the context of the history of the twentieth-century: the European colonies and post-colonies; the Holocaust; the Soviet forced-

1. Michel Foucault, ‘Society Must Be Defended’, *Biopolitics: A Reader*, (eds.) Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, Durham and London, Duke University Press 2013, pp61-81; 67. (Hereafter *Society*).

2. Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, (trans) Libby Meintjes, *Biopolitics: A Reader*, pp161-192; 161.

labour camps, and the executions carried out by Nazi forces in Stalinist Russia. In doing so, the scholarship of this issue offers theoretical means to navigate contemporary conceptions of death at the juncture of biopolitical and post-biopolitical discourses.

The starting point of the issue is Warren Montag's discussion of necessity and the law. The essay explores the maxim derived from Roman theorising about law: *Necessitas non habet legem*, or 'necessity has no law', in relation to the problem of the necropolitical order. Montag compares two books: Franz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961) (*The Wretched of the Earth*), and Gilles Couvreur's little known text *Les Pauvres ont-ils des droits? Recherches sur le vol en cas d'extrême nécessité depuis la Concordia de Gratien (1140) jusqu'à Guillaume d'Auxerre (1231)* [*Do the poor have rights? An inquiry into theft in the case of extreme necessity from Gratian's Concordia (1140) to William of Auxerre (1231)*]. The contemporary world, in which whole countries are left to starvation and 'zones of exception' proliferate, spaces abandoned to violence and destitution in the name of the necessity of killing and letting die, is addressed through the prism of Roman law. Montag offers an account of Couvreur's text, which retrieves the historical moment in which the jurists of medieval Christian Europe, the Decretists and Decretalists, agreed that the laws of property cannot be invoked to deny food to the starving who will not wait to be fed but will take what is necessary to their survival. Such a state of exception that prioritised the right of the destitute to existence over the rights of ownership suspended the law, and linked sovereignty with necessity. This maxim Montag brings to bear on contemporary issues, exposing the power of Couvreur's text in the contemporary moment.

Elizabeth Rottenberg's essay moves the enquiry into sovereignty to present-day America and the debates surrounding the death penalty. Rottenberg frames the scene of execution in Jacques Derrida's *Death Penalty Seminar* (1999) and Foucault's analysis of capital punishment in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), with 'the American scene' of execution in Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979), a true-life story of the events surrounding the execution of Gary Gilmore by the State of Utah in 1977. Alluding to Mailer's remarks regarding the need for the scene of execution to be made visible, Rottenberg interrogates the virtual or phantasmatic scene of execution in Derrida's *Death Penalty Seminar* and the 'coming-to-visibility' of sovereignty itself. Her article reveals two economies of visibility: one inherent to a society of the spectacle, the other emerging in the recent cultural shift to a society of surveillance. The death penalty, which for Derrida, Rottenberg points out, is the epitome of sovereign power, will survive its abolition because of the persistence of the phantasm that sustains it.

Another very different scene of execution: that of the Soviet guerrilla fighter Zoya Kosmodemianskaya, is the subject of Jonathan Platt's essay. Platt examines the photograph of Zoya Kosmodemianskaya taken by Sergei Strunnikov, which first appeared on the page three of *Pravda* on 27

January, 1942, after her execution by German Nazi forces on November 29, 1941. Platt considers two possible attitudes to Kosmodemianskaya's death and the contexts that support them. On the one hand the image is read as emblematic of maiden sacrifice; on the other it has been regarded as a picture of revolutionary militancy. Platt's reading of the image gives breadth to the ambivalence of Kosmodemianskaya. Apprehending her as the last Soviet militant, the paper challenges the typical interpretation of the photograph that reinforces the gender stereotypes that are usually escalated during wartime. Taking up the idea of chronotopic hybridity in Stalinist culture, the essay argues for a reconsideration of Kosmodemianskaya as more than an emblem of Stalinist ideology. The article explores this position from a psychoanalytic perspective, arguing that the mutilated Stalinist hero can be understood as a non-phallic subject in the Lacanian sense. Platt illustrates his argument through analyses of four different moments in the memorialisation of Kosmodemianskaya, demonstrating that the ambivalence of Zoya Kosmodemianskaya remains open.

Timothy Secret's essay offers a philosophical approach to the ethical issues surrounding assisted dying. Drawing on recent legislation and the shifting position of the British Medical Association in relation to assisted dying, the essay explores the contemporary debates within the fields of philosophy and medical ethics. Assessing the extent of engagement with the subject of euthanasia in these fields, Secret exposes the lack of discourse on assisted dying in contrast to the abundance of scholarship on issues such as abortion or intersexuality. As a means to address this gap, Secret takes up the work of Emmanuel Levinas to explore whether there is an approach to ethics in Levinas's work that might circumvent established ways of framing the questions surrounding euthanasia's ethical status and legislation. Engaging with Torben Wolf's work on suffering, the essay explores the role philosophy might play in mediating between public and specialised debate. Secret's essay on what a Levinasian ethics might illuminate in terms of the debates surrounding euthanasia offers a model of such enquiry.

François Debrix extends biopolitical and necropolitical discourses by shifting the focus on individual bodies in contemporary instances of geopolitical violence and destruction to what he terms 'the pulverisation of the human'. Borrowing Adriana Caverero's language, Debrix opens out the term as a radical violence, the objective of which is the destruction of the uniqueness of the body. Two forms of contemporary geopolitical annihilation are the focus of Debrix's study: suicide bombings and drone attacks. Through these modes of violence, Debrix explores Caverero's idea of 'horrorism' and the effect of horror on human lives and bodies in the twenty-first century.

Roger Luckhurst's article outlines the return of the physical dead body and the materiality of the corpse across a range of aesthetic practices, particularly contemporary photography: the work of Sally Mann, Annie Leibovitz, Luc Delahaye, Gilles Peress and other war reportage. Luckhurst explores the

contexts for this return: the transformation of mourning practices since the 1960s; the challenge to what Anthony Giddens calls the 'sequestration' of extreme experience and the rise in fascination with ruined bodies in contemporary trauma theory; the medical redefinition of death and the emergence of a series of liminal states between life and death created by medical advances - from 'beating heart cadavers' and the debates in medical ethics around sustaining life 'after' death; the crisis of the 'real' induced by digital photography and the rise of the wounded body as a new marker of 'authenticity'. Death's insistent return in the photograph, the essay argues, needs to be grasped in formal, historical, social and medical frameworks that mutually reinforce each other. That which has been called the New Death by recent critical-medical theorists, Luckhurst contends, is necessarily an interdisciplinary object of concern.

In a time of 'everywhere war', Andrea Brady's essay sets out to assess the effects that drones may have on the committed lyric. The essay focuses on contemporary poetry since 2010, revealing six ways in which drones are revolutionising perspective and relation. Brady suggests ways in which these changes in perspective and relation might be applied to the theorisation of contemporary poetry. Situating the investigation within the context of twenty-first century American foreign policy in the Obama and Trump administrations, the essay traces the radicalisation of viewing, seeing and being seen that emerges in drone aesthetics back through the effects of aerial technology on the visual arts that began with modernism. This genealogy is extended in the essay from a contemporary perspective to encapsulate the textual engagements with the ideologies that accompany drone warfare. Brady offers a critique of Catherine Taylor's 'Inanimate Subjects' (2013), and brings this analysis into comparative dialogue with a close reading of Solmaz Sharif's poem 'Look' (2016). The final part of the argument outlines a 'drone poetics' that takes up the perceptual, legal, and phenomenological specificities of drones, and brings these aspects of drones to bear on a reconceptualisation of lyric form. Examining the implementation of structures of splitting and compartmentalising, the essay illuminates the artificial intimacy of drone warfare, and brings this into relation with the lyric's illusion of collapsing spatial and temporal distances. The perspective of drones is reflected, Brady argues, in the contemporary lyric that offers a way of magnifying selected objects from 'the safe container of a radical aesthetic'. The essay, through such an analysis, examines drone aesthetic in relation to the role of the lyric poet in contemporary culture.

Lisa Downing considers a very different form of death. Her essay examines the practice of erotic asphyxiation and representations of erotic fatalities, taken from a range of discursive fields including forensic pathology, the psy sciences, media coverage of celebrity deaths, and humorous internet e-cards. In particular, the essay closely reads the way in which erotic asphyxiation is problematically depicted in Tim Winton's novel, *Breath* (2008). The

essay argues that contemporary discourses and representations of erotic asphyxiation and autoerotic death offer an explication of the establishment and inscriptions of cultural norms and sexuality. Downing moves the focus of the debate onto those who pronounce on normal and abnormal sexual practices, ascribing to the Foucauldian logic that the classification of sex is coterminous with the exercise of power. Through a number of case studies, the essay explores the way in which media, fiction, the internet, and popular culture, alongside the more recognised authority discourses of sexual science and medico-legal institutions, contribute to and reinforce the creation of sexual norms and the imposition of limitations in terms of acceptable and unacceptable degrees of the risk of bodily harm, in line with normative socio-cultural agendas. Calling into question dominant assumptions prevalent in contemporary society, Downing traces practices of erotic asphyxiation back to the Mayan period. Addressing the cultural anxieties surrounding erotic asphyxiation, the essay discloses two distinct conceptions of masculinity: either failed or weak masculinity, or excessive risk taking hyper-masculinity. Downing reveals that the concept of pathological erotic asphyxiation is even more pronounced when the practitioner is a woman. The cultural association between erotic asphyxiation, effeminacy and shame, transpires to be a contemporary phenomenon.

In her essay 'The Violations of Empathy', Jennifer Cooke addresses the limitations of empathy. She argues that empathy is not always benign and can involve violation, despite the extensive amount of scholarship extolling the ways in which empathy is improved by literature. Rob Halpern's *Common Place* (2015) is the first example, a poem about the death of a Guantánamo detainee, which is read in close relation to Vernon Lee's work on empathy. The essay argues that Halpern's work matches empathy in Lee's work, and embodies a refusal of empathy in its common sense. Both of these facts, the essay argues, lead to a violation of the dead Islamic man. The second example the essay draws on is Andrea Brady's 'Song for Florida 2' (2014), a poem that addresses the killing of Trayvon Martin. Cooke's reading of Brady's poem probes how empathy can obscure what is at stake in injustice by replacing or supplanting the one empathised with. The ending of Brady's poem attempts and fails to imagine the death of Brady's son. It fails, Cooke contends, because such a form of empathy would obscure the racial and economic injustice that means Brady's white son is safe in a racist world.

Georgina Colby also draws on a form of empathy in her essay on new temporalities in the work of Denise Riley and Nicholas Royle. In her essay *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012), and her collection of poetry *Say Something Back* (2016) Riley inscribes her experience of the death of her son, and the attending experience of being flung into a new temporality, that which Riley terms a-temporality. Royle's work *Quilt* (2010) is centred on the death of the narrator's father. In both works there is a collapsing of the narrative voice and the deceased. Through experimental writing practices, both Riley and Royle

depict new temporalities related to death that occur outside of linear time yet are experienced by the living person who has lost a loved one. For both Riley and Royle these temporalities run counter to death as it is experienced in contemporary culture: what Riley calls the ‘sweetened overlay’ of sentiment, and the experience of contemporary funeral practices. In each of the writers’ works, such new temporalities are imbricated with geological time or ‘deep time’. The essay contextualises these new non-linear models of time via the attempts in the field of phenomenology to theorise the relations between temporality and finitude. Colby brings the experimental works into dialogue with Stephen J Gould’s work on deep time, *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle: Myth and Metaphor* (1987) to navigate the ways in which such an imbrication of the time of death / the time of mourning with geological time might illuminate the relationship between temporality and death in the early twenty-first century.

In his essay ‘Blind Seeing: Deathwriting from Dickinson to the Contemporary’, Peter Boxall provides a new account of the trajectory of ‘blind seeing’ that can be traced through the poetic tradition. Through an examination of Blanchot and Kafka’s deathwriting, the essay considers Blanchot’s idea that a generative principle accompanies the experience of death. Extending this analysis, the essay traces a thread from the work of Emily Dickinson to the contemporary. In this literary ‘tradition’ (a term renegotiated by this article) Boxall discerns both a form of negation in the approach to realised death, but also, importantly, a means of producing a new possibility, that which Dickinson understands as another way to see. This idea of deathwriting is brought into dialogue with what it means to be contemporary. Drawing on Heidegger’s idea of the world picture and Agamben’s idea of the contemporary, which demands us to see what is excluded from the visible and representation, Boxall theorises ‘blind seeing’ in contemporary fiction. Deathwriting summons us to rethink the literary tradition through the countersight inherent to seeing and therefore challenges the normalising cultural forms to which we have become accustomed.

Sites of death in recent British fiction are the focus of Robert Hampson’s essay. Situating his analysis within the context of Michel Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), Hampson argues that death in contemporary culture is ubiquitous but in mediated forms. In the staging of the body in recent popular culture death has become characterised by the performance of the medical gaze, which separates the body from identity. Graham Swift’s *Last Orders* (1996) yields a number of examples of the way in which contemporary fiction consistently returns to ‘non-places’ of death: the hospital, the funeral parlour and the crematorium. Hampson argues that these spaces of death in the novel are discontinuous with the life of the deceased. J G Ballard’s *Crash* (1973) provides a further example of ‘non-sites’ in the form of motorway slip-roads, airport access roads, police pounds and reservoirs. From the technologised death of the car crash the essay moves to a consideration of Tom McCarthy’s contemporary novel *Remainder* (2007) and technologised

sites of death. Hampson offers an account of psychogeographical sites of death in the work of Iain Sinclair and Allen Fisher. Concluding with an analysis of spaces of autopsy and forensics in popular television, Hampson reveals the proliferation of technologised sites of death in contemporary popular culture.

In bringing these essays together, this issue of *New Formations* opens up the debates surrounding death in contemporary culture and positions death as an interdisciplinary subject of enquiry.

#### GUEST EDITOR

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