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Violence

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Cross references: naturescultures; necropolitics/thanatopolitics; neocolonial; non-human
agency; posthuman rights; technicity; war

To think violence today requires that we reposition ourselves, philosophically, legally,
politically and ethically, in the space between certain extremes, themselves built upon violent
historical categorisations and exclusions: human/nonhuman, subject/object, culture/nature,
physis/tekhnē, active/passive; the list goes on.

On the one hand, spectacular images of violent acts, for instance those produced by the
media machine of so-called Islamic State (IS) precisely for our consumption, fill our screens
on a daily basis.[1] Such images, be they of gruesome beheadings or immolations, demand that
we consider the status of the human body as it relates to violence in our present moment. First
of all, in today's 'wars of religion' (if we can truly call them this), the 'contemporary' must
be thought through its untimeliness. Here, as Jacques Derrida writes in 1995, but as is still of
relevance, violence has two 'ages': on the one hand, that which appears contemporary, 'in
sync […] with the hypersophistication of military tele-technology – of "digital" and
cyberspaced culture' (encrypted communiqués and hellfire missiles carried by unmanned
aerial vehicles, for instance); and on the other hand, a 'new archaic violence' that counters or
seeks revenge against the 'contemporary' and the attendant decorporalizing, delocalizing and
expropriating powers of the machinic and tele-technoscience (here identified with the global
market, military-capitalistic hegemony and the wholesale global export of the European
democratic model) (88–89). In the latter, violence carried out in the name of 'religion' reverts
as closely as possible to the body proper and to the 'premachinal living being' (Derrida 1995:
88). Killings are enacted by 'bare hands' or at least primitive tools other than firearms, and
the casualties and collateral damage of 'clean' or 'proper' wars (fought at a distance) are
continually supplemented by tortures, beheadings and mutilations.

And yet, considered through the lens of deconstruction and its rendering unstable of the
defensive borders between the organic and machinic, human and nonhuman, present and
absent, actual and virtual, archaic and contemporary, these two ages, modes and impulses
appear to collapse into and fold between one another.[2] If there is a specificity to the manner in
which we are to think violence *today*, it is precisely through the contours of this anachrony
and the violences enacted both as a response to and thanks to the impossibility of maintaining

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[1] Regarding the logistical infrastructure of IS, including its propaganda units, see Winter 2015.
[2] For the import of Derrida's writings for posthumanism, see Wolfe 2010.

such fantasmatic distinctions. For that which *appears* contemporary in its reliance upon the speed and delocalization of technoscience is in fact but a quasi-infinite *acceleration* – albeit more brutal – of a principle of virtuality, violence and ruin that had always already been at work (Derrida 2007), but that reveals itself all the more vividly today. Furthermore, in order to function, the revenge of the direct, corporeal act of violence (for instance, in execution videos) often relies upon the heightened rhythm of mediatic power as the resource that makes possible the media events or 'image operations' that underlie our contemporary aesthetics of terror (Koltermann 2014; Monzain 2009).[3] Here, images themselves function as hyper-effective 'weapons', and the material substratum of the image – together with its means of mediatization and archivization – constitutes the event as much as the human act (Derrida 1996; Schuppli 2016).

At the other end of the spectrum lies a violence of an altogether different speed, one that escapes the spectacle-driven corporate media and our flickering attention spans. Distinct from but related to structural violence, what Rob Nixon terms 'slow violence' – typically not even perceived *as* violence – is not time-bound or body-bound, but rather is attritional and of delayed effects (2011: 3, 11). This insidious violence, most often environmental and with everything to do with the 'violent geographies of fast capitalism' (Watts 2000: 8; cited in Nixon 2011: 7–8), as well as racism, elides the narrative closure of recognisable visuals of the victory and defeat of war, instead working its way inwards, 'somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that – particularly in the bodies of the poor – remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated' (Nixon 2011: 6). In this context, most notably in the case of climate violence and what Adrian Lahoud names its attendant 'weaponization of Earth', violence must be re-thought in the absence of a punctual act, a violent event (2014: 495). Unlike individual acts of violence, or the industrialization of violence in modern warfare – and with this the necropower or thanatopower that accompanies or supersedes contemporary biopower – this demands that we 'imagine a crime without a criminal', a violence 'without coordinates on which transgressions might be plotted', in the potential absence of a weapon and, moreover, a witness (Lahoud 2014: 496).

This, though, one might protest, is nothing altogether new: as Ann Laura Stoler reminds us in her forceful work on imperial debris and (ongoing processes of) colonial ruination, critical geographers, environmental historians and historically-inclined anthropologists have been calling attention to what has now entered our lexicon as 'slow violence' for some time (2013: 11–12). What is relatively new, however, are the attempts to bring various fields of enquiry, including postcolonial scholarship and work of a posthumanist bent, into a more organic

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[3] The 'operativity' of images, including in the context of conflict and terrorism, was discussed extensively at the 'Image Operations' conference held at the ICI Berlin in April 2014, <https://www.ici-berlin.org/event/571/>.

conversation – one that might at least begin to provide necessary tools for restitution and redress, and even legal prevention – a complex task when the legal 'personhood' of the violator, from the multinational corporation to the state (often both), is anything but straightforward. Here, a number of challenges arise: scientific, legal, political and representational. In the realm of the latter, scholars, activists and artists are called upon to make the unapparent appear, to make drawn out threats accessible to the immediate senses (Nixon 2011: 15). Aesthetic strategy demands reconceptualization. In order to render slow violence visible, speed must first of all be redefined (Nixon 2011: 13), as must causal relations and assemblages. In the work of the London-based Forensic Architecture project, for instance, 'field causality' becomes the operative concept through which conventional modes of understanding violence are challenged, accommodating for scenarios in which the environment itself becomes the medium through which violence is carried out, and in which nature possesses a certain agency. Unlike in the beheadings videos mentioned above, where a direct line is traceable between the figures of victim and perpetrator, establishing field causalities challenges the established model of criminal law and instead traces 'force fields, causal ecologies, that are nonlinear, diffused, simultaneous, and involve multiple agencies and feedback loops' (Weizman, 2014: 27). In the end, we might say that in each of the two scenarios – the linear and the diffuse, the hyper-visible and the hyper-invisible – we are faced with extreme violence.

As is already becoming apparent, the multifaceted strategies that befit the forms of violence we are faced with today entail a recasting of our (i.e. Western) historically hierarchical gaze away from the primacy of the human, as active, sovereign agent. History has taught us that 'humanity' is a shifting index; that 'humanism' is inherently violent and goes hand-in-hand with the structural violences of racism, colonialism and patriarchy; that the biological status of 'human' is by no means the guarantor of the legal institution of 'human rights'. As such, contemporary investigative practices and conceptualizations, for instance 'forensic aesthetics' (Keenan and Weizman, 2012; Forensic Architecture 2014), not to mention more-than-human or 'companion species' ethics (Haraway 2003), must entail a hospitality towards thinking agency as distributed beyond the human, including matter and nonhuman forms of life (Bennett, 2010), and thus towards a malleable relation between subjects and objects. Shifting attention from the *figure* (the human individual; be this agent, victim or witness) to the *ground* (collectives, technological assemblages, or environments; as the 'backdrop' against which a violent crime would conventionally be considered to have been committed), and as such breaking with the norms of human rights work, objects and environments (including digital ecologies) are registered not only as the fields *through which* violence is enacted and mediated, but also as the potentially active *sensoria* or *indicators* that

might bear witness to the (violent) crime – as soon as one learns how to access and read the traces (Forensic Architecture, 2014).[4]

But the nonhuman is not only an evidential figure, assistant to human demands for justice; neither is the environment merely a passive victim of violence. Rather, war is waged against nature as if it were a criminal *subject*. This war is no longer fought merely in the name of progress, profit and security (i.e. modernity, colonialism, capitalism), but also as part of the global 'war on terror' that has ever-intensified since the events of 9/11 (burned into the USA's psyche as *the* definitive image of violence),[5] bringing us back at least tangentially – albeit in a distinct speed and register – to the media spectacles of violence with which we began. In this context, as demonstrated by Hannah Meszaros Martin's research into the criminalization of the coca plant in Colombia, the violent eradication of nonhuman life (for instance, through aerial fumigation) necessarily implies the eradication of the lives of the humans that inhabit a given environment, as well as their 'lifeworlds'. Such violence is legally sanctioned in the name of fighting the 'war on drugs', as this intertwines with the global 'war on terror' – with both 'wars' serving as the smoke screen behind which states, legally or illegally, exert violence upon their human and nonhuman populations (Meszaros Martin 2015). This theatre of operations in which nonhuman life, here the object of 'ecocide' (Meszaros Martin 2015; Tavares 2013: 229; and Zierler 2011, cited in Lahoud and Tavares 2013), is deemed 'terroristic' and in need of violent extermination, is but one of the contexts that intensifies the need for a wholesale rethinking of legal standing and personhood, as a means of protections against violence and violations, that has since the 1990s been explored under the banner of 'nonhuman rights', 'the rights of nature' or 'Earth jurisprudence' (Tavares 2014; Demos 2015). Such a legal innovation (already practiced to some degree in Bolivia and Ecuador)[6] entails a legal, political, social, cultural and philosophical upheaval of extreme dimensions, one that embraces radically alternative cosmologies and perspectives regarding nature and culture (worldviews that have traditionally borne the brunt of colonial epistemic and material violences) as well as the very premises through which we conceive of violence itself (Viveiros de Castro 2014; Franke 2010).

Such a project on the one hand takes us back to slow violence, as this relates to Indigenous struggles for human rights, and environmental justice in the global South. But it also opens up into more universal questions such as what Patrick Hanafin calls a 'micropolitics of posthuman rights', enabled by the thinking of Rosi Braidotti, that aims 'to subvert the

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[4] See especially the chapters by Anselm Franke and Eyal Weizman.

[5] Nixon speaks of the impact of 9/11 in its reinforcement of 'a spectacular, immediately sensational, and instantly hyper-visible image of what constitutes a violent threat' for efforts to make forms of slow violence more urgently visible (2011: 13).

[6] The only international or national courts that currently recognize the rights of nature are Ecuador, under the constitutional provisions established in 2008, and Bolivia, under the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth, passed in 2010 (Tavares 2014: 558).

majoritarian model of human rights as one premised upon the human as white neoliberal male' (2014: 214). In this conception of posthuman rights that 'embody the claims of transversal assemblages of individuals who do not see a binary cut between thought and action, life and death, environment and humanity, or animality and humanity,' and who do not cede to the demands to divest oneself of one's singularity and become 'human' (Hanafin 2014: 215, 218), the challenge is to find strategies for aestheticizing and narrating slow violence that would entail moving beyond simply *humanizing* inaccessible violences.[7]

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[7] 'In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses' (Nixon, 2011: 15).

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