
*Queer Necropolitics* critically reworks, extends, and elaborates on aspects of the Mbembe necropolitics theorem, through nine outstanding test cases that span the world—the US, the UK, Iran, Palestine and Israel, Guatemala, and the Philippines. Importantly, drawing on Jasbir Puar’s (2007) idea of queer necropolitics, the project constructs a major critique of queer theory, and a significant contribution to critical race theory. It explores new tensions and fissures between attained LGBT rights, mostly benefiting persons enjoying class and race privileges in the global North, and rights that would protect the social and physical lives of “queerly racialized populations” (Puar 2007: xxvi). The latter increasingly find themselves under sustained and intensifying assault by the state, markets, and both heteronormative and (now also) homonormative majorities.

The editors and contributors engage with critical state theories, and more specifically with discourses on sovereignty and its implications, as these unfolded starting in the 1970s. The core critiques are of biopolitics and necropolitics. They identify the late modern structural transformation of economies and polities in, and by, neoliberalism, and the emergence of queer, white patriarchies, as loci of the life- and death-granting machineries of the state. Achille Mbembe’s (2003) work on necropolitics is the touchstone here. In his earlier work on Africa he subverts established imaginaries of colonizer and colonized, transforming our perception of these relationships as profoundly as Edward Said (1978) did for Europe and Asia.¹ Importantly for

¹ Mbembe’s statement that “[t]he most accomplished form of necropower is the contemporary colonial occupation of Palestine” (2003: 27) is not the only instance where there is a meeting of minds with Said, albeit through distinct critical theoretical articulations of post-coloniality. Mbembe remarks on the coherence of their general perspectives on empire in his interview with *Revue ESPRIT* entitled “Qu’est-ce que la pensée postcoloniale? (Entretien)”: “…la critique postcoloniale se déroule à plusieurs niveaux. D’une part, elle déconstruit, comme le fait Edward Said dans *Orientalisme*, la prose coloniale, c’est-à-dire le montage mental, les représentations et formes symboliques ayant
geography, in his influential “Necropolitics” he notes “the enactment of differential rights to differing categories of people for different purposes within the same space…Space was therefore the raw material of sovereignty and the violence it carried with it” (2003: 26). Mbembe posits that “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics) profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror” (2003: 39). A corrective to Foucault’s (1997) biopower and biopolitics, necropower and necropolitics problematize Foucault’s understanding of sovereignty as politically and socially generative, and responds to his silence on its lethal aspects: the right to kill, and the deployment of technologies to sort who is marked for either bodily or social death. He asks: “under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right? What does the implementation of such a right tell us about the person who is thus put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets that person against his or her murderer?” (Mbembe 2003: 12). And, further: “What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?” (ibid.).

Further, are collateral damage of the exertions of power structures those who are restricted to either mere zoë (as opposed to bios) per Mbembe, or bare life per Giorgio Agamben (1997), and who are also massively counted as brown, gender non-conforming bodies? Or are they chosen targets of them? Are populations that are continuously and routinely excluded from choice and immobilized in warzones and prisons, and segregated and sequestered in the least capacious and safe areas in the city, subject to a necropolitics of social and often literal death? Are these marked persons and groups violently and irrevocably denied any right and means to

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servi d’infrastructure au projet impérial. Elle démasque également la puissance de falsification de cette prose – en un mot la réserve de mensonge et le poids des fonctions de fabulation sans lesquels le colonialisme en tant que configuration historique de pouvoir eût échoué. On apprend ainsi comment ce qui passait pour l’humanisme européen chaque fois apparut, dans les colonies, sous la figure de la duplicité, du double langage et du travestissement du réel” (Mbembe 2006).
shaping futurity? And what happens when major swaths of the worlds of activism and the academy lose sight of the bifurcation and transformation of identity-based, emancipatory politics in the global North into a politics that is nominally liberatory, but axiomatically lethal to “queerly racialized populations”? *Queer Necropolitics* extends this conversation.

Sunera Thobani, in her prologue to the volume, interrogates these phenomena directly. She asks, “[w]hat comes into view when homonationalism is named homoracism? When feminism is defined as imperialist? When human rights are conceived of as recolonization? When queer and trans politics are identified as parasitic?” (p.xvi). It is this shot across the bow of the academy, this warning shot that may well be the most significant contribution of this anthology.

Several years in the making, and after great efforts to overcome publishing obstacles, the editors have assembled a multi- and inter-disciplinary collection of studies that are about the world today. Equally importantly, it engages the unfolding worlds in which state sovereignty is honing its “killability” through new permutations of perpetual war, expanded incarceration, and local and regional sequestration of systemic undesirables. The contributors represent a wide range of academic fields, including anthropology, gender, queer, feminist, transgender, and critical race studies, sociology and sociocultural studies, and law. Although geography is not formally represented in either the editors’ or the contributors’ credentials, several among them study body space, borderlands, and place, to name a few. Further, several members of the project collective are substantially involved in activism. Some of the identified associations include the Queer Migration Research Network, the Community United Against Violence (San Francisco), the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (a non-profit collective that provides free legal help to low-income people and people of color who are trans, intersex and/or gender non-conforming), and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (Canada’s largest feminist organization). Other involvement includes genderqueer activism, violence prevention, antipoverty work, and social justice initiatives.
The book is divided into five parts: Sunera Thobani discusses the theoretical framing of necropolitics (and then *queer* necropolitics) in the extensive prologue. An introduction by the editors follows, and to some degree mirrors some of the theoretical exposition of the prologue. It usefully outlines in detail the remaining three parts—which are titled “Death Worlds”, “Wars and Borderzones”, and “Incarceration”. Further, the introduction frames theoretically and then summarizes the nine case studies (three in each of the three parts). The tight focus on biopower/necropower, biopolitics/necropolitics in all parts and all chapters of the book results in some degree of repetition of the central ideas. Still, it cannot be avoided, and in the end, it might even be instrumental in helping the reader (who may include advanced students), truly embed the core concepts. Importantly, all nine case studies are exceptionally strong. All are theoretically informed and provide some degree of field study (though, ultimately, some are more heavily theoretical than others).

The nine case studies reveal a funhouse version of the world, where the old and the new mirror one another through the distortive medium of the state’s queerly-evolved, late-stage sovereignty. The concentration camp of old—a lockup for millions and a locus of genocide—is now the privatist prison system, where millions—mostly persons of color—lose their social lives (at least) and are effectively excised from the world of the living. Recognizing that all nine case studies are of great value, I discuss below four, which may be of particular interest to geographers.

The first part of the book—“Death Worlds” (p.29-89)—focuses on “the relation between life and death through analyses of the making of death worlds, social death and slow death…” (p.9). In Posocco’s “On the Queer Necropolitics of Transnational Adoption in Guatemala”, the transformation of transnational adoption circuits triangulates changes to the jurisprudential environment in the country, the outcomes of the 36-year-long Guatemalan civil war, and the changing positionality of both the native poor and the (international) perspective of adoptive parents (some LGBT) in the era of globalization and neoliberalism. Per Posocco, the young
“adoptees”, by straight or gay or lesbians situated in the US, are better understood as “abductees”, their biological parent(s) unable to resist the structural violence unleashed upon them by a corrupt and subservient state.

Michelle Martin-Baron, in “(Hyper/in)visibility and the Military Corps(e)”, explores funerary rituals which bring soldiers’ biological families and their queer, military counterparts into an “hyper(in)visible” division of emotive, social, and erotic labor (and a division of living and dying) that is instrumental to the state’s war-making ability. The state takes the son/husband and daughter/wife from the biological family milieu, and integrates them for the duration of their service into a sustaining (though also lethal) queer family, defined by homosociality, and at times homoeroticism.

Martin-Baron reveals placemaking where these familial trajectories intersect (in the fact of death, and in the ritual space where the soldier’s conventional and queer lives are commemorated and celebrated). The wife/widow and the Marine are brought into ephemeral cohabitation through death, rendering visible for a day, or a night, the otherwise invisible (to the family and the world) queer family of the soldier.
Part II—“Wars and Borderzones” (p.91-147)—focuses more explicitly on spatiality as it explores “zones of displacement, movement, war and everyday abandonment” (p.11). Jason Ritchie’s “Black Skin Splits: The Birth (and Death) of the Queer Palestinian” constructs a scalar ladder that links the fate of Palestinian queer bodies to state interests, regional geopolitics, and the particularistic activist interests of Israeli LGBT civil society organizations: Palestinians—often constructed as socially marginal but sexually desirable/hyper-masculine; oppressed by Islam yet simultaneously desirous of liberty—become instruments of Israeli sovereignty. The Palestinian body becomes a simulacrum of the existential struggles between traditionalism and modernity, oppression and liberty, and by extension, Israelis and Palestinians. By necropolitical logic, then, a dead queer Palestinian is even more useful to demonizing Islam and Arab culture than a living one.

In Part III—“Incarceration” (p.149-210)—the authors explore the prison as a topos of cruelty in relation to queerness. Going beyond conventional understandings of the carceral state and its practices, the case studies focus on the different ways sexual and gender-non-conforming people are spatially sequestered not only in prisons, where they are subject to especially lethal social and physical treatment, but also in public space. Elijah Adiv Edelman, in “‘Walking While Transgender’: Necropolitical Regulations of Trans Feminine Bodies of Color in the US Nation’s Capital”, exposes the geospatial strategies, policies and regulations that spatially sort “bad” bodies out of urban spaces targeted for gentrification, and mark them for elimination. Through ethnographies that trace the restricted mobilities of gender-non-conforming people and boundary-making through “neoliberally-informed spatial policies of exclusion” (p.175), Edelman reveals how the state and capital jointly target and criminalize trans women of color to carry out security and urban development projects in Washington DC. Importantly, we are shown the outlines of a strategy of resistance by civil society organizations, like the DC Trans Coalition. Subverting normative mappings of the city, the Coalition collected 108 maps and narratives from trans-identifying persons in the capital that lay bare the spatial contouring of their quasi-carceral

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sequestration in public space, and their punishment as queerly racialized transgender populations in the city (p.180-183).

I close with a remark and an invitation. This strong work does not fully engage the work of geographers, in spite of an expressed interest in spatiality by several of the collection’s contributors. Most of the cited geographic sources come from *Progress in Human Geography*—no doubt an outstanding journal, but one that excels in aggregations and presentations of geographers’ work. Significant contributions by Paola Bacchetta and Puar, for example, are not fully capitalized as spatially analytic. Most astonishing is the absence of any reference to Heidi Nast’s work, and especially her research published in the *Antipode* Special Issue, “Queer Patriarchies, Queer Racisms, International”—a collection that also included work by Bacchetta (2002) and Puar (2002). Anticipating one of the central points of queer necropolitics, Nast (2002: 878) argues that

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today a different regime of patriarchies is gaining legitimacy, one grounded only partially in what might be called “normative” gay white male masculinities. Though not invested in biological procreation, the contours of these patriarchies are similar, involving a virility assumed by differentially profitable engagement in market-based investments and transactions vis-à-vis women and persons of color and, in some cases, heterosexually identified elite white men…[G]ay white patriarchies coexist with, and in some cases displace, heteronormative patriarchies, shoring up preexisting racialized and politically and economically conservative processes of profit-accumulation.
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Regarding circuits of transnational adoption, she writes: “[t]he youthful, celebratory focus on nonprocreational gay white male bodies appears to be tied to a slight shifting of procreational activities offshore, persons of privilege in metropoles commoditizing the biological products of the largely poor and dispossessed through the adoptive purchase of their children” (Nast 2002: 7).
895). The paper titled “Renting Wombs” in the same Special Issue of *Antipode* anticipates some aspects of Posocco’s excellent work on transnational adoption in Guatemala (see Anonymous 2002). Am I being partisan? Perhaps. I certainly do not want to overstate the case, or diminish the great value of the anthology. It appears, however, that early, groundbreaking work by geographers might not be reaching other fields—even interdisciplinary ones—and scholars. Hence an invitation to do more.

*The View From the Core (White, Patriarchal, Sovereign, Neoliberal, and Newly Homonormative)*

*Queer Necropolitics* is a significant contribution to half a century of inquiry on the generative and lethal facets of sovereignty in late modernity. The editors should be recognized for moving forward the conversation that strings Foucault, Mbembe and Puar (at least) into a coherent intellectual lineage in critical queer, race, gender, and sexuality studies of the state. The nine case studies provide a set of theoretically-robust, critical, international, and interdisciplinary perspectives—some of spatial character—of great value to scholars and advanced students in the social sciences and the humanities.

I close with an illustration that leverages hypervisible aspects of queer biopower to lay bare the crisis of the queer, to mark the political transformation of LGBT activism in the global North, and, by extension, to further problematize the notion of the queer necropolitical. It is a story of queer privilege and homonationalism. In the summer of 2015, Sir Elton John offered to intercede with Russian President, Vladimir Putin, on behalf of LGBT civil society organizations and Russians who find themselves under close scrutiny by an increasingly authoritarian and violent Russian state. The face-to-face meeting never occurred, and, instead, it was enterprising hoaxers who capitalized on the public invitation. In their November 2015 interview in *The Sunday Times* magazine, Elton John and his husband, David Furnish, discuss the incident: “‘That was quite an elaborate hoax’, he [David Furnish] says, wagging a bejewelled finger at me across
the table”, writes the reporter Iain Dey. “‘We did check it out and it stood the first acid test. They had the right names and the right phone numbers’” (quoted in Dey 2015). Following the splashy headlines about the misadventure, Putin did call. In an extraordinary display of queer, racial, and class privilege, Furnish said of the Russian strong man: “‘He was lovely and polite; he was very, very gracious on the phone’” (quoted in Dey 2015). The presumption that a head of state would transact and negotiate civil and human rights with a private person—a celebrity, in this case—reveals the importance of public diplomacy. It further reveals the markedly elevated power position of persons enjoying interdigitated race, class, and now also queer privileges.

The article was illustrated with photographs by Harry Borden—art photographer to celebrities. Boden has arranged the couple in an assemblage that denotes couplehood at a moment of rest, and in a world of plenty. Also “marriage”. The men are differentiated: the older and rebellious Elton John (tousled hair, mauve notch-lapel jacket, mod silk pocket square) is the rock for the younger, elegant (and wifely?) Furnish (peak-lapel blazer in windowpane jacquard, white linen pocket square). Sharing an iconographic effect with an earlier Borden photograph of Margaret Thatcher, the “punctum” (to use Barthes’ [1993] word) here is their closed eyes, denoting intimacy, dependency, serenity, security, a sense of arrival and rest. Nothing lurks in the
shadows that might disturb the peace. Does Furnish take better direction, or is Elton’s roguish wisp of a smile part of it all? But is “blindness” the unintended connotation of their pose? The feature article’s title reads “Someone Saved My Life Tonight”. Elton John and his husband, now saved, appear to be paying it forward, defending LGBT rights, and supporting HIV/AIDS research and services, through their global charity, by attracting multimillion dollar contributions from titans of politics and industry, including media and entertainment. Can they be simultaneously actively engaged against grievous ills of the world and instrumental in upholding power structures and agents that are constitutive of them? Is ultimately Elton John’s global project (and others like it, which emanate out of newly homonormative and homonationalist action frames) marking those who are worthy of life and those who are not? For example, is calling for the punishment of African states for their homophobia, a bait-and-switch act that, ultimately, helps perpetuate the marginality of Africans? The value of their charitable work has been significant, which makes its critique politically fraught. Yet, LGBT emancipatory campaigns by empowered white gay males, like Elton John, appear to have profoundly transformed the public and policy discourses on queerness and queer rights. Goals, such as gay marriage, have diverted the public’s attention (by closing our eyes, perhaps) to expanding and mutating death-worlds sustained by white privilege, late liberal and neoliberal capital, and new iterations of imperialism and control. *Queer Necropolitics* attempts and substantially succeeds to provide analytical perspectives on these questions, and, hopefully, to fuel the conversation on the politics of oppression, elimination, and disposal of “queerly racialized populations”.

**References**


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