Wesleyan University The Honors College

All Downwinders Now:
Emergent Toxic Deserts, Fractured Forms of Life

by

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Class of 2010

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Sociology

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2010

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acknowledgements

This project is, as all projects of this nature are, indebted to a countless number of teachers, friends, and strangers, who together have brought me to where I am today. To all of those teachers and friends who go unmentioned here, to all of those strangers whose names I do not know but who have been my teachers nonetheless, I owe you my unending gratitude. I am thankful too for what my education here has given me, and for being lucky enough to attend a university where a project like this one is even possible. Writing this thesis has been, for me, a truly formative experience. After a joyful summer of field research and a year of intensive reading and work, I now find myself suddenly turned back toward a hopefulness that I once imagined had been lost for good. But this life-giving working process, which has been all-consuming to say the least, would have never assumed such meaning if it were not for the presence of several certain individuals who have all given me the gift of their love, their wisdom, and their endless and enduring encouragement. They have made my education into everything that I never thought it could be.

First and foremost, I wish to express my most profound thanks to my mentor, my advisor, and my friend, Charles Lemert, without whom this project would not have been possible. As a true teacher should, Charles opened a world to me, and for that, I will be forever grateful. To Jonathan Cutler, who, for me, has been both an inspiring teacher as well as a kind and patient listener. Anne Greene, who first encouraged me to write, and who has supported my writing ever since. My family: my parents, Peter and Monica, who have given me everything, and who have, above all, taught me what it means to love. My brother Alex, a friend with whom I will always be able to find the child in me preserved and reawakened. To the members of the social theory seminar, who have, for the past three semesters, shared with me their feedback, their work, and their friendship. To all of the unlikely friends I have made this year over the span of countless all-nighters pulled together, where our work is often forgone in the name of a soulful sunrise conversation. To those friends who have also been my intellectual comrades, and with whom my obsessive love of theory is shared and nurtured: Ezra, Irene, Kendall, and Max, to name a few. To Renae, Miles, Kevin, Bonnie, and to all the others I came to know in Utah last summer as I researched this project. They have impacted this thesis more than they will ever know. Finally, I owe to my housemates the greatest thanks of all: Sukey, Shay, Tina, and Sam – your love and endless patience has carried me through trying times of near-insanity, and has brought me also into joy, laughter, and a true knowledge of home, of friendship and of love. Thank You.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the assistance of the Davenport Grant, the Olin Fellowship, and the Annie Sonnenblick Writing Award. I am truly grateful for the support Wesleyan has provided to me in the service of this thesis.

This project is dedicated to all the world's Downwinders -
these Downwinders that I do not know and for whom I cannot speak-
these Downwinders who have taught me to listen, to remember, to live.

What counts is no longer the statement of the wind, but the wind.

Georges Bataille

The desert itself is a solitude already intertwined with a people yet to come…

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari

introduction

To negate one's own discourse is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself, to deprive it at every moment not only of what it has just said, but of the very ability to speak. It is to leave it where it lies, far behind one, in order to be free for a new beginning.

Michel Foucault

In the year 1897, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim published his groundbreaking work, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. The study, which explored differing suicide rates between religious groups, employed a unique methodological approach that bridged a number of gaps that had, until that point, allowed for the compartmentalization of scientific thought into strict and isolated disciplines. Unlike any other science, Durkheim's sociology aimed to examine a range of phenomena, including human consciousness, social institutions, the nation and politics, biological life, and modern economic processes. As a discipline, sociology had taken the human world as its object of study, and in doing so, had also claimed the fragmented whole of scientific thought as its province.

At the most basic level, Durkheim's sociology was to be the missing link between the psychological interior of the human being and the social exterior of the world in which he or she lived. Arguing, "the individual is dominated by a moral reality which transcends him—collective reality,"[1] Durkheim exposed the individual and the collective as always interlocked and fundamentally interdependent. For Durkheim and those who would follow him, reality would always be a relational

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[1] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 93

network of various phenomena in which nothing could exist in a vacuum: for them, the world was always sociological, and so their sociology, as the study of the human world, was meant to be an interdisciplinary science from the start.

The collective reality that Durkheim spoke of was a reality governed by the social institutions of late 19th century Western society. In the preface to Suicide, Durkheim argues the importance of the sociological reality:

> When one observes that marriage, divorce, family, religious society, the army, etc., affect [the rhythm of social life] according to definite laws, some of which can even be expressed in numerical form, one stops seeing these states and institutions as just inconsequential, ineffective ideological arrangements. Rather, they are felt to be real, living, active forces, which, because of the way in which they determine the individual, adequately demonstrate that they do not depend on him; even if the individual enters as an element in the emerging combination, to the extent that these forces become formed, they are imposed upon him. In these circumstances it becomes clear that sociology can and must be objective, since it confronts realities which are as definite and substantial as the realities that concern the psychologist or biologist.[2]

Ultimately for Durkheim, sociology was a way to reconcile the reality of individual consciousness with that of a modernizing social world: the discipline, as he had created it, imagined these two realities together as one, placed always in a system of social symbiosis.

Perhaps his most important contribution to social theory, Durkheim's notion of anomie gave a name to the mental state of distressed isolation that was, in 1897, quickly becoming a chronic condition of life within industrial capitalist society. Durkheim claimed that the state of anomie, resulting from the loss of the social bond (which was for him primarily a religious one), often led to suicide, for it meant that men no longer had anything holding them back from the dark emptiness of their

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[2] Durkheim, *Suicide*, PG

modern isolation. For Durkheim, who was raised in a close knit Jewish community, it was the loss of religious community alongside the rise of western capitalism that had given way to anomie: without the social bond provided by religion, men had been left abandoned to the isolation of their materialist individualism.

For Durkheim, anomie was the greatest threat to life within the modern condition, and so he made it his life's work to develop a solution to the problem of chronic anomie. After the publication of *Suicide* in 1897, he dedicated the thirty remaining years of his life to education reform in France, believing that nationalized education could reinstate the country's broken social bond. But for Durkheim, education would prove itself to be an inadequate solution to the task at hand. Although he had imagined that schools could be the cure for his sick society, in the end, Durkheim failed to cleanse France of its anomic illness. Rather than healed by education reform, French society was to be torn apart, shattered by the catastrophic violence of the First World War. And so it was also this violence that would bring Durkheim to his own anomic end, for in 1915, after losing his son in the trenches of the Great War, the scholar sank into a state of despair from which he never recovered.[3] Exhausted and disillusioned by grief, cast finally into an anomie all his own, Durkheim collapsed from a stroke only two years after the death of his son, and was soon dead himself, taken from life by the dark emptiness he had once lived to resist.

It is, perhaps, fitting that Emile Durkheim, the founder of modern social science would die in a state of anomie, for although Durkheim the scholar could see the modern condition with objective clarity, Durkheim the man was, in the end, a

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[3] Charles Lemert, *Thinking the Unthinkable*, (Paradigm, 2004)

prisoner of his own subjectivity, abandoned to isolation and left exposed to the radical emptiness of the social world in which he lived. Thus, it is in the death of Emile Durkheim that the anomic condition emerges triumphant, able to overtake even the man who had first identified it.

Today, almost a century later, anomie continues to remain triumphant in the West, though the condition has changed a bit, in terms of both its symptoms and its causes. In short, anomie is different because the world is different: the social world of Durkheim and his time is not the world that we know today, the social facts of the 21st century west expose a reality that sociology never could have imagined in 1897.

But sociology has strayed from itself. In the United States, Columbia school thought has taken the discipline away from its Durkheimian soul and turned it toward the soulless figure of the statistician and his impotent liberalism. Durkheim's sociology was a way of seeing the world and a science of progress at the same time: his work was at once a philosophy of the modern world while also being applicable as a solution for its betterment. Sociology today has, for the most part, rid itself of the explicitly philosophical dimension that once defined it, becoming more and ever and science of the state.

If this project is at all sociological, it is sociological in Durkheim's original sense of the term, for it simply aims to understand the collective realities of our 21st century west in relation to the forms of individual consciousness emerging within them. For Durkheim, sociology was, in part, a means of coming to terms with the despair of modern life, a despair that he most surely knew as his own. This project, in a certain sense, has become a way to speak of that same anomie, that same modern

despair.

But to speak of despair is nothing new. For as long as there has been thought, men and women have attempted to think through the unthinkable despair of human life. They have told stories of death and of darkness, of affliction and abyss. They have tried to make sense of what can never be truly understood. All of them have known the void in some way or another. All of us the living, in our own unspeakable ways, have known it too. The stories we tell and the ideas we create are proof of this. To put it in the words of a teacher of mine:

> Stories are the negotiations with time's dark spaces – the betweens, the hiddens, the mysteries, the absences, the longings, the unknowns, and the unmentionables…stories [are] we tell in order to make sense of what we have done and what has been done to us.
>
> [Social theory] is not so much theory as tellings of what we see through the glass dimly. In fact, we see only what we can say and that is not so bad, since there are not that many stories to tell or ways to tell them. Everything is in the telling without which we do not negotiate with the Dead, without whom we are nothing but idle chatter.[4]

This project is only a telling of what I can see of the world. As a story, as a telling, it functions to translate my vision of a world and the life that it holds into a very particular language, which is, for the most part, the language of social theory. And though the language might be uncommon at times, the function of this project is really nothing new: all stories are translations of a sort. And doing the work of translation means coming to terms with a process that will always fall short of its aim, for in all translation there is inevitably an element of mistranslation. This problematic of mistranslation is also that of representation, especially when representation concerns itself with the lives others and the worlds in which they

[4] Charles Lemert, via. personal correspondence

live. But in spite of all of this, I have chosen to write about the world. Moreover, I have chosen to write about a world that was, at one point, set apart from my own.

At first, this project grew out of my own interest in a story that I heard on the radio one sticky summer day: listening in the humid heat, I grew still as the voice of an American Indian man sounded over the crackle of bad reception and slowly told the story of the United States Atomic Testing Program and a group of people who call themselves Downwinders. This group of people, who have suffered unprecedented exposure to nuclear fallout from hundreds of atomic bomb tests, have seen their world contaminated, their lives plagued by radiation sickness, cancer, and pervasive death. The radio broadcast[5], which eventually led me to write this project, alerted me to the conditions of the Downwinders as well as to the existence of vast desert regions in the American west where the land itself has become poisonous, contaminated by nuclear fallout and radioactive waste. There, in a land made toxic, there in a region scarred by the detonation of almost 1000 Atomic bombs, the Downwinders have lived and died in a desert that was long ago left to rot, ignored by the a government that deemed them irrelevant and expendable. Today, after a sixty-year history of living wasted by cancer or radiation, the remaining Downwinders stand as the survivors of a government program that treated the local populations like guinea pigs, leaving them to a fate of sickness, death, and unimaginable loss.

Although the American west is and has been widely studied across many disciplines, few scholars have worked to understand the enduring social

[5] Scott Carrier, *Hearing Voices Radio Broadcast*, (NPR: 2001)

consequences resulting from the toxic contamination of the western deserts of the United States. In historical representations of the atomic age, it often goes ignored that the story of the Nevada testing program is also the story of the environment's radioactive contamination. The story of the Nevada Test Site directly coincides with that of the desert's ecological ruin, while at the same time, it stands as the primary factor in the rendering of the desert's downwind populations. And when all is said and done, the multiplicity of narratives that constitute this complicated history speak a story of a world destroyed, of a landscape made lethal by the toxic force of nuclear contamination, and of countless lives wasted by a cancer-causing state apparatus.

From the atomic testing of the cold war era to the nuclear experiments of the 1990s to the establishment of uranium mines in the 1950s, the US government's use of this land has transformed the landscape and altered the lives of those who live within it. This project's objective is to highlight this contaminated landscape and its relation to state power and the life of the population, as well as to rethink the concepts of Self, being, and life. Focusing specifically on the Nevada Test Site and the politically marginalized Downwinders, this project figures this social and ecological space within a larger theoretical discourse, framing the widespread cancer, genetic mutation, health issues, and deaths that plague this population as a tool for understanding what it means to live in a toxic world, a world in which the land itself now imposes illness and death upon entire populations.

When I began to research this project, I imagined that I would reconstruct the history of the Downwinders and their environment, framing my analysis within

the theoretical discourse of poststructuralism and similar forms of late modern thought. I had imagined that I would rely on archival and ethnographic sources to construct this work, employing semiotic analysis and historical inquiry in order to unearth the significance of this region as well as its larger political implications.

In the end however, I would do little of what I had planned. Soon into the research process, my methodology fell flat on its face as I began to realize that even in proposing a methodology at all, I was already inscribing the world with the inherently subjective language of "social science." And so I abandoned any scientific approach whatsoever, and began to live in the world instead.

What this project eventually became was an attempt to convey what I learned from the three months I spent living in this region and what this knowledge meant for me during the year following that summer. If it is anything at all, this project is an examination of the production of toxic Space and also of the form(s) of life and ways of being that are perhaps tied to its toxicity. This work has neither the right nor the ability to "give voice" to an oppressed group, nor does it attempt to affirm the agency of a disenfranchised population. It does not try to tell the true story of anyone's life, for a project such as this one cannot narrate a life without writing it into inevitable metaphorical significance. This project, at its heart, is simply a response to a few things I have seen and known of the world, a rethinking of a few texts that I have read and considered, and ultimately, a telling of the world from the extraordinarily limited perspective that I have come to know as my own.

When all is said and done, this work concerns itself with far to many ideas and worlds and spaces, too many forms of both life and death, of ways of being and of possibilities of being itself. And as is the case with any creative or theoretical

work (this one is both), the text inevitably and invariably becomes a portrait of the one (or ones) who wrote it. So of course what continues to appear everywhere in this work are the parts of me that gave rise to it in the first place, the parts of me that see the world as I have learned to see it. I have made an attempt to write of what I think I know of world, but in that attempt, it is quite possible that I have only managed to write myself as a world instead.

But to write from the ambiguous territory that emerges between the realms of self and world is not necessarily detrimental to a field of social knowledge, and may even enhance it, as long as the writing works to maintain a careful kind of self-awareness. It is only in the case that the writing forgets that it is mostly a translation, slips out of awareness of itself and into the belief that it is an objective or scientific mode of understanding, that its language becomes dangerously violent. This is the violence of the social science discourse as it stands today. A discourse that was, from its Durkheimian beginning, predisposed to enacting the violence that comes from writing oneself into disguise with the language of empiricism. Violence was, perhaps, the inevitable fate of sociology itself, for what else could result from a discipline that sought to make a science out of both being and world?

In an essay entitled "The New Philosophers", Gilles Deleuze writes of a dangerous mode of representation that was, during the last few decades of the 20th century, working its way in to the domain of theory. This type of philosophical writing, which Deleuze terms the "witness-function,"[6] marks the moment at which theory framed the incorporation of victim subjectivity into the work as a means to a

[6] Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews*, (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2006), 140

intra-textual form of justice. For Deleuze, theory's supposed incorporation of the witness-voice was nothing more than the disguised extension of an unchanged theory-voice, nothing more than the theorist speaking and thinking in the name of the victimized subject while never truly departing from the subjectivity of authorship at all. The witness-victim then, who, always absent, was spoken for, became the political tool of a theoretical framework that could see the witness in no other terms than those of otherness and death.

What Deleuze identifies in the "witness-function" is precisely the problem that plagues much of social theory today, emerging inevitably in certain parts of this project as well. When Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked in 1988 if the Subaltern could speak[7], she was not calling for theory to speak for the subaltern, not asking theory to assume the position of becoming the voice for the voiceless, the cry of the world's silenced 'victims', so to speak.

After all, theory has its own unspeakable silences. Often, when the attempt to speak for the subaltern comes to dominate a theoretical work, it is death, darkness, and invisibility that become the terms by which the 'other' re-inscribed into the discourse as that which is essentially incommunicable. Framed as a life that cannot speak because it is living death, the life of the subaltern becomes a signifier for the space that exists beyond the limits of representation. The re-inscription of the other into the discourse of social theory today is nothing other than a projection of the unspeakable self upon the world, simply evidence of the fact that the 'subaltern' is always-already within all of us: our own unspeakables, unknowns, and failures to hear within us that which we silence time and time again.

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[7] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

To write is to practice a dangerous form of production, for the language we use is inherently prone to committing the violence of inscription. But for we who are isolated and alone, for we who live in anomie, for we who are moderns, language is what we have together, even if it can only ever end in mistranslation. The technologies of language - words, speech, writing – these will of course always fail us in some way or another, for there is perhaps no kind of word that can fully speak itself, no words that can reveal themselves as anything more than a simple guessing of the world. These are not easy realities to accept if one loves language as I do, if one loves the space that writing opens in the betweens of its words. The stark realization that language can never be a pure form of communication is the realization that a full kind of being-together is almost certainly the impossible possibility of being itself.

But despite everything, we can still tell our stories. This project is only a single story, one vain move toward meaning, one errant pursuit of an ever-errant truth. And so, if there is any truth to the story that this project aims to tell– it is really nothing but a guess. And what is does it mean to guess at all? What is the guess but a story, a fiction? What has the modern world of the west been up to this point but a guess, a story, a fiction in and of itself? Should we continue even to speak what we see before us? Or should we abandon the guess and the fiction and language all together? These are questions for which I have no answers, but perhaps this is because they need not be answered at all.

Nietzsche once said: "The wide-awake person is certain that he is awake only because of the rigidly regular web of concepts, and so he sometimes comes to believe

that he is dreaming when at times that web of concepts is torn apart by art"[8]. Art blurs the line, divorces us from oppressive reason and confining consciousness. The art of writing opens the space of the irrational, transforms life into dream, frees us from reason in the betweens[9] of the words. The practice of writing is a practice of dreaming wide-awake, a means of touching the spaces we had not known were there. To write is to touch is to dissolve is to find the world in silence and to encounter the being of the earth that is also always already in us.

Dream art write earth dissolve. The line of reason is not so harshly drawn: cross the horizon again and again and maybe it will blur a little. But then again, maybe it won't. But no matter. We can still make the crossing, the movement, the error, the guess.

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[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press), 81

[9] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, (London: Verso, 1998)

to lay bare the ground: on biopower and the question of life

Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death.

Michel Foucault

It's in our life everywhere we turn, like it's snowballing. … I see what they've done. I see I've lost a child. I've lost my sister. I see the sorrow and the suffering. They are killing us for their own purposes.

Claudia Boshell Petterson, Downwinder

To Begin…

In the deserts of the American west, the world had been contaminated with the poison of radioactive fallout, the ever-lasting residue of hundreds of atomic bombs, detonated in Nevada by the United States Weapons Testing Program. And there in this desert, life grows ill with the disease of a toxic world. Those who have been affected by this cancer-causing fallout call themselves Downwinders.

These downwind populations, who have lived and died with the whims of a contaminated earth, begin to tell us something about the nature of life and of power in our late modern era. In the Downwinders and their desert home we find what is, at first, another narrative of United States atomic power, but becomes upon a second look, the story of a space and a people that together embody the conditions of our own present political context and the form of life that it functions to produce. This form of life, this life downwind, this disposable life, this is life that exists as such only because power has assumed a newly quieted lethal function.

It is the ultimate aim of this project to explore the production of life and world in our modern environmental and political context, doing so with a writing style that will seem, at certain times, somewhat untraditional. For the moment however, before this project truly begins, I have chosen to lay the theoretical ground for this thesis, in purely theoretical terms. This first section intends to outline and expand the theoretical basis for this project, which first concerns itself with a form of power that no longer directly kills, for it can now lay waste to life itself, no longer killing, but letting die instead. Our modern politics, singularly focused on life, no longer has any regard for death at all, and so it is in our turn toward the dying that we find the true function of this power revealed. Thus, it is with the more lethal aspects of our modernity that this project begins, for the conditions of the living who have been left to die are now of the utmost importance. If the Downwinders and their toxic world inform us that power has completely dislocated itself from its own capacity to kill, but kills nonetheless, then the form and function of this quiet violence must be further brought to light.

Making Life Live: Biopower and the Privatization of Death

In the final installment of his 1975-76 lecture series at the Collége de France, Michel Foucault began to speak of the emergence of a distinctly modern "biopower," which he defined on the most basic level as "the power to make live and let die."[10] Biopower, as both the inversion, and the immediate successor of traditional sovereign power, emerged, according to Foucault, around the time when the sovereign lost its explicit right to kill. Biopower, having "taken control of life in

[10] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*. (New York: Picador, 2003), 241

general - with the body as one pole and the population as the other,"[11] established itself as a political technology that had no use for death, for it had the biological life of the population as its only target.

According to Foucault, power exists always in relation to both life and death, for power, of course, comes from everywhere. But Foucault, who was always concerned with the history of power's shifting technologies, historicized his theory of biopower primarily in terms of power's emergent relation to biological life. As Foucault outlines in his 1975-76 lectures, biopower began with the advent of modern capitalism, gaining its strength as modern industrial nations came to depend less upon territorial control and more upon the use-value of their populations. Because it was now in the economic and social interests of the state to preserve the life of its population through a politics of health management rather than one of disciplinary violence, power shifted its gaze toward the biological life of the nation and its people. This unprecedented focus on biological life that is identified in Foucault's early explorations of biopower was, in fact, so utterly central to the modern political order, that it was power's relation to life, and not to death that would assume Foucault's central focus during the final eight years of his life. Much later, it was the idea of biopower that would become his legacy.

But it is not with biopower's right to "make live" that this project is concerned, for it was not the positive function of biopolitics that rendered the Downwinders as they are today. Almost unquestionably, the Downwinders were "let to die" by the state, and so it is toward Foucault's 1976 discussion of the invisible, lethal function of biopolitics that this project turns. This first lecture on biopolitics,

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[11] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 242

though incomplete, grants equal space to both aspects of biopower's dual, albeit asymmetrical, relation to life and death, and so remains useful as a window into the workings of Foucault's mind, just as he was beginning to develop what is, perhaps, the most important political theory of the contemporary era.

For Foucault, it is in the privatization of death that power first begins to turn away from its explicit right to kill and takes up a violence of "indirect murder" instead. "Death has become," he writes, "something to be hidden away. It has become the most private and shameful thing of all."[12] Here, the confinement of death to the most private of spheres directly correlates to power's increasing ability to make live, and thus marks the advent of biopower itself. Death then, because it is the absolute end of the life that power so attempts to preserve, comes to signify the limit and the ultimate end of power itself.[13] "Death is outside the power relationship," claims Foucault, "Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death."[14] Thus, for those who are left to die by the state, death becomes the consequence of what Foucault calls indirect murder, "the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection."[15]

The Age of Space: Foucault, Lefebvre, and the Production of the World

Foucault asserts that "biopolitics' last domain is…control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, and their

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[12] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 247
[13] *ibid*, 248
[14] *ibid*, 248
[15] *ibid*, 256

environment...[which] is not a natural environment."[16]. As this claim implies, human life is lived always in relation to the environmental space in which it makes for itself. Space then, as Henri Lefebvre argued in his 1974 work, *The Production of Space*, is "neither a subject nor an object but rather a social reality – that is to say, a set of relations and forms."[17] This claim, while useful, was not necessarily a new one. Seven years before the publication of Lefebvre's seminal work, Michel Foucault had argued nearly the same point in an address to the Architectural Studies Circle given during March of 1967. In the lecture, entitled *Different Spaces*, Foucault asserted that it was space, and not time, that stood as the essential organizing principle of the contemporary western experience. Professing the simulated, scattered nature of the late modern period, Foucault claimed; "the present age may be the age of space instead."[18] Here, in this early work, where the space *outside* of the self appears as a central concern, the lived environment is figured anew as an interdependent ensemble of emplacements. Here, landscape, as an intellectual organization of physical space, is no longer figured as a stagnant entity, and instead becomes redefined as a multiplicity in which all relations of proximity are subject to change and flux.

Like Durkheim's 1897 re-conceptualization of the social space, Foucault's, and later Lefebvre's, re-conception of place as relational assemblage explicitly defined environmental space in terms of its power to affect the forms of life lived within it, and in doing so, exposed an inherent relation of power between life and

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[16] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 245
[17] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 171
[18] Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces" in *Essential Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, (New York: The New Press, 1998), 253

landscape. Within this relation, subject to the relational quality of space, lived experience and spatial practice become elements of the topographic web, and are thus incorporated into a landscape that both subjugates, and is subjugated, by human life and ideology.

Following Lefebvre and Foucault we can thus rethink environmental space in terms of western biopolitics as well as in terms of what is, perhaps, now becoming a post-biopolitical context. If life necessarily exists within physical space, and life is always politicized within biopolitics, then geography, or ecology, may also be politicized in a similar fashion. Accepting the notion that the primary function of biopower as it relates to human life is to 'make live' and 'let die,'[19] we can, perhaps, apply this relationship to landscape. It follows then, that within biopower, land itself is either made to live or left to die, or in other words, our lived environment is either made to be a productive space of life, or, as we have seen in the case of the Downwinders and their contaminated desert, the land itself is rendered lethal by any number of toxic forces.

Considered within a biopolitical context, environmental space is always tied to the political life of the population it encompasses. In this sense, land that is "living" and land that is "dead" plays home to the living and dying processes of the population, though this relationship is not always immediately visible. Perhaps the last domain of biopolitics,[20] landscape plays an essential role in the regulation of the population, its life, its death, and its normalization.

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[19] Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 241
[20] Ibid, 244

At the Limit of Biopower

To understand how the contaminated desert of the Downwinders can be understood within a biopolitical framework, we may turn to Foucault's formulation of the limits of biopower, only one of which I will discuss here. In that same lecture given at the college de France in 1976, Michel Foucault conceptualized biopower as being always-already directed toward its own limits:

> We are in a power that has taken control of both the body and life or that has, if you like, taken control of life in general – with the body as one pole and the population as the other. We can therefore identify the paradoxes that appear at the points where the exercise of biopower reaches its limits.
>
> On the extreme, you have biopower that is excess of sovereign right. This excess of biopower appears when it has becomes technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage life but to make it proliferate, to create living matter, to build the monster, and, ultimately, to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive. This formidable extension of biopower, unlike what I was just saying about atomic power, will put it beyond all human sovereignty.[21]

This biopolitical limit, which is reached when there emerges a biopower that is excess of sovereign right, figures the biopolitical function as an exponential one. In the sense that biopower reaches its limit when it can no longer control the "making" of life, this limit is the result of a power that actualizes to an such an extent that it can no longer control the rate, or the consequence, of its actualization. Thus, in the sense that power's technologies take hold over the production of biological life itself, they are always bound to surpass its control, for life, which always has a mind of its own, is predisposed to error, to mutation. Thus, it is at the point when the technologies of power, having taken on a being that is exponential and knows no bounds, surpass sovereign control entirely and thus mark the second limit of biopower as the absolute suspension of the sovereign right.

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[21] Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 254

If Foucault is indeed correct in his formulation of the manufactured virus as the ultimate end of an intentional biopower, then it is in the virus that biopower's technologies go beyond their intended purpose and function outside of any sort of human structured power whatsoever, biopolitical, sovereign, or otherwise. In this scenario, biopower can no longer actualize its power to "make live and let die" as a productive and discerning force, for with the virus of power, life itself becomes viral, as does death, for it is now a viral force makes life live and leaves it to die. Here too sovereign power can no longer maintain itself as the capacity for the decision on death, for in the viral, death itself becomes as a cancerous proliferation, and so the right to kill no longer has any relevance at all. Here in this second limit of biopower, the viral transcends the human and power itself becomes molecularized.

With the emergence of the virus and a viral form of power, both sovereignty and biopolitics undergo a rather complex structural transformation. First sovereignty, which is, as discussed above, the power to kill and let live, doubly grounded in its being as both potentiality and actuality, becomes impotent in light of the indiscriminate 'killing' of the manufactured virus. To put it simply, when the decision on death becomes universal and is 'made' without reason, as it is by a virus, any power that maintains itself through its decision not to kill can no longer matter to life at all. Life here becomes always-already consigned to death by the virus or even its very virtuality. In this sense then, sovereign power can no longer ground itself as potentiality, but neither can it exhaust itself as absolute actuality. In the wake of the viral then, sovereign power becomes utterly impotent and no longer functions as power at all.

Biopower too, in the face of the viral, cannot act as anything other than a band-aid for a bullet wound – that is to say rather – that biopower can only actualize in the individualizing, and interventionist, act of "making live." Here, biopower remains in a state of suspension, for it operates always in relation now to the plane of death. With the viral, the possibility for a massyfying biopower that moves always toward its positive absolute, becomes impossible. Biopolitics, in this case, now corresponds to the very structure of potentiality that had once belonged to sovereignty, only as its inverted mirror image. Suspended always in relation to itself, biopower now operates in a context where life, all of which has been has been left to its own cancerous proliferations, can no longer be defined by its capacity to sustain itself as such. Fundamentally, biological life can no longer sustain itself in the ways that it once did, nor can it look toward any power to sustain it. Here biopower asserts itself as sovereign power once did, through a single defining act, but can never actualize fully, for absolute actualization, in the wake of the viral, becomes entirely impossible.

Rethinking the Camp: Bare Life and Sovereign Power After the Viral

As a power emerging beyond the limit of the biopolitical, the viral form of power that governs life in the contaminated desert zone should be understood as the consequent extension of biopower rather than as its end. For as it has been traced through history, power progresses not through a process of ends and replacements, but rather through one of layerings, transferences and complications. This molecularized form of power then, a consequence of biopower that crystallizes in the contaminated zone, is but another layer upon the life of power and so implies the

reconstitution of the strata underlying it. Thus, in considering the prospect of a molecularized viral power, biopower must be thought anew. For just as pure sovereign power gave rise to biopower and so assumed a new function within its context, biopower, in giving rise to this viral form of power also becomes re-contextualized, assuming a new and secondary function. In this sense, molecularized viral power also implies the need for a re-conceptualization of terms such as Life, People and Politics.

Although a number of scholars have taken up Foucault's work on biopolitics, none has figured so prominently as Giorgio Agamben. Almost twenty years after Foucault's first mention of biopower in 1976, the publication of Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* furthered the project that Foucault could not during his lifetime and expanded the concept of biopolitics beyond its original limits.

Above all, Agamben's *Homo Sacer* functions to articulate the existence of a biopolitical paradigm that Foucault's later work did not attempt to envision. Deriving his thesis primarily from the work of Carl Schmitt and an analysis of national socialism and its concentration camps, Agamben develops the notion of *The Camp* as a political paradigm, further claiming that "the camp is the nomos of the modern", for it stands as the most acute realization of the "biopolitical space in which we are still living". Agamben's camp, which is born out of the suspension of the law and created as a space, or state, of exception in and of itself, is endowed with the power to strip life of its value as such. This form of life, stripped bare by the hand of power, is what Agamben calls bare, or naked, life. Thus it is in the rendering of this disposable being, the creation of the life that may be killed but not sacrificed,

that the act of eliminating, wasting, or harming the living becomes a form of politically legitimate violence, and in going unseen becomes the hidden regulator of the population, extinguishing the lives that have been already let to die.

Agamben's camp, being "the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule,"[22] marks the realization of a new political space in which the old land-order-birth trinity of the state is ruptured by the appearance of a fourth, inseparable element that is the camp[23]. In the sense that the camp's appearance marks the disassociation of birth, or bare biological life, from the nation-state, the camp itself functions as "the new, hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order – or rather, the sign of the system's inability to function without being transformed into a lethal machine."[24] The zone of the camp, then, is primarily a re-structuring of political space that compensates for the break between bare-life and nation-state; or in other terms, the camp is the localization of a politics that no longer operates with regard for the link between biological bare life and human political rights. As a space in which each and every life may, at any time, be deprived of its political status, the camp is both an actualization of this mechanism as well as its ever-present possibility. In its relation to physical space as both actuality and potentiality, the camp is both the realization of an undoing processes as well as the figuring of that process as a potential characteristic of all space.

Agamben defines naked life, or bare life as it is translated in the English edition of *Homo Sacer*, as "the life of the homo sacer, who may be killed and yet not

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[22] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 168
[23] *ibid*, 175
[24] *ibid*, 175

sacrificed."[25] Thus, it is the isolation of bare life from the politically qualified life of the subject that constitutes the animalization of the human, and it is by means of this isolating mechanism that the politically sanctioned extermination of human life becomes possible, working though a mechanism that decisively signals the political space of modernity itself.[26] But the camp, as that which isolates bare life and subsequently consigns the living being to a fate of death, is always a mechanism operating in the interest of politcal power, for it is the sovereign who decides on death. In this sense, Agamben's identification of the camp as paradigm figures death itself as decision, as a mode of political inscription that writes upon the living the fact of their worthlessness.

In figuring death as a structural mechanism of politics, the paradigm of the camp assumes that a life outside of politics is a life that sustains itself as such. In this sense, the entire framework of Agamben's paradigm is predicated on the assumption that when it is left alone by power and to its own devices, life furthers itself by the very process of living, by the tendencies of its own pure being. In this formulation of life in absence of the camp, life lives (and dies) as a form of being that is nothing other that what it always-already is. The camp, in Agamben's framework, is the primary mechanism by which death becomes something other than that which is naturally included in life and so it politicizes death in a way that places life in a singularly biopolitical framework. If the camp is, as Agamben so claims, the nomos of the modern, the space in which we are still living, then it follows that in this space, both death and the production of bare life exist always in relation to political

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[25] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9
[26] *ibid*, 175

power, each assuming an inherently political purpose, for they function as nothing other than the negativity of the biopolitical state and the life that aims to make.

As various forms of molecular contamination continue to render an increasingly lethal planet, it becomes clear that if it is applied to the toxic ecologies of the world today Agamben's thesis does not hold. In the face of the Downwinders, as well as all other life that is subject to the whims of a toxic earth, the camp falls apart in a newfound irrelevance. It is, perhaps, possible to say that we are now approaching the point when it is no longer the sovereign who decides on death, for the 'decision' on death is increasingly made by a toxic earth that has no knowledge of the life that lives upon it, and in the face of death, stands sightless and ambivalent. In this sense, death can no longer operate as a pure political mechanism, for has now become the accidental consequence of power's viral technologies as they spiral out of sovereign control. Thus, it is with the coming of this proliferating viral force that biopower is now losing its ability to manage life at all, that the sovereign right is now becoming irrelevant in the face of a world kills without politics or intent.

What People is This? Conditional Subjectivities and Emergent Groups

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the life of the Downwinder appears most fully in the context the contaminated desert, for it is in this desert that the world has been made anew by deadly and viral force. It is there in the deserts and in all of the earth's contaminated zones that the status of bare life as the dominant form-of-life in the world today comes into absolute clarity. There these spaces where molecular

ecology itself is allowed to continue the work of death, the dead, the dying and the deserted go unnoticed, contained in a world where life never really mattered at all.

In his essay, *What is a People*, Giorgio Agamben proposes that from its very beginnings, biopower has aimed to create a "People", or a body politic, without fracture. A People, which indicates the whole of human life unified under the umbrella of political citizenship, comes into being only when every person possessing biological life (zoe) is also a person endowed with a political life as well (bios). In other words, a People without fracture can only exist when every biological human is made into a political subject. But as history has proven, a People without fracture is fundamentally impossible, for there are always people who are not subjects, living beings whose suffering is without cause and whose lives are of no consequence to power.

As Agamben, extending Foucault, points out, the creation of the People depends, in fact, on the production of those whose suffering does not matter, whose lives are deprived of political meaning and reduced to the status of biological, or naked life alone. For Agamben, a People is only possible within a political framework that figures the subject by means of a dialectical oscillation between the two poles of the body politic and naked life, for the biopolitical plan to produce a People without fracture depends precisely on the existence of life that is not yet politicized: the very production of the biopolitical plan depends precisely on the reciprocal production of its negativity in naked life. As Agamben notes, the People "it is what already is, as well as what has yet to be realized; it is the pure source of identity and yet it has to redefine and purify itself continuously according to

exclusion, language, blood, and territory."[27] Thus, as the concept of a People already entails within it the fundamental biopolitical fracture, as long as there is a People, there must also be naked life. Where there is naked life, there must always be a People.[28]

But as we have seen, the emergence of the contaminated desert as a spatial type renders bare life, as it exhibited in the case of the Downwinders, no longer in relation to sovereign power alone. Always situated within the context of toxic space, the bare life of the Downwinder is rendered as such by a form of violence that is a product of the environment itself. As a population created by its relation to a toxic landscape, the Downwinders are both completely constituted by the lethal ecology of their desert and utterly inseparable from its physicality.

The Downwinders, who name themselves according to the nature of their bare life, may in fact represent the first feeble incarnation of a "biopolitical body that is bare life" that is just now beginning to transform itself into "the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is…in bare life and a bios that is its own zoe."[29] The population of Downwinders, composed of biologically rendered subjects, constitutes itself as a People no longer placed in opposition to bare life, but defined precisely by the coincidence with it. Perhaps the Downwinders, as paradoxical and complex as they are, today signify the coming of a population for whom traditional mechanisms of political subjectification will become impossible. In their emergence as virally produced biological subjects who still stand as a self-

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[27] Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 32
[28] *ibid*, 35
[29] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188

constituting People, the Downwinders assume the position of being a population already given in the being of its own bare life.

But if all of this is true, and I am not certain that it is, then what becomes of the singular self in the wake of a contaminating form of power, of a people already given in its own bare life? Within a lethal ecology, what becomes of the body, of being, of the living life? These are the questions that this project now asks, and in the pages that follow, will further attempt to explore.

to cross a thousand deserts, to burst a thousand suns…

Light itself is only negligence.

Michel Foucault

If the radiance of a thousand suns / were to burst into the sky / that would be like / the splendor of the Mighty One, / and I am become Death / the shatterer of worlds.

Bhagavad-Gita

The Desert and the Bomb

The night of July 5th, 1957 was a night of desert silence, and it was, like it always is during the Nevada summers, unbearably hot. Forty-five miles north of Las Vegas, at the Nevada Test Site, the United States Military prepared to detonate an Atomic bomb more powerful than any that had come before it[30]. On this particular night, like so many nights before, a classified military operation was already underway at the test site. There, concealed by the deep black of the guarded desert and protected by the violent promise of its patrolled military borders, the test site had been secured almost to the point of invisibility.

The desert air was thick with heat. Somewhere deep inside the test site's guarded borders, bands of Atomic soldiers moved with purpose and did not make a sound. Together they slipped though the blackness and dissolved into the silence. These men were good soldiers. As a matter of survival, they had all made

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[30] Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 61: The bomb was "shot hood" and "at 74 kilotons, it was by far the largest atmospheric nuclear detonation conducted within the borders of the united states."

themselves almost identical in both thought and manner of existence. Together as soldiers they moved as one. Together as men they had become absorbed in the darkness of their nuclear desert world. Together in being they had forgotten how to see.

At the north-east corner of the test site, in a placeless place called camp desert rock, a group of men belonging to the United States Air Force crouched in the dirt, waiting silently together with their hands over their eyes[31]. On their elbows and their knees, the silent squatting men pressed into the earth. To stay still and steady and strong, the men dug their booted toes into the dirt, carving shallow footholds from the cracked desert surface. Each identically concealed by the second skin of a military uniform, each identically held in the posture of preparedness, the men had become almost interchangeable: it was now by face alone that each man could reveal himself to any other, for it was now face alone that presented the possibility for sight or for recognition. On this night, it was only in face that the men had been left to remain unconcealed.

But the men had already become sightless. Bodies turned toward the dark western horizon they did not look at one another or at anything at all. They were waiting fearfully for an explosion in the west. They wore thick gloves on their hands. They pressed their gloved palms against their eyes. As they crouched they leaned on their elbows, and soon their elbows grew sore from supporting the weight of their full-grown bodies. As they tried not to move or to speak, their eyes forgot how to see beyond the dark surface of an inner eyelid or that of a hard- pressed

[31] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 60: my description of this scene is derived from a photograph displayed in Gallagher's book, as well as from the testimony of Robert Carter who was "the only one whose eyes looked out toward ground zero"(61)

palm. They waited for the bomb test and kept their hands upon their faces. They pressed the heels of their palms into the sockets of their eyes and found that the sloping edge of the hand fits perfectly into the shallow valley of the skull's eye socket. Palm over eye, skin against skin, bone within bone; in the covering of sight each of their bodies became pressed back in upon itself and was made blind to everything outside. And so the desert dark became no longer real for the soldiers. Alone in themselves, the men were thus contained and covered over by their internal blindness, rendered sightless as they waited for the bomb on elbows and knees, faces resting upon the blinding heels of their palms.

But there among the silent men with covered eyes, a young private named Robert Carter sat in the desert, calm and apart[32]. He was seventeen years old and had not been a soldier for long. New to the desert, he had come from a farm in rural Utah, from a life in a Mormon home. And though he was still a boy at heart, Robert Carter believed himself to be a happy man: he felt full of life. He loved the world. He did not yet know what this desert held. Robert Cater was still only a boy and so he was brave in the way that most boys who do not yet know the world are. A child among his fellow soldiers, he could not know the reason for their necessary blindness. Content in the desert dark, Robert Carter sat apart among the blind, stubbornly refusing to cover his eyes.

Carter crouched in the low brush, his gaze directed toward the dark desert horizon. He waited and did not speak. In the thick night there was only silence. Tonight the desert was itself a silence. In the dark, the desert slid over Carter's skin

[32] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 60-63: My narrative is a creative expansion of Robert Carter's 1988 testimony, given in Taylorsville, Utah.

and though his pores and into the flows of his blood where it moved alongside him. This was not like other kinds of silence - this was a desert silence, a property of the desert itself.

Exactly what Robert Carter heard in his own desert silence cannot be known by anyone other than Robert Cater, for it belongs to him and his memory alone. As to what Carter heard of the desert, as to how he felt in the moment of his silent calm– as to these things we can only imagine. We can imagine that as he waited Robert Carter gazed up at the night sky above him and saw that the stars hung low and bright above the desert surface. We can imagine that as he watched the sky Carter waited to witness the largest atmospheric test that the western hemisphere would ever see and did not know what to expect. We can imagine that when the bomb exploded more than a thousand feet above the desert floor[33], a blast of fire and ash mushroomed red against the darkened sky, its force sending shockwaves over the arid ground. We can imagine that the bomb created a glow brighter than that of the sun, and that the force of the blast knocked the men from their crouched positions and sent them tumbling over the sage brush carpet. We can imagine Robert Carter, reeling from the blast, body coated in dirt and covered in a white film of nuclear fallout. And we can imagine that Carter thought for a moment that he had gone deaf, for he could no longer hear his desert silence. We can imagine that Carter's desert silence had been shattered by the force of the bomb, for what we do know for certain is that in this very moment the world of Robert Carter had been fractured beyond repair.

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[33] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 61: This atmospheric shot, suspended 1500 feet above the earth, was detonated from a lit and striped balloon device.

In a 1988 interview with the historian Carol Gallagher, Robert Carter told of what it meant to see the bomb:

> I was happy, full of life before I saw that bomb, but then I understood evil and was never the same. I was sick inside and it stayed with me for a year after. I seen how the world can end. This world is a really thin sheet of ice between death and this happiness I had known all my life. There's a thin line between total destruction and peace and quiet and happiness.[34]

At the age of seventeen, Carter believed that he had seen how the world would end. The year was 1957 and the United States had been conducting atmospheric nuclear tests for almost a decade. The "evil" that Carter claimed to have seen in the bomb was perhaps a vision all his own, but the bomb itself had been seen countless times and by countless others before him. The bomb had been seen by soldiers and locals from the deserts of Nevada and by native inhabitants from the pacific islands of Bikini atoll. By only a few, it had been seen from the barren landscapes of the Soviet Union; by a great many, it had been seen from two cities in Japan.[35] And in New Mexico, twelve years before Robert Carter was to witness the July 5th explosion, the first Atomic bomb in history had been seen by the eyes of its creator, a quiet man called Robert Oppenheimer.

What Robert Oppenheimer saw in the New Mexico test on the morning of July 16th, 1945 was, perhaps, exactly what Carter would see in Nevada blast twelve years later. On Oppenheimer's morning, the New Mexico sky hung low and heavy

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[34] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 61: Quoted Testimony of Air Force Atomic Veteran Robert Carter.

[35] Smithsonian Institute, *United States Atomic Testing Museum*, Las Vegas Nevada: The information on global nuclear testing and much of the information written about later on in this project was gathered or absorbed by me at the Atomic Testing Museum and the affiliated United States Nuclear Testing Archive, where I conducted research for several weeks during July of 2009.

above the desert, quiet, clouded, and bloated with water that had not yet become rain. In a control tower overlooking the White Sands Proving ground, the father of the atomic bomb stood quietly and watched the sky through tinted glasses, waiting to see his creation explode. At precisely 5:29am, the Trinity test commenced, shattering the silence of the still, gray dawn. In the wake of the blast, test director Robert Bainbridge turned to Oppenheimer and said to him softly: "Now we are all sons of bitches."[36] It is not now known if Oppenhimer replied, but years later he would claim that during that moment, a phrase from the Bhagavad-Gita entered his mind: *Now I become death, destroyer of worlds.*[37]

Less than a month after the trinity test at White Sands, the United States dropped two Atomic bombs on Japan. On August 6th Hiroshima was hit and on the 9th Nagasaki followed. By the end of 1945, more than 200,000 Japanese people were dead. For the first time, it seemed that human invention could destroy the entire world; for the first time, human invention had destroyed thousands of worlds and lives, all of them at once.

The stories of Robert Oppenheimer and the Trinity test are well known, as are those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Together, these stories have become the central narrative of 20th century atomic power and its disastrous consequences.

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[36] Costandina, A. Titus, *Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics.* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 17

[37] Quoted from a Youtube clip, taken from the *Atomic Age Video Collection*, of the audio of Oppenheimer's public statement upon his return from a visit to Hiroshima in 1963. The Full Quote is as follows: "We knew the world would not be the same. few people laughed. few people cried. most people were silent. I remembered the line form the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty ,and to impress him takes on his multi armed form and says, 'now I am become death the destroyer of worlds'. I suppose we all thought that, one way or another"

Today Hiroshima and Nagasaki stand in the public imagination as the only example of atomic power's actualization as a lethal force; Japan as the single victim of a form of violence that was to be named the central threat of the postwar world. After 1945, as the threat of the bomb became the fuel for the international arms race of the Cold War, the world waited in fear for the second coming of its destructive power. But the world would never again see what it saw in Japan, and so would assume that Japan itself was the bomb's beginning and its end, the first and last actualization of atomic violence, the start and finish to the bomb's life as a weapon of murder, destruction, and war.

But to say that the violence of Atomic power reaches its height in the bombing of Japan and its conclusion at the end of the Second World War is to abruptly halt the story of the bomb at the beginning of its arc. The story of the bomb's destruction is, in fact, a much longer, and a much more international history, which spans the latter half of the 20th century and occurs in Japan, the Pacific Islands, and most importantly for this project, in the deserts of the western United States.

And the story of the bomb's destruction is also the story of Robert Carter, who was, in his own way, destroyed by what he saw on that quiet desert night in the summer of 1957. The seventeen year-old Carter, who would go on to live a life plagued by depression and despair, would also soon find his body sick with the poison of nuclear radiation.

After watching the blast at the test site, Cater looked down to find his coverall cracked and melted, his skin terribly sunburned, his body prickling with an unbearable heat. Finding himself in a great deal of pain, Carter became dizzy,

nauseous, disoriented. The doctors told him they thought he had radiation sickness, but didn't suggest any treatment. According to Carter, nobody knew what to do for radiation sickness except to watch the patient die.

But Robert Carter did not die. Instead, he was put under observation at the George Air Force Base, near Los Angeles, California. There, Carter's health rapidly began to worsen. He found his hair falling out in clumps. His spinal cord began to deteriorate. His muscles weakened. He had trouble walking. After a transfer to Newfoundland, Cater was soon hospitalized at a nearby base. While in treatment, he became paranoid and depressed, haunted by memories of the bomb and what he had seen that summer night. Consumed by the memory of a monstrous, sickening, ball of evil fire, Carter was released from the hospital, discharged, and sent back home to Utah, where he would remain confined to a wheelchair and in a state of debilitating paranoia that would keep him housebound for the rest of his life. [38]

Robert Carter is both an Atomic Veteran and a Downwinder. Though his case may seem extreme, his story is not uncommon among those who worked at the Nevada Test Site, as well as those who lived in the surrounding areas. Carter is simply one of a countless many Downwinders who have lived and worked, for the past half-century, in a region that has been exposed to toxic fallout patterns resulting from the US atomic testing program.

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[38] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 62. From the testimony of Carter, self describing as "clinically depressed," also remains paranoid due to what he saw at the test site" "cages and fenced enclosures, which contained animals burned almost beyond recognition. Some cages held humans in handcuffs, chained to the fences…burned and shackled remains of humans on the nuclear battleground"(62). Carter's testimony of this, though echoed in the stories of other Atomic Veterans, still has not been proven to be anything other a paranoid fantasy.

Today the Downwinders, diseased and dying, mutated by radiation and weakened by cancer, live in political invisibility, faced by the persistent sorrow of inevitable decay. The federal government has barely acknowledged the Downwinders at all[39], and so their suffering has gone ignored while their lives are lived in illness; simply in being downwind, they have been made sick by the violence of the state's experimental warfare.

There in the contaminated nuclear deserts of the American West, where an infrastructure of national defense has imposed cancer, mutation, and death upon entire populations, life is rendered both naked and still. Bodies are transformed into waste. Cancer disposes of life while radiation mutates the living. The inevitable waste of progress, these Downwinders have become a people living always with death. Shrouded in the desert dark, they are a people made ghostly by their nation, confined to the desert borderlands that surround the Las Vegas sprawl. Today, the Downwinders live quietly and without recognition. And at the edge of the downwind territories, where the light of American capitalism collides with darkness of the Western desert, the world splits, and fractures the fabric of space itself.

The story of the Downwinders and their toxic desert is a story of our modernity. It is a story of almost one thousand atmospheric and belowground bombs detonated by the US Atomic testing program at the Nevada test site and the subsequent nuclear contamination of the surrounding desert regions. It is the story of the people who lived in those nuclear deserts, of a population whose homes sat directly downwind of the bomb tests, exposed to the lethal effects of nuclear fallout

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[39] Valerie L. Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental Ruin in the American West.* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 32

and dangerously high levels of nuclear radiation. It is a history of six decades of life in this desert, of six decades of life wasted by unnaturally high levels of cancer, thyroid disease, radiation poisoning, and death. And finally, the story of the Downwinders is a story of life laid waste by power, of those lives forsaken by the United States government in its quest for control, and of those people who even today remain the invisible victims of almost one thousand invisible bombs. The story of these people and their wastage is the second silent narrative of US atomic power, and it tells of state administered violence, of lives forsaken, and of worlds destroyed. The living consequence of the American will to power, today, the Downwinders demand our attention.

In the summer of 2009, I went to the Nevada Great Basin to find the desert of the Downwinders and of Robert Carter, to write of the bomb and its contamination, to tell of wasted life and shattered worlds. I lived in Las Vegas while I looked for this world Downwind. In some ways, I found what I was looking for. In some ways I have written the story I always meant to write. But there is, as there always is, another story, another desert. What I found in the contaminated territories of the American west was a desert I did not expect, a desert all my own…

Another Desert

In the summer months, the deserts of southern Nevada grow still and silent in a blistering heat that does not let up, even in darkness. There, when it is dark, especially when it is dark, when the heat is heavy and the stillness alive, the night begins to vibrate and resonate and move though itself. Time bends and stretches and sways with the warmth during these summer nights, for desert time is not like

other time, which thinks it can move without error or tilt, forward and ahead, in the form of a line. But time is never a line in the dark desert, for it is always moving in relation to the whims of desert space. And desert space? Desert space is open and so is never absolute in matter or form, but can perhaps be most fully understood in the moments during the night when the sky is cloudless and deep, the world bristling and pitch black, and the stars clear points of light that hang, suspended and still, far above the earth's lonely surface.

And in the desert there is always silence, but it is not the silence that we think we know silence to be, for it is a silence that is not the absence of sound. This is, rather, a silence made of echo and movement, of friction and wind, of dust and machines – this is a desert silence, a textured fabric of space rather than a condition of sound or volume. And as a consistency of space, desert silence expresses itself as composition of wind and sand and heat, of stirring centipedes and sagebrush carpets, of the distant echo of a car on the highway, the far flickering hum of gas station lights at dusk, the low and baneful murmur of a dusty wind that sweeps over the desert and beyond its borders, out toward the east and through the lives of the people who live there…

But the thick nights and the textured silences of the Nevada desert are not the nights and the silences of the Las Vegas metropolis, that lethal and simulated city…Las Vegas, that city that grows faster than any other city in the nation. Las Vegas, that city which sees more suicides[40] than any other city in the United States…

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[40] John D'Agata, *The Believer*, "What Happens There", (San Francisco: McSweeny's), 9. The city with the highest suicide rate in the nation, in Las Vegas, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death, coming in after cance, heart disease and stroke.(5)

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Summer in Las Vegas. The temperature is one hundred and thirteen degrees and the ground is melting. Concrete roads blister in the heat. For miles there are no trees. On the highway, cars stream toward the glow of the strip. Ahead, the city rises abruptly from the naked ground, flashing neon and gold.

In the center of the city, the strip is clogged with bodies and buildings and cars and light. Illuminated hotels tower and slice the sky into pieces. Sidewalks here are soaked with alcohol and sweat. The air smells like cigarettes, even inside the restaurants and casinos, which have remade the world in miniaturized simulation. Above the city skyline, Caesar's palace rises – a roman temple gleaming white and gold. Here the Las Vegas Mecca. Inside the palace walls, Bette Middler sings for thousands of paying customers while men dressed as roman soldiers guard the casino gates. In the outdoor courtyard, tourists roam aimlessly in the heat, snapping photos of the building's façade or of the mini Eiffel tower that lies across the way. On the streets, escalators carry bodies up and across intersections jammed with honking cars and two-tiered tour buses. Walking here is almost unnecessary; most movement is mechanized. Advertisements on every surface, and surface itself an advertisement. Bloated bodies clump around every neon spectacle, waiting to be entertained. Occasionally, the cry of *Vegas baby!* can be heard above the dull roar of the strip, which never ceases to sound, even in the dead of night…

There is, in Las Vegas, no city save for the strip, that flashing neon center built in the image of a world, but governed by excess alone. Here the air is clouded with glitter and grit; the summer is laden with yellow haze and the dull taste of

rooftop tar. Here space is composed of narrow asphalt arteries and pulsing streams of excess bodies, all of which are bound together with a glue made of piss and silicone and semen and beer, of cigarette sweat and sidewalk spit and of all the human grease that leaks from every bodily orifice, of all the human grease that leaks from every human being.

And here in the summer Las Vegas is always toxic, for in this sprawling, stinking city, life quickly grows cancerous and lethal toward itself. Here there is always the plastic weight of the strip that is already too much to bear, the scent of burger grease and casino fumes that seeps into every crevice of every being, the lethal air that sickens life so deeply there hardly seems a cure for life or even a future for it at all. For life is, in Las Vegas, always itself made ill with the sickness of commercial urban toxicity. And so life, always-already made sick, can only look ahead toward more of this sickness and toward its final toxic death.

But even in Las Vegas, life attempts to resist its contamination. In those moments when it can no longer bear this toxic being, when it can no longer stand the putrid stench of the strip, life looks instead toward the absence of the Vegas lights, becoming newly directed toward darkness or blindness or a drunken leap, toward free fall, toward desert, toward absolute flight.

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Las Vegas summers demand the desert nights as a form of relief, for life in Las Vegas demands its exteriority in the desert and its silence its fluid form of being. A movement away from the strip and out into the Nevada desert is a line of flight that coincides with the desert and with desert space, for even in flight itself there emerges a desert form of being.

The flight of the speeding car. Following route 93 out of Las Vegas, through the sprawl and under the metal canopy of the Hoover dam, speed pushes highway into desert and darkness as long as the night will allow. During these drives and during the nights, being itself is left to be in the heavy Nevada heat, and so there it learns of desert silence and desert space, and also of desert being. For in desert being, in what it is to sit with the desert on a clear and quiet summer night, in what it is to even be in this desert at all, there is, in every way, a being that is opposite of what it means to be in the world of Las Vegas, and perhaps even to be the world of the modern itself.

Far out in the desert, the being that is made into an I and a You and a Life and a Face becomes no longer I and no longer Life and is only a desert time, only a momentary you, only the you of your being that the desert knows. To be in the desert is to allow the darkness and the silence and the heat to seep into you and out of you and across your skin and through your pores so that you yourself dissolve into the texture of desert space itself. And you are here more in texture than as a body, more as movement than in time, more in being than as Being, more toward living than as life, more with dying than in death. Here no sickness of the strip; here no toxic or plastic life. Here you become so much so that you have forgotten how you once were and what your face still is even now. Here you have become so much that you have forgotten how you used to be. Forgotten that you ever had a face at all. Forgotten everything before this desert being.

But remember Las Vegas – that utterly simulated city with the highest suicide rate in the Nation. There, no one cares to think of death or even of the desert at all: life in this city prefers to blind itself with the glow of the strip, for Las Vegas

is always a city of light. Casting its glow far out into the desert, the strip illuminates the entire city and leaves nothing dark. Shadows are hard to come by in sin city, but this is perhaps a shadow city nonetheless. Here, in the casinos and the strip clubs, on the streets and the sidewalks, among the tourists and the drunken gamblers, one begins to sense the absence of something vital. Under the artificial lights, thousands of bodies move together toward the fulfillment of material desire. Rowdy and inebriated, life in Las Vegas has become blind to the dark desert at the city's edge, and so sees the world itself as a mirage, appearing only in the reflective surfaces of the Las Vegas casinos. A reflection of many reflections, life is flattened and squeezed, deformed and mutated by the mirroring exchange, emptied of sight and emptied of any knowledge of death – the death that it had once known so long ago but does not know now and will not know again.

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In the summer of 2009, I spent a month living in Las Vegas. During this period, I passed a great deal of time driving through the deserts outside of the city and it was during these long drives through the Nevada heat that I learned the most about this space and the life it holds within it. Always on my drives, as I sped down the highway and though a landscape peppered with barbed wire fences and military barracks, I would think of the Downwinders. I would think of their cancer while I looked through my window and out toward the horizon line that sat crisp and clear at the desert's edge. I would think of their death as a drove just far enough so that the glow of Las Vegas was no longer in sight. And I would think of their ghosts and

I flew through the barren desert at speeds so high that the land would become nothing more than a blur of dull brown beneath the blue of an infinite sky.

And always, just as the desert would start to feel fluid and free, just as it would begin to disguise itself as an open expanse of land, as a space in which the frontier itself could be found just beyond the horizon, just as I would begin to forget the toxicity of this lethal desert land and begin to come into my own form of desert being, the Downwinders would come back into to mind again. And so, what I have learned from the Downwinders is that in the deserts of the American West, space itself has come to mask the lives of the dead and the dying. In this desert, forgetting has become the task of both the people and the earth. But here in this desert, where Las Vegas has forgotten death and the government has forgotten the Downwinders, life itself has been fractured into worlds that seem no longer to touch. But perhaps this is not such a terrible thing in and of itself. Perhaps, as they like to say in the Las Vegas casinos, that is just the way the chips fall.

the world and its shadows: occupied spaces and wasted lives

Along the trail you'll find me lopin' / Where the spaces are wide open / In the land of the old A.E.C. (yeeee-ha!) / Where the scenery's attractive / And the air is radioactive / Oh, the wild west is where I wanna be.

Tom Lehr

Directions in America are different…But there is the rhizomatic west, with its Indians without ancestry, its ever-receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers. There is a whole American map in the West, where even the trees form rhizomes. America reversed the directions; it put its Orient in the West, as if it were precisely in America that the earth came full circle. In America everything comes together, tree and channel, root and rhizome. There is no universal capitalism, there is no capitalism in itself; capitalism is at the crossroads of all kinds of formations, it is neocapitalism by nature. It invents its eastern face and western face, and reshapes them both
—all for the worst.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

The Earth That Can Kill

In 1984 interview, a Downwinder named Glenna Orton gave an account of a world contaminated. A Mormon mother from southern Utah, she had lived simply, unaware that under the toxic force of the fallout clouds, the very act of living had become a life-threatening activity:

> We were back to nature as much as a people could be. We all grew gardens, did canning, raised our own animals, we had milk, our own cows and chickens. We ate meat and fruit and things growing in the ground and we were being recontaiminated with it. This fallout, you were breathing it, you were eating it. They kept on telling you there was no harm, so we were all quite fascinated as we watched the pink clouds, big clouds that came up over the west hills. We'd all get our children up and took them out to watch this wonderful sight…[41]

Most striking in Orton's testimony is her description of taking the children out to watch the fallout clouds, unaware that in their majestic appearance, death itself was

[41] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 178, Quoted from the 1991 testimony of Glenna Orton, taken in Parowan, Utah.

disguised. As the defining feature of the fallout clouds, the coincidence of death and beauty seems also to be a reoccurring theme in the testimonies of those who live in contaminated zones, emerging also in accounts of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. In one of these accounts, Chernoblyan Nadeja Vygovsaia remembers: "people brought their children out onto the balconies, lifted them up in their arms and said: 'look at how beautiful it is! Remember this image!' We stayed in the back dust. We breathed. We did not know that death could be so beautiful."[42] Recounting death as beauty, the story of Chernobyl is, like that of the Downwinders, the story of a lethal earth. This story is told again and again as the experience of the contaminated zone, recounted by those who watched as the environment itself became a deadly force. Svetlana Aleksievich, in a published excerpt from her Chernobyl diary, recounts a world that is much like the downwind world of Glenna Orton, contaminated, lethal, and deceptively full of life:

> During my first journey into the contaminated zone, I suddenly realized I was scared of everything that was good and harmless in the past. I was scared to eat an apple, scared to lean against a tree, scared to sit on the grass. Everything was the same as before – forms, colors, smells, names – but it was a different world. Another space. A world where everything could kill me: soil, water, berries, rain, wind…[43]

The accounts of the contaminated zones given by Orton and Aleksievich, by the Downwinders and by the Chernobyl victims – these accounts tell the same story over and over again. In the words of those who live a life contaminated there emerges always a vision of a world made lethal in every way, a picture of a space poisoned by an undetectable toxic force, an understanding of death as the inevitable

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[42] Paul Virilio, *Unknown Quantity*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), Taken from the section, "Chernobyl Diary", written by Svetlana Aleksievich, 163
[43] Virilio, *Unknown Quantity*, "Chernobyl Diary", 163

conclusion to life made invisible by the violence of molecular toxic space. It is there in the contaminated zones and the toxic territories that the earth itself has now become the deadliest thing of all.

But what does it mean to speak of an earth that can kill? Surely, the chronic occurrence of the ecological catastrophe, which is itself the recurrent actualization of this lethal earth, has profound implications for the status of life in this era, as well as for the status of power. In the production of the lethal earth, is becomes clear that space itself has now taken on a violent dimension, and so also gives rise to a newly ecological form of violence.

In attempting to talk of the Great Basin desert, where the lights of the Las Vegas hyperreal blind and life downwind remains subject to the violence of ecological contamination, we are faced with the possibility that this American desert is occupied in a way that is not yet fully namable.

Colonized life: Necropolitics and the Organization of Space

It is, perhaps, in the zone of contamination that the world comes into full relief as a space of molecular colonial occupation.. Colonial occupation, which is the claim, control, and reorganization of a territorial space, originally grounds itself as a spatializing form of power. Given that the successful occupation of a territory means the complete remaking of that territorial space, it comes as no surprise that colonial power is almost always linked to the idea of a world. From the "New World" occupied by the early North American colonists, to the "Developing World" occupied by the modern apparatus of globalizing industrial capitalism, colonial occupation has always itself implied a production of the world anew. Molecular

colonial occupation is no exception to this tradition, for in functioning as a contaminating spatialization, this form of colonial power produces a toxic world, inscribing the territory with a new set of molecular-spatial relations.

The colonial spaces of the modern era, as Frantz Fanon has pointed out, were first produced in the division of space into compartments, organized by a network of borders and frontiers, enforceable boundaries and state-drawn lines. The fragmented geometry of colonial space, which functions to expose the colonial as a space that is absolutely striated, also gives rise to the living conditions of a colonized people. Living almost on top of one another, in the forgotten spaces between the strata of occupied space, the colonized people, according to Fanon, are starved of every vital nutrient, consigned to a darkness in which their birth, their death, and their form-of-life is invisible and of no consequence. In occupied colonial space, colonized life is synonymous with disposable life.[44]

Fanon's conception of native life in the colony, as an expression of life rendered disposable by the territory itself, is derived from a conception of colonial space as pure sovereign occupation. The space of Fanon's colony, which is for Achille Mbembe a space that is itself the raw material of sovereignty and sovereign violence[45], functions to relegate the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood. Inside of this third zone, which is itself a shadow space of indistinction between being and nonbeing, life becomes a shadow of itself as the colonized become the living dead. Absolute in structure and function, the space of sovereign occupation is the earliest incarnation of modern colonial space, which becomes complicated as it transforms alongside the shifting paths of modern power.

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[44] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 42
[45]Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics." (*Public Culture* 15, 2003), 25

Thus it is in this transformation that the colonial space of sovereign occupation cracks and ruptures and gives rise to the splintering verticality of late modern occupation, which grows colonies out of deserts and cities alike.

As globalization renders the world anew, spaces of occupation become almost unrecognizable. Operating in realms beyond the terrestrial, colonial power has carved a new face for itself. As territorial borders blur and nation-states melt into one another, the two-dimensional geometry of sovereign power is rendered insufficient. It becomes clear that the logic of spatial organization can no longer correspond the logic of the map. As Mbembe points out, sovereign power has become newly vertical; space becomes newly divided along a y-axis (however, Mbembe's y-axis, which is the line from earth to sky, could better be described as a z-axis, the vertical axis of differential mathematics). Splintering space from earth to sky, colonial occupation now functions within three-dimensional Euclidian space, for it can no longer operate according to the geometry of the Cartesian plane.

According to Mbembe, late modern occupation is a constellation of disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitcal powers,[46] the combination of which "allocates to the colonial power an absolute domination over the inhabitants of the occupied territory."[47] But Mbembe, almost completely concerned with military and state power, fails to consider the prospect of a form of late modern occupation that is not carried out according to the interests of the state-apparatus. In his formulation, the absolute dominion of modern colonial power gives rise to a space in which daily life is militarized, for a state of late modern occupation is fundamentally a state of

[46] Mbembe,"Necropolitics", 29
[47] *ibid*, 30

siege. But perhaps there remains the possibility for a 'state of siege' that is institutionalized by a power other than that of the military. Perhaps the militarization of daily life can be considered in other terms.

In a consideration of non-state militarization, it may be useful to situate the power of virtual capitalism within the context of colonial occupation. In other words, within a framework of consumer space, conceptualizing the militarization of daily life becomes a matter of militarization by other means. "Militarization" – so to speak – becomes, in consumer space, institutionalized by the apparatus of pleasure capitalism; the state of siege becomes the institutionalization of the simulacrum[48]. To the constellation of the three powers that give rise to late modern occupation we may now add the fourth power of consumer politics. In its most absolute form, this power gives way to the space of the simulacrum, and so may be conceptualized as the power of simulation itself. The most accomplished form of this power is the contemporary corporate occupation of Las Vegas.

Las Vegas Occupied: The Simulacrum and the State of Siege

Far out in the barren wastelands of the west, an occupied city rises from the smooth desert plane. It is the vertical desert city of Las Vegas, a city where space is profoundly simulated and death has been hidden fully away. Always expanding itself into the desert, Las Vegas is the fastest growing city in the United States,[49] for life here seems to love the strip. It is a known fact that more tourists come to Las Vegas

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[48] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994). For the term, "Simulacrum"
[49] ABCnews.com, "City-A-Go-Go: The Nation's Fastest Growing Metro Areas", 2008.

each year than to any other place in America[50]. But life in this city also seems to hate its simulated condition. It is a fact not well known that more people kill themselves every year in Las Vegas than in any other city in the United States[51]. What a strange city this is, this Las Vegas metropolis.

Jutting up from the desert Las Vegas rises along the strip in glow and glory, reaches its height and then collapses into itself at the border between the sprawl and the simulacrum. On the boulevard, pushing against the Las Vegas sky are rows of casinos and reflective glass hotels; an infinite wall of tainted mirror windows that towers over the strip and refracts its glow, the distorted reflection concealing all life moving inside of the casino-hotels. Past the strip the city divides itself into long blocks of buildings made from faded industrial stone and the wide squares of crumbling concrete parking lots. Here, Las Vegas splits into air-conditioned high rises and familiar chain restaurants, splinters into highways and tunnels, desert patches and asphalt arteries, urban enclaves and the invisible outskirts at this city's the final edge. There at the ends of the sprawl, there where peeling shacks lean starkly together in the heavy heat, there is the space that plays home to the illegal bodies of immigrants who came from Mexico and across its lethal border, there is the space that marks the edge of the reservation territories that harbor the life of the Indian tribes, who did not come from anywhere but were pushed out into nowhere nonetheless.[52]

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[50] Forbestraveler.com, "America's Most Visited Cities", 2008
[51] John D'Agata, *The Believer*, "What Happens There", 5
[52] DesertUSA.com, "Las Vegas Vital Statistics": The Moapa Band of Paiute Indians occupies 71000 acres of reservation land north of Las Vegas, and about one square acre of the downtown area, an urban reservation.

And over every inch of the Vegas sprawl there also sprawls a space that has no color, save for the occasional green of a palm tree or the red of a woman's dress on a peeling billboard advertisement. Here amongst the tourists, the performers and the casino kings, those who are the disposables, the colonized and the living dead remain unseen, hidden in the city's dark bowels or abandoned to its dusty outskirts. Here against the roar of the casinos, the cheers, and the rush of the strip, the cries of the dead, the dying, and death itself remain unspoken, concealed by the silence of a city that prefers to live life as a simulation.

Within the Las Vegas metropolis, the splintering urbanism of the city sprawl and the vertical sovereignty[53] of the striated strip come together and form a rising multidimensional network of mirror walls and guarded virtualities, of strata layered upon strata, of life layered upon life, of vertical axes of sky and high rise, of fractured ground of asphalt and exhaust. Here each day, streams of tourists flock to the capitalist glow of the strip. Armed with fanny packs and money to spend, they hope to strike it rich, fuck a hooker, live the American dream. Here, everything operates as a cycle of expenditure and consumption, which has replaced every cycle of destruction and creation. Material exchange keeps life flat and passive. Within the city, the massyfying power of the West fuses with the technological advances of late modern capitalism and power can no longer be traced to a point of origin at all. Instead, power in Las Vegas operates though splintering spatialization and infrastructural violence, through casino sovereignty and in the service of casino life. Here in Las Vegas, power operates from everywhere and nowhere, for the city is occupied by the sovereign of virtual capitalism itself. Here in this simulacrum, life

[53]Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 27

goes blind as it continues to consume; with nothing more to see, it moves with ambivalence over the mirrored plane.

Always attempting to construct itself as the ultimate fantasy metropolis, Las Vegas must always dispose of its very own waste, human, fecal, or otherwise. It is an occupied city of the virtual sort; it is a space inscribed with the production processes of the illusion-commodity, the territorialized space of the illusion itself. As a city that has little governmental structure and an economy that has always put life itself up for sale, Las Vegas has too few subjects and harbors an excess of objects; it is a city that always places primacy on commodification rather than subjectification. Thus, in the sense that in Las Vegas, the subject is scarce and the object proliferates, it is perhaps in this city that the third zone of the colonial space opens itself anew, here that this third zone of indistinction between objecthood and subjecthood becomes the holding ground of every form of Las Vegas life that refuses the simulacrum. Perhaps this third zone that holds naked life functions to make death itself invisible, for as the Las Vegas County Coroner sometimes likes to say: "Suicide doesn't sell."[54]

As Las Vegas illustrates, late modern colonial space may come into being as a product of a totalizing power that is not necessarily the power of the state. Occupation in this city is occupation by the force of absolute virtual capitalism; spatial relations in Las Vegas are rewritten according to corporate interests rather than those of the military. In Las Vegas then, the state of siege persists even as occupation takes on a demilitarized form and gives itself a newly commercial face. Because life here is subjugated by a power that is fundamentally spatial, the

[54] D'Agata, *The Believer*, "What Happens There", 9

sovereign force of pleasure capitalism that structures Las Vegas is simply constituted by a corporate appropriation of the sovereign right. And yet, this appropriation does not negate the occupied status of Las Vegas, for inherent in sovereign power is the capacity for transference.[55] In Las Vegas then, it is no longer the sovereign that kills. In this utterly simulated city it is no longer military infrastructure that gives way to invisible death worlds. Here, the business of killing is now the business of consumer capitalism alone. Here, death is always put into the context of commercial exchange and the dead made invisible by the word of the sovereign simulacrum.

But even as Las Vegas marks a transference of the sovereign right from the state to the simulacrum, the city remains, according to Mbembe's formulation, a space of late modern occupation. Where Mbembe's logics of occupation begin to break down is in the toxic deserts that border the Las Vegas sprawl. There in the contaminated zones, a new form of colonial occupation is rapidly taking hold of the space, as well as the life that is lived within it. Today, this form of occupation has become most acute in the wasted, toxic deserts of the American West.

Wasted Deserts and Contaminated Homes: New Paradigms of Occupation

At the edge of Salt Lake City where the desert begins, the lush Wasatch Mountains slope downward and disappear into the earth. Gone are the rising rocky cliffs, the evergreen forests, the rivers and the peaks. Gone is the crisp mountain air, the sprouting life of the tree-lined lakes, the sky framed by granite angles and redwood spires. At the foot of the mountains, all life seems to disappear. To the

[55] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan.* (New York: Cambridge, 1996), 76

west, the north, the south, the Great Basin of the United States extends. Horizons emerge on three sides; the earth vanishing in almost every direction.

Here, low-lying plants grow into each other and over the red-gold ground. The sky sprawls pale and blue; clouds hang heavy above the flat, shadows shifting over a packed dry surface. Spirals of wind unsettle the earth, appearing out of nowhere. The air vibrates with a slow and languid rhythm; the rippling folds of silver heat waves, the passing plumes of gentle dust. Here the desert unfolds.

Here this great basin, here this most barren space, here this nation's flat and pale belly. The sagebrush carpet, the sloping mounds of iron dirt, the gleaming white salt flats – here the desert, the open, the smooth.

In the heart of the great basin, the sky expands, grows wide and clear, and dwarfs the earth with its emptiness. Here, the desert presents itself without apology, extending west over Utah, encompassing all of Nevada and coming to an extreme at the tip of Nevada, just south of Las Vegas.

Marking the eastern border of the desert basin is Utah's Great Salt Lake. At the edge of a valley, the silent salt lake sits, shining with flat light. Water undrinkable, life small and festering, waves limp and clouded with decay. Barely moving, flies coat the shore with their tiny bodies. A pulsing black carpet. Few plants grow in the gray and muddy earth. Gulls and sandpipers comb the water's edge, making food from the flies or the shrimp that wash up in the waves. The water laps too gently to make any sound. A fractured reflection on the gray surface, the scattered sun becomes a ghost of itself, faded and dull.

West of the lake, the basin, the salt flats, the desert. Heat shimmers and the land speaks a story of lifelessness. In the great basin, the fierce summer winds

gather low and strong, like snakes coiling on cracked earth. Slinking over the lake, springing into the valley, the winds carry with them the stench of rotting life. Like everything in the valley, the stench has been deemed holy, blessed by the Mormon prophet. This is the American Zion, after all.

Above the bleached earth, sky stretches on and out. Stark, cloudless, chaste. Vultures, and seagulls, and hawks rise high and cry their piercing cries. Wings slicing the blue, the scavengers move west with hunger, hunting for food that is already dead.

Following the birds, the line of a highway stretches out across the basin, cuts across the world and splits it in two. Here, the great basin truly begins. At first the land seems empty, smooth, free, but slowly, a toxic presence emerges from invisibility. Strange forms and ominous indicators pepper the land on either side of the road. Everywhere, barbed wire lining countless stretches. On the right, a government billboard: *Warning. Danger zone. Land contains unsafe radiation levels.* Off of exit fourteen, a chemical weapons facility, guarded by soldiers and their many guns. To the southwest a copper mine, black smoke rising. A radioactive landfill to the north, bordered by barbed wire. A sudden guard tower in the middle of the desert, soon followed by a lone Indian casino. Miles off the highway, a bombing range; ground pocked with craters and littered with shrapnel.

Plumes of blue steam, squat buildings of concrete on the side of the highway, Uranium mines everywhere in the desert. Many of them located on reservations, the mines produce thousands of tons of ore and depleted uranium. Working for only a few multinational energy corporations, American Indian laborers dig deep into their lands, mining the earth for money. The corporations then, take what the can from

the mines and the tribes and bury what they can't use under the desert ground. Deep in the earth, the depleted uranium leeches into the water, the soil, the rock.

Cut into the dusty foothills of the Oquirrh Mountains, the Kennecott copper mine goes deep into the earth, the largest man made excavation in the world. A mile deep, two miles wide, the pit continues to grow. After a century of mining, this rugged wound of industry is visible from space. Between the faces of the stripped mountains, in the deep cavern where the copper is made, workers sweat in the desert heat.

Far down a long and one lane desert road is Dugway Proving Ground, the military's chemical weapons testing facility. In full combat gear, soldiers guard the gates. Nobody gets in without a pass. Inside the gates, there are enough lethal chemicals to kill every person on the earth. Anthrax, Agent Orange, cholera, nerve gas. Almost fifty years ago, the nerve gas leaked out – a weapons test gone wrong. Two thirds of the sheep in the valley died from exposure, sixty thousand woolly bodies blistered and bloodied. Far out in the desert, ranchers buried their sheep in mass graves.

Nestled among valleys and rugged rock plateaus, the sagging town of Wendover quietly waits. Casinos advertise air conditioning and free drinks. To the west, the mean desert extends beyond the horizon. To the east, black mountains rise darkly over a white and salted plane. If you climb high enough here you can see the curvature of the earth. Past the casinos, up a rocky road to the highest cliff. Look to the west and the horizon line curves before your eyes. Before the horizon, an old military base. Abandoned barracks; crumbling concrete slabs over the desert. Beside the military base the abandoned Enola Gay hangar; the home of the plane that

dropped the atomic the bomb over Hiroshima in 1945. Inside of the barracks, soldiers have left graffiti and bullet marks on the wooden walls. In red ink, a drawing of a mushroom cloud and the words *what goes up must come down.*

Here in the Great Basin region, absence itself is a tangible presence, and yet, it is tangible only because a presence long gone has left so many ruins. On the surface of this territory everything dissolves into the banality of desert space. Land here is home to an excess of waste – nuclear, chemical, human. And life here too, life here is lived as waste - cancerous, toxic, abandoned. Here the wasted desert; here the texture of decay.

At last, the southern tip of Nevada. Here, the desert is most barren. On the highway, cars whip by at ninety miles an hour, and the desert blurs dull brown against a darkening sky. Far off in the distance, the city shimmers, blurry in the heat, the glow fades in and out of sight – a mirage of desert light.

Forty-five miles north of the city sits the Nevada Test Site, vast and controlled. A great swath of desert land larger than Rhode Island, this is the largest military space in the country. Barbed wire, armed soldiers, checkpoints and danger signs mark its edges and guard it from the public and their curiosity. Though today it remains little more than a relic of the cold war era, the Nevada Test Site was once the home of the most extensive Atomic testing program in the world. Established in 1950, the NTS and its testing program were created by the US congress in the name of national security and as a strategic response to the threat of the Soviet Union and its growing stockpile of nuclear arms. At the new test site, a well-funded atomic testing program was developed as both a security measure and as an effort to keep in step with global technological progress, for although atomic testing was primarily a

practice in weapons development, it was also an effort to perfect a technology that had become a central scientific focus of the era. Thus, the Nevada desert was to be made into a militarized zone where the United States Department of Defense could work outside the gaze of the nation, conducting its weapons research and competing in an arms race that seemingly justified the detonation of 928[56] nuclear bombs.

For the both the military and the government, the Nevada desert was an ideal location for a weapons testing program. Dry and flat, with minimal vegetation and high visibility, the desert provided constant and prime conditions for regularly scheduled explosions. Additionally, the regional population was relatively poor and lacking in employment opportunities, which was not entirely unrelated to the demographics of the population itself. The population local to the test site, which is located near to the Utah border at the southern tip of Nevada, was composed mainly of Utah Mormons from nearby towns, and American Indians from a number of reservations outside of Las Vegas. Thus, it was with this population in mind that the US government decided upon the location of the Nevada Test Site, for it was due to the "low-use segment of the population"[57] made of local Mormons and American Indians that the desert was so ideal, as one government official claimed. As is evidenced by official government records, the NTS commission had no issue in subjecting these populations to the lethal effects of radiation, even though it was, at the time, made aware of the medial implications of nuclear testing.

On January 5th, 1951, a one-kiloton atomic bomb was detonated over the Nevada desert, marking the beginning of a testing program that would last for more

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[56] United States Department of Energy, *Atmospheric Nuclear Weapons Testing: 1951-1963*. (Washington DC: Office of History and Heritage Resources, 2006), 21
[57] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 109

than forty years. Unaware of the harmful nature of nuclear fallout, eager to embrace the economic benefits and labor opportunities provided by the department of defense, local populations welcomed the new test site. Even the tests themselves became a welcome presence, for they provided a source of entertainment for the locals and drew tourists into Las Vegas. Often during the 1950s and 60s, from the heights of the Las Vegas hotels or from the ridges and hills of the nearby desert, spectators would gather just to watch the bombs drop. Mesmerized by the fiery beauty of the bombs, they would gaze on in awe as the light of violence mushroomed against the blue Nevada sky. But as they gathered to watch the tests sometimes just a few miles from their source, neither the Las Vegas locals nor the Atomic tourists had any idea that in coming so close to the explosions, they were exposing their own bodies to dangerously high levels of radiation and nuclear fallout.

As it delighted in Atomic tourism as a form of America's anti-communist sentiment, the US government said nothing of this danger, even though it had, for the past two decades, funded a research program that investigated every aspect of the bomb, including the effects of atomic radiation and fallout. Thus, the government would continue to detonate its bombs for decades, doing so even as the land and the people outside the test site began to bear the burden of nuclear contamination.

Carrying nuclear fallout across the Great Basin region, desert winds scattered the government's radioactive waste in towns and reservations all over Utah and Nevada. As the fallout settled into the water and the ground, entire flocks

of sheep began to die.[58] Eating radioactive grass, the sheep suffered burns on their mouths and faces. Blisters and boils appeared on their bodies. Female sheep miscarried, giving birth to blood. When not dead in birth, the lambs were so grotesquely deformed that they either died naturally or were killed out of mercy. This was the first sign of the bomb's poison; only a foreshadowing of what was to come.

Like the herds of sheep, surrounding populations would soon find their babies born into death, their bodies transformed by illness, their lives taken by cancer and radiation poisoning. Nuclear winds swept though the desert, though the Indian reservations and though the Mormon compounds. As these populations were rendered helpless in sickness, mutation, and death, the government remained silent and unaccountable. Legally, there was no way to prove the connection between the medical conditions of the Downwinders and the atomic bombing at the test site. Their death a by-product of the state's will to power, the downwind populations became the expendable resource in the quest for American dominance. Ignored by law and politics, they continued to live or die invisibly, abandoned in the nuclear deserts of the American West.

Since the establishment of the Nevada Test Site, both the energy industry and the DOD have transformed the region with an increasingly destructive use of the land. The great basin region in now home to a number of government weapons testing sites, mining facilities, toxic waste dumps, air force and military bases, and nuclear power plants. At the same time, local populations continue to suffer from

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[58] Howard Ball, *Justice Downwind: America's Atomic Testing Program in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 46

abnormally high rates of cancer, thyroid disease, asthma, and a variety of other medical issues, many of which stem from the atomic weapons tests conducted during the latter half of the 20th century.[59] Today, much to the dismay of the DOD, the Nevada Test Site no longer conducts atomic tests, for after the ratification of the nuclear test ban treaty in 1996, testing was halted all together. While the test site is now home to a counter-terrorism training program, the surrounding desert, still contaminated by radioactive fallout, still occupied by a variety of toxic industries, remains a landscape in which waste is the primary factor in the rendering of both life and land. Here, making their homes in this wasted desert where they are subject to the toxic effects of American excess, the population of Downwinders remains, growing larger with every passing year.

Lethal Ecologies: The Molecularization of the Sovereign Right

In the contaminated deserts of the American Great Basin, the world has been made lethal in an invisible way, for this entire space has been poisoned by a seemingly blameless molecular force. For those who live in the contaminated zones, the wasted deserts, and the toxic territories, the decision on both life and death is a decision belonging to lethal ecology itself. Developing the earth into reservations or suburbs, commons or mines, landfills or camps, the rise of state-industrial development signifies the decline of the ecological and its affective, life-preserving capacity. As it proceeds primarily through territory and ecology, the force of corporate or military-industrial excess does not simply reorganize a three-dimensional space, but completely saturates it with a pervasive environmental

[59] Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental Ruin in the American West*, 79

violence that has no identifiable source. In this sense, the space of lethal ecological occupation is produced when the decision on death or naked life is made on an micro-ecological, or microbiological level. In this sense, the becoming lethal of ecological space constitutes the molecularization of the sovereign right.

As an emergent paradigm of modern occupation, the presence of lethal ecology is dangerously difficult to identify or prove: in exercising a form of violence that moves invisibly through channels of molecular or biological space, lethal ecology may come into being undetected, rendering a toxic earth but a world unchanged. Exercised in the molecular contamination of topographical space, the invisible violence done by lethal ecology constitutes the production of an invisibly toxic world.

The deserts of the American Great Basin stand as only one ecology that has been made subject to the territorializing forces of the state and its armies, of corporate interests and capitalist industries, of multinational corporations and military-industrial complexes, and generally, of development itself. This territorializing force, which seeks to organize territorial space in the service of state-science or industry, operates in a manner parallel to the that of an occupying colonial power. As a production of space that produces a toxic excess, the military-industrial occupation of the great basin remakes the "third zone" of the colonized by means of molecular, chemical contamination.

The micro-spatial violence operates within the "third zone" emerging within the space of lethal ecological occupation is form of violence that is both undetectable and pervasive. In the third zone, the colonized being (i.e. Downwinder) lives beyond the gaze of the sovereign state, stripped bare by molecularized sovereign violence,

the life of the colonized assumes a position essentially outside the gaze of the state. Blending into the contaminated wasteland, the figure of the colonized being is essentially absorbed by the landscape of lethal toxic space. There, the colonized, consigned to viral death, go unnoticed and unseen, left to decay alongside the wasted land.

The lethal ecology that defines the Great Basin desert, the Chernobyl disaster area, and other zones of contamination emerging around the globe, should be understood as nothing other than the unintended consequence of unlimited production and consumption, as the accidental outcome of military-industrial complexes and multinational corporations, and as the unforeseen result of a long history of resource extraction and the continuing industrial development that even today is spreading over the planet. On a global scale, ecological contamination stands as the inevitable absolute of modern power in the West, and its emergence exposes the limit and the end of modern power itself. In this sense, the coming of a world made catastrophic by its own toxic ecology is also the coming of the end of the modern order, for no human made system can compete with the absolute disorder of ecological catastrophe.

Nuclear, chemical, commercial, biological, the violence done by lethal ecological space is inherently self-perpetuating and so renders the exercise of violence beyond the limits of human control, for it is only lethal ecological space that remains after power has gone so far as to alter the molecular makeup of the natural environment. Today, it is becoming increasingly clear that ecology itself has been endowed with the capacity to cause human suffering, even when that suffering no longer serves the interest of modern state power.

As nothing more than the accident that capitalism forgot to imagine, lethal ecology is proving to be capitalism's ultimate threat. Today the idea of a world newly rendered in ecological catastrophe hangs suspended always before us, promising a coming future of global disorder, it whispers a prophecy of modernity's ultimate end…

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, it is perhaps redundant to point out that the prospect of climate change presents a serious threat to the life of the earth and its people. The coming reality of climate change, denied for decades by politicians and scientists alike, has now been largely accepted as fact within the collective mind of the industrialized West. But this collective acceptance is not without consequence. As is true of all issues politicized by the West, the problem of climate change is presented in terms of its fundamental solvability, which is itself grounded the notion that climate change, as a human made problem, must also have a human solution. As it is represented to those across the world who live in conditions of comfort and ease, global warming seems a reversible tide, a reality that will be pushed back by the consumer's 'green revolution,' a future that can, and will be stopped short before it ever comes into its full and catastrophic being.

For the state, the problem of climate change is a simple problem: if the earth becomes inhospitable, the life of the human population is consigned to death. To put it in the words of Barack Obama: "if we fail to meet [the problem of climate change] – boldly, swiftly, and together - we risk consigning future generations to an

irreversible catastrophe." [60]Thus, to save ourselves from catastrophe and death, we must save the earth from climate change. More simply, to continue modern human life, we must manage and preserve the life of ecological space, for the life of the population has become directly dependent on the environment itself.

It is clear that at its heart, the problem of climate change is the problem of lethal ecology. It is fundamentally a force that threatens to destabilize life itself by means of producing an inhospitable earth, increasingly divided into healthy enclaves and contaminated zones. Today, it is both climate change and globalization that unite the world under the threat of their universal being, a coming to be of catastrophe for all the live that lives. Within the territories that have already begun to fester and decay under the force of capitalism's poisonous excess, it is toxic death that stands more and more as the present and future for those who live invisibly under the violence of the globe's proliferating lethal ecologies. As globalization relentlessly produces the planet anew, its excesses and excrements flow in the direction of the world's darkened spaces, seeping into the lives and homes of those who will live or die invisibly under the toxic conditions of lethal ecological occupation. There in the contaminated zones and the toxic territories, there where the earth itself has become the deadliest thing of all, here on the planet lethal ecological space could perhaps be called the nomos of the landscape in which we are now living.

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[60] Barack Obama, Speech on climate change, given to the UN on September 20, 2009. Text of speech via foxnews.com, "Obama says US Determined to Combat Climate Change, Despite Senate Delay," September 22nd, 2009.

of the double and the diseased: life in a lethal world

Welcome America. We are All Downwinders Now.
American Downwinders Website

Man is sick because he is badly constructed.
Atonin Artaud

Engels and The Violence of Omission

In 1897, Emile Durkheim wrote of life within modernity as being increasingly lived in a state of chronic emptiness, a condition that he called anomie. For Durkheim, France's rising suicide rate was the product of industrial capitalism itself, for as the scholar observed, the sphere of life in which anomie had become a chronic state was nothing other than the sphere of trade and industry.[61]

Although his study on suicide affirmed the existence of the link between the despairing psychological states of men and the alienating social environment in which they lived, Durkheim was by no means the first scholar to identify this fundamental relation. In 1844, more than fifty years before the publication of *Suicide*, Friedrich Engels had also written of suicide within modern industrial society. In *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, Engels identified the chronic condition of being that Durkheim would later come to call anomie, but in doing so, wrote of the modern condition in a way that Durkheim never would:

[61] Durkheim, *Suicide*, PG

> The working-man's unnerved, uncomfortable, hypochondriac state of mind and body arising from his unhealthy condition, and especially from indigestion, is aggravated beyond endurance by the general conditions of his life, the uncertainty of his existence… when reduced to the utmost extremity, [the workers] starve or commit suicide. For suicide, formerly the enviable privilege of the upper classes, has become fashionable among the English workers, and numbers of the poor kill themselves to avoid the misery from which they see no other means of escape.

Friedrich Engels, who was one of the first to see the conditions of the working class with clear eyes, was also, like his colleague Karl Marx, perhaps a prophet of the modern itself. Engels wrote further:

> When society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live…its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.[62]

In 1844, Engels had described a type of violence that was without an identifiable source. The "death of omission" suffered by the proletariat was, for Engels, evidence of an invisible sort of violence that functioned as a feature of the environment rather than as an act committed within it. Ultimately, it was the lethal condition of the proletariat's world that constituted capitalism's greatest crime: within the toxic realm of trade and industry, man could no longer defend himself against the threat of injury, for violence, murder, and death had been disguised, made invisible, and naturalized as a feature of the environment itself.

It is not difficult to see the parallel between the conditions of the working class

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[62] Friedrich Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1958), 109

that Engels wrote of in 1844 and those of the Downwinders that are, in 2010, only now coming to the fore. Five decades into the nineteenth century, when Engels described the conditions of the modern city, he wrote in terms of pervasive illness and poison atmosphere, of flowing filth and contaminated waters, of tattered, rotten clothing and indigestible food, damp crowded dwellings and teeming hordes of victimized men, of blind alleys and ill-kept streets, all of them filled with the swarming bodies of diseased and dying human beings.[63] Today, at the turn of the millennium, to write of the world's toxic conditions is to write of the emerging lethal ecologies that are only now becoming revealed to us.

Our 21st century life is lived in an almost-infinite number of ways, within a range of conditions that is as vast as it is diverse. The earth contains any number of lethal ecologies, each one of them slightly different than the rest. And the number is growing. For as the violence of globalization renders the earth anew time and again, the planet of the living continues to break apart, dividing into worlds that seem to no longer touch. Each of these worlds is, perhaps, home to a particular system of lethal ecology; each one made up of a unique set of toxic conditions, each one itself the site of a distinct and localized form of violence. But though all demand our attention, it is only two of the earth's innumerable lethal ecologies that are of empirical significance for this project: the first is the toxic simulacrum of the Las Vegas metropolis; the second is the contaminated deserts of the American West.

When Engels wrote of the modern city, London was, at that time perhaps, the modern European city par excellence. For the western world of today, especially for the United States, the modern geography par excellence is perhaps best understood

[63] Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 95-110

as a pair of spaces rather than as a single space alone. Thus, let us now consider this project's two central ecologies as a united pair: Las Vegas and the desert, two doubles colliding, together made one.

The World Doubled Over: Two Ecologies as Paradigmatic Pair

Away from the barbed wire fences and outside the military barracks, where the glow of Las Vegas is just within sight and the horizon line sits crisp and clear in the distance, the desert disguises itself as an open expanse of land, a space in which the next American frontier can be found just beyond the horizon. But in this desert of the modern, where the histories and the bodies of the Downwinders lie buried beneath the dry cracked earth, the ever-present mirage of the simulacrum obscures the real of death, and pushes it into invisibility. There, at the edge of this Las Vegas hyperreal, where the light of American capitalism meets the darkness of the Western desert, one finds a landscape fragmented by the continuous creation of death-worlds[64], a landscape in which the invisible spaces of bare life constitute the borderlands of the American hyperreal[65].

Splaying into the desert, Las Vegas is the consequence of the American ethos; the boomtown of the hyperreal frontier. The city, though absolute as a simulated space, is not unique in its hyperreality, for it does not stand alone as a site of simulated life. In those realms of being in which the illusion has occupied every crevice and every desire had been commodified, life itself is colonized by the pervasive touch of pleasure capitalism. Moving through wires and appearing on

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[64] Mbembe, "Necropolitics", 40
[65] Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation*, in reference to The term "hyperreal", as appears in this work.

screens, the simulacrum persists, becomes sovereign in the mass-existence of all representation. In all of its forms, the simulacrum renders death invisible, and in doing so, furthers the central project of our modernity, which is, as Foucault pointed out, the complete privatization of death[66], the exile of the dying and the production of the known world as a space of life alone.

As it spreads itself over the territory, the sovereign simulacrum flattens the world and primes it for development. Boomtowns spring from the empty surfaces of collapse. With death now confined to invisibility, life in these boomtowns bears no resemblance to life as it was before the project of modernity began. It is life after the disguise of the dead, life without an awareness of death. Life, now simulated, becomes life that does not live. The dead and the dying disappear from sight. Blindness sets in.

But death never disappears completely from the realm of the living, even when life itself becomes a simulated condition. In a state of exclusion, death looks for new territory and finds it in the borderlands. Just beyond the boundary of every world of simulated life, a corresponding world of death emerges. In these death-worlds, as Fanon and Mbembe have said, life is lived almost *as* death; the living beings become the living dead. Closed in upon themselves, death-worlds are made invisible by the blind gaze of those who live a simulated life.

But the death-world of the Downwinders is only one in many. Like the landfills and the waste repositories that can be found everywhere in the American deserts, as well as all over the world, the death-world of the Downwinders, and death-worlds in general, allow power to deny the human waste that it makes.

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[66] Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 248

Concealing death from sight, these lethal zones enable the extraction of death from life. They are the counterpart to worlds of the Las Vegas type; the invisible borderlands of the simulacrum. Together always as a pair, the hyperreal spaces and their lethal borderlands spread over the earth, pepper it with pockets of invisible death, which go undetected in their constant proximity to simulacrum and its own toxic ecology.

When looked at from outside, the death-world appears as a space of negativity in which absence is the only defining feature: all death-worlds are desert worlds of a sort, for each and every one of them has been deserted by power. Abandoned and out of sight, the death-world cannot be mapped with the traditional methods of cartography, which now lacks the capacity to mark that which is essentially un-mappable. To chart the invisible spaces then, one must look away from the map and into the world. Only in a shifting of the gaze away from the light that blinds, only in a movement of the self into the darkness that illuminates, only in this can we find what has been lost from us.

Absent Futures: Living and Dying Downwind

In sightlessness and idle talk, life in the Las Vegas simulacrum flees in the face of death, while those who have fallen into blindness bask in the glow of the city's artificial light. Outside the reach of the glow, within the darkness of the death-worlds, the hand of power continues to strip life bare. Naked and ridden with cancer or despair, life is forever confronted by the darkness of death, a death that had been exiled long, long ago. There, in the deep silences of the desert territories, diseased and out of sight, the Downwinders continue on with the task of living, even as life

itself seems no longer to live. For those Downwinders who live in a landscape made lethal by the radioactive fallout of Atomic testing, death has become the decision of the wind, the rain, the soil and the dust. Consigned to the fate of an almost inevitable cancer, the Downwinders live always in heightened anticipation of death. Jay Truman, a Downwinder from Utah, spoke of this anticipation in a 1987 interview:

> That fear…that internal resignation, I guess, that it's going to get you too, one of these days. That fear is to me as big a burden to the people downwind as the cancers themselves. Its psychological torture…These are not isolated personal tragedies. They are a cultural tragedy, a part of everyday life. We have all lost loved ones, friends, and we've all been lied to and we've all been expendable…I think we always stand by looking into the endless graves of the not-yet-dead.
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> This trauma is just as much a part as the helplessness, the despair, the fear. I understand this because deep down there isn't any question that eventually the Big C is going to get its way. I remember in school they showed us a film once call A is for Atom, B is for Bomb. I think most of us have in our own minds added C is for Cancer, D is for Death. I think that's what I see in the future. In my own life I try not to think about the future in a sense because I don't know if the future is ever there. The realization comes that you don't really have a future…[67]

Jay Truman's life is a life that is constantly brushing up against death. In his sense of despair, his anticipation of an inevitable cancer, his realization that the future is never there, Truman possesses a consciousness entirety structured by the fact of his toxic ecological conditions, his contaminated biological life. He is, in many ways, living a life that is completely constituted by the deathworld in which he had found himself. His very sense of being is inseparable from the conditions in which it has come into existence. It is a life made subject only by means of the conditions of bare life alone. In the life of Jay Truman, and perhaps in the lives of all Downwinders, the possibility for differentiation between biological body and political body, bare life

[67] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 309, Quoted from the testimony of Jay Truman

and qualified life, between bios and zoe, has become an absolute impossibility. As the form-of-life presented by this coincidence, the life of the Downwinder is, at its very essence, always-already consigned to a politically meaningless death, a death determined by the violence of toxic ecology and the viral form of power that makes it.

Echoing throughout the collected testimonies of the Downwinders are the cries of those who have realized that they were always expendable. In these testimonies, the Downwinders constantly refer to their lives in terms of their being disposable, worthless, expendable, without freedom, and in once instance, "not worth a hill of beans"[68]. The language of animality also comes into play quite frequently in these accounts; repeatedly, the Downwinders refer to themselves as being the "forgotten guinea pigs", "waiting like sitting ducks", or "dropping off like flies."[69] In one interview, while recounting the birth of a son with shriveled black legs and a face so deformed he barely appeared human, a Nevada mother repeatedly refers to her son as "it", seeming unable to speak of his short life in any human terms.[70] Her account of her son's birth is devoid of any articulated emotion, but the sparse tone of the narrative evokes a sense of detached hopelessness that comes through the majority of these collected accounts. From these voices, it becomes clear that death is always a fact for the Downwinders, the dead and the dying an ever-present reality.

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[68] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 209: from the 1985 testimony of Joanne Workman, taken San Jose, CA. Workman died in 1987.
[69] *ibid*, 159: from the 1983 testimony of Isaac Nelson, taken in Carson City, Nevada,
[70] *ibid*, 117: from the 1988 testimony of Martha Bordoli Laird, taken in Carson City Nevada.

From the dozens of Downwinder interviews emerges an overarching narrative of worthlessness, emotional despair and the desire for death and suicide. This collective narrative is perhaps best reflected in the account of Ken Pratt, a Downwinder from Salt Lake City:

> When my son was born, his face was a massive hole. I could see down his throat, everything was just turned inside out, his face was curled out and it was horrible. I wanted to die. I wanted him to die…[After a while] I got so suicidal that I tried suicide three times and three years ago I tried it the last time. Every time I get into a car today I think about it, just ramming into a bridge or a building or something. It's always on my mind. Because there's nothing to live for. Everything disappears. We don't know our enemy really.[71]

Kenn Pratt, who, like many of the Downwinders, is constantly imagining his own death, seems caught between the prevailing belief that we should all want to live and the reality of his own bare life, which has been rendered by a world confronted with the constant presence of death. Thus held back from the suicide he so desires, Pratt is unable to move toward death, for he remains unwilling to let go of the life that the world has told him to live. It appears from this testimony that Ken Pratt lives a life suspended in constant relation to death, for even in leaning always toward death, his is a life prohibited from becoming that to which it tends. Prohibited from its desired state in this way, perhaps Pratt's life is halted out of fear, but on the other hand, perhaps it is simply a force of habit that keeps him suspended in the face of death.

It is not difficult to imagine the life of Kenn Pratt. For caught between the magnetic pull of the death that we know but cannot logically understand and the pull of the life that now exists only in memory, an ideal of life that can no longer correspond to the process of living, who would be so bold as to depart from the comfort of life or logic? Who would renounce the idea of life all together, for it is

[71] *Ibid*, 297: from the 1988 testimony of Ken Pratt, taken in Salt Lake City, Utah.

not the logic of life that has come to define our very being? Who would give up the habit of life? Life: perhaps our human addiction?

Downwinder Paradox: Conditions of the Divided Being

The Downwinders, as those living in constant contact with the virtuality of death, emerge at the point of fracture that characterizes the limit of our modern biopolitics. Continually faced with the living death of their own bare life the Downwinders remain, at the very same time, legal and cultural political subjects. In becoming identified as subjects, they live as bare life that has chosen to simulate politically justified life. For even the Downwinders, despite their despairing accounts of death or suicide or absolute hopelessness, always remember to claim their condition in the terms of injustice, to claim their lives in terms of human rights, and citizenship, and pure American patriotism. As one Downwinder, a Mormon man who had lost many loved ones to cancer, said: "I am just about the most patriotic person you'll ever meet "[72].

In the Downwinder, life becomes inherently paradoxical. As it appears at the limit that divides being as biopolitical "life itself" from being as form-of-life, the life of the Downwinder remains suspended at the limit of life's outside, living in a state of perpetual oscillation, swinging always between the life of the self and its distant double, that dark and deathly other, shattered, selfless, naked, laid bare.

Perhaps the Downwinders, suspended at this fracture in the way that they are, mark a life rendered by power's transition out of the biopolitical and into a realm that exists beyond the limit of modern politics. Perhaps the Downwinders

[72] Gallagher, *American Ground Zero*, 72

exemplify a state of being caught between political subjecthood and a desubjectified form-of-life: in this sense, their particular kind of consciousness could be called a subjectivity of the desubjectified. As such, the life of the Downwinders exposes a form of life that constantly engages in a process of self constitution in which it is first deterritorialized and made bare, and second, reterritorialized by the matrix of subjectification, stratified again as a simulation of that which it never really was. The life of the Downwinder, always suspended at the limit of death or pure Being, appears as a paradoxical life that corresponds exactly to the paradoxical structure of biopower.

The paradoxical being that appears in the life of the Downwinder is perhaps the most acute form of an existential paradox that is inherent to all life within our modernity. In the Downwinder's life, being appears as an oscillating movement between the oppositional categories that have come to structure life within the modern world and its ontology. Thus, the life of the Downwinder occurs as an eternal movement across the divisional line of being itself, the going back and forth between categorical binaries such as death / life, smooth life / striated life; animal on the inside / animal on the outside; plant/man; zoe / bios, bare life and politically qualified life[73]. As a means of subjugating life to power, the binary opposition that gives way to these categorical distinctions is always at work within the interior space of the modern human being; it is the means by which we are made to give into the force of self-subjugation, a power that Deleuze once called the microfascism inside,[74] a compulsory practice that was, for, Hannah Arendt, the self-writing of the

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[73] Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 233
[74] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987),

Fascist subject[75]. The subjugating power that is both ours and not ours, outside of our bodies and contained within our skins, this is a power that fractures life and world at once, making pure being and pure earth unthinkable, impossible, unimaginable.

The divisional line of being is a boundary always already inscribed within us, and also upon the surface of the earth. It is precisely this line that has produced the world of the modern itself. And there on the line that splits being and earth in two, there where the blinding glow of the simulacrum meets the invisible darkness of the toxic desert, the earth splits. As these worlds continue to emerge alongside each other, the border multiplies and cuts the earth into infinite spaces. As all space divides itself between life and death, life becomes blind in simulation or is made invisible in disease. With the continued division of space, the territory splinters as the borderline is drawn again and again. The earth becomes fractured and still. Splitting even the smallest spaces, the borders become indistinguishable from the fabric of the territory. It becomes impossible to tell if there is any form of life that can still move across the lines.

Within the simulacrum, the living continue to imagine themselves into subjecthood. They speak of the nation and of freedom, but their words echo across the spaces, ringing hollow and false. Attempting to produce themselves as subjects time and again, they destroy every imagined difference, wasting life without a second thought.

And in the toxic deserts of the west, the living persist in the face of death. As they speak of their conditions, the earth rumbles and stirs. In invisible spaces of

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[75] Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973), 416

exteriority, those in the death-worlds have become the dark underbelly of modern life in the West and also that of simulation itself. Disguised always in absence, they haunt the earth softly with their spoken silences and with their bodies that live always in a state of dying death. And every once in a while, when those who are dying together grow strong with anger or will, when the desert ground is dry and fragile and the word's borders do not seem so harshly drawn, those who live in the death-worlds or inside of lethal ecologies cross over the lines and shatter them, cracking the surface of the world, which trembles as it is traversed by those beings that it has willed itself to forget.

The Illness of Man and His Ghost

Those who are the forgotten of the earth are the diseased, the dying, the living dead. They are the wasted, the suicidal, the blind, the shadowed lives. They are the doubled beings of the modern world, cast into invisible darkness or blinding light by the West and its occupying powers. And they the forgotten have lived among the known for as long as there has been knowledge at all. It was, however, only with the becoming-capitalist of the world that those forgotten beings began to gather together as a people with a name to unite them as one.

It was at the midpoint the 19th century, when the conditions of industrial capitalism had become too much to bear, that Frederich Engels looked at the modern city and saw that it was populated by working men who had become as ghosts of human life. He looked at these ghosts of men and women and children and saw that they were a class of people unto themselves and would soon come together as the working class, united under the title of the proletariat. He wrote:

> If one roams the streets a little in the early morning, when the multitudes are on their way to their work, one is amazed at the number of persons who look wholly or half consumptive…these pale, lank, narrow-chested, hollow-eyed ghosts, whom one passes at every step, these languid, flabby faces, incapable of the slightest energetic expression… [Their] disease must be the inevitable consequence of the conditions of the working class. Thus are the workers cast out and ignored by the class in power, morally as well as physically and mentally…a whole class of human beings [held] in such perfect, I might almost say, such mad blindness.[76]

For Engels, before the working man awakens to the consciousness of oppression, before he understands himself as part of a whole, as belonging to a people, as a being himself a proletariat – before any of this occurs, the working man is simply just a man who is sick with disease, only a man made into a brute. Degraded by his toxic living conditions, the workingman is hollow eyed and expressionless. Exhausted, pale and listless, in the morning light he is ignored by those who pass him on his walk to work. It is no surprise that almost all seem to look through him, for the body of the working-man appears to be little more than the translucent body of a ghost.

In the case of the workingman, it is disease that stands as the primary manifestation of his violent living conditions. In this sense, before he is anything near to a political subject, the workingman is always already diseased. Disease is the primary condition of his existence, it is the manner in which he lives. In this being-in-disease, it becomes clear that sickness is the existential condition of the workingman himself.

The Downwinder, like the workingman, is a being for which sickness is a way of life. The condition of the Downwinders points to an emergent form of what Emile Durkheim would have called anomie, for it is their toxic ecological conditions

[76] Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 133

that have rendered the Downwinders as they are, living alone together in a state of isolating despair. In their interviews and testimonies, the Downwinders speak of illness as a way of life, exposing sickness itself as an existential condition. By virtue of their contaminated environment, their cancerous disease, the lives of the Downwinders are also contaminated, both in biological and psychological terms.

Disease, as Foucault once observed, "is at one and the same time disorder - the existence of a perilous otherness within the human body, at the very heart of life - and a natural phenomenon with its own constants, resemblances, and types."[77] Thus disease, as it was and continues to be for the Downwinders, is always a condition of the body that changes the condition of the soul, or perhaps it even reveals a condition within the soul that was always there to begin with.

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When Martin Heidegger asked if sickness and death should have been conceived as existential phenomena[78], he would have been wise to answer his own question by conceiving of them as such. In the end though, Heidegger would fail to do the very thing he had proposed, for the scholar did not care to consider the life of the body from anything other than a peripheral standpoint. Always secondary to the mind, the body was not of much philosophical importance to Heidegger, for he was primarily concerned with developing an existential interpretation of the phenomenological subject, a subject rendered by thought, by intentionality, by the

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[77] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1994), xxiv

[78] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962), PG: "Must not sickness and death in general- even from a medical point of view – be primarily conceived as existential phenomena?"

consciousness of the modern human being. What Heidegger forgot to consider was that at some point, all of us the living will experience some kind of bodily illness. Even today, it has been reported that one in every three people will have cancer during their lifetime. A third of all bodies made cancerous? This is no small fact of life…

In March of 2010, New York Times columnist Dana Jennings published an unusually poetic editorial entitled: *With Cancer, Lets Face It: Words Are Inadequate.* She wrote:

> As a patient, it's hard to articulate how being seriously ill feels. In a profound way, we are boiled down to our essential animal selves. We crave survival. We long for pain to end, for ice chips on parched lips, for the brush of a soft hand.
>
> It pays to have a positive outlook, I think, but that in no way translates to "fighting" cancer. Cancer simply is. When I was sickest, most numbed by my treatment, it was more than healing to bask in a friend's compassionate silence, to receive and give a hug, to be sustained by a genuine smile. Strangely enough, although cancer threatened my life it also exalted it, brought with it a bright and terrible clarity. So, no, cancer isn't a battle, a fight. It's simply life — life raised to a higher power.[79]

Almost four hundred people responded to the editorial. They wrote thank-you letters and told stories of recovery or loss. Many of them had known cancer. Many of them had known the inadequacy of words in illness, many of them had wished for quiet, and for a quiet kind of love.

Jennings' account of cancer as "simply life – life raised to a higher power" allows us to consider the claim that illness is simply a life, as well as its inverse: the notion that modern life itself might simply be a kind of illness. The pain of cancer exposes something within us that speaks of life in is most elemental state. Perhaps

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[79] Danna Jennings, "With Cancer, Lets Face it, Words are Inadequate," (NYtimes. Com, March 15th 2010)

this pain is more of a key to us than anything else, a means of getting to know the nature inside. Lamenting the impossibility of this interior knowledge Frederich Nietzsche once wrote:

> For what does man really know about himself! Does not nature keep nearly everything secret from him, even about his own body, in order to hold him fast under the spell of proud delusionary consciousness, unmindful of the windings of his entrails, the swift flow of his bloodstream, the intricate quivering of his tissues! She threw away the key"[80].
>
> And:
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> Nature knows no forms and concepts, hence also no species, but only an x that is inaccessible and indefinable for us…how pitiful, how shadowy, how fleeting, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect appears within nature.[81]

For Nietzsche, our own nature, the X, is that which marks the existence of an unknowable other inside us. Nietzsche's X, an articulation of the other within, is perhaps a decisive articulation of the modern condition. Modernized by a carefully organized world, we are opened to reason and logic and we are cut off from our bodies. Can a modern mind know how to sense the inside of its bodily skin? How to track the flows of a system's blood or bile? The modern body is always cut in two by consciousness. The boundary line of reason is drawn already within us. Entrails and organs disappear beyond the line into the unknown territories of the nature inside. Each of us divided, each of us already thrown into our own bodily form of anomie.

This bodily anomie is perhaps a chronic condition of modern life today, and is possibly on the rise, alongside the rise of lethal ecology. In any case, in light of this anomie and also in this (or that) modernity, it seems now that the very possibility for Nietzsche's X, for desert being, for a knowing without reason, for a

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[80] Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense*, 247
[81] *ibid*, 248

transgression of the limit of life, - each and all seem to be an impossible possibility for we the living. Perhaps this is even the impossibility of life itself. But what of this life itself? Is not life also a concept made by the modern, simply a myth taken as fact, a subject taken as being, the two equated, time and time again?

After all, what is wrapped up in this notion of a modern life? For Antonin Artaud at least, the concept of life is itself a violence against being. In his *To Have Done With The Judgment of God*, living itself implies a process of subjectification, exposure and loss: "To exist one need only let oneself be, / but to live / one must be someone / to be someone, / one must have a BONE, / not be afraid to show the bone, / and to lose the meat in the process."[82] What then, we may ask, is the meat lost from us when we are continually made to live by a modernity that cannot simply let being be? This is, perhaps, a question that cannot be answered here with anything other that the words "pure being", for language, as a form of representation, stands insufficient as a means of communicating pure being. Pure Being is perhaps essentially incommunicable by representation; essentially unthinkable by reason[83]. Thus, the "meat" that is lost from us in our living is thinkable only as that which exists apart from man and his consciousness, from reason, from logic, from the ideal of life.

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At this early moment in the 21st century era, it seems that more than ever before, the contaminated ecologies of our modernity expose illness itself as an existential condition. As we the living are more and ever cast under the shadow of a

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[82] Antonin Artaud, *To Have Done With the Judgment of God*
[83] Agamben, *Potentialities*, 236

lethal earth, it is life itself that becomes newly unthinkable. And so it is now life that demands our first consideration as we come into a world that gives the gift of death with ambivalence and strips life bare as a matter of its very being. In light of this earth, this violence, this life, the phrase headlining the national Downwinders foundation takes on a new relevance:

"Welcome America, We Are All Downwinders Now… [84]

In a purely existential sense, living downwind simply means living under a condition of violence, a condition into which all of us the living are now born, in one way or another. There are many kinds of violence, many types of cancer, many states of despair. The Downwinder is perhaps nothing other than the sick or the wounded being that all of us already are.

And so, if we are all Downwinders now, it is only because we always already were, and also because we always already will be.

*All Downwinders Now…*Perhaps a slogan for life in our present age?

[84] National Downwinders Foundation, Downwinders Homepage

together toward a life: fragments of a conclusion

The world undoubtedly has a soul, and the soul is itself a world.

Gilles Deleuze

What language is, what language is in its being, is that softest of voices, that nearly imperceptible retreat, that weakness deep inside and surrounding every thing and every face…

Michel Foucault

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fallen: the modern life

Though I do not know them, the Downwinders have been my great teachers. The story of their contaminated deserts, their disease, their sadness, and their loss, while standing as an extraordinarily important narrative in its own right, is also a story that speaks of something much larger, something that affects all of us who live today. Above all, the Downwinders reveal to us a form of being that exposes the hollow insufficiency of the modern ideal of life, a paradoxical existence that is, perhaps, the decisive condition of our modernity. The Downwinder, when taken as a paradigmatic figure, leads us into a new understanding of what it means to live, shows us that life, a modern ideology unto itself, today demands a radical rethinking. Thus, in order to begin to do what the Downwinders demand of us, it is necessary that we let them go for a while, and begin the move toward a reexamination of our modern ontology, our conception of life. To begin this task, we can fist turn to a man who was, perhaps, the greatest intellectual pioneer of the 20th century, Michel Foucault. Always rethinking, Foucault ultimately opened up thought itself in order to develop a drastically different approach to the notion of

what it means to live. In 1984, nearing his death, he wrote once again, and finally, on the concept of life:

> At the most basic level of life, the process of decoding and coding give way to a chance occurrence that, before becoming a disease, a deficiency, or a monstrosity, is something like a 'mistake'. In this sense, life – and this is its radical feature – is that which is capable of error.[85]

Life as that which is capable of error. Life, here becomes no longer the set of functions that resists death, as Foucault had once said[86]. And so, taking seriously the Foucault at hand, it becomes clear that if we wish to inquire into the question of life we must also ask what it truly means to err. And even more, that we must inquire into the conditions that allow for error in the first place. To understand life primarily as that which is capable of error, is, after all, to understand both the subject and knowledge as rooted in the errant experience of life rather than as the product of a modern, and quasi-autonomous, human consciousness. Foucault, here working past every Heideggerian distinction and thinking beyond the intentionality of phenomenology itself, begins to frame life as a chance becoming, a process pone to mutation, as a being no longer endowed with the self-sovereign power of the modern subject.

As Giorgio Agamben has pointed out, Foucault's rethinking of the concept of life was consistent with his enduring ability to rethink knowledge itself. And yet, this later perspective is somewhat inconsistent with the rest of his work. Although Foucault's rethinking of life in terms of error was, in one sense, simply another dislocation of the theory of knowledge, it was, at the same time, perhaps his most

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[85] Michel Foucault, *Essential Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 15
[86] Agamben, *Potentialities*, 220

radical break - a break that pushed thought itself into a completely uncharted territory.[87]

"What is the nature of a knowledge that has as its correlate no longer the opening to a world and to truth, but only to life and its erracy?"[88] To this question of what Foucault's formulation implies, Deleuze and Guattari attempt an answer. In their final collaborative work, the self-reflexive *What is Philosophy?*, the pair paint an image of thought that has no image, figuring thinking itself as a creative movement, thought as delimited by a pair of thought-doubles that are its negative potentiality. This pair of doubles, the first error, the second illusion, stand as the two decisive threats to thought. As the danger immanent in thinking itself, the first double, error, is the less fearsome of the two.[89]

Deleuze and Guattari imagine that "error is the infinite movement that gathers together the whole of the negative…[that] into which thought continually falls."[90] Error then, as what results from delirium or madness or forgetting or disease, is essentially the movement of thought when thought unknowingly turns away from itself and toward its negativity, and so becomes cancerous, insane, lethal to itself. As a feature of creation, and also of life, this thought-double is a diseased sort of thought, a thought that undoes itself completely and, in error, moves toward death alone. This double, this error, the inevitable falleness immanent in both thought and life, is for Deleuze and Guattari, far less of a threat that to thinking than is the second double, that of the logical illusion.

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[87] Agamben, *Potentialities*, 221
[88] *ibid*, 221
[89] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 52
[90] *ibid*, 52-54

The simulacrum, the commodity, the cancerous double of life, are, for Deleuze and Guattari, always aligned with the illusion, the double of thought that ensues when all movement imperceptibly comes to a halt, while the classical image of thought replaces the process of thinking, when the belief in knowledge no longer demands thought as knowledge's infinite pursuit. This double, the knowledge-commodity, the concept simulacrum, the illusion, this is that which proliferates, overtakes, and masks all thought in the blinding fog of western reason[91]. The simulacrum, the source of light that only blinds, the impossibility of creation, of knowledge, of life. The threat of the modern, the illusion is that which blocks off all movement, rendering even error an impossibility. So it is now the capacity for error –the radical feature of life – that is made dormant with the illusion. To err, no longer, to live, no more. The illusion, thought's blinding light, and now thought, left only to illuminate and to nourish the life that does not and cannot live.

Life and Language

The opening epigram of Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* reads, "Life does not live.[92]" This sweeping statement of modern inhumanity, spoken first by Ferdinand Kürnberger, not only rings across the breadth of Adorno's fragmented work, but also finds resonance in a countless number of western philosophical texts written after the second world war. Following the Shoah and its incommunicable violence, the west, cast into a crisis all its own, could do nothing other than think itself into stillness. For Adorno, it was now life that could not live, for Agamben,

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[91] *ibid*, 53

[92] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 1

now language that could not speak[93]; for Baudelaire, now man who could not move.[94] There are many more claims like these, made again and again; they themselves compose the west's self-articulating stagnation, writing the modern world with the words of an ever-stagnant discourse. In the language of absolutes, 20th century philosophy had thought life into a being of solid stone. Now, the image of life – nothing other than the still figure of a marble statute, absent of both language and movement.

It is not difficult to understand these articulations of still and stagnant life. If it does anything at all, our modernity continually attempts to capture life, to remake it in stillness, in silence, in an artifice of preserved decay. After all, the nature of our modernity, fleeting, ephemeral, accelerated, is such that the modern ideal of human life does not match up to the world that harbors it. The modern life, never the fleeting or fluid one, is defined precisely by its resistance to modernity's time, always attempting to solidify itself in spite of its inherently fluid living environment[95]. The modern life then, thought to be a production of the Real, becomes nothing more than a production of a being as a commodity, always-already inscribed with the narrative of its assigned subjective world, always already held up as the known eternal; life - the transcendental being of transcendental time, the life figured in terms of its heroism, its manhood, its humanism.

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[93] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188: "There is no return from the camps. In the camps, what is communicable and sayable was taken from us forever"
[94] Foucault, *Essential Foucault*, 50: "for Baudelaire…to be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of passing moments, it is to take oneself as an object."
[95] *ibid*, 51: "being modern does not lie in recognizing and accepting this perpetual movement; on the contrary, it lies in adopting a certain attitude with respect to this movement…that consists in recapturing something eternal within it"

If anything, the modern ideal of life is only just a humanist idealization of being, a profound nostalgia for a pure human subject that never truly existed at all. This modern life, this myth of humanity always inscribed upon reality in terms of its absence, constitutes the fiction of the human that still governs our modernity today. Thus our world, apparently deserted by some sacred humanity, is always figured as fallen, its failures rewritten as secular sin, its narrative spoken as a rearticulation of the fall. The modern life, always figured as a utopian human subject, is precisely what makes the modern condition one in which life can no longer live.

We, Wings of Icarus

Imagine our modern life as the flight of young Icarus, who could not foresee his future or his fall. The errant life is what emerges there in Icarus: there in the flight of the boy toward the sun, there in his father's warning, there in the sag of his melting wings. The errant life is there in his brutal, boyish fall, there in his death, his tumbling ignorance. And there in his life, is error itself, there in his living, in his dying, in his darkly churning sea.

But we who live the modern life, we do not live the life of Icarus alone, for it also seems that the modern being resembles the wings of the boy himself – the modern life a tool, a failure of flight; always insufficient, the subject a botched attempt at movement, the modern an image of the broken tool itself. And like the artificial wings of Icarus, the modern life is poorly constructed, always-already destined to fall. Perhaps now imagine this life apart from its body, becoming familiar anew in a boy's faulty wings.

Attached to a young living back, we his wings, rise lamely, sagging with the drip and the drawl of a newly fluid wax. And soon we sink slowly again, now tired of moving, in a state of living begin to abandon our task. We wings become folded and gathered and carefully hunched, pressed against a warm boy's supple body. Drawn as a hopeful idea, we are now his tattered creation, and will soon become worthless, broken, worn down.

Exhausted we attempt flight once more, only to become a languid flutter in a rippling ray of heat, the sightless turning toward the world's inner eye, the whiteness of the always-blinding sun.

Under the sun, now flailing, we as wings collapse, grow groundless, pull into all remaining life. Suspended before the sky in a blistering pain, form decays into stillness, or perhaps only into a wounded silence. Unable to fly, flight becomes a false wing's stagnant glide, now pulled, projected, and carelessly thrown.

And so our being now becomes laden with living itself, while our life, under a sudden heaviness, is cast from its flight. There, in stark loneliness, it sinks with the weight of a sudden stone. And then the quick, the fall. A gesture – one swoop of crooked wings and cloth-covered wood, of yellow, of oil, of liquid wax heat. Of scalded or blistered this Icarus skin, of aging or creaking these wooden wing bones. This descent of a life grown still, this sketch, this fracture, this life always dying; this body free falling, a rapid approach, this life with its future of skeletal remains.

All fall together, now in one graceful glide, the backwards inverted, and the fall becomes flight. But life, life, all life: wings of body of sight of skin, this life together, now leaping senseless, sightless, diseased. Cast finally into its soft and darkening retreat, life drifts into the delirium of a world's surging sea.

And yet, still on the surface of the slow waves, there floats one boy's poorly constructed set of wings: torn canvas and splintered branch, leaning together in the low tide. Atop the water, long curls of melted wax extend, hardened by the ocean cold, in dislocation they chip and flake away as fragile wax often does. Casting off from the wings, the fragmented surface of this unbinding glue breaks apart, becomes a scattered set of islands, timid upon the surf. Waxy slivers of white translucence, sour shards of failed flight, sharp crescents of pale moons, all waning in shadow, undoing, undone. And the ivory moons, the last of the wings and their final failed flight, now drift ghostly over the sea's small swells, where there and away, they are swallowed, a slow fade into darkening blue.

diseased: the errant life

Once more, let us ask the question: what does it mean to live a modern life? And so now to live: to not be made still by the force of horror or war, to be continually jolted out of stillness by hope, to find that motion cannot stay in motion for long, for every apparatus has its own particular friction, its own wind resistance. To live: to realize the impossibility of inertia, to be violently pulled back down toward the world, to be alone and defeated, fractured into form by the force of the fall. To live: to move again toward the open, despite being enclosed, to traverse the limit, even when it remains sharp and firmly drawn.

And so now to live – to live is to oscillate or transgress, to flip, to fly, to fall back and away, to lean into the darkness of error, to go blind from the illusion's hollow light. To escape the shackles of the Self, to cast off the weight of the signifier – oh, to imagine this impossible utopian being. To retreat always into the organism, to grow lazy from this loneliness, to return ceaselessly back to the isolating violence of anomie – oh, to know this cancerous fascism so well.

After all, perhaps we knew that life never had any real or concrete meaning. All we can say is that perhaps in the space between us and our desires, there emerges the motion that is life. Life is, most simply, a movement: the infinite back and forth of us, our disappearance from ourselves and then our appearance once again, our formless effacement, the returning form of our unwanted face.

In living like this, it becomes possible to imagine what it would be to shatter the self into a white and dissipating light, to remain as energy, as the absence of form, a scattered illumination, a body becoming of world. Here no longer a life in

dull color or blunt form, but only a force, a movement, the full being of color itself. Oh, to be this scattered light that life so desires to become; to forget the Self or the subject or the sign. Oh, to disown the strata that has carelessly, violently, ceaselessly taken life for its own, to reject life's empty human image, its doubled illusion, becoming its representation again and again.

What may be a collective desire to shatter the self, to tear away from the organism, to finally become both formless and free, is in part, a desire to reject the imposed form of the human subject, to peacefully resist the violence of subjectification, of the significance, of the sovereign word. Life, in becoming formless, tends toward living in its own fluid being. But can we prove this tending toward formlessness at all?

There is no proof, for this is only a question of desire. After all, we who know ourselves as modern human beings, have we not all wished, at some point or another, to become water or dust or other or air? To find within or without a death or desert or violence or dream; to know our being as animal or other or infant or earth? Affect, open, nature, utterance, love: the dissolve of the body, the leap outside of the skin, the living of life as creation, as art. Is this desire not only ours but that of the modern world which is always attempting to decay or dissolve back into a state of being earth?

It is there then, in the earth and in us, that springs forth a desire for involution[96] rather than evolution, for negative addition rather than subtraction, for a movement of tearing away that is not a destruction, but is instead a freeing of

[96] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plataues*, 289, 185: "*involution*, [is that] in which form is constantly being dissolved, freeing times and speeds"… "always a contemporary, creative involution"

matter from form, a dissolving of map and a turning inside-out of skin. All of these are processes that can only emerge from a world that has already made itself ill with the disease of the modern. This is desiring life that springs from the life diseased, decaying, downwind. But this is perhaps not so terrible: perhaps we should recall Karl Marx, who once declared, "decay is the laboratory of life."[97]

I, my doubled skin

Long before coming to know of the Downwinders and their contaminated world, a small sliver of a Downwinder being appeared in me, an illness of biological contamination. This Downwinder appearance occurred some years ago, when me and some friends, finding ourselves stuck in a desert town, let our bodies drift mindlessly into an aimless day.

Summer was near. The town had no shade. We took shelter from the heat in a dark bar that smelled of citrus and mildew and powdered lemonade. There, we drank sodas over ice. A piano sat slumped in the corner. Someone played a waltz and we slurped the final drops of soda from our glasses. We waited for the ice to melt in our cups. Thirst, oh the thirst. On this listless day, the bar was empty. Outside, under heavy weight of noontime, the town was empty too.

The heat was dry and stagnant. A slight wind blew, coaxing the dust up from the ground and in through the bar's open door. The bartender told of the dust: more than just dirt, it held pollutants from nearby farms. He told of the waters

[97] Karl Marx, as referenced in Geroge Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 32

nearby: a delta contaminated by agricultural runoff. Too many pesticides, too much poison, no regulations. Don't swim he said. Things fester silently under the surface.

Outside the bar, we wandered. Nothing was open. On the side of the road, a fruit tree. The bark was soft and the leaves dark green. The fruit had not been tasted before, not by my tongue at least. Lemon, grape, orange: the product of an accidental genetic mutation, a stranger said. Glowing skin of the fruit, pink with promise. But the flesh stung bland and sour. Walking away from the tree, the beating sun, a weight on my back.

Dry heat, thick on the lips. Forgetting the pollution – time for a swim. Stripping down, bodies left in underwear, we let the delta waters take us in. A great blue heron on the opposite bank. Life! Plants sprouting on the shore, vital blooms of growth. The water, a world into which we easily fell. Oh to be seduced by this blue, to forget what we knew of its toxicity. Oh to let go, to be fallen, to move with the drift.

There, limbs and torsos floated, drifting in the murky cool. Your leg, my arm, our selves – together and the current, entangled. The sun, veiled in haze, seeming slow to cross the sky. A word or a phrase, suddenly lost in a gathering of reeds. In the water, a half-hour was enough. Now we, back to shore, no longer weightless, again found the heat. The bank was dirt and not sand. Sleep came. Under the weight of the sun once more, my skin prickled.

Woke to a sun already gone and the kind light of dusk. The air vibrated with the soft hum of mosquitoes and crickets and cicadas and birds and the rush of the river and the sounds of fish flipping out of the water to catch gnats. But my skin felt strange, a burning. A red rash covered forearms and hands. A sprinkling of blisters

graced a bicep. Poison. The rash had spread across my legs – rosy tentacles winding up pale calves. The delta is no longer clean. This had been forgotten. The fall into the delta, my mistake, my error. Here, now and again the foggy thought - remember to remember the quiet violence of this water. Too late. In the blur, a seeping toxicity, stigmata on skin. The rash, relentless, continued to spread.

Today the rash remains in me, always potential, appearing here or there, whenever the sun is strong. Perhaps it is a sign of my very own genetic mutation, my chemical occupation, my self-same contamination.

But no matter. And no cure. Here and there, am I, unsettled by toxic water or dust. A rash, an error, an illness. A body thrown by the movement of mutation. A body no longer speaking itself as a body alone. This virus, this weakness, this second skin, this painful companion, undoing, undone. Now and always, becoming with the weight of the sun, the strange rash emerges from this body, my old organism, unfamiliar, disappearing, disappeared. Once mine, this body, now doubled, is no longer known; this body, not mine, a crowd of boils, reactions, inflammations. My self-made other, this body without language, the outside of all skin.

A blister forms slowly, and clean skin surrounds. At this limit, two viral doubles touch upon a porous surface. Here the meeting of two bodies in one, both living, both strangers, each itself a self-same skin. Funny, my bodily mutation, bringing the me of disease toward the I of me, an I long foolish, long fallen, long gone. But here and there is the pair of me, now preparing for the flip, the inversion, the inevitable exchange. Double, redouble, the disease made as life, and life the disease.

This threatening promise of a body made ill, only an affirmation of my oscillation; this life prone to delirious disappearances, to future redoublings, to a being always-already split from within, a reciprocal speaking of two bodily doubles, one in the virus, and the other in skin. But here the communication of the origin and its death, there the two doubles made one, where together they become eternally inverting, both caught in the play of perpetual emergence[98].

Mutation, disease; the world's gift, perhaps. But a gift known as gift to me alone, my small illness, this easy eruption. No loss there, really. Skin against skin, the pain of the sun. A molecular play, the painting of contamination, on me, in me, only a becoming, never a death. For me, death is elsewhere, concealed. There, over somewhere and outside, it remains dark, absent, a desert. A death, forgotten, obscured by skin or by inflammation. Preoccupied by my surface, I remain fallen.

For me though, fallen is fine. A life always in error means a life of movement at least. With error, life, and the life of the world both stay in motion. To live a living life means always to err. This errant life, inevitable and mine, lives my being into worlds of deserts or cities or darkness or light, into worlds where winds carry the poison of nuclear war, into territories where toxic rivers slip a slow and steady violence through dusty old desert towns.

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[98] Foucault, *Essential Foucault*, 440: "the origin in contact with death….in the flash of their infinite oscillation"

desert: a life…

Given the state of us who live today, it becomes clear that it is now more than ever that thought must inquire into the very essence of the question of life: that is to say, in other words, that in the attempt to live, we must comport ourselves toward the question of what it means to live at all, toward an idea of life that is always itself a question: life only as that which hangs suspended before us in a state of perpetual indeterminance, as the pure potentiality of life itself, as the 'living life' that is itself a resistance to violence or to war, as a process that is itself a becoming of life and of love.

At the end of his own life, Gilles Deleuze wrote a short essay entitled *Immanence: a Life*. It was to be his last work, a work that held the force of a life within the space of its words. Deleuze wrote:

> A life is everywhere, in all the moments that traverse this or that living subject and that measure lived objects…It neither follows nor succeeds, but rather presents the immensity of empty time, where one sees the event that is to come and that has already happened in the absolute of an immediate consciousness.[99]

And:

> A wound is incarnated or actualized in a state of things or of life; but it is itself a pure virtuality on the plane of immanence that leads us into a life. My wound existed before me: not a transcendence of the wound as a higher actuality, but its immanence as a virtuality always within a milieu.[100]

Deleuze's concept of *a life*, which serves to define the potentiality of all life as absolute immanence,[101]also reveals other paths as moving toward immanence, exposes life's less elegant potentiality in both the wound and its disease. For we the living, we are always-already living with the wound as the potentiality of life. We

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[99] Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews*, (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2006), 387
[100] *ibid*, 389
[101] Agamben, *Potentialities*, 237

are each born open to the virtuality of our woundedness, and into a truly wounded world. Deleuze's understanding of the wound as itself a virtuality on the plane of immanence begins to push us toward an understanding of the wound as that which leads us into a life.

And it is the wound that exists before any sickness of ours, for what is the wound but the virtuality of disease itself? But the wound, always inevitably actualized in violence or error or cancer or plague, when incarnated, visits upon the body the experience of its own human sickness. Our disease – the bodily manifestation of Foucault's perilous other within, a force that engenders the becoming of Deleuze's life in play with death[102] – as such, disease becomes incorporated into being as the condition of its dissolve, of its transgression, of its zigzag between the limit and its outside. And disease is perhaps also there to remind us that life will always contain within it the virtuality of death. As our human sickness, life becomes clearly revealed as the most basic bodily error, grounding itself in its potentiality for error and immanence, and for death perhaps as well; populated by virtuals of which the coincidence of two or three is not unlikely.

For Deleuze, who figured reality as a circuited movement between actuality and virtuality, the virtual was not lacking reality by any means[103]. The virtual, as it is figured in the philosopher's later writings, assumes importance as the defining characteristic of the plane of immanence, while also providing a conceptual framework that allows for a rethinking of the milieu, of time, of the concept of life. The last of these three concepts, a life, is in Deleuze, figured almost as the complete

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[102] Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness*, 386: "between his life and his there death there is a moment where *a life* is merely playing with death…this life with whom everyone sympathizes and who attains a kind of beautitude"
[103] *ibid*, 388

inverse of the modern life of the subject. In the claim that a life contains only virtuals, that life is composed of virtualities, events, singularities,[104] it becomes clear that Deleuze not only wishes to release the concept of life from the strata of its double, the subject-illusion, but also that he wishes to imagine life anew, placed in relation to the plane of immanence, figured in terms of its potential, its beatitude, its spark, its emergent blessedness.

The wound is a pure virtuality, the virtual being of a the scar, the mark of life as the virtuality of being as always-already wounded. The virtual of the wound is always among a collectivity that constitutes the whole of the virtual itself. The field populated only by virtuals is itself the plane of immanence, the presence of the undifferentiated within every other plane. For Deleuze, the plane of immanence is precisely that which can never be thought or lived, for it is the virtual of thought and also that of life as well[105]. But the plane of immanence cannot not be written off as just another unknowable, for it is that very inability to know or to speak this plane which teaches us to know that it is there, always un-thought. To simply know that the plane of immanence is present, better even, to show the there of its being, the potentiality of its presence, is for Deleuze, the supreme act of philosophy. He writes:

> The plane of immanence is the non-thought within thought. It is the base of all planes, it is the most intimate within thought and yet the absolute outside - an outside more distant than any external world because it is an inside deeper than any internal world. It is immanence…the incessant to-ing and fro-ing of the plane, infinite movement. Perhaps the supreme act of philosophy: not so much to think THE plane of immanence, but to show that it is there…that which cannot be thought and that which must be thought, which was thought once, as Christ was incarnated once, in order to show, that one time, the possibility of the impossible.[106]

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[104] *ibid*, 388
[105] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 59
[106] *ibid*, 59

In the virtuality of the wound, we find a sly promise of beatitude, the promise of a life of pure immanence: a life without moments, without progress or event, beyond good or evil, with no need for a name. This life, a life already everywhere among us, is a life no longer actualized as being for it lives as the virtual lives, suspended as potentiality, the immanent possible, always within the distant collectivity of the plane. This life, *a life*, is as to living as the plane of immanence is to thought. *A life* is the very potentiality of life itself, the suspended salvation of we, the living. Turned toward this flickering figure of our own possible impossibility, we await life's second coming, forever forgetting that this life is precisely the being of us that is always-already everywhere, come just as soon as it has gone.

Thinking on the Lower Frequencies

Never spoken or seen, perhaps *a life* can still be heard. The ever-shifting limit of our being, a life is that which remains undifferentiated. Never articulated, it moves though our words, the being of language itself. Perhaps to listen for a life then takes an adjusting of the ear, for a life is more a matter of rhythm than melody, an issue of time rather than place. The oscillation of a sound wave – a tempo, a movement, a virtual time. Perhaps a life, and so the plane of immanence, pose the question of frequency after all: a life of pure immanence was there in Ralph Ellison's invisible man who spoke from the pages of his invisible book: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"[107]

The discourse of "voice" that has dominated the western theoretical discourse for several decades has worked against our ability to listen, for it has

[107] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (New York: Vintage, 1995), 581

resulted in an obsession with speaking oneself out of silence, and speaking the "voiceless" out of silence as well. The fact that theory has begun to think it can both speak of and speak for the subaltern is a sign that its discourse has become, at times, a way of producing the world through the violence of inscription. We - the we who try to theorize – we should, perhaps, stop speaking for a while and learn to listen instead. The question of what it would mean for theory to hear has no easy answer: the question of a listening theory demands the interrogation of both language as well as the extent to which it can work in the service of communicability as it perhaps once did.

The question of this thinking, this theory, this written work is at first the question of listening itself, but demands a becoming aware of the plane of immanence, of realizing the absolute groundlessness of being, of knowing that there is the potential for a being apart the weight of modernity. How is it that even the simulated life of the Las Vegas type, this life made subject to the fascisms that proliferate in the simulacrum, how is it that even this life can perhaps know its own potentiality as absolute immanence, that this life can perhaps glimpse the beatitude of impersonal and singular life even as it remains in its hyperreal conditions? These are questions directed toward the modern life itself, for in every modern being there is always-already an element of simulation…

So let us now revive the notion of a possible life, for we know better now than to speak ourselves as corpses. There is, perhaps, no dead death in store for you and me, we together, a living, breathing, reader-writer pair. Between us, between the me of text and the you that reads it, we both become double: now there are at

least two souls, at least two texts. And in this between where there are at least two of each of us and almost certainly more of us than that, perhaps here we find together a strange between where there is no me, no you, no text, and nobody to read it – perhaps we find also that there really is no us at all, instead only the dissolve that us becomes when this divided thought, already doubled into the pair of the read and the written, comes together in the becoming-other of language, and passes over into itself at last.

In writing, this search for the doubled companion, our guide once lost from us, we find this double in our disappearance into language. Touching the outside of both life and thought, the eternal zigzag of the smooth space of language continually traverses the limit of being and the limit of language's being as well. This perpetual crossing, this elated dissolve, this is a labor made improbable for the modern life, time and time again. Often, in this transgressive attempt at pure communication, we stand in loss of a dark night that made us faceless and free, there left alone in lack with our absence, our lives long to become mobile, formless, and truly lived.

Gilles Deleuze imagined that there is and always a life sparking somewhere in the betweens of our words, that in passing through language, a life shatters into an always becoming idea.[108] The life of a text, as the force that traverses it, opens language up to itself, unfolding the word in a becoming of the smooth or haptic space. The space of the haptic text also expands itself into the being of an infinite silence, itself suspended before the law of the word. Here, through the text, life moves free and unattached. In this open, the potentiality of literature simply

[108] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, (London: Verso, 1998), 5

becomes a life, for the space of language has become neutral, smooth, formless and free.

As it relates to language and otherwise, the principle of smooth space in Deleuze functions always in relation to that of striated space: in contrast to the ordered territories of the apparatus, it is an expression of the deterritorialized. As a space that creates and is created by nomads, smooth space is defined in terms of both topography and speed: it is both and at once a production and a feature of the earth. Itself a sort of circuit, smooth space gives rise to the nomads, who themselves are the vectors of deterritorilization that give rise to smooth space. In this way, the principle of smooth space serves to localize deterritorilization itself, functioning to express a space that is occupied by intensive nomadic speeds or filled by the vortical movement of a war machine. And just like the war machine that is exterior to the state apparatus but always operating in relation to it, smooth space is apart from the striated but is, at the same time, always localized within the context of a striated cartography, which is the cartography of global space. On smooth space, Deleuze and Guattari write:

> Smooth space is directional rather than dimensional or metric. Smooth space is filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things. It is a space of affects, more than one of properties. It is haptic rather than optical perception. Whereas in the striated forms organize a matter, in the smooth materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them. It is an intensive rather than extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties. …. Perception in it is based on symptoms and evaluations rather than measures and properties. That is why smooth space is occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities, as in the desert, steppe, or ice. The creaking of ice and the song of the sands.[109]

[109] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 382

The principle of smooth space, therefore, serves to denote a space that cannot be perceived by any exteriority, for it is nothing other what is local to it. It is a space that works in fundamental opposition to the three great strata: "the organism, significance, and subjectification."[110] Smooth space is, is the most basic sense, the space produced in the becoming of literature, of desire, of art.

So how to write to make the smooth, and how to write to hear a life? How to use the terms of reason to make a gesture that does not invoke the hand? To write in the very words that solidify the passage of energy into force or power is a dangerous game if the task is to create a space of n-dimensions, to write a work without an author, to melt words together in the service of a world and a life. And so the listening language means that the work itself, by way of both its language and content, becomes a force of deterritorilization.

But in every smooth space of creative production, thought itself becomes undone in the absence of the thought-image, and so comes into a momentary contact with its outside. Moving between the limit in eternal oscillation, thought itself becomes a movement, a flash, a flicker, a trace. In the movement of thought and of language, we begin to glimpse of the delirious spark of life, to feel the shattering glory of transgression as a self-same resonance. We become undone by the force of the life that moves through the text. There in the dark of a worded wood, we may begin to lose ourselves in order to find ourselves[111] once again, to locate what has become absent, to join with our divided doubles and to commune with each other fully and at last.

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[110] Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 159
[111] Foucault, *Essential Foucault*, 438

Deleuze once said "the book makes an assemblage with the world"[112]. I say: Make a work of art that never acts, that communicates and brushes up against life! Disavow the task of thought, refuse to "think" both being and time, rupture logic or language from without and within. Shatter thought to shatter the self; write in a shattered language to hear what can never be voiced. To make a text is to know its rhythm before its words. The work is always best understood before one can articulate an understanding of it. Language, a rhythm, creates its own time: in time, a true aesthetics of existence for the work, and language, only a gesture, a rupture, a trace. In this writing, we find the passage of life through language, there and always becoming…a language, a life, the becoming of a welling in the chest, the flicker of light in a breaking dawn, the shifting pulse of the sea, the faint and faraway echo of a forgotten night, a warm wind upon pricking skin, the suspended silence of an endless wait, the turn, the flight, the fall, a life.

Write in order to hear the soul of the world. Or as Gilles Deleuze might have said, write to make the desert, write for a people who do not yet exist…

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Writing is a production of space. The question is, how to write a desert space from within language itself?

An shifting answer here, a beginning in the words of Michel Foucault: "To lend an ear to the silvery voice of the Sirens, to turn toward the forbidden face that has already concealed itself, is not simply to abandon the world and the distraction

[112] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4

of appearance; it is suddenly to feel grow within oneself a desert at the other end of which gleams a language without an assignable subject, a godless law, a personal pronoun without a person, an eyeless expressionless face, an other that is the same."[113]

In writing, the sound of a silent language, echoing across the desert within us and our language. Our desert and in the space of our desert, there our full and selfless being. There in desert being, desert life, a life of pure immanence, there is a life that knows nothing of what it is meant to be or to become, for all it knows are betweens. It is, perhaps, only the deserts of our modernity that can truly think life as the being that it always-already is….

Can this desert be written? I have no answer, for there is, of course, the possibility that this cannot be answered, cannot be done within the framework we have inherited, the framework of this project. There is the possibility that the desert is not ours to make.

But then again, perhaps it is not a question of production at all. Not a question of the act, the future, the made. Perhaps this is not even a question, but simply the sign of an answer that we always-already know, already do, already are. Perhaps the desert was never meant to be made or mapped or found or made.

Perhaps the desert is only a source of faith: our desert unknown, we listen for its trace in the lower frequencies, and there is how we hear desert space beneath all spaces, desert silence the sound within all sound, desert thought the virtuality of thought itself. And there is how we sense this desert being, this faceless, forbidden being that awakens all of us to movement, to silence, and to our living life.

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[113] Foucault, *Essential Foucault*, 436

Life, this desert flight

This desert, again. Look out the car window and at a dull and continuous streak of highway landscape. Those blurred and industrial tones of gray-brown—garbage- smoke that coat the world of the highway like a layer of fine dirt that has settled and become.

On earth splashed occasionally with a line of red-orange-yellow-grease, signs marking fast at ninety-five miles an hour on a Nevada highway. Here when the sky is hanging low and the road stretches empty and the desert dull brown in every direction, the world begins to smudge itself smooth, like a thumb softening rough charcoal lines drawn on coarse paper.

The smudging of the world in car window. Here speed begins to soften the edges of the real. There movement begins to blur the harsh lines of highway geometry.

There, content and its image. The unpleasant details of a cracked landscape. Scatterings of mines, industry, reservation, expanse, Las Vegas lights: Nevada appears in a series of images framed by the shape of car window. The world flickers for a second past the metal frame. Worlds blurring together as speed leads into dust or heat or the rushing silence of the road. Speed like a whip, down the highway, life goes toward wherever it is going, where there, it will live as whatever kind of life it becomes.

But the desert has the bitter taste of tastes for the air along most Nevada highways is not quite clean. It was tested by my tongue, the taste what we have

swallowed together. Here the air does not taste of quiet or its open, but of exhaust, of grease, of mines. Near to Las Vegas, windows stayed closed.

These highways of the western United States. The view out the car window in Utah really looks like, no words. Just get in to a car and out onto highway fifteen, speeding will tell everything of place. Here the flat lakes and the wide shifting skies speak of a landscape that is of drought and of wind, of rippling heat and sprawling industrial expanse. And speak the great and lifeless salt lake that lies to the north, with its stagnant waters smelling of sulfur and rot. The stench that drifts down to us, bringing with it a desert, its toxic, together, self-same. The earth's drifting soul. Sway with a blessed wind. But no. Do not ask the wind for a blessed land.

This stinking, cracking earth, this home in the desert. Open stretches of flat, arid earth, and long limbs of wild, discarded emptiness. Here, build a world unwanted. Occupy a space abandoned. Here, life tends toward itself like milk left to curdle. Under the blue, land is left also to its own leanings.

The desert stretch and the wide sky above reflect together. On the horizon a mirror surface, a space of rarest kind. A distant line apart from sky and away from ground. Heat curls over the line of the world and becomes a wave. Here the air quivers. And not a sound in the still brush or in the brown and salted basin. The world quiet outside, there in the dirt lie bodies long dead. Here was made long ago into a dumping ground. Some life goes ignored. Some lives put in the way of lethal winds. Bodies on flat dark stones left for dead, diseased, or dying. Here a barren home. In the heat a place is abandoned to itself and its own gravity. A toxic being settles in, life becoming contaminated, still moves, still speaks, still lives.

No voice of the world but the quietest whisper. So to hear, listen always through the heat, ear tilted into the long moan of the desert winds or toward the quiet breath of a life that knows it is unwanted.

Listen for the brush, the basin, the valley. Search the desert for us and for the desert within us. Find only the emptiness of the harsh. Or perhaps its fullness. Nowhere and everywhere is the unsettled earth, nowhere its people, everywhere they, emerging into absence. And the desert. Here and always this desert, longing only to be or become, but always already in passage or becoming. Sudden on skin is its brush - a desert, a silence, a soul. And sudden are we, in flight or in fall, in movement, left shuddering. Made anew from the echo of what is everywhere already forgotten. Over us, into us, always passing through us - a life, a gesture, a warm and wandering wind.

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