

RESEARCH

(Im)possible Breathing: On Courage and Criticality in the Ghostly Historical Present

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Written in the midst of a courageous collective response to antiblack police brutality in the US, this text tackles the figure of breathing as a performative embodiment of grammar and time through which the ongoingness of racialized breathlessness is articulated, dis-remembered, and dismantled. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, the text seeks to account for repeated and immeasurable (un)breathability in its particular implications in the histories of racial capitalism, and in multiform sites, geographies, and temporalities that underwrite the global present. In this sense, breathing is addressed through its differential and differentiating conditions of possibility induced and regulated by suffocating spatio-temporalities, as a way to attend to the question whether and how the biopolitical contingencies of vulnerability, weariness, and brokenness are taken up as situated knowledges of courage, critical response-ability, and radical political imagination.

Keywords: breathe; courage; criticality; vulnerability; spectrality; Black Lives Matter

‘... the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for ...’
Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987, 275)

‘With breathe comes possibility’.
Sara Ahmed (2010, 120)

‘In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always to rupture the present.’
Christina Sharpe (2016, 9)

Breathtaking Injustice, Time and Again

These lines are being written in the midst of a courageous collective response to George Floyd’s death as a consequence of antiblack police brutality in the US. In the summer 2019 workshop from which this special issue originated, and which had proposed *vulnerability* as its guiding concept, I had opened my presentation commemorating the police killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in the summer of 2014. While working on the written version of

that text, 'another black person was killed by the US police.' *Another one*. George Floyd was killed after a white police officer kneeled on the back of his neck for nearly nine minutes and after he pleaded for air multiple times. The order of the horrific phrasing 'another one', which registers, however inadvertently, the figure of the suffocated black body as reiterative, excessive, and more than one, is caught up in the biopolitical *normalcy* of white temporality. Indeed, the very order and ordinariness of the phrase 'another one' repeats and recollects the ongoing givenness – quotidian as well as exceptional – of black killability. It indexes the temporal order of the necropolitical present: another one, more than one time, more than one at any time, always exposed to death, only acknowledged at death, always already dead.

What do 'ordinary' lexical terms indicate in this utterance ('another one'), in all its durable continuity and radical singularity? How do pronouns, determiners, and verbal tenses, along with the premises of visualization, tacitly subtend the lived grammar of unending, pervasive, ritualized everyday racial power? How do they work to render the devaluation of black lives unnamed, unspoken, invisible, and inaudible? Tangled in the historically sedimented, repetitive, normalizing contours of white supremacist necropolitics, the machinery of racialized police violence takes place in the long and continuous present tense. Its tense and time is old and new at the same time. Its unbearable return is not done with unless the economy of this signification – made over time, through a colonial capitalist reproductive mastery of time – is dismantled in re-articulating and re-membering alternate temporalities, different worlds.

The performative embodiment of grammar and time – as well as, crucially, the grammar of time – is imbricated within the repetitive sequence of dismemberment and dis-rememberment that produces racialized others as unbearable, un-breathable, nonhuman, or other-than-human matter. Hortense Spillers (1987) has outlined the normative American grammar that structurally produces the black captive body as a figuration of 'thingification' through routinized formations of carceral and linguistic violence that expel it from the time of self-determination, ethicality, gender, kinship, and history. It is through the markings of this ongoing violence on the captive body, what Spillers calls 'hieroglyphics of the flesh,' that the grammar of human intelligibility is rendered legible. Echoing Spillers, Christina Sharpe (2016) addresses 'anagrammatical blackness' as an occasion of violability and also resistant potentiality: in the wake of genealogies of slavery, available matrices of intelligibility, such those of grammatical gender and kinship that signify the *human*, are at once undermined and reconfigured while intersecting the signifier *black*. There is no episteme of meaning and no orthography of representation that can possibly capture these genealogies in the long aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade. And yet, the specter of captivity also produces conditions for resistant rearrangement of systems of representation into new times and spaces. Blackness simultaneously inhabits and is inhabited by, reoccupies and rearranges, the grammar of temporality and signification by emerging again, back, anew, and in excess, as the prefix *ana-* in 'anagrammatical blackness' implies. Even in the face of 'the long history and present' (Sharpe 2016, 115) of antiblack deathliness, political presents and futures of social justice steadfastly insist on repositioning language to address archival violence, attend to the traumas of Black deathly life, and perform the wake work.

The intensely repetitious timing of antiblack atrocity, through which this discursive realm of racialized biopolitics operates, invokes Foucault's analytics of the thorough normalization of the human body and bodily movement through time. The disciplinary apparatus of the timetable becomes, in his account, the emblematic indicator of a modern power mode which focuses on surveillance and self-regulation rather than the public spectacle of the visibly dismembered body. The methodological purpose of the timetable, writes Foucault, is to 'establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition' (1979, 149). The current-day temporalized systematicity of antiblack violability, however, dissolves

the boundary between carceral regulation and public annihilation, disclosing the constitutive operation of racial subjection in the genres of biopolitics. It thus occasions a necessary critique of the Foucauldian assumed 'human body' premised upon an opposition between life and death, from the perspective of critical race, queer of color, and black feminist theory. Achille Mbembe's conceptualization of necropolitics accounts for contemporary formations of power, which, in remaining haunted by the 'death-worlds' of slavery, determine 'who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not' (2003, 27). In a recent article, Mbembe addresses in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic what he calls 'the universal right to breath' as a fundamental, unquantifiable and non-appropriable, right to existence: one that is to be conceived beyond its biological aspect and instead as held in common; and one that was already threatened before the pandemic, through various forces of oppression in the long history of racial capitalism (2020).

The biotemporal matrices of modern humanity, as well as the modern idea of the human, produce and define a legible humanness (white, propertied, heteropatriarchal) from which black people are barred as inhuman and nonbeing, already dead – always already dead (Freeman 2019). Predicated on legacies of slavery and coloniality, the epistemic violence that underlies liberal humanism and the universal ontology of the human operates structurally to dehumanize blackness; it constitutively requires the abjection and annihilation of black, brown, and other non-white bodies (da Silva 2011, Lugones 2010). And so the biopolitical/thanatopolitical grammar of power calls for a critical reconfiguration from the vantage of the Black Lives Matter movement and all the struggles against pervasive cultures of living death. Critically evoking Foucault's theorization of timed body politics, Elizabeth Freeman offers a powerful account of *chronothanatopolitics* as a tool of ongoing and persistent, racializing production of deathliness: 'Antiblackness is more than repetition, even without a difference, if such a thing is possible; it is simply, duration, ongoingness without even the promise of the break that allows for repetition. [...] How, then, can there be repetition within a condition of unending death, or a repetition of unending death?' (2019, 67).

It is such sense of chronothanatopolitical ongoingness that haunts this essay throughout. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, this text is punctuated, yet also enabled, by the struggles to dismantle and decolonize the lethal banality of *this* present tense. As I seek here to account for repeated, immeasurable unbreathability in its particular implications in the histories of racialized dispossession, I attend to the ways in which this singularity lives on in multiform sites, geographies, and temporalities that underwrite the global present. And thus, as I engage and think through this pervasive ongoingness, I find myself, as non-black, wrestling with the recurrences of political suffering and loss that position myself in it –with others, as other; out into the world, for another world. 'We can all be said to be in the wake but we are not all in the wake in the same way,' as Sharpe (2017) puts it, thereby pointing to the differential and differentiating (im)possibilities of the textured and transversal *we* upon which coalitional political subjectivities are trans-formed in light of interlocking oppressions.

Struggling for Air in the Ghostly Historical Present

Inspired by, and indebted to, the last anguished words 'I can't breathe' gasped by those asphyxiating in racialized law enforcement custody, this essay seeks to address breathing and its uneven conditions of possibility induced and regulated by suffocating spatio-temporalities. It attends to the question whether and how the biopolitical contingencies and situated knowledges of vulnerability, weariness, and brokenness are taken up as terms of courage, critical response-ability, and radical political imagination. In this sense, exceeding and troubling the reductive distinction between *ordinary* and *extraordinary* exercise of violence, imperiled breathing illuminates chronic necropolitical economies of slow wearing down,

disenfranchisement, precarity, deprivation of resources, incarceration, extraction, militarization, and inhibited access to public health care infrastructure as constitutive for the production of certain bodies and populations in racial capitalism.

Indeed, this is about the *debilitating* logics of racial capitalism as overwhelmingly ubiquitous in Israel's systematic debilitation of Palestinians, which works to foreclose not only Palestinian life but also future possibility of resistance (Puar 2017). This is a biopolitical logic of imposed exhaustion as a mode of governance, reverberating with what Fred Moten calls, by way of Puar, 'blackpalestinian breath' (2018) to capture the perpetual state of wounding with impunity that registers the inextricable entanglement of black and Palestinian death within the realm of settler colonial violence. As Achille Mbembe requires us to ask: 'Is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective? What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)?' (2003, 12). My inquiry pertains to the ways in which the political performativity of anguished and agonistic (appeal for) breath responds to contexts that constitute socially positioned subjects as 'wounded or slain' in accordance with racialized, gendered, sexed, ableist, and classed terms of (un)livability. I ask how the exhaustion and aspiration of subjects produced and weaponized as non-white, indigenous, Palestinian, female, disabled/debilitated, migrant, and/or LGBTQI*, troubles such entrenched processes of subjectivation as management of disposability.

The Black Lives Matter chant 'I can't breathe', in its intimate relevance to the articulation of textuality and corporeality, became a call to interrupt the time of living death that drains the present of its air. This is a call that reconstitutes the present and prefigures the time of justice. As José Esteban Muñoz astutely notes: 'we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality' (2009, 1). This text, then, is an attempt to account for ways in which the situated and subjugated knowledges of uneven breathability might hold particular critical force in this pressing and present moment, in terms of responding to their unrealized, haunting potentiality and doing justice to the breathtaking social injuries at work in this recurrent living present.

The movement Black Lives Matter began by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi as a response to the July 2013 acquittal of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin's killer in Florida. The August 2014 killing of unarmed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson by a police officer was also subsequently acquitted by a grand jury. It was on July 17, 2014, when Eric Garner was murdered by a chokehold applied by police officers while he pleaded for a breath of air eleven times, in Staten Island, New York City. In response, thousands of marchers took to the streets and protested chanting Garner's last words: 'I can't breathe'. Three words, as an appeal for air but also as a call for redressing institutionalized asphyxiation, turned into an antiracist rallying cry and inspired an epochal movement in the US and all across the world. As a political slogan that foregrounds a state of wearing down and a call for empathy and accountability, it acknowledges all those who died gasping for breath after being restrained by police officers who had pushed them face down, hands cuffed behind their back, either on the ground or on the floor of a holding cell. It also protests the circumstances that make possible the impunity, whereby struggling for air is often found by government investigations to be an 'erratic or aggressive' act and the involved officers' neck restraint actions have been therefore justified (Baker et al. 2019).

George Floyd was not alone in his appeal for breath. His last words had been uttered by dozens in fatal police holds all across America. Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice in 2014, Tony Robinson, Eric Harris, Walter Scott, and Samuel DuBose in 2015, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery in 2020, and many many more. Named or nameless, unaddressed, countless,

unaccounted for. It was in the aftermath of James Thomas Mincey's chokehold killing in 1982 that Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates stated that 'some blacks' might be more susceptible to death by chokehold because 'their arteries do not open as fast as they do in normal people' (see Correia and Wall 2018). Establishing racial difference as pathological, this statement brings to mind Denise Ferreira da Silva's critical engagement with the scientific knowledge apparatus as an ontoepistemological tool of racial subjection that justifies the murder of people of color (2007).

The rally cry 'I can't breathe' commemorates the police killings of unarmed black persons at the hands of white authority and the courts' acquittal of them as an echo of a long history of unaccounted obliteration of black Americans. It also commemorates the civil rights movement and its vibrant practices of civil disobedience and non-violent protest. A language of breathlessness has been crucial to postcolonial and anticolonial criticism. In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon had stated that oppressed people revolt because it becomes impossible for them to breathe (1967, 201). And in meditating on the violence of the colonial state in Algeria, he wrote that in occupation 'the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing' (1970, 50). The Fanonian term *combat breathing* implies the authoritative reduction of the colonized subject to a fatal corporeal position of striving to endure and survive the routinized exercise of colonial rule (Górska 2016; Perera and Pugliese 2011; Sharpe 2017). In her insightful engagement with Fanon's interweaving of breathing with embodied situatedness, political subjectivity, and power structures, Magdalena Górska writes: 'Combat breathing becomes a matterwork as well as a material analytical tool for understanding dynamics of contemporary – and in the context of my discussions, Western – necropolitics. Simultaneously, what Black Lives Matter protests make clear is that necropolitics operate in a differential manner that cannot be reduced into humanistic claims of sameness, which overlook differential structural power relations' (2016, 277).

Attesting to the stirring and moving entanglement of word and world, as well as bridging the autobiographic and the political, the phrase "I can't breathe" lends a uniquely subtle plural-singular language to convey the ambient anguish of combat breathing amidst the workings of suffocating power. It bespeaks an embodied and affective openness toward the others, those sharing the agonies and agonism of breath and breathlessness, but also the awareness of long-term institutional racism as insidious somatic distress and deadly deprivation of air, akin to Fanon's conceptualization of violence as atmospheric (2004, 31). Drawing on the final lines of *Beloved* when Morrison writes 'The rest is weather,' Christina Sharpe has addressed the persistent and pervasive presentness of antiblackness and its afterlives as the total 'climate' in which black people live and breathe, or hold their breath; as the inevitable and self-evident 'atmospheric condition' of still living 'in the afterlives of slavery, in a lived and undeclared state of emergency' (Sharpe 2016, 100). This naturalized, ever-present atmospheric condition of horror – or, the weather as antiblackness, in Sharpe's terms – is denoted by the contemporary, enduring dispensability of black lives as it is haunted by the repressed mnemonic sign of the slave ship. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the ghost of the African girl who had been held captive during the Middle Passage and returns to haunt '124' and Sethe, whom she considers her mother, gives an account of the animated past of slavery in terms of the stuffed place from which she came – a slave ship saturated with the presence of dead or dying people, a slave ship where she experienced her mother's suicide as simultaneous loss and abandonment: 'Dark ... Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in... A lot of people is down there. Some is dead' (92); and 'I am always crouching the man on my face is dead' (210). *Beloved's* monologue is written in the present tense of deferral and disrememberment; in a syntax that, by allowing no breathing space, re-members the impossibility to breathe against the backdrop of racial subjection.

Re-membering, therefore, is about belated reinhabiting, reappropriating, and reassembling the traces and the debris of the disremembered past in the light (or in the thick air) of the present and its master narratives. The deadly suffocation of antiblack violability as 'the very foundational notion of modernity' (Sharpe 2016, 7) is not a matter of the past: it keeps coming back and unfolding, as the disremembered, spectral voices of the dead resound in the archives of the body-political calling for response-able acknowledgement in the disjointed time of the moment. This response-ability gestures towards what Sharpe has described as 'the wake' (2016) – invoking a multiplicity of manifestations including the path left on the water's surface behind a ship but also the activity of keeping watch with the lives of the dead entailed in critical practices of tracing black genealogies. Doing justice to the moment, then, requires dislodging its self-complacent ordinariness and reclaiming a present as always already infused with the atmospheres of the past and its ongoing violence. It is about reading now-ness as written on, and secured through, illegible and unlivable marked bodies in the wake; it is about engaging the historical present in the ship's wake, that is, in a ghostly present tense attentive to experiences and narratives 'of life lived in the immanence of death' (Sharpe 2016, 127).

What would be the political possibilities of the aporetic im/possible mourning that comes as a consequence of *still present* terms of racialized disposability and suffocation? In the face of the impossibility to memorialize or mourn a durational (exposure to) death, critical work is implicated in and complicated by ongoing albeit discontinuous histories 'of life lived in the immanence of death,' thus remaining contingent on carrying out wake work 'as a problem of/for thought' (Sharpe 2016, 5). Wake work is about transformative (and transformatively surviving) bodies breathing and/as aspiring, whereby aspiration is defined, in its plural overlapping senses, as: 'the withdrawal of fluid from the body *and* the taking in of foreign matter (usually fluid) into the lungs with the respiratory current, *and* as *audible breath* that accompanies or comprises a speech sound' (Sharpe 2016, 109). Performing wake work encompasses practices of re-membering and defending the dead and those living in the immanence of death, as well as practices of collective reflection, attention, care, survival and survivor testimony, through engaging with and thinking through resonances of systemic breathlessness, brokenness, exhaustion, misery, anxiety, depression, and dis-ease. It is this critical work of sitting (together) in the wake that requires a dismantling of the biopolitical calculus of living and dying in racial capitalism so that the dead start to count instead of being counted.

In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in the United States, reclaiming the haunting temporality of black bodies rendered disposable and expendable by racial capitalism requires attending to different exigencies, insinuations, reappearances, and incarnations of unbreathable life in the historical present, thereby contesting the reliance of this present upon intersecting regulatory operations of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability status, and national citizenship. The repeated sinkings and drownings in the deadly migrant route of the Mediterranean Sea and at the borderscapes of a barricaded Europe are an uncanny echo of the overcrowded slave ships, despite the distinct and irreducible historical specificities of those contexts. The call for accountability for lives lost in the postcolonial Mediterranean entails addressing *border-ness* through practices and processes of bordering and tracing, instead of the givenness of a geographical and temporal fixity (De Genova 2017, Demetriou and Dimova 2018, Green 2018). It is through such historically contingent traces, debris, and ripple effects (Green 2018) of border work that 'Europe' is persistently constituted by multilayered colonial and racial imaginaries, and new forms of political responsiveness are brought about.

We might ask how paradigms of refugee governmentality are saturated into colonial and racial, as well as gendered and capitalist, regimes of epistemic violence, and how they are displaced by the situated knowledges and resistances of the economized, racialized, and

illegalized precarious in transit across the borders of Europe and in the rough waters of the postcolonial Mediterranean. As some of these racially marked dead bodies get to be singularized in attracting the attention of white mediatized viewership and others don't, we might need to reflect on the performative contradictions and complicities engendered by the racialized processes of *making public* what had been made invisible and inaudible by dominant terms of recognizability. What histories of injustice does the media spectacle serve to hide from view? Such questions seek to indicate the ongoing production of dispensability and deathliness through technologies of border-making and border policing such as those activated by the boat C-Star which was chartered by a far-Right, anti-immigration vigilante group, after having raised more than 75,000 € through crowdfunding, to hamper the crossing of refugees in the Mediterranean. Promoting racialized European nationalism, the group claimed to safeguard Europe's identity and prevent 'Islamification' of the continent by aiming to send refugees 'back to Africa.'¹

In July 2019, hundreds of migrant protesters mainly from West Africa occupied the Panthéon building in Paris to denounce their conditions as undocumented workers and to demand their right to stay. They chanted, waved papers in the air, sat down on the building's floor, and remained in the Panthéon for several hours before they were evacuated by police. One of the protest organizers said in a statement ahead of the event: 'We are paperless, voiceless, faceless for the French Republic. We come to the graves of your great men to denounce your disrespect.' Prime Minister Philippe stated on Twitter in response: 'France is a country based on the rule of law which means... respect for public monuments and for the memory they represent.'² Marine Le Pen tweeted: 'In France, the only future for any illegal immigrant should be getting kicked out, because that's the law.' *This statement, in all the hideous violence of racism and coloniality* that evinces, makes us aware of the injustice inscribed in normative frameworks. Making claims of justice cannot be understood apart from the means by which people come together or are kept from coming together, or certain bodies are empowered and others are made available for injury, within unequitable realms of (juridical) recognition and in public spaces dispossessed by the *nomos* of racial capitalism. So at stake in the performativity of activist protest and commemoration amidst various registers, geographies, and conditions of suffocation or drowning are, in Judith Butler's (2015) terms, embodied practices of appearing, reappearing out of place, appearing in disappearance, and refusing to disappear.

Activist Wake for Breathing Spaces

The grim parallels between refugee and antiblack disposability – between black Atlantic and black Mediterranean – were registered in a protest sign that appeared in a migrant rights demonstration in Italy in the summer of 2020: 'From the Mediterranean to Minneapolis, under water or under a knee, I can't breathe' (Sunderland 2020). In this translocal agonistic archive, those whose lives have been subjected to white supremacist violence and those who died unacknowledged at border crossings as a result of anti-immigration nation-state and EU policies come together to reoccupy the entrenched space and time of memorability and propose dissident visions of affectability. This expanded and unfinished constellation of atmospheres of unbreathing in the Global South is inscribed in a grammar of raciality that, in

¹ See Mareike Gebhardt's contribution to this special issue on the representations of drowning in EU migration discourses.

² The group called themselves the 'black vests' – a reference to the yellow vest protest movement that spread through France in 2019. 'Black vest' protesters storm Panthéon in Paris. BBC News, July 12, 2019. Accessed July 13, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48969438>.

constructing populations as non-white or non-European, produces and regulates the global power configuration of the present.

In the bodily instantiations of gasp, sigh, cry, scream, chant, smother, utterance, whisper, or speechlessness, breathing comes to matter as a critical and transformative exercise in the global present: an ethico-political *askesis* in vulnerability and freedom with others in the face of rampant racialized, sexualized, and classed regimes of suffocating power. This political possibility of courage that comes with the breathing of marked bodies together is theorized by Butler while evoking the poems smuggled out from prisoners at Guantanamo Bay: 'The body breathes, breathes itself into words, and finds some provisional survival there. But once the breath is made into words, the body is given over to another, in the form of an appeal' (2009, 61). Whether breathing themselves into words or unutterable gasp or both, socially and historically situated bodies are exposed to necropolitical conditions and given over to others in breathing, enduring, and protesting, as well as in order to breathe, endure, and protest together. The political possibility of collective breathing within, despite, and against unbreathable conditions becomes an activist form of engagement, endurance, and commemoration in the archival present. Because breathing air is to be shared and transmitted, exceeding, at any rate, the boundaries of 'one's own' body and thus posing the question of togetherness. There can be nothing individualistically possessive about this transient, uncounted sharedness; there can be no breathing outside of a tenuous assemblage of (im)possibilities for sharedness.

Sara Ahmed has pointed to the togetherness established in the possibility of breathing for bodies out of place:

We could remember that the Latin root of the word aspiration means 'to breathe'. I think the struggle for a bearable life is the struggle for queers to have spaces to breathe. Having space to breathe, or being able to breathe freely, as Mari Ruti describes (2006, 19), is an aspiration. *With breathe comes imagination*. With breathe comes possibility (2010, 120, italics in the original).

The struggle to make life bearable and breathable (Górska 2016) in our current presents, and in light of racialized, sexualized, and classed privatized exhaustion, involves the collective work of reimagining, recuperating, and reinhabiting inchoate places and times from where to engage, again and again, in practices of challenging normative configurations, of countering institutionalized injustice, and of organizing in different, more just and equal, ways. It involves interrupting long-held terms of unlivable lives and ungrievable deaths through quotidian tasks of worldmaking.

Thus understood, the struggle to make life bearable and breathable in the present involves multi-scalar gestures of defending and reappropriating 'spaces to breathe' from the biopolitical calculus of economization, racialization, and securitization. And so I think this mode of creating and recuperating 'spaces to breathe' does not translate into a register of possession and self-preservation. Rather this critical methodology is about standing in for a possibility for giving over indivisible and securitized selfness and becoming an occasion for the ecstatic collective political work of being beside oneself in thinking and acting critically within, despite and against the exhaustive ether of enduring racism, colonialism, capitalism, and cis-heteropatriarchy.

Different street actions and activist movements, as they transcend national borders and gather to contest the differential terms of socially situated and distributed vulnerability, have performed the yet-to-come of social justice in struggling for spaces to breathe as horizons of criticality. The activist movement Black Lives Matter conveys – in ways resonant with Ahmed's

formulation earlier – a particular kind of racialized deadly violability and disposability that black people experience in ways so thoroughly embedded in the choking ordinary. Clearly, such contemporary street actions and activist movements take inspiration from, acknowledge, and reenact the interrelation of grievability and protest that had emerged in different contexts of ‘activism of mourning’ across geographic spaces. The ways in which AIDS activism in the 1980s deployed mourning as a political sign, such as the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the Names Project, as well as the public vigils and the ‘die-ins’ in major public places, forged not only collective recognition of homophobic/transphobic dispensability but also queer archives of camaraderie and testimony in the face of preclusions that regulate the space and time of the memorable (Crimp 2004). Argentina’s Madres de Plaza de Mayo partakes in this layered genealogy of political enactments of mourning, whereby public grief emerges as a performative mode of non-normative, queered collective affectivity and protest in the aftermath of loss (Sosa 2014; Taylor 1997).

The Women in Black activists (in Israel/Palestine, former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere), in their street actions of agonistic feminist mourning, embody their own and others’ dissident belonging vis-à-vis power assemblages of heteropatriarchy and nationalism. Their political mourning despite and against ethno-nationalist and heteronormative kinship assumptions indicates the struggle for breath as constitutive of political subjectivity reconfigured in terms of collective vulnerability and courage in the face of political loss and amidst induced conditions of political suffocation. In their affective politics of activism, vulnerability marks both the differential production of suffocating lives and the condition of making life breathable. ‘The atmosphere was suffocating’, said Branka, a Women in Black activist, in a conversation with me, in which she offered a dissonant account of the state of ‘normality’ that hovered ‘in the air’ and despite and against which she and her comrades took to the streets arousing anger in their nationalist opponents. ‘Just a few women standing at the centre of the city, protesting against the war. Passersby were cursing us, spitting on us. But I was so devastated that I did not care. [Standing] was like a breeze that was saving my life, again and again, every Wednesday.’ For Branka and her comrades, standing together in public against all odds, in discordance with the surrounding normality, was their breathing space: a sensual experience of bodies assembled in space whereby the air becomes both the life-supporting medium and the outcome of comradeship in the face of nationalist hostility and militarist devastation. Since October 1991, when the Women in Black weekly actions started in Belgrade as part of the resistance movement against the regime of Slobodan Milošević, the element of *stasis* as standing still and in dissent emerged as a crucial aspect of these activists’ re-positioning of their political bodies at the centre of the city. Every Wednesday at half past three in the afternoon, standing in the street to protest the militarized ethno-nationalism of one’s own country was a risky business at those times of national fervor. In the context of the wars in former Yugoslavia and their aftermath, these activists’ social poetics of bodies emerging out of place and affirming relationality with others reconfigures public space through the spectrality of appearing and disappearing, assembling and disassembling. It is through this performative self-estrangement that they become the phantom residues of those who have gone out of presence in the *polis*. And this is perhaps how an agonistic configuration of the body politic is made possible (Athanasίου 2017).

The multinational activist movement Ni Una Menos (‘not one [woman] less’), which spans several countries in Latin America, is resisting and fighting the killing of women, trans people, and those subjected to the violence of masculinist and neoliberal violence. Emerging in May 2015 in the form of massive women’s street demonstrations, in many cities across Argentina, the movement registers outrage at gender violence in its transversal relation to economic inequality and social injustice. This collective commitment and call that not one

more woman will be lost to feminicídio/femicide struggles to dismantle the terms by which routinized and unacknowledged violence constitutes women and all those non-conforming to cis-heteronormative capitalist domination as dispensable. Opposition and responsiveness to injuries inflicted on gendered, class-laden, and racialized bodies is performatively enacted as a feminist politics of mourning that calls forth a different livability (López 2020).

Such questions of mourning and/as protest were critically posed in the immediate aftermath of the lethal public beating of Zak Kostopoulos, also known by her drag stage name Zackie Oh, a queer activist and drag performer committed to raising awareness about HIV, in downtown Athens, Greece, in September 2018. Zak was kicked to death by a shop owner allegedly 'protecting his property' and a mob of male onlookers and policemen, as she was lying wounded on the ground, unarmed, radically exposed to homophobic and police brutality. When the policemen who arrived at the scene, instead of stopping the assault, handcuffed Zak, rather than her assailants, it became outrageously clear whose vulnerability mattered and whose didn't. The queer body became dehumanized and construed by the lynching mob as inherently threatening and dangerous, and thus police violence was justified not only as self-defense but also as protection of 'public safety' (presumptively cis-heteronormative, white, national, bourgeois). One of the demonstrations was named after a phrase used by Zak in an interview: 'Violence isn't my thing.' We might discern here a possibility for an ethics of nonviolence as a mode of politically embodied protest, whereby bodies on the line avow their vulnerability and refuse to be violated. Breathing becomes a rallying cry and a collective ethicopolitical stance, as in the title of the last song that Zak posted on Twitter on the eve of her death: 'The trick is to keep breathing.'

In such contexts of painful loss ghosted inside the historical present, as 'we take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names' (Muñoz 1999, 74), our struggle to do justice to them entails enacting transformative modes of survival and engagement with established terms of livability. Survival for non-white, indigenous, economically exploited, female, LGBTQI*, debilitated, and/or migrant bodies speaks to a politically saturated struggle to sustain oneself despite and in the face of lethally normative forms of life. The spectral reappearances of this struggle upset the terms of grievability that regulate the present tense. As both the one-year anniversary of the anti-neoliberal mobilizations in Chile and the two-year anniversary of massive street demonstrations 'in grief and anger' in the aftermath of Zak's brutal killing in Athens are approaching in the fall of 2020, transnational solidarity was recently foregrounded in stencils of Zak's face that appeared, somewhat uncannily, in the streets of Santiago. What is more, the protest stencils were accompanied by the slogan *Furia y Nanai* (rage and affection), which was used in the context of the 2019–2020 Chilean protests as a catchword for comradeship and collective resistance in the midst of political outrage. The phrase *Furia y Nanai*, especially redeployed as a caption for Zak's face, bears a suggestive resonance with the political slogan-neologism 'stOryí' (στΟρyή), denoting the assemblage of affection and rage – in the sense of rageful affection, or affectionate rage – which emerged in the Athens street manifestations demanding justice for Zak (Efthymiou 2020).

From Santiago to Athens to Belgrade to Buenos Aires, transnational activist mourning for black, migrant, and/or queer normalized deaths, reworks the present into the potential of its transtemporal transformation by exposing the established coordinates of normative life by which those lives had been rendered 'already dead'. Butler has importantly argued for the future anterior temporality of grievability whereby the latter is understood as 'a condition of life's emergence and sustenance' (2009, 15). Through collective modalities of political grief and protest, those lives *will have been* (or *would have been*) sustainable. The terms of racist

state violence that have rendered them dispensable are contested and dismantled, as the present becomes haunted by the persistent reappearance of those losses' irrecoverability and irremediability. Butler allows us to think how the 'aftermath' of loss becomes an occasion for reconfiguring the temporality of social and political life, as its habitual markers such as pastness, belatedness, newness, and afterlife, are all called into question: 'And so this past is not actually past in the sense of "over", since it continues as an animating absence in the presence, one that makes itself known precisely in and through the survival of anachronism itself' (Butler 2003, 468). In activist mourning, a *disremembered* past extends beyond the prescribed boundaries of the archive and is enabled to haunt the present in such ways as to open or reassemble possibilities (both present and future-directed) for other lives, for living otherwise.

All these activist manifestations of public grieving imply a politics of (re)appearing that cannot be defined by a spatial and temporal frame of presence/absence. Rather than a taken for granted, common physiological operation, breathing becomes a corporeally manifested figure of differentially induced anguish and occasionally the fugitive, non-volitional means by which to disrupt the ongoing suffocating ordinariness of things. Thus, rather than a pre-existing territory, the political space is brought forward or 'inspired' (*breathed in*) by singular plural bodies struggling against the routinization of suffocation and enacting what Adriana Cavarero has called 'thinking done with the lungs' (2005, 63). This way, these activists, affected by power with/and others beside themselves, make room for horizons of critique and transformative trouble over what counts as politics, relationality, vulnerability, and breathing space.

The Critical Mattering of Vulnerability

'To be in the wake,' writes Christina Sharpe, 'is also to recognize the ways that we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force' (2016, 16). The figure of breathing, deployed as a situated knowledge of continued and uneven vulnerability, seeks here to account for the political implications of precarious and critical subjectivation in delineating possibilities for a decolonial, antiracist, anti-fascist, and queer feminist subjectivity in our times.³ How might the avowal of vulnerability as openness and exposure to others be taken up in critical and resistant ways, that is, in ways that call into question the boundaries of what it is intelligible for bodies to appear and matter? How might it create the space for re-imagining and re-enacting the productive tensions and resonances of alliances across and amidst differential vulnerability?

And so I have dwelled here on the figure of breathing, especially imperiled and exacerbated breathing under political duress, in relation to a politicized understanding of vulnerability. Vulnerability, in this regard, is about pervasive, (un)exceptional assemblages of power relations which manage life and expose to death by means of producing dispensable bodies. Within this purview of vulnerability, resources are differently and unevenly distributed among different bodies – differently economized, racialized, and gendered bodies. Such figuration of vulnerability may have some resources to offer us in our attempt to grapple with the question how to perform a living suffocated by injustice, and how to organize and act with(in) the affective dispositions of outrage, despair, exhaustion, and anxiety (see also Górska 2016). What is at stake here is the sense of possibility that comes with the appeal for breath and the

³ The element of air and the notion of breathing have been crucial in critical epistemologies as a way to foster an embodied ethics of sexual difference and a feminist critique of phallogocentric Western metaphysics. See Irigaray 1999; Górska 2016; Škof and Holmes 2013.

critical resistance to conditions that preemptively close off any horizon of possibility. Taking up an account of critical agency informed by the performative reverberations and vibrations of this appeal, I argued for a vision of political subjectivity that attends to relational vulnerability as a condition of making claims of transformative justice, and at the same time of resisting the processes of subjectivation that generate unjust fields of vulnerability.

The perspective on vulnerability suggested here, however, is not to assume a totalizing and generalizable ontology of *human essence* (be it vulnerable, resilient, or both), one that would compel transubstantiation *from* vulnerability *to* safety or incapacitation. This is to suggest that vulnerability is thought not as a foundational condition preexisting the politics of subjection, but instead as inflected and afflicted from the start by the historically authorized power relations that differentially invoke it as a naturalizing marker of those disenfranchised by racial, gendered or economic violence (Butler 2016). Put differently, there is no shared condition of vulnerability, which is not differentiated – that is, fraught with the historicity of subjection, interpellation, power, and location. And further, there is no shared condition of vulnerability which is not marked by the possibility of critical, resistant, and transformative responses to those injuries. The vulnerability at stake, therefore, signals precisely the performative potentiality of being affected, both in the sense of susceptibility to regimes of power and of relational openness to others: shared and yet socially positioned and unequally distributed (Butler 2006). Thus, vulnerability is taken up as a critical lens through which to rethink (with) political agency as a way of questioning the liberal humanist tenets of individualistic selfhood. Thinking vulnerability in terms of both susceptibility to overwhelming power and implication in the domain of agency might allow us to trouble the possessive individualistic accounts that posit subjectivity in terms of free will mastering an array of available life options in order to heroically exceed the constraints of vulnerability.

In order to render vulnerability available as a critical device for prompting nuanced political visions of courageous agency and transformative justice, we would need to deauthorize the fundamental injustices done in the name of vulnerability, notably the reductive mechanism of essentialist gendering that associates it with femininity, and by extension, with passivity and powerlessness. Decolonial feminist thought allows us to politically mobilize vulnerability as a site of critical resignification through which to call into question the power differentials of racialization, gender, sexuality, class, and ability/debility status through which vulnerability is experienced in the global present. In this sense, 'vulnerability' itself undergoes an important conceptual and political reconfiguration when at stake are dissident acts of defending and politicizing vulnerability by those dispossessed of, and yet courageously claiming, self-determination. This critical reconfiguration takes place not in the sense of striving to repudiate or overcome vulnerability, but rather in the sense of working with/in it, dismantling its deadly injustices, and devising new collective forms of relating to it.

Such conception of vulnerability delineates agency and courage as not reducible to self-willed, invulnerable, sovereign individuality, but rather implicates the gendered, sexual, racial, and economized intricacies of one's exposure and responsiveness to embedded frames of subjectivation, as contingent as they may be. Courage, in this regard, is imbued with the ongoing, quotidian, and comradely contingencies of resistance to induced conditions of injurability that forestall the possibility of breathing together, of breathing otherwise. Thus conceived, it is at once utterly uneasy, wounded, and hopeful. It simultaneously mourns and organizes (Crimp 1989). It involves critical formations of exhaustion, agonistic responsiveness, and the yearning for a different future. As Fred Moten (2003) has shown, engaging with the aesthetics of 'black mo'nin',' political imagination and the potentiality of critique are claimed, desired, and enacted by those whose lives and futures have been violently exhausted

by the entwined powers of race, gender, capital, and nation. It is precisely this collective critical affectivity – dislodged from any heroic (masculinist or militarist) connotations – that creates spaces to breathe as spaces of organizing, reimagining, and resisting (in) the present, through transfiguring this present's no longer and yet-to-come.

I sought here, in all, to attend to the multivalent forces of criticality by which the 'disremembered and unaccounted for' (in Morrison's memorable phrase), simultaneously produced and foreclosed by atmospheres of deadly living, return to the space of their erasure and reoccupy it as a resource for a shared albeit differential sense of vulnerability to the injuries of injustice. In this sense, the critical horizon of breathability pertains to reconfiguring the (im)possibilities of courage and/as criticality. The critical horizon of breathability is evinced, to invoke Sharpe again, in the atmospheric condition of horror (the 'weather') as it is in the resounding embodiment of living 'in the wake.' And so the Black Lives Matter resonant rally cry 'I can't breathe' calls for an 'anagrammatical' mode of vulnerable political subjectivity in the wake of, and in spite of, the grammar of ongoing, pervasive breathlessness and exhaustion.

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