Jill H. Casid

Necrolandscaping

Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Necrocene

To confront Anthropocene crisis is not to cast a prospect of distancing projection onto a deep past or lost future but, rather, to work from within the scene in which we are enmeshed, the Anthropocene as a landscape of genocide. With what they call the “orbis hypothesis,” climate scientists Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin propose 1610 CE as the “golden spike” origin point for the Anthropocene. Working from the proposition that the effects of genocide are registered as declining levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide measurable by traces in arctic ice cores, the orbis hypothesis positions colonial encounter, the transatlantic slave trade, and its lethal effects on indigenous plants, animals, and peoples as pivotal. In representing the Anthropocene as a scene of genocide precipitated by the fatal transformation of world into orbis, or territorialized globe, by techniques of colonial landscaping—that is, “exposure to diseases carried by Europeans, plus war, enslavement and famine” along with the transfer of plant and animal species between Europe and the Americas, leading to a significant loss in biodiversity and acceleration of species extinction rates—it might, rather, be named the Necrocene. It is not a term I have coined, but one I give a particular twist that foregrounds the agencies and power-producing effects of making die.

For historian Justin McBrien, Necrocene does not just give a name to the shadow double of the Capitalocene but also its internal process of necrosis, a self-consumption born of capitalistic extraction and accumulation as traumatic injury and surplus death not just birthed by extinction but as a process of “becoming extinction.” In critically contesting planetary catastrophism, Necrocene joins forces with the critical keywords Capitalocene, Jason W. Moore’s counter-naming to insist on geo-history and the “capitalogenesis” of planetary crisis not restricted to environment or climate; Plantationocene, that collectively generated postcolonial anthropological intervention that moves the slave plantation–machine of enclosing, extractive monoculture from periphery to center and potentially widens the scene of genocide to necessarily include the Middle Passage and anti-black violence; and Donna Haraway’s Chthulucene, that resistant compound of the Greek roots khthon (for beings of the earth “both ancient and up to the minute”) and kainos (for times of beginnings that do not wipe out what comes before or after) to rename a “thick, fibrous, lumpy” time-place for “learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth.”


McBrien’s exclusive emphasis on capitalism and the ostensibly dead matter of fossil fuels, I am interested in how Necrocene works to further shift the emphasis from death as extinction, death as abstract state, death as the opposite of life, to death as felt, material presence and active process by giving us death as a scene in which we are vulnerably situated. Poaching and redeploying Necrocene promises not just to foreground but also to make palpable the presence of death in life, that is, of the ostensibly verdant life-world of landscape as scene of death in which we are positioned not as remote witnesses or only as mourners but also as the mortal vulnerable exposed among the killable and dead. This version of the Necrocene does not so much partake of the apocalypticism of certain nihilist versions of dark ecology but rather puts the focus on feminist, trans*, and queer interventions that redirect Anthropocene extremities of deep past and ostensibly still-remote futures to the present pressures of thinking and feeling with the turbulent unpredicabilities of mixed affects and entangled agencies, with the enwrapping of the wildly incommensurate, and the ruptures of not the reparative but of demands for reparation and revolution on the part of those entities, those forms of life, bare life, and not-life, and ways of being and becoming for whom the ostensible privileges of the status of the human have never constituted refuge, those for whom the imperatives to sustain and reproduce life have, rather, been the terms of slow death, and those whose very form or lack of privileged form is rendered unlivable, killable, and not even registered as loss, as grievable losses or deaths that count.

Necrocene puts pressure on the burning questions: What makes diverse forms of earthly trauma matter? What connects forms of earthly, planetary trauma held apart? Necrocene, if misrecognized, raided, and put to queer work as not just a landscape scene of genocide but as an obscene landscape scene of

not tidy green cemeteries of preserved graves but mass interment that makes us begin to sense what cannot be seen, what resists possession by classification and measurement, what presses at the limits of the fetish of the fossil record, what is not necessarily exhumable as skeletal remains and, yet, becomes part of the matter and mattering of landscaping as processes of inhumation. Necrocene as the obscene landscape of what exceeds the containerized, embalmed version of the matter of what happens when/as we die makes queer kin of the dead.

Going to Seed

In my book *Sowing Empire*, I observed that the founding paternal gestures of dispossession and possession take the form of scenes of displacement, of making diasporic in scenes of scattering of seed: “With the materializing metaphor of planting scattered seed, that is, the practices of agriculture and landscaping as heterosexual reproduction, to plant was to produce colonies and to generate subjects to sustain them.” However, such ostensibly founding scenes of dissemination as devices of bio- and necropower set the stage for other possibilities, for there is arguably nothing predictable about the effects of transplantation, production, and reproduction or the kinds of composting and decay that turn what I term *death-in-life* into emergent forms. Take the migratory declaration carved into the wooden sign at the entrance to the Transgender Memorial Garden in St. Louis, Missouri, planted by members of the Metro Trans Umbrella Group and dedicated October 18, 2015, to those lives lost worldwide to anti-trans violence: “They tried to bury us.

---

They didn’t know we were seeds.” This digital dia-spor moves across hand-carved signs, T-shirts for the Transgender Day of Remembrance, painted signs at the Women’s March in January of this year, and posters carried at marches in Mexico City in the name of Ayotzinapa (shorthand for the forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa Normal School near Tixtla, Guerrero who were disappeared after their bus was attacked by municipal police and other armed men while en route to demonstrations in Mexico City). The activist meme (popularized by the Zapatistas in the 1990s in its Spanish form “Quisieron enterrarnos, pero no sabían que éramos semilla”) was adapted from a two-line poem in which Dinos Christianopoulos—a Greek writer of homoerotic verse with the outlaw blues quality and seediness of the “rembetiko” or “rebetiko” of underground music—adapts the ancient story of Cadmus who sowed an army of warriors from the magical seeds of dragon’s teeth to mine the metamorphic necro-erotics of classical myth to raise an army of the dead against the heterosexism of claims to the natural: “What didn’t you do to bury me, but you forgot that I was a seed.” The

6 The Transgender Memorial Garden in St. Louis, Missouri is one of the projects of the Metro Trans Umbrella Group of St. Louis. See: https://www.stlmetrotrans.com/trans-memorial-garden/

planting of a version of these words on the site of the Transgender Memorial Garden in St. Louis, Missouri, carries a particular charge due to its proximity to Ferguson where the protests surrounding the police murder of Michael Brown in 2014 were pivotal in galvanizing what has become the Black Lives Matter movement as, while 2016 was the deadliest year on record for trans people (with 2017 set to exceed it), most murdered trans people are women of color. The promiscuous popularity of this clarion call of the discarded and buried that turn out to be seeds risks erasing important differences with blanket generalizations that we are all mortal while foreclosing any reckoning with loss as loss by covering over the space of loss with signs of life that bear the promise of resurgence and resurrection. At the same time, however, rather than a covering over of pain and loss


or the segregation of loss into not just discrete and marginalized but also uncounted losses, the landscape of the discarded and buried as unanticipated seed renders the Necrocene not an inert past or a foreclosed future but a roiling compost of a present which is mined not just by the military-pharmaco-agro-industrial complex but also by the discarded, discounted, and buried of stigmatic, agitating difference that refuses assimilation and calls for justice and reparation.

In response to this work I began on landscaping as a device of bio- and necropower in *Sowing Empire*, I was invited by anthropologists Heather Swanson and Zachary Caple (who are engaged in a research initiative called the “Postcolonial Anthropocene,” which they coined to describe our situation in the contact zone of contamination) to think with their call to perform the double move of critically demonstrating the ongoing violences of environmental crisis integrally shaped by colonial histories of transplantation, hybridization, extraction, and the terrible conversion of human and animal bodies into disposable objects and commodities of exchange, while at the same time pressing against the limits of empirical evidence to ask not just what makes earthly trauma matter but also about the tracks and traces of the agencies of the more-than-human and also especially of that which is cast as the expendable, consigned to waste, and yet devises ways of living on in the situation of what they call “contaminated survival.” And to do so the plantation and the plantation-machine in its entanglement with factories, mines, finance capital, and transport resurface not as the sites of a superseded colonial before but as necessary to the work of thinking the question of, as they articulate it, how humans and

---

9 From the abstract for the session “Postcolonial Anthropocene: Pidgins, Power, and Contaminated Survival,” American Anthropological Association Convention (November 18, 2016) organized by Zachary Caple and Heather Swanson. I served as a discussant for this session along with Carolyn Martin Shaw. I thank the organizers and other presenters Lesley Green, Mayanthi L. Fernando, Kristina Marie Lyons for the provocation of their work.
nonhumans come together to eke out an existence—or even flourish—in unbearable histories. They ask the poetic but also cheeky question: “If forests are flush with the chatter of humans and other species, can the plantation speak?” Rephrasing Gayatri Spivak’s famous performance of the negative limit to articulate along the virtual lines of impossibility and taking up Eduardo Kohn’s trans-species pidgins, their call presses at the limits of evidence with the desires of an otherwise that refuses to open the escape valves of fantasies of autonomy. I found myself compelled by the ethical and political commitment to the power of attending to not so much the knots of entanglement but the nots of the negative, that is, to the investment in attending to the audible silences and palpable absences that make the not not the end but the space of the contaminated interval in which we work. To ask can the plantation speak, to ask about living in unbearable histories is to commit to making us feel the questions whose very posing makes unbearable histories not a question of where we came from but a present space in which the questions not just of livability and even of flourishing but also of slow death and lives lived under the sign of lethal violence must be negotiated in relation to absence and loss, in relation to the irrecoverable and irredeemable of what Saidiya Hartman, for example, characterizes as the pornographic violences in the afterlives of the plantation’s scenes of subjection and, yet, at the same time in relation to the impos-

sible and ostensibly unaskable at the limits of evidence—that is, the potential imminence of subjunctive possibility even in the holes and hold of the archive and the ostensibly unaccountable of deaths in the absence of fossil records and remains that take legible shape: the critical imagination of the what could have been and might yet be.  

And it is on this note of the imperatives of critical imagination that recognizes diverse entangled agencies that include our complicity in worlding the world that we might otherwise take to be the resolved of *terra firma* that I return to the radical device of the discarded and refused as buried seeds. In English, there is a metaphorical phrase for insufficient life—“gone to seed”—that derives its power from forms of plant matter that become no longer harvestable or extractable because their energy has gone into the making of seed. A negative phrase of disparagement, “gone to seed” points to the unsettled and unsettling processes of decay and alternative forms of resistant generation from within landscapes of the dead that, rather than staying still, roil with the mixed means of making something out of contacts and contamination that draw together the differences—sexual, racial, gendered, geopolitical—that make up rather than dissolve into the horizontality of necrolandscaping as connective transversal exposure to mortality.

### Landscape in the Deformative and the Arts of Dying

Landscape so often appears as if fixed, as if not just a stabilizing stable of settled forms but also the ground or frame of the

---

settler-colonial enclosure, dispossession, and extraction of a lost wild, a precolonial before, the potent open of witchcraft, the secret knowledge of plants, and the living microcosms in the vibrancies of soils against which any queer, ecological, decolonial project in recognizing and enlisting the agencies of non-human or more-than-human worlds can only move on from or out of the “landscape-form” or landscape as the very form of unsustainable, unjust, and lethal settlement. In the imperative terms of critical ecology, landscape’s colonial and neocolonial dreamwork, its picturesque prospects of verdant horizons, and proprietary claims of master-of-all-I-survey perspectives appear under the sign of negation in the moldering mold of form to be gotten over and gotten past, as, if not the already dead of stilled life or the table of global capitalist imperium that serves up an array of dead nature, then an ostensibly European mode of imposing a distancing and dangerously aestheticized way of seeing that, in the scaping appropriation of land, reduces nature to object. In short, landscape appears as stilling form, as form that kills.

Rather than attempt to redeem landscape, or return to a reimagined Garden of Eden, I propose that we consider land-scaping as an assemblage of devices of necropower, or power produced in the death-grip intimacies of making live and making die enacted on and through matter (biological and geological) that worlds the world we might otherwise take as just there. In calling out land-scaping as a means of necropower with the neologism necrolandscaping, I press the double edge of landscape’s queer necropower, that is, as engine of global capitalist extractivism and accumulation, frontier conquest, and bioprospecting but also as means of contesting and transforming or, rather, deforming from within its performative imperatives to reproduce and maintain life.13

13 In developing the concept of necrolandscaping, I draw on the work of Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, Public Culture 15.1
Refusing the fantasy that “landscape” is somehow over, and to elaborate a contaminated ethics for negotiating the not-so-much post but arguably neocolonial Anthropocene situation of what I call death-in-life in the terrain of crisis ordinary, this essay thinks with queer, trans* experiments in the art of dying as a way of living with and making something provisionally habitable with the dead out of tainted aesthetics and the compost of discarded forms. Necrolandscaping offers an aesthetic tactics of landscape in the deformative that mines the de-forming, volatile, but also strangely resilient powers of the negative, from shame to dirt. The concept of death-in-life designates the compromised, nonautonomous, interdependent, and finite conditions of contaminated survival as the living on in the wake of traumas registered but not necessarily visible across more-than-human bodies in what I characterize as a necropolitical landscape of life after life, of life lived under not just the sign of imminent death but with mass incarceration, precarization, and heightened vulnerability, with retractions of care hinged at the same time to a politics of making live lives of slow death, of forced barely life at the edge of livability. The powers of the negative or deformative in queer landscaping offer necro-tactics for negotiating the Necrocene not by opposing a politics of the affirmative reproduction of life on any terms but, rather, by refusing to let go of our dead, thinking and feeling at the limits (2003), p. 11–40. In foregrounding the “deformative” as the negative aspect and potential within the performative, I activate a term used but never quite taken up by both Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler in their classic work on queer performativity. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s The Art of the Novel,” GLQ 1.1 (1993), p. 1–16, and Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” GLQ 1.1 (1993), p. 17–32.

of biopolitical optimization of life, and from the place of and practice as the vulnerable exposed of the as-if-already-dead.

Necro-Scene One: Negrogothic Cracking

So seared into the public imagination as the primal scene of a history of slavery that is not over is the field of black figures picking cotton that four barren trees stuck with first-aid cotton balls are more than enough to conjure not just any field but the slave plantation landscape. And it is here (Fig. 1) in a shadow-scape amidst the cotton-ball studded saplings that classically trained counter-tenor, visual artist and composer M. Lamar sets the centerpiece video Surveillance Punishment and the Black Psyche, Part Two, Overseer in the installation Negrogothic, A Manifesto, The Aesthetics of M. Lamar (Fig. 2), Lamar's first solo show in New York, which framed the video with large-scale photo-prints of scenes from Lamar's video works and props of necropower and its philosophizing: a guillotine, a pillory, and a table supporting a pile of key books for black study (Toni Morrison's Beloved, The Cornel West Reader, and Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit).15 Opening with a panning shot that tracks slowly from a black bucket filled with round white cotton balls across the stark white bared ass cheeks of three kneeling “overseers” and “witnesses,” the slave plantation landscape as a scene of violent desires disavowed is no longer a matter of the archive or the past but reactivated by an aesthetics of a “negrogothic” that mines

Necrolandscaping

the dark lusts that fuel the materializing fantasy production of “blackness” across film noir, the Marquis de Sade, Pasolini’s Salò, heavy metal, torture, and the metal of slavery and black death as spectacle.¹⁶ Scaped by sounds of blowing wind punctuated by the blows of a cracking whip—as Lamar shrouded in hooded black picks cotton from the trees in the guise of “slave” and “ghost” turned “reaper” who sings with a seductive keening of beating, whipping, and watching on slow repeat—the slave plantation landscape becomes fleshly presence that enwraps us, the spectators, as seduced bodily witnesses who are not just part of the scene but seen as we watch Lamar and the white “whip-wielding” executioner/overseer linger in a long, wet kiss among the cotton trees. Lamar crosses the operatic trill with the more physical vibrations of ululating to not so much


Figure 1. M. Lamar, Mapplethorpe’s Whip, 2014. Image Courtesy of the artist.
address as penetrate with the call to see that cracks open the barrier of witnessing to catch us looking: “See me, Watch me, Watch me see. I can see you watching me, oversee-er.” We see and hear the whip crack but we never see the whip fall onto a back or backside. Instead, the cracking whip falls over and over again from the guillotine turned castration device, down from its ostensible height into the waiting bucket of cotton, and, as the sequence unfolds (Fig. 3), in Lamar’s hands, multiplies, as he inserts a black whip between the opened white ass cheeks of each of the bent-over overseers turned fleshly witnesses... witnesses, that might be us. Drawing on the sensory overdeterminations of the cracker (the hard salt crackers or “ship’s bread” as sailors’ staple of the transatlantic slave trade, the derogatory black term for white trash thought to derive from the sound of the overseer’s cracking whip, and the term for black overseers), the black leather whip in and of the slave plantation landscape as materializing fantasy scene cracks the bounds between the living and the dead to crack open the disavowed, desiring anus of the world.

Figure 2. Installation View of M. Lamar, Negrogothic, A Manifesto, the Aesthetics of M. Lamar, 2014. Image Courtesy of the artist, Participant Inc., and Rona Yefman.
Necro-Scene Two: Queer Inhuming

The vaunted scene of the exercise of grievable deaths as the performance of lives to be valued remains ritual interment, the digging and marking of a grave. But the actual process of inhuming (with its close Latinate ties—via humus for earth—to humiliation and the inhuman as that which is brought down and into the dirt or ground) exercises that edge where grievable death joins discarded life. And it is this volatile double charge that promises to make abjection, the filth and rot of shame, the source of power not by the camp alchemy of glitter but by the deformative necro-tactics of grave-digging. Two decades after the AIDS-activist ashes actions in 1992 and 1996 exercised the volatile, negative performative “shame on you” by throwing the ashes of loved ones who died of AIDS on the lawn of the White House that refused them and consigned them to death by malignant inaction, queer attachments in the age of potential access to drugs that make it possible to live with AIDS are still lived under the sign of death, haunted by the violences (such as the mass shooting on Latin Night at the

Pulse Nightclub in Florida in summer 2016—to name just one) that have persisted well after the legalization of gay marriage. Queer attachments are still enacted in the field of traumatic losses that would make it not hyperbolic to name inaction in the face of the AIDS epidemic and the ongoing refusals and retractions of care both supportive and preventative (from education to needle exchange) a genocide. Queer attachments are still sustained in the strange space and temporality of outliving expectation and out of the inventive brew of not just survivor’s guilt but also that strange edge-space of never expecting and never being expected to survive, that strange edge-space of doing one’s queer attachments in the space of their never being expected to endure.

Turning to extended endurance performance, the husband-and-husband artist collaborative Dutes Miller and Stan Shawbarger queerly inhume the socially engaged practice that Nato Thompson famously calls “living as form” by making the ur-act of the heteronormative social contract—the binding ritual witnessing of the performative “I do” of the marriage ceremony—the site of the radical dig of something like dying as de-form not by refusing marriage but making witnessing to the queer occupation of the marriage bed (claimed for a heterosexuality positioned in the place of the natural) just as altering and even alienating as the open grave. In *Untitled (Graves)*, first performed at


the Volta art fair in Basel in 2008 and then again at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art’s Time-Based Art Festival in Portland, Oregon in 2010 (Fig. 4), Miller & Shellabarger, out not in a field set aside as garden cemetery nor in a secluded setting but, rather, in a highly visible, open grass-covered clearing, spend the day digging two side-by-side rectangular holes that are not identical but, rather, fit the differing proportions of their bodies, cuing us to sense the more fine-grained distinctions in the heft and girth of their white-fleshed, white-T-shirted, jeans-clad, grey-white-bearded bodies. Across this interval of distance between the graves—highlighted by the outline of their differences in size—rather than bridge the distance by denial of the losses to come or through rituals of mourning that frame death only in terms of the tears of grief, Miller & Shellabarger dig a trench just big enough to extend their arms and hold each other’s hand. This gesture enacts the fantasy of holding on. But it does so in a way that does not collapse the spacing between the two graves. Rather, it makes the performative exercise of the little deaths of dailiness, the coming and going of holding on for the time one has that never forecloses separation or loss, the intimate and sexually charged stuff of queer attachment. It makes of our living with our own and each others’ dying a mortal, material bond in which we, as the attendant witnesses, are also held until death do us not so much part as make us compostable part.

Necro-Scene Three: Negative Spacing, Smearing

A Smeary Spot, (Fig. 5) the three-channel video installation that constitutes the opening episode in A. K. Burns’s unfolding cycle of video works and exhibitions on “negative space” (first shown at Participant Inc., New York, September 13 to October 18, 2015), takes its title metaphor from pioneering feminist science fiction writer Joanna Russ’s 1977 novel We Who Are About To…, the launching line of which immediately fills in the ellipsis with the death sentence: “About to die.”20 A radically dis- and reorienting riposte to the techno-triumphalism of the science fiction fantasy of the ever-survivable crash or the death-avoiding sublime of the instantaneous explosion, We Who Are About To...

recasts the ordinary guiding light of the sun as a “smeary spot” inextricable from “the light of our dying.”

Russ’s landscape that unfolds at an unknown and unmeasurable distance from that “smeary spot” puts us in the space-time folds of speculative fiction not to open the vista of the ever-expanding frontier prospect but to have us grapple, in the haze-making wake of crashes both literal and metaphoric that have already occurred, with agency in one’s dying as a radical life practice and alternative to killing forms of biopower, from colonization to compulsory reproduction and rape in the name of the propagation of the species. Burns’s “smeary spot” puts us into the dis- and reorienting space-time fold of the landscape of contamination between wide shots of public lands in southern Utah, where it is not just the power plant and the dam but the very terrain that bears the traces of conquest and colonization, and close-ups into the dark space of a black-box theater with a heaped pile of the cast-off debris of the ostensible optimization of life, mixing camping gear, office furniture, technology from the water cooler to the photocopier, and lifestyle tools such as the industrial-grade juicer. Charismatic queer and trans performers (including Jack Doroshow, aka Flawless Sabrina, as the clairvoyant psychic; Nayland Blake or Aunt Be/e as “Re/productive Labor” covered in yellow dust and wearing nothing but a jock strap and apron [Fig. 6]; and niv Acosta and Jen Rosenblit as “Free Radicals”—at once electron-seeking molecules and activists) seductively vie for our attention as they—to name a few of the actions—collect smoke, hike through the desert landscape

21 Russ, We Who Are About To....
Figure 5. Installation View of A. K. Burns, *A Smeary Spot*, 2015, 4-channel video installation, Video 1–3: HD color, 6-channel sound, 53:13 min. loop. Video 4: SD b/w, silent, 4:00 min. loop, Edition of 3. Dimensions of installation variable, includes twelve office chairs, videos 1–3 each projected onto 81 x 144 inch walls, built at a 10-degree angle to the gallery wall, gallery is painted black with black industrial carpeted floor and video 4 is presented on a separate 29 inch Sony cube-monitor. Image courtesy of the artist, Participant Inc., and Callicoon Fine Arts, N.Y.

Figure 6. Aunt Be/e as Reproductive Labor in Video Still from A. K. Burns, *A Smeary Spot*, 2015, 4-channel video installation, Video 1–3: HD color, 6-channel sound, 53:13 min. loop. Video 4: SD b/w, silent, 4:00 min loop, Edition of 3. Image courtesy of the artist, Participant Inc., and Callicoon Fine Arts, N.Y.
of Utah, dance on the edges of cliffs, wrap themselves in reflective blankets, recite a set of provocations from writers such as feminist physicist Karen Barad and feminist science fiction writer Ursula K. LeGuin, smear themselves with mud, make photocopies, deflate an air mattress, caress the military jacket tagged with the name of Chelsea Manning, and press carrots and beets with a shoe into a reclaimed, make-do juicer, forming a lurid, abjectly bloody swirl of seeping reds and oranges that spill out over the edges of the white cup emblazoned with “lavender menace” (Fig. 7). It is the negative space of this landscape of abjection and contamination that is activated to counter smear tactics with an aesthetics of the material smear that presses together the queer, trans, lesbian feminist, and black
refused to render that landscape habitable for queer attachments to the ostensibly unlivable across divides, including that between the dark, negative space in and between screens and the dark, negative space of the contaminated space of becoming that is our viewing. This is less speculative fiction than a tactics of speculative friction that activates the necrolandscaping of the smear to make the dark, negative space of our viewing a space of potential in which our senses are caught in the rub of strange contacts that create frictional energies to shake us out of the predictable orbital patterns of our elective affinities to make altered sense.

Necro-Scene Four: Readying

“REAAADYYY!” A guttural growl, a command, a challenge, a summons and its reply. Ready, with its connotations of military command, physical combat, and athletic competition as in orders to “ready, aim, fire” and “ready, steady, go,” “REAAADYYY!” radically condenses the particular sensory organization and orientation of deaths lived under the performative imperatives of late global capitalism between biopower’s orders to optimize life (and its promise to, if not avert, then forestall death by not just physical but also affective and sensory regimes of grooming for fitness, for the body that performs as if healthy, happy, optimistic, as the body that is ready in the sense of trained and prepared to perform quickly with ease and accuracy) and necropower’s commands to use and deploy such trained and prepared bodies

that are at the ready, to be ever-ready to kill or be killed in the name of life. “REAAADYYY!” cues the nervous system, aims directly at the muscles, tensing the body for action and, yet, carries no definitive affective charge, oscillating widely between the sense of being sufficiently agitated to be about to do something and the more general sense of being willing, even eager to perform an action. Echoing and yet unhooking and deranging the forced “Ready? OK!” of the cheerleading chant, the shout “REAAADYYY!” constitutes the structuring and yet de-forming refrain of K8 Hardy’s 2004 performance piece Beautiful Radiating Energy, developed over the course of several iterations, including those at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York (with a stage by artist collaborator Klara Lidén), the Pilot Television Conference in Chicago, and Artists’ Television Access in San Francisco.25 Already signaling the energetic pull of the power to move and relay the call to action across bodies, across time, and across space, “REAAADYYY!” may have been associated—when first performed in 2004—with the particular energies, the combinations of unrestrained pain, joy, and rage of the punk anthems of the Riot Grrrl movement and such imperatives as “Keep on Livin’” from Le Tigre’s 2001 Feminist Sweepstakes album with its call to “Take back your own tonight... It’s time now get ready.”26 But, with the passing of the baton


26 Le Tigre, “Keep on Livin’,” Feminist Sweepstakes (Chicks on Speed Records, 2001). In addition to integrating video in her performative art practice, Hardy directed the music video for Le Tigre’s Les & Ray (2001). Hardy frames the aesthetics and experimental approach of her film Outfitumentary (Hardy Studio, 2016) with reference to having “discovered
to artist Raúl de Nieves who trained with Hardy to re-perform *Beautiful Radiating Energy* at Participant Inc. on May 21, 2017, in an event organized by scholar-curator Rhea Anastas (Fig. 8), the cracking voiced screams of the performance's unhinged “REAAADYY!”—with its newly introduced shout-outs in Spanish—crackled with the intensely polarized negative-positive energies of an outraged and unsettled now. To heighten our sense of the sexed, gendered, and raced body as a volatile site of projection often asked to carry the burden of disavowed vulnerability and mortality, Nieves, like Hardy, performed the choreography’s calisthenic exertions in an all-white costume with a breast-pocketed shirt reminiscent of a nurse's uniform tucked into waist-high briefs over white tights and pink trainers, which renders the body's surface and the shadow it casts not figures in the changing landscape of projected images but a strained site of landscape trouble as ungrounded ground.

Strain extends to the vocal strenuousness of the “score” that calls on the performer to shout in varying registers: “I am happy; I am here; I am hurt; I’m ready!” The affective collision of the lines that force open a public space that can hold happy and hurt in the same here and now also exert a strain of their own on us that is matched by the sense-making visual strain in video art through punk rock and Riot Grrrl,” [http://www.picturepalacepictures.com/OUTFITUMENTARY.html](http://www.picturepalacepictures.com/OUTFITUMENTARY.html)


the seeming chaos of the montage effects of the video with its combination of images of urban, pastoral, and cemetery landscapes (Fig. 9), its close-ups of looming floral blooms (fig. 10) and luridly colored geometric and biomorphic shapes, and its found footage of gay rights parades, women’s and men’s body-building competitions, and protests at the funeral of the Baader-Meinhof group who ostensibly committed suicide while in prison. Here the rope of power enacted through making die and subjecting to social death is also the jumping rope of what is not just child’s play as the re-performance opens with Nieves running from the wooden stage out into the middle of the gallery, forcibly clearing space to jump rope among us.

In re-performance, the cry of “REAAADYY!” takes on an ominous cast as the translation in Spanish interrupts the cheer of the shouts “I am happy; I am here” with not “I am hurt” but “tengo miedo.” The negative anticipation of “I’m afraid” vibrates in irreducibly radical tension with the seeming tranquility of the new-age prospect of the “beautiful radiating energy” of the performance’s title which begins to issue more as an anxiety-producing question lining and mining the tense energetics of being crowded into the dark space of expectation. Ready or not this time, the re-performance puts the imperative pedal to the question of what readies us for a here and now in the wake of the not-yet of failed revolutions in which the compelled performance of happiness and optimism cannot be dissociated from what hurts and what induces fear, in which the pastel petals of psychedelic dreams, the landscape prospects of the journey cannot be disentangled from the violences enacted against the disposable and the violences we may claim to oppose, nor from the violences that hail us, the violences that we may be called upon to enact, and the slow, quiet, unnoticed violences of what gets abjected to answer the call to happiness.

Necrolandscaping

Situated in what might seem the ditch and not just pitch of the risky, unprotected field of heightened hurt, loss, and exhausted hope that is the Necrocene, I have laid out four necro-scenes that exercise the deformative as a resource for a kind of practice I call necrolandscaping: cracking open the bounds between living and dead, inhuming to form queer attachments for living our dying, smearing the boundaries between negative and positive to pose the negative space of contamination as a site of becoming, and issuing a call of readying for acting within the impure situation of the exhausted, the failed, and the already dead. Exercising the volatile potentials of death and decay in the wake of what the never or never again has yet to banish or resolve, these necro-scenes experiment with ways of bearing the unbearable from within the very scenes of what appears beyond and even directly threatens our capacity to show up, stay, parti-


Doing the Deformative
cipate, and engage. Grappling in a let’s-get-into-it way with the powers and possibilities of doing not merely the performative but also and especially the deformative, these necro-scenes reopen consideration of landscape as a way of approaching the crisis-ordinary of the Necrocene via a set of powerful tactics that offer “going to seed” as ways of negotiating and even transforming the everyday sites of damage in which we find ourselves.

29 I first shared this work on the deformative in my collaboratory on “Doing the Deformative” (September 2014) for the “Art + Scholarship” Borghesi-Mellon Workshop at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, which I co-coordinated with Katie Schaag, Andrew Salyer and Jon McKenzie. See https://artandscholarship.wordpress.com/2014/09/11/collaboratory-1-philosophy-in-the-performative/.