

**kunsthalle
wien**
karlsplatz

Denise
Ferreira
da Silva &
Arjuna
Neuman

**ANCESTRAL
CLOUDS
ANCESTRAL
CLAIMS**

5/10 2023 —
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Short Introduction

Andrea Popelka



Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims, 2023 (film still)

Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims is Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva's first solo exhibition in Austria. It is centered around the presentation of a new work, co-produced by Kunsthalle Wien and presented as a large-scale projection.

The eponymous film is the latest part of a series called *Elemental Cinema*, which the artists began to develop in 2016; each film in this series is dedicated to one of the four classical elements: earth, water, fire, or air. In it, the artists have developed an approach that takes matter, material, and the elemental as its starting point—aspects which continue to be neglected and suppressed by the globally dominant order of thinking and being.

In doing so, Ferreira da Silva and Neuman's work undermines ways of thinking about and relating to the Earth that have been shaped by European colonial modernity. They show that categories and distinctions that might seem self-evident to us—such as the interiority of the subject versus the exteriority of its surrounding—underlie a profoundly unequal, racist world.

Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims turns the spotlight on the persistence, though in altered form, of this modern relation to the Earth in the history of neoliberalism and one of its defining early episodes: Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship. Recently, on 11 September 2023, the seizure of power by the junta under Augusto Pinochet and the subsequent establishment of one of the most violent dictatorships in Latin America marked its fiftieth anniversary.



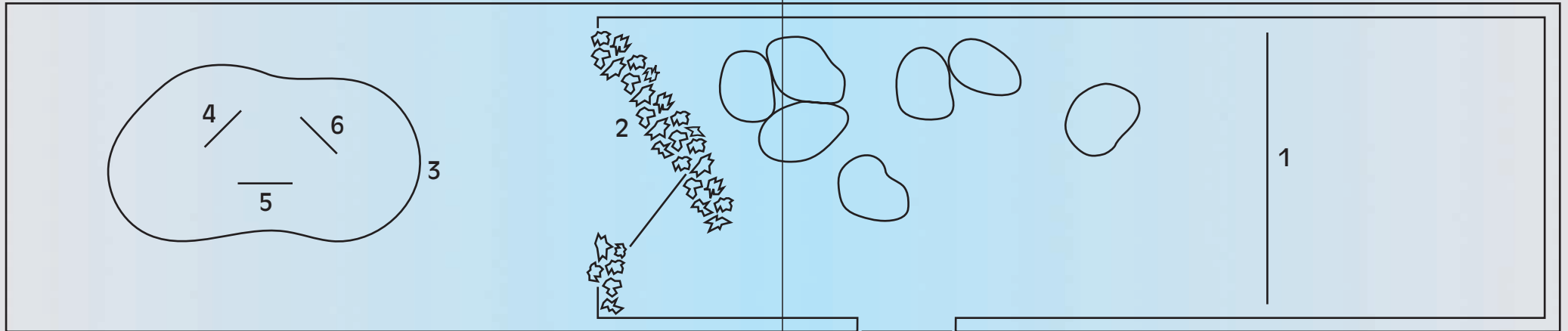
Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims, 2023 (film still)

The experimental essay film was shot in Chile's Atacama Desert. Because of the extreme aridity and elevation of the terrain, the skies above the desert are completely clear, allowing for an unobstructed view of the stars. Scattered across the land are powerful telescopes, through which scientists gaze into the deep time of the cosmos, while the surrounding desert freezes history: Today you can find prehistoric stone drawings there, but also labor camps from colonial times which were later reactivated during Pinochet's dictatorship and used to exploit opponents of the regime—stories of violence that stay hidden in plain sight. The artists ask: "How can there be such clarity and obscurity at the same time?"

Ferreira da Silva and Neuman's work experiments with thinking and sensing simultaneously the various moments of material existence: the quantic, cosmic, organic/mechanic, historic/geologic. It often departs from a particular site, but then moves through and weaves together various times and places to show the planetary scope and historical depth of pressing geopolitical issues. In *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*, the wind—air is the classical element taken up in this part of the series—travels from the Sahara to the Amazon and along the Pacific coast. Like the film's off-screen voices, the composition and movement of material reality tells stories of migration and displacement, but also of another geography drawn by the winds.

By thinking with matter, the artists dig up and experiment with the soil of what supposedly is. Alongside and beyond the critique of, for example, history or politics, they thereby allow to reimagine reality beyond a constitutively violent world.

Floorplan



1

**Ancestral Clouds
Ancestral Claims,
2023**

4K video: 49'
color, sound

The work was
co-produced by
Kunsthalle Wien.

2

**What a Wall
Could Be,
2023**

migrating Tillandsia
plants, size variable

3

**Cloud Chamber,
2023**

PVC strips,
fog machine, videos

4

**Serpent Rain,
2016**

video: 30'
color, sound

5

**Interview with
Constanza Vargas**

Coordinator of the Desert
Studies Research Station,
Pontificia Universidad
Católica de Chile in
the Tarapacá region
(Atacama UC Station –
Alto Patache)

The interview was
conducted in 2022.

6

**Interview with
Hongbin Yu**

Research Physical
Scientist with the
Climate and Radiation
Laboratory at NASA
Goddard Space Flight
Center (GSFC)

The interview was
conducted in 2023.

Curatorial Essay

Andrea Popelka



Serpent Rain, 2016 (film still)

Where is that place where what should not “happen to nobody” happens every day?

- Denise Ferreira da Silva, “No-Bodies: Law, Raciality and Violence”

I am very worried that we may not be able to stop the end of this world in which we exist; I am worried about the demolition of democratic structures that, though limited and perverse, provided at least an anchor to claims for social and global justice (from indigenous, migrant, LGBTI*, non-white populations everywhere) and could (at times) limit total violence; I am worried that insects and other species are becoming extinct, that rivers are drying up, that oceans are being suffocated by plastic, that fracking is destroying and threatening to contaminate large areas of underground water. This is a long list. However, I am invested—because I don’t see how we will be able to exist otherwise—in the end of the world as we *know* it.

- Denise Ferreira da Silva, “An End to ‘This’ World”

Our world lives when their world ceases to exist.

- Indigenous Action, “Rethinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous Anti-Futurist Manifesto”

Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims is the third and newest film in Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman’s series *Elemental Cinema*, which the artists began working on in 2016. (Shown here for the first time, *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* was co-produced by

Kunsthalle Wien. It is also the artists' first solo exhibition in Austria.) Each film in the series focuses on one of the classical elements of earth, fire, water, and air or wind, and every one is an experiment in thinking and aesthetics, in practice and sensibility.

Ferreira da Silva and Neuman met for the first time at the Bergen Assembly in 2016. Stefano Harney, as part of the freethought collective, had been invited to curate a section of the triennial, which he titled *Shipping and the Shipped*. Harney commissioned Ferreira da Silva and Neuman to develop a film together.

Getting to know one another through discussing philosophy, theory, law, art, science, tarot, and other practices, the two began to pose each other questions.

One of those questions was: how to make a film without time? After initial failed attempts to have Denise speaking on camera, the duo made *Serpent Rain*. This film, which is also shown in the exhibition at Kunsthalle, contains long unmoving shots: for example the industrial goings-on in the port of Bergen or frozen waterfalls in the forest. The long sequences center on the material reality of the environment, such as, in the case of the latter, water rushing forth or frozen mid-air and slowly melting at the same time. In these images, the material, or, as the artists put it, the elements emerge and time comes forward. The port of Bergen hints at Norway's oil and gas industry,¹ and there is a single drawing of the *Fredensborg*, a Norwegian slave ship whose sunken wreck was discovered off the coast of Norway in 1974. Until that point, Norway had only admitted its indirect participation

1 The anthropologist Massimiliano Mollona, who contributed a text on spectral, obfuscated migrant and refugee labor to this booklet, focused on Norway's oil industry at the same Bergen Assembly. Together with collaborators, he investigated workers in the local fossil-fuel sector and how the profits made off their backs fed into Norway's bourgeois social democracy. The project also asked: what comes after oil? A question that is central to *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*.

in the slave trade via Denmark. For the film, Neuman interviewed the divers who had found the *Fredensborg*.

One of them told him that “seeing [the ship] for the first time was the best moment of his life: the discovery made it impossible for Norway to continue to deny or ignore its role in the slave trade.”²

Back then, Ferreira da Silva and Neuman began to collaboratively think about what has been purposefully neglected over hundreds of years by Western idealist thought: matter, (raw) material, the stuff that everything is made of—including us. This forms one part of their critique of the bedrock principles of Western philosophical tradition, which erects a “racist onto-epistemological global order”³, meaning that this order has immense consequences both for how we understand the world (epistemology) and its being makeup (ontology). Ontology and epistemology are intertwined, hence “onto-epistemology”.

This racist global order runs incredibly deep. It appears in the earliest premises of the Western history of thought—from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Hegel, and Marx. Such depth requires an equally profound strategy to deal with it, a task undertaken by many Black studies scholars. Their aim is to show how notions we may take for granted—for example, as Ferreira da Silva shows, the very opposition of interiority (where the Hegelian sovereign, self-determined, rational subject lives) versus exteriority (where nature, objects, and racialized others reside)—lay the foundation for racist and colonial subjugation.

In her writing, Ferreira da Silva directs us to what is kept outside of this racial global order of knowing and being.

2 Arjuna Neuman, “Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva ‘Serpent Rain’”, interview by Margarida Mendes, *Vdrome* (2016), <https://www.vdrome.org/neuman-da-silva/>.

3 Henrike Kohpeiß parses this out with great precision in her book *Bürgerliche Kälte. Affekt und koloniale Subjektivität* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2023), 218. Translation my own.

What is the seemingly irrelevant raw material, the bricks used to construct this order? How do the subjects of this order fashion themselves and their world? What are they indifferent to? What does this order unsee?

“What is hidden in plain sight?”—a question that the artists pose with *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*.

Ferreira da Silva, for example, looks at a passage in Marx’s equation of value in *Capital*, vol. 1, in which he uses cotton as an example of a commodity. The artist applies a reading device she developed called “blacklight” to the text: “What blacklight does in the reading is to make the commodity of cotton shine in the description of the theory, thereby making it possible to contemplate colonial production—that of expropriated slave labor applied to the cultivation of expropriated indigenous lands.”⁴ Further explaining that “blacklight [...] is about a method, a how. By throwing blacklight at something, one can attend to what is there but is not highlighted: to what is there as a filler, a detail, as means, or a raw material.”⁵

Under blacklight, the holes in historical materialism become evident. Moreover, this reading device helps to extend and redeploy Marxist theory so that it can account for racial capitalism and the real material consequences inflicted on racialized, gendered

4 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Notes on the Underside of Visibility: Denise Ferreira da Silva (in conversation with Jota Mombaça and Thiago de Paula Souza)”, in *Propositions for Non-Fascist Living: Tentative and Urgent*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Wietske Maas (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 44.

This is the full quote: “I have elsewhere developed a device, which I call ‘blacklight,’ for reading philosophical and theoretical constructs, primary critical ones, such as Marx’s ‘materialist conception of history.’ Blacklight works by foregrounding the components of a statement that are relegated to an insignificant role in its construction and effect. For instance, I apply blacklight to Marx’s equation of value as presented in ‘The Labour-Process and the Process of Producing Surplus Value,’ from *Capital*, Vol. 1. →

5 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva ‘Serpent Rain’”.

populations and the Earth through the violent extraction of land and labor. “Where deconstructive tools are designed to expose constitutive aporias, blacklight is closer to conventional tools of analysis in making it possible to redeploy the very concept, statement, or thesis by turning it inside out or expanding it.”⁶

It may be clear by now that the legacy of Western idealist philosophy isn’t the only object of inquiry; critical theories such as historical materialism and its understanding of history and how it moves are also questioned.

This critique of history brings us to one of the artists’ unsettling experiments mentioned earlier: thinking without time. As Ferreira da Silva makes clear in a conversation about *Serpent Rain*, “The ship [*Fredensborg*] has significance not only to Norway, but to the whole world.”⁷ The *Fredensborg* is not a singular, isolated event. It is an event that has repeated so frequently in the last five hundred years that it can’t quite be called an event anymore.⁸ A more accurate description could be that the *Fredensborg* is a logic or principle. This principle constitutes a violent practice

→ What blacklight does in the reading is to make the commodity of cotton shine in the description of the theory, thereby making it possible to contemplate colonial production—that of expropriated slave labor applied to the cultivation of expropriated indigenous lands. By projecting blacklight it is possible to expose the obscurations (which white light always produces) that limit the proper meaning and even application of a given concept or thesis. In the case of Marx’s equation of value, blacklight exposes how the critical program that finds labor time as the sole source of exchange value is sustained by a juridical distinction, that between contract and (among capitalists and wage laborer) and title (of the owner of the slave’s body). Where deconstructive tools are designed to expose constitutive aporias, blacklight is closer to conventional tools of analysis in making it possible to redeploy the very concept, statement, or thesis by turning it inside out or expanding it.”

6 Ferreira da Silva, “Notes on the Underside of Visibility”, 44. The full quote is in note 4.

7 Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman, “Serpent Rain: A Conversation with Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman”, *Living Commons Magazine*, no. 1 (February 2018), <http://livingcommons.org/denise-arjuna>.

8 See Fred Moten’s discussion of Saidiya Hartman’s use of the term *event* in Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), xii.

of forcibly stealing and taking lives with impunity in order to extract land, resources, labor and energy used to build an extremely unequal world. Western modernity's descriptions of the world, which were critiqued above, obscure the violence that is constitutive of the world. At the same time, this very world threatens to destroy itself, and thus the Earth, with its own violence, as becomes evident in the present climate crisis. (The artist Hannah Black puts it succinctly: It is "a world dying of itself."⁹) As a recurring and structuring principle, the ship has significance for the whole planet. It is right here in the present, not in the past. In this regard, Ferreira da Silva also speaks of the "life" instead of the "afterlife of slavery."¹⁰

If the ship is not a singular event, the notion of time underwriting the event is also dispensable.¹¹ This remains but a brief outline of why Ferreira da Silva and Neuman attempt to think without time, or space, for that matter—but I hope it clarifies that in order to formulate an adequate ethical response to ongoing racial-colonial subjugation, it is crucial to do away with linearity/sequentiality (of time) and separability (of space). *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* follows the classical element of air or wind, because this element allows the artists to experiment with distribution and diffusion (or migration) of matter across space and time.

Supported by sources such as classical and quantum physics or the seventeenth-century German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,¹² the artists' thinking enables a more complex and accurate description of reality. In it, as I understand it, all different temporal and spatial points, all entities, are "deeply implicated" in one another—to such an extent that they cease to be separable points or entities all together. "There is a whole other planet that is fundamentally

9 Paraphrasing Hannah Black, *Tuesday or September or The End* (New York: Capricious, 2021), 29.

10 Ferreira da Silva, "Serpent Rain: A Conversation".

11 Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*, xii.

12 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability", *32a Bienal de São Paulo Art Biennial: Incerteza viva* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016), 57–65.

Serpent Rain, 2016 (film still)



connected, on which we live, but to which we don't pay attention.¹³ More than that, this understanding of reality contains the virtual, that which could have taken place: "all possible configurations", in the words of Ferreira da Silva.¹⁴

At the beginning of *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*, a voice speaks over a black background: "This film has many beginnings and many endings." The black screen lasts for several minutes, a nonimage that the artist Hannah Black finds almost humorous, as if the camera had stopped working during the shoot.¹⁵ These words introduce the film as one with neither origin nor prescriptive outcome.

Nevertheless, one of the beginnings of *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* is clearly located in the Andean region of Chile, specifically the Atacama Desert, where the film was shot. While the artists diffuse notions of space and time, their projects always depart from concrete political events or what they

13 Conversation between the artists and Hannah Black conducted for the exhibition. An excerpt can be found in this booklet.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

call “global catastrophes”. Incidents of police brutality were an important starting point for *Serpent Rain*, whereas the recent global intensification of fascism—not only from within the far right, but from within purported democracies, from liberalism to neoliberalism¹⁶—is dealt with in *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*.¹⁷ The Atacama Desert and Chile mark one of the early and defining episodes of neoliberalism, which was implemented in the country under Pinochet’s fascist rule.

Scholars Sabrina Axster, Ida Danewid, and others have observed neoliberal nation-states shifting towards increasing authoritarianism. This restructuring can be witnessed in the installation of aggressive security and border regimes, which, as the scholars demonstrate, has roots in older colonial forms of racial ordering.¹⁸

In a 2009 article, Ferreira da Silva wrote about the emergence of a global “security turn” after 9/11. Eight years later, following the financial crisis, the “architectures and procedures of national security” that had been built in response to the attacks “shifted its targets from the phantasmagoric ‘terrorist’ toward the ubiquitous ‘undocumented immigrant’”:

16 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, “Plantocracy or Communism”, in *Propositions for Non-Fascist Living*, 52.

17 Neuman and Ferreira da Silva (conceptually) arrived in the Atacama region after they held a number of exhibitions and symposia along the Pacific coast. On these occasions, the artists encountered different Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and activists and their struggles around self-defense and land claims. These and many other conversations inform what Ferreira da Silva calls a decolonial politics of “ancestral claims”, outlined in her eponymous essay included in this booklet. After this, the artists started to engage with winds that, by travelling up and down said coast and beyond nation-state borders, form an alternative geography across the different sites they had travelled to. Wind has a specific meaning in the Andean region and local Indigenous practices. According to artist Nicole L’Huillier, it is a crucial element in collective flute processions. For Neuman, it is a medium that not only carries matter on a microlevel, but also words, song, poetry, and gossip.

18 Sabrina Axster et al., “Colonial Lives of the Carceral Archipelago: Rethinking the Neoliberal Security State”, *International Political Sociology* 15, no. 3 (September 2021), 415–439, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olabo13>.

Perhaps the least exposed dimension of the neoliberal program is the fact that, while the state everywhere has dramatically reduced their presence in the economy, the assembling of the juridical architecture of free trade has also included measures that allow it to play a large role in law enforcement. For almost eight years, the architectures and procedures of national security have become an unescapable fact in the United States. Built under the claim that it was necessary for protection from foreign threats, this enormous apparatus—which is a good example of how the state has not shrunk under the global mandate—has recently shifted its targets from the phantasmagoric “terrorist” toward the ubiquitous “undocumented immigrant”, which it seeks along the country’s borders, in rural areas, and in large and small cities.¹⁹

Another ten years later, in 2019, Ferreira da Silva discerns a further intensification of this security regime. Political contexts such as Brazil under Bolsonaro and the Philippines under Duterte, amongst many others, demonstrate an increased “logic of obliteration” against economically dispossessed, racialized, and gendered communities, Ferreira da Silva states. This development is accompanied by the dismantling of “democratic structures that, though limited and perverse, provided at least an anchor to claims for social and global justice (from indigenous, migrant, LGBTI*, non-white populations everywhere) and could (at times) limit total violence”.²⁰ She asks what we will do against a security and “corporation state” that protects the economic interests of the elites and companies that sponsor it instead of its citizens. In the 1960s and 1970s, a wave of revolutionary leftist movements swept through South America. This included the election of socialist Salvador Allende, a trained medical doctor and former minister of health, as president of Chile in 1970. He won by a small

19 Ferreira da Silva, “No-Bodies: Law, Raciality and Violence”, *Griffith Law Review* 18, no. 2 (2009), 226.

20 Ferreira da Silva, “An End to ‘This’ World: Denise Ferreira da Silva Interviewed by Susanne Leeb and Kerstin Stakemeier”, *Texte zur Kunst* (April 12, 2019), <https://www.textezurkunst.de/en/articles/interview-ferreira-da-silva/>.

margin with a coalition of leftist parties, the Unidad Popular (UP). This was against all odds, since the Nixon administration and the CIA in the United States together with Chilean right-wing forces had been running a covert multimillion dollar anti-socialist and anti-communist campaign in Chile since the early 1960s. (Allende ran unsuccessfully for presidency four times, including 1964.) At that time, a large movement of rural landless peasants and Indigenous communities had built momentum against the *latifundios*, large estates that date back to colonial times and belong(ed) to the few. The redistribution of land and wealth was one of the main goals and promises of the UP's economic policy.

After only three years in power, the Allende government was overthrown in a military coup on September 11, 1973, again supported by the CIA. Under the rule of general Augusto Pinochet, the military installed a fascist dictatorship that lasted until 1990, almost twenty years. This year, 2023, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the coup.

On the day of the coup, Allende gave his last speech from the besieged presidential palace, La Moneda in Santiago. He declared that he would not surrender: "La historia es nuestra y la hacen los pueblos [History is ours, and people make history]." ²¹ Shortly after, he took his own life.

After the leftist political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the South American ruling classes aimed to consolidate their counterrevolutionary power by collaborating with the military, transitioning into nominally democratic societies in the 1980s and 1990s,

21 As my colleague Michael Simku remarked: At the beginning of the 1970s, in the midst of the Cold War, Chile was on the brink of becoming a leftist utopia. In 2019, when major protests against the government flared up again after public transportation fares were raised, the country found itself in that place again. A riotous, intersectional movement of millions of Chileans aimed to abolish the dictatorship's constitution. An initial successful referendum was held to determine whether to form an assembly to draw up a new constitution, but the resulting draft was rejected in a subsequent referendum. →

according to Jennifer Ponce de León.²² (Chile was part of a succession of military coups between the years 1973 and 1976.)

Pinochet's regime installed privatization, free market, and anti-worker economic programs based on ideas developed by Milton Friedman and others at the University of Chicago, where Chilean economists were sent to study. Friedrich von Hayek, an Austrian economist, was also an important member of this matrix of right-wing economics.

The enforcement of the dictatorship's economic policies necessitated immense (transnationally supported) state and military violence. The military, trained and supported by the United States of America, persecuted leftist political opponents. Thousands were tortured, killed, and disappeared. About two hundred thousand people had to flee into exile.

Traces of these atrocities can be found in the Atacama Desert to this day.

Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), a documentary film to which *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* is related in its methodology, depicts groups of women who continue to sift through the desert's sand in search of the human remains of their loved ones who disappeared during the dictatorship. Untold numbers of murdered dissidents were left there without burial.

The camera in *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* mechanically moves over fields of unmarked mass

→ "Although Allende's socialist project had been under sustained attack by global and national conservatives since its inception, September 11, 1973, marked the beginning of the end of a political dream that involved millions of people who had worked to create revolutionary and cultural change through *poder popular*."

Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Where Memory Dwells: Culture and State Violence in Chile* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 23–24.

22 Jennifer Ponce de León, *Another Aesthetics Is Possible: Arts of Rebellion in the Fourth World War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 132.

graves. In his essay for the exhibition booklet, Arjuna Neuman writes about these graves as a double displacement. They prevent the deceased from resting in peace after death, the dignity of a community burial with its attendant material culture and processes of grief are deferred indefinitely. The deceased can't be located in space and time, which subjugates them under a status of spectrality. What happened to them is unknown. Their loss remains unresolved; it is loud and persists throughout time. The impact of this violation is absolutely immeasurable.

The enforcement of disappearances—the *desaparecidos*—was strategically employed by the regime against the whole population. Generations of scholars and the region's population have dealt with this brutality and how the state, in its different phases of nation-building, both during Pinochet's time and in a nominal democracy after, concealed the violence then inflicted to keep it hidden in the past.²³

In terms of visibility, there is a paradoxical relationship at work in the Atacama Desert. Because of the extreme aridity and elevation of the terrain, the skies above the desert are completely clear, allowing for an unobstructed view of the stars. Scattered across the dry land are powerful telescopes, such as the ALMA observatory, a science facility shown in the film. (*Alma* is Spanish for *soul*.) Through the telescopes and the clean air, scientists gaze into the cosmos's deep time, whilst empty former camps and unmarked graves in the surrounding desert are suspended in a past that remains unseen. Why is that past hidden in plain sight? Arjuna Neuman writes about *Nostalgia for the Light*:²⁴ “The documentary seems to ask of Chile: how can there at once be such clarity and such obscurity?”²⁵

The artists think from the elemental level of the desert, from its sand and winds. The former is defined

23 Gómez-Barris, *Where Memory Dwells*.

24 In *Nostalgia for the Light*, the director also establishes a connection between Chile's atrocious past, its traces in the Atacama Desert, and the consolatory power of local practices of stargazing and astrology.

25 See his essay on unmarked graves, republished in this booklet.

as that which has been ground to a particular tiny size. The category of sand is not a question of *what*, but a question of *what size*. Myriad substances intersect on this level: the Atacama's sand contains copper, salt-peter, seashells, mountain rock, bone, and industrial toxic waste. The sand of the unmarked mass graves in the Atacama is, for Ferreira da Silva and Neuman, a space where different human remains mingle. “It is a gruesome, difficult image”, says Neuman, but it enables the artists to conceive of a mutual implication of different dispossessed communities. They call this “elemental sociality”.

This concept culminates at the end of *Ancestral Clouds* *Ancestral Claims*, when an animation of a shadowy ghost ship flies through the clouds. Hannah Black asks Ferreira da Silva and Neuman whether this animation suggests the cloud as water vapor. That is, water that has evaporated from the Pacific Ocean, where the Pinochet regime disposed of the bodies of political opponents and where drowned slaves persist through “residence time”.²⁶ (Another aspect is that the *Fredensborg* from *Serpent Rain* spectrally overlaps with the animated ship, so the artists' first work haunts their latest. This is only one of the “wormholes” that connect all of their films.)

26 “Residence time” is a term used by Christina Sharpe in her book *In the Wake*:

“There have been studies done on whales that have died and have sunk to the seafloor. These studies show that within a few days the whales' bodies are picked almost clean by benthic organisms—those organisms that live on the seafloor. My colleague Anne Gardulski tells me it is most likely that a human body would not make it to the seafloor intact. What happened to the bodies? By which I mean, what happened to the components of their bodies in salt water? Anne Gardulski tells me that because nutrients cycle through the ocean (the process of organisms eating organisms is the cycling of nutrients through the ocean), the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues. Around 90 to 95 percent of the tissues of things that are eaten in the water column get recycled. As Anne told me, ‘Nobody dies of old age in the ocean.’ →

Ferreira da Silva and Neuman's work intervenes into what we perceive as history and what we perceive as violence. Jennifer Ponce de León would call this an intervention into the "aesthetics of violence and history", broadly defining aesthetics as "the social forging of perceptions of [history and] violence", the "forged sensory composition of a world."²⁷

Neuman and Ferreira da Silva don't provide an image or representation of violence or suffering. Rather, they help us reflect upon what constitutes white ways of perceiving the world and how violence is disappeared and thus legitimized.

The composition of the sand also points to the layered, long history of mining and extraction in the region, which *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* also traces. A voice in the film repeatedly recounts the seemingly endless accumulation of resources, pointing to the recurrence of extraction across time that we have mentioned before with the non-locality of the *Fredensborg*-principle: "copper, gold, cobalt, plastic, glass, aluminum, indium, germanium, gallium, tungsten, tin, tantalum, silicon, iron, lithium".

Sequences of the film depict the bright blue, yellow, and green *salares* of the Atacama, salt flats used to extract lithium, a mineral that today powers rechargeable batteries, electronic devices such as computers, smartphones, robots, electric cars, and solar panels all around the planet. Lithium is supposed to help answer

→ The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time. Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years. And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which 'everything is now. It is all now' (Morrison 1987, 198)."

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 36. Quoted is Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume Contemporary Fiction, 1987), 198.

²⁷ Ponce de León, *Another Aesthetics Is Possible*, 129.

the question of what comes after oil to power the world. But many have shown that this "so-called renewable future comes at the cost of the devastation of the planet"²⁸.

Hannah Black felt that the shots of the desert in *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* show the becoming-material of a particular thinking that the artists critique. By this, she means that the legacy of the global racial order has severe material effects on the planet. In the desert's depletion, we can see and feel the world dying of itself. (Extraction in the Atacama Desert produces water shortages, to which Chile, that has experienced ten years of drought, is especially prone. With this depiction, the film also seems to hint at the specter of increasing heat and desertification of the planet.) In response to this planetary socioecological catastrophe, the artists state that "decolonization—the restoration of the total value extracted from Native Lands and expropriated from Slave Labor [...] is the only relevant ethical principle of our times."²⁹

Behind the large-scale projection of *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims* is a cluster of plants that are native to the Atacama Desert: *Tillandsia usneoides*. Hung in a cascading curtain and titled *What a Wall Could Be* (2023), they separate the viewing room from a space called *Cloud Chamber*. *Tillandsia* grow without soil, nourishing themselves from the air alone. In this, they resemble some of the science facilities shown in the film that filter water from the air.

Behind the plants sits a separate space, called *Cloud Chamber*, in which visitors can watch *Serpent Rain*, as well as two videos of interviews with scientists that Neuman and Ferreira da Silva conducted during the making of the film.

²⁸ Rose-Anne Gush, "Sacrificial Energy", *Framer Framed* (June 27, 2023), <https://framerframed.nl/en/dossier/sacrificial-energy-door-rose-anne-gush/>.

²⁹ See Denise Ferreira da Silva's essay "Ancestral Claims" in this booklet.

As an “interscalar vehicle”,³⁰ the public program shows how the planetary and Chilean contexts and topics such as extraction or migration are implicated in the local setting of Vienna and Austria.

As Massimiliano Mollona writes in this booklet, we find ourselves in the middle of a “new logistic of the war economy.”³¹ In order to secure an energy supply, mines are being reopened and prospecting for new deposits is taking place in European countries such as Spain, Portugal, Serbia, Germany, Austria, and, crucially, Ukraine. In *How Does One Get to Own a Mountain?!*, Rose-Anne Gush, Philipp Sattler, and Markus Gönitzer will discuss these urgent issues in reference to a future lithium mine in the mountain ranges of Carinthia in Southern Austria. They will bring together present-day concerns with the legacy of nationalist-socialist concepts of agricultural property and nature, as well as partisan resistance and modes of living in that region.

Philosopher Henrike Kohpeiß and writer Maxi Wallenhorst will look into the sociotechniques of bourgeois coldness and disassociation. *Bourgeois coldness* is a term taken from Theodor W. Adorno, referring to a “contemporary affective state with which citizens protect themselves from the violence they cause.” Together, Kohpeiß and Wallenhorst will analyze how the European bourgeois subject can maintain indifference towards the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean while fashioning itself as a subject with values such as humanism or universality at the same time.

Together with the Kunsthalle Wien’s art education team and especially Daliah Touré, we are developing

30 “In science-fiction dreams of *interstellar* travel, characters travel distances unbridgeable by conventions of Newtonian mechanics. They arrive at impossible destinations, worlds that teach them new ways of seeing and being. Let’s attempt similarly impossible journeys. What happens when we treat empirical objects as *interscalar* vehicles, as means of connecting stories and scales usually kept apart?” Gabrielle Hecht, “Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence”, *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2018), 115.

31 See Massimiliano Mollona’s essay in this booklet.

a program called *Making Sense* for the exhibition that focuses on the senses and the body. It is a practice-oriented format encompassing performances and workshops. Making sense is understood here in its double meaning: as understanding something and as *making* sense, creating new sensory pathways to (the) art.

Furthermore, a seminar for the Master for Critical Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna will be held inside of the exhibition space. It will comprise study circles that are open to the public and will collectively be developed by the group. Its thematic focus is extraction and extractivism.

As I was preparing for this text, I found out that the title *Serpent Rain* comes from the last card of tarot’s major arcana: the world. In some versions, the card depicts a figure encircled by an ouroboros, a snake biting its own tail. Four beasts sit on clouds in each corner of the card, representing the four classical elements. The card signifies a world that periodically begins anew. It folds together the beginning and the end of time. After this card, the cycle of the major arcana starts again with the deck’s zero point: the fool.

Anonymous members of the collective Indigenous Action write, “Our world lives when their world ceases to exist.”³²

I want to warmly thank the artists and all collaborators and comrades inside and outside of Kunsthalle Wien and everybody who tries to find strategies against present-day fascism wherever they are, and especially within Austria.

32 “Rethinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous Anti-Futurist Manifesto”, *Indigenous Action* (March 19, 2020), <https://www.indigenouaction.org/rethinking-the-apocalypse-an-indigenous-anti-futurist-manifesto/>.

Ancestral Claims

Denise Ferreira da Silva



Ancestral Claims, 2023 (film still)

Species Man did not shape the conditions for the Third Carbon Age or the Nuclear Age. The story of Species Man as the agent of the Anthropocene is an almost laughable rerun of the great phallic humanizing and modernizing Adventure, where man, made in the image of a vanished god, takes on superpowers in his secular-sacred ascent, only to end in tragic detumescence, once again. Autopoietic, self-making man came down once again, this time in tragic system failure, turning biodiverse ecosystems into flipped-out deserts of slimy mats and stinging jellyfish. Neither did technological determinism produce the Third Carbon Age. Coal and the steam engine did not determine the story, and besides the dates are all wrong, not because one has to go back to the last ice age, but because one has to at least include the great market and commodity reworldings of the long sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the current era, even if we think (wrongly) that we can remain Euro-centered in thinking about “globalizing” transformations shaping the Capitalocene.

— Donna Haraway,
“Tentacular Thinking”

If it is thus conceded that one must go beyond a given concept in order to compare it synthetically with another, then a third thing is necessary in which alone the synthesis of two concepts can originate. But now what is this third thing, as the medium of all synthetic judgments? There is only one totality in which all of our representations are contained, namely inner sense and its *a priori* form, time. The synthesis of representations

rests on the imagination, but their synthetic unity (which is requisite for judgment), on the unity of apperception. Herein therefore is to be sought the possibility of synthetic judgments, and, since all three contain the sources of a priori representations, also the possibility of pure synthetic judgments, indeed on these grounds they will even be necessary if a cognition of objects is to come about which rests solely on the synthesis of the representations.

— Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

When considering the global catastrophes of the past decade or so, it seems that only a re-orientation can respond to them; only a radical shift (perhaps a demolition) of the underground and the crumbling of the intra-structures of thinking, I find, may allow for the kind of transformation needed to appreciate the challenges that will be faced by the generations to come.

As I attempt to outline the itinerary
—the path that Black Feminist
Poethics signal—my starting point is
decolonization—the restoration of the
total value extracted from Native Lands
and expropriated from Slave Labor.¹

For decolonization is the only possible signifier/signified for anything that can be taken as a descriptor for what so many mean by “social justice” or “global justice”; or more directly put: decolonization as a demand hosts the most urgent ethical-political issues. Any shift in thinking that prepares the terrain for the emergence of descriptors of existence capable of addressing today’s global catastrophes will have to begin with decolonization; that is, it will have to start by acknowledging and confronting colonial and racial subjugation as constitutive of and active in the current global circumstances. Not as that from which such catastrophes derive—as the past of this present

1 This description of decolonization accepts the liberal and historical materialist account of labor as well as of production. I offer an alternative account in Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (Cambridge, MA/Berlin: MIT Press/Sternberg Press, 2022).

or the cause of these effects—but as that which is operative in all of them.

Which catastrophes? Which ethical-political issues? Let me mention four. First, there is an ongoing juridical-economic strategy, which I will call “criminality.” It is a decades-long practice which takes the form of increasing rates of incarceration and of state-authorized killings, all justified by criminality (of the “gang bangster,” of “the terrorist,” of the “illegal immigrant”) and facilitated by private economic entities (privately owned-prisons and detention centers, war mercenaries, and builders of walls). I am referring to Black and Latinx persons in the United States, but also to Muslim populations caught in the wars in the Middle East and the African continent; I am also referring to drug-related armed conflict throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Second, and related, there is the unprecedented displacement of populations in the Global South, such as Europe’s “refugee crisis,” which the world began to take note of about five years ago but has been going on for much longer. A “crisis” which, most forget, related to the same local and regional wars I mentioned before—armed conflicts that do not interfere with labor expropriation, which seem to facilitate further land expropriation and the extraction of minerals so dear to global capital. This “crisis” is inseparable from the devastation of livelihoods provoked by development strategies, which seem to be returning the economies in the Global South to extraction and agriculture—this time around in the hands of multinational corporations. Let us not forget Europe’s response to the “refugee crisis,” which has been causing the death of so many Black and Brown persons from former European colonies, has consolidated the corporate-security state and the return of lethal white identity politics. Third, there is the latest global crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic which, true to form, in less than one year has proven deadlier to the Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations of North America, and will, for sure, wreak havoc in the former colonies of the Global South. Fourth, no less dramatic in its expression—as seen in the recent fires on the West Coast of the US—there is global warming, and our sheer incapacity to make sense of it. A thinking that

takes into account all four developments—criminality, displacement, the pandemic, and global warming—and that situates them jointly unfolding in a global context must, I find, begin with the view that decolonization is the only relevant ethical principle of our times.

Why is this the case? Why is the connection between these four issues not given immediately, and why is decolonization the only appropriate ethical-political response to them?² If we are to attend to the demand for decolonization and appreciate its ethical force, a shift at the level of principles or a reconfiguring of the *transparent I* must occur underground and intra-structurally. As a contribution to the groundwork necessary for appreciating the demand for decolonization and for contemplating the fundamental re-orientation it requests, I provide a description of the moments at which such an operation must first occur, namely a description of existence (deep implicancy). As I have done elsewhere, instead of providing a definition, in the following commentary of global warming I outline what happens to thinking when deep implicancy describes its intra-structural level, that is, as the unspoken basis for gathering what happens and what exists.

ORDER OF NATURE

My point of departure here is how the Kantian “I think,” the “unity of apperception” mentioned in the opening quote, is inscribed in the grammar and

2 There are, of course, many reasons why. Let me briefly comment on a theoretical one, which is that the prevailing logics for arguments for anything that could be taken as substantive (corrective and not only protective) justice, whether understood as “social” or “global,” are distribution and recognition. Unfortunately, I don’t have time to revisit either John Rawls’ theory of distributive justice or Charles Taylor’s articulation of recognition as the principle under multiculturalism—or their critics. I will mention only that the sharpest critiques begin precisely with shifting the attention to social (racial, gender, sexual) and colonial subjugation. On the former, see Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); on the latter, see Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

lexicon that constitute descriptions of what happens and what exists, both human and more-than-human. When considering how Kant’s version of the subject operates at this level, as the figure of determinacy, it is important to note that it does so underground and intra-structurally—in the ontoepistemological pillars (separability, determinacy, and sequentiality) and descriptors (formality and efficacy). That it does so is a consequence of the pre-condition for knowledge, of *given order*, that is, *nature*, which undergirds the Kantian program. Here I am referring to what Kant calls the “law of the specification of nature,” which “assumes in behalf of an *order of nature* cognizable for our understanding in the division that it makes of its universal laws when it would subordinate a manifold of particular laws to these.”³ Being the sole and fundamental guide of judgment, this principle is the pre-condition for determinative scientific statements, reflective aesthetic statements, and imperative ethic statements.

A crucial step in the direction of thinking needed for an adequate anticolonial analysis of the global context is to expose how the “I think” is at work in the very descriptive terms that compound our discourse.

Let us consider those critical approaches to global warming which correctly consider colonial extraction, widespread agricultural production, and the needs of industrial capital as central to the creation of the conditions leading to an increase in greenhouse gases. The terms Donna Haraway comments on in the opening quote, “Anthropocene” and “Capitalocene,” work correctly to attribute global warming to the human, to the way the conditions of human existence have impacted the planet. When doing so, however, in the attribution of determinacy, they establish a chain of efficacy that does not allow for an appreciation of how colonial extraction and expropriation are at work in the process. This is the case because of the

3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 72.

way formality and efficacy operate intra-structurally in the “empirical” or “material” conditions that the terms Anthropocene and Capitalocene are designed to capture. On the one hand, formality is at work in how the Kantian “I think” is presumed in the procedure developed for establishing the ages of the Earth, which inscribes linear time onto the planet and allows for the naming of the phases of its history. The existing techniques and tools set the Earth’s age at about 4.6 billion years. The first 600 million years are not yet officially named, it seems, due to a lack of the kind of evidence (life of bacteria) that allowed for the naming of the following 4 billion years. Formality, one of the ontoepistemological descriptors that sustain claims to knowledge with certainty, maps the “I think” onto the planet because the naming procedure employs the methods, concepts, and formulations of the science of life.⁴ On the other hand, efficacy is the primary ontoepistemological descriptor in analyses of global warming that register the beginning of a new phase in the Earth’s existence, whether it is called Anthropocene or Capitalocene; that is, whether or not it results from shifts brought about by large-scale economic activities, all of which are dependent on extraction and labor expropriation. To put it differently, human economic activity is identified as the efficient cause in both cases; the difference is that “Capitalocene,” as Haraway indicates, takes on a critical perspective

4 Formality uses the biological classificatory system that the French naturalist George Cuvier designed in the early nineteenth century. In it, the organic form of the European (Caucasian) “race” governs (as the model and the most perfect living formation) the understanding of the forms and functions of other living things. Hence, the unnamed phases/layers of the planet are so because they cannot be separated according to living things, which are, in turn, knowable because of the different degrees of complexity of their organisms, which allows for the determination of their genera, species, etc. And, after Cuvier’s comparative anatomy was combined with Darwin’s theory of natural selection, more-than-human living beings also acquired a place in a temporal sequence that charts the development of life that, as a figuring of Hegel’s Spirit, is both the efficient and the final cause of the particularity of the parts and the movements of living things. For an in-depth analysis of the science of life and an elaboration of this argument, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

in regard to the “I think,” which is unexamined in “Anthropocene.”

What if, instead of naming yet another geological age and rendering human exceptionality the final explanation for what we know results from economic activities, one attended to those activities?

Humans have led to a rise in temperature that can/will cause the destruction or extinction of the planet’s living inhabitants.

At the most basic level, the food we eat and the fossil fuel used in our vehicles are culprits in this deadly energy flow, which is nothing but an increase of heat. Heat, the transfer of internal kinetic energy, is what is at work in global warming. Heat flows from flesh to flesh by contact, radiation, or mediation. Everything that exists emits electromagnetic radiation, as long as its temperature—or rather, a measurement of its average internal temperature—is greater than absolute zero (which, as far as I have learned, has only been achieved through the intervention of scientists in a laboratory). Internal kinetic energy, which depends on mass and speed, can be transformed into any other form of energy. And how to attend to these activities without the ontoepistemological intra-structure of the “I think” and its ordered world?

What if, instead of describing the economic activities that cause global warming in terms of efficacy, one considered all that enters in them—labor, raw materials, and instruments of production—in terms of their materiality?

More precisely, I am interested in proposing a description of what happens in the very process of generating greenhouse gases. That is, in the transformation or transduction of potential energy (labor) or internal kinetic energy (calor) that takes place when something is applied to provoke an alteration in something else (labor), or when something exists alongside everything that is already in existence (calor).



Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims, 2023 (film still)

LAND

With such a proposition, I move to introduce the outline of an argument: that decolonization provides us with an ethical basis for demanding the kind of juridical and economic changes necessary to challenge the dominance of state-capital and inspire a shift away from extraction (of lands and resources), which results in the displacement, dispossession and death that forces the racial others of Europe to leave their homes. Even without a good grasp of what is at work in global warming, everybody knows that it results from the emission and accumulation of greenhouse

gases—carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide—which have raised the temperature of the lower layer of the Earth (troposphere). The rise in temperature results from these gases' absorption and emission of infrared radiation. The accelerated accumulation of greenhouse gases has to do with an increased extraction of matter from the Earth, in the form of fossil fuels and soil nutrients to feed crops and livestock. The accumulation of gases, then, is inseparable from the expropriation of land and of the labor necessary to access fossil fuels and soil. Whether we locate the efficient cause earlier, with the emergence of agriculture, or in the late eighteenth century with the Industrial Revolution, there is no question that a certain concentration of means of production and of access to raw materials corresponds to the excess of greenhouse gases. I don't need to say much to support the point that coloniality—that is, the mode of governance that relies on the deployment of total violence to ensure the expropriation of the internal energy of lands and bodies—has facilitated this concentration for over five hundred years now. It is then not unreasonable to point to the fact that the accumulation of these gases also expresses (materially) the extent and intensity of the concentration of expropriated internal (kinetic) energy facilitated by coloniality and the juridical-economic mechanism of state-capital. As for evidence of the intensity and extent of this expropriation of internal energy, it is sufficient to recall the levels of dispossession found in the Global South, or the never-ending wars in the African continent, the Middle East, Afghanistan—colonial conflicts that do not interfere with the extraction of natural resources.

Land, including the waters and other more-than-human inhabitants, exists as potential energy (chemical, gravitational, etc.).

How to think in such a way that violates the linear separation and progression given by space and time?

Well, think about how the equivalence between matter and energy presented by Einstein materialized in the bombs tested in the Marshall Islands. In my

view, this is about an image of existence without the presumption of separability. If we think, at the same time, that something has been extracted, and that Indigenous claims to land are not only a claim to possession (which is the logic of economic value I mentioned earlier) but are ancestral claims (as Indigenous epistemologies already assume)—we can think that Indigenous people are the water (bodies composed by water and also by everything that grew on the land because of the water—plants, fish, birds). It is also possible to think that what has been extracted has not disappeared in consumption. Actually, if we think of “change” in terms of phase transition (the same matter changing into solid, liquid, gas, plasma) and transduction (one form of energy turning into another, as a microphone transforms sound waves into electrical waves) we can say that the bodies of their ancestors were composed of what grew because of those waters; when the water was extracted, parts of them were taken elsewhere.

This is an ancestral claim; it cannot be measured because it is everything.

In the case of water extraction, two things can be contemplated at once: first, extraction and the total violence that enables it (ongoing theft of economic dispossession); and second, what I call re/de/composition, the fact that the water remains materially as bodies, trees, and all the other things that exist. We can think that the wealth that has been accumulated by the descendants of the occupiers, of the settlers in these lands; the wealth that was sent back to Europe in the form of objects but also of raw materials that entered the initial accumulation of capital, as industrial capital; the stolen wealth that has been transformed in so many ways, is also composed of that water. What has been extracted remains transduced into money, and now into these virtual financial objects that prevail in global capital.

If we take both matter and energy into account, we can think of the restoration of the extracted total value along different lines. It is not the return of a possession that can be monetized.

It is the return of a constitutive part of the expropriated Indigenous community (like the return of a limb). Because the wealth yielded by what was extracted entered in the composition of what exists not only in Europe but everywhere, the return is also a homecoming of sorts; it is the actualization of a deep implication that already exists.

So, restoration cannot be monetized, it cannot be calculated and addressed as a loss (or a gain). Thinking without linearity, without its ontoepistemological pillars (separability, determinacy, and sequentiality) and descriptors (formality and efficacy) and its ways of creating meaning allows for another appreciation of the call for decolonization by Indigenous peoples, and the demand for reparations for Black persons. What has been demanded is a restoration of something that never completely disappeared and that has also made them/us part of all that exists.

“Ancestral Claims” by Denise Ferreira da Silva was previously published in Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman, *Se avvicina un terremoto, Quaderns portàtils* 39 (Barcelona: MACBA, 2023), https://img.macba.cat/public/document/2023-05/def_qp_39_infinitem_b3.pdf.

Unmarked Graves: The Bones of Neoliberalism

Arjuna Neuman



Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims, 2023 (film still)

This text looks at both refugees and unmarked graves as particular symptoms of an emerging fragile future. Through personal and geopolitical lenses, it asks how and why neoliberal globalization seems to be merging with new forms of fascism.

BORDERS UNBOUND

My father is first generation North American. He was born in New York and grew up in Teaneck, New Jersey. He grew up, like many boomers, pledging allegiance to the flag and believing well into his forties that the USA was the greatest place on earth. This hubris of course crashed later when his wife, my mother—who is not white—was detained at the US border and interrogated for most of the day, ending with a court summons to return and explain herself six months later. She was supposed to not leave the country until the court hearing in Washington. Her “crime,” was that she had given up her green card some years before, since my family had no plans to return to living in the US. This decision to leave was finalized when my grandmother, Helen, my father’s last living relative, passed away. Since then, it has been a slow family process to cut legal and emotional ties with the US—in part to detach, in part to avoid double taxation, in part to start new, or at least once again forget.

The immigration hall official had not encountered a person who had surrendered US citizenship before and, with an expression that he was somehow doing my mum a favor, he flagged it as suspicious and sent her to secondary (the screening room when you fail the first level of immigration questioning).

My mum was then separated from my father after a long flight. He would have been waiting more impatiently than concerned, or that's what he told himself, with the luggage stacked on a trolley by the rotating baggage belt, empty now for hours. My mother, kept on airside, had to answer two separate interrogations. Returning each time for hours to the secondary screening room—a nerve-racking room, kept bright under flickering neon-lights at all hours of the day. With no windows and an armed guard, time stands just as still as the space is suspended outside of any national territory, in many ways space-time doesn't quite exist here, or at least it is subjugated entirely to the whim of the immigration officers, their small, unmarked kingdom that smells sharply of cleaning products with signs that warn, might cause cancer. There is a vending machine with Reese's Peanut Butter Cups and stale Mars bars, and two television screens on either side of the room, that sometimes play cartoons blaring loud with Spanish subtitles. A televisual technique that might be more intended to upset the psychology of adults than appease children.

Unlike many countries, the US gives a lot of power to the individual immigration officials to make ultimate decisions.

For example, there is no set rule of how many days you can spend in the US as a foreigner. Or how many times you can return in a given period, unlike the Schengen 90/180 rule. This ambiguity may be intentional. Not only to give authority to the border force, but also to instill a sense of uncertainty and unease, or even paranoia, in a person who is never quite sure whether they have overstayed their welcome, whether they have broken the invisible rules and will be banned from the US for ten years and perhaps be separated from their children for this time. Gaslights always hang on a threshold, lighting what is outside, but hiding what is inside.

In many ways it is the ambiguity of the cracks and edges, of the in-between and extra-territorial spaces, that are exploited to garner power and wealth, and therefore give form to the nation-state, its

authority—these borders (of all denominations) have been expanding well beyond their traditional place on the edge of a territory once defined by mountain ranges and oceans. Now we find them hundreds of miles offshore, in proxy countries (see Nauru for Australia, Morocco for Spain, or Kenya for UK) but also in legal and financial loopholes, in trade agreements, in migrant identities and identity migrations, and all across geo-political maneuvering. At the same time, importantly, the nation-state in all of its capitalized, puffed up, and even mythic substantiation, gives form(lessness) to these in-between spaces—spaces where a certain type of invisible but quite supreme power lives, or rather lives by feeding on the ambiguity.

This is a symbiotic (or even a *sym-necrotic*) relationship, where arguably, neither could survive or thrive without the other.

Put in broader terms, even if they have many differences, contemporary forms of nationalism (whether center-right or neo-fascist) and neoliberalism need one another.

Of course, my parents did not stay in the US until the court case. They returned after their holiday to England, back to their new home of now over forty years. And my mum spent the next six months trying to call the right person, lost in the Kafkaesque castle of US immigration, until finally she found someone who would simply say, “yes, of course you can surrender your green card, let me log that in your file. No, you don't have to go to court. And it should not be a problem next time you visit, just fill out the Visa Waiver.”

It was probably somewhere over the Atlantic, a reversal of the journey that his parents had made in 1939 and 1940 by boat, that my father lost the last strands of faith in his nation of origin, perhaps, it was there at 30,000 feet in the oxygenated cabin of grey plastic, that through his anger, he fully detached from his homeland, the USA. As first generation, with no deep ties and no more living relatives, and only a handful of old school friends there, this decision to detach was probably not difficult—or in fact, it felt natural, given

that before his parents had fled to New York, they had only been in Vienna for two or three generations and before that in Galicia, Poland which is now Ukraine, before that, as Ashkenazi's we have no record. Moving, migrating, forcibly or willfully, and with it detaching, necessarily or hopefully, was more the norm than staying put. He had already, in his late twenties, changed his beliefs to a framework that championed non-attachment and with it, his birth name.

SAMUEL NEUMAN, GRANDFATHER

After Samuel died, my grandmother kept a separate and somewhat sealed "memorial" room in her house dedicated to her late husband—she never remarried. I only ever entered this "memorial" room in my imagination. I'm not sure if the house I visited in New Jersey a few times was the same one my father grew up in, or the same one his father had died in. Often in my imagination it is not really me entering the memorial room, touching the yellow hanging tie, wrinkling my nose from the mothballed smell, or trying on the brown leather shoes that are too big, but rather a teenage version of my father perhaps with his brother behind, slightly afraid. What I do remember of my grandmother's house, before she was moved to a retirement home in Hollywood, Florida, was a jar full of sweets with shiny wrappers on the glass table and the white fabric sheets that she draped over all the furniture. It did not strike me as strange until many years later, or perhaps until I noticed a similar tendency in my father who keeps the curtains closed in his house in London, a little too often, to protect the carpet from sun-bleaching he would say, to protect it from ghostly imprints darkening under the furniture's shadows, to protect it from time passing. It gave me a small pleasure to peak under the white sheets when no one was looking, this is pretty much the only memory I have of this suburban house in Teaneck, New Jersey. Under the white sheets, draped as if my grandmother was about to leave, or leave at any moment, or actually had already left, was a beautiful sky-blue fabric, embossed with small squares. I run my fingers over the squares, the fabric feels

silky, smooth, and slightly shiny, still new, forever new. The gridded stitching holds it all together, as if tugging on one thread could untie all the furniture that would simply spill its guts out into the street, an entire living situation turned inside out.

In many ways this "memorial" room—or was it a closet? or a drawer? or an ever-more distant room in one's memory?—seems like an attempt to pause time, to hold things as still as possible in a world filled with change.

**A grave of sorts, but one that doesn't
change, doesn't age, doesn't grow
weeds, doesn't fade under another
rotation of the sun's bright glare.
A song put on pause.**

This refusal of time, or at least this slowing down of its movement and decaying force, its tug on threads, seems to be an attempt at also fixing in place—of making and marking a very specific space, a material, physical space in the world, even when the one that fits it like a jigsaw piece, has left it physically. How long does a body's imprint stay in a pillow after they have gone, if untouched?

ANTI-ARCHITECTURE

For refugees, I can begin to understand what others might call "neurosis" or "obsessive-compulsive disorder"—but when a world is already so deeply disordered, stateless both literally and existentially, then small attempts to find order, to hold things dear together in a certain stasis is par for the course. My grandfather, although he died young, maybe eight years older than I currently am, was fortunate enough to die in his home. This is so vastly different from the unmarked graves that both defined the Nazi period and were the fate of all his relatives (like his uncle who ran into an electric fence in a camp to commit suicide), but also so many other authoritarian and before that, colonial political orders that used the disappearance and displacement of people as an

infrastructure for accumulating power. Of course, the political orders across time had and have different agendas, even if the architecture of unmarked graves and their use as de-territorialized zones for fear mongering is relatively consistent right through to the present.

As an architecture, the unmarked grave is a type of space that produces refugees, where to stay is to put oneself at risk of being murdered and disappeared, ending up in such a space/ non-space—

as well as the journey of seeking asylum carries a risk of dying at sea, or equally while trying to cross a desert often never to be found. The unmarked grave does not quite produce the refugee subject in the way other architectures affect its inhabitants or frequenters through the “production of space,” but rather the unmarked grave works invertedly, a kind of anti-architecture that produces the refugee subject by being a space that one does not want to inhabit or rather ex-habit—its possibility haunts the future refugee enough that they must leave and leave immediately. The unmarked grave exists both as a real, albeit unfindable, space and—significantly—within the refugee imaginary.

In my paternal grandparent’s case, they were escaping the Holocaust and rumors at the time of being killed in gas chambers—rumors that of course turned out to be true, but at their inception the gas chambers were entirely clandestine. As an architecture, the chambers constitute a more industrial form of the classic unmarked grave: a ditch outside of town filled with undifferentiated bodies, sometimes lined up to be shot with one bullet—to save bullets. This is an architecture of fear that thrives on its invisibility, paranoia, and symbolism, that is very much by design in regimes that use violence for power, both implicitly and explicitly. That which is invisible tends to be much more uncertain and frightful and therefore powerful, than that which stands in plain sight—in many ways the panopticon is for prisoners what the unmarked

grave is for refugees. We might call this “spectral architecture,” or at least the prototypical stage of ghost architecture (especially pertinent to national formations), that of invisible infrastructures that include the unaccounted-for masses of bodies hidden within—architectures designed for fear and control, or expulsion (death in an unknown place or exile—the unmarked grave, a double exile). This use of death in ordering society we know as necropolitics, meanwhile what the unmarked grave and its proto-spectral architectures add to this body of analysis, is a certain emergent necro-economy and with it *ghost capital* or *ghost value*. A type of infrastructure and method of control that helps classical fascism and early authoritarian governments evolve/hybridize into more contemporary coalition forms of neo-liberal governance, where fear, expulsion and death equal investment, assets and profit—a type of governance and political economy whose fascist, neo-fascist and authoritarian, not to mention colonial roots, are starting to become increasingly apparent, marking a worrying trend for the fragile present and near-future.

OFFSHORE BONES

Much has been said about Chile, the coup, the US involvement, the human rights violations, the indictment of Pinochet, as well as the latter’s status as an authoritarian criminal and good friend of Thatcher and Reagan. What makes this history worth revisiting in this contemporary moment (not to mention its revival in right-wing culture from memes to the Mont Pelèrin Society’s recent conference keynote) is that as one of the first prototypes of neoliberal capitalism (with an authoritarian local flavor), Chile might help us understand the near future, the new developments of global capital, its new partnerships with neo-fascisms all with some perspective, now over fifty years from neoliberalism’s practical debut and subsequent hegemonic grip on the global economy—what some have dubbed as today’s “mutant neoliberalism.” Chile might also help us understand the behavior and subjectivities of much of the world as subjected to the force for Thatcher’s end goal of “changing the soul.” It

is useful to think of neoliberalism as both a set of policies and economics, and as a mode of subjectivization, that both of course influence the other.

This irrational, soul-based and subjective dimension (often described as self-entrepreneurship or what I call *soulcraft*) arguably differentiates it from the many forms of capitalism that predated neoliberalism.

At the same time, more and more links are being uncovered with practices of racial capitalism from the colonial period, which used racism and popular hatred to create cheap pools of migrant or refugee labor today—a legacy of slavery and racecraft, which also transcends classical liberalism’s boundaries around what can and cannot be market determined (love and hate for example, were excepted from capital until the twenty-first century). Under neoliberalism’s rhetorical ideal of the free movement of people, this “freedom” is always tempered by order. This order, or more accurately racism as ordering logic, works both above and below the juridical and visible threshold, making irrationality one of its prime currencies (i.e., racial hatred, with its mix of fetish and repulsion, fear and desire). And therefore, a significant precursor to immaterial economies today that capitalize every aspect of the human soul from love and desire to belief and hate. This relay between the rational and the irrational, material and immaterial, liberation and order, in the genesis of neoliberal capitalism can be read through the unmarked grave both generally, and specifically, as found in Chile as a certain prototype that holds these contradictions together.

To this day—as is heart-wrenchingly depicted in Patricio Guzmán’s *Nostalgia for the Light*—the relatives of disappeared dissidents and Marxists are searching through the vast Atacama Desert. They are searching for their relative’s bones that were dumped in unmarked mass graves. Many were thrown from Pinochet’s helicopters into the dark Pacific Ocean, while others were moved from their internment camps in old, disused saltpeter mines, and when murdered,

were left in random pits under the clearest sky on the planet. *Nostalgia for the Light* plays with this contradiction, counterposing the lost bones of Marxists with the ALMA satellite facility which has some of the most powerful satellites for scoping the universe lightyears away, situated at 4,000 meters altitude, exactly because the light is so damn clear. The documentary seems to ask of Chile: how can there at once be such clarity and such obscurity? This relay between what is seen and what is hidden, what is included and what is excluded, what is rational and what is irrational, conscious and unconscious, above and below ground—comprise the key contradictions that are held together in twentieth-century Chile’s nascent neoliberalism. Contradictions that are also continued, exported, or expanded within neoliberal logic/illogic more generally, where they don’t seem to be contradictions at all, but present themselves as necessary or optimal conditions for the advancement of the political economy we are currently so deep within. In fact, we can say that the appearance of these contradictions, and a certain insistence on “picking a side” rhetoric within popular politics has made analysis of recent transformations in the dominant political economy quite difficult to grasp.

HELICOPTER RIDES

A particular contradiction that has confused the analysis, is that fascism is a reaction to a crisis of capitalism—and so stands mostly in opposition to capitalism and its latest variant, neoliberalism. Classical fascism of course arose in response to poverty and desperation, and Hitler and Mussolini capitalized on this economic distress to unify people. At the same time, the economics of classical fascism tell a slightly different story—Mussolini’s Italy was the first nation to privatize much of its public sector, while Hitler and the pre-Nazi party were funded by many of the German industrialist families that quite remarkably continue to exist transnationally today—both hid profit, for an elite class, behind populism. Classical fascism of course prioritizes ethno-national glory and hatred of foreigners as its leading cause, but that does

not mean it did not have economic goals or policies that had proto-neoliberal qualities. On the flip side, while Pinochet's neoliberal Chile was not *technically* a fascist dictatorship, it did sustain and employ many techniques of governance, militarization, and political ideology that connect it back to classical fascism—for example, unmarked graves and the whole regime of disappearing those deemed other, outside, or opposed to the dictatorship.

The unmarked graves function as both a real and symbolic architecture—they make a space where there was no space, and inside of this indeterminacy or irrationality much can happen outside of the laws of the land despite being very much in the ground, soil, and earth of that nation. What the unmarked grave shows us, as an architecture shared by both fascism and neoliberalism, is how these two seemingly separate and opposite political economies intersect, and in fact seem to be growing ever closer in the present moment and near future. The unmarked grave is an irrational architecture which, like the unconscious, is designed to be invisible but still to exert a political and/or economic force—the same can be said of torture. While fascism and neoliberalism call on different irrational forces to drive their popular flourishing, this difference is merely at the level of content, rather than form. For fascism, a mythical blood and soil versus everything outside of this galvanizes its governance, while desire and freedom currently inform neoliberalism in the Western context. Neoliberalism could very easily be predicated on blood and soil and a hatred of others (in fact the extremist side of recent neoliberal theory exactly posits unprecedented stratifications of society—see Curtis Yarvin, as a potential future scenario). Or in fact, it could be predicated on whatever the unconscious drive is, as long as it is intense, profit will ensue—this tenet of affective intensity equals profit we know from social media. Under fascism the unmarked grave is a literal technique for expelling those it deems unwelcome, a form that produces refugees who by design, constitute so much of the semi-legal global workforce as the latest phase of racial capitalism—but, importantly, it prototypes a technique that is outside of, or rather below (like the

unconscious) the official juridical process at the same time as being above board: state-executed (from Pinochet to his soldiers, the arms of Chilean government).

In neoliberalism the unmarked grave is a prototype for sustaining activity that needs to be outside of regulatory frameworks—it models and haunts the type of offshore and unregulated spaces that today have come to contain more wealth than any nation. Offshore economies are believed to hold five times the amount of wealth as the USA, the world's wealthiest nation. The history of these havens are less anarchic pirate islands and more a consequence of capital flight from decolonizing empires into an offshore system that was created and supported by nation-states (see Vanessa Ogle who argues that twentieth-century social democratic nations were in fact sustained through the invention of offshore economies). Not only do offshore architectures traffic in wealth, but they more generally traffic in all that is unregulated and hidden from view, but importantly, is still state-sanctioned—from “terrorists” detained and tortured by the US and UK military in Guantanamo Bay to workers with diminishing rights and life-quality in free-trade zone factories all over the world.

The unmarked grave is the blueprint upon which these spaces and architectures of unregulated exploitation are built, a blueprint that has deep roots in fascist modes of governance, and before that, racist modes of colonization—the ease of their return, therefore, is unsurprising.

As we have seen, the unmarked grave as blueprint was deployed par excellence in Chile, where neoliberalism's nascence was accelerated through a partnership with a military, authoritarian dictatorship and economists who were trained by Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago; economists, who to this day hold power in the Chilean political system, and who to this day deny any knowledge of Pinochet's human rights violations despite being members of his close political cabinet at the height of the mass disappearances.

Pinochet more recently has been revived as a meme by the alt-right—clips of Pepe the Frog dressed as Pinochet throwing Marxists out of helicopters have been trending for the last few years. His revival as an icon of the alt-right boosts their critique of “cultural Marxism,” and the culture wars more generally (the recent decolonial turn against Marxism could be read as a form of allyship with the new alt-right). This image perhaps best encapsulates the legacy of Pinochet, at least outside of Chile—someone who ruthlessly murdered thousands of dissidents to maintain authoritarian neoliberal rule for almost two decades. What the alt-right and perhaps the world more generally has forgotten is that Pinochet was originally arrested for tax fraud and embezzlement. He allegedly had more than \$27 million in offshore bank accounts, and was estimated to have owed the Chilean government \$16.5 million in tax—using offshore vehicles to hide wealth and evade tax is a direct invention of neoliberal economics and financialization in its quest for ever greater freedom and global trade. The financial corruption of a dictator with fascistic tendencies should, however, come as no surprise. The use of offshore banking, shell companies, and all kinds of illegal or unregulated trading to amass such a fortune is only surprising in that it marks the birth of a type of political order that is predominant today—where unmarked graves and offshore banks are two sides of the same coin (think of how much tax Trump paid alongside his racist rhetoric, think of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s status as a transnational millionaire with an extremely harsh immigration policy, or before him David Cameron’s own offshore portfolio). A more accurate meme would show Pinochet the Frog in both his fascist and neoliberal hats: throwing Marxists out of a helicopter that was bought through a shell company registered in Panama with funds kept in a British Virgin Islands account that was earned from illegally trading tax-free weapons that are stored in Genevan freports.

One can only ask, if this was the birthplace of the emergent political and economic global order today, how has it accelerated and mutated in the last fifty years?

ALPHABET SOUP

My father and I are in London, I forget where we are going, maybe to my parent’s house, but I suggested we take the bus. I knew it would be a novel experience for my father, who only started to ride the tube years later once he got his senior card and could ride for free—I suppose before that he took taxis or drove himself. It was a bright, winter day, cold and crisp, but the sun was shining in a way that made the red double-decker buses vibrate against the blue sky—as if the whole vehicle was alive. We waited at the stop and in a moment of rare vulnerability, he told me that when his father died of a heart attack at 46, his mother, well, she never really got over it. My father would have been only 11 at the time, and that meant in 1958 that he became the man of the house with a younger brother, Errol who had red curly hair and freckles, in tow. He started working in a clothing store that year, and began earning money, and with it slowly garnering what he called “freedom,” or what more commonly you might call “power,” his sole focus—a way to cope, a way to fill the hole of grown man-sized shoes left in his home and heart, a way to sublimate the anger, disappointment, loneliness, and growing waywardness.

The heart attack was, he said, caused by cholesterol and smoking. When I was in primary school, I had to make a family tree and hang photographs of my relatives on string attached to two wire coat hangers taped together. There were almost no photos of my grandfather, and to this day I couldn’t really tell you what he looks like, although secretly I like to imagine him a bit like Leonard Cohen. To solve this absence my father drew his father in profile, wearing a trilby hat and a cigarette with a trail of smoke rising to heaven, perched in his mouth. Despite this deep and presumably painful impression, my father smoked, as did I for years, which could either mean we both tempted fate, or perhaps more likely, that neither of us quite believed that Samuel Neuman died only from cholesterol and too much smoking.

It wasn’t until around 2015, in the midst of the so called “refugee crisis,” that my family owned up to

an identity I had never heard before—that we were, or my grandparents had been, refugees. This re-identification came up during a family dinner, where my brother’s wife, who is German and from a small town near Leipzig, was relaying her grandmother’s experience of the million refugees that entered Germany. She said, without much reflection, that her grandmother was scared to walk through the town alone. The conservative myths—with their fear of outsiders, especially Middle Easterners—had sunk deep into provincial Germany and the Former East, as well as into the minds and nervous systems of the people. My sister-in-law relayed this fear with a tinge of racism in a way that made my father blurt out, quite impulsively, that we, the Neumans, are refugees too. It silenced the conversation, as strong declarations tend to. Perhaps this family dinner, with its German nationalist undertones, had struck too close to home, or too close to what was once home. Or perhaps all the images of bodies sometimes alive sometimes dead floating, as if the sea itself were a news channel, across the Mediterranean to escape war and other violence, struck a very deep chord. Some of that buried and boxed trauma started to reverberate in my father.

The number 12 bus arrived. We tapped in and climbed the narrow stairs. I could see a slight bemused look on his face as we sat down a few rows from the front, holding on to the yellow handrail. We got comfortable. Soon the bus navigated the tricky roundabout that is Hyde Park Corner, the centrifugal force pushing our bodies from different generations together in a way that public transport does. In a way that trauma also does. He continued to tell me about his mother, Helen, who spoke to him in German with what I would learn later was an Austrian accent, but which my father replied to in English, American English to be precise. Grandma spoke to my brother and me in broken English, but mostly she spoke to us with food, a *Gugelhupf* (a marble cake with a hole in the middle), some poppyseed strudel sent by post, or a vegetable soup when we visited her, that had tiny alphabet pasta shapes floating in oily chicken broth. My dad would always ask if there was chicken stock, since we were all strict vegetarians, and she would

say “nein” in response, but everyone knew the truth. Chicken stock is a deep habit.

He told me, that when his father, Samuel, died, my grandmother never remarried. She couldn’t get over it, couldn’t detach for over forty years until her death. She kept a room in their house in Teaneck dedicated to her late husband, where she kept all his things, dusting them off. She kept their family home suspended in time, just as they perhaps were suspended in place between German and English, Vienna and Teaneck, a veritable alphabet soup of a home. She could never put his things, or her feelings, in a box or bring herself to throw them away—at least not again, not so soon after she had boxed up her Austrian life in 1939. I believe she knew or rather shared, the actual reason for her husband’s heart attack: that a heart explodes when forced to leave what it loves.

The bus jolted to a stop in the middle of the road, near the turn off from Buckingham Palace Road to Victoria. It had broken down. The driver apologized and asked everyone to leave, a new bus was on its way. Suddenly my father’s brief openness was replaced with frustration, he asked me rather flippantly whether this always happens. He hailed a black cab and, jumping in, he said curtly, “let’s go home.”

HELEN NEUMAN, GRANDMA

My grandma arrived in New York by boat. She arrived a little more than a year before her husband, my grandfather, was processed and cleared, and was finally allowed to take a boat across the Atlantic from England. He did not have any direct relatives or contacts in the US when they left Vienna in 1939—this made it very difficult for him to gain permission to enter. Instead, he went to Sandwich in Kent, England. Here, in the Kitchener Men’s refugee camp, in what is today a primary school, he stayed until his application was processed.

In the 1940s, the US Department of Immigration was housed under the larger Department of Labor. Its

director was Francis Perkins, the first woman to occupy a place in high-ranking US politics. She had both progressive labor and immigration policies—meanwhile the very placement of immigration within the category of “labor” is telling, and somewhat forgotten today.

Most of the rhetoric around refugees is political, both in describing them as “illegal” and as rallying points for political maneuvering.

Think of the Trump Muslim ban and Brexit—or more recently Rishi Sunak’s severe but well-received plan to deport refugees to a third (ex-colonial) “safe space.” At the same time, what is a little more colloquial or popular is the idea that refugees will “take our jobs.” This sentiment was a strong rallying cry in the build-up to Brexit, especially amongst the conservative and slightly hysterical red-top tabloids in the UK. This fear, however, was turned on its head during the pandemic—where there were special provisions made for migrants to travel across travel bans to pick fruit and vegetables. With images of empty supermarket shelves, the panic around adequate levels of meat or toilet paper seemed to trump the fear of foreigners—albeit only temporarily. Subsequently laws around deportation were relaxed, especially in relation to workplace raids. In the US, similar policies were expedited into place, where illegal migrants were notably not only tolerated but *encouraged* to stay in challenging workplaces like meat-packing factories.

In an excellent article on “Refugees and Racial Capitalism,” Elizabeth Dunn and Shae Frydenlund unpack this contradiction and explain how it is quite deliberate. Racial capitalism uses racist language and ideas to create profitable conditions—the representation of refugees as unwelcome, stigmatized, dangerous even virus-like ensures their position as sub-human, or at best not welcome and not included. At the same time their low-cost labor is needed for jobs that native-born residents refuse or cannot do. This doubling or gaslighting sense of being needed but not welcomed, creates the perfect conditions for ever

lowering wages and removing rights, for accepting whatever they can get—in just the sense that factories in special economic zones are unregulated spaces, the refugee is an unregulated worker within an otherwise “normal” workplace, and both continue a “race to the bottom” in terms of labor wages and rights, both call on a suspension of regulations (neoliberal policy) to ensure greater profits are made. The refugee labor market spans everything from domestic to agriculture to factory work and functions according to this semi-legal and unregulated plan—like the unmarked grave, this labor market is both located on national soil but exists below certain thresholds of legality and visibility, meaning that in many senses it is also *not there*. This foginess is exploited by nationalist political rhetoric that galvanizes the racist sentiments that boost the nation but rarely does it reveal its ulterior and quite contradictory motive of importing and fostering a cheap pool of labor.

The ubiquitous polarization of politics today that often reduces complexity to black and white positions, such as foreigner vs. local, conservative vs. liberal, means that not only are contradictions sustained but they are also rendered invisible and incomprehensible, since such a deliberately simplistic political rubric cannot adequately parse the nuances of these conditions. In a similar way, convoluted financial vehicles are clandestinely built through elite accounting firms to “shield” wealth from taxes. Unmarked graves, offshore financialization, *maquiladoras*, entre-pots, flags of convenience, black op sites are all part of the same neoliberal infrastructures that partners (*sym-necrotically* towards the production of *ghost value*) with nation states and racist nationalistic sentiments—important to add to these sites of deregulation or so-called “liberation,” are refugees themselves. Refugees that have been produced as sites for the extraction of sub-market value wage labor (modern slavery), but also as individualized instances of border regimes, regimes that follow them everywhere. Both of these imposed identities, in their existential soul-shaking and contradictory determinations are deliberately executed as they build on long legacies of racial capitalism, tools from

slavery, colonization, fascism and authoritarianism. What neoliberalism adds to this mix, is the possibility of holding these contradictions together, or rather cherry-picking from these different political and economic systems across history in such a way that makes it ever more robust and incomprehensible within binary and rational, or even dialectical modes of historical and socio-political analysis. In short, hidden from plain sight. Part of this problem of analysis, comes back to one of the major inventions of neoliberalism: its epistemic discovery that nothing is outside of marketization—this means even ideas that were once directly antagonistic to the core tenets of neoliberalism can get retooled. The refugee initially stands against the neoliberal tenet of free movement of goods and people, through calling on theories of racial capitalism, this restriction of movement is cultivated at the same time as it is unrestricted and exploited. This is not so much a logic, but an illogic or anti-logic, just as the unmarked grave follows in a similar way—it is not so much an architecture but an anti-architecture that thrives through death by holding territory and extra-territory together, by being both domestic and unlocalized at the same time—a contradiction that refuses to synthesize.

KUMPEL

My grandma, after she arrived, worked in a lightbulb factory in New Jersey. The factory was full of Jewish refugees, most of whom had arrived with no money and certainly no access to their stolen assets back home in Europe. The factory had surprisingly low light for a place that made lightbulbs. My grandma stood in a long line of mostly women assembling the small parts of the bulbs. She wore a blue apron, her red curly hair pinned back. This was hard, tedious work.

One of the things I remember about my grandmother, was her glasses. She wore thick 1970s spectacles that made her eyes seem magnified when examined from a certain angle. I remember because it was slightly scary, the glass lenses were very large as was the style, and it made her look like an alien: bug-eyed. She

had pale almost translucent skin, which was strange for someone living in Florida. I remember one visit, where she was recovering from a bout of chickenpox and under one eye, she had a band aid. She was not wearing her glasses, and this was maybe the first time I had seen her without them on, or at least it is the only time I can remember. She looked fragile, presumably weak from the chickenpox, but without her glasses, she looked naked and tired. She also could not see and kept asking me to pass her things that she needed in English but with the heaviest Austrian accent.

In the lightbulb factory there was a daily quota. The lightbulbs had to be assembled piece by piece. My grandmother, who perhaps needed an update on her glasses' prescription, struggled in the low light. She rarely could meet the daily quota. Her tired fingers could not manage.

She missed her husband as months turned to years of separation, the uncertainty of knowing whether they would be together troubled her.

She was struggling to learn English and often misunderstood the instructions from the floor manager. She could not explain that she needed new glasses, that she couldn't see the parts very well, that the lighting was too low. At the same time, she had no choice but to work in this factory, as it was the only possible source of income, the only local place that would hire refugees. To her surprise, the woman next to her, also from Austria, but a small village in the North, helped her. She asked how many bulbs she was missing, and each day gave her the remaining bulbs to make up the daily quota. To say this person rescued my grandmother's life is perhaps an overstatement—to say that kindness and a certain workers' solidarity gave my grandmother support and perhaps more importantly, hope, belief in the goodness of people after so much pain, and *that* saved her life, would be an understatement.

“Unmarked Graves: The Bones of Neoliberalism” by Arjuna Neuman was firstly published in Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design (HfG)'s online journal *UMBAU*, <https://umbau.hfg-karlsruhe.de/posts/unmarked-graves-the-bones-of-neoliberalism>.

Conversation

between Hannah Black,
Arjuna Neuman,
and Denise Ferreira da Silva



Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims, 2023 (film still)

HANNAH BLACK (HB)

Maybe you could start by telling me how the film *Ancestral Clouds* came to exist, about the genesis of your work together.

ARJUNA NEUMAN (AN)

Denise and I have been working together since 2015 or 2016. Stefano Harney had invited us to make a work at Bergen Assembly; we made a film called *Serpent Rain*, which was a bit of an experiment for both of us. After we made that film, we decided to make a series of films, one for each classical element. We made *4 Waters*, which follows the element of water. We made *Soot Breath* about two years ago, which follows the element of earth. *Ancestral Clouds* is the third film in that series—and fourth in total. It follows the element of air or wind and clouds.

DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA (DFS)

The idea for *Ancestral Clouds* developed from a couple of symposia that we did during exhibitions for *Soot Breath*. One was related to our installation at Hacer Noche, which took place last year in Oaxaca. In that symposium, we had a conversation involving Indigenous as well as activists and academics in other areas who are focusing primarily on the issue of water in Mexico and Indigenous territories and the right to land and water. The other one took place in Vancouver as part of our exhibition *Elemental Cinema* at the Belkin Gallery at

the University of British Columbia, which also brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and activists.

The idea behind the film is that the air is the other environment along the continent, along the Pacific Coast, that connects Indigenous and ancestral claims, claims to sovereignty over land, territory, as informed by Indigenous philosophy.

That took us down to Chile along the Pacific coast.

AN There were many seeds for this film. For instance, Denise and I were driving to Death Valley, where we were filming *Soot Breath*. We started talking about whether or not there are lots of ghosts in Death Valley or in the desert. This was just a passing conversation, but it came back in the film two or three years later. One of the first guiding questions of this film is: what are ghosts made of and how can we think of ghosts in a more material, less metaphysical way? In the film, in partial answer to this question, we quote Pinochet, who says “El Marxismo es como un fantasma” [Marxism is like a ghost].

HB Towards the end of the film, there is an image of clouds containing Marxists killed by Pinochet and also drowned slaves. It seems to me that there’s an image of the ghost as vapor that’s moved around by the air. Was that what you were aiming for with that matrix of thoughts that began in the desert?

AN Definitely. Another question is: what is carried on the wind? The winds that we were looking at travel all the way up and down the Pacific coast. We were imagining the different things that the wind holds and is held by. We thought of poetry and fragments, ideas, Indigenous knowledge, ancestral claims, as well as sand and the mineral residues of Marxists and slaves, and all kinds of

displaced and dispossessed people. That comes together in the animation at the end of the film. It’s also a sort of resurrection of the slave ship that was one of our meeting points in *Serpent Rain*,¹ which we had trouble imaging because it was at the bottom of the ocean off the coast of Norway. In a sense, this was an opportunity to image that sunken slave ship.

HB It’s funny encountering this film and these ideas now, because it’s been given a topical resonance: the movement of wildfire smoke around North America. New York City has suddenly been engulfed in haze from wildfire smoke from Canada. Then also thinking about the wrecked ship at the bottom of the sea you just mentioned in relation to the recent, strange hubristic news story around the wrecked Titan submarine that has become a way for people to discuss the treatment of the other maritime disaster in which six hundred migrants drowned. Do you see a relationship between these wind patterns and the changing international discourse on these overlapping historical events?

DFS That’s an interesting question. To me, those events are versions of the same event that has been repeating for five hundred years now. This is especially true when political authority is involved, as it was in both cases: attempting to rescue those unreasonably rich people contrasted with the refusal to rescue six hundred people under threat. We can think of that in terms of the recurrence of something that is visible but is rendered invisible because we don’t have these abstract structures to attend to it, to care about it, and to make it matter.

In a way, it’s kind of like the wind: there is a whole other planet that is fundamentally connected, on which we live but that we don’t pay attention to. Things happen in the Amazon

¹ *Serpent Rain* is being shown in the exhibition at Kunsthalle Wien alongside *Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims*.

rainforest that affect Western Canada, but we are not aware of it. This is something of an abstraction: the ways in which we treat that which is not immediately visible as an existent. When, by accident, two things come together, like those two events on different seas, you start to pay attention. You also pay attention when you have cold air and hot air coming together, creating a storm. Then the air is no longer invisible. I think it's a good way of starting to think about things that we don't generally attend to because we assume that, because they are invisible, they don't exist. This is very much what the film is about. We also try to bring things to the limit of visibility, like teasing. I think we talked explicitly about that, about *teasing*. Now, even as we are talking about something else in terms of the exhibition itself, how do you stay within the limits of the sensible?

HB I feel like wind is something that's imperfectly understood. Obviously, some of the mechanics of wind are known, but there does also seem to be a kind of excess that can't be captured by science. This brings me back to the fundamental criticism in the film, which is a critique of Kantian reason or of the Enlightenment. Again, I would be really interested to hear if that specifically pertained to the topic of the wind or if you saw the wind and its complexity as a counterobject to some of the scientific rationality the film seems to be critiquing or that Denise's work critiques.

DFS **It's not so much how we sense or how we feel something, but what we *assume* is there, like the air.**

The wind, as a representation of air, allows us to think (in a material way) of what appears not to be there. The wind touches you. It brings things to you that are not necessarily in your environment. The question is, also in the other films: what different bases for sensibility are there that are not Kantian, that do not begin with an appreciation of the abstract forms, but of the actual stuff, the matter, and how it touches you?

Even when you don't see it or smell it, like the air here that I'm breathing. The short answer for your question that it is a critique of the fundamental epistemological basis that we have—the Kantian program in terms of knowledge and its categories—but also of the sensibility.

AN Just to pick up on that, I think cloud patterns are too complex even for supercomputers. They can only do fifteen square miles or something, so the supercomputers max out their capacity. Cloud patterns are "hyperobjects", using Timothy Morton's phrase. It is one of the things that exceeds current scientific measuring devices. Continuing with what Denise was saying about sensibility, one of the things that we really wanted to disorganize was the hierarchy of sight in the way in which knowledge and understanding function. Of course, we thought of clouds and fog and mist. When you're in mist, your sight is reduced, but all your other senses are activated and blurred together.

You taste the cloud. You smell the cloud. You feel it. All of your senses are activated while your sight is being significantly reduced.

I think the film tries to exist within the space of a cloud the whole way through in different ways. In an aesthetic way, it's taking up residency within the mist.

HB That makes me wonder if a cloud is a different way to think about a crowd or a mass or a collectivity using these ideas of blurring together and so on. Obviously, the film process included talking with many activists. Then there's an academic philosophy element as well. In what way could the general critique of history relate to particular moments of social movements or resistance struggles? How do you see the relationship between a philosophical critique and social movements?

AN Before we get to the cloud, we start with the unmarked graves that have been in almost all

our films in different capacities. For *4 Waters*, we looked at unmarked graves and then, of course, sunken slave ships. It's been an ongoing and relatively implicit theme until now. The unmarked graves are a space that is, of course, really horrific. It's a double displacement. You're killed and then you also disappear. Within the space of the unmarked grave, I guess there's a reparative potential, a mingling of body parts. It's gruesome, but you know it's unmarked, so it's not individual plots. Bodies are grouped together and mineralized, collectivized. At the end of the film, we ask a marine biologist whether these unmarked graves could then rise up into the clouds and form what we call a "mineral solidarity" or, as Denise would say, "elemental sociality". I think of the clouds as polysensual mineral, bacterial, human remnant clusters, entanglements, however you want to phrase that. I think it does propose a type of potential social movement that includes the nonhuman, the inorganic, and the organic. I think that's where we've always tried to push the political.

DFS It corresponds to the shifting of the question about the political. If we begin with the lethal displacement and the effects of that violence, then the question here is: when we think in terms of how you counter colonial and racial violence, how do you envision the figure that will counter it? Then the complexity of the cloud, the complexity of the wind, the complexities of this rendering of air, I think, should be at the center of how you envision that counter figure without naming it, just by assuming it's complexity. It even includes that which is unknown to us. Even these unknowns should be taken into account in the figuring of what can be said to counter global state capital.

HB Can this be done without cosmology or theology? I sometimes have the feeling that for resistance to work—in the sense of being sustained—and to have some success, it either has to have some element of cosmology/theology or a situation of

total confinement, which makes the resistance to oppression almost necessary for survival. What do you think?

DFS I think that this you are pointing out is very much how we have come to think of the political in the past 150 years or so. It is related to the kind of political subject articulated by the historical notion of the nation, and the senses of finality and efficacy it conveys. That underlying notion has expanded into the conception of political subjectivity. So that the idea of cosmology or theology as crucial to a social or resistance movement refers to this sense of an end that brings it all together as a unified group (finality) which is involved in the countering of another force (efficacy)—both of which capture the idea of a revolution or a revolutionary force, by the way. Anyway, these terms guide how we think about everything, primarily that which is connected with the human and human conditions. What I'm interested in is a way of thinking that does not presuppose finality or efficacy—this idea that you need a force to counter a force—and also formality, which is the thing we have been talking about in relation to categories. I mean, for lack of a better term,

I'm interested in thinking that begins with the complexity of matter, including its atemporality and aspatiality, that is, matter at the elemental level.

HB As I understand it, the thesis of the film is that the current degradation of the ecosystem is not exactly revenge, but is the becoming-material of this kind of thinking that you're suggesting. Even though there's a relationship to Indigenous thought systems, it actually seems like you're trying to decreate something that would be quite common in an Indigenous thought system, which would be having an origin. Maybe there is no origin in a scientific sense of origin, but there would be a story about origin because there's a necessity to have it. I love the Wikipedia list of

all the different types of creation myths: earth-diver, divine twins, creation from nothing ... They're all quite different. Am I understanding it correctly that what you consider novel about this approach is that it involves trying to think entirely without origin?

AN Without origin and without final cause.

HB Even if I don't think that is what's happening in those thought systems, how does that then relate to the invocation of Indigeneity?

AN It's a collaboration and a sharing of knowledge. We were talking about these fragments that get carried in the wind. I think it's not to exclude one and celebrate another. Instead, it's the possibility that they can exist at the same time.

DFS When we use ancestral clouds, ancestral claims, we are both thinking about Indigenous peoples' claims to territory and also in my case at least, about it figures in Black Brazilian claims over Africanity. Ancestrality is the term that connects both of them, and as such it refers to their common emergence as colonially subjugated populations. They are different claims, because the Black Brazilian ancestral claims are not claims over territory, with the exception of the quilombos land claims. The move then is to take the claims seriously, recognize the claims, the differences between them, and the complexities of those ancestral claims. Key in this regard is that ancestrality does not refer to temporarily, figured either historically or even biologically, organically. Ancestral claims are current political, and fundamentally material. They are about the fact that the lethal displacement—of First Nations from their lands, African persons across the Atlantic Ocean, and Europeans' settling of what became the Americas—is the condition for the creation of capital itself and for capital accumulation. Those ancestral claims are actually claims to decolonization, to restoration and return. The claims are not historical. They don't require biological

proof or historical proof, because they are claims over the matter itself. It's important to say that it is not a matter replacing European philosophy with Indigenous or African, Black Brazilian thought. By using a term that signals a claim that also signals the total violence characteristic of colonial subjugation—which is a violence that modern thinking never fails to 'naturalize,' to render not only true but also necessary—we move to consider other "metaphysical" basis for thinking, understanding, and comprehending the claims. Why? For many reasons, in particular to counter the ways in which first nation and Black folks' claims—the decolonization, repatriation-rematriation, reparation—are usually dismissed on a historical or biological basis. In any event, of course, the kind of thinking I am after is still very much taking place within the framework of very Western thought, it seeks to undermine from within.

HB That brings us to something I wanted to ask about the difference between claims and rights. So, an ancestral claim is something that would not be legible within a juridical structure in the way a right would be?

DFS Ancestral claims exceed what the juridical language can comprehend, because they are not based on a recognizable, juridical subject or object like evidence. Not because they are less, but actually because they are more. Let's talk about Black Brazilian claims that are based on ancestral geography. There is no way historically or biologically to connect somebody to an orisha. Yet those claims are made, and life is experienced with these Yoruba entities all around. The evidence of that connection, for the most part, cannot be reduced to something that you can touch or take a picture of. The question is what happens when listening to the demands for rights or sovereignty over the territory like here, for example—I live in Vancouver, in a Musqueam First Nation land. It is a middle-class residential conglomerate owned by the Musqueam First Nation.

But it is an exception. Most of the houses around here are very expensive, huge mansions. A few years ago all the land around here was returned to the Musqueam people. However, my very rich neighbors had their property rights changed into ninety-nine-year leases. I mean, when the land claim was recognized, the Canadian government did not immediately revert everything to the Musqueam First Nations, the traditional owners, the caretakers of the land. The rights of the legal owners of the houses trumped the traditional claims to sovereignty over the territory. I think that ancestral claims operate precisely by displacing the temporal (the historical, anthropological, and biological) limitations it imposes on anticolonial claims.

HB It seems to me that these are things that are not worked out at the level of an elemental being, but are worked out through what I'm calling, perhaps too loosely, social movements. This might be where I've reached some Marxist limitation in my thinking. Aren't we back to the question of struggle and social practices here?

DFS That is not an opposition. I think that is another movement, a movement that I call the movement of *negativation*, the movement of confrontation, which is what you call the social movement. Then, at the same time, there must be another basis for living together and making sense of it.

HB Obviously, the engagement with the elemental has a poetry and a beauty to it, but it still seems to rely on practice, in the sense that it would still have to be developed as a practice and not developed only as a philosophical standpoint. Of course, it has its legitimacy. It seems to be that these things ultimately would have to be worked through in collective practice and that would be how they would take on a reality.

AN It's a question of aesthetics or sensibility, which seems to me, best fitted to art. I think the poetic or the landscape, or this relationship to

the natural world, also to others, also to our bacteria, I think inside of that, there's almost an automatic practice that happens, or could happen. A practice that is by definition collective, but one that is not limited to the human or to the social. This example of tenderness (that we dedicate *Soot Breath* to) is not just a human emotion. Tenderness is a physical sensation, where the Blues or bruises gather inspiration, but also a state: grass can be tender, just as spending time in wild grass makes you tender. Practice in this sense, is a training, a transitioning, an embodying, you know a disposition, like the way you sit, the way you receive. I think this toes the line of practice and disposition, organizing and metaphor. It is totally poetic, but more precisely, it is the ethical disposition that poetry places you in. A kind of organizing, if you want to use that word, at the cellular, fleshy, elemental, even quantum level. For me at least, I think that's where the practice of our work, but it's not "traditional practice", comes into play. Just as I understand this type of political engagement as best fitted to art, it also seems to me, to be one of the main fronts, that of subjectivity, affect, and dreams—or in other words the soul—where practice or resistance or whatever you want to call it needs to happen. Neoliberalism now for 45, 50, 55 years, is pretty sophisticated in its extraction and exploitation of this domain. We quote Margaret Thatcher in the new film, who in 1981 (*Sunday Times*) says "economics is the method, the object is to change the soul". I think this is where the activism of poetry, where the activism of speculation, of the practice of speculation, the practice of poetry really comes into its strength.

It is in fighting neoliberalism, or more specifically the aspects of neoliberalism (and its many precedents) which, you know, aim to immortalize: extraction, violence and expropriation.

DFS It is a combination of things, isn't it? You have four movements instead of three in the dialectic. In the dialectic, we have the positing, that is, the affirmation, the second would be its negation, and then the third, the negation of negation, which would then also be another positing. That, the third one, can be read as the moment of resistance, which might just set up another dialectical cycle. To me the question of how we get out of this cycle is a question for the imagination. Therefore, the question is: what if we could exist in this world differently? This means that the last two moments—negation of negation and the question of something else have to go together. Anyway, I'm saying this after forty years of being an activist. I am tired of trying to win by fighting with the terms that are given. We have to be able to imagine this thing and live it. Or else we keep going back, redefining the political subject and going back again and again and again and again.

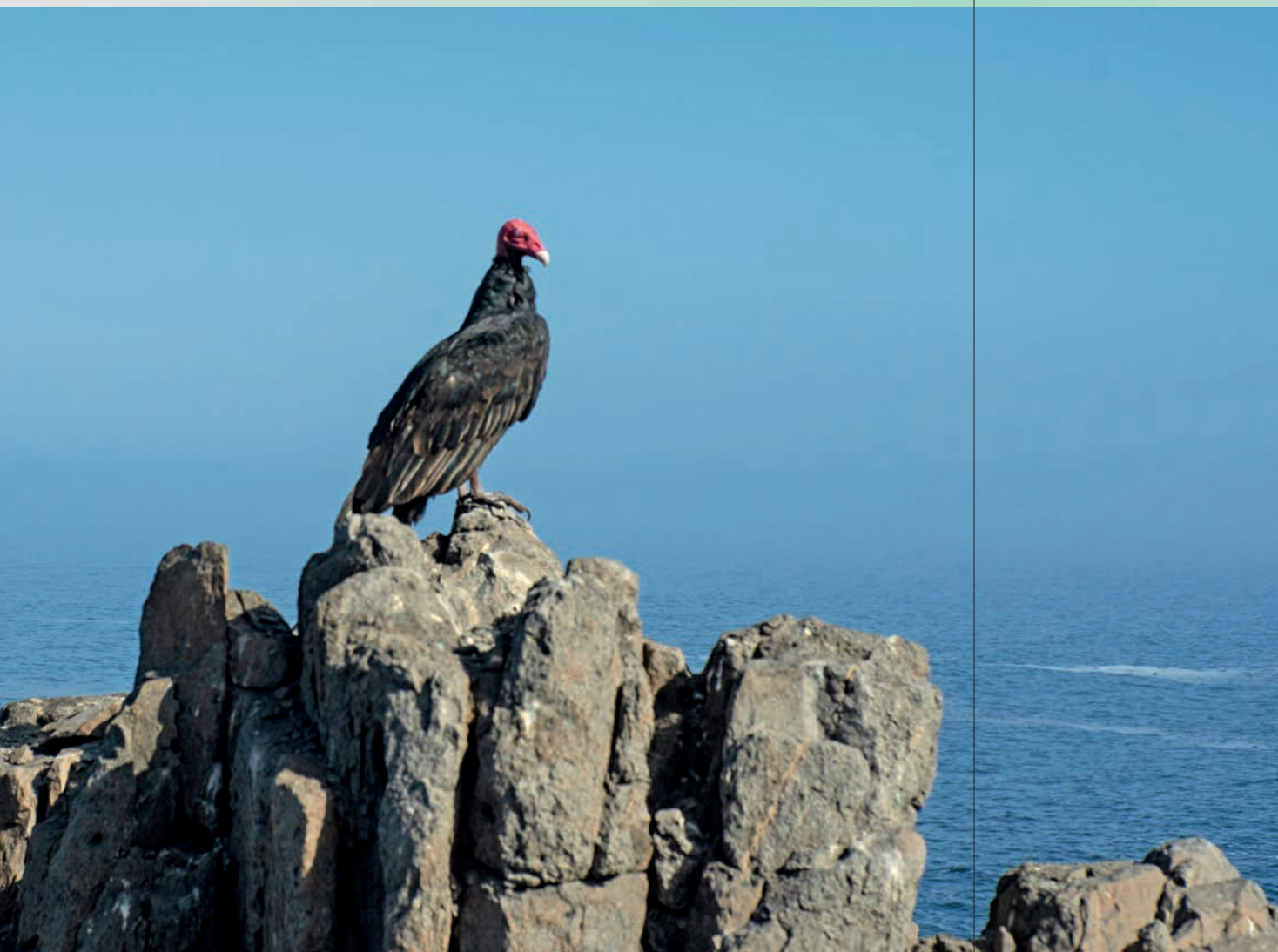
HB I think it's an interesting provocation to try and desubjectivate the question of politics in some way. I really appreciate that. I wonder about this, because we hear so many voices of people who are engaged in something more like conventional activity or from Indigenous communities in the film. I guess I'm trying to tease out what I perceive as, not a problematic dissonance necessarily, but an interesting, perhaps productive dissonance. I feel seduced by this idea that they could all just coexist, almost as droplets in a cloud. Or perhaps there doesn't have to be a resolution. Maybe they don't even have to be dialectically combined. They all just are. It's interesting to hear you talk about, even as a nonrelation, how they might have a relation. Of course, there's a tendency that people like me have to reify and idealize the concept of social and political movements. Of course, what you understand from real experience is that these things are just as complicated and run into all the difficulties of actual, existing people. For you, the role of art as a speculative zone for coming up with new ways of relating to the world seems important. At the

same time, I keep returning to the question of—I probably shouldn't call it essentialism—this play with essence. If we are going to play with essences, we will run up against the usual problems, the usual issues of discursive realities, and so on.

DFS I think, as we've been saying, the work has two moments. On the one hand, one that is very much concerned—I'm talking about the films now, not about my writing—with those global catastrophes, as we call them. All the films comment on them, *Serpent Rain* comments on police brutality, *4 Waters* on what is called the "refugee crisis". *Soot Breath* was about a tragedy, which was the social and ecological destruction caused by the collapsing of a dam that contained iron ore waste, in Brumandinho, Brazil. Now we are focusing on the political violence aspect of neoliberalism. I think that, at one level, the films are very much talking to and about and bringing focus and critical attention to existing processes, circumstances, and political movements. At the same time, when we pay attention to those catastrophes, to those political events, and acknowledge their colonial and racial character, we are also making the statement that it is a particular way of 'feeling' the world, seeing it, and existing that keeps feeding into this violence. Ours is an invitation to the imagination, an invite to consider: what if, in addition to attending, to encountering those processes, we also began the process of changing how we think. It has nothing to do with essence. It has nothing to do with something that is fundamental or common that has to be actualized. It's actually a shift away from anything close to thinking along those lines. This goes back to the term finality to describe what you are calling cosmology and theology. The invitation is a provocation, too. I think it's interesting to think about what it would take to do both at the same time. We are so attached to whatever reward we have from this existing structure of thinking that we can't just think about it coming to an end. What would be lost if we just entertained that possibility?

Ten Cents

Ehsan Fardjadniya



Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims, 2023 (film still)

At 4:30 am, I stand in front of the gate of the Eleonas refugee camp in the industrial outskirts of Athens. The night's protest was captured on my nearly full camera, and its battery was almost drained. But I have a few crucial minutes left on my memory card. Moments I can't afford to miss.

Farzan, a resident of Eleonas, suggests we go to his place for tea. "Can't enter anymore", I remind him. For months, I could pass through effortlessly, mistaken for a refugee. But since the protest began, the guards have started to recognize me as a journalist and deny me entry.

There were fleeting instances when Eleonas felt like home. Daily conversations in Farsi awakened forgotten fragments of my being, accumulated over two decades in exile.

The security guards press the push button with increasing frequency. The gate opens briefly, accommodating only two individuals at a time. Swiftly, it closes once more. Some of the protesters make their way inside, while others, who rested during the night, fill their spots.

Farzan looks at me, running his fingers through his ginger beard. "We worked the night shift, didn't we?" he says. His resemblance to Marx has become more striking since immersing himself in *Das Kapital* during the past two years of living in Eleonas. "Stay here. I'll fetch some tea."

Inside the camp, the voices of the female leaders rise, rallying others after a brief rest. The clatter of cooking pans fills the air as they sing in unison, "Eleonas ...

No Close! Eleonas ... No Close!" The gate opens again, and the women and their comrades pour out onto the streets.

Amidst the steady stream of people passing through the gate, some swiftly navigate the sit-in circle, purposefully averting their gaze. A familiar face triggers anger in a protester, who shouts in response. Undeterred, the person quickens their pace, evading the confrontation. Determined, the demonstrator gives chase, clutching their backpack from behind. Shouts erupt, a scuffle breaks out, and others swiftly intervene.

A dark gray minivan captures my attention, as it slowly approaches and parks nearby. The young men from the protest shout, but it remains motionless. One man strides towards the driver's side. "No work today. Leave immediately," he demands. The driver starts the engine and swiftly departs. At the end of the street, he stops for the person with the backpack, who boards the van. The shouting intensifies as the van speeds away.

The gate opens. I see Farzan return with two flasks of tea. We sit among towering trolleys stacked with cardboard boxes. The highest reaches four meters. Farzan pours concentrated Earl Grey tea from one flask and adds hot water from the other. I purposely avert my gaze as he takes the first puff from his hand-rolled cigarette. I see a trolley move.

"Where are you going? Your tea ..." Farzan calls out.

"I'll be back soon", I reply.

I run towards an old man pushing a cart.

"*Salaam, sobh bekheir* [Hello, good morning]", I say in greeting.

"*Salaam, vaght khosh* [Hello, good day]", the old man responds.

"How many kilos do you have?" I ask.

"Maybe around 200 kilograms."

"And how much is the price per kilo?"

"Twenty cents."

Appearing to be around 65 years old, his belt bears additional holes that wrap around his waist, almost reaching the middle again. "Do you mind if they close Eleonas?" I ask.

"I'm like *kaf-e roy-e ab* [foam on water]", he replies. "I'll go wherever they throw me." He then pushes the cart with such speed that I have to run to keep up, camera in hand.

"My daughter wants to go to Germany. What would you do if you were in my shoes?" he asks.

I press pause on my camera and stop running.

Before me stands a dilapidated structure—an abandoned factory building that bears the scars of long-term neglect. Close by, an empty house stands in solitude, its roof collapsed. I walk towards it and settle at the pavement's edge.

A time-worn window, stripped of its glass, frames the hues of the twilight sky, serving as a gateway to my fading recollections.

* * *

The alarm clock blared at 4:30 am, signaling the start of my first job: distributing a right-wing newspaper. I layered on my clothes, bracing myself for the chilly, damp Dutch morning as I hopped on my bicycle.

At the office, my boss handed me a map, attempting to explain my route. However, his instructions were lost on me, and all I caught was his final word in Dutch: "Success!" Loaded with newspapers, I embarked on my distribution route.

Within an hour, I did some calculations and thought that the pay was decent.

Working six days a week for up to two hours each day, along with the provided allowance, would cover my room expenses. I could even afford a return train ticket to the refugee center for the weekly register.

The next morning, red stickers adorned the map, scattered throughout my neighborhood. “Only complaints”, my boss informed me, shattering my Hollywood-inspired image of casually tossing newspapers into gardens.

With precision, he folded a newspaper, walked to a mailbox, bent over, opened it, inserted the paper, closed it, and straightened up with a groaning sound. “Do you understand?” he asked, peering at me through his thick glasses.

The drizzle soaked the newspapers in my bike’s back paniers, weighing them down. With each forward pedal, the added heft lifted my front tire momentarily, as if defying gravity. At every stop, I dismounted, retrieved a wet newspaper, located the house, and carefully inserted it into the letterbox, repeating the process over and over. After two hours on my route, I realized my progress was minimal.

The following day, complaints filled half the map in red. “Newspapers too wet.”

* * *

A car horn blares, interrupting my reverie and drawing my attention to the man in the driver’s seat. He leers at me, his eyes glimmering with lascivious intensity. I tilt my head, a questioning expression on my face. His grin widens, revealing yellowish teeth, and the deep, sunburned lines on his face transform into prominent scars. I shift my focus to the opposite direction.

I notice my friend approaching from the sit-in. The driver of the car cranks up the volume of his music. Dimitris, a dedicated member of the Greek solidarity group that has actively participated in the protests for the past few months, has been with us at the sit-in since yesterday.

He reaches my side and greets me with a knowing look. “Looks like you’re taking another day off”, he says mockingly. I manage a faint smile. Meanwhile, the car executes a swift U-turn and disappears from sight, leaving behind a trail of exhaust fumes.

“Why are there so many empty and abandoned buildings in Athens?” I ask. He chuckles softly. “Well, you, as a Dutch person, must know.”

“You know I can’t be.” I turn my head to the deserted house before us.

“Recently, I found a similar argument to your president’s in the bible”, Dimitris says, “If your roof sinks in, it means you haven’t been working enough or you have been lazy.”

I look at him, waiting expectantly for his response.

“*Páme?* [Let’s go?]” He motions towards the sit-in.

“I’ll take a few hours to rest and then return”, I reply.

As I begin to walk away, a question surfaces in my mind. Why do I constantly push myself to the edge of exhaustion and torment?

* * *

As I finished delivering the last newspaper, I made my way back to my bicycle. The sound of a creaking window on the second floor caught my attention, but no face appeared. Instead, a hand emerged, gesturing for me to push something. I retraced my steps to the letterbox. I pushed a small section until the paper

dropped inside. Satisfied, I glance upwards. The window is tightly shut.

A year later, my improved delivery skills granted me two zones to cover. After delivering the last paper, my daily routine was to hurry home to change, then cycle for an hour to attend a three-hour Dutch language class. I usually aimed to return home by 6 p.m. However, on that particular day, I had to make a detour back to the office. My boss handed me a stack of Christmas cards: "Fifty cents. Christmas bonus."

The next day around noon, I rang the first doorbell, but there was no response. It was the same at the second door. At the third door, someone answered. I greeted them in Dutch, but they hung up the intercom.

I moved on to another door on the next street. An elderly woman accepted the Christmas card. She disappeared inside her home, closing the door behind her. As I made my way back to my bicycle, I noticed the door creaking open once again. I turned on my heels and retraced my steps to the woman's door. She emerged with a small mandarin, extending it to me with a simple, "*Alsjeblieft* [Here you are]." Then she closed the door while saying, "*Dag* [Goodbye]."

As I walked with my bicycle in hand, I thought to myself: *I need to ask for money more directly. But how?* The next person I approached declined the card. The subsequent door remained shut. However, the person behind the next door offered thirty cents without me even asking. There were instances when I received twenty, fifteen, or even fifty cents. And then I found myself standing at the entrance of a well-to-do house.

"Good morning", I said. A young female voice responded with a cheerful, "Hi!" I instantly heard a smile.

"I'm your 'newspaper guy'", I said. *I'm your newspaper boy?* I thought, correcting myself.

"Yes?" she replied through the intercom. I thought she liked what I said. I pictured her opening the door.

"I have a Christmas card for you", I said.

There was a moment of silence. "A ... Christmas ... card", I repeated.

"Mom, did we order a Christmas card?" I overheard her asking.

How could I explain that it was for sale? What would she think of me?

"But we didn't order a Christmas card", she replied.

I felt the urge to just give it to her for free ... *How should I say it? I've been silent for too long*, I thought.

"Can I give it to you?" I asked.

Silence.

"It's a Christmas card. Can I give it to you?"

"Just drop it in the mailbox", she said.

Say something ... say something ...

The intercom went silent.

I mounted my bike once again, the Christmas card still in my hand. With a slight opening of my fingers, the wind snatched the card away.

I pulled the raincoat hood over my head. Reaching into my pocket, I gathered all the coins I had collected, clenching them tightly in my fist. Gripping the handlebars firmly with my other hand, I pressed my feet down on the pedal. The bike screeched to a sudden stop.

In one swift motion, I flung open my clenched fist, sending a shower of coins scattering towards the cloudy sky.

I swung open the bike bag and seized the stack of Christmas cards. I hurled them into the nearby water

channel. They collided with the wet surface and started sinking into the murky depths. I mounted my bike once more and pedaled as fast as I could.

* * *

A voice breaks through my thoughts. I glance up and across the street. I see the old man pulling his empty cart. "Are you leaving?" he asks.

Approaching him, I reply, "I'll come back later."

"The cardboard prices have dropped", he says. "Now it's only ten cents per kilo."

I struggle to find the right words.

"Where are you going? You have a house in Athens?" he asks.

"No, I'm staying at someone's house while they're on holiday", I reply.

"Is Germany a good country for Afghans? I heard they give houses to asylum seekers."

"I'm not sure."

"But you live in Germany?"

"No, I used to live in the Netherlands."

"Do you have the passport?"

"Yes."

"But they didn't give you a house?"

"No."

"Why?" he asks.

"It's a long story", I reply.

"Let's go have tea at my place", he offers.

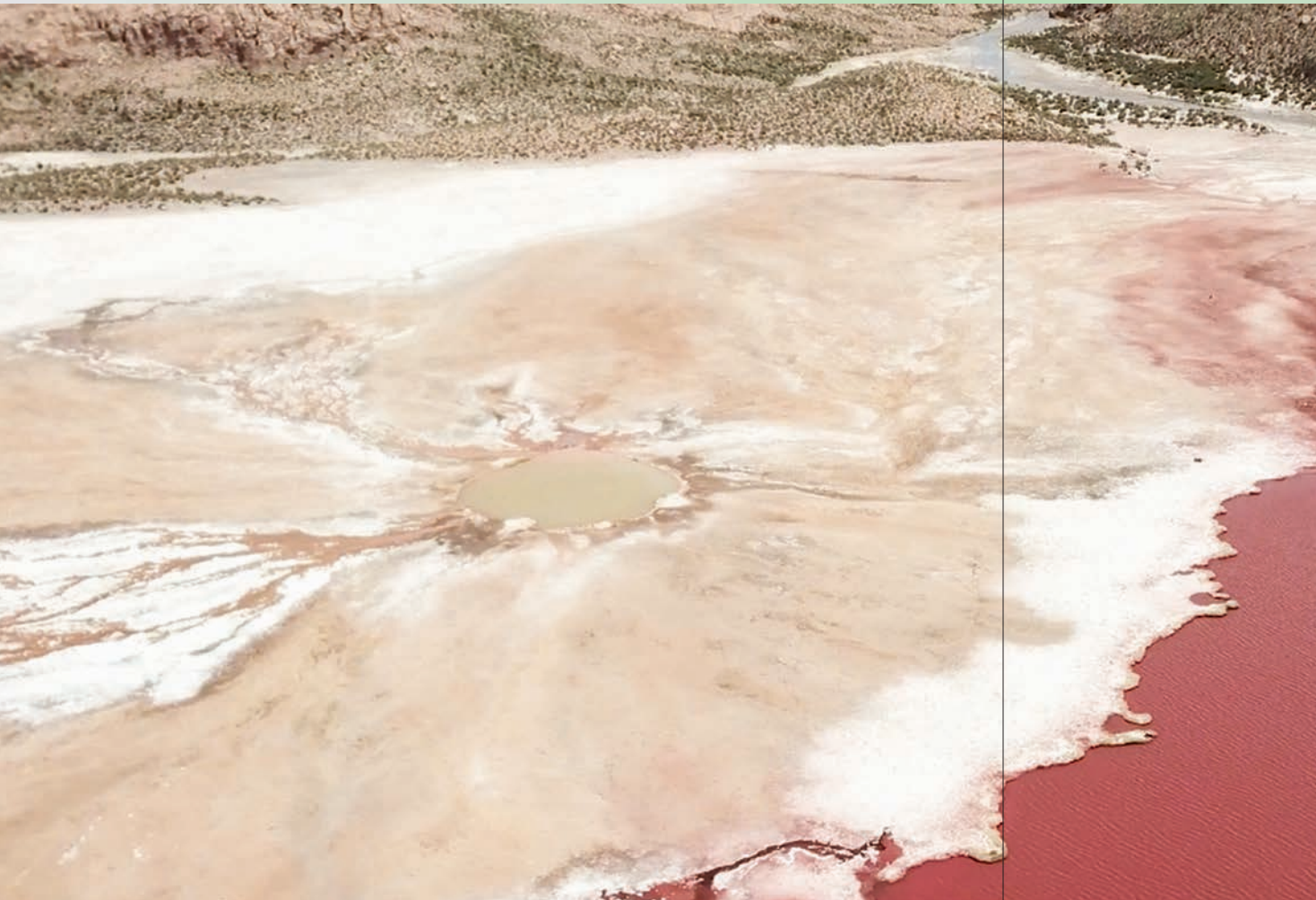
"Thank you. Next time, for sure."

I begin my walk, remembering my promise to Farzan that I'd return. But I continue walking, knowing I'll come back again.

As I continue on my path, I encounter another abandoned house. I intentionally avoid casting even a single glance at it.

Refugees, Spectral Labor, and Elemental Cinema for Denise Ferreira da Silva

Massimiliano Mollona



Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims, 2023 (film still)

For Daniel Heller-Roazen, there are many ways of becoming absent: death, disappearance, slavery, severe illness, extreme reclusion, loss of consciousness.¹ The figure of the refugee seems to embody all these forms. In their floating status, as absent-present beings, refugees are the absolute embodiment of what I call spectral labor.

I define spectral labor as the effect of the systematic capture and neutralization of movement, the reproduction of immobility, and the devaluation of life implicit in the principle of the market—an enclosure that devalues all that it contains by quantifying it and subjecting it to the principle of scarcity—and in forms of “unpayable debt” associated with racial capitalism. Denise Ferreira da Silva discusses the “unpayable debt” borne by Black and Brown people as “the obligation that one owes to the system, but which is not one’s to pay”, or in the words of Christina Sharpe, “the experience of freedom as the aftermath of slavery”.² Unpayable debt points to the continuity between historical slavery and contemporary capitalism—how the institution of slavery has been reproduced through “modern” economic and juridical means in the form of precarious labor, mortgage repossessions, civic unfreedom, and mass incarceration.

The drowning of six hundred refugees off the coast of Greece on June 14, 2023, the most dramatic accident in modern migration history, shows the

¹ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Absentees: On Various Missing Persons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

² Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (Cambridge, MA/Berlin: MIT Press Sternberg, 2022), 23.

vertiginous acceleration of unpayable debt and the shift taking place within current capitalism, whereby the violence of accumulation by dispossession has taken over the contractual side, and market “freedom” has given way to necrospeculation,³ that is,

a regime of value emerging from the systematic killing and dehumanization of Black and Brown bodies.

Spectral labor is the aftermath of “the end of work”⁴; it is the labor of the surplus population, the disposable people, the present absent—refugees, migrants, informal workers, the unemployed, those trapped in zero-hour contracts, indentured labor, neo-slavery, seasonal labor, informal labor. Never mind the neo-liberal propaganda about social mobility, free circulation, and unlimited growth. The movement of capital is syncopated, interrupted, involuntary, and forced. It is the movement of bodies without self-determination, a reactive jerk that goes only as far as the chains of capital allow. And as the neoliberal era draws to a close, with its frictionless financial economy choked by the new logistics of the war economy, the materiality of the spectral comes to the fore.

Spectrality is now the generalized condition of human existence. Not a posthuman condition, but a nonhuman or unhuman condition. Spectral labor is a debilitating aura, a ghostly and toxic nonhuman presence that we carry within us, but also a zone of possible autonomy from capital and escape from capture via processes of elemental rearticulation. Unlike precarious waged labor, spectral labor is unhinged from the dialectics between superstructure and infrastructure, the superior and the inferior, the condition of freedom (infrastructure) and the horizon of freedom (superstructure). Dialectical and teleological explanations must give way to an epistemology of attunement,

3 Kris Manjapra, “Necrospeculation: Postemancipation Finance and Black Redress”, *Social Text* 37, no. 2 (2019), 29–65.

4 This is a reference to Jeremy Rifkin’s book *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York: Putnam, 1995), in which the economist predicts the disappearance of formal, salaried employment.

based on analectic (stepping back) and hauntology, the “unearthing of the ghosts”.⁵

ELEMENTAL MATERIALISM

Movement is central to the political economy of life, that is, the ongoing processes of gathering, release, dispersion, and recombination of matter that make life possible, and within which humans sensuously apprehend the world, articulate their interactions, and learn to act and feel in ever shifting material and immaterial environments.⁶

As Black radical tradition makes all too clear, from Fanon to Senghor and Moten, movement is a central dimension of autonomy and self-determination, and hence, runs counter to the forces of colonial capitalism, whose compulsion is to define, circumscribe, dissect, direct, contain, and exhaust life movements through borders, walls, frontiers, and enclosures, to generate scarcity for its own profits. Against capital enclosure, the labor of commoning consists in gestures that open fissures, cuts, cracks, and ruptures in these enclosures to resocialize life.

Moreover, the operations of capital rely on processes of material extraction across uneven geographies. Matter is extracted in raw form—as mineral, solar energy, or human labor—from the dark enclosures and petrified geological formations of the Global South and alchemically repurposed in the liquid form of money or the aerial one of finance in the Global North.⁷ The alchemical algorithms of extractive capital are simple: first, they capture, solidify, and remove those human and more-than-human entities that contribute to the reproduction of life and use value; then,

5 I am referring to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

6 On movement and political economy, see Massimiliano Mollona, *Art/Commons: Anthropology beyond Capitalism* (London: Zed Books, 2021)

7 On the changing states of capital, see David Harvey, “Rate and Mass”, *New Left Review* 130 (July/August 2021), 73–98.

they dissipate, vaporize, and relocate them, as exchange value, to the human-made enclosures of markets, workplaces, and other forms of state-enforced enclosures. (But air is not a pure medium: it carries with it water, sand, coal, and dust. Vaporized capital—unlike Duchamp’s bottle of air or the clouds in Antonioni’s *L’Eclisse*—is not without frictions and the spectral matter carried within the mediums of capital haunts capital back. And we will ask what happens when the temporality and materiality of the weather—the temporality of the *tempus*—are considered, and aerial resistances, delays, feedback loops, and parallel flows come to affect the movements of value.)

The hauntological approach to labor I propose focuses on elemental materialism, rather than dialectical materialism, whereby struggles between capital and labor are deeply entangled with the flows, assemblies, and articulations of matter; horizons of antagonistic liberation are foreclosed, and lateral, non-linear, and unexpected routes to survival, autonomy, and liberation can suddenly be revealed.

Elemental biopolitics differs from anthropocentric biopolitics in several ways. Firstly, from the perspective of matter in movement, human subjects are situated in ever-shifting environments, human and more-than-human, over which they have very limited control or even consciousness. Marx famously argued that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”.⁸ Such a framework can be reformulated by pointing out that the course of history is constantly diverted by the living agency of the environment, within which human temporality is but one vector. Therefore, attention and attunement⁹ to the complex unfolding and

8 Karl Marx, *The Eighteen Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte* (1852, London: Penguin, 1972), 245–246.

9 See Vine Deloria’s critique of the western idea of knowledge as revelation, against “indigenous attunement” (*On Liberation* [London: Routledge, 2019]).

reverberations of the past in the surrounding environment are central to regaining control of our future.

Activism is not the making of the new. It is the reception, capture, redirection, and refraction of what is already there.

Secondly, elemental biopolitics is a politics of negotiation and definition of the borders and boundaries of human life, in relation to the nonhuman or unhuman, through its sensory workings on the body. It always entails violent processes of institutionalization, that is, of neutralization of flows and capture of movement achieved through various capitalist “techniques of the body”.¹⁰

For German philosopher Georg Simmel, money is one such technology of bodily abstraction and enclosure. Anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli describes capitalist biopolitics as geontopolitics, that is, a system of power premised upon the divide between living and dead matter, or between agents with different degrees of animacy.¹¹ Racist and patriarchal, geontopolitics casts Black and Brown bodies as crystallized and ossified remains of a geological past,¹² while, at the same time, contributing to their systematic immobilization, disablement, and hold; likewise, for Fanon, the effect of colonial biopolitics was to literally petrify the Black body.

Thirdly, with biopolitics operating at more-than-human and infrahuman levels, the distinction between nature and culture disappears: the microscale associated with individual bodies blurs with the structural and even planetary scale associated with processes of mineral extraction, ecological depletion, but also ancestral knowledge, ecological rearticulation, and elemental affinity and solidarity. Inspired by Trotsky’s notion of uneven and combined development, I

10 I am referring to anthropologist Marcel Mauss’s “Techniques of the Body (1934)”, *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973), 70–88.

11 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

12 See also Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

imagine elemental politics in long-term cycles of planetary history—a history without single narratives and directions, carried through the volatile and unpredictable trajectories of matter and experienced from multiple and dispersed fields and geographies—a politics of the Earth¹³ in which the geopolitical and the geophysical converge.

I am interested in elemental biopolitics from the point of view of Marxist analysis—that is, looking at how capitalism captures flowing matter and entraps it in solid forms and enclosures that are isomorphic to the commodity form—biocapitalism as spectral-alchemical politics. But I also look at its transformative potential:

how can we turn spectral forms of control into spectral infrastructures of solidarity?

I look at this transformative potential especially within the tensions between capital and commons—the former as an enclosure, the latter as a fold—but with porous boundaries sensitive to the politics of elements.

Lastly, elemental politics also has to do with notions of love, care, and endurance and with the affective components of the politics of the commons. I am interested in how materiality affects emotions and relational fields in ways that escape the bourgeois logic of love and to the labor of “living mediation”¹⁴ that holds things in “commons” at the threshold of the affective and the material, organizing sensuous relationships between bodies—their bonds, affinities, resonances, refractions, and reverberations—making impermanent folds, knots, and bridges, sensing life as it senses us. Those gestures of mediation, weaving,

- ¹³ I am referring to Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology. Thinking from the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).
- ¹⁴ I am referring to Lauren Berlant’s notion of the affective infrastructure of commons (“The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 [2016], 421).

and folding—the reproductive labor and “red love”¹⁵ as opposed to bourgeois love—are central to the elemental politics of the commons I envisage.

Considering spectral labor at the level of matter¹⁶ allows us to step back from human-centered labor-value theory—according to which the capacity to labor or “labor power” is contained within the borders of the human body/subject and is manifested in discrete objects/commodities—and focus on the transcorporeal, the infrahuman, and the micro. Besides, through the lens of elemental materialism, the “multiplication of labor”¹⁷ associated with the current financialization of life can be reframed as alchemical biopolitics consisting in uneven processes of vaporization, fractalization, and chaotic dispersion, of human and more-than-human matter, but also of heavy condensations, crystallization, and geological stratification of Black and Brown lives.¹⁸

In the UK, the condition of spectral labor resurfaced dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the reproductive labor of carers, nurses, and other service workers turned into slave labor, and the figure of the “key worker” collapsed into the figure of the slave/hero/alien, living every day to the condition of the spectral, the deadly, the contagious, the poisonous, and the toxic. It was mainly Black and Brown key workers who carried the moral obligation to perform spectral labor, breathing toxic air, without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), and becoming the underbelly of a toxic welfare state that framed “public interest” as trade-off between saving lives and saving the economy. But post pandemic, British key workers withdrew from the NHS en masse, due to the low wages and appalling working conditions, with

- ¹⁵ See Alexandra Kollontai, *Red Love* (1927, New York: Seven Arts Publishing, 1998).
- ¹⁶ See Dimitris Papadopoulos, *Experimental Practice: Technoscience, Alterontologies, and More-than-Social Movements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
- ¹⁷ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
- ¹⁸ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*.

refugees from Asia and Africa increasingly filling the occupational gap. Due to the deregulation of the labor market that followed Brexit, these refugees turned NHS workers are often recruited by gangmasters to work in conditions of indentured labor, that is, for more than twelve hours per day and having to repay the costs of their transfer to the UK and for food and accommodation before earning any salary.¹⁹ Transitioning from the status of nonpersons to that of carers, from illegal migrants to key workers, and experiencing different forms of elemental oppression, from the “heaviness of water”²⁰ to the thickness of air, refugees fill the gap between care and carelessness, the reproduction of life and its annihilation, which is at the core of capitalism’s logic of anti-value.²¹

ELEMENTAL AESTHETICS

How to capture this elemental dimension of politics, that is, the granular form as well as the essence of the extreme dispossession refugees and other nonpersons are exposed to in the current stage of necrocapitalism?

Below, following Denise Ferreira da Silva’s raw materialistic philosophy, which considers aesthetics as a matter of life value, I argue for an elemental aesthetic that, rather than being just a tool of immaterial capture and representation, brings forth a political rearticulation of the material.

19 Robert Booth, “UK Care Operators Accused of ‘shocking abuse’ of migrant workers”, *The Guardian* (July 10, 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jul/10/uk-care-operators-accused-of-shocking-abuse-of-migrant-workers>.

20 I am referring to Elizabeth Deloughrey’s decolonial discussion of oceanic spaces (“Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity”, *PMLA* 125, no. 3 [May 2010], 703–712.)

21 Capitalism is premised on the systematic devaluation of reproductive labor vis-à-vis productive labor (Mollona, *Art/Commons*) as well as on their separation (David Graeber, “Turning Modes of Production Inside Out, or, Why Capitalism Is a Transformation of Slavery”, *Critique of Anthropology* 26, no. 1 [March 2006], 61–85).

Firstly, elemental aesthetics goes beyond the foundations of aesthetics as a racial system²² set by the world’s centers, whereby beauty is both parasitically entangled (think of the market for tribal art) and dialectically opposed to the state of wilderness in global peripheries, a wilderness that can be both sublime and abject, and generate feelings of compassion, empathy, repulsion, and sexual arousal. Instead of considering aesthetics as a space separated or dialectically related to the everyday, the material, or the utilitarian, as in the classical western Adornoian or Hegelian view, I look for it in the atomical and the elemental, not in the human, posthuman, or antihuman, but at the infrahuman level.

Lastly, elemental aesthetics refuses the Western bourgeois notion of beauty as value, idea, or feeling, and focuses instead on sensing patterns, entanglements, and forms in an environment that is open, unfolding, and constantly forming. Art is part of the broader political economy of life, through which humans experience a world of images in flow, not just visually, but through all their senses. It is the movement of matter that flows and folds over itself in habitual patterns and cycles of dynamic equilibrium.

I am particularly concerned with art’s role in subverting the conditions of imagination under colonial capitalism, a regime in which the greatest physical violence relies on spectral infrastructures operating at the level of the invisible.

On one level, the world is much less solid and fixed than we think it is and is constantly moved by forces and agents operating below the threshold of human consciousness—and mastery. On the other, our perception of the world that surrounds us is predetermined, preformed, and reified, that is, bound to the

22 David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

ossified commodity form.²³ I consider revolutionary art as spectral labor, that is, the labor of unveiling the empty value of the commodity form *through material interventions in its condition of existence* instead of through intellectual/aesthetic negations that end up reifying it. Art as spectral labor is the act of piercing through the hallucinatory containments of capital and connecting to the rich and polymorphic texture that exists underneath what Ta-Nehisi Coates describes as the “white dream”,²⁴ clearing the ground for the materialization of other life-forms. For imagination to be a practice of freedom and anti-colonial reparation, as per Robin Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams*, it must be entangled with material processes of making and caring, keeping and sharing, rooting and grounding, containment, release, and endings.

Cinema, a medium grappling, since its inception, with the absence-presence of the real, is a powerful tool to reflect on and intervene in the absence-presence of precarious subjects.

Ferreira da Silva’s *Ancestral Clouds* and *Ancestral Claims*, made in collaboration with Arjuna Neuman, is a tale of migration, extraction, and rearticulation of human and more-than-human matter that exemplifies the notions of elemental aesthetics and spectral labor sketched above.

At the beginning of the film, we see hands gathering dirt and then coiling a copper wire in what seems a ritual of reparation. As it unfolds, the film captures the elemental violence of Western capitalism, the hubris of mastering the elements, and the power to reduce Blackness to dust, making it “invisible in plain

²³ I am particularly interested in the theories of reification developed by Evald Vasilyevich Ilyenkov (*The Ideal in Human Activity* [1970, New York: Marxist Internet Archive, 2009]) and György Lukács (*History and Class Consciousness* [1923, London: The Merlin Press, 1971]).

²⁴ The bourgeois capitalist dream that is premised upon the structural exclusion of Black and Brown bodies. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (London: Text Publishing, 2015).

sight” in the granular and atomized form of the desert. But it also shows the lines of flight and resistance that come from the force in excess of precarious lives, which cannot be folded, contained, or enclosed but are instead regathered, reassembled, and coalesced in circuits of “mineral solidarity”, in the form of sandstorms or clouds, contesting borders—across Europe, the Atlantic and the Pacific—and disrupting formal geographies and histories. Sound is central to the politics of the film, human voices morphing into the sound of matter that gathers, touching and transporting us into its waves, and culminating in the ancestral articulations of Archie Shepp’s saxophone, cutting a soft opening on the surface of the visible, into the mineral storm a long time in the making.

In antiquity, the image (*imago*) of the absent person was reproduced in the form of clay as an absence-presence for their loved ones to hold on to. Likewise, the elemental cinema of Ferreira da Silva and Neuman is the making of a vessel: a holding space for the gathering of Blackness—a ghostly matter that continues to be absent from our view, except for when it materializes in the deadly commodity form. In this sense, elemental cinema, rather than a form of representation, is spectral labor, that is, a process of alchemical transformation of absence into presence to be reckoned with.

Ghost Theory

Ana Teixeira Pinto



Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims, 2023 (film still)

It is on the basis of a distinction between reason and unreason (passion, fantasy) that late-modern criticism has been able to articulate a certain idea of the political, the community, the subject—or, more fundamentally, of what the good life is all about, how to achieve it, and, in the process, to become a fully moral agent. Within this paradigm, reason is the truth of the subject and politics is the exercise of reason in the public sphere. The exercise of reason is tantamount to the exercise of freedom, a key element for individual autonomy. The romance of sovereignty, in this case, rests on the belief that the subject is the master and the controlling author of his or her own meaning.

— Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”

1.1.

I open an e-mail. It’s an invitation to contribute to a journal whose topic is “The Age of Unreason”, which the editors find to be a better diagnosis of the present than the “post-truth era”. Neither sit well with me; in fact, I feel uncomfortable about being addressed as someone who would have something to contribute, someone who the editors believe agrees we have entered the age of unreason. I sketch a response that will remain unsent. I toy with the idea of sending, in lieu of an essay, a quotes quiz—Who said it?—but decide it would be a cheap rhetorical trick. I recall a sentence from Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters*: “Those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not.”¹ I feel that those who haunt our values have

¹ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 5.

misnamed what haunts them and wonder how to rename it ...

In ghost stories, the phantom often returns from the dead in order to reveal something hidden or forgotten, to right a wrong, or to deliver a warning that might otherwise have gone unheeded.

A ghost, to quote Avery Gordon, is “not simply a dead person,” but a form by which something that was lost makes itself known or apparent to us, even if fleetingly or in a barely visible manner.² The ghost “is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place.”³ The sighting of a ghost points to “the way the past makes cultural demands on us we have difficulty fulfilling.”⁴ But not all things that haunt “*like a ghost*” demand reparation, “justice, or at least a response.”⁵ Some demand the burial of an unspeakable fact in an object designed to mislead the haunted subject.⁶ Unreason is one such object. Since Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro were elected, liberals have tried to put a name to what they are defending from these illiberal leaders. Reason is the name academic circles often settle for, and it would be quite a provocation to say this term is somewhat equivalent to the “rules-based international order” popular with foreign policy actors. Haunting each of these formulations is the specter of a problem that a great many authors have already identified: that which is communicated renders that which is not communicated incommunicable. Things become “impossible to formulate because the means by which they could be formulated have been excluded from

2 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

3 Ibid.

4 Martin Jay, *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time* (London: Athlone Press, 1998), 163–164, quoted in Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, eds., *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 11.

5 Blanco and Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader*, 9.

6 See Colin Davis, “Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms”, *French Studies* 59, no. 3 (July 2005), 373–379, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni143>.

the discursive context.”⁷ What must thus remain unspeakable for Western representations of rationality and civility to “sustain their power of universal reiteration in contemporary political theory?”⁸

1.2.

A recent televised interview has fired up passionate discussions about the “fascist irrationalism and ‘post-truth’ mythmaking” that define our era, as my journal editors would put it. On *60 Minutes*, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene told her stunned host, CBS journalist Leslie Stahl, that all Democrats are pedophiles. In the media frenzy that ensued, everyone rushed to deny the veracity of Greene’s statement—the literal content of the sentence—to argue that this is not factually true, that the Democrats are not pedophiles. But it is not important whether the statement is factual—politicians’ statements seldom are—what matters is that the statement articulates a political program.

“Won’t somebody please think of the children!” is a phrase that evolved into a rhetorical tactic.

Commenting on Bill Clinton’s 1997 appearance in a series of print ads and video spots in support of a group that identified itself as the Coalition for America’s Children, Lee Edelman argues that the appeal of “fighting for the children” is impossible to refuse:

Such “self-evident” one-sidedness—the affirmation of a value so unquestioned, because so obviously unquestionable, as that of the Child whose innocence solicits our defense—is precisely, of course, what distinguishes public service announcements from the partisan discourse of political argumentation. But it is also, I suggest, what makes such announcements so oppressively political [...] political insofar as the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably

7 Barnor Hesse, “Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity”, *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591714526208>.

8 Ibid.

shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought.⁹

The same logic, I would suggest, is at play in Greene's recent polemic. If futurity cannot be articulated in other terms, then the children are the future. This sentence establishes an identity so that one cannot be thought of without presuming the other: if you fail the children, you extinguish the future. No children, no future. The political content of "all Democrats are pedophiles" is not in fact that all Democrats are pedophiles, but that Democrats are stealing, stalling, or otherwise evacuating the future. Greene's statement can be read simply as "the Democrats are stealing our future", but can also be more accurately qualified as "the Democrats are stealing the white future". The Democrats are stealing the white future by being pro-immigration, or the Democrats are stealing the white future by putting the interests of global finance (personified as the "International Jew"¹⁰) before the interests of the American industry. All of these elements can be incorporated into the metapolitical plot that tells us that all the Democrats are pedophiles. Prompted to explain her statement, Greene went on to say, "The Democrats are pedophiles because they are sexualizing children." What Greene means is that the Democrats are sexualizing children the wrong way, in a nonheteronormative manner. Greene has no problem with the girling of girls or the boying of boys: what she objects to is the modalities of sexual identity that would lead to nonreproductive futurity. In its coercive universalization, the image of the Child,¹¹ which is not to be confused with the lived experiences of real children, namely queer or trans children, whose well-being is sacrificed at the altar of that image, articulates a perfectly coherent

9 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

10 *The International Jew* is a series of antisemitic articles originally published in the early 1920s by the Dearborn Publishing Company, an outlet owned by Henry Ford, the American automobile manufacturer.

11 Edelman, *No Future*, 2.

political program, even when said discourse is expressed in ways that are not readily legible as political.

No wonder the other targets of the current cultural wars are female reproductive autonomy, gender nonconformity, migrant rights, and critical race theory.

1.3.

We are often told fascism appeals to unreason. Fascism, Umberto Eco argued in his often-quoted essay "Eternal Fascism", does not have a political philosophy, only rhetoric. Its features cannot be organized into a system. In *The Authoritarian Personality*, a widely read study published in 1950, the team of researchers—Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford—developed and popularized the "F scale" (*F* for fascist). Created to gauge the psychological predisposition for fascism among the democratic citizenry, the F scale charted the potential for the devolution of individual and autonomous liberal subjects into an irrational, frenzied mob. Equipped with a set of criteria by which to identify fascist characteristics, the decades that followed individualized and pathologized fascist violence, depoliticizing it. By the late '50s, fascism became another generic term denoting an undifferentiated evil, leaving the postwar consensus to settle on the notion that fascism was a negation or distortion of politics, not one of its constitutive features. The current resurgence of fascism under figures such as Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, or Donald Trump has been narrated along these lines, as a descent into lunacy or an outburst of unfocused anger, spilling into the public sphere, running rampant over middle-class civility. But events like Biden's nomination of Elliot Abrams, who oversaw mass murders and torture in Central America, to the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, undermine all attempts to narrate Trump's presidency as an aberration divorced from American norms. Fascism is not a form of lunacy or descent into mass psychosis. It is not a political anomaly, nor is it irrational. However genocidal, as Achille Mbembe argues, "such figures

of sovereignty are far from a piece of prodigious insanity”.¹²

The epoch we call the Age of Enlightenment devised a system of justice for the few while erecting a system of *justified* discrimination for the many.

The history of modernity, as Achille Mbembe argues, is “not so much about the progress of reason as it is about *the history of reason’s unreason*”¹³ whose legacy continues to haunt contemporary societies and their public spheres to the present day.

1.4.

Although colonial history, in its bid to civilize the uncivilized, produced bile even more overt and hateful, it is not prejudice but the notions of *duty* and *moral obligation* that make Marjorie Taylor Greene’s pronouncements similar to those of many “great thinkers”, who sought to manage the affairs of those whom they believed to be less developed.

Colonialism was, as Mbembe, puts it, “a fundamentally ‘civilizing’ and ‘humanitarian’ enterprise. The violence that was its corollary could only ever be *moral*.”¹⁴ Hence the paradox of modernity: only by force can most men be freed.

The history of imperial expansion is an eschatological tale as well as a form of political economy, offering its own story of human fulfilment. Predicated on the belief that the future will be different from the

¹² Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003), 14.

¹³ Achille Mbembe, “‘The Reason of Unreason’: In Conversation; Achille Mbembe and David Theo Goldberg on ‘Critique of Black Reason’”, interview by David Theo Goldberg, *Theory, Culture and Society* (July 3, 2008), <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/interviews-achille-mbembe-david-theo-goldberg-critique-black-reason>.

¹⁴ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017), 12.

past, modernity entails a forward-looking and unidirectional temporality. The notion of “the Future” as object of economic and emotional investment is a function of this linear representation of time. But this articulation of difference hinges on, and intersects with, another articulation of difference: racial difference. This is why the Enlightenment grafts a distinction between bad (insolvent) and good (solvent) desires onto the concepts of history and progress. Addressing fellow philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder’s pleas for the Ma’ohi (Tahitian) islanders, Immanuel Kant famously quipped that their happy life, lived on the edge of history, is neither properly human nor worth living:

Does the author really mean that, if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more civilized nations, were destined to live in their peaceful indolence for thousands of centuries, it would be possible to give a satisfactory answer to the question of why they should exist at all, and of whether it would not have been just as good if this island had been occupied by happy sheep and cattle as by happy human beings who merely enjoy themselves?¹⁵

Hegel would later develop Kant’s opinions into a fully fleshed out philosophy of history. He is usually credited with the insight that reason itself has a history, but reason for Hegel does not simply have a history: reason *is* history. This conflation of reason and history is called *Spirit*.

For Hegel, reason does not just order the world, giving it form and meaning; reason gives the world its *orientation*.

History is the process via which Spirit realizes its essence, freedom, which is, at the same time, its telos. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, written over half a century before the theory of evolution gripped the

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, “Reviews of Herder’s Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind (1785)”, in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 219–220.

public's imagination, Hegel had already outlined a developmental schema by arranging the modalities of difference and conflict by which the unity and identity of Spirit reveals itself *in and as history* as relay points of a single sequence.¹⁶

Within this system, desire emerges as the driving force of world development. This desire cannot be directed towards natural objects, however, for if it were, it would be identical to the desires expressed by the islanders in Tahiti, which are, in Hegel and Kant's account, the desires of the animal: a desire that is uncreative, because, by affirming both the present and the world as the world is, it does not engender history. For Self-Consciousness to emerge, desire must be creative, that is, it must orient itself towards that which is not yet in the world, and must be realized as action negating the given.¹⁷ Creative desire entails a temporal dimension; it is a desire to become "becoming", a desire in which "the Future" takes primacy. And because the content of the subject is a function of their object, as the Ma'ohi islanders' desires are devalued, they are, by extension, devalued too. Alexandre Kojève, through whom our contemporary reading of Hegel has been filtered—to the point we are often talking about the former when we mean the latter—makes plain how this narrative of emancipation necessitates the institution of a fundamental division between the world of the animal and the world of the human in order to articulate its notion of futurity:

If ... Desire is directed toward a "natural" non-I, the I, too, will be "natural." The I created by the active satisfaction of such a Desire will have the same nature as the things toward which that Desire is directed: it will be a "thingish" I, a merely living I, an animal I. ...It will never attain Self-Consciousness.¹⁸

16 Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Hegel. Reinterpretation, Texts, and Commentary*, (New York City: Doubleday, 1965), 148.

17 See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, comp. Raymond Queneau, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 4–5.

18 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 4.

Human desire, in contrast to the desire of the animal, is, according to Hegel, empirically manifest as a desire that desires recognition. By opposing the lord and the bondsman, Hegel argues that for man to affirm *his* humanity, *he* must be willing to risk *his* (animal) life for the sake of (human) recognition:¹⁹

To be human, man must act not for the sake of subjugating a thing, but for the sake of subjugating another Desire (for the thing). The man who desires a thing humanly acts not so much to possess the thing, as to make another recognize his right to that thing, to make another recognize him as the owner of the thing. And he does this—in the final analysis—in order to make the other recognize his superiority over the other. It is only Desire of such a Recognition, it is only Action that flows from such a Desire, that creates, realizes, and reveals a human, nonbiological I.²⁰

One can contest, as Achille Mbembe does, this "definition of politics as the warlike relation par excellence", and the "idea that, of necessity, the calculus of life passes through the death of the Other".²¹ But Hegel's "narrative of mastery and emancipation" is not only linked to "a narrative of truth and death", whereby "terror and killing become the means of realizing the already known telos of history."²²

Death is perched on the threshold of insolvent desires and the solvent desires that are now called politics and history.

Hegel does not just keep "death within the economy of absolute knowledge and meaning",²³ but gives the relation between death and Logos a structuring force. When mortal combat is metaphysics incarnate, politics becomes "death that lives a human life":²⁴

19 The presupposition here, often left unexamined, is that recognition can only be recognized qua recognition when experienced as resistance.

20 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 40.

21 Mbembe, "Necropolitics", 18.

22 *Ibid.*, 20.

23 *Ibid.*, 15.

24 *Ibid.*, 14–15.

The life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. [...] Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being.²⁵

1.5.

Needless to say, if you are not an idealist, tarrying with the negative can be read as a metaphor. Even so, it is a metaphor that performs conceptual, as well as aspirational, work. Though you do not need to believe in teleology to invest in concepts such as emancipation and progress, the Hegelian strife “to realize one’s autonomy, one’s Freedom”²⁶ only has a leftist sheen until one asks:

What must we be freed from? What (and whom) must we leave behind?

To be human, for Hegel, is to free oneself from nature.²⁷ The function of culture is to undo nature, in order to create a (man-made) second world. The failure to free oneself from nature is described as a cultural failure, which Hegel attributes to conceptual inadequacy. From Hegel’s perspective, race is an index of this failure. “Negroes,” he wrote in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* “are enslaved by Europeans and sold to America. Bad as this may be, their lot in their own lands is even worse, since there a slavery quite as absolute exists; for it is the essential principle of slavery, that man has not yet attained a consciousness of his freedom, and consequently sinks down to a mere Thing—an object of no value.”²⁸ Though he seems

25 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold Vincent Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 19.

26 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 40.

27 Teshale Tibebu, *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 28.

28 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (Kitchener, CA: Batoche Books, 2001), 113.

undecided whether the non-white races are constitutionally unable to articulate the unconscious elements that drive their actions into a conscious—that is, rational—project, or just immature and underdeveloped, his writings make room for imperial expansion and military occupation to be codified as a form of emancipation, a way of awaking in those not-yet-human the dormant seeds of their own sublation. As Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, “the very arsenal designed to determine and to ascertain the truth of human difference already assumed Europeaness/whiteness as the universal measure ... of universality.”²⁹ Overcoming difference, that is, overcoming race, is tantamount to becoming white. Whereas others point to Hegel’s distaste for the given to prove his opposition to nativism or the corporatist metaphors that organize fascist doctrine, I would argue for a continuity.

The life the Spirit lives is nonracial, or even anti-racial. But in spite of, or precisely because of this, it nonetheless takes part in the logic of racialization.

Now, Mbembe’s concern is not “those figures of sovereignty whose central project is [...] the struggle for autonomy”,³⁰ but mine is, and not just because Hegel is still the go-to author for political theorization of anti-fascism or for all those who turn left at Isaiah Berlin’s attack on “positive liberty”,³¹ but also because, to borrow from Edelman, the fantasies subtending Hegel’s image of openness and freedom invariably shape the progressive logic within which the political

29 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter beyond the Equation of Value”, *e-flux journal* 79 (February 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/>.

30 Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, 14.

31 Isaiah Berlin attacked Hegel’s statism as a dogmatic and dangerous prelude to totalitarianism. Hegel’s concept of “positive freedom”, the freedom to fully emancipate the individual, is opposed to Berlin’s own concept of “negative freedom”, the absence of coercion or interference by an exterior social body, which Berlin believes is the only form of freedom not open to political abuse. Attacks by conservative commentators have contributed to solidify the view that Hegel offers resources to the Left.

itself must be thought. Hegel's specific contributions to racial capitalism, as Rei Terada argues, "matter particularly much because they continue to characterize the preferences of left political theory",³² which, as Terada sustains, does not so much desire "not to be racist" as it "desires to minimise the scope of race".³³

We could also say that the political, here, names the space in which imaginary relations compete for symbolic fulfilment,³⁴ that is, the framework within which we experience social reality, in the form of a fantasy: "The fantasy, precisely, of form as such, of an order, an organization, that assures the stability of our identities as subjects and the coherence of the Imaginary totalizations through which those identities appear to us in recognizable form."³⁵ The Hegelian schema affords one such identity, although here identity becomes a matter of knowing that one is not bound by the particularities one projects to others in order to define oneself by promising freedom from all particulars.³⁶ Claiming to be at home in otherness, and flaunting its capacity to be deformed and hence informed by absolute freedom, this universal I nonetheless struggles for "a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject's alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history."³⁷ Spirit unties at a mundane level in order to tie at a higher one.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida suggested the Hegelian *Geist* is haunted by the specter of metaphysics. He would rather live with other ghosts and replace ontology with hauntology.

Unlike the Spirit, ghosts don't metabolize all forms of alterity.

32 Rei Terada, "Hegel's Racism for Radicals", *Radical Philosophy* 205 (Autumn 2019), 12.

33 *Ibid.*, 11.

34 Edelman, *No Future*, 8.

35 *Ibid.*, 7.

36 See Terada, "Hegel's Racism for Radicals".

37 Edelman, *No Future*, 8.

They also reject Hegelian attempts to exorcise the disjointedness and incoherence that haunts history. We can maybe conclude, with Carla Lonzi, that Hegel's "Lordship and Bondage" is just a "settling of accounts between groups of men".³⁸ By emplotting the homecoming journey of the *Weltgeist* (world spirit) within the dramatic structure of a bildungsroman, including an antagonist who operates as a foil, patriarchal values can be sublated into a metapolitical plot and reappear under the guise of universal history. Or we can conclude, with David Marriott, that "the tribunal of reason can only delimit itself as a *racial* jurisdiction; the identity of which appears to be a thinking of race as the condition for our thinking *anything at all*."³⁹ Either way, it is not unreason that haunts contemporary politics, rather—and here I am extrapolating from Cathy Caruth's description of trauma—

our public sphere is haunted by the symptoms of a history the Spirit could not entirely possess, becoming instead possessed by it.⁴⁰

At any rate, the sighting of a ghost not only points to "the way the past makes cultural demands on us we have difficulty fulfilling,"⁴¹ but also tends to expose the entanglements of terror and theory.

38 Carla Lonzi, "Manifesto: Female Revolt (Rivolta femminile)", in *Feminist Manifestos: A Global Documentary Reader*, ed. Penny A. Weiss (New York: New York University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479805419.003.0051>.

39 David Marriott, "The Becoming-Black of the World?: On Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*", *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (June 2018), 62. Emphasis added.

40 Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.

41 Martin Jay, *Cultural Semantics*, 163–164.

Biographies



Arjuna Neuman, photo: Kunsthalle Wien



Denise Ferreira da Silva, photo: Miquel Coll

DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA is an artist, philosopher and the Samuel Rudin Professor in the Humanities in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literatures at New York University. Her artistic and academic work reflects and speculates on themes and questions crucial to contemporary philosophy, aesthetics, political theory, Black thought, feminist thought, and historical materialism. She is the author of *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), *The Impagavel Divide* (Workshop of Political Imagination and Living Commons, 2019), *Unpayable Debt* (Sternberg / MIT Press, 2022), and co-editor (with Paula Chakravartty) of *Race, Empire, and the Crisis of the Subprime* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). Besides the films made in collaboration with Arjuna Neuman, Denise's artwork includes the relational artistic practices of Poethical Readings and the Sensing Salon, in collaboration with Valentina Desideri. She has performed shows and lectures in important artistic spaces such as the Centre Pompidou (Paris), Whitechapel Gallery (London), MASP (São Paulo), Guggenheim (New York), and MoMA (New York). She has also written for major art event publications (Liverpool Biennial, 2017; São Paulo Biennial, 2016; Venice Biennale, 2017; and documenta 14) and published in art magazines such as *Canadian Art*, *Texte zur Kunst*, and *e-flux journal*.

ARJUNA NEUMAN

is an artist, filmmaker, and writer. His films and installations have been shown internationally, including at Berlin Biennale, Manifesta, Sharjah Biennial, and in museums such as Centre Pompidou (Paris), Madre Museum (Naples), MAAT (Lisbon), and Jameel Arts Centre (Dubai). As a writer, he has published essays with *Relief*, *Into the Pines Press*, *New Writing*, *VIA Magazine*, *Concord*, *Artvoices Magazine*, *Flaunt*, *LEAP Magazine*, *Hearings*, and *e-flux journal*. He studied at the California Institute of the Arts. He works with the essay form through a multiperspectival and mobile approach in which “essay” is an inherently future-oriented and experimental mode, becoming the guiding principle for research and production, which shifts between the bodily, haptic, and affective through to the geopolitical, planetary, and cosmological.

ARJUNA NEUMAN and DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA’s collaboration includes the films *Serpent Rain* (2016), *4 Waters—Deep Implicancy* (2018), and *Soot Breath//Corpus Infinitum* (2020). Their films have been exhibited at major art venues, such as the Centre Pompidou (Paris), Whitechapel Gallery (London), the 56th Venice Biennale, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin), Centre for Contemporary Arts (Glasgow), Museum Arnhem, and others. Their films have been screened at Berlinale Forum Expanded (Berlin), Images Festival Toronto, Doclisboa (Lisbon), Pravo Ljudski (Sarajevo), and others. They were the 2021 feature artists at the Flaherty Seminar (New York), and their work is held in the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery collection (Vancouver). In 2023, they showed the ensemble of their films at the MACBA (Barcelona), and they premiere their new film, *Ancestral Clouds, Ancestral Claims*, at the Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna).

HANNAH BLACK

is a writer and artist. She lives in New York and Marseille.

EHSAN FARDJADNIYA

For the last two years, I have been filming a search for something, but I haven’t yet figured out what I am looking for. To do this, I left the Netherlands and headed to the nearest European border with Iran: Greece. During my encounters with those attempting to go in the opposite direction, towards the western part of Europe, I reflected on the question of why I left the Netherlands, who I am, and whether I will ever find a home in exile.

MASSIMILIANO MOLLONA

is a writer, filmmaker, and anthropologist. He is an associate professor in the Department of the Arts (DAR) at the University of Bologna. He has a multidisciplinary background in economics, anthropology, and visual art, and his work focuses on the relationship between art and political economy, with a specific angle on work, class, and postcapitalist politics. He is a co-founder and member of the Institute of Radical Imagination (IRI) and the Laboratory for the Urban Commons (LUC), Athens.

ANA TEIXEIRA PINTO

is a writer and cultural theorist based in Berlin. She is a professor of art theory at the HBK Braunschweig and teaches cultural theory at the Dutch Art Institute. Her writing has appeared in publications such as *Third Text*, *Afterall*, *e-flux journal*, *Artforum*, and *Texte zur Kunst*. She is the commissioning editor for a book series on the antipolitical, published by Sternberg Press. Together with Kader Attia and Anselm Franke, she organized the conference and podcast series *The White West: Whose Universal*, which takes place at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin), and is currently working on its forthcoming publication.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Opening *Ancestral Clouds* *Ancestral Claims*

Thu 5/10 2023, open doors at 7 pm,
welcome & introduction at 8 pm
Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz
with the artists;

Andrea Popelka, exhibition curator;
What, How & for Whom / WHW,
artistic directors of Kunsthalle Wien

The opening will be followed by an
afterparty at Club U in cooperation
with the exhibition *A Quiet Storm*
Blowin' by **Soñ Gweha** at Kunstraum
Niederösterreich.

Artist Talk and Listening Session *Difusiones*

with **Denise Ferreira da Silva**,
Arjuna Neuman, **Lama El Khatib**,
and **Sam Nimmrichter**, as well as
Nicole L'Huillier

Fri 6/10 2023, sunset / 6:30–9 pm
Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz

Daliah Touré will open the evening
with short somatic exercises as
part of the program *Making Sense*
(see below). No prior knowledge
required.

The conversation transitions into
Difusiones, a Listening Session by
artist **Nicole L'Huillier**.

The talk is organised in cooperation with
Tanzquartier Wien.

Conversation *unfeeling* with **Henrike Kohpeiß** and **Maxi Wallenhorst**

Tue 17/10 2023, 6–8 pm
Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz

As disappointment with the
dominant vocabulary of how to talk
about one's own as well as shared

feelings is growing, unfeeling
has recently been receiving more
attention. What happens when,
particularly in the face of social
violence, feelings appear not as
too much but as absent, lacking,
insensitive? In this conversation,
Maxi Wallenhorst and **Henrike**
Kohpeiß talk about provisional
histories and latest trends in not
feeling anything. Expanding on
Maxi Wallenhorst's work on a
dissociative poetics and **Henrike**
Kohpeiß' book on bourgeois
coldness, they aim to relate
individual indifference and injury to
infrastructures of unfeeling.

A short tour through the exhibition
will be followed by a conversation at
6:30 pm.

Discussion *How Does One Get to* *Own a Mountain?!*

with **Markus Gönitzer**, **Rose-Anne**
Gush, and **Philipp Sattler**

Thu 23/11 2023, 6:30–8 pm
Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz

In *How Does One Get to Own a*
Mountain?! we discuss a landscape
of memory and property that
stretches along the mountain ranges
of Carinthia in Southern Austria.
This landscape holds the site of
a future lithium mine that opens
questions concerning neo-colonial
modes of extraction on-shored
to European soil, NS heritage of
agricultural property and fascist
concepts of nature, the impact of
climate breakdown in the region,
and counter-concepts found in
Partisan resistance and anti-fascist
practices along these borderlands.

Open Study Sessions on **Extractivism**

with **Anca Benera**, **Moira Hille**,
Annette Krauss, **Andrea Popelka**,
and the students

First session: Thu 12/10 2023, 1–4 pm
Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz

This practice-based seminar is
situated in the Master in Critical
Studies at the Academy of Fine
Arts Vienna, but open to all who
are interested. Together we will
explore the theme of extractivism
and various artistic approaches to it.
The seminar is anti-hierarchically
structured. In *Open Study Sessions*
we will not only deal with the
content, but also with the way *how*
we gather and discuss the topic.

At the end of January, students will
present a larger *Open Study Session*,
first at the Academy of Fine Arts and
then at Kunsthalle Wien.

If you are interested, please feel free
to contact us at:
andrea.popelka@kunsthallewien.at

In cooperation with the Academy of Fine
Arts and the University of Applied Arts
in Vienna.

Series Making Sense

This series has emerged from an
interest in exploring new ways of
relating to art that focus on the
body and the senses. *Making Sense*
is a practice-oriented, open format
that encompasses performances and
workshops. It draws from a variety
of disciplines and approaches that
shall allow the visitors to navigate
the exhibition space with curious
and playful enquiry. Its relaxed
atmosphere seeks to establish
a different attunement to the
exhibition space, where art is not
static or separated from us.

The first session will take place on
Fri 6/10 2023, 6:30 pm in the context
of the Artist Talk and Listening
Session *Difusiones* by the artist
Nicole L'Huillier.

Tours

All tours are free of charge.

My View Tours

My View is a program series in
which experts, non-experts and
interesting people are invited to
present their personal view on the
exhibition. In this exhibition, the
guided tours is aligned with *Making*
Sense.

with **Imani Rameses**, Cognitive
Neuroscientist, Dancer, and
Choreographer
Fri 10/11 2023, 6:30 pm
Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz

Programs for Schools

Kunsthalle Wien offers an extensive
program for schools. Information
and registration at [vermittlung@](mailto:vermittlung@kunsthallewien.at)
kunsthallewien.at

Kunsthalle Wien Podcast

Switch on and listen to the podcast
to hear what the artists have to say
about their work.

Please see our website for regular
updates and further details on the
programming of the exhibition
Ancestral Clouds Ancestral Claims:
<https://kunsthallewien.at/en/>



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Denise Ferreira da Silva (essay)
Arjuna Neuman (essay)
Hannah Black with Denise Ferreira
da Silva and Arjuna Neuman
(conversation)
Ehsan Fardjadniya (essay)
Massimiliano Mollona (essay)
Ana Teixeira Pinto (essay)

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