



Making Live and Letting Die in COVID-19: The Biopolitics of Race, Space and Freedom

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article applies discussions of biopolitics and rationalities by governments to “make live” and “let die” as a heuristic for the speculative sorting of bodies and their antibodies as the United States and individual states lurch toward post-COVID life. It considers how governments rationalize the elimination of certain populations in the name of improving the vitality of the dominant group. Sociologist Michel Foucault, who popularized the idea among academics in the late 1970s, called biopolitics the application of “life-producing techniques.” Biopolitics operates under the prerogative of whom to “make live” and whom to “let die.” Its applications in the last century have rationalized the elimination of perceived outgroups to improve the vitality of the nation-state. This article theorizes that the prerogative to “make live” and “let die” functions as a tacit rationale for negotiating pandemic life. As a cultural agent, COVID has brought into stark relief the burdens of suffering that U.S. society places on marginalized communities, particularly African Americans and Latinx populations; as well as incarcerated and otherwise detained individuals left exposed to virus spread.

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From managing vaccines to countering conspiratorial discourses, negotiating a viral pandemic presents an ongoing problem of governance and management of space. Given the unknowns related to vaccine administration, the logistical challenges of immunization, and the polarization of the population that limits efficacy of medical guidance, we can expect ongoing months of discomfort, potential lockdowns, and conditions for new conjunctures of social protest. The spirit of this inquiry began last spring, as we followed in real time the “Hammer and Dance” of policy decisions that opened and then restricted commercial and social activities in response to spikes of infection.¹ Yet so much and so little has changed in how we have moved through space and viewed one another as potential carriers or unwitting victims of disease and (mis)information. We verified that virus transmission and COVID-19 unevenly affected geographies and segments of the population through a constellation of social conditions. Vulnerable populations, already burdened by social inequity through racial discrimination that pervades U.S. social, financial, vocational, healthcare, education, and housing conditions, were exposed and killed at higher rates. The cyclical nature of viral pathology and transmission also coincided with U.S. federalism, which promised that viral contagion would return in unknown variant mutations as some states that prioritized commerce over public health saw renewed transmission spikes. Counties/cities/states managed to contain spread through social distancing and safety measures, followed by robust vaccine distribution.

Early in the pandemic, researchers floated ideas for “immunity certificates” based on the prevalence of one’s bodily antigens, which even found some purchase by America’s leading infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.² Antibody blood tests, it was thought, could also be deployed to verify immunity, which would supposedly allow segments of the population to move freely and participate in social activities otherwise prohibited by safety concerns and/or restrictions. Other types of categorization were speculated based on age or place of residence. Additionally, state actors proposed vaccine passports in order to travel. The European Union was the first to suggest such a requirement.³

Disease experts continue to deliberate over the most efficacious approach to getting the most vaccine shots “into the arms of the American people,” as President Joe Biden is fond of saying. Immunity is, after all, a powerful symbol, whose meaning is hotly contested. The immune system, says Donna Haraway, “is a plan for meaningful action to construct and maintain the boundaries for what may count as self and other in the crucial realms of the normal and pathological.”⁴ As I hope to illustrate in the following pages, we cannot separate culture and signs from the ecology of a pandemic. Pathogen is not only biomedical with its language of “stunning artefacts, images, architectures, social forms and technologies.”⁵ It is also a social negotiation that reflects our own pre-morbidities in troubling relief. After all, the U.S. medical system – like other privatized systems of care – is designed to profit on inequality and segregate by race and income; “It undergirds health inequities.”⁶ In other words, uneven care is not a malfunction of our health system, but a sign that it is working as intended. According to Rhea Boyd, chief medical officer of San Diego 211: “We have a healthcare system that profits off of

1 Thomas Pueyo. “Coronavirus: The Hammer and the Dance: What the Next 18 Months Can Look Like, if Leaders Buy Us Time.” *Medium*, March 19, 2020. <http://medium.com/@tomaspueyo/coronavirus-the-hammer-and-the-dance-be9337092b56>.

2 Quint Forgyery. “Fauci: Coronavirus immunity cards for Americans are ‘being discussed’. The proposal, already being implemented by German researchers, is under consideration in the United Kingdom and Italy.” *Politico*, April 10, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/10/fauci-coronavirus-immunity-cards-for-americans-are-being-discussed-178784>.

3 Raf Casert. “EU Considers COVID-19 Vaccine Certificates to Help Summer Tourism, Make Travel as Free as Possible.” *Associated Press*, January 15, 2021. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/news/2021/01/15/europe-travel-eu-considers-covid-vaccine-certificates-help-tourism/4176930001/>.

4 Donna Haraway, “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse.” *Biopolitics: A Reader*, Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, eds. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 275.

5 *Ibid.*, 275.

6 Michael Dawson, Interview with Rhea Boyd, Aresha Martinez-Cordoso, and Brandi Summers. “Covid-19 and Racial Inequities: Unpacking the Anti-Black Response.” *New Dawn*. Podcast. June 25, 2020. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/covid-19-racial-inequities-unpacking-anti-black-response/id1213696020?i=1000480891953>.

inequality and an insurance market that creates a tiered healthcare system.”⁷ As we look to the end of this once in a century crisis and attempt a post-mortem of the tragic sacrifices made to the disease, I propose we examine the underlying rationalities for sorting bodies and their antibodies. We have seen such practices – underlain by discourses on race and national health – taken to extreme and murderous conclusions before. What happens when biomedicine intersects with society writ large? Sociologist Michel Foucault in the late 1970s framed efforts by the state to apply “life-producing techniques” as biopolitics.⁸ It generally refers to applying specific knowledge from statistics, demography, epidemiology, and biology in order to govern individuals and groups. The concept is believed to have been coined at the beginning of the 20th century by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén.⁹ Through biopolitics, the state strengthens its position of “making live” through forecasts and statistics to lower morbidity, increase life expectancy, stimulate birth rates, and in effect, establish a norm that optimizes a state of life. By regularizing a condition of “making live,” societies can better navigate catastrophic, yet perennial events, such as scourges and epidemics.¹⁰ Scholars view biopolitics (sometimes used interchangeably with biopower) as a method of governmentality that applies metrics of public health on the level of the population for a softer touch of governance that compels individuals to live.

While a preoccupation over “the good of all” presumably optimizes a state of life, the philosophy has also rationalized the killing of subgroups. This expression of a negative side of “making live” came into full fruition under Nazi Germany, which rationalized genocide. It is often accompanied by nationalism and xenophobia.¹¹ So, the function of “making live” is inextricably tied to “letting die.” Together, they rationalize the pruning of unwanted portions of the population in order to strengthen the dominant group. Biopolitics seeks to reshape conduct without limiting one’s freedom to conduct her life as she sees fit; “And if in Nazi Germany, their freedom to act, indeed the very existence of some subjects had to be erased, this was in the name of a greater freedom of Aryan people and their destiny.”¹²

In our COVID-19 crisis, “making live” and “letting die” have tacitly rationalized reopening businesses and public activities despite known risks to Latinx and African Americans who are disproportionately affected with higher pre-existing conditions, close living quarters, and public facing jobs. This viewpoint has led to locking down carceral spaces such as immigration detention centers and prisons, places reminiscent of Agamben’s camps where individuals are stripped of their political lives and left bare without statehood protections.¹³ This is maybe most obvious with the the closing of national borders, particularly the southern border where refugees and migrants wait in objectionable conditions without statehood protection from exploitation, kidnapping and other violent crimes.

FREEWILL AND FREEDOM FOR WHOM

Foucault argued that biopolitical technology found its pure expression of power through medicine – which he called a power/knowledge that can be applied to both the body and the population, and therefore has “both disciplinary effects and regulatory effects.”¹⁴ Instead of the sovereign’s heavy-handed right to kill, biopolitics manages the population through the production of desire, which goes to the heart of Foucault’s central character of liberalism:

7 Ibid.

8 Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze. “Biopolitics: An Encounter.” *Biopolitics: A Reader*, Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, eds. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.

9 Thomas Lemke. *Biopolitics: an Advanced Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 10.

10 Michel Foucault. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France 1975–1976*. Translated by David Macey. Eds Alessandro Mauro and Fontana Bertani. (New York: Picador, 2003), 247.

11 Michel Foucault. *Society Must Be Defended*; Thomas Lemke. *Biopolitics: an Advanced Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Rowan Savage. “‘Disease Incarnate’: Biopolitical Discourse and Genocidal Dehumanisation in the Age of Modernity.” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 20, no. 3 (2007): 404–440.

12 Nikolas Rose. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23.

13 Mathew Coleman and Kevin Grove. “Biopolitics, Biopower, and the Return of Sovereignty.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, no. 3 (2009): 489–507.

14 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 252.

Homo Oeconomicus.¹⁵ The individual is enticed to live. But the question becomes what to live for? If not for the sake of life itself, then for the market. “In Foucault’s telling, liberalism was born with a market governmentality rather than the rights of man at its heart,” writes Wendy Brown. “Without touching the subject, liberalism governmentality rises with the emergence of biopolitics.”¹⁶ The political economy becomes the new logic of state and establishes how not to govern too much. The state produces desire to entice sovereign, free-thinking individuals to act in the public’s best interest. One’s role in the state is imparted through “free will” or consumer choice. Thus, the modern capitalist state and modern autonomous individuals co-determine each other’s emergence, which Foucault said was indispensable to the development of capitalism.¹⁷ This expression of freewill is wrapped up in structures of government, politics, science, and social forces that come together to produce the free subject. In order for the subject to enjoy this freedom, various tactics of suppression become justified, as Nikolas Rose argues. So, the question is always freedom for whom?: “The constraint of the few is a condition of the many.”¹⁸ Rose delineates various tactics of surveillance and policing of inner cities (as well as foreign wars) as the price of freedom. Limited coercion may be required to reform the unwilling or pathological to accept the rights and responsibilities of freedom. Such coercion to eliminate dependence and enforce the “autonomy of the will” is a prerequisite for freedom. This fear of dependence was a familiar trope among Enlightenment thinkers and is still deployed by U.S. conservatives to rationalize limited social programs and government support. The Trump Administration moved to reduce unemployment benefits during COVID-19 to incentivize people to return to work. Predictably, limits to COVID-related relief for individuals and businesses coincided with hostility towards forced closures and lockdowns.

Last summer, we saw states moving to reopen businesses likewise strip away unemployment benefits for employees afraid to return to work. One blunt example was the State of Iowa, where Gov. Kim Reynolds allowed businesses in a majority of counties to reopen, despite the state’s still-climbing daily confirmed COVID-19 cases. According to Iowa Workforce Development, which oversees unemployment benefits, Iowans on temporary layoff from COVID-19 lost unemployment benefits if they refused to return to work when recalled by their employers. A refusal was considered a “voluntary quit.”¹⁹ While workers were not literally being whipped into action by a sovereign king, they had little choice but to risk exposure, sickness, and death in order to “make live.” Former-President Trump’s now notorious authorization of the War Powers Act on April 28, 2020 to keep 14 U.S. slaughterhouses open, where 10,000 workers had been infected or exposed and 30 died, forced vulnerable workers into a similar quandary.²⁰ If one refused to work, they would not qualify for unemployment. Therefore, the free choice was to work at the risk of infection or be forced into a labor market with record unemployment.

Such tactics leave free-thinking individuals with few actual choices, which seems far afield from the lighter touch of governance promised by biopolitics. States that imposed restrictions by closing businesses faced an assortment of reopen protests, many of them led by armed people who refused to wear masks. Although ethnographer Diana Daly, at the University of Arizona iSchool, noted that protesters she observed seemed to acknowledge the virus’ severity, their anger, she said, largely had to do with group affiliation.²¹ Ideas of tyranny and overreach are often based on who is making policy. Even classicist liberals like John Locke and John Stuart Mill, who believed that men were entitled to personal freedom as a matter of natural law, accepted

15 Wendy Brown. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Zone Books, 2015), 57.

16 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 58.

17 Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. (Random House: Vintage Books Edition, 1990), 141.

18 Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 10.

19 Gov. Kim. Reynolds. “Workforce Update from Governor Kim Reynolds on April 24, 2020.” *Iowa Workforce Development*. April 24, 2020. <https://www.iowaworkforcedevelopment.gov/workforce-update-governor-kim-reynolds-april-24-2020>.

20 Abraham White. “Trump Order to Re-Open 14 Meatpacking Plants Fails to Increase Coronavirus Testing and Safety Measures Needed to Protect Food Supply & Workers.” *United Food and Commercial Workers Union Press Release*, May 8, 2020. <http://www.ufcw.org/press/>.

21 Diana Daly. “What are the ‘reopen’ protesters really saying?” *American Politics*. (Utica College Center of Public Affairs and Election Research) 2020. <https://www.ucpublicaffairs.com/home/2020/5/3/what-are-the-reopen-protesters-really-saying-by-diana-daly>.

areas of curtailed freedoms to protect other values such as justice, security, and equality. Daly noted that protestors expressed little deference towards Black and Latinx segments of the population more vulnerable to COVID-19; “Their compassion also seemed limited to fellow White people.”²²

Journalist Jamelle Bouie argues that the notion of freedom evoked by reopen protestors emanated from a sense of entitled freedom in the context of Whiteness.²³ To be White is to be the quintessential autonomous subject who has control over oneself and one’s labor. “Freedom from domination and control is one aspect of the meaning of Whiteness,” he writes. “The other aspect, in a kind of ideological inversion, is the right to control the presence and lives of non-Whites.”²⁴ Whiteness in antebellum America was the right to discipline and punish those who violated the racial order. “If Whiteness has meant the right to control and to be free from control, then it is easy to see how racial identity might influence the reaction to the lockdowns among a certain subset of White Americans.”²⁵ White cultural entitlement intersects with a number of privileges of bodily and sexual sovereignty over Others, writes Mel Chen.²⁶ The straight White neoliberal citizen renders viral transmissibility impossible while it racially Others those its marks as vectors: “We find two cultural images of sexualities: a queered, ‘wet’ interspecies commingling in China and a straightened image of neoliberal, ‘dry’ monospecies (human) independence.”²⁷

RACE AND SPACE

Foucault argued that in order to “make live” on the level of the population, states must rely on a mechanism to differentiate racial or ethnic segments of the population.²⁸ “Foucault’s working thesis is that the transformation of sovereign power into biopower leads to a shift from a political-military discourse into a racist-biological one.”²⁹ Race and racism function as a central technology to biopolitics. Just as medicine is the intersecting locus of public health and disciplinary effects on the body, race becomes the intersecting rationale for sorting disqualified groups from a healthy body politic. In Foucault’s mythology, racism allows the taking of life through bio-power that is otherwise primarily concerned with “making live.”

Racism fulfills two important functions within an economy of biopower. First, it creates fissures in the social domain that allow for the division of what is imagined in principle to be a homogeneous biological whole.... In this manner, a differentiation into good and bad, higher and lower, ascending or descending ‘races’ is made possible and a dividing line established ‘between what must live and what must die’.³⁰

The power to kill is then justified through the mechanisms of “making live.” It becomes the power to kill some on behalf of the greater population. The function of racism by the state is to cull away the diseased for the rest to flourish. “Racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the Other — in a biological type relationship.”³¹ As perceived inferiors die, the stronger the species is expected to be. In a normalizing society, racism is a precondition that makes killing acceptable. So, it must be in the service of society as exemplified by the Nazis: “There were two central features of the National Socialist conception of state and society,” writes Thomas Lemke. “First, it promoted the idea that the subjects of history were not individuals, groups, or classes but self-enclosed communities with a common

22 Jamelle Bouie. “The Anti-Lockdown Protestors Have a Twisted Conception of Liberty.” *The New York Times*, May 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/opinion/sunday/anti-lockdown-protesters.html>.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke University Press, 2012.

27 Mel Y. Chen. “Feminisms in the Air.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. (special online issue on COVID-19), 2020. <http://signsjournal.org/covid/chen>.

28 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*.

29 Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 40.

30 Ibid., 41.

31 Ibid.

genetic heritage.”³² This idea was complemented by the assumption of a natural hierarchy³³ among people and races in a nation, according to their different “inherited biological quality.” This allowed it to seem not only justified but necessary to treat people unequally in order to enhance what the Nazi’s called a *Lebensraum* — or a “living space,” which is a concrete space where the occupation, partition, and distribution of land is grounded in the duty to care for and enable the multiplication of a specific population.³⁴

Second, National Socialist ideology rested on the belief that social relations and political problems could ultimately be attributed to biological causes.³⁵ The Nazi worldview feared tiny, powerful agents corroding the German body, which catalyzed “a vast hygienic experiment” to usher a utopia scrubbed of all diseases — from cancer and mental illness to alien racial elements, writes Rowan Savage.³⁶ The nation-state here is threatened by the “internal presence of the extraneous” and vulnerable by the mere presence of those who sap the strength of the body politic.³⁷ By removing Jews, Roma and other groups seen as intellectually inferior by race and birth, the Nazi Regime sought to improve the health of its Aryan Nation. It was the most “murderous” and “suicidal” biopolitical movement of modern history.³⁸ What made Naziism particularly effective was its ability to render itself technical as part of the natural order of things, which gave it a legitimate authority, language and thought. It produced a political rationality and discursive field characterized by a shared vocabulary, intelligible logics, and commonly accepted facts.³⁹ “From this point onward, war is about two things. It is not simply a matter of destroying a political adversary, but of destroying an enemy race” and any biological threat that the Other represents.⁴⁰ This is the only way possible “to both protect life and authorize a holocaust.”⁴¹

Racism is “an expression of a schism within society that is provoked by the biopolitical idea of an ongoing and always incomplete cleansing of the social body.”⁴² Racism here is not defined by individual action. “Rather, it structures social fields of action, guides political practices, and is realized through state apparatuses.”⁴³ In the United States, racism becomes inculcated into neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility. A proclivity to blame individuals for their poverty and health as opposed to the structural and historic conditions produced by the political economy can easily slip into a rationality for “letting die” as a kind of sacrifice for the greater whole. One of the most insidious and invisible forms of racism in the United States occurs through spatial management and land use and zoning decisions. An individual’s health becomes tied to a zip code. Environmental justice scholars have, since the 1980s, appropriated the frame of “sacrifice zones” from Cold War lineage to index industrial neighborhoods where residents (largely of color) are overburdened with toxic emissions generated by plants to produce low-cost consumer products. Impoverished African Americans are sacrificed for capital accumulation elsewhere. In Louisiana where I live, for example, air pollution from an industrial corridor along the Mississippi River, dubiously known as Cancer Alley, has become a comorbidity for COVID-19. The 85-mile stretch of river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is home to more than 150 industrial sites wedged into predominantly African American communities with lineage to the former plantations where petrochemical plants now reside. These “fence-line” communities are exposed to carcinogens like chloroprene, Ethylene Oxide, and benzene at 200, 300, 400, and

32 Ibid., 11.

33 Ibid., 11.

34 Adam Sitze. “Biopolitics and Political Space.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2012): 217–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2012.659471>.

35 Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 11.

36 Savage, “‘Disease Incarnate,’” 409.

37 Ibid., 409.

38 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 259.

39 Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 28.

40 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 257.

41 Giorgio Agamben. “Introduction to *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.” *Biopolitics: A Reader*, Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, eds. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 167.

42 Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 43.

43 Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 44.

up to 800 times the national average.⁴⁴ Early in the pandemic, the “river parishes” (in Louisiana, counties are called parishes) logged the highest per-capita concentration of COVID-19 deaths in the country due to respiratory complications.⁴⁵ At the same time, the EPA was temporarily relaxing regulatory reporting requirements for plants at the request of the chemical industry in response to COVID-19.⁴⁶ Such industrial “sacrifice zones” are not unique to Louisiana, but are peppered throughout the United States.⁴⁷ The pre-morbidities of pollution, poverty, housing, and other burdens shouldered by communities of color have only been compounded by the novel Coronavirus. Fatality gaps among White and Black men seem to be highest among early middle age, 35–44 years old, where the biological, “cellular age” of Black men is accelerated by the chronic stress of racism. “This pandemic is taking a particular toll on black folks,” says Michael Dawson, Director of the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago.⁴⁸ The legacy of racism was brought into awful relief by COVID-19.

Then, on May 25, 2020, George Floyd was brutally murdered by a Minneapolis police officer. The pandemic re-animated long-standing intersectional claims for social justice – prompting protests, marches and debates on race, police violence, anthropogenic climate change, income inequality, White supremacy and, finally, sedition. “These viral particles have a physical and interactive character segregable enough to be called ‘novel’, and yet so much of what is being witnessed feels old and familiar, writes Chen.⁴⁹ COVID-19 became a cultural actor, further cleaving pre-existing social and cultural divides as it ricocheted through “super-spreader events” and inconsistent U.S. interstate health policies.

EXPECTED SPACES OF EXCEPTION

While Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power was a spatial phenomenon, his later formulation of biopolitics allowed for a withdrawal of territorial interventions. But Thomas Lemke argues that sovereign, territorial power is critical for biopolitics if for no other reason than “many of our imaginative possibilities are structured around it.”⁵⁰ The advent of the modern nation-state shifted perceptions about people as culturally distinct to the territory they inhabited. “A conceptual conflict arose between *demos* and *ethnos*. The nation was, to use Benedict Anderson’s concept, an ‘imagined community’ – but who were the citizens imagined as national subjects?”⁵¹ It is, in fact, within bounded territories where cultural identity is contested, sometimes fatally. The nation state resurrected the metaphor of the bounded “body politic” in relation to a unitary polis in “a world of oppositional Others.”⁵² The Pandemic has presented a quandary of spatial management as nation states attempt to contain virus spread while conducting commerce. Restrictions on immigration in countries around the world have hardened national boundaries and redefined accepted notions of space and mobility.

Then-President Trump’s decision to close the southern border to immigration under the auspices of COVID protection while calling the virus a foreign invader from China played on well-established Orientalized tropes of miscegenation, exotism, and invasion. Turkish author Orhan Pamuk writes

44 “2011 National Air Toxics Assessment,” *United States Environmental Protection Agency*. Released in 2015. Washington, D.C.; Sharon Lerner. “The Plant Next Door.” *The Intercept*. March 24, 2017. <https://theintercept.com/2017/03/24/a-louisiana-town-plagued-by-pollution-shows-why-cuts-to-the-epa-will-be-measured-in-illnesses-and-deaths/>.

45 Ashley Killough and Ed Lavandera. “This Small Louisiana Parish Has the Highest Death Rate per Capita for Coronavirus in the Country.” *CNN*. April 15, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/15/us/louisiana-st-john-the-baptist-coronavirus/index.html>.

46 EPA. “EPA Announces Enforcement Discretion Policy for COVID-19 Pandemic.” *United States Environmental Protection Agency Press Office*. Washington, D.C. March 26, 2020. <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-announces-enforcement-discretion-policy-covid-19-pandemic>; Kimberly A. Terrell and Wesley James. “Racial Disparities in Air Pollution Burden and COVID-19 Deaths in Louisiana, USA, in the Context of Long-Term Changes in Fine Particulate Pollution.” *Environmental Justice* 0, no. 0 (2020) 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2020.0021>.

47 Steven Lerner. *Sacrifice Zones*. MIT Press, 2019; Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Hendrix Wright “The Politics of Pollution: Implications for the Black Community.” *Phylon* (1960–) 47 no. 1 (1986): 71–78; Robert Bullard, Paul Mohai, Robin Saha, and Beverly Wright. “Toxic wastes and race at twenty: Why race still matters after all of these years.” *Envtl. L.* 38 (2008): 371.

48 Dawson, “Interview.”

49 Chen, “Feminisms in the Air.”

50 Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 13.

51 Savage, “‘Disease Incarnate,’” 408.

52 Savage, “‘Disease Incarnate,’” 409.

that plagues have historically animated xenophobic impulses: “The most common rumors during outbreaks of plague were about who had brought the disease in and where it had come from. Like evil itself, plague was always portrayed as something that had come from outside.”⁵³ I believe this explains why President Donald Trump fomented protests against stay-at-home orders because of economic fallout while also further restricting immigration because of the COVID-19.⁵⁴ These two actions appear contradictory based on different threat assessments. The threat is real enough to shut down the border but not enough to keep the economy closed. Yet they fall under the single logic of resistance to foreign invaders. In this schema, COVID-19, which Trump liked to call the “Chinese Virus,” is the product of a foreign adversary. This was also reflected in the rhetoric of reopen protests that framed it as an invading threat to the U.S. economy. Pamuk explains the sentiment: “It had struck elsewhere before, and not enough had been done to contain it.”⁵⁵ The virus was the product of a foreign adversary. Such anxieties about “intoxications, mixings, and Chinese agents” also echo the “Yellow Peril” fears that have periodically erupted in U.S. history, most recently with the 2007 toxic lead scare in baby toys. “That lead was subject to an outbreak narrative works synergistically with these anxieties.”⁵⁶ The racialization of Chinese sources — whether toxic lead or Coronavirus — replicates fears of racialized immigration into the vulnerable U.S. homeland, which coincides with anxieties about U.S. economic decline. Images of foreign bodies when introduced into the social imaginary are vehemently met with familiar racialized public health discourses, whose roots lay in the 19th century hygiene movement. “The corrupted Chinatown arguably still lives, albeit now understood as an entire nation covered in irresponsible factories that spread their poisons far and wide.”⁵⁷

Fears of outsider infection reinforce tropes that tie the nation’s land to certain qualified people at the exclusion of those who do not belong.⁵⁸ In a Pre-COVID essay, Beth Gardiner wrote that immigrants are often framed as invasive species, analogous to foreign plants or animals that spread unchecked into new ecosystems. While Gardiner organized her essay around the implications of white supremacy on climate change, COVID-19 presented an equally urgent catalyst among certain groups to harden these lines of attack. Xenophobic rhetoric echoed racial schemes to protect the German homeland against foreigners. “The Nazis embraced notions of a symbiotic connection between the German homeland and its people.”⁵⁹ Indeed, *The New York Times* reported that the hardline immigration adviser, Stephen Miller, spent the administration’s entire term in office, and well before COVID, hunting for disease outbreaks in immigrant detention camps to justify shutting down all immigration through an obscure U.S. legal code of health powers.⁶⁰

In translating the social conflicts of the industrial world by racial/ethnic terms, we end up analogizing today’s foreigners, racialized others, and stateless people to the “savages” of the colonial world.⁶¹ When it comes to imagining the inhumanity of foreign peoples, their mere existence can be seen as a mortal threat to one’s “imaginary sovereignty.”⁶² This inevitably leads to the need for spaces of exception where nationalist outgroups can be stripped of their political lives. This is the disciplinary component to “letting die” where stateless actors are

53 Orhan Pamuk. “What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us: People have always responded to epidemics by spreading rumor and false information, and portraying the disease as foreign and brought in with malicious intent.” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-orhan-pamuk.html>.

54 Jenny Jarvie. “These U.S. citizens won’t get coronavirus stimulus checks — because their spouses are immigrants.” *The Los Angeles Times*. April, 20, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-04-20/u-s-citizens-coronavirus-stimulus-checks-spouses-immigrants>.

55 Pamuk, “What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us.”

56 Chen, *Animacies*, 169.

57 Ibid.

58 Beth Gardiner. “White Supremacy Goes Green: Why is the far right suddenly paying attention to climate change?” *The New York Times*. Feb. 28, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/28/opinion/sunday/far-right-climate-change.html>.

59 Ibid.

60 Caitlin Dickerson and Michael D. Shear. “Before Covid-19, Trump Aide Sought to Use Disease to Close Borders.” *The New York Times*. May 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/03/us/coronavirus-immigration-stephen-miller-public-health.html>.

61 Mbembe Achilles. “Necropolitics.” *Biopolitics: A Reader*, Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, eds. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013, 167.

62 Ibid.

thrown away — in prisons, immigrant asylum detention centers, and other spaces of control, where COVID-19 infection has accelerated. Agamben saw this clearly, when “stateless” actors were imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay in the occupied territory of a foreign country. Here, Agamben’s “bare life” proves to be the solid basis of a political body. “Bare life” as existing, for example, in asylum seekers, refugees, and the vegetated have one thing in common: although they all involve human life, they are excluded from the protection of the law. They remain either turned over to humanitarian assistance and unable to assert a legal claim, or they are reduced to the status of “biomass” through the authority of scientific interpretations and definitions.⁶³

Agamben’s reconstruction of the interrelationships between sovereign rule and biopolitical exception results in the unsettling outcome that the camps are co-constitutive for the recognition of human rights. The concentration camp is a precondition or “hidden matrix” of our current politics.⁶⁴ The camp symbolizes and fixes the border between “bare life” and political existence. “Camps” in this sense are not only Nazi concentration camps or contemporary deportation centers, but rather any space in which “bare life” is systematically produced: “the camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule.”⁶⁵ Here, COVID-19 does the state’s murderous work as it travels silently and undetected, pruning unwanted groups on behalf of the state that affirms its actions by neglect and willful inaction.

COVID’s victims in these enclosed spaces often comprise people of color whose fate is determined by a lack access to financial resources, lack of appropriate legal representation, and racial profiling by arresting officers. Instead of exercising a power to kill, the state exercises its sovereignty to enact a state of exception.⁶⁶ It exercises a power to “let die” by neglect that ensures exposure to epidemiological events.

In California’s San Quentin prison, about two-third of the prison population had tested positive for COVID-19 by August 2020: 2,200 cases and 25 deaths, among a population of 3,260 people. A released inmate told *The Los Angeles Times* that there was no ventilation in the prison, which meant that one couldn’t avoid it. “They put a little white piece of paper on the door of everyone who was positive,” Michael Kirkpatrick said.⁶⁷ “On our wing, there were, like, maybe five cells that didn’t have that piece of paper on them.”⁶⁸ A San Quentin inmate on death row, named Tim, describes prison staff coughing on food trays: “I feel like they are actually trying to spread the virus to us ... it would be a solution on death row, after all,” he wrote to Rachel Nelson, who published his letter.⁶⁹ Tim has been on death row for 16 years, one of 757 people who are “living dead indefinitely” in California after Gov. Gavin Newsom imposed a moratorium on the death penalty.⁷⁰ His life exists in a state of precarity, a sort of “living dead” or nebulous “animacy.”⁷¹ That COVID-19 could be construed on death row as a governmental solution, implies that there is something willful happening, writes Nelson.⁷²

The conditions Tim refers to—the extreme of shoddy management of life (and death) captured in his description of swabs passed through slots, the coughing staff distributing food trays through locked gates, and the sick quarantined in “the hole”—force the question of what can be learned about “emergent viral biopolitics” through the conditions endured by those who have been condemned to die.⁷³ Inmates are vulnerable to the solutions of death by inaction, which is naturalized through the ongoing sorting, categorization and separation – if not erasing – of

63 Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 55.

64 Agamben. “Introduction to Homo Sacer,” 44.

65 Ibid., 168–169.

66 Ibid., 171.

67 Rong-Gong Lin II and Kim Christensen. “San Quentin’s Coronavirus Outbreak Shows Why ‘Herd Immunity’ Could Mean Disaster.” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-08-11/san-quentin-coronavirus-herd-immunity-covid-19>.

68 Ibid.

69 Rachel Nelson. “Viral Biopolitics COVID-19 and the Living Dead.” *The Brooklyn Rail*. May 2020. <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/05/field-notes/Viral-Biopolitics-COVID-19-and-the-Living-Dead>.

70 Ibid.

71 Mbemba, “Necropolitics”; Che, *Animacies*.

72 Nelson, “Viral Biopolitics.”

73 Ibid.

those deemed to be detrimental to society. This continuous, scientific biopower not only “makes live,” but also hides death. Hiding death is easier in corporeal spaces. It is also happening where memorialization of COVID victims occurs in private or sealed ICU hospital units. There were few live funerals in 2020. Evidence of death included the presence of refrigerated trucks outside of hospitals or the macabre specter of particulates in the air. California regulators on Jan. 17, 2021 issued an emergency order temporarily suspending air quality standards for Los Angeles crematoriums facing a backlog of COVID victims.⁷⁴ Death has been disassociated, instrumentalized and silent.

CONCLUSION

So here we are. At the time of this writing, state economies lurch toward reopening as vaccine rollout plods along, prolonging the “dark winter” of COVID-19 infection with more lethal variants until vaccination distribution and acceptance results in some workable herd immunity (depending on length and efficacy of immunization). The Biden Administration inherits the lethal effects of a two-prong biopolitical strategy to protect the Lebensraum-homeland from foreign carriers of plague and purge segments of the U.S. population that are more susceptible to disease – which fractures along race. Incarcerated subjects remain in a state of exception locked down and exposed to contagion. Stay-at-home orders shift as qualified, self-interested subjects exercise their biopolitical prerogative to sacrifice others for their own freewill and consumer choice, which is required to sustain the modern capitalist state that co-determines their subjectivity. I believe the moment calls for a continued explication of naturalized discourses of risk and human costs for economic activity – and how that interplays with productions of space, territory and the nation state. The application of biopolitical theories of power will be helpful critiques for epidemiological discourses and decisions as new therapies and treatments to COVID-19 emerge. We must be ever mindful of those socio-historical cautionary events that echo through our current moment in uncanny ways. Let us learn from those dark histories that attempt to exclude and erase those who are perceived as outsiders or unqualified rather than re-perform them. We can turn toward the murderous conclusions of the past in order to liberate those currently being sacrificed for profit and power.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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⁷⁴ Kim White. “South Coast AQMD Issues Emergency Order for Crematoriums Due to COVID-19.” *South Coast Air Quality Management District Press Release*, January 17, 2021. <http://www.aqmd.gov/docs/default-source/news-archive/2021/emergency-order-for-crematoriums-jan17-2021.pdf>.

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