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Inheritance

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This is a new fictocritical work, about nursing to death my two parents in Columbia, Missouri over the same two and half years that saw the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, the rise of Black Lives Matter, the election of Trump; events that saw me return to my home in the Midwest for the first time for longer than the few days it had been for over three decades. And while I appreciate that the violence and undoing of these events are not related nor commensurate according to a logics of scale—I do not want to be ‘whitesplaining’, in this sense, reducing differential inequities or to be making my narrative the one—nevertheless the events are materially entangled in what Karen Barad might call a ‘strange topology’ or ‘geopolitics inside a morsel... an implosion/explosion of no small matter’.¹ It is this matter and the mattering that has taken place since, that ties racism, the rise of neo-fascism, to the death of my parents, to a hauntological that won’t quit; a brutal facticity of indeterminacy that is constitutive; what I call *composting death*.

The Age of Grief

We live in an age of grief, or perhaps I do specifically, working as I have for almost three decades in a context haunted by the spectre of death, emergency intervention and life under occupation that is remote Aboriginal Central Australia. There the most common ritual today is funerals, the average life expectancy in places like Lajamanu is 47, and suicide leads the charge 6 times the rate compared to non-Aboriginal national averages.

At a global level, pre-mature death is now considered a defining characteristic of the racialised legacies of colonialism. As Ruth Gilmore Wilson charts in her work, economic precarity and racism are life-shortening facts of everyday existence in what are endemic carceral geographies where Indigenous and black populations are rendered marginalised, dispossessed and killable.

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Geontology: or how Ferguson is not the South.

When I first heard about the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, I assumed Ferguson was some small town in rural Missouri; the hypersemanticity of the name joining here a certain patronymic lineage of rural towns in Missouri named after their white settler progenitor, Branson, Thayer, Forsyth, Purdy. But Ferguson is in fact a suburb of north St. Louis, 90% black, 50% unemployed, 2/3s of its citizens with warrants out for their arrests - unpaid rent, power bills; poverty not crime or rather, poverty is a crime, in the zoned urban 'non places' that typify the now 'left behind' once great midwestern American cities in the deindustrialisation, land snatching and tax inequities of post-1970s; more marked yet in the case of Ferguson flanked by the wide water pathway of the Mississippi river and the superhighway of Interstate 70 that splits St. Louis literally in two north south, east west; the highway I have driven all my life indifferent, nothing to see there, on my way home.

Michael Brown was 18 on August 9, 2014, when he was gunned down in the middle of the day, by white police officer Darren Wilson. He had, eight days earlier, graduated high school, and was heading for college in two days' time to begin a training program for heating and air conditioning repair at Vatterott College. He was 6 foot 4, an inch taller than my son, who has also just turned 18.

Whether Michael held up his hands in self-defence was debated at length during the federal investigation following his murder. What is not debated was that he was unarmed at the time, killed by multiple gun-shot wounds to head, chest, arm, hand, six in total, fired at close range. But by as fast as the first night, 'Hands up, Don't Shoot' was appearing in the visual materials that would go on to be used in multiple protests within the Black Lives Matter (BLM) visually-driven campaign. This was set in motion by BLM co-founders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, who began to broadcast racial profiling and police brutality through social media, enabling a horizontal distributed community of the #hashtag to combine with coordinated civil disobedience, including the 'Million Hoodie March' in New York City² and the hunger strike of undergraduate Johnathan Butler at the University of Missouri, Columbia, my home town, in 2015. This was where I was nursing my stepmother to death. Jonathan Butler was starving in protest against racism on campus, inciting the Missouri Tigers football team to strike, forcing the president of the University to resign, inciting in turn, protests across the country at 80 other college campuses, Yale, Smith, Amherst. I was back in Missouri a year later when Spike Lee was filming his documentary *2 Fists Up* – this time nursing my father to death. Eighty percent of American middle-class men over 70 who have a life partner die will die themselves within 12 months. White, male, mature-age death is you see, well researched I have since learned, now that it no longer matters.

Cultural Citizenship is not a Choice

All that time, I hadn't once been back in summer. It was the smell: sweet sorghum, corn; metallic sump oil; hot concrete; manure. It might be I flew into St. Louis that time, but even at Lambert airport, about a mile west of Ferguson, the fact that Missouri is an agriculture state, screams.

The sounds on dusk, boy howdy. Crickets, katydids, aphids, prairie moles, chiggers. And fireflies. No one tells the truth but after a rain, if you find a grassy patch and set yourself down and you're lucky, the performance might start: so not-human the 'bioluminescence', what you

might fix-on will flick off again, non-syncoated, non-coordinated and all the more miraculous for it.

We used to catch them and put them in glass jars. They'd light up a whole room once you had six or eight, and no matter we'd diligently punch nail holes in the metal lids, in the morning, they'd always be dead, indistinguishable then from any ordinary dead bug, too many legs tangled up, something between a wasp and a beetle, not much to look at in short. In the ruthlessness of childhood greed, killing off in the attempt to preserve, what is valued most.

Inheritance not kinship

Anthropology, my profession, is defined by the imperative to travel, tied as it is to a colonial legacy linking exploration, discovery, to the new of 'being there' elsewhere and otherwise; long term immersion, phenomenologically present, open. A model of the accumulation of knowledge itself as expansion; to know is to gather, gain, to know more; a model of the body, in short, seeped in the same expansionist model of colonial accumulation, growth; a model of the body premised on living-on, expanding, indefinitely. The logics of late liberalism and its fundamental promise and greatest ruse: that we can continue to change, grow, become, while staying the same.

I've been thinking a lot about inheritance in this context, clearly not as the seamless and simple transfer of goods from one generation to the next, a future that resembles the past it inherits and builds upon itself in a model of progressive accumulation, past to present. But rather more as Walter Benjamin figures it; as a catastrophic form of receiving that must be 'rescued' from any quick-to-assimilate moves. What inheritance in this sense demands is more difficult, not to be deaf to what is at once most important and impossible in the uncompromising task of inheriting as act, as verb, as labor; the quality of attention and care it takes to apprehend a gift without return.

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Endnotes

1. Barard, Karen 'No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness and Strange Topologies of Spacetime-mattering' in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan and Heather Anne Swanson (eds), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2017, p. G117.
2. The killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012 and acquittal of his shooter George Zimmerman in 2013; and the choke-hold killing of Eric Garner by the NYPD the same year, predate and set a certain stage for BLM.