

Introduction

This is a book that would hearken the voices of the dead, the dying, the dispossessed. But what might it mean to heed those we have let die, those who have been disappeared or disclaimed as the quiet casualties, the collateral damages, the opportunity costs of life today? Under what conditions might we hearken those dead who summon us, and exhort us, perhaps, to reckon with our unspeakable complicity in their deaths? These pages, which arise in care of such summons, exhortations, and calls to reckoning, neither speak *for* nor *as* the dead, the dying, or lives lost; neither as biography nor autobiography, theirs or ours, for it is too late for them (and for us) to take interest in their living. Rather, in its address to the dead this book would hearken voices that precede it, and in writing, imagine something akin to thanatography. Death would speak. And, in that moment, life would no longer stand as the sole and privileged condition of possibility for speech, no longer as a “value” in-and-for-itself, as it is in liberal-humanist thought. Instead, death would lend necessary contour to living, and would be that nonfugitive condition from which speaking and writing irrupt.

This is a book about biopolitics in our time, about a politics ostensibly devoted to life (*bios*). But it is also about the time and timeliness of biopolitics today, which seizes on life-times and propels them into counterfactual futures in which we would be immortalized, tomorrow, life vouchsafed and death deferred, defeated. And yet: there can be no politics of life—no politics of *making live*—that does not also *let die*. Biopolitics kills, albeit indirectly and in the passive voice. It lets die in the name of life. This book begins here in the care of deaths disavowed—rather than from life’s sacred vows and avowals—to respond to and theorize neoliberal biopolitics over the last two decades: since 9/11 and the global War on Terror; in light of ongoing Contingency Operations that furnish us with the ways and means—both technological and tropological—to visit unconscionable state violence; with the rise and ubiquity of the internet, meme culture, and the alt-white/right; the revivification of nativist nationalisms and racisms; seemingly

sacrosanct identities and identity politics; merciless neoliberal governments and burgeoning authoritarianisms; and most recently, a deadly global pandemic. We live and die today on a knife's edge of disaster, and there is something epochal to be discerned, a historic rupture, in our social order.

Looking to Western history, for his part Michel Foucault has theorized our last great epochal rupture: from classical modes of power to biopolitical ones—that is, from sovereignty (with its divine right of kings and queens) to modern liberal democracy (with its increasing emphasis on human rights, reason, and possessive individualism). Foucault places this rupture around the beginning of the nineteenth century. In broad strokes, we might call this the transition from premodern forms of governance to modern state structures, acknowledging that “modernity” is a sloppy term to describe a deeply contradictory condition: “the modern” is not quite synonymous with teleological progress and development. As Foucault notes, the gallows were once an emblem and locus of the sovereign's right to kill, and yet while spectacular public punishments began to wane late in the eighteenth century, this does not mean that power over life altogether disappeared in modernity. This power was displaced into new technologies and has become increasingly abstract, hidden, and secreted in “a new legal or administrative practice.”¹ In the liberal democratic state, power's new legal and administrative scaffolding works biopolitically to “incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them.”²

This is the productive purchase of biopolitics, in which “life” is cultivated and the living are governed by increasingly autonomous efficiencies and economies of scale, through techno-administrative mechanisms that include systems of surveillance, segregation, health and welfare regimes, pro-“life” policies and improvement programs, through education, statistical forecasts, securitization, risk management, law, biomedicine, and popular culture, too. Together, these inform a vast and diffuse global network, from Davos to Darfur, that defines, regulates, counts, exposes, and encloses human life across our planet. Death, however, is not unequivocally deferred or defeated. For some it has been accelerated or mandated. And even as death is so righteously and widely repudiated, this only belies its indispensability and vital utility. Looking to the future, the following questions impose themselves: Are we living and dying today on the threshold of our own great epochal rupture? Are we at the end times of neoliberal

biopolitics—of nominally liberal-democratic state forms (now increasingly illiberal)—awaiting a revolution and a reckoning with our dead?

To offer a tentative definition of biopolitics, I turn to Foucault's March 17, 1976, lecture at the Collège de France, which is often cited as a key text. Note here how Foucault falters, repeats himself, and equivocates in his description:

I think that one of the greatest transformations political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that, I wouldn't say exactly that sovereignty's old right—to take life or let live—was replaced [*substituer*], but it came to be complemented [*compléter*, also “to complete”] by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it [*le pénétrer, le traverser, le modifier*, “penetrate it, traverse it, modify it”]. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the power to “make” live and “let” die. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and let die.³

If this epochal transformation occurred more than two centuries ago, Foucault writes as if we still can't define it or reckon with its constitutive power over us. Language fails us. Foucault is commenting here on the historical discontinuity between sovereign and biopolitical power that took place in Europe across the nineteenth century—a transformation, he reminds us in the next sentence, that “obviously did not occur all at once.”⁴ I read Foucault's textual vacillations as symptomatic, an equivocation at the heart of biopolitics itself, a politics of life whose genitive is itself ambivalent (a politics that *belongs to* or *speaks as* a biological body?). Foucault resorts to the passive voice: political right *underwent* a transformation; sovereign power *came to be complemented, penetrated, permeated, modified*; a new right *is established*—seemingly by no one, or nothing, and yet in the name of an incipient “life itself.” The biopolitical referent is radically contingent—for life is always contingent.

If the “life” of biopolitics is the most concrete biological body, it is, paradoxically, also the most disincarnate, sacred, or transcendent notion. This “life” is a rhetorical accomplishment, neither given nor natural, but it is constituted in and by a tropological regime that fabricates a vital “truth” from which all else seems to follow. Foucault's definition, above, does not permit us to establish a point of origin. And if his grammatical subject fails us, if his locutions become intransitive and language

falters, it is because ours remains overwhelmingly a grammar of sovereignty ensconced in liberal subjectivity and transitive speech. This “sovereignty”—in the guise of liberal humanism, possessive individualism, autonomy—has become a great biopolitical ruse, that in and through which biopolitical tropes are propagated and popularized. The illusion is that I freely choose and choose the very conditions of my own choosing—a grammatical “I” propped up in its delusional sense of rationality, autonomy, and enlightened agency. An entitled “I” through which “life itself” would speak.

Foucault ends his description of biopolitics by reiterating that sovereign power was the old right to “take life or let live,” whereas biopolitical power is the new right to “make live and let die.” These are power’s distinct historical impresas or mottos. The “old” power was localized in the sovereign by right of divine origin. Once upon a time, sovereignty intervened into the lives of the living *either* to take a subject’s life *or* to let that subject live—an imperial decision that was either/or but that nevertheless presumed the prior givenness of the subject’s life. The sovereign therefore possessed the divine right to kill, by the rule of the sword, exercised as a “deduction” (*prélèvement*)⁵—“a subtraction mechanism, a right to appropriate a portion of the wealth, a tax of products, goods and services, labor and blood, levied on the subjects.”⁶ With biopolitics, however, power’s new right is neither localized nor entirely vertical: it is decentralized and reticulate, and the object of that power, its site of application, is not a singular body to be disciplined or punished. Biopolitics makes live and lets die en masse. No longer concerned with given individuals, it is applied systemically on—and constitutes—particular “populations.”

Today, life is “made” and no longer preexists the powers that make it. Invoking a discursive “set of processes” and “a whole series of related economic and political problems,” Foucault says that biopolitics

will introduce mechanisms with a certain number of functions that are very different from the functions of disciplinary mechanisms. . . . Forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures. And their purpose is not to modify any given phenomenon as such, or to modify a given individual insofar as one is an individual, but, essentially, to intervene at the level at which these general phenomena are determined, to intervene at the level of their generality. . . . In a word, security mechanisms have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life.⁷

The “agency” and allure of biopolitics resides in its systemic processes, its applied techniques and technologies.⁸ In neoliberal parlance, biopolitics is a diffuse power that is scalable, nimble, and resilient. Indeed, neoliberalism is not just a metaphor for biopolitics, but an ideological avatar of it, informing and organizing human conduits according to globalizing circuits of desire, death, and capital accumulation. While disciplinary power once “individualized” bodies, biopolitical bodies are now “massified,” “regularized,” and “replaced by general biological processes.”⁹ The biopolitical powers that both “make live” and “let die” are conjoined; these combined and differential powers no longer represent a sovereign decision in the mode of either/or. Making live *and* letting die—both/and—have become part of a hydraulic and absolutely co-constitutive relation, a compact, a sacrificial economy in the differential applications of power. They cannot be cleaved. For some, death is as it were called for, recommended, and covertly produced as a biopolitical necessity—as the cost of living. To employ a metaphor from digital technology, we might say that death is life’s biopolitical “protocol,”¹⁰ an anonymous algorithmic effect.

Famously, in the closing lines of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault imagines a future moment in or from which we might at last recognize contemporary “freedom” as that which, paradoxically, makes us most unfree. In this text, Foucault argues that “sex”—as origin, norm, and truth—is radically contingent on “the deployment of sexuality” (*le dispositif de sexualité*), which is not so much a “deployment” as a discursive “apparatus” (*dispositif*) that constitutes “sex” as ultimate freedom and truth. But “sex,” Foucault insists, is “an imaginary point determined by the deployment [apparatus] of sexuality—[a discourse] that each individual has to pass through in order to have access to one’s own intelligibility . . . , to the whole of one’s body . . . , to one’s identity.”¹¹ It is not that our tireless discourse works to free “sex” from the shadows, to reveal its truth; rather, our discourse works frenetically to produce “sex” and to make of it both a truth and a freedom to be “discovered” and lived. Simply put, “sex” is the *effect* of that discourse, even as “sex” is fashioned as a secret origin or cause. Gesturing to the future, Foucault writes, “We need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow.” He concludes, “The irony of this deployment [*de ce dispositif*] is in having us believe that our ‘liberation’ is in the balance.”¹² That

“austere monarchy of sex,” its sovereign power over us, relies on the ruse of liberation, “enlightenment” as mass deception (to borrow from Horkheimer and Adorno). But it is also the critical moment in which the model of sovereign power is exposed as phantasmatic, even libidinal, and another paradigm of power can be seen at play.

It is, then, no surprise to find a robust discussion on biopolitics in the pages of *The History of Sexuality*. There, biopower is conceived as twofold: on the one hand, it operates as an anatomo-politics that relies on disciplinary mechanisms that “individualize” particular (docile) bodies, and on the other, as a biopolitics that seizes on the *bios*—life itself—and intervenes to “massify” a (re)productive population. For every textual instance of “sex” vis-à-vis the apparatus (or deployment) of sexuality, we might instead read “life” in its place. For “life,” like “sex,” is also discursively constituted as origin, norm, and truth; “life,” like “sex,” is that discursive formation that governs our knowledge and incites desire: the *effect* of a biopolitical apparatus rather than the cause. As it is for “sex,” so too for “life”—the two are biologically coincident and constituted in and through a heterogeneous set of (pre)dispositions, formal and informal institutions, regulatory mechanisms and police functions, beliefs, laws, moral orthodoxies, scientific statements, pedagogies, or, more metaphorically and in a materialist vein, architectures, technologies, circuits. The future time of critique, the one Foucault imagines, is neither quite the time of my sex nor the time of my life. Critique gestures proleptically to my death, to that future in which I will have been.

The study that follows attends (to) death’s claim on our livingness. For this, our life, is purchased on death. “Life” is a rhetorical vestige of the fatal exchange in which the lives of some will matter, will flourish, at the expense of others who will not and who will succumb. If our biopolitical grammars name a future “life” held in trust, this promised referent is always fleeting. As Lucretius wrote long ago, “Nor by prolonging life / Take we the least away from death’s own time.”¹³ In my response to the biopolitical disavowal of death, then, and from death’s own time: a disaffirmation of letting die in life’s name. For death’s temporality interrupts both sovereign and biopolitical time, past and future temporizations. Death undermines the transitive grammars of sovereign speech, which is historically steeped in the power of precedent and convention. “Death is outside the power relationship.”¹⁴ As for biopolitics, death finds no grammar in its futures: death is demanded, and yet it is voiceless, a non-concept, disavowed. If, then, I am to hearken the dead, there can be no impulse to resurrect or to reclaim death for the living; rather, in hearkening I must listen instead from my own

future having-been, for dead voices will be unrecognizable in the timeliness of life's time.

"Affirmative" Rhetorics

The Living from the Dead isn't intended as a comprehensive introduction to biopolitics,¹⁵ but it also doesn't presume a prior knowledge of the vast and valuable scholarship that employs biopolitical theories to critique racial injustice, socioeconomic inequality, colonialism and settler-colonialism, globalization and development, "sustainability," transnational migration and climate crisis, the regulation of women's reproductive freedoms, the uses of biotechnology and pharmacology, "securitization," and the surveillance and militarization of public culture, among others. Instead, this book's case studies home in on the distinctly rhetorical conditions that underwrite some of these critiques: on the tropes of biopolitical sacrifice and abandonment, on the differential fungibility of human lives unto death—all business-as-usual, a social compact that everyone more or less already "knows" (in the deniable modalities of an Orwellian doublethink). I seek to demonstrate how the biopolitical interface of making live and letting die is a rhetorical relation, obedient to the tropes in and by which "life" is constituted and informed by political powers and social (pre)dispositions. In the prevailing biopolitical discourse, it is as if life itself *speaks* the political, and even though this "life" is unreconstructed, it increasingly figures as beyond critique—as both value and fact, means and end, in-and-for-itself. These rhetorical forms matter because they have come to drive neoliberal biopolitics almost autogenously.

I focus on biopolitics over the last two decades, suggesting that there is something distinct in the "life" of our millennial neoliberal moment, a rupture in linear models of historical "progress."¹⁶ It is difficult to discern those discourses and discontinuities that are closest to us, constitutive of us. We find that we've been recruited—however "freely"—as teleological conduits, driving "progress" forward in tandem with materialities and markets, technologies and tweets, medicine and law, together with a host of other agentic nodes in these networks. But developments in pharmacotherapies or weapons or media technologies, for example, do not merely represent incremental or "progressive" differences of quantity or degree; often enough they are qualitative differences of kind, with socio-subjective and ontological effects that herald power's new modalities and sites of application. And more than freedom's false-consciousness is at stake. As the liberal political

subject effectively wanes, biopolitical grammars become hegemonic, and, indeed, more desirable as the delusory means of securing and asserting one's self-sovereignty, identity, and right to "life."¹⁷ Didier Fassin has argued that a "new language" of common sense has gained ascendancy in recent decades, in tandem with a biopolitical "humanitarianism"—a widespread concern for precarious lives and a desire to make them live: "Inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma."¹⁸ In this "new lexicon of moral sentiments"—the grammar of identity and identity politics—it is difficult to discern the sinister paradox of neoliberal biopolitics, namely, how making live, even as a humanitarian gesture, with the best of intentions, relies on and often reduplicates relations of inequality, domination, and death-warranting. Despite ourselves, we, too, are agents of this aggressive world order. The new lexicon hobbles the imagination and, ensconcing us in a sham self-sovereignty, preempts a much-needed critique of our wider social (infra)structures and norms.

This biopolitical Newspeak signals a paradigm shift on a larger scale—a shift in the politics of the production of knowledge and in the commonsense rhetorics of "life" we social beings find ourselves compelled to affirm ideologically and to mirror affectively, conspicuously, publicly. Foucault's historical shift from sovereign to biopolitical power yields a clue to our current moment. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault had analyzed this epochal transformation according to the shifting historical conditions of possibility for knowledge, which he plotted along three intersecting axes: labor, life, and language. It is not difficult to see how the first two, the regulation of the economy and biological life, have been biopoliticized—increasingly governed according to the interplay between making live and letting die.¹⁹ And it is in these realms, in the government of economies and biologies, that most studies on biopolitics are situated. Significantly, however, Foucault's epochal rupture also represents a *rhetorical* discontinuity, even as the transformation of our grammars is trickier to discern because they are that *by* which we are *able* to discern. Theorizing the biopolitical language-effect, Foucault writes, "From this event onward, what gives value to the objects of desire is not solely the other objects that desire can represent to itself, but an element that cannot be reduced to that representation."²⁰ In other words, something escapes the representation of representational systems *in* and *by* that system itself. And so, this book intervenes precisely here, where "the sovereignty of the Name"²¹ begins to yield to other forces. If, as Foucault argues, classical language systems implied a rather straightforward representation, this no longer holds in the biopolitical context:

“What makes it possible to define a language is not the way in which it represents representations, but a certain internal architecture, a certain manner of modifying the words themselves in accordance with the grammatical position they take up in relation to one another; in other words, its *inflectional system*.”²² Building on Foucault, we might say that the manner of modifying the very inflectional system—part of a tropological and socio-symbolic regime—has been colonized by biologizing and capitalizing forces, with neoliberal biopolitics as the “internal architecture” of our dominant discourse.

Today, the politics of life itself has become neoliberalized, and political action reconfigured according to the moral orthodoxies of economic administration. The economy is exalted as our new ontology, immunized from critique because it fashions our inflectional system itself. Managing the economies of lives and measured risks constitutes an advance claim and worldview. Particularly since the economic collapse of 2008–9 or the COVID-19 pandemic, it is in the name of the economy that Western, nominally democratic governments have demanded subjugation, sacrifice, and austerity on the part of their citizens, where both labor and life (ultimately coextensive) conform to political economies (themselves vassals to global debt markets)²³ and are reshaped from within, as if by acts of collective will. Human nature is reconfigured as human (bio)capital, the *animal laborans* as *homo oeconomicus*. Neoliberalism, as Foucault has defined it, “involves extending the economic model of supply and demand and investment-costs-profit so as to make it a model of social relations and of existence itself, a form of relationship of the individual to oneself, to time, to those around one, to the group, and to the family.”²⁴ Under neoliberalism, power is unlocalized, there is no longer a sovereign who demands subjugation and threatens by the rule of the sword, no sovereign whose exceptional prerogative it is to take life or to let live. Instead, power is diffuse and anonymous, circuiting through reticulated vectors of control, digital networks, the ebbs and flows of global(izing) capital. If this is correct, and our relationships to ourselves, to time, and to others have been territorialized, then it becomes difficult to imagine how our evasive tactics might gain any revolutionary momentum. Our resistance feels co-opted in advance, commercialized, sold back to us at a discounted price, and a profound cynicism settles in.

Language fails us in our critical understanding of neoliberal biopolitics, and this is no small irony given the torrent of its terms and tropes, loquacious, and vainly parroted in the empty speech of identity and truth. I hold fast to Hans Blumenberg’s insight: “We are appearance to ourselves, the secondary synthesis of a primary multiplicity, not the reverse. The substantialism of identity is

destroyed; identity must be realized, it becomes a kind of accomplishment, and accordingly there is a pathology of identity."²⁵ This is a book, then, about pathologies of persuasion, forms-of-life, and identity politics. Our tropes and twitterings are the means and the manner by which we relate to ourselves, to our bodies, to others, to the time of our lives, and to the wider world. They would ensconce us in a warm dialectic of epistemic closure, driving out any self-awareness that our words' work exceeds the bounds of knowledge-claims. And in this, they lack rhetoricity—not just what our language represents or describes for us, constatively, but what it does and does *to* us, its desirous “end-users,” performatively. Indeed, as a normative tropological regime, neoliberal biopolitics advances (on) a kingdom of ends: it's a siren's song and a glittering abyss in which we're meant to find ourselves reflected and perfected.

On the other side of this mirror—in a language to infinity, perhaps even a heterotopia²⁶—we might hearken the dead and hear in the rhetoricity of their petitions an ontological claim that transits through us, in life and unto death. In this volume, I'm less concerned with epistemological claims that would permit us to pass judgment. Rather, I'm preoccupied by the rhetorical conditions of possibility for voices to speak and to be heard. To hearken is impossible without a sense of rhetoricity; to disaffirm, impossible in sovereign speech or in the grammars of identity and epistemic truth. It's in this context that I offer a distinctly rhetorical critique of biopolitics, its speech/acts and its tropological constitution of subjects, political identities, and lives lived. For me, rhetoric attends to the trope's turns, its supplications, and persuasive effects. My argument is therefore preoccupied with my own language, for our terms are always-already occupied, colonized, overdetermined. This book proceeds self-reflexively across situated case studies or sites that variously disaffirm the rhetorics of making live while refusing to disavow the (infra)structural conditions, and the social norms, through which we conspire to let die. Indeed, I hope to address these conditions, less through established grammars of social critique than by hearkening the dead—those we have let die—whose voices haunt the tropological constitution of “life” as much as they unsettle my own words here.

My rhetorical approach and its contemporary cultural situatedness distinguish this study from the many sometimes contradictory readings and applications of biopolitical theory. Paolo Virno is surely correct when he declares biopolitics an equivocal concept. “The concept,” he writes, “has recently become fashionable: it is often, and enthusiastically, invoked in every kind of context.”²⁷ Indeed, in recent years a surge of “biopolitical” scholarship can be found in virtually every discipline

across the social sciences and humanities—some with a transhistorical, politico-philosophical, or even metaphysical remit, while others are narrower in sociohistorical scope, or even molecular in their focus. Such a patent diversity of discursive and materialist approaches and repurposings is itself equivocal. Whether conciliatory or critical, these voices are uneven in their enthusiasm or criticism. And admittedly, biopolitics is a very confusing “concept,” especially when diametrically opposed camps make biopolitical claims on (or to) life. For example, both the pro-life and pro-choice movements are typically biopolitical, one advancing a political argument that exalts the life of the fetus, while the other is concerned with a woman’s life and the political rights that ought to follow from her livingness. (I address the biopolitics of abortion in the book’s Refrain.) How might we adjudicate these contesting conceptions of “life”? In one sense, it will depend on whose life is imagined to speak, morally and politically. There are facts of life, surely, but life itself is not a “fact,” and it’s impossible to say with any epistemic certitude what “life” is for biopolitics, which is one reason its discourse is so easily propagated. “Life” is a floating signifier, simultaneously moral and material, metaphysical and molecular, from the grandest transhistorical scales to the local and temporally situated micropolitics of genomic technologies. A critical rhetorical approach is necessary to understand the conditions under which a claim might be heard, and to parse how the “life” that is made can be claimed, valued, given voice, and come to be mobilized in public discourse.

I therefore aim to transect the polarized positions situated along a continuum that ranges from those who enthusiastically endorse an “affirmative” or even “democratic” biopolitics, at the one end, to those who hold a highly negative or apocalyptic view of biopolitical power, on the other. Scholars who position themselves in the “affirmative” camp might ask, as Timothy Campbell does, if “our current understanding of biopolitics may, in fact, be too indebted to death.”²⁸ (And if his answer is yes, my own view is that biopolitics has disdainfully defaulted on its debt.) For their part, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri will celebrate the generativity of the multitude, claiming that “the political has to yield to love and desire, and that is to the fundamental forces of biopolitical production.”²⁹ Roberto Esposito, in turn, argues that the shift to biopolitics is “irreversible,” but this does not mean, he contends, “that another kind of democracy is impossible, one that is compatible with the biopolitical turn.”³⁰ Esposito would tentatively “trace the initial features of a biopolitics that is finally affirmative. Not over life but of life.”³¹ (Here, again, the little genitive “of” begs certain questions.) And Nikolas Rose imagines biopolitics, at its best, as providing us with what he calls a “positive

eugenics,” because “letting die is not making die.”³² Alongside a host of affirmations, the claim to a “democratic” biopolitics is similarly fraught because the representative opinions of a moral majority do not make those opinions ethical or just—but then, this particular line of critique would require a treatise on the very meaning of democracy, or rather, how we might rescue democracy from corporate plutocracy and “post-democracy.”³³ There is no doubt that scholars of affirmative or democratic biopolitics offer distinct conceptualizations of biopolitics—of “life,” of “politics,” and their relation—from what Foucault has bequeathed us. But I do not wish to rehearse or adjudicate among these many and various studies. Not only would it be impossible to do so in a single volume, but the power to pronounce precisely which (or whose) biopolitics is truly “affirmative” would always involve a sovereign violence. Instead, this book remains close to Foucault’s original conceptualization of biopolitics and develops it in a rhetorical reading of our present moment.³⁴ And if we insist on the co-constitutive relation between making live *and* letting die, as Foucault formulates it, it seems to me that we cannot solemnly “affirm” the terms of life-making without also, at least implicitly, affirming its death-warranting.

In this light, proponents of affirmative biopolitics must either commit to severing its co-constitutive powers to make live *and* let die or find ways to mitigate death for a kinder and gentler biopolitics. To affirm biopolitics would also suggest that biopolitics (or some version of it) could be severed from its neoliberal bio-economies or that the ruthlessness of racial capitalism and resource extraction could be meliorated or contained, again, for a kinder and gentler biopolitics. This strikes me as a rhetoric of secular salvation—akin to humanitarian reason,³⁵ or white saviorism, perhaps—that invokes transcendental principles, such as universal and inalienable human rights, while nonetheless yielding to a nexus of particular means and mechanisms that are ultimately both neoliberal and biopolitical in their differential alienations. Here, it strikes me that the onto-logic of affirmative biopolitics is obscured by its liberal utilitarian mien: maximizing life and minimizing loss, or, in neoliberal jargon, maximizing production and minimizing costs—all the while knowing that those losses and costs are lethal and incalculable. Said another way, *to affirm* is the performative speech/act of a (neo)liberal political subject and iteratively both relies on and shores up a problematic underlying ontology. Nancy Fraser’s use of “affirmative” in the context of distributive justice applies equally for affirmative biopolitics: “Affirmative strategies for redressing injustice aim to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate them.”³⁶

Proponents of affirmative biopolitics therefore have little sense for its tropological dimensions, its rhetorics; their discourse redounds on the purported interiority, and good intentions, of a liberal subject empowered to sovereignly ensure, as Rose phrases it, that “letting die is not making die.” But who polices this murky border?

This study has little faith in the liberal subject. And it cuts across the antinomies of negative and “affirmative” biopolitics to disturb the generativity of their underlying social structures. But I’m neither “for” nor “against” biopolitics as such. I’ve taken inspiration from scholars on both ends of the continuum and cite them where it seemed appropriate. To position me as either “for” or “against” biopolitics, whether in an affirmative or negative voice, misses the point of what it might mean to *disaffirm* its tropes through a rhetorical critique. To critique is not to judge the truths or lies of biopolitics (it proclaims both), or whether it is good or evil (it can be both); rather, critique would pursue rhetorical questions concerning the conditions in and by which such statements could be voiced, circulate, and recruit desiring subjects as agents of the biopolitical apparatus. Here, Blumenberg offers a pithy definition of rhetoric that I find apropos: “Rhetoric is form as means.”³⁷ Rhetoric is, by these lights, a method and an argumentative form that must reckon with its provisional status. It is neither a *mere* means nor is it *the* means employed by self-evident truths (imagined to speak “for themselves”); instead, we might say that rhetoric is the *seeking* of appropriate means precisely when evidence for the ethical distinction between what is appropriate and inappropriate is sorely lacking, and where horizons of interpretation are not necessarily held in common. It grapples, as I do, in a certain humility; it listens for strife and suffering; it obsesses about its form; and it proceeds with the understanding that what is appropriate, ethically, is not necessarily legitimate or sanctioned. To speak is to risk. As Blumenberg continues, “To see oneself in the perspective of rhetoric means to be conscious both of being compelled to act and of the lack of norms in a finite situation.”³⁸ The rhetorical task, in our own finite situation, is not to propose new norms, however “provisional”: it is to interrogate our compulsions.

Disaffirmations

Biopolitics furnishes us with innumerable tropes—the modalities, the means, the manner in and by which an unreconstructed “life itself” is taken up as an

ethos, a lived truth, spoken in the grammars of a sham popular sovereignty. The communication is hardly direct. As Blumenberg states, “The human relation to reality is indirect, circumstantial, delayed, selective, and above all ‘metaphorical.’”³⁹ This is true of “life itself”—a technological production, a rhetoric of realism, no matter how “direct,” “natural,” or nondiscursive it may appear. And indeed, “the deeper the crisis of legitimacy”—today the legitimacy of multiple and clashing forms-of-life and identities—“the more pronounced the recourse to rhetorical metaphor becomes.”⁴⁰ This book hopes to surface some of these metaphorizations, the tropes of “life itself,” and responds not by positing new natures, norms, foundations, or ontologies, but obliquely—and with rhetorical “form as means”—by addressing the normative ways that life has been lojacked by terms that facilitate a flattened conception of “life” easily managed, administrated, and normalized according to neoliberal “values” and “identities.”

With respect to death, the biopolitical subject remains fugitive. Its devotion to making live is at once a disavowal of death—both its own and the deaths of those others it lets die in the silent bargain of its continued livingness. This subject would flee and prefers not to see that these deaths cannot be uncoupled, mine and theirs. “I” flee from the deaths of those I let die, not only because I might hope to disavow and uncouple myself from this sacrificial exchange, its violence and injustice, but also because I would hear in their voices, if I hearkened them, my own violence and death echoed there, and the deaths of those I love and (will) have lost. The structural, impersonal, and ritual violence of biopolitics is not just a transactional economy; it is intrapsychic and existential. And despite my frenzied biopolitical investments, my livingness will never be secured in time. Foreclosure is certain.

The language of this book is inescapably hostage to—and yet deeply suspicious of—sovereign grammars and “master” tropes. How might we speak in care of death when ours is the unreconstructed language of life? Writing must grapple with its constitutive violence, its purported powers to name and to know, its powers to appropriate and to colonize. In response, my style is at times lyrical and apostrophic, swerving in *form* from the normative and teleological assumptions of logical “content” and epistemic closure; aesthetically, it seeks to make of compositional form both an open question and an occasion for voices other than the one I call mine. Any purple passages are meant to resemble a bad bruise more than airy flights into gratuitous prose. These are sites of struggle in the stubborn effort to say what, in polite company, remains unsaid. I do not rush to summative statements in which readers will “cash out” my argument. Rather, the pace is more

ponderous, solitary, as might befit an ethics of listening. Dead voices would speak in and from these pages.

The stakes of this book are rhetorically performative. I hope for plural voices to arise and to perform—in writing, as speech—a disaffirmation of biopolitics that does not merely “resist,” whether by attempts to negate or invert, the “affirmative” tropes in and by which biopolitics is propagated. Disaffirmation is vigil, it keeps watch, and it hearkens another kind of speech/act that is irreducible to the tactics of resistance. And indeed, few would deny that there is widespread and diversiform “resistance” in our Age of Identity—a resistance that oftentimes silently shores up and reproduces the powers against which it purports to position itself. To disaffirm is to refuse this dialectic, in another voice. I remain critical throughout of the hypocrisies of liberalism and modernity, and I would disaffirm the normative valences of their tropes as well (even as I’m tangled in their webs). But in no way do I advocate a return to some pre-liberal or pre-modern past. In fact, I’m most anxious that so many, in their oftentimes righteous or fearful rebuke of globalized modernity and (neo)liberalism, have been tempted to hail purist mythologemes and a nostalgic “return” to state structures that predate modern forms of liberal democratic power. They, too, seem to have sensed that we are on the threshold of epochal rupture, maybe even war, and many seek liberation from our fraught commitments to equality, multiculturalism, and human rights—commitments that I’m unwilling to abandon, even as I believe they must be radically rethought.

We might recall the animus of Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, masterminded by Stephen K. Bannon, who would later serve as Trump’s White House chief strategist. More recently, Bannon has run a popular (and populist) multiplatform online “information” program called *War Room: Pandemic*.⁴¹ Bannon reflects one face of our current Zeitgeist, where “American freedom fighters” and a far-right “resistance” movement are incited to reclaim the “traditional” values of America’s Judeo-Christian past (however phantasmatic), to fight globalists, to destroy the fakestream media, and to protect civilization from a new Communist threat whose vectors are as invisible as the novel coronavirus itself. (Bannon is one of the few on the far right who from the early days took the COVID-19 pandemic seriously, and yet in his imaginary all roads lead to China.) In his recent book on Bannon, Benjamin R. Teitelbaum details Bannon’s commitment to the philosophy (or rather, ideology) of Traditionalism—a movement that takes issue with modernity and foments a kind of spiritual awakening, even a “crusade,” based on pre-modern values that include religious beliefs, transcendent truths, and

homespun values.⁴² Traditionalists, like Bannon, position themselves against modernity—now, at this moment, when modernity and liberalism are in crisis. This, too, is a biopolitical project and a claim to lives and livelihoods, and as much as we might deplore the dystopian “life” that such a movement would portend, we ignore it at our peril. I take this animus seriously. If it is not quite mainstream (yet), it is its powerful undercurrent. Its posture of moral innocence, indeed, its victimhood, only belies its ecocidal and genocidal reflexes.

I argue that we must disaffirm biopolitics and advance a critique of (neo)liberal modernity without capitulating to a retrogressive Traditionalism. In other words, my position is neither nostalgic nor does it embrace the teleological “progress” that characterizes an “affirmative” or “democratic” biopolitics. Neither a sovereign past nor a biopolitical future, then, because both variously leave intact the very systems and (infra)structures that generate their normative violence and injustice. The “resistance” of the religious Right, of fundamentalist homeschoolers, anti-vaxxers, radicalized libertarians, and other self-anointed “sovereignists,” ends up—almost despite itself—propagating and rhetorically reenacting the tropes of “life itself” furnished by biopolitics. But much the same could also be said of the “progressive” Left, whose “resistant” postures of moral indignation and identity politics recycle familiar tropes already co-opted in advance, short-circuited by memes and ready-made moralities, to become wounded parodies of themselves. While their intentions are dissimilar, Right and Left, and while I would not wish to collapse these tendentious movements, their rearguard effects converge because they ultimately recirculate similar biopolitical tropes. In their competing claims on Constitutional rights to life and liberty, the radicalized faces of both a Right and Left politics do not belong to fringe movements but represent, in many respects, the apotheosis of a mainstream liberalism driven to its extreme neoliberal-biopolitical conclusions.

My approach, instead, relies on the rhetoricity of disaffirmation, which is not quite a “resistance” to biopolitics. Here, I have imagined death, rather than life, as a productive rhetorical and political force—a thanatopolitics. In my response, I would hearken the dead, whose voices might disaffirm a power that lets die in the name of making live. It is in their address, their prior and abiding call, that we, the grim living, might be gathered in resounding refusal. My case studies diversely problematize the notion of tactical “resistance” under neoliberal biopolitics. What, after all, do we resist? A hydra-headed monster, and no longer quite the strategies and stratifications of a repressive sovereign power that is top-down. Today, power is less a matter of strategy than an amorphous and

satirical “strategy.” And if we ask, Who resists? it is difficult to locate a coherent subject whose personal actions or devices have not always already been co-opted in advance. Despite this, we still tend to imagine “tactics” as counter-hegemonic forms of resistance that would be appropriate in our moment. I’m trying to think and write beyond the tactic/strategy binary, which is widespread and continues to inform political activism and resistance movements.⁴³

To hearken death’s rhetorical agency in response to (infra)structural and systemic violence is more than to politicize death: it is to situate an aesthetics of existence, the living of (a) life, within the resonant, rhythmic, and temporizing horizons of death. Mine is not an ethics that impulsively affirms the positive value or content of life itself, or even of lives in their singularity and materiality (as much as each life is both singular and material)—and it is not simply an ethics of resistance, *against* killing and *against* injustice (as much as these should be painfully obvious). I cannot embrace an exalted animism or vitalism. For, an abstract “life itself” is the ultimate biopolitical ruse, the disguise, the meme, that obscures the fact that some lives do not matter, that some lives will be exposed to death, that some lives will be ritually dispossessed, disappeared, shot, suffocated, and systematically cannibalized. I gesture instead toward a shared agony that would hearken death, hold it and hear it, and refuse the productive terms by which some lives are lived, valued, and exalted, while for others it is death that is forcibly lived and lived-out. No redress or salvation, then, but something of a paratactical practice of hearkening those we have let die in silent ignominy.

Mindful that rhetoric is “form as means,” the trope I have in mind here is parataxis, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as follows: “The placing of propositions or clauses one after another, without indicating by connecting words the relation (of coordination or subordination) between them, as in *Tell me, how are you?*” Significantly, the *OED*’s example is in the form of a direct address, where it is the addressee’s responsibility to join the clauses significantly. In a recent essay reflecting on the (im)possibility of reasoned debate today, Tad Lemieux and I elaborated on this definition of parataxis: “In between, in its lacunae, caesuras, the parataxis unsettles the common current of the text, its topography and durational field, whose movements and metrics become more fluid; sequence and coherence yield to anacoluthia; grammatical conjunctions are unavowed or unavowable, anagrammatical; metaphysical relations of ordination and subordination are ruptured, *dérangées*, neutral-ized; and we become uncertain of the relation of (presumably heteroclit) parts to the (presumable) whole.”⁴⁴ As a disaffirmation, any tactic of “resistance” must become a para-tactic or para-site,

untimely and displaced by parataxis—(a) life, then, not in the productive politics of making live or making work, but alongside, and as a reckoning with, mortality, illness, and human finitude. As a paratactical irruption, such an unworking would interrupt our spatiotemporal and grammatical regimes, the planned and “progressive” livingness of neoliberal biopolitics, and would grasp instead, however tentatively, the times and places of (a) life, set of necessity within the horizons of the inexorable: my death. Here, and in this manner, we might hearken the strange, paratactical lives—and the rhetorical agency—of the biopolitical dead, disappeared, decaying, and delinquent. For they are not simply the waste products or byproducts of neoliberal biopolitics, but foremost its condition of possibility, its raw materials, its inclusive-exclusion. My own parataxes are open wounds. They defy syntactical closure, logical or chronological connection—and if readers “hear” themselves called into this caesura, then in some small way their reading will have performed the kind of “listening” demanded by hearkening. This prior and enabling call is the condition for any response, any speech or writing.

To disaffirm is a devastating undertaking. It is not self-righteously censorious, neither a disapprobation nor a condemnation issued from a posture of moral superiority or a secure sense-of-self. Disaffirmation would spurn the affective affordances of identity, whether compliant with the Right or the Left. Instead, it would turn its gaze inward to reckon with *my* collusion and complicity in systems that let die in the name of my own livingness. And it would not purblindly affirm the virtues of free expression, the “free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society.”⁴⁵ Nothing could be more anodyne (both innocuous and a pain-reliever—but, for whose pain?). It will no longer suffice to seek recourse in these fundamentalist tenets of liberal politics and human rights discourse, which propel the moral censures of what I can only describe as a spurious Left, an alt-left. Many on the Left, half-sleeping yet “woke,” make vain display of their affective orthodoxies. How, then, shall we address our “good liberal” complicity—whether as perpetrators or “mere” beneficiaries—in long-standing colonial, racist, misogynist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist violence and dispossession? For, *these* dead and dying have always been the true “lifeblood” of our “liberal society,” fodder for our free-world economies, our cannibalizing machines. My livingness is contingent on the deaths of others, my wealth on their poverty, my security on their precarity. It’s not as if we don’t *know*. And yet, our rote liberal “acknowledgments”—of unceded lands, of violent histories, of injustices, of self-identity or “positionality”—can neither absolve us nor grant our speech.

These pages may well wish to suggest a heterotopic space, a paratactical in-between, another world. I offer no roadmap, no manifesto, no epistemic closure. None could originate from a single human being writing in lonely isolation from a tiny corner of our plagued planet. Disaffirmation turns first on my own grievous fugitivity. Reluctantly, fearfully, the writing of this book has changed me. Across its chapters, it gains momentum as a mortification of *this* subject, “I,” who writes—here, from the sad givenness of my own tenuous identities “gifted” by an accursed social order—and now, from a (neo)liberal subjecthood I would gladly renounce if I could. In my words’ work, in care of the dead, I tentatively reach toward a fragile “we,” curses notwithstanding. These subjects come undone—first-person, singular, plural—as much as they stubbornly endure—in the long moment of hearkening: the project becomes one of holding and rendering remains.

Book Outline

This book’s stakes are rhetorical, but by rhetoric I don’t have in mind a singular methodological or theoretical approach to the study of persuasive discourse. My argument presumes the transdisciplinarity of rhetoric, just as the case studies themselves are “undisciplined” sites of critical contestation and travel across often divergent communities of reception. I’m in conversation with—but by no means expert in—the many distinct fields of study that have variously informed my rhetorical critique of neoliberal biopolitics: Military and Terrorism Studies, Critical Race Studies, Critical Public Health, Human Rights and Prison Studies, Legal Studies, Philosophy, Sociology, and Media Studies, to name a few. I would add, as well, that these disciplines—much like Rhetoric—are not monolithic. They are rich in a diversity of perspectives. I don’t speak from these fields of expertise, but have learned from reading them, and believe that Rhetoric has something to gain from engaging in this work and something to offer in return.

The case studies in this volume include “sacrifice” in the “war” against COVID-19, where I read the emergent cultures of pandemic “resistance” alongside suicide terrorism and military suicides (chapter 1); the California mass hunger strikes of 2013, read as performative speech that “begins after death” and proleptically claims the human right to die (chapter 2); two legal cases of “preventable” and “untimely” childhood deaths, which figure the irreconcilable sovereign claims of anti-vaxxers and Indigenous peoples, respectively (chapter 3); and finally, the video-recording of the death of a disabled Black man read in the context of racist

speech/acts digitally remediated across our social media platforms (chapter 4). The concluding Refrain invokes the trope of apostrophe and self-reflexively returns, in refrain, to the painful question of writing and how “I” might address, and hearken, the dead. While each chapter might be interpreted as a discussion on “suicide,” this term only makes sense in the old grammar of sovereignty, where suicide is a (criminal) usurpation of the sovereign’s prerogative to take life.⁴⁶ I seek instead to problematize the liberal agency and possessive individualism, as well as the psychopathology, presumed in discourses on suicidality and suicidal ideation. This is not to exalt suicide or other forms of dying, but it is an occasion to reflect on the ways that many are “suicided by society” in our postsovereign age, here, on the knife’s edge of epochal disaster.

In the end, my choice of case studies was deeply personal: they moved me, and I hope I have honored the voices that spoke to me from their particular places of abandonment. But more than this, they enjoined me to critically reflect on and expose something of my own relation to them and to my writing and speaking on them, ever mindful of the inherent risks of appropriating them, exploiting them, or colonizing them. Parataxis has been my writerly trope, bringing into proximity distinct and incommensurable case studies that do not permit the syntactic construction, sequential coordination, or subordination of the stories they tell. The cases are not representative examples of neoliberal biopolitics so much as they are occasions to hear and to analyze situated disaffirmations. Textually grounded in this way, I hope to surface some of the wider ethical tensions and collisions at play in the political project of making live and letting die. I think of myself as critically curating these cases, in Cara Finnegan’s sense of this term: I don’t claim mastery over these scenes, but rather, would contest the assumption that critical research “discovers” the meaning or truth behind a representation.⁴⁷ Indeed, since the cases constellate around death, what mastery or truthful representation could anyone sovereignly claim? A critical rhetorical reading should instead shine light on the subject of speech and writing. And finally, the particular resonances between the four sites—and the deaths they ask us to hearken and to hold—make of the whole an artificial construction: given their incommensurability, their relation remains open and is curated here with the hope of generating unforeseen interpretations, connections, critiques.

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