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# “Deputies said they did not find any K2, but three people were arrested on unrelated charges”: Eventfulness, Contagion, and Abandonment around Brooklyn’s Zombie Outbreak

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## Abstract

The article investigates “eventfulness” and dynamics of liberal governance within the social and spatial implications of discourses of infection, quarantine, and crisis management in the mediated public sphere. The paper begins by taking as a case study the media coverage of a mass overdose on K2—a powerful synthetic marijuana—at a busy Brooklyn intersection. Local and national news media treated this “zombie outbreak” as a calamitous event, sensationalizing the plight of victims and warning the public about the dangers of the drug. However, by turning the scene into a media “event,” chronic social problems (criminalization, racialization, classist gentrification) at the heart of the “epidemic” and its coverage were pushed to the side. While police and paramedics converged on the area to treat and clear away victims, official responses to the problem merely urged individuals to avoid the drug, and state presence was intensified in the area to raid local shops suspected of distributing the product. Increased policing—and its threats of violence to some and promises of safety for others—thus occurred in the middle of one of the most rapidly gentrifying areas in the city. Using Elizabeth Povinelli’s theories of late liberal governance and Roberto Esposito’s immunization paradigm, this paper analyzes how media responses, state policies, and civil society are entangled within the exhaustively dynamic processes of oppression at the heart of liberal societies. However, when imagining different ways of political activity with media, the figure of the “zombie” can emerge as not as a subhuman figure but as a productively non-human stimulus for different tactics of care and organization outside of the liberal imaginary.

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On Tuesday, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, reports of a “zombie outbreak” at a busy intersection in Brooklyn surfaced in the news and spread across social media. It happened in the strip underneath and just beside the elevated JMZ line where it diverges at Myrtle-Broadway, in the fuzzy jurisdictional zone between the gentrifying neighborhoods of Bushwick and Bedstuy. Synthetic marijuana (K2 or “spice”) users populating the area passed out, wandered aimlessly, stopped in the middle of the intersection, pissed, vomited, and had violent seizures and apparent paralysis on the ground. As evidenced by the many photos and cell phone videos taken of the scene, police and paramedics quickly flooded the area, and raids were later carried out on local bodegas thought

to be vending the drug. This particularly calamitous event, where thirty-three people overdosed and were hospitalized after consuming a bad batch of K2 bought from the same store, was sensationalized in New York and national news media.<sup>1</sup> However, these scenes were chronic and endemic (on a smaller scale) here and at other intersections around the city, and this particular area was well known at the time for illegal K2 distribution from both shops and individual dealers on the sidewalks.

The increased police presence to contain the so-called epidemic raises questions as to the ambiguity of securitization in response to such events. News media coverage of the event provides an array of examples and euphemisms that illustrate this very

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ambiguity:

Law enforcement officials conducted surprise inspections at stores in Brooklyn Wednesday near where dozens of people became sick, likely from K2. The sheriff's department and NYPD conducted five simultaneous inspections at delis and stores near Broadway and Myrtle in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section, looking for the synthetic marijuana. Deputies said they did not find any K2, but three people were arrested on unrelated charges.<sup>2</sup>

While the raids ostensibly occurred to find and reduce the supply of K2 in the area, occupants of the area faced arrest and were exposed to state violence for other reasons.

This paper will argue that different social formations and political categories are required to get out of this trap of event, containment, and the resumption of normality, a framework of power circulated through the so-called public sphere of digital media. The virality of media spreads along the lines and networks of the fear and risk of virality of a different sort, that of the poor, racialized, and criminalized seen to threaten the liberal body politic. I will navigate these dynamics of exception, contagion, and violence through two primary theoretical models. The first is Roberto Esposito's immunization paradigm, which posits that liberalism issues an immune response to "difference" which strategically and violently incorporates the contagious outside into the social body to stop its growth.<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, the second is Elizabeth Povinelli's idea of the "ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime" suffering of social abandonment.<sup>4</sup> Through these lenses, this paper investigates the concept of "eventfulness" and the social and spatial implications of discourses of infection, quarantine, and crisis management in the so-called public sphere. Such a case study offers a chance to identify and work through the exhaustingly dynamic and modular processes of liberal governmentality, as the mediascape of the public sphere spectacularizes events of crime, poverty, and suffering, serving to justify repressive and inadequate state responses to the crisis. With the ongoing negotiations of legalization and the "war on drugs," the so-

called public sphere continues to debase and criminalize those disproportionately affected by state processes determining whose bodies deserve saving and care. The contagion of drug users, and the "eventfulness" of their suffering, offers a chance to confront and re-negotiate the liberal public sphere in relation to those continually affected by processes of state violence, abandonment, and containment.

### K2 and the Spectrality of the Fake

To begin, one must unpack K2's discursive relationship to marijuana and its exceptional legal status. While this essay will not dive into ongoing debates about the US "war on drugs" and its disproportionate focus on black and other marginalized communities, it should be duly acknowledged that Bedstuy and Bushwick are traditionally black and Latin American neighborhoods. The intersection of race, law, infrastructure, and state violence is thus a crucial undercurrent to any and all discussions of poverty and drug use in the area, especially in terms of the policing of legitimacy (white marijuana use is progressive, marijuana possession by people of color is subject to brutal violence) that surrounds drug-related offenses. Drugs make manifest wider social phenomena, and these disproportionately affect and criminalize the poor and racialized. Synthetic marijuana plays a particular role within this classed and racialized field of discourse. It has been advertised since its appearance as "incense" and a legal alternative to marijuana, despite insincere warnings not to smoke it and its drastically different and under-researched side effects. While its use and sale have since been criminalized across many locations, it remains in a fuzzy legal category somewhere between a potentially misused consumer product (i.e. glue and other inhalants, bath salts, Robitussin, Sudafed, etc.) and a scheduled drug class (like "real" marijuana), although since 2011 many of the compounds commonly found in "spice" have been considered "Schedule I" substances at the federal level. However, this remains difficult to enforce, as new compounds continually enter the market, and local and state-by-state bans are often more effective than federal ones. According to the

website *Spice Addiction Support*, synthetic marijuana is merely plant material coated with research chemicals.<sup>5</sup> Research-chemical-based drugs, or “designer drugs,” whose multifarious chemicals and classifications make them slippery to regulate and control, are understudied in terms of their effects, and change legal categories often, despite their frequent and spectacular representations in popular press.

Synthetic marijuana is thus legally and discursively positioned as a “fake.”<sup>6</sup> The fake here serves a particular function in its widespread use among marginalized communities: K2 is cheap



Fig. 1

(about \$1/joint) and it can pass a drug test.<sup>7</sup> Disproportionately used by the poor, racialized, and criminalized, it occupies the same spectral, pathologized space as other illegal and illicit materials. K2 in popular media representation is seen to transform people into non-humans, an infective catalyst for criminal behaviors that reduce subjects to bare life (subject to excessive violence and repression), or in the case of the K2 “outbreak,” contagious non-life.

But these spectacularizations in the media occlude the real processes that are at the heart of this transformation from human to only semi-human—namely, the criminalization of drugs like

marijuana, the sequestration and segregation of the poor and racialized, the ongoing development and everyday tension within such communities in New York, and so on. Shop-owners and workers allegedly selling the drug were reportedly persecuted mostly for selling untaxed cigarettes when no K2 was found. In spite of the recent criminalization of K2 (at least at the level of commerce), the familiar enforcement strategies are geared towards clearing away and not rehabilitating users. A pathetic public awareness campaign—posters were put in public venues and high-use areas advertising the dangers of the drug—was the only solution posed besides intensified enforcement. According to Mayor de Blasio’s multi-agency task force, education and enforcement go hand-in-hand, linking education and enforcement in a familiar nexus of pathologization and maintenance of the status quo.<sup>8</sup> As the website states, this public awareness campaign (through the Consumer Affairs office, no less) has four pillars: to “reduce the supply of K2; reduce the demand for K2; end the distribution of K2; ensure the effectiveness of the Task Force’s Efforts.”<sup>9</sup> Posters coming out of this task force advertised that K2 is “0% Marijuana; 100% Dangerous,” with the figures K2 made up of its various other street names. No treatment information was provided on these posters. Governor Cuomo also initiated a campaign which stressed citizens to report its use and sale: “Synthetic marijuana (K2, spice, rocks, candy) is dangerous and illegal! Call 1-888-997-2587 to report illegal sale. If you see it being sold on the street, in a convenience store, or in a bodega, report it immediately.”<sup>10</sup> A phone number for addiction help is included in the bottom corner. Social care, inadequate and underfunded, plays second fiddle to law enforcement, as the idea is to “get it off the streets”—the drug, the users, and the sellers, at once. Simply trying to remove drugs and their users from the equation is a primary tool of the state and the elite formations it represents. While the state’s “monopoly on violence” may be in decline, echoing Achille Mbembe’s work on “necropolitics,” the entanglements of the state and the private accumulation of wealth are becoming more and more intricate,<sup>11</sup> leading to a privatization of violence and increased exposure to enforcement as policing intensifies.

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### Ordinary, Chronic, and Cruddy

Media discourse, public campaigns, and policing mechanisms contribute to the continued social abandonment of poor and racialized populations. Elizabeth Povinelli discusses how social abandonment is structured into the “happiness” of dominant societies. Elaborating on Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” she extends the metaphor of a suffering child in a broom closet that everyone knows about, but does nothing to help, or risk compromising the happiness of the society.<sup>12</sup> The suffering of socially abandoned populations is “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime,” and yet the socially abandoned share in the same social body, as the unhappiness of the part is *necessary* for the happiness of the whole.<sup>13</sup> Expanding on Foucault’s analysis of neoliberal governmentality, she argues that the normativization of the “market” as an agent of social care through “aggressive social policies” in late liberal societies meant transformation in liberal governance of life and death<sup>14</sup>—against the risk of the common, the risk of the informal, the risk of non-normative social worlds. Failure is built into the neoliberal logic, as the social investment of the state (the politics of recognition) glosses over the abandonment of inclusion, of subjecting populations to the care of the “market.”<sup>15</sup> In neoliberalism and “late liberalism,” crisis-laden, temporally delimited events tend to be absorbed into governing technologies that intensify state power and open market areas for exploitation.<sup>16</sup> But late liberal responses to these crises, and the crises themselves, are not isolated events, but a series of unfolding circumstances brought on and responded to by a variety of adaptive governing procedures.

In Brooklyn, and across the landscape of many gentrifying “post-industrial” cities in the Global North, the care of the market is directly exploitative. In New York, without adequate city protections for tenant rights, non-propertied and racialized city-dwellers in gentrifying neighborhoods are under constant assault by private landowners and developers. Social housing is poor, unavailable, and inadequate. And this comes on top of the increased risks of appealing to official state and local channels (the police, courts) in many of these neighborhoods

populated by poor, non-citizen, racialized, and criminalized subjects. The K2 “event,” stirred by an imagined contagion of drug use and criminality, brought increased attention to the area, for better or worse. Processes of recognition occurred in the rapid response of city officials to the “crisis,” with the swift police escalation in the area and a campaign to spread awareness of the dangers of K2. However, as outlined above, there were no cognate treatment programs, addiction centers, or systemic adjustments. The campaigns are almost entirely based on criminalization and drug enforcement, and led to the shuttering or excessive fining of local bodegas in an area where property is at a premium for high-end and commercial development.<sup>17</sup> The function of police is to protect the interests of private property, despite the apparent recourse to public good seen within campaigns against particular kinds of criminality. The crisis was recognized, exceptional powers were strengthened, the threat was immunized, and the community left to fend for itself in the aftermath, as endemic poverty in the area remains a key driver of continued crime (and policing) as well as unchecked development, remaining under the care of a market system and its “ways of making live, making die, and letting die.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, it is through the “eventfulness” of something like a “zombie epidemic”—a sensationalized description of a traumatic mass overdose—that these processes can be seen at work in the public sphere. The criminality and corporeality of drug addiction is represented as a pathology, using the literal language of contagion, the uncontrollable proliferation of a biological threat that must ultimately be vaccinated against with state intervention. While responses are ostensibly designed for care and damage reduction, the results are often the opposite, as the structures through which these are meant to operate are hard-coded with given assumptions about who deserves to live well and who does not. As Povinelli asserts in terms of eventfulness and abandonment (through Le Guin’s metaphor of the child in the broom closet),

The small child’s life-as-suffering will drift across a series of quasi-events into a form of death that can be certified as due to the vagary of ‘natural causes.’ As a result any ethical impulse dependent on a certain

kind of event and eventfulness—a crisis—flounders in this closet. How does one construct an ethics in relation to this kind of dispersed suffering?<sup>19</sup>

This logic of the “big event,” the temporality of “eventfulness” which paints over the everydayness of the suffering of poverty and drug addiction, structures the response tactics. Liberal governing bodies look for sources of blame and quick fixes to systemic problems, which then fades back into continued dispersed suffering. These forms of violence demand an ethical response, “taking sides” against an outside, spectacularly threatening enemy, for example, against terrorists, drug users and dealers, counterfeiters, and the like, constructed to be equivalently threatening to the stability and security of liberal societies and global capitalism.<sup>20</sup> In reality, the contexts of suffering from which this spectacular misery arises continue in the presence or absence of the overdetermined enemy, structurally produced as an ideological “other” against liberal justice.<sup>21</sup>

### Media, Infrastructure, Immunization

Thresholds of legitimacy operate on the daily level of illegality and invalidity, in fluctuations between everyday social life and structuralized social death, especially through the violence of sanctioned legalities and the inclusionary exclusion of mass media.<sup>22</sup> But these processes, being built into and structured within the infrastructures of governance and the market, appear (and often are) accidental. While systemic, they respond the “wobbly order of the everyday.”<sup>23</sup> The architectonics of these processes emphasize the systemic dynamics of global capitalism. Treat the symptom, and resume function. Roberto Esposito describes the social processes by which “immunization” occurs through legal formations by the construction and inclusion of their outside, tying discourses of the vaccinating for the health of the individual body to that of the imagined political body.<sup>24</sup> The violence of law and enforced legalities is at the core of such processes themselves: “That law is essential for protecting all sorts of shared life from the conflicts that traverse them does not detract from the core of violence that the law brings with it, lodged squarely at its origins

but also at the heart of its process.”<sup>25</sup> Landlords and private developers continue to utilize enforced legalities, public programs designed for community betterment, and increased policing and security to sell and exploit an image of the area as a frontier for wealthy renters and consumers.

These issues are all-too-often literally structural (built into the architectures and governing bodies



Fig. 2

of the city).<sup>26</sup> The intersection under Myrtle-Broadway is a “dark space” made by urban infrastructure, creating a massive shadow which runs the length of the elevated train line. Ironically, as infrastructure, the train tracks themselves are tied to Enlightenment ideals of movement, change, and “free circulation of goods, ideas, and people [that] created the possibility of progress.”<sup>27</sup> This makes it a literal inversion of Enlightenment modernity. Ravi Sundaram describes how modern cities attempted to plan these dark spaces of “epidemics, urban panic, the homeless multitude and criminal activity” out of existence, tied up in colonial norms of health, civility, publicness, and humanism.<sup>28</sup> The train tracks themselves and their pathologizing shadow are, visibly, a kind of ruin, a foreclosed future of this modernist infrastructural planning. As subways across the city fail, these elevated tracks appear particularly archaic, whose appearance from another urban era shelters a hyper-modern world of noise and commerce below. The line was originally built in the late-1800s, but the transformations of New York throughout the 1900s saw the space organized around such tracks change drastically, along with the socio-economic demographics of the populations around them, and thus the political function and

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effects of the tracks overhead. The street-vendors, bodegas, salons, barber shops, furniture stores, bars, clubs, and other businesses lining Broadway, and the monumental train tracks above, represent the collision of various worlds and temporalities—from modernity to later demographic shifts to gentrification—and the vital but fragile economies that arise from these interactions.

There are a few recognizable scales and strategies of media coverage surrounding the event in relation

and responding to the event.<sup>30</sup> The most widely-used video was a Facebook Live recording taken by Brooklyn resident Brian Arthur walking around the area and often laughing while recording the overdose victims and response teams (police officers and paramedics), making comments intermittently, and advising viewers not to use K2, calling the scene “zombieland.”<sup>31</sup> At one point during the video, Arthur observes about one particular victim being escorted by police into an ambulance: “They’re gonna lock this dude up if he don’t get right.” While such warnings about the dangers of its use are valuable and necessary, most videos—not to mention the sensational and fear-mongering news stories—accept and praise the police response and urge the drug users to get sober or be cleared away from the area, not questioning the potential criminal charges nor costs of ambulance services and hospital care, however necessary. Some news stories even recognize the disproportionate effects of such drug use on and within marginalized communities, but put through a problematic (white) savior complex.<sup>32</sup> These reports, along with other reports of the drug’s dangerous spread across the New York metropolitan area, conjure K2 as a catalyst for criminality,<sup>33</sup> an infective agent distributed by unsavory shop owners in the city’s internal peripheries, the seed of an infective crisis run amok.

Thus, the event imposes the simplified binary of good guy/bad guy, even though the contagion spreads along spatial and discursive networks where these divisions are far more complex and multiplicitous. Reports showed local residents cheering and recording the arrest of local bodega workers and owners (presumably among the three actually unrelated arrests made during the day of raids).<sup>34</sup> As Mayor de Blasio stated during the fervor, “We will throw the book at anyone selling K2...If you’re selling this drug we have the ability to shut you down. We will literally take away your livelihood.”<sup>35</sup> Community groups in particular have, understandably, pursued and celebrated this strategy of enforcement, pointing out that sentiment is not necessarily against the users, but against those profiting on addiction by continuing to sell the drug in the area that came to be known as “zombieland.”<sup>36</sup> Drug dealers, deli owners, and drug users are thus seen as threats to the community, distracting from



Fig. 3

to this space, which emphasize the virality of the media’s spread as well as the virality of the urban epidemic. The most prominent and frequent were local news reports, which utilize scare tactics and the “zombie epidemic” headline along with reports around the responses and local governing strategies that would affect the local populaces reading them.<sup>29</sup> They paint the scene as an “event,” a crisis requiring a swift and targeted response, often utilizing on-the-scene media recorded by local residents and passers-by. Thus, another trend was the use of on-site phone recordings and clips used to amplify fear, sensationalism, and entertainment value. Largely ironic horror-movie descriptions mask a genuine fear of the misunderstood drug and its effects. The reports also harvest the free labor of consumer-citizens, using videos and terminology gleaned directly from those on the Internet witnessing

the advancing agents of gentrification (private development, bourgeois leisure spaces, and policing) which displace users, sellers, and local residents alike. Due to the failure of official channels to adequately account for these communities apart from half-cooked attempts to educate, along with heightened monitoring and policing, these media traces in are crucially evidentiary around the responses to these events at both official and cultural levels.<sup>37</sup> The choice of interviewees; the language of fear and contagion; the grandstanding of politicians; and the absence of reference to the systemic reasons for “outbreaks” in given spaces and territories; all force consideration of the often accidental ways in which these exploitations happen. But perhaps within the gaps between these oppressive infrastructures, the accidents of coordinated violence made visible by public sphere of digital media, we can see a different set of tools and tactics, towards communal care and solidarity, which I will unpack in more detail below.

### Zombies and Liberal Governmentality

The ways in which these entangled repressive processes have come to represent inescapable elements of life—particularly in the United States, but also elsewhere—under neoliberal capitalism has led many to question the practical maintenance of political categories like sovereignty, justice, and rights. Such concepts—derived from the Enlightenment’s liberal humanism—continually seem to fail those whose lives are continuously threatened and disrupted by everyday incursions by state and non-state violence. Esposito has proposed the concept of the “impolitical,” the space of the political evacuated of such categories, as a strategy for overcoming the impasses of contemporary governmentality.<sup>38</sup> With such an argument in mind, against re-inscribing categories of liberal justice into the legal control and legitimation of populations who have been categorically denied such protections under (neo)liberal societies, it is telling that Povinelli flirts with and Esposito and Sarkar turn to “post-human” arguments in terms of the stimulation of the common through mutual activity (in Sarkar’s case, often in terms of media technologies).<sup>39</sup> Esposito develops an idea of substantive and productive exchange within the interface of the human and the non-human, developed from the

bio-technological theories of Donna Haraway and Alred Tauber, where the immune system, on the one hand responsible for biopolitical governance, but on the other a productive negotiation of difference, “is not the enemy of the common, but rather something more complex that implicates and stimulates the common.”<sup>40</sup> Bhaskar notes that these practices of “parasitical fecundity” do not take shape in the official avenues of political participation in a liberal humanist sense, but rather, “in their pestlike peskiness, forge ‘avenues of participation’ within the larger ebb and flow of economic and cultural life.”<sup>41</sup> The uncontrollable proliferation of the common enters into structures of legitimacy unofficially and mutates them from within, potentially introducing a viral seed of eventual transformation, and the possibility for alternative forms of political activity through the informal productivity of media technologies and techniques of mutual aid.

To this end, anarchist collective the Invisible Committee’s manifesto *To Our Friends* introduces a political argument which attempts to reclaim non- or post-humanism for emancipatory purposes. They describe the ways in which American Center for Disease Control’s *Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse* prepares subjects for a coming apocalypse, but they note that zombies arise from Haitian voodoo culture, manifesting in American movies as an allegory of black insurrection. In a post-Cold War environment, this external threat became a unifying internal enemy for the defense of capitalism in the face of anti-colonial uprisings against growing (neo) liberal consolidation.<sup>42</sup> Here, we have the mechanism described—spectacular enemies penetrating the heartland, intensified policing and surveillance of potentially insurrectionary populations—as popular culture functions as a distorted mirror in a haunted house. Within this formation, the spectral “other’s” body is seen as a creature somewhere between the living and the dead, not inhuman but also not completely human. However, “the real living dead are the petty bourgeois of the American suburbs,”<sup>43</sup> who would largely consume these images fearfully, comforted in their affirmed humanity. In this alienated and alienating condition, the spectacular fetish for apocalypse porn, whether in zombie films or disaster epics, acts as an eventful space for both the spectacle as well as potential apertures for new forms of living. But instead of imagining a post-

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capitalist (and post-human) future when facing the real potential of global, planetary catastrophe and extinction, mass media in liberal societies assigns these threats to “humanity” to the spectral otherness of the racialized or “non-Western,” forcibly maintaining humanist categories of unity and valorization. It is worth quoting The Invisible Committee’s critique at length:

When one asks the left of the left what the revolution would consist in, it is quick to answer: ‘placing the human at the center.’ What that left doesn’t realize is how tired of the human the world is, how tired of humanity we are—of that species that thought it was the jewel of creation, that believed it was entitled to ravage everything since everything belonged to it. ‘Placing the human at the center’ was the Western project. We know how that turned out. The time has come to jump ship, to betray the species.<sup>44</sup>

There is, of course, the negative flip-side of these discourses, as the appeal to a non-human body risks reinforcing racist and classist logics and reductions to bare life.<sup>45</sup> There is an inherent difficulty in applying epistemological claims, theories, and ideas of immunization and the post-human body. These concepts include Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai’s “monster-terrorist-fag”—“reticulated with discourses and practices of heteronormative patriotism but also in the resistant strategies of feminist groups, queer communities, and communities of color”<sup>46</sup>—and what Sarkar refers to as the contagions and potentiations of informal and piratical activity of the figure of the “pirate-terrorist.”<sup>47</sup> These formations prompt perennial attempts at regulation and incorporation, serving to strengthen and reassert the hegemony of the overall process. The immunitary impulse of modern governmentality does not necessarily shut down these activities, “its legion human parasites,”<sup>48</sup> as it requires these forms of social “innovation” for enrichment. Legalities (and legitimacies) respond to the transgression of social and economic norms, often by non-valued subjects, populations, and communities. Studies of these spaces can reveal the ways in which dominant systems and infrastructures of care and control abandon or are enriched by the

biopower of given populations, whether in the realm of welfare, culture, circulation, technology, and how subjects endure in these gaps.<sup>49</sup> This can be seen at points of mediation between official infrastructures and dispossessed populations, whether in the form of media documentation or illegal markets. However, within these contexts of real social abandonment, the productivity ascribed to such formulations as a post-human biopower seems to contradict pragmatic concerns for the civil rights of given populaces. As one commentator argues, “describing the scene as ‘The Walking Dead’ is dehumanizing. Zombies can’t think. They don’t feel emotion. They’re hungry for warm live people... Remember, though, that the next time you say #AllLivesMatter, it includes the humans you call zombies. Their lives matter too.”<sup>50</sup> Recourse to the category of human rights is a survival strategy for attracting better harm-reduction services and treatment infrastructures.<sup>51</sup> This is a clear and present tension, as Neferti Tadiar suggests, in trying to understand “remaindered ways of *living* in the world that move and generate that world in ways we would otherwise be unable to take into political account.”<sup>52</sup> But what if this post-humanist critique was actionable as a form of political mobilization? As Sarkar asks, how can such spaces and communities “become an aperture to a world constituted on a basis of such mutualities [of viral socialities]?”<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion: In Infrastructure’s Shadow

With tone-deaf irony, a commissioned mural of Mos Def’s lyrics “I’m blacker than midnight at Broadway and Myrtle” was written in the shape of a bright red sign on the side of a building just outside of the dramatic shadow of the elevated tracks. A stopping point in Bushwick graffiti tours, this culture of graffiti tourism, generally frequented by non-neighborhood residents and performed by gentrifiers, was critiqued by a *Dazed* piece as a form of “urban safari” in poor and minority neighborhoods, comparing them to favela tours in Brazil.<sup>54</sup> These critiques themselves could represent a re-appropriation of the language of the non-human other, pushing back on the liberal ideas of art and culture embedded in cultural development logics like revitalized arts districts. But the author refers to the tours themselves as “an odd *spectacle*...

An inebriated, forlorn man drinks a scavenged bottle of water with his ass hanging out of his tracksuit bottoms. I'm not sure who's more shocked to see who" (emphasis mine). The author contributes to an outsider's perspective of the neighborhood, off-loading stereotypes of poverty and representing Bushwick as somehow foreign and exotic to the ostensibly middle-class readers of the periodical. The article concludes that these tours are important in some ways, but "the intrinsically weird dynamic that this particular tour creates is felt by many that encounter it. People *live* in Bushwick. It's not a nature reserve or museum." This is still victimhood without potentiality, a recourse to logics that observe both phenomena of life under subjugation and that of capital with the same detachment. We see in such spaces that governance, built space, and everyday life are not merely different channels that interact but are experienced as entangled processes.

But while Bushwick and Bedstuy are cross-sections of development in one of the Global North's most important financial centers, it may be necessary to look at theories of the subaltern to get a true understanding of how growing inequality proliferates in fractal formations across the heterogeneous territories of capital.<sup>55</sup> Sundaram refers to the "contagion of the ordinary" in the "pirate modernity" of postcolonial Delhi in order to articulate these conditions in everyday spatial practice: a "splintered urbanism [that] is by no means unique to Delhi or to South Asia; it reflects a larger global process of rapid urban transformation in the contemporary period. Most importantly, and perhaps dramatically, a vast new mediascape envelops cities like an all-pervasive skin."<sup>56</sup> At Broadway and Myrtle that day, lights flashed in bodega windows, trains rumbled overhead, music blasted out of shops and cars, horns blared, sirens screamed, pirated media lined sidewalks, and cameras recorded and captured the event in the hands of residents and passers-by.<sup>57</sup> But crucially, this mediascape within the geographical boundaries of the Global North, but ideologically constructed and developmentally targeted as Southern for development, was absorbed directly into the viral zeitgeist and the news media's spectacle of the liberal event. The police and paramedics were called. Governance intervened. Civil society and community groups mobilized for damage reduction.

Development occurred unchecked, as this symptom of other contagions—the contagions of capital, racial othering, and associated violences—was treated, leaving the chronic diseases to progress.

Governing systems and public spheres represent conflicting patterns, projects, and thresholds of legitimacy, but unruly social worlds within their cracks and shadows contain the potential for different configurations of living, precariously situated within the threshold of life always confronted with social death. We must pay closer attention to cases and spaces of subjugation and violent dispossession by these processes as operated through public discourse. Through a more vigilant critical eye, we can better understand everyday states of remaindered life, and perhaps begin to see them, as others have, not as exceptional but as a chronic condition of contemporary life under global neoliberal capitalism. We can then understand the constant porosity (and control and regulation) of boundaries between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" life, "valuable" and "invaluable" life, where these thresholds cluster, what frictions arise.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten argue that academic critique often serves to police forms of knowledge production from an external position, especially in terms of political struggle, even though the university institution may harbor a fugitive "undercommons" of radical thinkers.<sup>58</sup> Povinelli also frequently grapples with why critical theory puts so much hope in the potentiality of these precipices of life deemed valuable and invaluable,<sup>59</sup> positing "immanent critique" as an ethical position from which to address contexts of abandonment. In conversation with these forms of critique, what I propose is to ask how the figure of a drug-addled zombie, or a child in a broom-closet, existing somewhere within this threshold opens apertures not for containment and greater regulation but rather a more affirmative form of communal activity. This kind of activity is not directed towards the state or the market but within a communal logic of care and organization that can push back against or even past the forces of development, systemic racism, endemic poverty, and discriminatory violence.<sup>60</sup> The fear of creeping subaltern criminality infects the public sphere as a new possibility for affect and identification, a different kind of event, demonstrating the racism and classism embedded

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in public discourses of drug use and inner-city populations. Critiquing this media discourse for its failure to sensitively render the reality of remaindered life under neoliberal capitalism gets us nowhere. Rather, the brutalizing and ironic representations of the so-called public sphere can be mobilized for real care in the place of a system designed to ironically detach itself from suffering by brushing it out of sight and underneath a veneer of disgusted affect. We can see in the event a recognition that the bourgeois elite are scared, whether of the inverted mirror of the undead (as suggested by The Invisible Committee) or the contagious bodies and affects of the socially abandoned. Media institutions and the police recognize these contagions, and use them to repressive advantage. But what would happen if the virality of technology and biology, when considered as intimately related processes in the generation of a common goal, operated towards emancipation?<sup>61</sup>

Political life under liberalism always assumes a body in contact with or service to a head, as in the appeals to the city-state and the absorption of viral media under informational capitalism. But what if the resistant social body—and its various arms and attachments to public life and popular media—came to move with a contagious, proliferating, multitudinous force? What if social bodies acted as communal units, claiming and distributing resources for common use against the racist, classist, and for-profit functions of the corporate state? The life of a so-called zombie would mean as much as the life of the living, outside of the systems of valuable and invaluable life embedded within liberal capitalism, and we would cease to make such distinctions and recognize the capitalist, racist, and intolerant processes that push such differentiations into realms of death and violence.

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### Notes

The essay began as a portion of a presentation entitled “Spaces of Piracy” conceived with a PhD colleague of mine, Piyusha Chatterjee, at Concordia University. While presented here as an individual work, it would not have reached this point without our initial conversations.

1 Eli Rosenberg and Nate Schweber, “33 Suspected of Overdosing on Synthetic Marijuana in Brooklyn,” *The New York Times*, 12 July 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/nyregion/k2-synthetic-marijuana-overdose-in-brooklyn.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/nyregion/k2-synthetic-marijuana-overdose-in-brooklyn.html?_r=1).

2 Tim Fleischer and Eyewitness News, “Police conduct surprise inspections looking for K2 at Brooklyn stores,” *Eyewitness News ABC7*, 13 July 2016, <http://abc7ny.com/news/k2-crackdown-police-conduct-surprise-inspections-at-stores/1425656/>.

3 Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). See also Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Malden, MA: Polity, 2011).

4 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

5 Spice Addiction Support, “What Is Spice / K2? Get The Facts On Synthetic Marijuana (2018 Update),” *Spice Addiction Support*, 8 January 2018, <https://spiceaddictionsupport.org/what-is-spice/>.

6 Akbar Abbas, “Faking Globalization,” in *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age*,

ed. Andreas Huyssen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008): 263. He discusses it as something immaterial, existing ideologically, as “understudies of the global commodity” in the Global South, acting as a driver of globalization and urban change but also existing behind a boundary of illegitimacy in terms of various forms of policing by and within the Global North. See also Laikwan Pang, “China Who Makes and Fakes’: A Semiotics of the Counterfeit,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 25, no. 6 (2008): 117-140.

7 Leland Radovanovic, “A Response to the Brooklyn K2 Overdoses,” SSDP Blog, 18 July 2016, <http://ssdp.org/blog/a-response-to-the-brooklyn-k2-overdoses/>.

8 “Public Awareness Campaign about the Dangers of K2,” NYC Consumer Affairs, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dca/media/k2-campaign.page>.

9 “Public Awareness Campaign.”

10 “Governor Cuomo Launches New Campaign to Stop Sales and Use of Synthetic Marijuana,” New York State website, <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-launches-new-campaign-stop-sales-and-use-synthetic-marijuana>.

11 Mbembe speaks of this in terms of the transnational arrangement of trade and its enforcement: “a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights to rule emerges, inextricably superimposed and tangled, in which different de facto juridical instances are geographically interwoven and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties, and enclaves abound.” However, the ways in which these enclaves and differentiations are enforced are within traditionally recognized territories, leading to the intensification and militarization of the police. And Mbembe recognizes this violence, crucially, as part of what he calls “infrastructural warfare,” drawing from Eyal Weizman’s work on Palestinian occupation. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.

12 Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 1-5.

13 Ibid. 3-4.

14 Ibid. 22.

15 Ibid. 23.

16 Ibid. 145-146.

17 One article, using a different kind of recognizable techno-biological metaphor, evocatively claims that the NYPD literally “swarmed” local bodegas the day after the mass overdose. Andrew Siff, “NYPD Swarms Brooklyn Bodegas in K2 Crackdown, Day After 33 Hospitalized,” *NBC4 New York*, 13 July 2016, <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/NYPD-Crackdown-K2-Sellers-Brooklyn-Stores-Day-After-33-Hospitalized-386690121.html>.

18 Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 29.

19 Ibid. 4.

20 A much-maligned example of these forceful equivalences is the famous RAND report: Gregory F. Terverton, Carl Matthies, Karla J. Cunningham, Jeremiah Goulka, Greg Ridgeway, and Anny Wong, *Film Piracy, Organized Crime, and Terrorism* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009).

21 Theories of the “pirate figure” argue that this construction of an other outside of the laws of Western liberal society, having their origins in the figure of the pirate as the “enemy of all” and an exception to legal right, now in the form of the “pirate-terrorist,” the “specter” of which “remains a potent embodiment of today’s anxious zeitgeist, a distillation of various risks and threats—actual, virtual, imagined.” Bhaksar Sarkar, “Media Piracy and the Terrorist Boogeyman: Speculative Potentiations,” *Positions* 24, no. 1 (2016): 349. See also Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Enemy of All: Piracy and the Law of Nations* (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

22 I am referring here to dynamics of exception, as initially discussed by Agamben, and then of course to Esposito’s immunization paradigm in terms of liberal governmentality. When looking at the proliferation of bordering mechanisms across everyday life we can also refer to Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, who discuss the idea of “differential inclusion” as crucial to the function of contemporary border spaces, which acts as an update to Hardt and Negri’s recognition of the intensified policing mechanisms within “Empire.” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tran. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Esposito, *Immunitas*; Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method*:

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or, *the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

23 Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 144.

24 Esposito, *Bíos*, 46.

25 Ibid. 10.

26 Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (New York, Routledge, 2001); Susan Leigh Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure," *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 377-391.

27 Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 332.

28 Sundaram, Ravi. *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 19.

29 "K2 'Zombies' at Brooklyn Intersection Where Use Is 'Epidemic': Reports," *NBC4 New York*, 29 June 2016,

<http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/NYC-K2-Synthetic-Marijuana-Drug-Use-Brooklyn-Intersection-Epidemic-384801001.html>; Anthony Izaguirre, Rocco Parascandola, and Graham Rayman, "Thirty-three people treated in Brooklyn from possible K2 synthetic marijuana overdoses; scene compared to 'The Walking Dead,'" *New York Daily News*, 13 July 2016,

<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/brooklyn/multiple-people-hospitalized-k-2-overdoses-article-1.2708254>; Kevin Sheehan, Shari Logan, and Chris Perez, "Cops on zombie patrol in wake of mass K2 overdose," 13 July 2016, <http://nypost.com/2016/07/13/cops-on-zombie-patrol-in-wake-of-mass-k2-overdose/>; Michelle Miller, "Synthetic marijuana overdose turns dozens into 'zombies' in NYC," 13 July 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/synthetic-marijuana-overdose-turn-dozens-into-zombies-in-nyc/>; Emma Whitford, "Bed-Stuy K2 Crackdown: 'It's Zombie Land Out Here,'" 14 July 2016, [http://gothamist.com/2016/07/14/bed-stuy\\_k2\\_zombieland.php](http://gothamist.com/2016/07/14/bed-stuy_k2_zombieland.php).

30 Rosenberg and Schweber, "33 Suspected of Overdosing"; Annetta Konstantinides and Liam Quinn, "Return of the Living Dead: K-2 zombies return to Brooklyn neighborhood one day after 33 addicts collapsed at 9.30am after smoking bad batch of the synthetic marijuana from infamous deli," *Daily Mail*, 13 July 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3689054/K2-zombies-return-Brooklyn-neighborhood-one-day-33-twitching-addicts-collapsed-9-30am-smoking-bad-batch-synthetic-marijuana-infamous-deli.html>.

31 Brian Arthur, *Facebook* video, 12 July 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/brian.arthur.758/videos/1138866112852242/>.

32 Nicole Piazza, "K2, other synthetic marijuana products harming low-income communities," *New York Daily News*, 12 July 2016,

<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/k2-synthetic-marijuana-products-harming-poor-article-1.2709009>.

33 In a highly publicized event, a driver high on K2 drove through crowds in Times Square. First reports questioned if it was a terrorist attack, representing slippages between events of drug-related criminality and terrorism. "Sources: Times Square driver was apparently high on synthetic marijuana (K2) at time of pedestrian crash," *ABC7 Eyewitness News*, 19 May 2017,

<http://abc7ny.com/news/sources-times-square-driver-was-apparently-high-on-k2/2009161/>.

34 Ben Fractenberg, Kathleen Culliton, William Mathis, and Camille Bautista, "VIDEO: City Sheriffs Raid Bodegas After 33 People Overdose on K2," *DNA Info*, 13 July 2016, <https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20160713/bed-stuy/bed-stuy-bodega-raided-by-city-sheriffs-after-33-people-overdose-on-k2>.

35 Erin Durkin and Glenn Blain, "Gov. Cuomo, Mayor de Blasio decry New York City's K2 'crisis' after mass of overdoses in Brooklyn," *New York Daily News*, 13 July 2016,

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/gov-cuomo-mayor-de-blasio-decry-nyc-k2-crisis-article-1.2710112>.

36 Cristin Noonan, "No K2! Bushwick Community and Business Owners Join the Doe Fund March Against the Drug," *Bushwick Daily*, 3 August 2016, <https://bushwickdaily.com/bushwick/categories/community/4070-photos-doe-fund-march-against-k2>.

37 Fleishcer and Eyewitness News, "Police conduct surprise inspections."

- 38 Roberto Esposito, *Categories of the Impolitical*, trans. Connal Parsley (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- 39 It is crucial to separate these claims from anti-humanism. Povinelli's flirtations with post-humanism are articulated further in her most recent book, where she argues that Life and Nonlife are both captured under liberal governance. She posits the concept of "geontopower" to describe this: "what is sovereign is the division of Life and Nonlife as the fundamental ground of the governance of difference and markets...Are the subjects of politics now not merely humans and other forms of living labor and capital...but also the undead and never-have-lived?" Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 35.
- 40 Esposito, *Immunitas*, 18.
- 41 Sarkar, 263.
- 42 The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (Boston: MIT Press, 2015).
- 43 Ibid. 27.
- 44 Ibid. 34.
- 45 This is key to Povinelli's repeated critique of Agamben's camp metaphor, that the reduction to bare life strips potentiality from spaces of abandonment. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*; also see Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
- 46 Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," *Social Text* 72, vol. 20, no. 3 (2002): 140.
- 47 Sarkar, 362.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Lisa Parks, "Water, Energy, Access: Materializing the Internet in Rural Zambia," in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, eds. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015): 115-136. See also Povinelli, *Geontologies*.
- 50 Radovanovic.
- 51 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten present a compelling version of this critique in terms of the university. Their argument centers on the fact that the critical academic operates as an agent of state and corporate power within the confines of the university as an institution: "This maroon community, if it exists, therefore also seeks to escape the fat of the ends of man. The sovereign's army of academic antihumanism will pursue this negative community into the undercommons, seeking to conscript it, needing to conscript it. But as seductive as this critique may be, as provoked as it may be, in the undercommons they know it is not love. Between the fiat of the ends and the ethics of new beginnings, the undercommons abides, and some find comfort in this. Comfort for the emigrants from conscription, not to be ready for humanity and who must endure the return of humanity nonetheless, as it may be endured by those who will or must endure it, as certainly those of the undercommons endure it, always in the break, always the supplement of the general intellect and its source. When the critical academic who lives by fiat (of others) gets no answer, no commitment, from the undercommons, well then certainly the conclusion will come: they are not practical, not serious about change, not rigorous, not productive." But, I would argue, these non- and post-humanism are not anti-humanisms. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013): 38-39.
- 52 Tadiar, Neferti X. M. "Lifetimes of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (2013): 43.
- 53 Sarkar, 363.
- 54 The initial article was Jonathan Turton, "'Ghetto Tourism': New York's disturbing new trend," *Dazed* 2 June 2017, [www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/36160/1/ghetto-tourism-new-yorks-disturbing-new-trend](http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/36160/1/ghetto-tourism-new-yorks-disturbing-new-trend); a follow up piece that consolidates a lot of the strong reactions to the argument is Danielle DeCoursey, "These Urban Tours are Spurring a Discussion About Income Inequality," *Attn*, 9 June 2017, <https://www.attn.com/stories/17528/these-urban-tours-are-causing-discussion-about-income-inequality>.

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55 Abbas, “Faking Globalization.”

56 Siegfried Kracauer, as Sundaram points out, saw this “outer skin of things” as a key to an urban sensorium that could disrupt bourgeois normativization in technological modernity, but was also highly ambivalent. Sundaram, 5-8.

57 Much work has been done on the ability of sous-veillance and counter-surveillance in attempting to regulate police violence against black men and women. Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

58 Harney and Moten, 30.

59 Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 116.

60 Post-autonomia theorists have written extensively on potential anarcho-communist political organization around the common through the idea of the political “multitude” or, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten argue from an angle of critical race studies, the antagonism of the “undercommons.” Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*. See also Gigi Roggero, “The Production of Living Knowledge,” in *The Production of Living Knowledge: The Crisis of the University and the Transformation of Labor in Europe and North America*, trans.

Enda Brophy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 87-111; Hardt and Negri, *Empire*; Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004); Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

61 Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker interweave infection discourses of biological and technical networks in *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007). See also Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*; and Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.