

Bleak House

An Afterword

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

This tightly conceived collection provides us with a luminous set of ethnographic encounters with exhausted social worlds and the effort that people within them exert to create embankments against partial or utter dissolution. Its focus is directed at the concept of *the social*, a term whose dismantling was certainly well under way by the time Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958) famously took umbrage at its rise and the subsequent transformation of politics. As Arendt railed against a concept and form of governance organized primarily to enhance the health of a new people—a people which, Michel Foucault argued, were better understood as a population—many indigenous, anticolonial, feminist, queer, black, and brown social movements were denouncing “the Social” for very different reasons. There was no *the Social*, definite article, capital S, although not for the reasons Margaret Thatcher would claim. No singular social existed; rather, there were extractions and distributions that created and then crossed the unequal terrains of various human spaces. True, many still called for a new form of society that would truly enhance the lifeworlds of all.

As neoliberal economics displaced Keynesian imperialism, a new geography of precarity and vulnerability greeted even those who previously benefited. By 2012, the year the authors in this volume first brought their work together in another forum, the forms of abandonments seen during the high-water mark of neoliberalism had given way to the stagnation of the Great Recession. The Bush wars were not won, nor did they end, although the damaged and maimed bodies kept piling up everywhere. And by 2012, the ethnographic magic of conjuring social or cultural reason where others saw none had long given way to the practice of

conjuring hope where none should be expected—to find poetry where others might read psychosis; decampments in the midst of the most draconian detention centers. The village had long given way to the bleak house as the privileged site for ethnographic reflection.

These essays would certainly seem to be solidly situated within this Dickensian turn. Suicide is a central thematic, as is radical aloneness. And when human bodies are not in the existential grip of social isolation, it is because they are being forcibly socialized in drug detention centers and postwar rehabilitation hospitals. And if we are not contemplating suicide, we are heading straight into the grave or up the maggot-ridden butts of street dogs.

Of course, the residents of the bleak house have long been of interest to social theory; thus, it is no surprise to find the name of Émile Durkheim invoked in the collection's framing. Modern sociology defined itself by claiming it could tell us something more, something truer, about collapsed physiological and psychic states than could the sciences of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and medicine. Erving Goffman's writing on stigma and the total social institution and Foucault's writings on madness and the clinic are critical moments in this unfolding conversation, as are Catherine Malabou's recent reflections in *Les nouveaux blessés* (2007). There, Malabou explores a double foreclosure that emerges across psychoanalysis and neuroscience when they face certain forms of human injury such as brain trauma and Alzheimer's. Whereas psychoanalysis is silent about these conditions because they are considered physiological rather than psychic states, neuroscience is silent about the psychic conditions and experiences of those experiencing these conditions because they are not considered pertinent to the physical trauma. What sort of theory and rhetoric are needed for an ethical encounter with these forms of existence?

Although none of the essays in this volume explicitly says so, the collection as a whole opens the question of how and what the discipline of anthropology and the practice of ethnography have to say to and about these spaces that seem on the surface so desolate. What role do they have to think with or through these spaces, and what right? What is the purpose of entering and dwelling within them? Something like a set of answers seems to emerge across these essays, or perhaps less a set of answers than a set of problems. The first answer, or problem, is deceptively simple. The reason to dwell critically in these spaces is simply to insist that their existence have a public. And this insistence that these spaces be able to claim space within the public of critical thought is indeed increasingly necessary given the forms of institutional erasure arising from the intersection of legal preemption and liberal "protection." We can think here of the rise of the human subjects institutional review boards, whose purpose and function are stretched across the cynical reason of the university's desire

to preempt lawsuits and the liberal goodwill to protect human and non-human animals from the excessive intrusions of the will to know. At this intersection a barricade is raised against knowledge of, with, and within the late liberal distribution of precarity and vulnerability.

Second, the reason to dwell within and with these social worlds is to show that the condition of life within these spaces provides a critical perspective on the formation of late liberal power. If we believe that the governance in, through, and of life defines the form of contemporary power, something we have now long called biopolitics, then the condition of late liberal life (slow death, shattered life, depressed existence) is no longer inside or outside this politics. The vulnerable, the precarious, the depressed, the shattered: what is biopower when these conditions are not the tail ends of the statistical curve of normative life but the peak center? Third, all of these essays remind us that dwelling demands, or is at its heart, a political purpose, and this purpose is to interrupt a given formation of power rather than either report and adjudicate that formation or report and extract an affective charge of hope from it. The rhetorical force is aimed not at feeling for but at affecting with—of staying with the errant rather than trying to quickly press it into a form of resistance, of hope, of an alternative social world.

But what these essays also do—and I think the courage of this needs to be acknowledged—is register the strain, anxiety, and discomfort of trying to treat these social conditions as something other than spaces for adjudication, affective extraction, or liberal intervention even as they show, with rich exacting descriptions, that they exist at the intersection of exhaustion, endurance, and death. Thus, as certainly as the argument of each essay bears careful attention, so does the rhetoric, which is often weirdly factual and decidedly (at least attempting to be) inert to liberal affect.

Anne Allison takes readers into the affective force of a social fact, namely, that many contemporary Japanese men and women are dying alone. The essay rhetorically vibrates with an analytic ambivalence that mirrors, in order to intensify, the social condition of relationality's increasing absence. Note that Allison is not encountering a condition, or a politics, of antirelationality, antinormativity, or counteraction. She is encountering a radical irruption of asociality at the heart of neoliberal sociality and encountering the social practices emerging around and through this hole in sociality. She focuses on the rise of suicide and the emergence of new ways of caretaking the dead. But as Allison braids the fact of high suicide and the increasingly abandoned shrine, her prose strains to follow the optimism of the new mortuary movements that argue that the solitary death can give rise to new forms of collective feminist memorializations and lineal homage. What to do with the facts that these new mortuary movements have an economic logic and interest (how to keep the temple

financially viable) and that feminist understandings of the new roles that women play are animated by political concerns? Is it because of these economic and political interests that her essay gives way to the draining existential despair of those youth for whom the question of what to do has given way to the question not merely of why do anything at all but also why exist at all.

This turn on existence versus social form is also found among the men and women in the US military hospitals in which Zoë H. Wool writes an ethnography of trauma. She also finds a form of solitude. And the fragmented conditions of this solitude are also the social alienations of a post-Keynesian world. But here we are shown the materially shattered bodies of an ongoing war and a landscape of defunded care. As with Allison, we find Wool struggling to wrench positivity out of decidedly errant socialities. Much rests on what she describes as the in-during bonds of interned soldiers who evidence intense attachments with one another while within the hospital but do not seem to see a need to extend these intensities outside the hospital grounds or into the future. No matter how it might sound, the phrase “here today, gone tomorrow” is affect neither of the devil-take-care nor of a Broadway show. It is not nihilism or vitalism. What it *is* is what Wool, like Allison, struggles to convey. Note “struggles to convey” as opposed to understand—this form of in-during exists. But that’s where Wool thinks we should leave it. Leaving it there allows her to draw a distinction between the consequential and the transformative, allows her to say that in-during bonds are consequential socialities without being transformative socialities, allows her to open a spacing for something that is inside and outside the affective script of an ever optimistic liberalism. In-during bonds do not sink into asociality, but neither do they quite take us forward into a new way of being together.

Lisa Stevenson sketches a deathscape outside of late liberal (biopolitical) ways of recognizing harm and taking care and inside of ongoing settler disruption. Three topological layers are explored. Stevenson begins with the living ghosts produced when, in the 1950s, the settler state removed Inuit children and adults with tuberculosis to southern hospitals. When the children returned they were sometimes greeted as ghosts, parents and relatives not recognizing their children as living, and the children unable to relate to their living relatives. Stevenson knows, of course, how this history of settler care maps onto others, most notoriously the removal of children during the boarding school tragedies. But Stevenson layers into this ghostly landscape another mapping of death, as the Inuit use death to mark place, so that place is narrated through stories of where so-and-so fell and died. And these layers are stitched together through an existential stance toward time and endurance summarized by the phrase “everyone dies” as a bracing counterpoint to liberal hysteria over, sup-

posedly, the preciousness of life when in practice it is often merely the preciousness of certain lives—certainly not Inuit lives. Rather than life and death as ultimate values, Stevenson thinks with the Inuit about the form of living and the where and with whom of dying. I was reminded reading this essay of Rolf de Heer and David Gulplili's 2013 film *Charlie's Country*. In this film, the evacuation of the sick from what is called remote Australia to Darwin Hospital is figured not as a way station to death as an existential abstraction but as a demand to die in a specific way, as if settler colonialism hadn't attempted to impose enough forms of life.

Angela Garcia begins her essay with an explicit film reference, Carlos Reygadas's luminous film *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012), an analytic and aesthetic exploration of the tense relation between contemporary elite and rural Mexicans, and, from within a scene central to the movie, curls into contemporary drug treatment centers (*anexos*) in Mexico City. At the heart of the essay is an attempt to read a movie as something other than an apologia for the contemporary Mexican elite and to encounter contemporary drug treatment centers as something other than vicious manifestations of neoliberal abandonment. They are both also these things, as, Garcia notes, *anexos* provide a space in which to endure, and possibly subvert, the consequences of marginality and violence typical of contemporary Mexico, but without transcending them. The essay is remarkable in its ability to face the violent practices of some of the *anexos* without turning this violence into the secret truth of their rotten or redemptive core, their true corruption or poetry. One engages (in) violence not to seek hope and certainty but precisely to disrupt the controlling nature of these affective thoughts.

The experimental space between scholarly and poetic analytics is exemplified in the poetry of Fady Joudah and Solmaz Sharif, brilliant poets whose precise prosody lays bare the signs that cross glow-in-the-dark stars with surgical tables, dog-eared texts, and monk brains. What world is this where date shakes and syphilis, seizures and anal fistulas write a new alien geography? What language will we create and find to light the way?

In the intensity of these essays, maggots are a welcome reprieve. But Naisargi N. Dave's essay is also exemplary of the entire collection's attempt to pay careful attention to the texture of these worlds while remaining inert to liberal affect. Dave takes the reader on a journey around the cycle of life and death as human, cow, dog, and maggot define the topography of existence. There is no purity here, no space where good affect can relax. A man who draws no distinction between forms of life nevertheless barks orders to another man who labors for him. And another man who carefully ministers to a dog's maggot-ridden ass does not express great concern when the now-dewormed canine is nearly hit by a car. Having done

what he could do, he does not seem to obsess over what lies beyond his doing—if the dog dies by car accident, so be it. Perhaps another man will take it upon himself to tend to roads as carefully as he tends to intestines. What Dave opens is a space beyond a liberal schoolboy logic in which care is either made a universal ruler or denied altogether. If you cannot do everything—solve the problem across a homogenized space—then why act at all? Dave seems to counter: in overwhelmed worlds one does something or doesn't, and these are consequential but not universal actions.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. (1958) 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Malabou, Catherine. 2007. *Les nouveaux blessés: De Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains*. Paris: Bayard.