

Down for the Count

*Before the Myth of Sanctuary, after Transits,
and below Ground*

When the US Census Bureau director abruptly quits his job, and just as the US minority will soon be the US majority, we might consider how the biopolitics of counting bodies facilitates the structural adjustment of social refuse. Whose bodies count? Are there conditions where bodies in dissent count differently? What countersovereign modes interrupt, grant permission to, and work against the sanctioning of black, brown, and Asian bodies?

For those who inhabit the privileges of full citizenship, we want to be counted until we don't. We'd like to count until the cost of that inclusion becomes exorbitant, painful, and threatening to assimilation. Some call this immigrant inclusion, and we wonder why such projects garner national attention and funding. And then withdrawal happens: count me out! Let activity and activism be the work of others. Or, in the mode of complicity: I will never align with the position of the vigilante, or that of the settler. As Rebekah Garrison asks: But what, then, about settler responsibility?¹ How do we count South–South migrations, where 80 percent of the world's displaced populations transit? How might we make demands for citizenship without perpetuating “American” exceptionalism and the myths of liberalism? In all these ways, is it possible to divest from the asymmetrical counting of some bodies over others?

These questions take us straight into the entrails of the morgue, the state institution that tallies the daily body count. Mexico City artist Teresa Margolles knows the morgue and has gone to it as a kind of ethnographic recollecting and repurposing for necroperformance. She distills the liquid that is used to cleanse the “disposable” bodies of sex workers and garbage pickers. Vaporizing dirty liquid from the washing of dead bodies, the artist diffuses it through a fog machine and sends

it into the comfortable space of the gallery.² This disquieting, interconnected labor of literal transposition enters and unsettles the cross-class contact zone. Such work sits alongside a host of experimental performance art pieces from Mexico to Central America and across the trans-Pacific, foregrounding the residue of human lives in the spaces lived by imperial subjects. That is, attentive dystopic artistic labor reorganizes the material residue of war and empire by showing the starkness of its maximum life/death indistinction.

Margolles's work provokes scandal, and it wrestles with the afterlives of the war on drugs. In *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* (*What Else Could We Talk About?*), a piece made for the 2009 Venice Biennale, she collects blood, glass, and other items from the scenes of Sinaloa murders to draw attention to the high cost of President Felipe Calderón's widening social war.³ Here we find the ephemeral materiality of state violence, a collection of the residual, a proliferating wasteland of bloodied objects, burning smells, and undervalued abjection, an archive that counts corporeal remains.

The social and political drug wars at the center of Margolles's gory production assemble what came before and what follows in a pendular, if teleological, arc. The here and now includes the contemporary wars that engulf the north of Mexico and the moral panic of children transiting from Honduras, preceded by "cocaine wars" in Colombia and Bolivia and themselves preceded by Oliver North's Contra war. This chain of events was all preceded by Nixon's coining of the *war on drugs* and the brutalities of a horribly misnamed Cold War. In political geographies across the planet, the immediacy of experience with war is too closely felt. And a failed US war on drugs means that many global South bodies have yet to be counted.

In Southeast Asia, the performance of sudden unaccountability is perhaps all too familiar as a mode of extraction. Favored by the neoliberal economy of authoritarian states like Singapore, the migrant labor population from neighboring countries counts as a promising statistic until it becomes unruly or unproductive. In advanced economies or wealthy states like the United States and Singapore, disappearing migrant workers by draconian agencies such as US Immigration and Customs Enforcement or the Singapore Ministry of Manpower is ostensibly an administrative act to cast out the "bad actors," even though they have long been effectively disenfranchised and made invisible by the violence of the economy itself. The relationship between those who are citizens and the countless who are illegally deported, rendered rightless, or quickly returned as disposable labor lies at the heart of who or what counts as life. The stories performed by artists like Margolles account for those who are made uncountable through the state's violence. They interrogate the rhetoric that often

justifies the violence of erasure by the state in terms at once gendered and fictive (“bad hombres”).

And in our attempt to recount disposable labor, let’s not redisappear: forty-three chairs sit absent in the schoolroom. On 26 September 2014, forty-three rural indigenous and Mestizx students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico, went missing. Other than a vociferous and transversal hemispheric social movement, and the daily walks by the victims’ relatives, who counts the bodies of Iguala? *Iguala que nadie*. Iguala is the no-body that is ever present in recent global body counts.

Sanctioning Sanctuary

Accounting, counting, the countable, the discounted. Turning humans into numbers to be added and subtracted is, for Diane Nelson (paraphrasing David Graeber), “a primary engine of forcing people out of their context, cutting them off from human ties, and making them exchangeable.”⁴ Can we claim sanctuary as the repossessed space of the dispossessed? Are we a refugeless social being, undone by our limitless indebtedness to one another, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten might put it?⁵ How do we respond to the stranger at our gates, to the refugee whose figure looms over the mediatized illiberal watching of the other? How do we respond to the exile of estrangement that we also are? A radical definition of sanctuary presumes that we understand the underpinning arrangements of the colonial condition. It presumes that we have read Cheryl Harris’s “Whiteness as Property,” which accounts for the systematic formation of white racial identity in the parallel domination of black and indigenous lives and territories. What is the sanctuary for the migrant that protects from the state and, at the same time, continues to disavow foundational violence?

In 1988, Jeanne Ellen Clark wrote a book called *Prophetic Rhetoric and the Sanctuary Movement*, which rehearsed religious and political models of sanctuary—both of which can minimize complex underground movements that have long provided sanctuary to migrants and the refugees of empire. Clark focused on southern Arizona, where, amid countless border crossers and refugees from the Central American conflicts of the early 1980s, it was the trial of eleven church workers that prompted a strategic recalculation of sanctuary rhetoric.⁶ Paired palimpsests: accumulated discourses of sanctuary and the space of southern Arizona, where layered histories such as the fights for sanctuary, DREAMers, and the undocumented are preceded by the war against ethnic studies, preceded by border expansionism, preceded by settler wars (by Spanish, Mexican, and US aggressors) against the Apache and other native groups. What

kind of a sanctuary movement counts? How do we tally successes and failures? Is there ever sanctuary from settler vigilantism?

In a recent activity with an Art of Protest class, we had the idea to sticker public places with the phrase, “Is this a sanctuary?” The question forces a response by unsuspecting viewers. If this café or public bench is not a sanctuary, then where *does* sanctuary exist? There is no sanctuary. If refuge were offered, who would most likely take it, especially within a public sphere where performance art and technologies of capture might unwittingly document the undocumented? Uncoupling intention (protection) from effect (exposure) requires experimentation; it requires courage beyond the comforts we take in celebrating visibility, invisibility, safety, protection, and accountability.

Borders, Papers, and Bodies in Motion

Who gets to move? Who has to move? Who wants to move? And what constitutes the “who” that moves? It’s rare that bodies move through space, and especially across national borders, on their own. Possessions and paperwork usually accompany them, and at various points along a journey those objects can carry serious consequences. It might matter gravely whether someone is carrying a virus or a Koran, more than three ounces of liquid or some coke, a passport, a visa, or no papers at all. Those documents themselves isolate particular details about bodies—a face pic, fingerprints, and other biometric data, all presumably residing as well in a far-off database—and ignore others, and they themselves present words and images that identify bodies as citizens, guest workers, or detainees. A typo on a visa can lead to endless hassle at a checkpoint or in an airport, and British citizens wouldn’t be believed to be such if their passport covers didn’t bear the striking image of a unicorn and a lion humping a coat of arms.

This tangled mess of papers, objects, and symbols that accompany bodies in transit speaks to the messy business by which capitalism requires the movement of bodies. Certainly, passports mark national citizenship and thus become flashpoints in discussions of immigration and “undocumented” laborers. When residents of the Dominican Republic wore T-shirts emblazoned with the image of a Dominican passport after 2015, they sent a disturbing nationalist message to the Haitian migrant laborers targeted for deportation—and even to the similarly targeted Dominicans of Haitian descent who hold one of those passports—that they are vulnerable, disposable, unwanted. But it’s becoming more difficult for passports and visas to keep pace with (and keep count of) bodies moving to and from proliferating zones of indeterminate sovereignty. In lieu of permanent residency or citizenship and its attendant protections, individuals,

militaries, and more and more businesses receive visiting rights that grant immunity from local sovereignty. Spaces of exemption from state jurisdiction—the kind commonly associated with military bases in “foreign” countries—are increasingly extended to businesses as well as militaries. In regulating the mobility of capital and corporations like this, what attendant provisions do states make for the movement of individuals—as citizens, workers, refugees?

For the most vulnerable participants in these endeavors, temporary visiting rights serve to strip the mobile *who* of important protections. The outsourcing of US military labor, for example, has created a private military services industry that offers few safeguards for workers, whatever their documentary status. In recent years they have found their way to Iraq, Jordan, and Afghanistan from some of the most vulnerable and dangerous parts of the global South but have little or no standing in those nation-states, in military courts, in the US civil system, or in their home countries when things go bad. These practices lay bare, in Naomi Paik’s words, the “imperial roots of the labor systems on which military outsourcing relies,” a system that “eviscerates the rights and recognition of the already vulnerable and empowers and the already powerful.”⁷

As for those “already powerful,” a growing cash-for-passport industry offers workarounds for the “inconvenience” of citizenship and its territorial jurisdiction. The Global Passport Power Rank, compiled by Arton Capital, “a financial advisory firm specializing in investor programs for residence and citizenship,” ranks passports by the number of countries the holder can visit without a visa.⁸ Mobility is not just a requirement for low-skilled, low-paid, or enslaved and indentured workers; those at the top, too, thrive on easy mobility (not exhausted by electronic communication and wire transfers)—but theirs is expressed through a vocabulary not of displacement and dispossession but of freedom and flexibility. Is there a comparative advantage for Caribbean nations in the cash-for-passport industry? If so, what does this say about capitalism and mobility?

All of this points to the inadequacy of discerning the circuitry and stakes of capitalist mobility today through attention to border policing that tracks citizens moving between nations—especially when the United States receives disproportionate attention in that calculus. We refuse to respond to “America First” with a comparably America-centric focus on America’s borders, American visions of citizenship, and America’s hallowed traditions of rights for all in a “nation of immigrants.”

This returns us to the pressing concerns of sanctuary, even as the multimedia artist MIA’s video “Borders” performs a highly abstracted and mediated account of the global refugee crisis.⁹ In her technofuturistic border of the here and now, a “multitude” of particular brown male bodies stand in for, and begin to inhabit, planetary duress. And the lyrics to

the song call out the nation-state for its artifice of militarized borders in a world system of sanctioning: “We’re solid and we don’t need to kick them, this is North, South, West, East, and Western.” This statement denounces the here and now as an expulsive condition for those bodies in transit that seem mobile but are actually really stuck. We might follow MIA in her persistent retort “what’s up with that?” Counting whiteness, “what’s up with that?” Failing drug wars, “what’s up with that?”

From Global Refuge to Black Lives Matter

Can an ethics and history of countersovereignty grapple with these questions? Possibly, if we acknowledge first that sovereignty plays differential roles in indigenous, immigrant, and refugee lives, such that countersovereignty cannot merely be evoked reflexively against the state, capital, or empire. Furthermore, dissensus and contradiction within and across movements is the generative ground of social urgency, not a problem to be policed or wished away through magical appeals to coalition or solidarity. The histories of coalitional social movements and acts of solidarity and allyship form an indispensable component of our usable past, but we cannot know in advance how they will be operationalized in a given sovereign conjuncture.

The political history and activism surrounding Black Lives Matter, for example, directs us to a long arc of decolonial and antiracist struggles within and across the Americas. As it requires a long view of diasporic dislocations and disavowed body counts, it also demands an up-to-the-moment analysis of how digitally networked communicativity enables long-existing racial hierarchies and violences to meet new horizons of contestation. A slogan and a hashtag that crystallized out of a 2013 Facebook update by Alicia Garza titled “A Love Note to Black People,” #blacklivesmatter ignited the most sustained sequence of black rebellions against state violence in a generation, shocking the ruling class into a reactionary embrace of dog whistle law-and-order politics and “All Lives Matter” blustering.¹⁰

It also provoked the *Guardian* to begin The Counted, an open-source database to log homicides by police officers that, in the final weeks of the Obama administration, became the basis of a new “hybrid system” at the Department of Justice to improve data, adopted after acknowledging that journalists were developing better statistical methods than the government. Statisticians noted that the new system was “catching” almost twice the number of police killings than the haphazard government system used to. What ends can these data serve—“better” policing?—and how secure should we feel about the commitment of the Department of Justice to remain vigilant? The collective endeavor that fuels The Counted

database and the embrace of Maya numeracy that Diane Nelson points to in Guatemala suggest a wide range of possibilities for calculating loss and gain, for giving a proper, unsettling account of the here and now.

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Garrison, “Island Relationality and Settler Responsibility.”
2. Carroll, “*Muerte sin fin*,” 104.
3. Margolles, “¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?”
4. Nelson, *Who Counts?*, 25.
5. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*.
6. Clark, *Prophetic Rhetoric and the Sanctuary Movement*.
7. Paik, “*Adhikari v. Daoud*,” 1.
8. “Passport Index—All the World’s Passports in One Place,” www.passportindex.org/byRank.php (accessed 3 November 2017).
9. MIA, “Borders,” posted by MIAVEVO, 17 February 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-Nw7HbaeWY.
10. Anderson and Hitlin, “3. The Hashtag #BlackLivesMatter Emerges.”

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