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Melancholy as Medium

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The photograph (fig. 1) of the “human toll” cover of the *New York Times* I posted on Instagram on Memorial Day 2020 was one of my first efforts to work with what I call “melancholy as medium.”¹ As I noted, the text by Dan Barry accompanying the *New York Times*’ cover incants the number 100,000 over and over to give it meaning, asking us to imagine a city of 100,000 residents that was here at New Year’s Day but is now wiped from the map. “All we can do,” he tells us, “is hold our collective breath, inch toward some approximation of how things were—and try to process a loss of life greater than what the country incurred in several decades of war, from Vietnam to Iraq.”² Rather than circumscribe our mourning as a means to return to the regime of things as they were, melancholy practiced as a medium holds open the aperture for change, calling on us to confront the incalculable of a novel coronavirus made lethal by a necropolitics of abandonment, driven by a racist, xenophobic calculus of life made disposable. Thus, in my post, I responded:

If this is the lesson, then . . . may none of us rest as we live our dying. May we not forget but actually do the work of reckoning with the still uncounted of the crimes of the endless war we are still in, the uncounted of mass incarceration, the uncounted of the warehousing of life exposed from the border to the nursing home, the still uncounted of genocide within the settler colonial occupation, the uncounted of histories of slavery that are not over. May none of us hold our breath, but, rather, learn to breathe through the supports we demand for living with more than one virus. May we not mourn and move on, but activate our melancholy to insist that, there was nothing inevitable about this number and that this number is a criminal underestimation of the unfinished histories and conditions of heteropatriarchal racial capitalism that made COVID lethal. May we also refuse to return to any approximation of the



Fig. 1. Jill H. Casid, Untitled (“Human Toll” cover of *The New York Times*), posted to Instagram, May 24, 2020. By permission of the author

before unless it is to continue the work of imagining and materializing a Black trans*feminist commons. Remembering Douglas Crimp who died just before COVID-19 and his insistence on mourning and militancy. Remembering José Muñoz and the practice of a resistant melancholy in carrying our dead with us into the battles we must still wage in their names, in our names, in all the many names that claim us, all the names given to life marked for uncounted death. It’s why I call it the Necrocene.³

It is now more than time we reckon with the unimaginable of the other side of the official calculus, that shadow region of what is called “excess mortality.” The recent study in the *Lancet* of March 10, 2022, makes plain that mortality metrics do not just shape the public-health policies that determine who lives and dies.⁴ As I learned early from my refugee statistician grandparents, whose primary means of negotiating the uncommunicable and untranslatable wound-gulf of preventable loss was metrical calculation, these numerical barometers of what we are willing to face are shaped by the bio- and necropolitics of who and what counts.⁵ In the shadow region of excess death, the global toll by the end of 2021 is closer to an estimated eighteen million, and the excess death count for the United States more than one million.⁶

If this is what care looks like, then let us *not* move on. Let us, rather, take back care and rage-grief resistance. *TRANSMISSIONS*, the 2020 Day With(out) Art program of videos commissioned by Visual AIDS in honor of World AIDS day, in the corona of COVID-19, reminds us that “care” has a violent paternalist, necropolitical, and colonial history of anti-trans, anti-crip, and homophobic making die.⁷ But, thanks to the video performance by the Chilean *travestí* band Las Indetectables of Noelia le Shalá’s poetic rewriting of care, “Me Cuido” (Spanish for, at once, “I take care of myself” and “I’m careful”), we may hear the call of a form of care turned back against the system that weaponizes it. Listen to the lyrics’ rearticulation of care as a rallying cry of refusal against the violences of disposability: “I take care to reject your patriarchal myths that seek to marginalize us, to label us other, the inhuman, the murderable, those fags that can be killed, those people who deserve to die . . . Me Cuido . . . I take care not to suppress my sexuality.”⁸

So then what form of taking back care across this fragile planet may help us confront the challenge of an AIDS crisis that is not over as we face a COVID-19 made pandemic and lethal by the structural anti-Black racism, transphobia, and ableism of the global heteropatriarchal racial capitalism and settler-colonial condition that make us sick?

We might begin by acknowledging another form of care that is already its own force of contagion in the world. Against the platitudes of the nonperformative well-wishing of “get well soon” and “take care,” artist-activist Johanna Hedva calls on us to hear past the platitudes to summon another version of care, a radical praxis of care that, like revolution, “insists on itself”: “We take care, we give care, and it can be contagious, it can spread. It shows us that the limit of the world is always a place to be exploded, pushed against, transformed. Meet me there, at the end, where there is give and take, and let’s follow each other into the beginning.”⁹

At the end of the world, in the wake of the retraction of the convivial promises of human life lived together under what is called democracy (remember rights, access, agency, autonomy, something called the “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”?) that have yet to

materialize as “unalienable” for disabled, queer, trans, and racialized life lived in conditions of exacerbated vulnerability and forced precarization, this pandemic-turned-endemic moment, in which we must figure out how to live with more than one virus, presents a critical moment for aesthetic intervention.

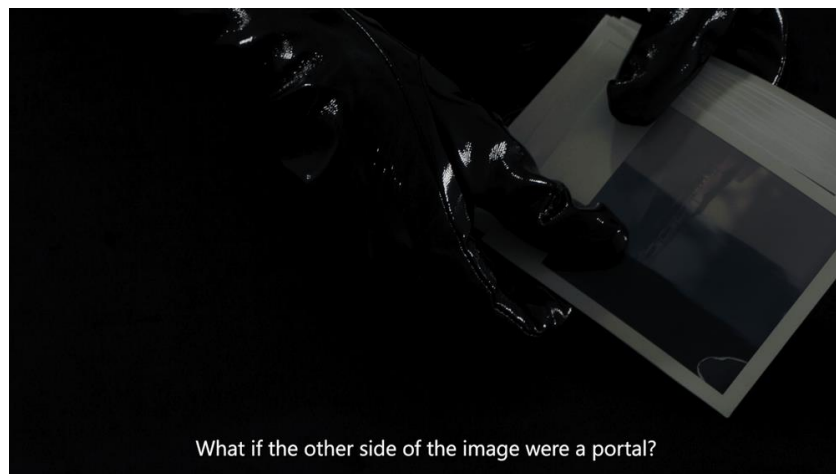


Fig. 2. Jill H. Casid, still from *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)*, 2021, color video with sound, 9:43. By permission of the author

While in quarantine and with an old Polaroid SX-70 in hand, I pursued participant-observation research that took me out to the South Brooklyn Marine Terminal where (as of May 2021) hundreds of the unclaimed dead from COVID-19 were still held in the limbo of the freezer-truck network of disaster morgues, awaiting possible burial on Hart Island (the largest mass grave site in the United States, which may also be the largest cemetery for victims of the AIDS epidemic).¹⁰ These fugitive Polaroids (that summon the kind of uncontrolled, chance encounters where material vulnerability meets disposability and something alchemical happens) became the basis for a first film, *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)* (fig. 2).¹¹ A commission from the Ford Foundation Gallery, the short experimental film premiered on June 9, 2021, in the fifth online chapter, “Melancholy as Medium,” that I conceived for the exhibition *Indisposable: Structures of Support after the Americans with Disabilities Act* as an activist wake.¹² Unfolding a ritual of mediumship, the film conduces our outraged grief as catalytic for the uprising and care work of living with more than one virus, amidst more than one pandemic, carrying our as-yet-unaddressed losses into the battles we’re still waging in the name of supports for the thriving of Black, Brown, Indigenous, crip, queer, and trans vitalities. Centered on these fragile Polaroids (fig. 3), the film conjures with the material susceptibility of analogue photography to commune with the incalculable but still powerful presence of unredressed loss.¹³ In reversing the primacy of showing over telling, the film incorporates disability access as aesthetic gain by making closed captioning integral and image description its primary vehicle.



Fig. 3. Jill H. Casid, Polaroid used in film *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)*, 2021. By permission of the author

Melancholy understood and practiced as medium is no mere synonym for sad; nor is it some fancier, multisyllabic word for grief. Rather, *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)* advocates for melancholy as a praxis. Far from necessarily isolating, melancholy as praxis bonds us in a critical form of denied relation. That is, melancholy practiced in and as the wild binds us together in a presumptively unnatural assembly with the dead and dying, which we also are. And it holds us fast in a refusal to accede to a new normal that accepts death and disposability as necessary and inevitable. *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)* builds on my theoretical work on care for death and is dedicated to opening a portal onto the praxis of a kind of unhinged melancholy as medium, a queer kind of wild care for the dead, dying, and consigned to death to confront the necropolitics of disposability.¹⁴

And yet, while *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)* may be about catalyzing rage-grief resistance to normalization and moving on, it is not inimical to joy. We might, rather, call the melancholy it advocates a praxis of “melancholy joy” off the hook of prescribed happiness and mourning as a ritualized stage that is also contained by the commercial consumption of a funeral-industrial complex.¹⁵ That is, it may be a praxis of the obscene, which gets close to death and dying to contest the very terms of that dying: not mourning and militancy but mourning *as* militancy or, rather, activated melancholy as medium, practiced as a way of conducting our outraged grief that also questions the means as well as the when and where of the political and of activism—from one sick and death bed to another—and not just *on* but also *from* the inhumed but not-at-all-emptied ground of settler coloniality.

Notes

¹ Jill H. Casid, “#thehuman toll cover of the #newyorktimes on #memorialday . . .,” Instagram, May 24, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAImgxUlgmz>. On the construction of the cover, see John Grippe, “The Project Behind a Front Page Full of Names,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/23/reader-center/coronavirus-new-york-times-front-page.html>.

² Dan Barry, “An Incalculable Loss,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/issue/todayspaper/2020/05/24/todays-new-york-times>. The print edition was accompanied by an interactive graphic, updated May 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/24/us/us-coronavirus-deaths-100000.html>.

³ In my post, I reference José Esteban Muñoz, “Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van DerZee, Mapplethorpe, and Looking for Langston,” in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 57–74; Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 3–18; Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002). On the Necroocene, see Jill H. Casid, “Necrolandscaping,” in *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics after Landscape*, ed. Jens Andermann, Lisa Blackmore, and Dayron Carrillo Morell (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2018), 237–64; Jill H. Casid, “Doing Things with Being Undone,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, no. 1 (2019): 30–52.

⁴ COVID-19 Excess Mortality Collaborators, “Estimating Excess Mortality Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Analysis of COVID-19-related Mortality, 2020–21,” *Lancet*, March 10, 2022, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)02796-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02796-3).

⁵ I develop the problem of necrometrical calculation more fully in Jill H. Casid, “Necropolitics at Sea,” in *Migration and the Contemporary Mediterranean: Shifting Cultures in 21st-Century Europe*, ed. Claudia Gualtieri (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 193–214.

- ⁶ David Adam, “COVID’s True Death Toll: Much Higher Than Official Records,” *Nature*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00708-0>.
- ⁷ Visual AIDS, Day With(out) Art 2020 project, *TRANSMISSIONS*, a program of six commissioned videos considering the impact of HIV and AIDS beyond the United States by Jorge Bordello (Mexico), Gevi Dimitrakopoulou (Greece), Lucía Egaña Rojas (Chile/Spain), Las Indetectables (Chile), Charan Singh (India/UK), and George Stanley Nsamba (Uganda), <https://visualaids.org/projects/dwa2020>.
- ⁸ Las Indetectables, “Me Cuido,” Visual AIDS, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/476954259>.
- ⁹ Johanna Hedva, “Get Well Soon,” Caring Structures, Kunstverein Hildesheim, 2020, https://www.kunstverein-hildesheim.de/assets/bilder/caring-structures-ausstellung-digital/Johanna-Hedva/10ef20affc/AUSSTELLUNG_1110_GWS_e.pdf. The essay is part of the project getwellsoon.labr.io by Sam Lavigne and Tega Brain. This work is co-commissioned by Chronus Art Center (Shanghai), Art Center Nabi (Seoul) and Rhizome of the New Museum (New York).
- ¹⁰ The Associated Press, “Bodies of 750 Covid-19 Victims in New York City remain in refrigerated trucks,” NBC News, May 8, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/bodies-750-covid-19-victims-new-york-city-remain-refrigerated-n1266762>. See also Dave Davies, “Reckoning with the Dead: Journalist Goes Inside an NYC COVID-19 Disaster Morgue,” *Health Shots: Health News from NPR*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/28/863710050/reckoning-with-the-dead-journalist-goes-inside-an-nyc-covid-19-disaster-morgue>.
- ¹¹ Jill H. Casid, *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)*, film, June 2021, color video with sound, 9:43. I thank Jack Kellogg for the film’s realization and Jessica A. Cooley, Ann M. Fox, and Lisa Kim for the commission. The film was also shown in *artists + allies iv*, curated by Mitra Korasheh, Signs and Symbols Gallery, August 1–September 25, 2021. I also thank Michelle Handelman for the allyship and for drawing on my theoretical work on the Necocene for DOOMSCROLLING, a livestream video premiere of her THE PANDEMIC SERIES (2020–21), <http://participantinc.org/seasons/season-19/doomscrolling>. I am also grateful to Chi-Ming Yang and Cyle Metzger for the invitations to screen and discuss the film at the University of Pennsylvania and Bradley University, respectively.
- ¹² See “Indisposable: Structures of Support After the ADA, Chapter 5,” Ford Foundation Gallery, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/the-ford-foundation-center-for-social-justice/ford-foundation-gallery/events/indisposable-structures-of-support-after-the-ada-chapter-5>. To watch the event, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dmt9gjjb4ek>. The evening’s session began with a performance of *Transmission V* (2021) by fierce pussy, which was also commissioned as a printed edition in Braille and provided to participants. Holding space to ask such questions as “what does a collective grief doula do?,” members of the What Would an HIV Doula Do? collective Pato Hebert and Abdul-Aliy A. Muhammad read the introduction of their coedited zine *What Does an Uprising Doula Do?* I debuted my film *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)*. Pamela Sneed intervened in the telling of HIV/AIDS as history and honoring the transformative powers of Black lesbian litany and elegy by performing selections from *Funeral Diva* (2020) to remind us of the forms that resistance should not have to take—like survival. And master of ceremonies for the evening, Heather Johnson, read from their poem “Mississippi Appendectomy,” a brilliant re-working of the settler colonial landscape-form published as part of this Colloquium.
- ¹³ See also Sarah Cascone, “Editors’ Picks: 11 Events for Your Art Calendar This Week, From a Talk with the Director of the Uffizi to a Musical Reflection on Agnes Martin,” *Artnet News*, June 7, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/editors-picks-june-7-2021-1972870>.
- ¹⁴ For my elaboration of “care for death,” see Jill H. Casid, “Handle with Care,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 121–35; Jill H. Casid, “Pyrographies: Photography and the Good Death,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012): 109–31. I return to further elaborate “care for death” in the compounded pandemic context and to the Public Feelings Salon convened by the Barnard Center for Research on Women, to which I contributed a first iteration of “Handle with Care,” in “They Did What They Could Do at the Time: Thinking With and After Lauren Berlant,” *Art in America*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/lauren-berlant-remembrance-jill-casid-1234599248>.

¹⁵ See Jill H. Casid, "Thanatography: Working the Folds of Photography's Wild Performativity in Capital's Necrocene," in "Capitalism and the Limits of Photography," ed. Kevin Coleman and Daniel James, special issue, *Photography and Culture* 13, no. 2 (June 2020): 213–38.