

Decolonizing Damiens

The Coloniality of Sovereignty and Government by Terror

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The links between modernity and
terror spring from multiple sources.
—Mbembe, *Necropolitics*¹

1. Introduction

It took a long time for Robert-François Damiens to die. The tortures that were designated for him were not unusual: his flesh was torn by red-hot pincers, one of his hands was burnt with sulfur, a mixture of molten lead, wax, sulfur, and burning resin was poured on the places from which his flesh was torn, and his body was quartered by four horses and then burnt.² The torture did not go smoothly; the pincers were twisted, the horses were untrained, they had to cut his body from the thighs because severing his arms and legs from the joints proved to be too difficult, and he still did not die after being quartered (DP 3–5). It was 1757, and Damiens, whose infamous attempted regicide marks the opening of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, did not die so easily. The spectacle of his death that stretched out over time was one to be watched, and nevertheless so gruesome that many averted their eyes.

Death seems to take a long time when it is wrapped up in spectacles, and so it happened in the spectacle of the death of the girl on the deck of the slave ship *Recovery*, merely a few decades after the death of Damiens, in 1791.³ As we learn from Saidiya Hartman's account, the girl was hoisted in the air over the deck of the ship, her limbs pulled and jerked, and her legs and back whipped.⁴ First suspended by her wrists and then her legs, she was dropped repeatedly until the ropes suspending her came loose and she was opened to a free fall. She did not budge after that. The captain was annoyed, the observers were

concerned. For the next three days after finding her way back down to the ship's hold, she did not move nor eat, until her body gave way to her death.⁵ The terrible spectacle witnessed by everyone on the ship paved the way to her death, to be sure. Nevertheless, her death took longer than the spectacle. It happened at another time, not until the spectacle was done and over with, after she had refused to eat and move for three full days.

Death and spectacles, although seeming close to each other, do not always coincide, nor do they follow each other in the same order. Haci Lokman Birlik's spectacle, for example, took place after he was already dead. Birlik was killed by Turkish security forces in October 2015.⁶ There are conflicting reports on the conditions of his death. According to autopsy results, he was shot twenty-eight times; some reports claim that he was shot while attacking the police forces, while others claim that he was executed in the midst of the clashes, while he was tending to his wounds. What happened after his death, however, is well known: his dead body was tortured and mutilated, large gaping holes were opened in various parts of his body, which was then tied by the neck to the back of a security vehicle and dragged across the streets of Sirnak.⁷ The spectacle was hard to miss for the residents, who were confined in their homes, but it even exceeded the confines of the city: the video of the body being dragged across the streets was later released on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) by the Turkish security forces. Birlik's death became a spectacle after the fact, when he was long gone.

This paper investigates the relations and differences between these three spectacles, and the relation between spectacles and death. I start with these "terrible spectacles," as Hartman calls them, not primarily in order to bring attention to the (of course existing) humanity of these three individuals, nor to condemn violence by appealing only to its most visible and visceral formations.⁸ Moreover, it is not my goal to focus on the similarities and continuities between these "death-events," as Banu Bargu calls them.⁹ Rather, I present a decolonial genealogy of the relation between sovereignty and spectacle, specifically considering what coloniality does to this relation, how it shifts the very core of the sovereign aesthetics of punishment. In the following section of this paper, I focus on Damiens and the role of spectacles for classical theories of sovereignty; engaging specifically with Foucault's account of sovereignty as one such account, I problematize his explanation of the disappearance of spectacles in modern political methods of punishment. In the third section, I focus on the girl on the deck of the *Recovery* whom Hartman describes and situate the spectacle of her death in the opening up of the "abyss," as Édouard Glissant calls it, of the Atlantic slave route,

and the colonization of Americas.¹⁰ I argue that the abyss opens up a new world order, in which structures of power shift drastically. In this view, the coloniality of sovereignty coincides with the opening up of a new mode of living and dying for the enslaved—a phantom-like world of horror, where living and dying are not easily distinguishable from each other. Spectacles of corporeal punishment proliferate in this phantom-like world, not in order to uphold any juridical roles but in relation to economic goals. In the last section of the essay, I turn to Birlik’s death in Turkey’s War on Terror and situate the modern nation-state as a formation that emerges within sovereignty and functions through the establishment and sustaining of colonial difference across the globe. Overall, a decolonial genealogy demonstrates the formation of what I call “colonial sovereignty,” as the emergence of a new relation between sovereignty and terror. In colonial sovereignty, terror is an inseparable element of sovereignty, formed not through the uniqueness but rather the repetition and proliferation of spectacles of death. At the same time, the colonial/modern nation-state functions, as a government by terror, where death becomes meaningless and the spectacles of dead bodies outlive death.

2. The Many Faces of Damiens: Damiens, Spectacles, the “Origin” of Sovereignty

Foucault’s extended discussion of Damiens at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish* is famous not only for the gruesome details it recounts but also due to its place within Foucault’s account of the architecture of power and its role in elucidating the connection between modernity and sovereignty (DP 3–5). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault famously provides a story of power: from sovereignty to discipline, from spectacle to punishment, from the punishment of the body to the punishment of the soul, from Damiens to the timetable. Damiens’ torture is a key moment in the “decline of the spectacle” and the formation of “modern rituals of execution,” which focus on the punishment of the soul rather than the body (DP 10–1, 16). As such, in Foucault’s account, modernity and modernization in punishment consists in the disappearance of spectacles, and Damiens’ execution marks one of the last instances of this particular relation between sovereignty and spectacles.

The spectacle of Damiens’ torture in this story is a paradigmatic example of the work of sovereignty for Foucault. Accordingly, sovereignty is a specifically juridical mode of power that moves from the body of the sovereign to the body of a people.¹¹ It works through laws as prohibitions, and it is necessarily a territorial mode of power. As such, it denotes the capacity to set up rules such as “you must not kill” or

“you must not steal” over a given territory, and the body of the people exist primarily as an undifferentiated mass.¹² Individuals, then, are not important as entities, but only inasmuch as they populate the territory as a mass that is subjected to laws.¹³ Over this mass, sovereignty works specifically as a “negative” exercise of power, working first and foremost through the right to “take life or let live”; in other words, the sovereign is the authority that has the right to kill if borders are crossed or the laws are disobeyed.¹⁴ Because the objects of sovereignty are primarily the laws and the territory, each crime that disobeys laws or crosses borders is an attack against the sovereign: “It attacked his rights and his will present in the law and it thereby attacked his strength and physical body.”¹⁵ The sovereign is vulnerable against the crime. “There was a fragment of regicide in the smallest crime,” Foucault argues, and thus punishment was the “sovereign’s personal vendetta.”¹⁶ In classical law, punishment is the way of the sovereign to erase and overcome the attack, undo the crime, and restore its power: a ritual reversal that is characterized by excess, insofar as the task of the punishment is primarily to show the disequilibrium between the criminal and the sovereign. As Foucault says, “the ceremony of punishment, then, is an exercise of ‘terror’” (DP 49). As such, the example of Damiens shows for Foucault that sovereignty uses punishment as a political ritual that justifies the power of the sovereign, inasmuch as it is a corporeal kind of power that implements its effects through marking the body, an “art of unbearable sensations” through which truth is produced (DP 11).

This conception of each crime as a sort of regicide allows Foucault to focus on Damiens’ torture not as a distinct or exceptional form of punishment for serious crimes but rather as an example of the general attitude of sovereignty toward punishment: it relies on torture (*supplice*) as a method of obtaining truth, and this method is necessarily a spectacular one: “Torture is a technique; it is not an extreme expression of lawless rage” (DP 33). It is a method of demonstration and restoration of sovereignty, it requires to be demonstrated and sealed with a ritual of truth that reinstates the unequal power between the sovereign and the criminal: “The public execution . . . has a juridico-political function. It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most spectacular” (DP 48). The public becomes the witness of the reconstitution of the sovereign authority in the spectacle of torture; spectacularity is precisely what erases the attack. The sovereign becomes brand new through the spectacle. Hence, as Foucault says, “If torture was so strongly embedded in legal practice, it was because it revealed truth and showed the operation of power” (DP 55).

Foucault's account of sovereignty and its juridical foundations follows, as Banu Bargu says, from the accounts of classical theorists of sovereignty. According to Jean Bodin, for example, sovereignty is famously the power to make or annul laws within a given territory.¹⁷ That power to make or annul laws exhibits itself in temporally and territorially limited instances; sovereignty is a 'cut' in the sense that it establishes/reveals itself specifically through opening up an incision in the life of the territory. This view of sovereignty as concretized in the decision-making power of the sovereign is also present in Thomas Hobbes, who assigns to the sovereign monopolized power to punish, and also in Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty as the power to decide on the state of exception.¹⁸ What is specific in Foucault's characterization, however, is not only its focus on the law and the legal nature of sovereign power but its emphasis on the body, and thus the intensification of sovereignty as a corporeal mode of power, which needs spectacularity as a way of proving its hold on the body. In Foucault's account, this is precisely what starts shifting in the eighteenth century with the intensification of disciplinary mechanisms and the progressive disappearance of the spectacle of public torture (DP 6–8, 13–16). This marks the replacement of the monarchic or feudal sovereignty with the intensification of modern nation-states; the state as apparatus ceases to be the central mode of power and instead, in its democratization, it starts working with mechanisms that target the 'soul' as much as the body, thus focusing on methods such as surveillance and regulation.¹⁹ Hence, according to Foucault, this "gloomy festival of punishment" started dying out slowly, leaving its place to the intensification of more and more invisible modes of punishment that were, if not less violent, less proud of their violence (DP 8). Starting from the eighteenth century, the juridico-political function fulfilled by the spectacle leaves its place to more insidious modes of punishment. Accordingly, "justice no longer takes public responsibility for the violence that is bound up with its practice. If it too strikes, if it too kills, it is not as a glorification of its strength, but as an element of itself that it is obliged to tolerate, that it finds difficult to account for" (DP 9).

To be sure, Foucault notes on multiple occasions that modes of power do not simply replace each other: rather, they become more or less prevalent at various points, even as they coexist and infiltrate each other (DP 14–5, 16). In this sense, corporeal punishment still 'haunts' modern punishment for Foucault, though not as spectacle (DP 16).²⁰ As Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson explains, this link between sovereignty and spectacular corporeal punishment is all too often seen as an aspect of sovereignty, that is, as a mechanism of power and a function of its close relation to terror—an all too expected correlation between

supplice as seen in Damiens' case and the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, for example.²¹ Erlenbusch-Anderson quotes Edgar Quinet's work from 1865: "Thus, the Terror was the fatal legacy of the history of France. The weapons of the past were gathered to defend the present."²² If we are to understand the link between sovereignty and terror in the form of physical torture, in how spectacular corporeal punishment of the body becomes a site of sovereign power, like in the *ancien régime*, the torture of Damiens makes this point.

In his reflections on sovereignty, Achille Mbembe highlights the role of terror similarly, as one that is "nowhere . . . so manifest as during the French Revolution. During the French Revolution, terror is construed as an almost necessary part of politics" (N 73). For Mbembe, it is important, however, to shift the genealogy of this connection, and include a larger domain; accordingly, "terror is a defining feature of both slave and late modern colonial regimes" (N 91). Seeing *supplice* and the Reign of Terror as correlated discloses terror as a fundamental and foundational part of sovereign authority, seen not only in the context of western European history but also across the globe, potentially in contexts of slavery and late-modern colonial regimes. In this line of thought, one can thus see that all acts of corporeal and spectacular punishment—be they in the form of *supplice*, the guillotine, death on the deck of a slave ship, or on the back of a security vehicle in the streets of a small town in eastern Turkey—are marked by necessity of spectacles as an unmistakable mark of sovereignty. This affinity produces what Judith Butler calls "petty sovereigns," for instance, in cases when violence can be reproduced not only by sovereigns as state figureheads but also by other agents that perform this power in liminal spaces.²³ Accordingly, between Damiens' death, the Reign of Terror, the girl on the deck of the *Recovery*, and the death of Birlik, one can see the re-instantiations of sovereign authority, deployed at times by petty sovereigns—the ship captain, or the unnamed, military and paramilitary members of a remote town.

Nevertheless, as Erlenbusch-Anderson helpfully notes, "there is a more general and more intricate history of behaviors, methods, tactics, and devices that draws our attention not only to the techniques but also to their contextually specific function."²⁴ Ostensibly similar moments of violence do not necessarily serve the same function; as Foucault notes in *The Punitive Society*, despite appearances—"there have not been many ways of dying"—the role of death penalty fulfills different functions in penal systems based on retribution versus those based on vengeance, and those based on models of debt.²⁵ Death does not take the same shape, nor does it play the same function across different contexts and moments: seemingly similar moments of spectacle and violence,

such as the *supplice* endured by Damiens, and the torture deployed on the girl on the deck of the *Recovery*, and the torture inflicted on Birlik, can and should be considered as distinct from each other. Indeed, while all demonstrate spectacular and corporeal modes of punishment, they present significant distinctions. In these three instances of what seems like sovereign violence, not only is the subject of torture different but also the temporality of death and the function of the spectacle, as well as what and who is meant by the sovereign. Between the *ancien régime* and “slave and late modern colonial regimes,” it is important to consider not only what appears similar in terms of the acts of violence but what is irreducibly ruptured (N 91). In other words, it is important to analyze not what stays the same but rather what happens to it, and the ways in which the irreducible shift of coloniality marks the face of sovereignty.

3. Sovereignty in the Abyss: Coloniality and the Redistribution of Spectacles

Mbembe’s account moves from the idea, “that modernity is at the origin of multiple concepts of sovereignty” (N 67). Indeed, Foucault treats sovereignty as a monolithic concept, with a particular focus on tying sovereign authority to monarchic and feudal authority, especially within the European context; thus his account of the disappearance of spectacular corporeal violence with the rise of modern technologies of disciplinary power encounters significant obstacles when one considers the multiplication and dispersion of spectacles of subjection, precisely in relation to modernity. While Damiens is punished by sovereign authority taking the shape of feudal power, neither the spectacle of the girl’s death on the deck of *Recovery*, nor the dead body of Birlik, can be interpreted in relation to formations of feudal sovereign authority. These “terrible spectacles” take place as indisputably modern spectacles, spectacles of death that are situated at the crossroads of modernity and terror. The question, thus, is not only about whether the relation between sovereignty and terror is dissolved with the rise of modern technologies of power but rather about where we situate modernity, and the ways in which modernity ruptures, shifts, and even intensifies the connection between sovereignty and terror.

According to Aníbal Quijano, modernity must be understood not in relation to categories of progress and rationality but rather through the opening up of a new mode of power with the process of colonization of the Americas.²⁶ This new mode of power, which he names the “coloniality of power,” is “the first identity of modernity” (CP 182). Coloniality of power is defined by two key historical processes: The first “was the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the

idea of ‘race,’ a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others”; and the second involved the “constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources and products” (ibid.). What follows from these processes is the emergence of a “new world order,” as Sylvia Wynter refers to it, that is, of a world in which Europe constitutes the hegemonic center, as well as the emergence and sustenance of the Atlantic circuit for the very particular needs of this world order.²⁷ Thus, what is named “modernity” is a fundamental shift in the epistemic conditions for the relations between humans in accordance with relations of hierarchization, and the formation of new relations of labor that both support and feed from these relations of hierarchization. What comes forth in and through these two axes are new modes of living and dying, which emerge specifically in relation to the changes to the face of terror.

According to Quijano, while the idea of race emerges for the first time as a way of “granting legitimacy to the relations of domination imposed by the conquest,” modernity is marked by a “racial division of labor,” which is imposed as a way of sustaining the emergence of capitalism as the “global model of control of work” (CP 183–4). In this process, while waged labor is reserved for the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors, the rest of the population becomes hierarchized in their labor relations in accordance with the newly formed racial hierarchies—serfdom and slavery become the two models of labor control that are reserved, respectively, for the Indigenous population, and the Black population.²⁸ Slavery “was deliberately established and organized as a commodity in order to produce goods for the world market and to serve the purposes and needs of capitalism” (CP 198). Importantly, slavery as a mode of racialized subjection emerges in this context, and similarly, the mode of control that is operative in slavery significantly changes its shape to be reorganized in accordance with racial lines. Thus, as Hartman writes, “at the beginning of modernity, slavery declined in Europe as it expanded in Africa,” and moreover, the Iberians can be credited, according to one historian, “for restricting bondage, for the first time in history to peoples of African descent.”²⁹ The ossification of the line between the slave and the free, however, does not concretize until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the (by then fully developed) Atlantic route starts serving as the key distinguishing factor between the free and the enslaved across racial lines and, specifically, becomes the main delineator of peoples of African descent.

This moment of formation of racialized slavery as the underlying condition of modernity and modern political order, marks the formation of a new mode of subjectivity and a new relation to power and death: the opening up of the “abyss,” as Glissant calls it (PR 6).

Glissant further explains that for the enslaved the abyss is, in fact, a triple abyss, which opens up in the Middle Passage and, in many ways, swallows the globe with it. First, there is the slave ship, the “belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonword from which you cry out” (ibid.) The boat is “pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death”; it marks a moment where the dead and the living are not separated from each other with clear lines (ibid.). The sentence of death, moreover, is not the sentence of *supplice*: it is not decreed, and yet it is legal. Second, there are the depths of the sea; here, the dead exist and not-exist at the same time. Glissant highlights that the passengers of the boats become the cargo that can always be unloaded when necessary, the entire bottom of the ocean “marked by these balls and chains gone green” (ibid.). Last, there is the abyss of the unknown worlds, lands, and gods, where people are living and dying, forgotten by their gods and loved ones. The belly of the boat, Glissant says, is a “womb abyss,” accompanied by the “infinite abyss” of the ocean, and the abyss of the new lands; the abyss serves as the “alluvium” for the emergence of new modes of living and dying, which appear in this moment, as well as new modes of relations between subjects and terror in the “new world order” (PR 7–8).³⁰

This abyss that Glissant talks about in the emergence of the new world order is in line with what Mbembe describes as the “triple loss” of slavery: the loss of a home, the loss of rights over one’s own body, and the loss of political status; or “absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death” (N 75). The enslaved, separated from their kin, gods, and language, occupy a specific relation to death. Specifically, the abyss founds the formation of a new kind of death, a death that is so close to life that it seems indistinguishable from it (N 75–6). Just as the boat, as Glissant says, is pregnant with as many dead as living “under sentence of death,” where the living become cargo and alluviums at the bottom of the sea, Mbembe says the life of the enslaved is in many ways a kind of “death-in-life,” where “the slave . . . is kept alive, but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity” (N 75). In this “phantom-like world,” corporeal violence, which resembles *supplice* in its forms, becomes not any extremity nor any singular show of power, but rather “an element in manners,” an “act of caprice and pure destruction aimed at instilling terror” (ibid.). Terror, in the colonial power, becomes not an exception nor a height but rather a mode of caprice, a mode of everyday possibility for the enslaved. The girl on the deck of *Recovery*, thus, does not experience terror as a singular or unique occurrence; rather, she experiences it as an everyday possibility and element in manners.

Moreover, the infliction of corporeal violence becoming an “element in manners” or an everyday occurrence changes something about spectacles: the spectacle of corporeal violence also becomes an everyday, and not exceptional, appearance. Mbembe writes: “The violent tenor of the slave’s life is manifested through the overseer’s disposition to behave in a cruel and intemperate manner, as well as in the spectacle of pain inflicted on the slave’s body” (ibid.). In this phantom-like world, spectacles of routine violence constitute both everyday occurrences and also modes of intensification of the relation of domination in slavery; demonstrations of power, on the other hand, such as forcing the enslaved to watch the spectacle and, at times, partake in it, also make up everyday occurrences, all of which “confirmed the slaveholder’s dominion” and the captive body “the vehicle of the master’s power and truth.”³¹ These spectacles are split from forms of punishment; even though they demonstrate power, corporeal violence is not punitive, or a vendetta. Rather, as an “element in manners,” these spectacles are necessarily regular, and they are sustained by regularity. In this sense, the new mode of subjection that emerges in the Atlantic route consists of a phantom-like world, a new space in between life and death, where violence and spectacle consist in regular occurrences of this world, demonstrating the emergence of a kind of power that uses spectacular corporeal punishment not in irregular cases but as a form of its sustained exercise. Moreover, such repetition of spectacles is neither an act of punishment, as in the case of *supplice* that is the sovereign’s vendetta, nor a ceremonial restitution of power that is connected to a juridical or discursive sphere; rather, it forms an element of the mundane life of slavery where, as Hartman says, “terror is yoked to enjoyment.”³²

What marks the Atlantic route and the colonization of the Americas is not only the formation of a new historical moment, but the opening up of a phantom-like world, where living and dying are not strictly distinguishable from each other, and where spectacles of corporeal violence make up everyday occurrences. While Foucault’s account of sovereignty insists on the sovereign’s right to “make live and let die,” a new relation between power and the subject opens up in the coloniality of power, in the abyss—one that is able to open up such a phantom-like world (SMD 241). Such is the coloniality of sovereignty, a shift in sovereign authority that works neither through laws nor borders but specifically in the spaceless abyss described by Glissant, through the constant repetition of spectacles of horror until they become mundane. Rather than demonstrating power through the vendetta of a centralized authority, the coloniality of sovereignty consists in dispersions and voyages. Most importantly, the coloniality of sovereignty consists not in

the power to “take life or let live” but in a new mode of subjection that is born in the abyss.

As the Atlantic slave trade and its specific formation of slavery form new modes of living and dying, what is ‘new’ about modernity becomes clear: a new mode of organization of the globe across racial lines that inscribe relations of subjectivity and subjection. Indeed, a new “space/time” emerges in modernity: the possibility of a mode of subjection that dwells in the abyss, a mode of subjection that consists in creating a phantom-like world between living and dying (CP 205). “Coloniality was constitutive of modernity”;³³ indeed, and unlike Foucault’s thesis, neither torture nor spectacles of corporeal pain disappear with modernity; rather, they become multiplied, customary, dispersed, and, specifically, racialized. In other words, they coincide with a routinary part and expression of a new mode of subjection within a phantom-like world organized racially. The coloniality of sovereignty marks that particular form of authority that is neither juridical nor discursive, but rather a corporeal authority that realizes itself in opening up a phantom-like world of horror. In this world, spectacles do not disappear, nor are they rare. Instead, they are everywhere, and yoked to enjoyment.

4. Afterlives of the Colony: Government by Terror

Terror, thus, is a characteristic of modernity: modernity consists not in the disappearance of spectacles of torture but in their dispersion and multiplication, and the opening up of a new mode of subjection that consists in living with the continuity of spectacles of violence. Between Damiens and the girl on the deck of *Recovery*, between the terrible scenes of both of their deaths, one can thus see the different function of the spectacle: the coloniality of sovereignty distributes spectacles of corporeal harm differentially across racial lines. Spectacles do not correspond to laws or territories broken or crossed; instead, they coincide with the continuation and reconstitution of the house of horrors of modernity.

Nevertheless, while modernity and its conjunction with coloniality is a global phenomenon, it does not have the same face across the globe—it works and impacts different geographies differentially. When considering the link between sovereignty and terror, or terror in the form of corporeal and spectacular punishment, it is important to consider not only how sovereignty as a stable mechanism becomes more or less prevalent at different points but also the shifts that characterize sovereignty with the opening up of what Walter D. Mignolo calls “the colonial difference.”³⁴ Indeed, while modernity can be seen as marked by the coloniality of sovereignty, the phantom-like world that opens up

looks different from different geographies. The darker side of modernity involves that very specific phenomenon called the (post)modern nation-state, where spectacles of death outlive physical death and extend over time to the afterlives of the dead body. It is within this context of the postmodern nation-state that the body of those like Birlik is dragged behind security vehicles, and the spectacle of death consists not in its events, but in its aftermaths.

As Quijano says, “what is currently called the ‘modern’ nation-state is a very specific experience”: it is one that is born out of and in conjunction with coloniality (CP 205). A nation-state, Quijano argues, is formed through its juxtapositions with sovereignty: “The process always begins with centralized political power over a territory and its population (or a space of domination), because the process of possible nationalization can occur only in a given space, over a prolonged period of time, with the precise space being more or less stable for that period” (CP 206). Nevertheless, inasmuch as nation-states are formed as domains of sovereignty, a modern nation-state is a particular configuration of power: it “involves the modern institutions of citizenship and political democracy, but only in the way in which citizenship can function as legal, civil, and political equality for socially unequal people” (CP 205). As such, a modern nation-state is a product of coloniality, and inasmuch as coloniality lies at the heart of the racialization of the globe, the modern nation-state works on the basis of a socially unequal body of people, and on the basis of a process of homogenization that is displayed as democratic homogenization. A modern nation-state, in this sense, is born out of the coloniality of sovereignty through and through; it is born in distributing terror across the population. As such, the modern nation-state is a global phenomenon that operates in the phantom-like world of horrors opened up in the processes of colonization, and it extends beyond the geographic boundaries of the Atlantic circuit.

Coloniality is distinct from colonialism. Indeed, while the process of colonization of the Americas and the Atlantic route marks the opening of a new configuration of being, subjectivity, and politics, the space/time configuration that emerges in this process, as Quijano says, has “proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established” (CP 181). Coloniality, as a global matrix of power relations, extends beyond the temporal framework of colonization; the abyss, that is, extends over time and space. While the formal processes of colonization of the Americas and the Atlantic circuit mark concrete historical events, they also constitute shifts into new modes of subjection, and racialized relations of power mark the key element of these afterlives. Modern nation states are,

according to Quijano, products of coloniality, insofar as they enact racial homogenization disguised as democratic homogenization. This dynamic of homogenization marks their key characteristics, enacted through internal or external processes of colonization (CP 205–6). On the one hand, insofar as the body that the nation-state works on is the product of coloniality, it is a body of people that is hierarchized and divided across racial lines. On the other hand, by assuming civil and legal equality on the basis of this social inequality, the modern nation-state functions on the basis of homogenizing its domain; practices of ethnic cleansing and internal and external colonization all fulfill the same task, inasmuch as they function as constituting a homogenous, civilly and legally equal group of people (CP 207).

At the same time, inasmuch as coloniality is a global phenomenon, it does not function in the same way across the globe. What Mignolo calls “colonial difference” refers to the multiple ways in which histories of coloniality effectuate seemingly similar, but in fact quite different, processes across the globe: “The colonial difference is a connector that, in short, refers to the changing faces of colonial differences throughout the history of the modern/colonial world-system.”³⁵ Thus, the process of democratic homogenization does not take place in the same way within Europe as it does in its peripheries. In Europe, as Quijano explains, democratic homogenization takes place “with the emergence of some small political nuclei that conquered their space of domination and imposed themselves over diverse and heterogeneous peoples, identities, and states that inhabited it” (CP 206). Across the globe, the modern nation-state works through an internal homogenization of a heterogeneous group of people: in the Southern Cone, for example, the process of “racial homogenization of a society’s members, imagined from a Eurocentric perspective . . . was carried out . . . through a massive elimination of some of them (Indians) and the exclusion of others (blacks and mestizos)” (CP 212). In this sense, coloniality in the context of modern nation-states creates a house of horrors, where things that appear similar to each other and familiar are nevertheless marked by abyssal differences. The process of homogenization, integral to the modern European nation-state deploys different techniques, and the colonial difference is precisely what marks this distinction. Hence, Mbembe similarly repeats, the history of modern democracy (and, one could add, of European modernity at large) has “two faces, and even two bodies—the solar body, on the one hand, and *the nocturnal body*, on the other” (N 22).³⁶ Thus, one can talk about sovereignty as a colonial/modern mode of power, for example, but diagnosing it as such does not mean that it is going to operate through the same techniques across geographies; instead, it can mean that it does function differentially, deploying different goals, modes of

institutionalization, and modes of organization. The colonial difference functions not only on epistemic and ontological levels but on relevant political levels as well—modes of power operate differently, deploy different technologies, and have different goals at times.

This has crucial implications for the modes of living and dying that emerge in the coloniality of sovereignty, and those that operate in the solar and nocturnal side of modernity. In Foucault's account, the development of "modern" technologies around the body and the individual also implies the infiltration and permeation of sovereign authority with technologies of discipline and biopolitics. Hence, the de-emphasis of the corporeal and spectacular violence attached to sovereign authority is accompanied by the increase in mechanisms that are concerned with regulation and management of life and the living (DP 138–41; SMD 243–5, 276). However, the nocturnal body of modern terror demonstrates another deployment: "the state's progressive loss of the monopoly of violence has ended in a gradual devolution of this monopoly to a multiplicity of bodies operating either outside the state or else within it but in relative autonomy" (N 35). This is a form of "government by terror," in which, as Mbembe says, "at issue is no longer so much to repress and discipline, as it is to kill either en masse or in small doses" (ibid.). The multiplication of killing makes death the normal state of affairs, wherein sovereignty in government by terror consists in "the power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge—people for whom living means continually standing up to death" (N 37). What Mbembe calls "necropolitics" consists not in the killing itself but rather in the administration of death by creating death zones and, in doing so, managing and regulating entire populations. As such, necropolitics refers, as Mbembe says, to "organized destruction" (N 38). In the nocturnal side of modernity, colonial sovereignty gives birth to the modern nation-state, a necropolitical state formation that works through managing, administering, and maximizing death.

Thus, we can say that the multiplication of spectacles of horror that opens up in the phantom-like world of modernity, also brings with it another relationship of terror, which is distributed geographically across the globe; what emerges in this process is specifically the government by terror, which works on the nocturnal side of modernity through managing, administering, and maximizing death. This government by terror does not see death as connected to loss, and it rather results in "a generalized . . . habituation to loss" (ibid.). Within this context, there is nothing tragic about death, which becomes increasingly spectral (ibid.). In government by terror, death is utterly normal and removed from tragedy, and the dead body is devoid of any meaning. Indeed, as Mbembe

says, “Oftentimes, the most striking thing is the tension between the petrification of bones and their strange coldness, on the one hand, and their obstinacy in wanting to signify something at all costs, on the other” (N 36). Such is the context in which the body of Birlik is dragged through multiple streets at the back of a security vehicle, striking in its obstinacy to signify the death that fell upon him and, nevertheless, the spectacle of his death outliving death itself. This, indeed, is the “war on terror”: “a war of eradication, indefinite, absolute, that claims the right to cruelty, torture, and indefinite detention—and so a war that draws its weapons from the ‘evil’ that it pretends to be eradicating” (N 38).

Government by terror focuses on multiplying terror, neither to reinstate authority in the face of a crime, nor as a side element to the economic motive of profit (N 36). Instead, its goal is homogenization and, to achieve it, it focuses on the normalization of terror, opening up death worlds, where death and the dead become utterly meaningless and anything but tragic. This is the world of the modern nation-state on the nocturnal side of modernity, where acts are split from punishment, bodies split from rights, and spectacles split from death. The coloniality of sovereignty is what ensures their togetherness, and their separation, at once.

5. Decolonizing Spectacles

Damiens the regicide, the girl of the *Recovery*, and Birlik, are thus both close and far from each other. Each of them can be placed on the modernity/coloniality matrix, each illustrating a moment in the formation of the global colonial world order. They form constellation of what is called the coloniality of sovereignty, its relation to death, and its relation to spectacles. They belong in the same order but are also worlds apart from each other. Coloniality shifts the very meaning and operation of sovereignty, its connection to laws and territories, its connection to bodies, lives, and deaths. Unlike the theories of sovereignty that can be traced from Bodin, Hobbes, and Schmitt to Foucault, the coloniality of sovereignty consists not in the power to make laws or annul them or, as Foucault famously declared, in the “right to take life or let live” (SMD 241). Indeed, the episode of Damiens the regicide demonstrates, in Foucault’s account, the reliance of feudal and monarchic sovereignty on irregular spectacles of corporeal violence; *supplice* functions as that moment of vendetta of sovereign authority, for laws broken or borders crossed, where the sovereign demonstrates its might and reconstitutes itself.

On the other hand, it is particularly in colonial sovereignty, which consists in extending and stretching out terror and in creating a phantom-like world of horrors, as Mbembe says, that living and dying

are not distinguishable from each other, and spectacles proliferate beyond acts of sovereign punishment. Indeed, in this sense, while the depiction of sovereignty provided by Foucault, which is sustained by the “additional burden of a spectacular, unlimited, personal, irregular, and discontinuous power” (DP 88), attests to the work of monarchical or feudal sovereignty in the context of in-Europe relations, this tie between sovereignty as the “right to take life” and such an additional burden of making spectacles of pain rare or discontinuous, is broken in colonial sovereignty (SMD 247). The death of the nameless girl on the deck of the *Recovery* marks one such moment, where the spectacle of her pain is an “element in manners”: it demonstrates power, certainly, but it is not rare, discontinuous, juridical, or territorial. Rather, her death is a moment in that phantom-like world, where spectacles of corporeal violence belong in the economic system of the Atlantic circuit.

As we saw, coloniality is distinguished from colonialism, insofar as it demonstrates the opening of a new “space/time” that extends beyond the temporal and geographic lines of the Atlantic route and the Americas. Indeed, colonial sovereignty marks the emergence of a new world order and new modes of living and dying. While Europe-centered accounts of modernity may demonstrate the double process of “the disappearance of the spectacle and the elimination of pain,” a consideration of the coloniality of sovereignty points toward the “work of death” that pushes itself beyond the limits of life and death in order to create entire populations that have, in fact, the status of living dead (DP 11; N 66–70). In this context, while spectacle attests to the work of power, it is now separated from punishment, and becomes a technique of power, taking a life of its own.

The coloniality of sovereignty functions differently in the solar and nocturnal sides of modernity. The modern nation-state is a product of coloniality, not only historically but also schematically; it works through assuming equality on the basis of an unequal and racialized body of people, born out of the goal of homogenization, with the name of democracy. As such, it is born in distributing terror across the population racially, and it extends beyond the geographic and temporal limits of colonization. While this is the general formation that characterizes the modern nation-state, the colonial difference makes it function differently across the solar and nocturnal sides of modernity. On the nocturnal side, neither concerned with discipline nor with the management of the life of the population, sovereignty consists in administering, managing, and regulating death, taking the form of what Mbembe calls necropolitics. In government by terror, spectacles are split from death, and dead bodies do not signify death. Instead,

living means continually standing up to death, while dead bodies and their spectacles outlive death itself, obstinate to signify something.

NOTES

1. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 72; henceforth N, followed by page number.
2. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1978), pp. 3–5; henceforth DP, followed by page number.
3. David Richardson, ed., *The Final Years, 1770–1807*, vol. 4 of *Bristol, Africa, and the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade to America* (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1996), p. 193.
4. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Transatlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007), pp. 138–9.
5. Ibid.
6. “Who Was the Man Turkish Police Dragged through the Streets?,” *The Observers*, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20151008-turkey-police-dragged-streets-kurdish-video> (accessed May 27, 2023).
7. Robert Mackey, “Turkey to Investigate Images of Dead Kurdish Man Being Dragged,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/world/europe/turkey-to-investigate-images-of-dead-kurdish-man-being-dragged.html> (accessed May 27, 2023); BIA News Desk, “Davutoğlu: Two Police Officers Dragging Dead Body of Lokman Birlik in Şırnak Relieved of Duty,” *Bianet: Bağımsız İletişim Ağı*, <https://bianet.org/haber/davutoglu-two-police-officers-dragging-dead-body-of-lokman-birlik-in-sirnak-relieved-of-duty-168253> (accessed May 27, 2023).
8. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.
9. Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 41.
10. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 6; henceforth PR, followed by page number.
11. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at Collège de France 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart (New York: Picador, 2007), pp. 11–2, 23.
12. Ibid., p. 4
13. Ibid., p. 23.

14. Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at Collège de France 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 241; henceforth SMD, followed by page number.
15. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at Collège de France 1974–1975*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 82.
16. Ibid.
17. Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, p. 44; Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty: Four Chapters from The Six Books of the Commonwealth*, trans. and ed. Julian H. Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 2, 16.
18. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 216; Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), pp. 6–7, 12.
19. See Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, p. 46.
20. Penelope Deutscher writes: “This replacement can amount to a simultaneously complementary *and* conflicting survival of the replaced mode, a ‘survival’ containing dehiscence as well as absorption” (*Foucault’s Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2017], p. 88).
21. Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 26–7.
22. Edgar Quinet, *La Révolution* (Paris: Belin, 1987), p. 505; cited in Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism*, p. 25.
23. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 56.
24. Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism*, p. 26.
25. Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at Collège de France 1972–1973*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 10.
26. Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, ed. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 181–224; henceforth CP, followed by page number.
27. Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World Order,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), p. 13.
28. Quijano explains that “the vast genocide of the Indians in the first decades of colonization was not caused principally by the violence of the conquest or by the plagues that the conquistadors brought, but because so many

- American Indians were used as disposable manual labor and forced to work until death” (CP 186).
29. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p. 5.
 30. See John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
 31. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 8.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
 33. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. xxi.
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. Walter D. Mignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference,” in *Coloniality at Large*, pp. 229–30.
 36. One can find a similar point in the work of Maria Lugones, in the articulation of the “light” and “dark” sides of modernity at large, as applied, this time, to the colonial/modern gender system. See Maria Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 22:1 (2007), pp. 186–209.