

The Space of Death: The Black Hole from Which Colonialism Emerges

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WRITER'S COMMENT: I wrote this paper for my History 102x Seminar with Professor El Shakry, and I am very proud of the hard work and careful thinking that went into it. The class was titled "Colonialism and its Discontents," and every week involved thinking critically about a philosophical, theoretical, or deeply intellectual text. For this final paper, I chose a topic centered around the idea of the space of death, which itself is difficult to describe. I surprised myself with how willing I was to tackle a relatively philosophical and theoretical topic. I really enjoyed the process of writing this paper, largely due to Professor El Shakry's encouragement to think at a higher intellectual level and to interact deeply with the texts at hand.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Arianna Barzman-Grennan's essay on "The Space of Death" represents her final project for our capstone History seminar on "Colonialism and the Making of the Modern World." Throughout the seminar Arianna dazzled us with her brilliant oral and written skills; each week her written précis became more involved, more philosophical, and more cogent. I was not at all surprised, therefore, when she chose a most difficult and inchoate topic, "the space of death," for her final paper. Writing about colonialism, its horrors and its ambivalences, is no simple undertaking and Arianna affords it the appropriate gravitas. Arianna explores the space of death in the culture of terror under colonialism, delineating its material and ideological contours. Mobilizing multiple case studies, ranging from colonial India to colonial Algeria, her essay is at once empirical and philosophical, while grounded in both historical fact and liter-

ary fiction. Developing a powerful writing style that is inspired, in part, by the dense theoretical work of thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, and Talal Asad, she examines the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in the intimacy of the death worlds created by the colonial encounter.

— *Omnia El Shakry, Department of History*

Colonialism in action proves to be something far less golden than the standard European tale would have the world believe. In their respective works, Michael Taussig, Assia Djebar, Albert Camus, and Aimé Césaire all reflect upon the dark aspects of colonialism, in part by employing the concept of the *space of death*. It is difficult to give this concept a simple definition, but its repeated appearances in scholarly and fictional accounts of colonial histories widely separated over space and time, make it clear that the space of death is integral to understanding disparate observations of colonial interactions. It is the distance between the colonizer and the colonized, the oppressive silence shattered by violent noise, the erasure and invisible nature of the native before the colonizer's eyes, and when pulled together, it is a space for the creation of the New World: the colonized world.

In his article “Culture of Terror—Space of Death. Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture,” Michael Taussig draws out the relationship between colonialism, torture, and terror. He argues that it is indivisibly connected to the creation of a culture of terror vital to maintaining colonial authority. The space of death is both a physical space and the ideological space where the conflict between colonizers and natives occurs. Most generally speaking,

the space of death is crucial to the creation of meaning and consciousness, [but] nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes. We may think of the space of death as a threshold, yet it is a wide space whose breadth offers positions of advance as well as of extinction.¹

¹ Michael Taussig, “Culture of Terror—Space of Death. Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture,” *Comparative Studies in*

The space of death is “the mediator par excellence of colonial hegemony. The space of death is one of the crucial spaces where Indian, African, and white gave birth to the New World” (468).

Assia Djebar’s *Fantasia* and Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* both approach the space of death as a more abstract concept, but it is nonetheless apparent in their work. *Fantasia* gives accounts from Djebar’s life interspersed with reconstructed accounts of the colonization of Algeria. *The Stranger* is an insightful view of life in colonial Algeria, told through the fictional story of a *pied-noir* man (an Algerian settler of French descent). Djebar explicitly details the moment of first contact between the French and the Algerians, and in this first encounter several themes are established which appear in Camus’ work as well: the invisibility of the natives on the shore or their appearance as part of the landscape; the silence before the splitting, violent noise; and the coast or beach as a liminal space – a literal space of death. Camus’ use of the beach as the location for the murder of the Arab man incorporates all of these ideas. Meursault is on the beach and describes the oppressive heat of the sun: “It was this burning, which I couldn’t stand anymore, that made me move forward.”² From there he moves across the beach to where the Arab is reclining under some trees; Meursault literally crosses the liminal space of the beach to where the encounter will occur. The actual murder is described using very little detail; there is a characteristic haze which features prominently in *The Stranger*, and in the descriptions of violence in *Fantasia*. Meursault feels an enormous physical pressure, the sun feels impossibly bright and hot, and finally when Meursault pulls the trigger, he finds that “there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started.”³ It is the shattering noise, more than the bullets, which do not even mark the body, that is credited with killing the Arab and beginning Meursault’s troubles.

The dehumanization or purposeful erasure of the native people is characteristic of the creation of the space of death. The Arab in *The Stranger* is never given a name, consistent with the broader process of Algerians (or any colonized group) being systematically dehumanized through their relegation to the natural background of the colony. Frantz

Society and History, Vol. 26, No.3 (1984): 467-68.

² Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (New York: Vintage, 1989): 59.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

Fanon asserts, in *Wretched of the Earth*, that “The Algerians, the veiled women, the palm trees, and the camels make up the landscape, the natural background to the human presence of the French.”⁴

Fantasia mirrors the images presented in *The Stranger*; the moment of first contact between the French and Algerians, 13 June 1830, is blanketed in absolute silence: “No sound accompanies this transformation – this solemn moment of anticipation, breathless with suspense, the moment before the overture strikes up.”⁵ Algiers itself “faces [the French] in the unchanging light which absorbs the sounds”⁶ made by the nearly silent Frenchmen. Finally, “the silence of this majestic morning is nothing but the prelude to the cavalcade of screams and carnage which will fill the ensuing decades.”⁷ Taussig’s conception of the space of death as a space of creation also comes through in Djébar’s writing when she questions “why, above all the corpses that will rot on the successive battlefields, does this first Algerian campaign reverberate with the sounds of an obscene copulation?”⁸ The noise – once again breaking through around death – over battlefields strewn with corpses, so literally a space of death – is the noise of the creation of new life: the life of the colonized.

Another story from *Fantasia* that viscerally captures the real space of death is the smoking-out of the caves at El-Kantara in June 1845. The French blocked Algerians into a series of caves and lit fires at the entrances and inside some of the caves where they could. By enclosing the Algerians in the burning caves, the French created a physical space of death and condemned the Algerians to die inside this space. Once again Djébar uses silence and sound to describe the space of death: “The gunshots are followed by silence; a ripple of sound, then a distant hammering that eats into the heart of the mountain. The soldiers gaze upwards, waiting for the mountain to divulge the violent secret hidden in the rocks.”⁹ The next morning a few survivors made it out of the cave, only to be killed upon

4 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, [1961] 1963): 250.

5 Assia Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (Portsmouth N.H., 1985): 6.

6 *Ibid.*, 7.

7 *Ibid.*, 8.

8 *Ibid.*, 19.

9 Djébar, 71.

reaching the surface. The entire area was “surrounded by smoke and a quasi-religious silence.”¹⁰

These encounters take place on a beach, or in a shady cove, or in some cave, because they cannot take place in a firmly established space. When Lieutenant Colonel Pélissier actually reported on the cave burning with accuracy, his account generated embarrassment, fury, and shame in variously aligned factions, contributing to political upheaval in Paris. His error, according to another lieutenant, was that Pélissier “gave in his report an eloquent and realistic—much too realistic—description of the Arabs’ suffering.”¹¹ After that incident such reports were deliberately left much more vague. It would not do to name the atrocities committed or to acknowledge the personhood of the Arabs.

The beach as a liminal space is of great significance because it is between both cultures and groups, and thus the conflicts affect both of them. The beach is also a literal gap between the two entities of colonizer and colonized, and represents not only the physical space between them but also the gap of human difference. In the same way that the beach is a gap, streets are used to create space between Meursault and the Arab in *The Stranger*. The Arab is most often viewed from a distance, across a street or down a beach, putting a literal space between Meursault and his Arab victim. It is the gap between the self and the other, and it is felt in the horror of the gaze between the other and the colonizer.

The horror of the other is exemplified in many ways in different writings and serves to further stretch the gap between the colonizer and the other. The horror of the space of death extends from the colonized population’s participation (or their purported participation) in activities that are beyond what the colonizer is comfortable with. Taussig’s writing focuses in part on Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report (published by the British House of Commons in July 1913), which details the horrors associated with rubber production in the Putumayo region of Peru. Taussig identifies the colonizers’ deeply ingrained fear of cannibalism, which they associated with the Putumayo natives, as one of the roots of fear of the other in that region. The “great ideological potency”¹² that became attached to cannibalism lent itself well to the perpetuation of

10 Djebar, 72.

11 Ibid., 75.

12 Taussig, 489.

terror and the cultivation of negative stereotypes. “The figure of the cannibal was elaborated and used for many sorts of ends, responding as it did to some of the most powerful symbolic forces known to humankind,”¹³ and thus the figure of the cannibal achieved mythic status. Stories grew more fantastic with each retelling, increasing the negative power of the cannibal role, creating more fear and mistrust. Here it is possible to see the effects on both the colonizer and the colonized, as the colonizers became fearful of native populations (and thus more forceful with them), and the natives were bound by the harmful stereotypes perpetuated through the purposeful spreading of destructive stories. Because Taussig defines the space of death as a place “crucial to the creation of meaning and consciousness” especially “in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes,”¹⁴ the perpetuation of the terror around cannibalism was an aspect of creating the space of death in the Putumayo region.

There is a deeply mystical element to the space of death, and perhaps because of this, it is inseparable from colonialism. The related concept of *epistemic murk* also emerges from Taussig’s writing, and gives a name to the hazy, strange quality that surrounds the descriptions of violent events that take place in *The Stranger* and *Fantasia*. *Epistemic murk* is the product of ways and means of disseminating information that are deliberately designed to cause uncertainty, and “The truly crucial feature lies in creating an uncertain reality out of fiction, a nightmarish reality in which the unstable interplay of truth and illusion becomes a social force of horrendous and phantasmic dimensions.”¹⁵ In an uncertain atmosphere with lethal forces lurking about the edges, both the colonizer and the colonized are controlled; the colonizer is given an image of the colonized to substitute for an actual human being, and the colonized is relegated to stereotypes.

Whether the space of death is literal (such as the beach or a prison where the condemned wait to die) or a metaphorical societal construct designed for oppressing a group of people, it is constructed through power dynamics and the manipulation of terror. The power to dictate who lives and who dies is crucial, and so necropolitics becomes the

13 Taussig, 489.

14 Taussig, 467.

15 Taussig, 492.

new dialectic of control. Achille Mbembe argues in his 2003 article “Necropolitics” that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides... in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die,”¹⁶ and he links technology to the efficient use of force and terror to enforce sovereignty. Mbembe also argues that, contra-Hegel, death is a form of excess, a luxury, and there is “a correlation among death, sovereignty, and sexuality.”¹⁷ Mbembe uses an assertion made by Georges Bataille that “The sovereign world... ‘is the world in which the limit of death is done away with. Death is present in it, its presence defines that world of violence,’”¹⁸ but death really only exists in order to be denied by the authorities even though a sovereign himself “‘is the transgression of all limits.’”¹⁹ Thus a strange paradox emerges that perpetuates and subverts itself in an ongoing cycle. Because death is a luxury, like other luxuries too much of it can be negative and actually become detrimental to the colonizer. Death is specifically discussed as a luxury because it is the opposite of an economy of production, so it cannot be accommodated in a normal dialectic about commodities. If some death benefits the colonizer, but too much death is bad for the colonizer, then it is possible to see that death can be a liberating force when used in excess because that creates an over-saturation of luxury, effectively confounding the control of the sovereign. Death is thus commodified as people become commodified under the colonial system—their bodies are no longer their own, nor are their lives. Mbembe examines the links between modernity and terror, which are integral to the support of a system that perpetuates terror and the existence of the space of death. An early link between modernity and terror appeared in the French Revolution, particularly the “conflation of reason and terror” which was crucial to the political aims of the time.²⁰ The guillotine and political terror combined to form a dynamic duo. Ultimately Mbembe argues that “Terror and killing become the means of realizing the already known telos of history.”²¹

16 Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11.

17 *Ibid.*, 15.

18 *Ibid.*, 16.

19 Mbembe, 16.

20 *Ibid.*, 19.

21 *Ibid.*, 20.

If the existence of a space of death is an integral element of European colonialism, then it is crucial to consider how this generative space creates something that affects both the colonizer and the colonized. The new world is born here, in this constitutive space, but we can never quite define it. We can only move around it in order to define it to our best ability.

The use of terror, technology, and the control of death which are part of the system which perpetuates the space of death itself are all open to critique. Whatever has been created in the transformative, creative space of death is not seen as a positive creation, and all the terror and force used to perpetuate the colonial system are certainly not viewed positively, so now the time comes to critique the systems perpetuating colonialism. In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire offers a biting critique of Europe, the bourgeoisie, and the ideals of colonization. He condemns Europe and its methods as in decline and completely immoral, and he blames the bourgeoisie for their part in perpetuating the system that kept people in bondage and under the control of colonial powers. He claims that “slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward *savagery*”²² and that the Europeans are hiding the truth from themselves. Césaire states that “it is barbarism, the supreme barbarism, the crowning barbarism that sums up all the daily barbarism.”²³ before something terribly wrong like Nazism can arise, the ordinary bourgeoisie are accomplices in creating such a group, which is built up through the seemingly banal incidents that make up the everyday.

Césaire also firmly believes that capitalism, as it existed in 1955, was “incapable of establishing a concept of the right of all men, just as it ha[d] proved incapable of establishing a system of individual ethics.”²⁴ Césaire argues that there exists a willful desire not to see the problems at hand, and this is crucial. Just as Fanon says that the other is presumed to have no ontological standing and no ability to gaze back, Césaire’s bourgeoisie willfully refuse to see the colonized as people with agency. Césaire claims that “the bourgeoisie, as a class, is condemned to take responsibility for all the barbarism of history... in short everything against which it

22 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, [1955] 2000): 36.

23 Ibid., 36.

24 Ibid., 37.

protested in unforgettable terms at the time when, as the attacking class, it was the incarnation of human progress.”²⁵ Césaire decries colonialism as barbarism and claims that the proletariat is the wronged class in all of this, and that a classless society is the best solution.

Finally, there is the strange but simultaneously completely comprehensible estrangement and dissociation that takes place in these accounts, and in explaining it, both Frantz Fanon and Taussig bring up the idea of the colonial mirror. One goal of colonialism is to break down the colonized person so that he presents no threat—he becomes the other with no ontological ground to stand on, no place from which to gaze back—and in that process the colonized is estranged from his own identity. But the colonizer is, in a way, estranged from himself as well. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes about treating patients who have gone through what he terms a *disassociation* after torture and the poor treatment they received from colonizing officials, leaving them permanently unwell.²⁶ In writing about the Putumayo Report, Taussig concludes that the great violence inflicted on the Putumayo to extract labor also reflected in an extremely damaging fashion upon the colonizers. He calls this “*the colonial mirror* which reflects back onto the colonists the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savage or evil figures they wish to colonize.”²⁷ Césaire also names a similar effect, but he calls it the “boomerang effect of colonization” which occurs when “the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like *an animal*, and tends to objectively transform *himself* into an animal.”²⁸ Thus it is possible to see that these encounters were not simply affecting the oppressed, but also the oppressors.

Death is the nexus on which the colonial world system turns, and therefore great power comes from controlling it. As seen through these sources, torture, terror, and the physical bodies of colonized people were politicized to effect maximum control for the colonizer. The colonizers’ arrogation of the control of death and their efforts to inscribe limits on humanity affected both the colonized and the colonizers. The space of

25 Césaire, 67.

26 Ibid., 37.

27 Taussig, 495.

28 Césaire, 41.

death emerged as the liminal space between the two sides of colonialism, and its perpetuation through terror and force created a destructive yet simultaneously productive dichotomy.

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