

# NECROINTIMACIES: AFFECT AND THE VIRTUAL REVERBERATIONS OF VIOLENT INTIMACY



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## ABSTRACT

What is the work of racialized trans death in structuring white trans life? Tracing the chalky encounters of 'ordinary' racialized violence, this article extends Achille Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics to bear upon the centrality of racialized trans death in organizing contemporary trans life. In particular, this research analyzes how the circulation of necropolitical affects— what I have termed trans “necrointimacies”— coheres a morbid sense of belonging through fear, trauma, and the consumption of racialized death in rituals of trans memorialization.

## KEYWORDS

necropolitics, necrointimacies, trans, race, affect

chalk board [chawk-bawrd] *n.* A smooth hard panel, usually green or black, for writing on with chalk; a blackboard.

—Oxford English Dictionary

Over the past few years, I've found myself inspired, and some might say obsessed, by chalk's inherently paradoxical qualities. On one hand, chalk animates the psychic pulse of life; its powdery residue evoking memories of fiercely-contested hopscotch games, the velvety echo of blackboard erasers, or the stained remnants of childhood's innocence outlined in the hopscotch grids gradually fading on sun-bleached sidewalks.

But, on the other hand, chalk often indexes the morbid abjection of those anonymous bodies whose wretched outlines signal the violent territory of a crime scene. Used to mark the rough outline of a body's awkward position in death, chalk marks allow for a visual representation of violence without the gruesomeness of its lived materiality. This practice of showing a body without actually showing *the* body has always had a dramatic effect in its deployment for the purpose of capturing the public's imagination. At once poignant and cartoonish, chalk outlines are sanitized spectacles that, in outlining the figure of abbreviated life, animate the psychic pulse of death.

As a template for harnessing affect—for inviting a sort of public intimacy around the universal hard-wired fear of mortality—the chalked outline marks the symbolic abdication of space once occupied by the now-deceased body. However, because the outline can only represent a void left by the corpse, the chalked outline imputes presence while simultaneously conjuring up absence. Put simply, when one knocks at the door of these chalk outlines, what one finds is that there both is and is not a body home.

So, let me begin by tracing a rather zig-zaggy path back from an unfinished end. Between March 2008 and December 2018, almost 3000 trans people were murdered globally as a result of anti-trans violence. The brutality of their deaths serve as a stark reminder of the expendability of trans lives: 1145 trans people shot, 577 stabbed, 306 beaten, 104 strangled or hanged, 72 stoned, 59 asphyxiated or suffocated, 45 decapitated or dismembered, 44 tortured, 40 burned, 37 cut along the throat, 36 run over by a vehicle, 36 other, and 481 not stated (TGEU 2018). These figures represent the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Absent from the list are

those whose deaths were unreported, miscategorized, or those who, by virtue of their expendability, simply went missing.

In 1999, following the murder of Rita Hester in Allston, Massachusetts, Gwendolyn Ann Smith organized the first Trans Day of Remembrance (TDOR) vigil to honor the victims of anti-trans violence. Since then, each year on November 20th, trans people have gathered at TDOR vigils to publicly mourn the victims of the annual toll of violence and to “express love and respect for [trans] people in the face of national indifference and hatred” (Int’l TDOR n.d.). While the scope and nature of these vigils differ slightly depending on where you attend them, TDOR vigils are now international commemorations that memorialize the lives of trans people who have died as a result of violent, transphobic attacks.

I became actively involved in organizing and speaking at Canadian TDOR vigils, in Kingston and Toronto, Ontario, between 2002 and 2010. In Kingston, Ontario, the usual practice was to organize volunteers to lie on the ground so that chalk outlines could be traced around their bodies. Once an outline had been traced upon the ground, the name of a deceased trans-identified person—and, occasionally, the means by which their life was brutally cut short—was usually written in the empty void created by the lines. Although the number of outlines drawn varied from year to year, the victims of transphobic violence were always overwhelmingly trans women of color.

It was in Kingston that I started to feel the first stirrings of what I later came to recognize as a fraught ambivalence, not only to the tension between the narrativization of trans life and trans death, but also to the ritual-esque function of the TDOR vigil. As a trans person of color at a predominantly white post-secondary institution, I was often called upon to either read the list of names aloud or to help prepare for the event by drawing chalk outlines around the university campus. On one such occasion—as I lay on the ground, waiting patiently for a member of the campus queer society to trace the outline around my body—I found myself grappling with the implications of my own involvement with the politics of TDOR, particularly in terms of the narrative erasure of race in shaping anti-trans violence (Figure 1).

[IMAGE]

In the very act of offering my own body as a placeholder whose traced outline represented an ‘other’ body, I was also faced with the traces of a representation that could not be contained within the outlines of my own body contours. In that moment, the chalk outline was both a literal tracing of my body and an abstracted

sign whose traces exceeded their intended utility—an instant where my body, to transpose a Massumi-ism (2002), was as immediately actual as it was virtual, and where that virtual body was simultaneously rendered actual. The gap between the symbolic body traced upon the cold concrete and my brown trans body was one that could not be bridged through this single act of commemoration. Certainly, I was afforded a measure of privilege that was denied to the memories of those we now mourned for. My identity as a young trans man was navigated with

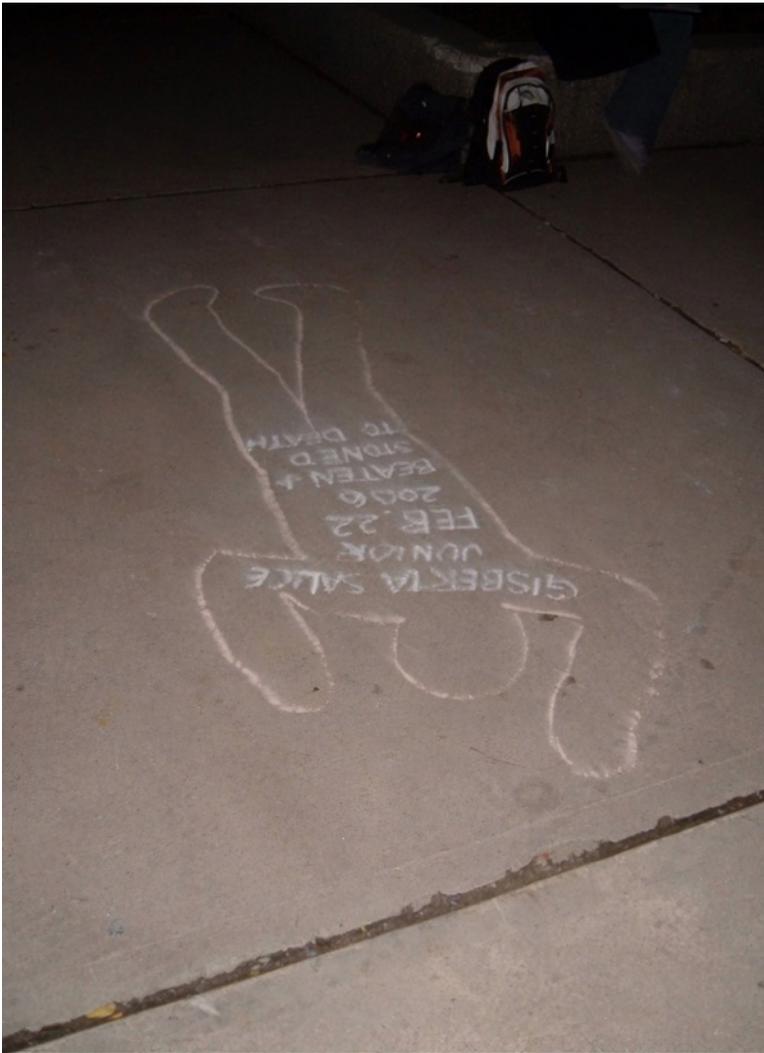


Figure 1. Chalk outline, Queen's University, 2006 (photo by author)

greater ease than a number of trans women I knew. Furthermore, what privilege I had was compounded by my normative ascriptions of future entry into middle-class respectability by virtue of my status as an undergraduate student at an elite university in Canada. In that near-all-white space of trans remembrance, the presence of my brown, post-colonial body was simultaneously in excess of, and inadequate for, the demands of trans remembrance. The ritual recitation of the names of the dead made me wonder about the haunting presence of those we mourned in death and the systemic absence of those same lives in everyday trans organizing. And I began to think critically about the centrality of trans death in this annual event organized by and for trans people.

What emerged from these early encounters with the (im)permanence of TDOR's chalk outlines were a series of tentative questions about the necropolitical value of racialized trans death in structuring trans life: how do narratives of racialized loss construct trans histories? How are these losses—and, by extension, the memories they engender—constitutive of identitarian politics? Which bodies are conjured up at the same time as others are consumed? How might we further complicate contemporary manifestations of trans-homonationalism—the realignment of configurations of race, class, and (trans)sexual citizenship within contemporary forms of national (in)security—through this consideration of the affective circulation of expendable bodies? In short, what is the affective register of the necropolitical work that racialized trans death performs in structuring white trans life?

In “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe suggests that “becoming subject...supposes upholding the work of death” (2003, 14). Mbembe argues that, so inextricable is the politics of race from the politics of death, that one only truly becomes a subject through confrontation with the death of an Other. To date, Mbembe's formulation of necropolitics has been of great interest to critical race theorists in examining how dead or dying marginalized bodies have been fetishistically inscribed into the order of power within state narratives to justify the geopolitical landscape of torture (Alves 2013; Dillon 2012; Haritaworn 2015; Puar 2017; Smith 2013). Several trans scholars, too, have explored the place of the racialized trans body using a necropolitical critique. Within these critiques, necropolitics converges with trans bodies via civilizational discourses that are inscribed upon the Iranian refugee trans body, whose death “is sanctioned in the state of exception as a refugee (outside of the nation-state) and as transgender (outside of the naturalized binaries of sex)” (Shakhsari 2013, 340). For others, necropolitics and homonationalism can be brought to bear on the geospatial distribution and regulation of erotic labor; the resulting “homo(necro)nationalism” (Edelman 2014) is reflective of the exclusionary practices that neoliberal citizenship demands. Necropolitics has also been linked to the rehabilitation of trans women of color

as ‘good victims’ that, in their death, ignite political activity under the umbrella of trans universality (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). Finally, we see the “dark shimmers” (Cardenas 2017) of these necropolitical impulses in the digitization of trans of color death in social media.

These convergences illustrate that there is a pressing need to theorize trans politicality through an intersectional framework that goes beyond static formulations of “gridlocked” identity (Massumi 2002), and takes into account the affective intensities that circulate around, through, and within the trans body. As this article illustrates, although trans lives are seemingly expendable, trans deaths are not. The afterlife of trans death is a time of politicality: memorials and vigils are at once performed enactments of mourning and formative elements of melancholic worldings (Stewart 2007). Yet these unfolding worlds depend on a trans-normative whiteness that is predicated upon the mobilization of spectacularized and racialized trans death.

I argue that entrance into trans-normative belonging depends upon such spectacularized, racialized violence. As such, racialized trans deaths are memorialized retroflexively as losses whose re-membrances or re-enactions mark the limits of trans futurity within state-sanctioned rights protections. This occurs at the very point where the materiality of race circulates as pure abstraction. While impermanent by design, chalk dust is contaminative and stubborn, always leaving us with the traces of its instructive labor. Being attentive to these chalky encounters of memorialization requires an uncertain willingness to play with—what Todd Ramón Ochoa describes as—an unnameable “*something* that overflows, that cannot be captured, that saturates and consumes” (2007, 487; emphasis mine). Throughout this article, chalk marks the liminality of ordinary violence and raises questions about the haunting visibility of, as Avery Gordon has written, “what modern history has rendered ghostly” (2008, 18). Extending Achille Mbembe’s (2003) concept of necropolitics to bear upon the centrality of racialized trans death in organizing contemporary trans life, I argue that the circulation of necropolitical affects—what I have termed *trans necrointimacies*—coheres a morbid sense of belonging through fear, trauma, and the consumption of racialized death.

Key to this argument is Jasbir Puar’s formulation of homonationalism (2007). First, in *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar describes homonationalism as a form of “homonormative nationalism” (2007, 10) that results from the alignment of norma-

tive homosexual subjects within US imperialist exceptionalism. Subsequently, in *The Right to Maim*, Puar further develops homonationalism to reflect upon the increasing incorporation of trans subjects within “national discourse and legal frames of recognition” (2017, 34). In this article, I draw upon Puar’s work to illustrate how practices of trans remembrance rely upon both the anachronistic presence of racialized death and the absence of the racialized body, thus entrenching necropolitical forms of trans-homonationalism through the spectacularized, affective circulation of racialized trans deaths. Emerging as history’s ghostly residues within neoliberal narratives of trans rights and national freedoms, I utilize the concept of trans necrointimacies to position this racialized circulation of cannibalistic affects as structuring trans-homonational narratives of belonging.

## Chalked Up: Expendability and the limits of (ac)countability

Chalked up [chawked up] *n. Brit.* A score, tally, or record.  
—Oxford English Dictionary

Imagine the single, vertical stroke of a piece of white chalk against a blackboard. As a signifier for a single count, chalk marks are typically grouped in sets of five, such that each cluster is a simple representation of a number of related objects. Each chalked line indicates an ongoing count that need not be considered a final score; rather, these counts are cumulative, shifting, and open to subjective interpretation and human interference. A tally, then, is an additive record or an archive of gains. Paradoxically, each tally mark can also represent a loss. For instance, each vertical notch on the wall of a prison cell simultaneously signifies another day of freedom lost whilst gesturing to a gain in time as one moves closer to eventual release. Death tolls, tracked in times of war or conflict, also constitute tallies of loss. Therefore, the tally is a non-static (ac)count where a positive accumulation may be read in conjunction with a negative loss.

The work of tallying lives lost, in particular, illustrates how the aggregate representation of death—the positive numerical sum of each life added to a running score—is simultaneously a negative assemblage of individual losses. Typically, death tallies have been used to represent the number of lives lost within a specific location and timeframe, often due to natural causes or deliberate acts of violence. Importantly, in the latter case, numerical data on pre-meditated violence allows for an extrapolation of patterns of mortality from the chaos of each individual death. In so doing, they offer an explanation not just of the ‘why’ or ‘how’ of the deaths but also of the ‘whom.’ Tracing the lives lost draws attention to certain lives

that were (in theory) de-valued. Conversely, it is precisely through the valuation of loss that we come to understand registers of expendability. In this sense, the death tally becomes a symptom of our times, an indicator of expendability. For what is it if not the sum of those human lives that are worth remembering?

Few remember the life or death of Chanelle Pickett. In 1995, twenty-three-year-old Pickett, a black woman living in Boston, was savagely attacked when a man she had met in a bar discovered that she had a penis. According to reports, he beat and throttled her for almost eight minutes before she died. Her attacker, a thirty-five-year-old white man, was eventually acquitted. Upon hearing of the lesser assault charge of two-and-a-half years, Toni Black, a transgender activist, expressed dismay, stating, “I’ve seen people get more jail time for abusing animals...we’ve been judged expendable” (Steinberg 2005, 522).

Black’s observation about the ways in which trans lives have been “judged expendable” suggests that trans liveability is always already foreclosed by the predestined fate of a necessary sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> The disposability of Pickett’s life allows for an appreciation of the multiple arcs of expendability that characterize the narratives of trans women of color as marked by a banal disposability that Giorgio Agamben has previously called the “state of exception” (1998, 12). What is especially peculiar about the privilege of these states of exception is their indispensability to the project of communal meaning-making. To this end, I argue that first, it is only in premature death that these disposable (trans) lives have surplus value, and second, this is the case precisely because of their affective capacity to produce political effects within the trans community.

Globally, between March 1970 and December 2018, over 3000 trans-identified individuals were rendered ‘expendable’ as a result of anti-trans violence, yet only a handful of these people have been documented by name.<sup>2</sup> While the sheer number of trans murders is disquieting, my primary interest lies neither in a detailed account of the policies that foreclose trans lives as liveable nor in the increasingly sophisticated community-led methods of data collection for tallying their deaths. Rather, I am drawn to the haunting concept of human expendability: What is an expendable life? How does a community (ac)count for its own expendability? Can we reduce life even further within the margins of expendability? And, finally, does this quality of expendability, or valuelessness, endure even after death?

Each additional chalk mark on the TDOR tally of violent anti-trans murders represents the negative loss of a life that has a perversely positive post-mortem value and which, in turn, carries important affective currency. But if a tally is a kept score or a number to be accounted for, how do we reckon with the stories of loss that are likewise marked by its ongoing calculation? What bodily remains (are) accounted for in the painful work of classifying, labeling, isolating, and aggregating loss? For each count, there is an account—likewise, every death has an attending narrative.

The recent hypervisibility of the violated corpse of the trans person of color signals a profoundly political project wherein spectacularized violence has come to characterize the brutal poetics through which trans-normative intimacy is founded. The introduction of the internet era and subsequent ease of online accessibility—when paired with technological advancements and competitive electronic markets—have given rise to electronically mediated practices of mourning and facilitated the birth of virtual crypts. Certainly, the presence of memorial pages on Facebook and websites such as *The World Wide Cemetery* show this new turn to the uninhibited “broadcasting” of grief (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 10). Today’s virtual graveyards are the twenty-first century’s response to older forms of collective mourning, effectively shifting experiences of grief from private spaces into the public realm. As Margaret Gibson explains, “the modern experience of ‘sequestered death’ has passed” (2007, 415). No longer a private affair, the specter of death has become one of a public intimacy.

## Necrointimacies: Affect and the virtual reverberations of violent intimacy

The face on my laptop screen is frozen in a mute scream of pain. Her matted hair and t-shirt are almost the same shade of yellow, splattered with shocking blooms of bright red blood. Her brown body, contorted with the exhausting agony of trying to protect itself from the blows being rained on it by the man looming over her, is covered in dust and streaks of blood. Captured with his arm mid-swing, the man’s threatening trajectory signals the certainty of further violence that will be directed at the pleading woman lying in the pockmarked rubble of a deteriorating street. A man in a blue shirt walks towards them, his indifference to the brutality betrayed by the casual trajectory of his stride. Nearby, with his arms hanging loosely by his side and his hands tensed in the universal gesture of readiness, another man stands, watching the scene unfold with an eerie expression of calmness on his face. There is no help for the woman being beaten in this screenshot: the men are at once casual observers and willing participants in this spectacle of violence.

In the second picture, the woman has clearly already been beaten for some time. The ground beneath the sky blue of her denim shorts is wet with the errant droplets of blood that completely obscure her swollen face. In the foreground, the bodies of the men have been frozen in a moment of malevolent deliberation. The third picture in this frame remains the hardest to look at. Because I now know what will happen next. In this final screenshot, there are five men in the process of lifting the woman's limp body and dumping it into a wheelbarrow. As two men wrestle with her legs, another man clutches the drenched collar of the woman's t-shirt in order to gain better leverage over her body. Partially obscured by the others, the last man in this frame carries a large plank of wood.

Her name was Dandara dos Santos. On February 15, 2017, the 42-year-old trans woman was dragged from her home in Fortaleza, Brazil, by eight men. In front of a group of cheering neighbors, Santos was kicked, punched, and hit with shoes and a large plank of wood. Still conscious and bleeding profusely, she was then dumped into a wheelbarrow and taken to a back alley where she was beaten again before being shot to death. Every painful minute of the savage attack—the laughter, the taunts, the sounds of an unyielding plank of wood on vulnerable skin, and those horrifying last minutes during which a terrified, bare-breasted Santos pleads for her life—was captured on video, shared on the internet, and circulated on Facebook.

Within a month of her death, these images of Santos' battered body appeared on my social media feeds. The most commonly shared link was to an article published by the *Daily Mail*; titled "Transsexual woman is beaten to death in Fortaleza, Brazil," this article included both video stills of Santos' murder as well as the streamable, uncensored video of her final moments (Al-Othman 2017). Shared publicly by trans-identified and gender-nonconforming friends and acquaintances, the real-time spectacle of Santos' death became an instantaneous anchoring point for reactions that ranged from the immediacy of communal outrage to disclosures of individual anger. Shaken, trans people in Canada reached out publicly and re-affirmed the need to keep fighting for the passage of Bill C-16.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, peppered amongst reflections on the precarious nature of trans rights under the Trump regime, many comments from American allies also alluded to the barbarism of the cultural heritage of the Brazilian men responsible for Santos' murder.

Sifting through these comments and reactions, many of which cemented the brutality of anti-trans violence as characteristic of life 'over there,' another pattern emerged: an intimacy, or sense of belonging; a "shock or relief at being 'in' something with others" (Stewart 2007, 27) that can only be wrought from the unas-

similable nature of proximity to a spectacle of violence. Nowhere was this clearer than in a Facebook post that encouraged everyone to watch the video and “tell a trans person you love them.”

Posted by a white trans man living in Canada, this public status update subsequently appeared on my Facebook’s newsfeed because it had garnered over 261 reactions, including expressions of anger or sadness. What was immediately startling was how many times this post had been shared. Together with the embedded video, the screenshots of Santos’ final moments in this call to “[g]o tell a trans person you love them” was circulated 69 more times within the span of a few days.

In the midst of all of the political debates and emotional reactions, a handful of trans-identified people of colour posted their own responses to the Santos video, asking others to stop sharing this video of a trans woman of colour being killed. Qwo-Li Driskill, a prominent Two-spirit scholar, issued a public Facebook post critiquing the commodification of Santos’ death in the service of trans remembrance (Figure 2). For Driskill, the circulation of Santos’ death was akin to “postcards of lynchings,” a reminder of the ambivalence with which the racialized and gendered subject has historically been objectified and then disappeared in the service of whiteness, capitalism and empire.

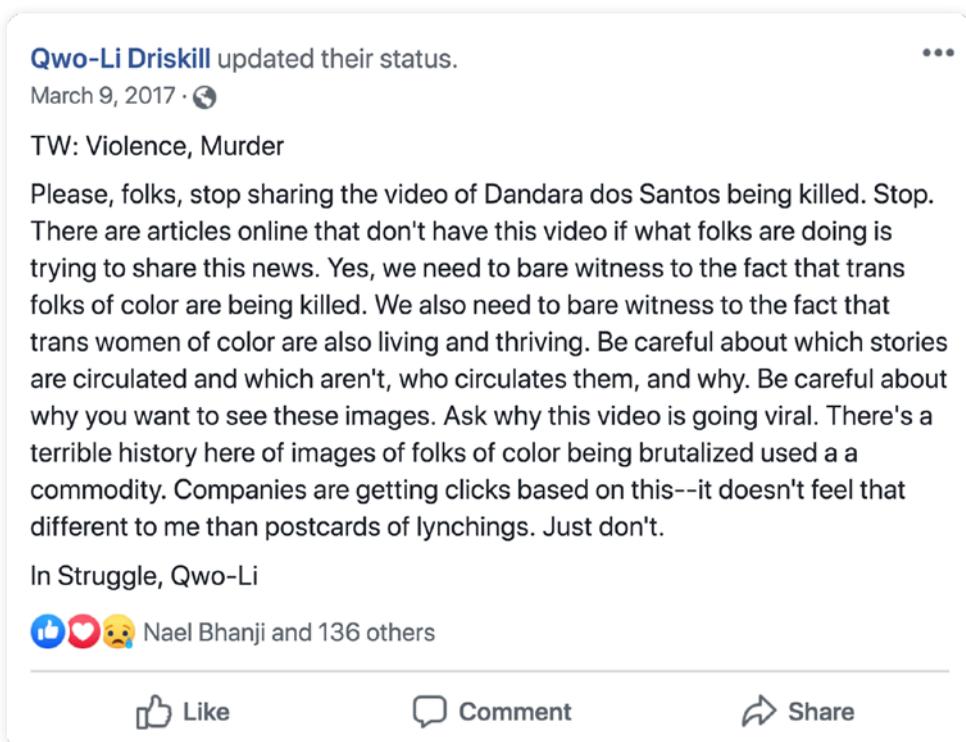


Figure 2. Facebook screenshot, March 9, 2017 (included with author’s permission)

Driskill's reference to postcards of lynchings is particularly salient as it points to the complex ways through which individual freedom has historically been predicated on making visible intimate spectacles of racialized violence. To date, several critical race scholars have explored how the images of racial corporeal decay undergird the structure of historical white supremacy in the US (Carby 2004; hooks 2006). Likewise, these images of racialized trans death continue to bear the "strange fruit" of the state-sanctioned spectacularization of states of exception that are so integral to maintaining "landscapes of inequality" (C. Smith 2013). As a technique of discipline, the photographs of bloodied, unrecognizable brown and black "unruly" bodies (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, 68) that litter the landscape of American memory find their genealogical parallel in contemporary displays of sovereign domination producing "macabre spatialities" (Alves 2013, 2). These topographies of racial abjection justify exercises of sovereign power over those who must always be excluded from society.

The work of Hazel Carby (2004), for instance, highlights how the "enslavement and dispossession of the not-fully-human" has been integral to building "the land of the free" (n.p.). Pointing to the images of tortured Iraqi civilians in the American-run Abu Ghraib prison, she explains:

The combination of brutal violence and desire that characterised lynching was developed and refined on the landscape of colonialism, has been taught by the US military to death squads in Latin America, and is to be found today in the prisons and precinct houses of the homeland. From lynching to Abu Ghraib, the continuous aim is the transformation of peoples from subjects into objects, what Frantz Fanon called 'decerebralisation.' In the shadow of the flag, of the Pentagon, and of an imperial democracy, lies the other's tortured body. (Carby 2004, n.p.)

Macabre spatialities point to the mundane work of racialized death in producing imagined political communities. They are likewise central to the organization of social relations, forming the "basis on which white life and citizenship [becomes] knowable" (Bassichis and Spade 2014, 195) through a consumptive racial economy that yokes whiteness to futurity and victimhood while relegating the racialized body to death and pathology. Still, while "the work of death" (Mbembe 2003, 16) is central to the reproduction of state sovereignty and the continuing assertion of power over racialized and gendered topographies of inclusion and exclusion, the corpse itself is not always the end of the story. Rather, it continues to hold the power to stir up more death. An object in perpetual motion, the corpse animates the stuff of life.

## Viral Necrointimacies and Spectacularized Violence

Chalk [chawk] *n.* A white soft earthy limestone (calcium carbonate) formed from the skeletal remains of sea creatures.

—Oxford English Dictionary

In the aftermath of her death, the viral intimacy of Santos' dying body became a consumable event, generating affective responses that galvanized politicality or inspired public intimacy among white trans activists. Still, by the end of the week, the novel immediacy of the reverberations of that initial shock wore off and Santos disappeared into the archives of remembrance, her brown body forever frozen in the three screenshots that can still (always) be called upon to offer the viewing public a morbid panorama of yet another brutal end.

While it is important to bear witness to the undeniable fact that trans women of color are being killed in record numbers, what does it mean that the trans community often coalesces in feelings of belonging and communality via the virtual 'shareability' of the spectacularized, dis-membered racialized corpse? How can we think through these intimacies of belonging that can only ever be affirmed from the safe distance that is granted by the banality of ordinary trans violences that are emblematic of a place that is 'over there?' How do we make sense of the violent intimacies that are evoked in the re-membrance, or reverberative ritual, of witnessing bare life at its barest end? What then becomes of the possibility of racialized trans life when its value is produced always and only through death?

The re-animation of the death throes of Santos's racialized body works in the service of what, I argue, is a specifically homonational trans-affirmation, and it is not a singular phenomenon. In "Retelling Racialized Violence, Remaking White Innocence," Lamble (2008) illustrates how the online memorial pages for the victims of anti-trans violence are dominated by pictures of white trans victims while the individual memorial entries of trans women of color are often accompanied by a silhouetted outline of the missing body. As Lamble argues, this use of the generic "No Photo" photo has a two-pronged effect: First, by virtue of its genericization, the ghostly silhouette used on the TDOR website obscures the ways in which the bodies affected by anti-trans violence are also marked by interlocking oppressions of race, class, ability, and sexuality. Second, transphobia is privileged as the singular cause of anti-trans violence.

While Lamble's text is notable for its critique of the rehabilitation of the unrepresentability of racialized anti-trans violence through universalized whiteness, since 2008, the politics of trans remembrance has been transformed from one that decontextualizes the unrepresentability of violence—via Lamble's notion of genericization—to a consumptive spectacle that now reterritorializes the trans body of colour via repetitions of virtualized violent intimacy. The TDOR website is now peppered with media links that invariably spectacularize the murders of trans women of color in particular via graphic descriptions and uncensored pictures.

Curated with the help of volunteers, the hyperlinks posted under an individual's memorial entry are mostly found by “just hunting the web” (G. Smith 2016) to follow up on names that have been forwarded to the TDOR website. Because of this piecemeal approach, sometimes the media link meant for a particular victim of violence will redirect you to witness the brutal end of someone else entirely. At other times, this virtual misdirection masquerades in the form of a ‘dead link.’ Still, as with all sleights of hand, the misdirection of information *tells* us something about the other stories that are in play. Misdirections are inextricable from the close-up magic of mourning. The representational gaps they engender are simply extensions of ordinary violences that have historically marked the racialized body as fungible and expendable.

When examining the media links for over 600 victims of transphobic violence that were memorialized on the TDOR website between 2009 and 2018, I found that when a trans woman of color was murdered, the accompanying media link beneath her name invariably spectacularized her death, thus objectifying her body in service of the broader politics of remembrance. Racialized trans bodies are no longer erased through genericization but, instead, are graphically brutalized post-mortem. Replacing the staccatoed efficiency of descriptive nouns that are easily boiled down to the singular, bare-boned truth of a brutal end, this memorial website, populated with almost entirely racialized bodies, has become increasingly enflashed with the raw viscosity of visual representation.

On the TDOR website, these descriptions of the “causes of death” for trans women of color are frequently as bare as the “bare lives” they seek to represent: trans women of color have been variously described as dying from blunt force trauma to the head, to being shot multiple times in the face or head, to being burned beyond recognition. In extreme cases, the attacker may, indeed, choose to get close and personal: limbs are dismembered, heads are removed and tossed in dumpsters, and genitals are hacked off.

The first media link to feature the uncensored corpse of a murdered trans person of color was posted on the TDOR website in 2010, when the body of an unidentified trans woman was discovered in Chihuahua, Mexico (Int'l TDOR 2010). Although the cause of death on her individual memorial entry for 2010 states that she was simply beheaded, the TDOR spreadsheet tells us that she was “beheaded while still alive” and that “her head was found a mile away from her body” (Int'l TDOR n.d.). On her individual memorial entry, a hyperlink to a Spanish-language blog shows a very graphic picture of a bruised and bloodied decapitated torso lying on the ground. The image is haunting because it re-animates the duality of her erasure: first, in literal death—as a body stripped of the identifying characteristics that would have been granted to it by the presence of a head—and then in the subsequent narration of that death. In lieu of a name or a picture—for we are provided with only the generic “No Photo” photo for this “unidentified transgender woman”—this virtual injunction to behold the corpse via the media link highlights the disjunction between the hypervisible banality of post-mortem racial abjection and the convivial racial erasures that sustain the curatorial project of contemporary trans memorialization.

## Curating Death

Notably, the vast majority of the graphic photos used on the TDOR website have been culled from both tabloid and mainstream South American press who, as website curator Gwendolyn Smith remarked, “[do] not hold back on those photos” (G. Smith 2016). As an example, in 2012, graphic pictures of the brutalized bodies of Carla White, Leandro Eduardo Campos Ferreira, and Paulo Robert Campos, all from Brazil, were available through hyperlinks on the TDOR website (Int'l TDOR 2012). This trend persisted in 2013. Among other pictures linked to the website, perhaps the most haunting hyperlink was that of an “unidentified child,” a thirteen-year-old who had been hanged to death in Macaíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil (TDOR 2013). In the five screenshots linked to this page on the TDOR website, a child's body lies in a dense thicket of bright green foliage. Close-up pictures show the black rope still tied cruelly against the delicate skin of their neck. Above the burst of white foam running down one side of their open mouth, their eyes have been left blankly open (Flintstone 2013).

The task of collecting and curating stories about the dead is a political one. The images and articles culled from the World Wide Web shape narratives of remembrance. As such, the TDOR website is a curated repository of mediated public memory. When I spoke to Smith about her choice to include these graphic pictures on the TDOR website, Smith said, “I don't think that we, that is to say, TDOR,

the project site, posts them. We're posting a link to a story. The stories have those photos" (G. Smith 2016). As Smith explained, often these links to graphic representations of violence are "the only media links for information linked on the cases" (G. Smith 2016), though she also acknowledged that there might be another way to go about the task of recording anti-trans violence: "You know, if that's what's there...um...and I'd rather they weren't. And maybe we should look at that and maybe we should change that" (G. Smith 2016).

Although these images of brutalized bodies are almost always available through the South American press, there is no obligation to recirculate them, since many memorial pages remain without. The links featuring such images have thus been chosen to supplement what were already sufficiently graphic descriptions of the "causes of death" for each victim. Regardless of Smith's intent, the spectacularized, graphic descriptions of brutalized bodies of color have become central to a kind of ordinary violent intimacy that has also become necessary for cohering the trans-cultural imaginary.

In her interview with me, Smith described this obligation to witness the death of another while sitting through court cases and looking at forensic photos. In particular, the trial of Gwen Araujo—a young trans Latina who was murdered in California in 2002—left her struggling with both the need to see and to *unsee* the brutalized body. Smith explains, "I can't unsee the things that I saw at the Gwen Araujo trial. It was very personally damaging to sit there and look at the forensic photos of Gwen and look at the murder weapons...I felt like I had to. But, in a lot of ways, I wish I didn't" (G. Smith 2016). As my opening example of the circulation of Santos' death illustrates, Smith's compulsion to witness trans death—especially a racialized trans death—is not unique. The self-professed obligation to behold the abject spectacle of the racialized corpse is often what structures practices of trans memorialization. In fact, it is my argument that spectacularizing dead trans bodies of color through tropes of belonging and intimacy is indicative of the centrality of race in the affective economy of necropolitics.

At once hyperlinked and hypervisible, the previously invisible racialized bodies populate the TDOR website with the reverberant force of banal abjection. The memorial archives between 2009 and 2018 are replete with images of unidentified trans bodies lying on dusty roads and of skeletons lying in shallow ditches. There are photos of bodies in bruised repose on sterile autopsy tables and bodies

in various states of decomposition. There are photos of bloodied corpses left in alleys, sugarcane fields, and shallow graves. Abandoned in rubble dumpsters or roadside dumps (Int'l TDOR 2008), the graphic details that enliven these discarded bodies can often, paradoxically, further disembody the dispossessed. As with other discarded objects, these bodies bear the mark of racialized and gendered abjection that suture the temporal narrative of trans citizenship through the necessary caesura of (in)difference.

By providing a frame of reference for how the living come to understand their position relative to states of exception, the graphic nature of the South American media links provides a counterpoint to the sanitized nature of North American media coverage. This was highlighted in Smith's observation: "I'm kind of glad the US media doesn't tend to do that."<sup>4</sup> You know, they're not immune. But they don't tend to. They just mis-gender us..." (G. Smith 2016).

## Necrointimacies

In *The Affective Fabrics of Digital Culture*, Adi Kuntsman (2012) traces the virtual banality of everyday violence in digitized spaces. Pointing to "the ways in which feelings and affective states can *reverberate* in and out of cyberspace, intensified (or muffled) and transformed through digital circulation and repetition" (1; emphasis mine), Kuntsman's thought-provoking ethnographic exploration of reverberation signals the importance of attending to the affective and political work of violence while remaining 'attuned' to the potentiality of movement. Kuntsman writes:

Reverberation is a concept that makes us attentive to the simultaneous presence of speed and stillness in online sites; to distortions and resonance, intensification and dissolution in the process of moving through various digital terrains. For example, it allows us to see how the movement of violent words in online domains can intensify hatred and hostility through what Sara Ahmed describes as 'affective economies' (2004a), where the power of emotions accumulates through circulation of texts. But reverberation also enables us to see how the injurious effects of online violent speech can be muffled. For example, it can momentarily dissolve into 'smileys', 'winks' and laughter (although not disappear entirely!). Or, met with some Internet users' *refusal* to engage in dialogue, it can fall out of circulation, become frozen in an online archive—ready to re-emerge again, but immobilized for the time being. The concept of reverberation, in other words, allows us not only to follow the circulation of texts and feelings, but also to trace and open up processes of change, resistance or reconciliation, in the face of affective economies of mediated violence (Kuntsman 2012, 2).

Spectacles of violence, as Kuntsman illustrates, leave traces of themselves not unlike the gradually fading vibrations left by an echo's reverberations. This linkage between 'reverberation' as a prolongation of sound and the affective economies of violence allows for an appreciation of the reflective continuity of effect, of those ripples and vibrations left in the wake of violent encounters that can be felt or sensed despite their remove. Indeed, as Teresa Brennan suggests, just as "every word, every sound, has its valence; so, at a more subtle level, may every image" (2004, 71).

The reverberating quality of violence produces a lingering effect, allowing spectacles of violence to 'bounce' around such that they transfer the watered-down traces of violence's origin stories through disparate moments of absorptive reflection or unpredictable refraction. For a brief moment, within the abstract and fragmented space of the internet, the feelings of loss, trauma, and fear that circulated as a response to Santos' death were given some semblance of substance, coalescing into something more than just emotion. Shared through the 'feeds' of trans-identified people and their allies, the close-up magic of Santos' re-animated death opened worlds by inviting intimacy ("hug a trans person") while also drawing the world's boundaries ever closer by positioning violence as a problem that is always already located 'elsewhere.'

Reverberation allows for an appreciation of the links between ordinary violence and intimacy, but it does not fully account for the way in which the intimate proximity with brutalized racialized bodies prefigure the "affective charge of investment" (Cvetkovich 2003, 49) that mobilizes trans communities within discourses of whiteness. Reverberation is an emergent expression of belonging pre-figured through visual economies of a violent intimacy with racialized abjection. In other words, the desire to 'reach out' in trans-personal affirmation is a re-active response to the displacement of yet another form of intimacy—one where the racialized Other is consumed for the purposes of community building (hooks 2006). In consuming the Other, the material realities that structure bare life are effectively effaced while structuring a de-racialized intimacy forged through proximity with racialized violence.

The task of defining the consumptive quality of an intimacy borne from spectacularized death is a difficult one because intimacy has an enigmatic boxing-with-shadows quality. At a basic level, intimacy describes not just the feel-

ing of connection to something, but it is evocative of an immediacy or sense of belonging. “Intimacy,” as Shaka McGlotten explains in *Virtual Intimacies*, gestures to “proximity, connection—a necessary precondition for certain affective states to bloom, especially those that have to do with other people. Affect happens in and through intimacy” (2013, 8). In this sense, intimacy is a form of identification or shared attunement; intimacy is both reverberation and resonance.

Following Kuntsman’s formulations, resonance is a phenomenon that occurs when the physical properties of a particular material allow it to emphasize or reinforce sound. Thus, if the reverb is the gradual “dying out” of sound, then resonance describes the buzzing/rattling sustenance of a particular frequency. What is important here is that resonance is object-based, and an object that ‘resonates’ is one that supplements the original vibration because of its ‘likeness.’ Expanding Kuntsman’s metaphor, we can say that the virtual proximity to the *event* of Santos’ re-animated death reverberated—or echoed—through the community as a sign of intimacy because her identity as a trans person ‘resonated,’ or provided a point of likeness, for those who identify as trans or gender-nonconforming. In death, the figure of Santos resonated because ‘likeness’ traversed along the figure of her imperiled body, coalescing into the immediacy of intimacy through which a “weirdly floating ‘we’ snaps into a blurry focus...[taking] on a life of its own, even reflecting its own presence” (Stewart 2003, 27–28). However, this reductive approach to an imperiled trans identity as the singular basis of victimized affiliation fails to account for how the specifically *racialized* figure of the dying Santos—marked by the state of exception in life—became a shareable object in death that one is obligated to first behold and then share.

Likeness, or resonance, gestures to the vibrational caesura borne of a forced proximity—a space where the borders between self and other struggle for articulation. As a form of intimate alignment, resonance points to the proximity to “a set of normative ideals and aspirations...tied to capital and corporeal” (McGlotten 2013, 59) achievement. The link between intimacy and the social distributions of life and death has also been explored by Elizabeth Povinelli (2005) and Lisa Lowe (2015). Povinelli argues that the “imaginary of the intimate event is always disrupted and secured by the logic of [racial] exception” (2005, 173–175), while Lowe adds that this allows for the emergence of “modern liberal subjects and modern spheres of social life” (2015, 18). Similarly, Snorton and Haritaworn (2013) have drawn parallels between the spectacularly violated body of color as “degenerate and killable” and the safeguarding of neoliberal transnormativity within the “realm of life” (67).

As fungible commodities, racialized corpses have historically been relegated to the status of spectacular objects, “permanently available for the ‘full enjoyment’ of white people” and “incapable of being violated” (Bassichis and Spade 2014, 195). The political economy of memorialization must be understood in terms of the colonial histories that govern the production, distribution, and possession of intimacy (Lowe 2015). “Sealed into crushing objecthood” (Fanon 1967, 109), trans women of color featured in the graphic pictures on the TDORwebsite mirror historical discourses that objectify bodies of color as both excessive and necessary for social life. This hyper-spectacularization of banal violence—where identification is formed through the ambivalent oscillations between categories of the human and the inhuman—finds its parallel in other situations. As Kuntsman offers, “the imprisoned orphan, the prepubescent sex worker, the refugee, and the innocent toddler dying of AIDS are such figures, figures of an appeal, a sex appeal that is racial, that is meant to humanize and naturalize what otherwise functions merely as a calculation of risk” (2012, 28).

Any object that resonates does so in a pleasure-driven, possessive economy. Indeed, we can also extend this analysis to explore how images of brutalized bodies of color have historically circulated as fetishistic commodities (Farley 1997; Rushdy 2000; Wood 2013; Yancy 2005; Young 2005). For instance, in his exploration of lynching postcards, Marcus Wood (2013) argues that the memorialization of these abject bodies through their aesthetic circulation can be read as a testament not just to the unique value of each body that is destroyed but also to the collective “white obsession with its inability to destroy this value” (207). Framed by economies of ritual and spectacle, photographs of naked and almost-naked bodies in “extreme states of physical abuse” are, argues Wood, almost pornographic in nature (2013, 217). Extending his analysis to the “trauma postcard[s]” (Wood 2013, 216) recording the systematic abuse of prisoners in the notorious Abu Ghraib Prison, Wood illustrates how these records of brutality create a casual social network of shared experience, shared national values, and shared pride in whiteness. These arguments are paralleled in Jenna Brager’s analysis of the viral consumption of racialized tragedy on social media; for Brager, such consumption underscores larger narratives of the West’s “fascinating cannibalism” of the “always-already violence” (2015, 1665) of vulnerable bodies in non-Western countries. Whiteness is thus formulated within this framework of pleasurable, ritualized returns to scenes of racialized destruction.

Practices of memorialization are symbolically and affectively mediated by discourses of inclusion and exclusion, yet, all too often, the consumption of racialized death is offered as a stand-in for the former while justifying the material structures that suture the latter. Only in death do trans women of color emerge as larger-than-life subjects, accruing macabre value in proportion to the violence of their ends. Bare lives and abject deaths highlight the excess of race, the safe remove from racialized space allowing the Other to “be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (hooks 2006, 380). Conspicuously absented from the theatre of trans politicality in life, the violent intimacy of death enlivens trans subjects of color through graphic descriptions of racialized corporeal obliteration sanitized by the façade of a re-narrativized post-mortem subjectivity. Since the act of witnessing death bypasses real-time individual presence, there is no risk in this version of proximity to the racialized object. Instead, death can be summoned up from the rubble, its value extracted and reconstructed for mass consumption, and then vanquished once again. And vanquished it must be, because the intensity that intimacy demands requires a sustained engagement through the repeated spectacularization of racialized loss.

Extending Mbembe’s focus on the disposability of bodies via the right to kill and reflecting upon the spectacle of the dying/dead trans body in the order of power, I return to my concept of *transnecrointimacies* to describe this spectacular affective economy of trans-homonationalism and the cannibalization of racialized decay upon which the former is dependent.<sup>5</sup> As an object *par excellence*, the brutalized corpse of the racialized Other contains a resonant quality that is predicated on economies of fantasy and pleasure. By virtue of violence’s distance from the immediacy of real-time proximity, the racialized figure that is Santos is at once excessive and erased, allowing it to first be claimed as an object for trans memorialization, then be consumed in the service of whiteness, and then be further utilized as evidence of a distant barbarism. Thus, we see that together with the embedded video, the screenshots of Santos’s racialized body reverberated at an intensity through which the circulation of the consumable intimacy of her death tentatively resonated in the form of appeals to belonging within neoliberal frameworks of (trans)sexual citizenship (i.e. via recourse to Canadian or American nationalism, necessarily positioned as safely removed from the barbarism of ‘elsewhere’).

As the provisional end-product of an affective circulation of the violent intimacies so necessary to the political project of remembrance, “resonance” extends Kuntsman’s acoustic metaphor to describe a turn to a kind of trans-normativity that is dependent upon the spectacularized violent intimacy of racialized, trans(gender) bodies as the living dead. The intimate spectacle of the dead or dying racialized

body invites the witnessing white body into an affective citizenship that requires that the Other be simultaneously possessed and repudiated. To behold the corpse of the Other is to flirt with the exotic—with the possibility of being ‘changed’ by *transnecrointimacy*—while remaining securely attached to the tether of trans-normative positionality. What resonates is not trans identity as a point of affiliation but, rather, whiteness and trans-normativity as emergent forms of belonging through the scopophilic consumption of the racialized body. Resonance is thus the retrospective reproduction of reverberation,<sup>6</sup> while ‘likeness,’ or trans-normativity, is formed retroactively through the chalky necrointimacies of racialized trans memorialization.

## Endnotes

1. My use of “necessary” here is deliberate as I seek to highlight the ways in which racialized trans deaths are positioned as always already constitutive of trans political life.
2. This approximate figure has been obtained from combining the data available on Gwendolyn Ann Smith’s website with statistics available on the *Trans Murder Monitoring* project.
3. Colloquially known as the “Transgender Bill,” Bill C-16 was passed in June 2017 and added gender identity and gender expression to the prohibited grounds of discrimination enshrined under the Canadian Human Rights Act.
4. While media coverage of anti-trans murders in the US is certainly less graphic overall, it is not always the case with individual reports: The TDOR website’s memorial entry for Aniya Parker, for example, a black trans woman who was murdered in 2014, contains a hyperlink to an *ABC7 News* article that features grainy surveillance video showing Parker being approached by a group of youth who punch her before shooting her in the head as she runs away. The video shows how, after being shot in the head, Parker crosses the street and slowly sits down on the sidewalk before suddenly slumping over, her head hitting the street’s asphalt surface.

5. This attachment to the dead actually gives the corpse power over the living, an ironic instance where we see the “subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 2003, 39)

6. Forgive the alliteration.

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