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### Desiring Life: Colonial Violence, the Anthropocene, and the Life/Nonlife Boundary Thinking with Derrida

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# **Desiring Life: Colonial violence, the Anthropocene, and the Life/Nonlife boundary Thinking with Derrida**

**Angela Patricia Heredia Pineda**

## **Abstract**

This article explores how Derrida's questioning of the life/death dichotomy intersects with anticolonial and feminist perspectives about the violent tracing of this boundary. From this point of departure, I want to reflect on how Derrida's unsettling of this dichotomy can open a space to trouble the desires for life and the terror for the inert at the centre of colonial/modern ontologies. His reflections about life and death seem to open avenues to address an unappropriable negation, a constitutive absence, and otherness at the core of these desires for aliveness. Therefore, the main aim of this essay is to explore how this way of unsettling the life/nonlife dichotomy can encourage (or not) a reflection on how colonial forms of violence are at the root of desires for life and their capture of being. In the first part of the paper, I bring Sylvia Wynter and Elizabeth Povinelli into conversation, looking into the violent capture of the space of being, life and the human that sustains the modern/colonial order and its centring around Man. Following this, I engage with Derrida's unsettling of the notion of life and consider the ways in which it can interrupt the logics of this capture and open a space to address the forms of violence that sustain them. In the last section of the paper, I offer a reflection on haptics (touch) through the perspectives of Hortense Spillers and Lorena Cabnal, whose anticolonial and feminist thought highlights the possibilities and limitations of Derrida's thought to address the violences that permeate the Anthropocene's intimate entanglements. In this sense, I present here a brief reflection on Derrida's relevance to thinking through and with the violent entanglements of the "Colonial Anthropocene" (Gómez-Barris).

## Introduction

What does life mean? What does it mean in the context of the Anthropocene, the awareness of human destructive and overwhelming imprint on the Earth? What does it mean when the transformations of material conditions of existence ignite a questioning of the boundaries of human spaces and survival? Or, as Elizabeth Povinelli suggests, what does it mean when nonlife seems to creep into the sacred space of life? Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook remind us that these are key questions for the Anthropocenic present “because life presents the most immediate of political imperatives, given the major threats to life in all its organic forms that mark the twenty-first century” (2). In the context of the Anthropocene and the anxieties about aliveness and survival, it is clear that life offers a contested meaning. Amid these anxieties, ‘we,’ ‘humans,’ borrowing Derrida’s words, “must be seeking to know what you understand by that, by the being-living of the living, by the livingness [*la vivance*] of the living, in other words, the life of the living, the difference between the living and the non-living” (*Life Death* 84). In the midst of a catastrophic Anthropocenic context, the creeping of nonlife into life, the central question, “what is life?” is not merely a concern of biology, but rather an existential, political, and ethical issue.

But let us slow down for a bit, and take the ‘Anthropos’ of the Anthropocene with a little grain of salt by asking: Who is this Anthropos? Who is this Man? And even more importantly, whose concern is this? Let us resist that grandiose movement, very proper of the Anthropocene’s discourses, in which we are swollen into a global human subjectivity that is taken for granted. Following Sylvia Wynter, let us situate such anxiety about the life/nonlife boundary within those histories of violence that have defined the space of the Anthropos, the space of Man, as the human itself. By slowing down our rhythm, we begin to see that the life/nonlife boundary is a contested and violently traced space. Not only as a dichotomy to be unsettled at the level of ontology but as a historical, existential, ethical and political scarred space in which humans, or rather, following Wynter, hu(Mans), navigate the multiple anxieties and predicaments opened up by the Anthropocene. Drawing on Tiffany Lethabo King’s work (121), I use the term hu(Man) precisely to point out as well as to resist the capture of the notion of humanity and being by the anxieties, desires, and experiences of the space of Man as if they were those of the human itself (Wynter, “Coloniality”). Precisely in this direction, Povinelli suggests that the life/nonlife boundary is fundamentally a question of power. Her notion of “geontopower” (*Geontologies*) highlights how the line that separates

and joins *bios* and *geos* has been violently traced, guarded, preserved, and managed to dominate and exploit both human and more-than-human existence. In the context of an awareness of the deterioration of material conditions of existence, this boundary starts to crumble and become visible.

If we follow both Wynter and Povinelli in this slower rhythm, we see how histories of colonial violence are at the centre of the very material and affective tracing of this boundary. Not only as past but as ongoing forms of violence that have failed to appear as such. Extraction, genocide, captivity, exclusion, dispossession, consumption, create inhuman violent spaces where it often seems that there are no hu(Man)s involved. In this way, this slower rhythm can allow us to situate such questions about life and nonlife, about the hu(Man) and a catastrophe to come, within modern/colonial forms of violence that are not only past but ongoing, in a present that ‘we’ cannot decipher or name. The forms of violence that carve the line between life and nonlife seem to remain in what Sarah Ahmed calls “the failure of presence—or the failure to be present”(121). The question of geontopower (life/nonlife) intersects with the violent constitution of the space of the hu(Man). If we underscore this intersection, the boundary between life and nonlife starts to complicate, to thicken, and to acquire much more texture. The dichotomy unravels:

*Being/Hu(Man)/Life vs Nonbeing/Inhu(Man)/Nonlife*

Ontology, the interrogation of being itself, is involved in the carving of this differentiation. Western ontology, as Derrida reminds us, is “subjected to the neutral totality of the Same as Being or as Ego” (“Violence” 105). Thus, part of the violent tracing of this boundary is the conflation and capture of the space of life and being, or being as life, by the space of the hu(Man). There is not only a sedimentation of the equivalence of being with the living, as Derrida points out (*Life Death* 11). Ontology, Fanon reminds us (82), is a captured space, filled with the desires, hopes, anxieties, and compulsions of Man, or rather, of Man as the human, as life and being itself. In this paper, I explore how Derrida’s questioning of the life/death dichotomy intersects with an anticolonial and feminist countering of the violent tracing of this boundary. From this point of departure, I want to reflect on how Derrida’s unsettling of this dichotomy can open a space to trouble the desires for life and the dread of the inert at the centre of colonial/modern ontologies. His reflections about life death seem to open avenues to address an un-appropriable negation, a constitutive absence, and otherness at the core of life and/as the hu(Man). Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to explore how this way of unsettling

the life/nonlife boundary can encourage (or not) a reflection on the way in which colonial forms of violence are at the root of desires for life that have the power to capture and coopt being. In the first part of the paper, I bring Wynter and Povinelli into conversation, looking into the violent capture of the space of being and of the human by the insatiable desires for (hu(Man)) aliveness, a coopting mechanism that sustains modernity/coloniality. Following this, I engage with Derrida's unsettling of the life/death dichotomy and consider the ways in which it can interrupt those desires and open a space to address the forms of violence that sustain them. In the last section of the paper, I offer a reflection on haptics (touch) through the perspectives of anticolonial and feminist thinkers Hortense Spillers and Lorena Cabnal that highlights the possibilities and limitations of Derrida's thought to address the violences that permeate the intimate intertwinements of the Anthropocene. In this sense, I present here a brief reflection on Derrida's relevance to thinking through and with the violent realities of the "Colonial Anthropocene" (Gómez-Barris).

### **I. Povinelli and Wynter: Biontologies and desires for hu(Man) aliveness**

Situating her thought in the questioning of the colonial capture of ontology, humanity and life, Sylvia Wynter is a crucial referent to critically approach the colonial Anthropocene and its predicaments. Through her reflections on the genre of the human, or being "human as Praxis" (Wynter, *Human Being*), she offers important insights into rethinking the entanglement of truth, power, knowledge, ontology, experience, and aesthetics within coloniality. For Wynter, the transformations of coloniality/modernity implied primarily a violent "aesthetic-affective mutation" ("Ceremony" 52) of what it means to be human. Coloniality, Wynter argues, is sustained by the materialisation in and through the senses, in corporeality, of a mode of being or not being hu(Man). More specifically, this means that coloniality captures and appropriates the narrative practices through which communities ontologically write and experience themselves as a human 'we.' In other words, there is a violent capture of the collective narrations of ourselves and the desires and hopes for this collective being. Colonial relations of power rely on a violent appropriation of the origin stories and aesthetic codes that materialise what Wynter calls the "genre of being human" ("Coloniality" 269), the cosmogonic narratives that articulate the kinship boundaries of a human collective being beyond blood.

Wynter's reflections on the violent transformations of coloniality/modernity underscore that the notion of the human is not static and predefined

but is instead materially, historically, and collectively constituted in praxis and aesthesis. She argues that it is crucial to rethink the idea of humanity as the given belongingness to a biological species by considering how the boundaries of a human 'we' have been contingently materialised within histories of colonial violence. These violent realities and histories sustain the production of the boundaries, membranes and surfaces within a human 'we', or "propter nos" (Wynter, "Coloniality" 281). Furthermore, defining the boundaries of the concept of humanity requires a redefining of what lies outside this category: blackness, indigeneity, scarcity, animality, nature, geos, earth, nonbeing. The transformation and capture of the concept of the human is not merely a matter of imaginaries, it is rather a question about the materialisation of being and/as hu(Man)ity: "Power is always linked to the poiesis of being...We now live in the poiesis or autopoiesis of 'Man'" (Wynter and Thomas 33). As Wynter points out in "Rethinking Aesthetics," what is at stake in coloniality and its aesthetic, ontological, phenomenological, and ethico-political dimensions is the creation of corporeal limits around a specific mode of being human and its capture of being and life.

According to Wynter ("Hombre"), the emergence and iteration of the colonial/modern order are grounded on the sedimentation of a sociogenically produced life/death code that congeals the boundaries of hu(Man) modes of being (or not being) together as kin. The life/death (subject/object, good/evil, rational/irrational, selected/dysselected) code is a principle of sameness and difference that regulates modes of kinship that reproduce normative hu(Man) subjectivities (life) and their constitutive outsides (death) (Wynter, "Hombre", 54). The life/death code is the

governing code by means of which human 'forms of life' are instituted and their specific ensemble of behaviors regulated. And, because this code is everywhere instituted about the representation of symbolic 'life' (projected as culture) and 'death' (projected as raw nature), it governs the processes by means of which each human mode of the subject is socialized as such a subject (Wynter, "Aesthetics" 245).

In the context of colonial power relations, the life/death code becomes a mechanism through which the boundaries of hu(Man) kinship are racialised. The colonial matrix of difference and its racialising mechanisms (Quijano) shapes the limits of hu(Man) subjectivity. As a result, markers of colonial otherness like blackness and indigeneity signal both ontological instability and negation (non-hu(Man)/non-being/non-life). Those racialised mark a lack of

“ontological resistance” (Fanon 83) and immanent value within the colonial/modern order, “in the eyes of the white man” (Fanon 83). In Wynter’s theorisation, these racialising markers stand for the abject which is embodied in the group category that signals death or nonlife. That is, they are markers of an abjected outside that both sustains and threatens the boundaries and thresholds of the hu(Man) overrepresented as life and being. By being a constitutive outside, the abject enables an orientation towards the normative mode of hu(Man) subjectivity (life) and its replication. Wynter argues that since the nineteenth century there is a biocentric orientation of hu(Man) subjectivity in which kinship is articulated around the belongingness to hu(Man)ity as a biological species. The selected/dysselected opposition contours the boundaries of species belongingness as well as the modes of life that are overrepresented as the only modes of being human. In the biocentric genre of the human, the abject signals evolutionary inferiority, and, therefore, becomes the liminality of hu(Man) life. It also marks the potential of a return to nonlife; the possibility, says Wynter, “of its potential enslavement to the ‘natural scarcity’ of external nature, and, therefore, to the threat of the insufficiency of the earth’s resources, as verified by the empirical condition of the new pariah figures of the poor and jobless” (“Aesthetics” 257).

Sustaining the boundaries of the space of hu(Man) life requires the violent production of certain corporealities as signs of nonlife: scarcity, debility, stillness, excess, lack, chaos, inhumanity. It is precisely in here that the question of the overrepresentation of the human as Man intersects with Povinelli’s notion of geontopower. For Povinelli, Western modern/colonial ontologies and modes of governance are anchored on an unacknowledged and violent guarding and continuous carving of the life vs nonlife (alive vs inert) boundary. Geontopower refers to “the governance of human and more-than-human existence through the divisions and hierarchies of Life and Nonlife and the toxicity of existence this division has left in its wake” (Povinelli, *Gaia* x). At the centre of geontopower, there is a “Carbon Imaginary” that reinforces a “bi-ontological enclosure of existence” (Povinelli, *Geontologies* 5) that permeates being with a desirable form of aliveness. Oriented by a transposition of biological notions like birth, reproduction, growth, death, with ontological concepts like event, conatus, or finitude, the Carbon Imaginary constitutes a scarred space for the circulation of the “thrills, wonders, anxieties, perhaps terrors, of the other of Life, namely the Inert, Inanimate, Barren. In this scarred space, the ontological is revealed to be biontology. Being has always been dominated by Life and the desires of Life” (Povinelli, *Geontologies* 17). The desert is a figure that articulates these desires for hu(Man) life and the

terror of the inert. By signalling a barren space that has lost the conditions to foster the thriving of hu(Man) life, the desert dramatises the potential threat of the “creeping desiccating sands of nonlife” (Povinelli, *Gaia* 136). No longer a space of hu(Man) fertility, productivity, and aliveness, the desert is a figuration of the anxiety towards and the abjection of nonlife.

If we follow the intersection of Povinelli and Wynter, we can see that the scarred space that joins and separates life and nonlife is affectively charged with desires of hu(Man) life overrepresented as life and being itself. It is a space filled with terror, anxiety, and sometimes thrill for the return of a state of inertness, stillness: the return to a barren state of the Earth for hu(Man) forms of life. Nonlife is a state in which Man can no longer become incessantly, it is a state beyond individual death and finitude. Through the dynamics of geontopower, the hu(Man) not only denies, excludes, but violently extracts and extends what Povinelli describes as, “those attributes that some regions of human existence define as the most precious qualities of life (birth, becoming, actualization) to all forms of existence, to existence as such. We can saturate Being with familiar and reassuring qualities” (*Geontologies* 55). This is precisely the biontological orientation of the coloniality of power, its reliance on the violent and extractive frontier between life and nonlife. Coloniality functions in and through the violent dynamics of geontopower and the biontologies that overrepresent Man as the living being, Man as the only way of being, living, and creating humanness. Furthermore, the reproduction, production, and boosting of Man’s aliveness through a violent and extractive relationality with nonlife becomes the way to avoid

a form of death that begins and ends in Nonlife—namely the extinction of humans, biological life and, as it is often put, the planet itself—which takes us to a time before the life and death of individuals and species, a time of the *geos* of soullessness...Life as opposed to the state of original and radical Nonlife, the vital in relation to the inert, the extinct in relation to the barren. In other words, it is increasingly clear that the *anthropos* remains an element in the set of life only insofar as Life can maintain its distinction from Death/Extinction and Nonlife (Povinelli, *Geontologies* 9).

By highlighting the bond between coloniality and geontopower, it is possible to see that the life/nonlife dichotomy is not situated in an ontologically neutral space. It emerges from within the violent spaces of the coloniality of power, from the systematic negation, extraction, and erasure of black, native, colonised life. The life/nonlife boundary is traversed by extractive, negating, genocidal forms of violence, by the creation of the inhuman spaces that enable

and ease the reproduction of hu(Man) life and its coping with the imminent possibility of inertness, of nonlife, that the Anthropocene awakens. Coloniality and its capture of the human appears in the centre of the desires for life that permeate the predicaments of the Anthropocene. From an anticolonial perspective, the notion of life cannot remain uninterrogated if we aim to critically approach the violent dynamics that sustain the present Anthropocenic context. As Heather Davis and Zoe Todd put it, “by linking the Anthropocene with colonization, it draws attention to the violence at its core” (763).

## II. Derrida: The gap within and beyond Life Death

The Anthropocene foregrounds an interrogation of the destructive and creative intimacy between the Man and the Earth: oceans, animal and vegetal species, the climate, microbiomes, geological and ecological systems. Not only does the Anthropocene emphasise the intimate imprint of ‘our’ ways of life in the more-than-human world, but it also underscores the fragility of the future of these modes of living and the dichotomies that sustain them (life/nonlife, human/nonhuman, meaning/matter, culture/nature). In this context, critical theory has increasingly focused on ontologies that try to undermine the life/nonlife as well as the human/more-than-human boundaries in what has been called a “nonhuman turn” (Grusin), or “material turn” (Boysen and Rasmussen; Bennett and Joyce). For example, neo-vitalist perspectives (Bennett; Braidotti; Grosz) aim to unsettle the opposition between life and nonlife by affirming the immanent vitality, the transversal, relational, productive and creative force, of nonlife itself. The ontological affirmation of the constitutive and productive entanglement of life and nonlife strives to unsettle the dichotomies that sustain the present threat to material conditions of existence. Furthermore, this ontological unsettling aims to counter human mastering desires towards the more-than-human, and “learn how to inhabit more richly a cosmic or ‘atomic’ strata of human experience” (Bennett, *Influx* 55). In this perspective, the transversality of the creative force of life itself enables “acknowledging the ties that bind us to the multiple ‘others’ in a vital web of complex interrelations” (Braidotti 100). Emphasising intimacy, entanglement, intertwinement, relationality with the more-than-human through the affirmation of the immanent vitality of nonlife, becomes a response to those hierarchies and dichotomies that, this tale tells us, have taken ‘us’ to this point of crisis.

Yet, by taking an ontological point of departure that starts with “the bigger questions about how to think about the earth, the cosmos, and time and

history” (Grosz et al. 140), these responses seem unable to address the force of the forms of violence that uphold the destructive/productive entanglement of life with nonlife in the Colonial Anthropocene. Indeed, as they aim to infuse all existence with the creative forces associated with life, they seem to rely on hu(Man) desires for the continuous creation of aliveness, newness, and endless becoming. Interrogating these desires and the way they capture the notions of being and life is a crucial critical task to open a space to address the inhuman forms of violence that are the condition of possibility of the Colonial Anthropocene’s intimate entanglements. The Anthropocene is not a neutral ground to explore the instability of the categories of life and the human, it is “an explicit formation of political geology that is racialized from its onset in the geologies of colonialism since 1492” (Yusoff, “Inhumanities” 2). As I suggested in the discussion of the intersection between geontopower and coloniality, in the modern/colonial order, the life/nonlife boundary is carved through the violent and systematic extraction, erasure, theft, and negation of black, native, and colonised life’s immanent value. Derrida’s unsettling of the notion of life in *Life Death* relies on a different logic than that of the explosion of the dichotomy life/nonlife by the affirmation of the immanent and infinite creative/productive power of nonlife. His approach to the life/nonlife intimacy shows an inappropriable gap that traverses desires for hu(Man) aliveness and their capture of the spaces of life, being and the human. I suggest that emphasising this gap may create space to address the inhuman ground upholding desires for hu(Man) vitality, desires that permeate the Colonial Anthropocene’s intertwinements with the more-than-human.

In the seminars compiled in *Life Death (La vie la mort)*, Derrida explores the logics and aporias that sustain and define the notion of life in Western thought. In the Western tradition, the notion of life and its conflation with being, “attributing of the name beings to the living” (Derrida, *Life Death* 10), is inhabited by the relations of force that sustain the “auto-reproduction” of sameness, the “carno-phallogocentrism” (Derrida and Nancy 113) of the modern subject. As Derrida suggests in *The Beast & the Sovereign* seminar, the space of life is not a neutral space in which any form of living enters equally into an ethical fellowship with others. Life is surrounded by an unacknowledged limit that traces the boundaries of ontological and ethico-political kinship: “fellow means for them, as is undeniably obvious, not ‘living being in general’ but ‘living being with a human face.’ There is here an uncrossable qualitative limit; I mean a qualitative and essential limit” (Derrida, *Beast I* 109). Life, as the space of Man’s aliveness, both separates and binds it with the nonliving as well as with those that inhabit the liminal spaces of this boundary.

In this way, the limit between the living and the nonliving is at the centre of the definition of “what is proper to man” (Derrida, *Beast I* 98). For this reason, it is crucial to point out that Derrida’s unsettling of this boundary aims to go beyond a neutral ontological point of entry and centres on the ethico-political grounding of this opposition. As Derrida points out, “in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but with a violent hierarchy” (*Positions* 41). By underscoring the violence that permeates these oppositions, Derrida seems to question the neutrality of an ontological starting point that abstractly reveals the instability of the dichotomies that underlie the Colonial Anthropocene.

For Derrida, the logics of opposition and conflation between the living and the nonliving are at the centre of the violent reproduction of the same. He complicates these logics by showing how the space of life is contaminated by the interruption of the nonliving. This contamination and eruption of the living/nonliving boundary is grounded in the trace, the movement of “différance,” and the spectrality or the dislocation of presence that it introduces in experience, relationality, as well as the human, being and life itself. For Derrida, there is always a rupture between every mark/sign and its signification that disrupts the wholeness and inevitability of any fixed meaning. Every being leaves traces, but, these traces, as they are impersonally deferred, fracture identity and self-presence from within. For this reason, every being becomes a spectre—a body in which distinctions between life and death, organic and inorganic tremble, a body with an un-appropriable absence within: “Mark, gramma, trace, and *différance* refer differentially to all living things, all the relations between living and nonliving” (Derrida, *Animal* 104). Living subjects, as every being, as selves that leave traces on themselves and the world, as autobiographical animals, are ontologically inconsistent. Aliveness is marked by this inconsistency and spectrality, traversed by the traces of a gratuitous, inappropriable and unjustifiable violence.

By highlighting an unappropriable absence and anaeconomic interruption within life, Derrida seems to maintain a space, a gap that cannot dissolve into the logics of aliveness, in which we can think about the negative force that sustains the violent and racialised intertwinements between life and nonlife in the Colonial Anthropocene. Derrida does not only critique the opposition and juxtaposition of “life *and* nonlife” or “live *vs* nonlife.” He also complicates the conflation or engulfing of the two terms (“life *is* nonlife”). In this logic of engulfing, “The *is* of life is death is *of* life, being is life, death is unthinkable as something that is...Life is this reappropriation of being, it is being” (Derrida, *Life Death* 4). In the appropriation and capture of being as life, the alterity of

nonlife—death or non-being—is engulfed within the movement of sameness. In an interview, Derrida refers to this logic of incorporation and assimilation as a “kind of sublimated eating-spirit” that “eats everything that is external and foreign, and thereby transforms it into something internal, something that is its own” (Derrida et al. “Limits”). The logic of incorporation and engulfment can be connected to a key dynamic of the colonial capture of the human: the erasure, theft and extraction of colonised life’s immanent value and its transmutation into “fungible” (Hartman 205) value for the hu(Man), that is, its violent transformation into resource for hu(Man) aliveness. To counter a strategy of engulfment to approach the life nonlife intimacy, Derrida emphasises how the entanglement of life nonlife, or life death, cannot resolve or engulf the gap or hiatus that is the condition of possibility and impossibility of the appropriation of being as life. An interruption from within and beyond the space of life remains; the flow of creative vitality and fluid becomings are continuously disrupted: “the sidestep of the detour [*du pas de détour*] that leads back always to death” (Derrida, *Life Death* 271). Moreover, it is precisely this gap, this detour, or interruption, that both sustains and un-stabilises the appropriation of being as life.

For Derrida there is, therefore, an unproductive excess, an unappropriable difference within, that does not respond to the logic of fluid productivity and endless creation. In Derrida’s words,

Our own hypothesis: irresolution, speculation, bottomless debt, interminable unbinding or binding—all this irresolution is not simply on the theoretical side...but in the thing itself, if there were such a thing, in the scene of writing, in fact, that binds, unbinds them, etc. In this process, there is no longer any opposition between pleasure and non-pleasure, life and death, this side and the beyond (*Life Death* 293).

That debt, irresolution and unbinding space interrogate the thought of fluid and smooth intertwinement of life and nonlife. There is no endless productive force that can override the space, the gap of life death. Perhaps within this gap we can address the emergence and continuity of the colonial/modern order as a “spike of brutality, sadism, and death, coupled with the subsequent dispossession of indigenous peoples from their land and the beginnings of industrial global slavery” (Yusoff, *Billion* 42). From an anticolonial point of view, this spike becomes an unappropriable hiatus that questions the conflation of being with the fluid reproduction of life as the hu(Man).

In the context of his discussion of the pleasure principle in Freud, Derrida emphasises in *Life Death* that this gap or crack also interrupts “a drive for mastery, a drive for power, or a drive to have power over [*pulsion d’emprise*], this last being perhaps best since it better underscores the relation to the other” (*Life Death* 294). In the anaeconomic logic of life death, production, creation, and reproduction are interrupted, suspended by an unappropriable alterity within and beyond. This is not, therefore, a dialectically sublimated and appropriated negativity, but instead, an incommensurable loss that can never be compensated for, fulfilled, or done justice to. Derrida links this anaeconomic movement and excess with Freud’s notion of the death drive or the repetition compulsion:

a bankrupt speculator, the death drive or the repetition compulsion drawing him, sucking him into the abyss of the pleasure principle and adding always more abyss, a supplement of abyss, beneath his every step, so that the obligation to treat a question becomes like a debt, or even a culpability of which he will never again be absolved and for which no reconciliation will ever be possible...A crime, an offense, a violence has taken place. An unpayable debt has been contracted (*Life Death* 284).

This is an unappropriable negation, negativity, absence, that cannot be captured by an endless spur of creativity and production, by the economic logics of pleasure and mastery. As Phillip Lynes puts it, “nothing can be done with such excess” (xxx). Thinking through “this crack (*Spalte*– this gap, this fissure, this hiatus)” (*Life Death* 148) within life itself interrupts fluid vital entanglements and shows their conditions of (im)possibility. Here is the space, a gap of an irreparable debt within materiality, within the living /nonliving boundary: “the ‘not’ or the ‘cut’ at the heart of the ‘yes’, the ‘death’ at the heart of ‘life’” (Cisney 269). This gap, this cut in life death is what haunts any kind of relationality, any “life that is pure and immune from all negativity” (Derrida, *Life Death* 109). This is a cut that interrupts any entanglement from within; it cannot be filled with nor melt into the flow of relationality, of the creative flow of the living through and in the nonliving. The hiatus in life death signals the impossibility of a flowy, innocent communion between the two. Interruption, nonlife, and an anaeconomic excess are not opposed to relationality; instead they haunt it. For this reason, this problematisation of the life/nonlife boundary seems to leave open a space to address the violent character of the Colonial Anthropocene and its inhuman intertwinements.

Can the attempt to “dissipate the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic using arguments and other rhetorical means to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality” (Bennett, *Vibrant* x) address what haunts the connective tissue of the Colonial Anthropocene entanglements? The neo-vitalist analytics of the force of life as that connective tissue and productive creative force that connects and overrides human desires of mastery is an analytics of connectivity and relationality that, from an anticolonial point of view, fails to address the negativity that inhabits such intertwinement. Such a way of unsettling the life/nonlife boundary fails to respond to the uninterrogated and violent intimacy between Man, life and being itself, as well as the cut that violently mediates such intimacy. Amid the entanglements between Man and the Earth, there is an unappropriable negativity and absence, a gap or cut in fluid, smooth intimate relationality, but also the possibility of refusal, of interruption. An interruption of the violent material entanglements in which matter has and is currently flowing, producing, creating a hu(Man) world, a world proper for hu(Man) life. Opening this space, which cannot be opened by a neutral ontology but that is first an ethical and political demand, perhaps we can address the constitutive violences of the Colonial Anthropocene’s entanglements, of our modern/colonial world and its ruins. Derrida’s unsettling of the life/nonlife boundary at least leaves a space to ask a key question: What haunts the raw connective tissue, the fluid relationality and reversibility of touching and being touched within an intertwined Earth, in the interweaving of life and nonlife in the Colonial Anthropocene, of the hu(Man) with the inhuman?

### **III. On the violence of touch: Spillers and Cabnal**

As an “ongoing geological event” (Gibbard et al.), the Colonial Anthropocene centres a fear and celebration of Man’s capacity to touch and be touched by the Earth’s inhuman forces. It invites ‘us’ to highlight a “more-than-human or earthy mode of affection” (Bennett, *Influx* 22); to see ‘ourselves’ as “earthlings—as geo-beings” (Bennett, *Influx* 22). Hu(Man) geological imprint and the threatening reverberations that it unleashes draw attention to the carved hinge that intimately joins and separates life and nonlife. The Colonial Anthropocene stresses “the pulsing scarred region between Life and Nonlife—an ache that makes us pay attention to a scar that has, for a long time, remained numb and dormant” (Povinelli, *Geontologies* 38). The question of touch appears here, in the violent forms of touch that sustain the reproduction of

hu(Man) life within the Colonial Anthropocene's corporeal entanglements. The kind of intimacy that occurs in the materially traced boundary between life and nonlife is an intimacy that cannot be fully present, an intimacy always disjointed by a violent interruption and inappropriability.

The opacity of this intimacy echoes Derrida's reflections on touch. "Nothing" says Derrida "no presence whatsoever, without a detour. No logic of sense, and not even a logic of touch, not even an ultratactile haptics, would then yield, it seems to me, to an ontology of presence" (*Touching* 130). Thinking from the pulsing cut of life nonlife, we begin to open a space for addressing "the obscurities of the tangible: touch isn't clear" (Derrida, *Touching* 4). Taking as a point of departure Aristotle's reflections on the aporias of the sense of touch, like the obscurity of its subject, object and medium, Derrida explores further its "inapparent, obscure, secret, nocturnal" (*On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy* 4) character. Reflecting on the obscurity of touch amid the Colonial Anthropocene's deathly intertwinements is not an unsituated ontological question. Taking seriously an anticolonial and feminist point of departure, I do not aim to reflect on a general theory or a neutral ontology that demonstrates the inherent obscurity of touch. My interest is to further address the disjunction of intimacy in its coloniality, by attending to how colonial violence in its multiple forms traverses and sustains it. Derrida opens a space for such unappropriable negativity, for this violent cut. His reflections, however, are not enough to respond to and counter it from an anticolonial and feminist situated thought. To address this limitation, I briefly engage with black feminist thinker Hortense Spillers's insights on intimacy and touch alongside Mayan-Xinka Indigenous feminist thinker Lorena Cabnal's reflections on colonial violence within the concept of "body-territory" ("el Cuerpo-Territorio"). Spillers and Cabnal's reflections on the intertwinement between intimacy, corporeality and violence in the colonial/modern order offer feminist and anticolonial avenues to explore the contradictions and aporias of touch and the haptic within the Colonial Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene and its haptic entanglements are situated in the iterations of "the socio-political order of the New World. That order, with its human sequence written in blood, represents for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile" (Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 67). As Cabnal ("Relato") points out, in these iterations and historical continuums of the "colonial penetration" ("Acercamiento" 20), multiple forms of violence, with different temporalities and dynamics, coexist and interact to create inhuman spaces that violate the integrity and vitality of bodies and their embeddedness in a territory. The body-territory becomes a space

of dispute, expropriation and extraction not merely on an individual level but also in the corporeal intertwinement with the land (Cabnal, “Acercamiento” 22–23). Within the violent affective grammars of coloniality/modernity, the connectivity of touch subjects certain corporealities to a violent and continuous reaching, which places them in a space of not-being, of nonlife, a space of erasure, extraction, death, and inhumanity. This space, as both Cabnal and Spillers suggest, shapes the boundaries of susceptibility to various forms of violence through gendering and racialising dynamics. No longer bodies, no longer subjects in a hu(Man) world, certain bodies become “flesh” (Spillers, “Mama’s Baby” 67), alien, fungible and expendable figures at the reach of the other’s touch. In a hu(Man) order, their bodies lose integrity by the possibility of being “invaded, entered or penetrated” by a “touch that engenders invasion and violence” (Spillers, *Bone* n.p.).

In the inhuman space of the flesh, “touching is not a token of social cohesion, of brotherhood, of fellowship or fellow feeling, but rather the very breath and death of alienation” (*Bone* n.p.). The paradox of touch in a world traversed by the afterlives and continuity of the colonial/modern order is that while touch can be the source of reparative erotic connectivity, it is also haunted and sustained by the possibility of this violent reach. As Spillers puts it, touch “unfolds a troubled intersubjective legacy, perhaps troubled to the extent that one of these valences of touch is not walled off from the other, but haunts it, shadows it, as its own twin possibility” (*Bone* n.p.). Under the violent conditions of the Colonial Anthropocene, intimate entanglements and intertwinements are haunted by this irreducible negative force, the negation that comes from being “Manhandled” (*Bone* n.p.). Before affirming too quickly the reparative powers of touch and intimate entanglements with, for instance, matter’s vibrant vitality, it is necessary to also address the negation, violence, block, and uneasiness that, in their spectral hauntings and returns, make possible the assumed reversibility of Man’s reach and capture of the space of nonlife. The body that is at home within the deathly and inhuman relationalities of the Colonial Anthropocene, and that easily finds reparative and binding power in touch, is a body that can dwell in a world traversed and drawn by whiteness and coloniality. A body at home in a hu(Man) world. As Rizvana Bradley puts it in her piece “The Vicissitudes of Touch,”

thinking the haptic irreducibility of the aesthetic requires constant re-attunement to the violence touch occasions and to the violations which occasion touch...If touch is ultimately inextricable from the aesthetic economy of worldly humanity, then we are compelled to

think about the violence that resides in our habits of worlding (Bradley n.p.).

What happens when that which haunts such intimacy, the gap that inhabits its core and manifests as an uninterrupted flow of energy, addresses us? If touch is pierced by coloniality's wound, by the violently carved boundary between life and nonlife, between body and flesh in Spillers' terms, touch cannot be romanticised by dismissing the coloniality of its fractures, its constitutive cracks. This does not mean that any possibility of healing, resistance and reparation is coopted and corrupted. The hiatus in the flesh is also the possibility of an interruption of the violent flow of hu(Man) aliveness. The gap that interrupts the violent and unsatiable desire for hu(Man) life might also imply the possibility of other modes of life beyond the extractive flows of a hu(Man) world. As Weheliye points out, recognising that these violent cuts are not merely deviations but are constitutive of a hu(Man) world also entails the translation of the "hieroglyphics of the flesh into an originating leap in the imagining of future anterior freedoms and new genres of humanity" (130). This translation, however, is neither a romanticisation, nor the evasion of the realities and horrors of these violences, nor is it simply a lingering on a wound. Cabnal's notion of healing as the emergence of new modes of life affirmation insists precisely on this point. For Cabnal (*Sanación*), the possibility of healing, resistance and reparation passes through a corporeally situated exercise of memory of the violences which permeate the body-territory in a personal and collective way. From her positionality as an indigenous woman, Cabnal emphasises that the possibility of healing starts from there, from the flesh and not from an ontological flight that can overlook this uneasiness and pain. The task is, as Cabnal writes,

To enunciate from personal and political responsibility my pain, diseases, feelings, disconnections, but also my emancipatory healings. My body becomes the immediate referent of oppressed or liberated life, either in rural or urban communities. Is in this body where the everyday effects of these violences are ascertained, as well as the emancipations (*Sanación*, n.p.; my trans.).

One's own corporeality is, therefore, a source of reflection, of conflict, of a painful healing that demystifies neutral ontologies and their abstract unsettling of the colonial/modern dichotomies at the core of the Colonial Anthropocene. Cabnal and Spillers emphasise the need for a situated, fleshy, corporeal, and affective way of thinking and praxis that emerges from the colonial

trace or wound that we differentially inhabit. In this way, they take further and show the limitations of Derrida's theoretical address of the violent cut in the gap of life death. Our body, our situated corporeality, is the source of questions and the ground for ontological flights that explore the undoing of dichotomies. Fanon ends *Black Skins White Masks* precisely with this prayer: "Oh my body, make me always a man who questions" (181). Such appeal resonates with the genealogies of feminist and anticolonial thought. The works of Gloria Anzaldúa, Audrey Lorde or Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui give rise to a methodology of reflection and affirmation of other modes of life coming from the en-fleshed self and its outwardly and painful inhabiting of a hu(Man) world pierced by intertwined forms of violence. In our situated inhabiting of this wound, a glimpse of what could have been is evoked and maybe pushes us towards the force of justice, reparation, and healing; towards other modes of being human that unsettle a hu(Man) world. This would be a "theory in the flesh," as it is developed in *This Bridge Called My Back*. "To look at the nightmare within us" (Anzaldúa and Moraga 33), says Cherrie Moraga, is a bloody and terrifying task. A neutralising ontological flight that escapes this corporeal and situated struggle is possible for those who can remain at home within a world traversed by these intertwined forms of violence with no direct effect on them. A feminist and anticolonial take on the violent contouring of the life/nonlife boundaries and entanglements in the Colonial Anthropocene, is a struggle from within the fleshiness of our situated body-territory in which other modes of living and being human can emerge. This affirmation of other modes of life and humanity does not dismiss, appropriate, or aim to fully understand, or capture, such forms of violence. An anticolonial and feminist situated perspective reckons and grapples with the force of these violences, with their incomprehensibility and irreducible traces, while continuing the struggle to affirm other modes of living and being together that counter the desires for hu(Man) aliveness at the centre of the intimate entanglements of the Colonial Anthropocene.

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