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## Necropolitics

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Necropolitics

Achille Mbembe

Translated by Libby Meintjes

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Wa syo' lukasa pebwe

Umwime wa pita

[He left his footprint on the stone

He himself passed on]

Lamba proverb, Zambia

This essay assumes that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.<sup>1</sup> Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its **[End Page 11]** fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.

One could summarize in the above terms what Michel Foucault meant by *biopower*: that domain of life over which power has taken control.<sup>2</sup> But under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right? What does the implementation of such a right tell us about the person who is thus put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets that person against his or her murderer? Is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective? War, after all, is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill. Imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?

## Politics, the Work of Death, and the "Becoming Subject"

In order to answer these questions, this essay draws on the concept of biopower and explores its relation to notions of sovereignty (*imperium*) and the state of exception.<sup>3</sup> Such an analysis raises a number of empirical and philosophical questions I would like to examine briefly. As is well known, the concept of the state of exception has been often discussed in relation to Nazism, totalitarianism, and the concentration/extermination camps. The death camps in particular have been interpreted variously as the central metaphor for sovereign and destructive violence and as the ultimate sign of the absolute power of the negative. Says Hannah Arendt: "There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death."<sup>4</sup> Because its inhabitants are divested of political status and reduced to bare life, the camp is, for Giorgio Agamben, "the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* ever to appear on Earth was realized."<sup>5</sup> In the political-judicial structure of the camp, he adds, the state of exception ceases to be a temporal suspension **[End Page 12]** of the state of law. According to Agamben, it acquires a permanent spatial arrangement that remains continually outside the normal state of law.

The aim of this essay is not to debate the singularity of the extermination of the Jews or to hold it up by way of example.<sup>6</sup> I start from the idea that modernity was at the origin of multiple concepts of sovereignty—and therefore of the biopolitical. Disregarding this multiplicity, late-modern political criticism has unfortunately privileged normative theories of democracy and has made the concept of reason one of the most important elements of both the project of modernity and of the topos of sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, the ultimate expression of sovereignty is the production of general norms by a body (the demos) made up of free and equal men and women. These men and women are posited as full subjects capable of self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation. Politics, therefore, is defined as twofold: a project of autonomy and the achieving of agreement among a collectivity through communication and recognition. This, we are told, is what differentiates it from war.<sup>8</sup>

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This essay is the result of sustained conversations with Arjun Appadurai, Carol Breckenridge, and Françoise Vergès. Excerpts were presented at seminars and workshops in Evanston, Chicago, New York, New Haven, and Johannesburg. Useful criticisms were provided by Paul Gilroy, Dilip Panneshwar Gaonkar, Beth Povinelli, Ben Lee, Charles Taylor, Crawford Young, Abdoumalik Simone, Luc Sindjoun, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Carlos Forment, Ato Quayson, Ulrike Kistner, David Theo Goldberg, and Deborah Posel. Additional comments and insights as well as critical support and encouragement were offered by Rhana Ebe-Vally and Sarah Nutall. The essay is dedicated to my late friend Tshikala Kayembe Biaya.

1. The essay distances itself from traditional accounts of sovereignty found in the discipline of political science and the subdiscipline of international relations. For the most part, these accounts locate sovereignty within the boundaries of the nation-state, within institutions empowered by the state, or within supranational institutions and networks. See, for example, *Sovereignty at the Millennium*, special issue, *Political Studies* 47 (1999). My own approach builds on Michel Foucault's critique of the notion of sovereignty and its relation to war and biopower in *Il faut défendre la société: Cours au Collège de France, 1975–1976* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 37–55, 75–100, 125–48, 213–44. See also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 23–80.

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