

# Necropoetic gestures

## Gestos necropoéticos

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## Abstract

If necropolitics, according to Achille Mbembe, involves “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the powers of death,” *necropoetics*, as proposed here, involves the poetic and gestural interruption of necropolitics. Starting out from a gesture that simulates the act of killing, I ask what sort of anthropology and corresponding mode of writing would be entailed if one were to imaginatively align oneself with that gesture and others like it as they traverse temporal, contextual, and intertextual thresholds – including that between life and death – and the racialized histories recalled thereby. The counter-fabulatory approach taken herein, in pitting the poetic (Black) subtexts of the iterations of this gesture against the varied modes of discourse – ethnographic (part I), historical (part II) and anthropological (part III) – that would capture them, seeks to performatively interrupt the pretense of a neutral language through which necropolitics passes for the continuation of history as usual.

**Keywords:** performance; necropolitics; writing; interruption.

## Resumo

Se a necropolítica, segundo Achille Mbembe, envolve “formas contemporâneas de subjugação da vida aos poderes da morte”, a necropoética, como aqui proposta, envolve a interrupção poética e gestual da necropolítica. Tomando como ponto de partida um gesto que simula o ato de matar, pergunto que tipo de antropologia e modo de escrever estariam implicados se nós nos alinhássemos imaginativamente com aquele e outros gestos similares, na medida em que esses atravessam limiares temporais, contextuais e intertextuais – incluindo aqueles entre a vida e a morte – e as histórias racializadas que ali emergem. A abordagem contrafabulatória assumida aqui, ao opor os subtextos poéticos (negros) das iterações desse gesto aos vários modos de discurso – etnográfico (parte I), histórico (parte II), e antropológico (parte III) – que os capturam, busca assim interromper performativamente a presunção de uma linguagem neutra através da qual a necropolítica se faz passar por uma continuação da história de sempre.

**Palavras-chave:** performance; necropolítica; escrita; interrupção.

## Part I: “In your hands...” Gesturing within and against ethnography and language

We dance as if we are marching. As if we are stepping from mountaintop to mountaintop, afraid to fall yet not giving a Goddamn if we do. We have been told that we are creatures full of song, creatures full of stories, and the stories are ancient ones. And they are brand-new – as new as what happened to me today and how I feel at this moment. When I open my arms, I am the most beautiful bird. A bird that is in fact a jet plane. This bird is capable of sorrow in the most lyric flight. This bird is capable of holding a knife and slashing your motherfucking throat. (Jones, 1995, p. 3).

This passage offers a singular figuration of what I take to be a *necropoetic* gesture.<sup>1</sup> It does this in part through the poetic nature of the passage itself – although this begs the question of what precisely “poetic” is taken to mean; and in part, through the incisively emotive action to which its final phrase gestures in subjunctive form. Up until the last line thereof, the passage could perhaps be taken as a figurative instantiation of Erika Fischer-Lichte’s (2008, p. 200-207) conception of the “aesthetics of the performative,” wherein *art* works towards transposing frontiers into *thresholds*, and foremost among these lies that between art and life, wherein art may itself become life-like no less than serve

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1 I have come back to this quotation from Bill T. Jones more than once in my writing, albeit each time from a distinct angle: first, in the final paragraph of an essay on gesture and ethnographic montage (Head, 2013); and second, toward the beginning of a paper discussing the relation between dancing, gesture and politics – wherein I contrasted the “cutting gesture” from that citation to the “shooting gesture” as performed as part of contemporary right-wing political discourse in Brazil and the United States (Head, 2020). In the present paper, the quote initiates a more theoretically sustained investigation of the interruptive power of gesture with respect to both necropolitical practices and anthropological writing. It thereby returns to address provocative comments received from Paulo Raposo and Vi Grunwald when an initial version of this paper, “Playing darkly with death and democracy,” was given at the seminar organized by them (“Corpo e espaço público: entre arte e política”) as part of the APA (Associação Portuguesa de Antropologia) conference in Lisboa, Portugal in 2019. I would also thank Fred Moten, whose three-day seminar, “Black Performance: Violence,” also held in Lisboa, in 2022 – through its far-reaching and deeply piercing discussion of the “*preformative*” conditions (wherein routinized and racialized brutality passes for “normal” everyday reality) to which Black poetic theory and practice both respond and endeavor to interrupt – inspired me to return to the matters addressed herein from an angle that – I hope – resonates with his own.

as a model for the living. Whereas, the abrupt appearance of that throat-cutting gesture points instead to the felt interruption of art and life alike.

As taken up in this essay, that gesture also presents an occasion for returning to and refiguring Achille Mbembe's (2003) conception of *necropolitics*, as first elaborated in his essay by that name.<sup>2</sup> If necropolitics, according to Achille Mbembe (2003, p. 11), involves "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the powers of death," *necropoetics*, as proposed here, would do something more than highlight the formal and/or formative dimension of that relation of subjugation as portrayed, delimited and rendered "reasonable" through attending discourses. Necropolitics, as elaborated by Mbembe (2003, p. 17), walks hand-in-hand with race and racism, wherein the latter constitutes the "condition for the acceptability" of the line drawn between those in one way or another sentenced to death and those whose lives are to be saved from – and by – that sentencing. If so, the gestures considered here point to the possibility of necropoetically *rephrasing* the "grammar of death" implied thereby. More than a matter of drawing attention to how the bio-political line between those who "may live" and those who "must die" comes to be drawn, enforced, displayed, justified, naturalized or occluded, necropoetics would draw out the potential for charged figurations of past and passing, subjunctive acts of violence to interrupt alignments presumed between life, art, reason, race and writing (ethnographic and otherwise).

While that might seem a rather grandiose and abstruse statement, the manner in which I seek to elaborate this premise is far more palpable and close-to-hand: through gesture(s), namely. My approach to gesture(s) herein may similarly sound straightforward enough: gestures come to matter (or not) through their relation to what comes *before* and *after* them – although not

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2 Given the two decades since it was first published, some might consider "Necropolitics" as – or soon to be – an "out-of-fashion" term. Although the fact that an article was recently published in *TeenVogue* magazine with the title, "What is necropolitics? The political calculation of life and death" (Verghese, 2021) could be presumed to confirm that assumption, I would suggest drawing one's own conclusion *after* reading the article itself. Another case in point is Brazilian rap (etc.) singer and self-ascribed "artist" Bia Ferreira's recently released and increasingly popular song by that very name – *Necropolitica*; as I can hardly hope to do justice to her poetic refiguring of that term in rhythm and rhyme – particularly once transcribed and translated on paper – let me suggest you listen to it instead (see Ferreira, 2020).

necessarily in that order. Resonating with and drawing from what Rebeca Schneider (2018, p. 289) terms a “cross-temporal approach to gesture,” the implications of such an approach are anything but straight or forward, however. Schneider herself starts out in this regard, mentioning a simple wave of the hand. While such a gesture – and perhaps some word or phrase voiced along with it – could be taken to call out in a friendly manner, it can just as well exude deadly implications, particularly if executed with, say, a blue uniform and accompanied by sharp verbal call. Taking up Althusser’s oft-cited “scene of interpellation,” involving a policeman’s *hail* on the street and its demand for a return gesture of acknowledgment, Schneider (2018, p. 287) goes on to formulate her broader approach to gesture through it: “Gesture bodies forth ideological precedent and casts it into the future by way of anticipated response, articulating a temporal and spatial interval that migrates body to body, even as that same interval is a potential site, dangerous as it may be, for alteration.” As Schneider (2018, p. 287) points out still in regard to the policeman’s hail, the danger involved in responding to (or ignoring) that gesture is unequally shared across bodies, “more deadly for black than white.” At the same time, the forced response to the threat of violence implicated in that hail may well be taken up by others and recontextualized in ways that radically change its nature, as she proceeds to relate:

On July 17 and August 9, 2014 respectively, less than a year after I returned from France, Eric Garner was killed by police on Staten Island in New York City and Michael Brown was killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri. In response to the killings, gestures of two hands held up and chants of “Hands up, don’t shoot!” took place in protests across the country in conjunction with #BlackLivesMatter, a movement that had begun in July 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin. (Schneider, 2018, p. 288).

This latter gesture, in offering a response to gestures of hailing turned cold-blooded acts of killing, could certainly be considered necropoetic in one sense I’m aiming to elaborate here. Namely, it could be taken as a “poetic” interruption of necropolitics – a rearranging of its constituent lines of reason and force: the otherwise forced reaction to the policeman’s hail, and its failure to prevent the *hail of bullets* (or chokeholds, or any other potentially lethal use of force)

that nonetheless followed, takes on new vitality when enacted collectively as a gesture of protest against the continued use of such normalized violence. At the same time, in taking up the cross-temporal, *call-and-response* approach Schneider elaborates in response to that gesture, and redirecting it in regard to gestures of a more ambivalent nature, other questions emerge as to how to approach such gestures and figure them with respect to their spatial, temporal and discursive surroundings.<sup>3</sup> But what do I mean by turning to “gestures of a more ambivalent nature”?

The gestures in question, rather than respond non-violently to potential acts of violence as in the hands-up gesture, instead simulate the act of killing – and thence seemingly preclude the very possibility of response. And yet, if an act of surrender involving the cessation of movement may be transformed into a gesture of protest and thence a call for mobilization, could not a gesture toward violence serve, conversely, to interrupt the seemingly endless story of orchestrating violence in the name of *order, progress, civility* and the like? Any attempt to treat this question as more than a rhetorical gesture in itself must clearly attempt to situate it with respect to the *how, where, and when* of particular gestures – while at the same time keeping in mind that gestures as approached here don’t really make sense “in particular,” on their own: they come to *matter* insofar as they are *repeated*, even if never in quite the same way.

To pursue this point, prior to turning to what might be termed a more *ethnographic* inflection of the gesture at issue, and figuring it with respect to what has been termed anthropology’s “ethnographic gesture” (Pina-Cabral, 2007, 2022), let me first return to the singular gesture punctuating the passage with which this essay began. This allows me, in part, to question what is meant by “ethnographic” to begin with, and thence suggest why I have opted to start elsewhere and else-when. It also allows me to first flesh out the gesture not as an “object” of ethnographic description or analysis, but rather from within the

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3 One such question in regard to Schneider’s approach, to which I shall return briefly in the last section of this paper, is how it might be fleshed out with respect to the black/African-Diasporic performance traditions to which she refers only briefly, yet without which the practice and theory of call-and-response to which she ties gesture, risks ringing hollow.

immediacy<sup>4</sup> of its enactment in and through writing, as directed toward its reader – even if that writing takes the form of a citation.

The passage cited, within which that gesture announces itself, consists in the first paragraph opening the book, *Last night on Earth*, by Bill T. Jones (1995). While written in part as an autobiographical text, significant portions of it unsettle and experimentally refigure the conventions thereof by playing between telling stories in regard to Jones's life up until then and the telling of dances to which he and his partner gave life, as well as clearly fabulated sections – such as that of its opening passage. Given that Jones's book also reads an homage to Jones's deceased dancing and living partner and co-founder of their dance company, Arnie Zane, the storying of life therein is certainly not limited to Jones's own life, moreover. More than an attempt to bring details of their personal lives to life into writing, or even those of their social and artistic lives as a bi-racial, southern Black and northern White/Jewish gay couple making a living and creating new vectors of movement in and beyond the dance world of New York, significant parts of Jones's book are also devoted to narrating performances that Bill danced with Arnie, as well as those danced and/or choreographed by Jones in the aftermath of Arnie Zane's death, wherein felt pain was reworked into a danced expression of personal and collective mourning and revolt.<sup>5</sup>

As such, *Last night on Earth* responds provocatively to Didier Fassin's (2014, p. 42) query into ethnography's and fiction's respective efforts to “regain life through writing.” In one sense, that book could be taken as articulating what Fassin (2014), following Martha Nussbaum, takes to be the “vertical” (truth-oriented) and “horizontal” (reality-oriented) approaches to depicting life in writing:

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- 4 Rather than imply a discrete, unmediated experience of something, ‘immediacy’ can be taken in the sense Erin Manning (2016, p. 81) implies to gestures via Whitehead's conception of ‘presentational immediacy’: “the experience of qualitatively felt effects in a relational field.” Making a similar point with regard to reading, Pia Ednie-Brown (2019, p. 182) notes how “words do not simply mediate – they also have an immediacy that acts in the moment of your reading – now – as the act is taking place.”
- 5 As Randy Martin (2007, p. 76) comments in regard to the wider resonances of Zane's death and Jones's loss, “the AIDS virus that ravaged Zane's body and that had such a devastating effect on the dance community also figured in the cultural conflicts of the day as a kind of social death.”

“Literature,” writes Martha Nussbaum, “is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, vertically, so to speak, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, more precise than much of what takes place in life” (1990, p. 48). I contend that anthropology is fundamentally an attempt to articulate the real and the true – the horizontal and the vertical – in the exploration of life. (Fassin, 2014, p. 41).

Approached from this perspective, Jones’s book could be read as endeavoring to invoke certain *truths* of life through dance and of dance through life, while at the same time offering a felt account of Bill’s life before and after meeting Arnie and before and after Arnie’s death to HIV/AIDS, and Bill’s own close call with death from HIV/AIDS as well.

To read *Last night on Earth* primarily as a testament to *life*, however, would be to risk smoothing over the impact of the “powers of death” on the tale it tells, and on the dances recounted therein. It would thence risk downplaying the book’s powerful denunciation of *avoidable* deaths – in this case those resulting from the HIV/AIDS epidemic as asymmetrically distributed along necropolitical fault-lines indexed by homophobia and racism; fault-lines that not only pre-existed the epidemic, thence pre-determining those most vulnerable to its ravaging, but also continue to extend into the present of those reading the book, and how the stories told therein gesture to ongoing permutations thereof.<sup>6</sup> Fassin’s discussion of similarities and differences between fictional, biographic and ethnographic approaches to the depiction of life is certainly attentive to how violence and death factor into such accounts in both personal and contextual/historical terms. What I wish to draw attention to here, however, is how violence and the “powers of death” also figure into – and *against* – the more formal dimension of textual composition, ethnographic and otherwise. When

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6 For a discussion specifically addressing the implications of necropolitics with respect to queer and black struggles in regard to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the past and present, see Che Gosset’s (2014) “We will not rest in peace: AIDS activism, black radicalism, queer and/or trans resistance,” in *Queer necropolitics*. As stated in the book’s introduction, “dominant queer historiographies imagine AIDS as belonging in a romanticized past of collective suffering and radical action that revolved around white gay men. This serves to reify death in the present by cutting off from queer community the majority of queer and trans people living with HIV/AIDS, most of whom are poor, of colour and trans feminine” (Haritaworn; Kuntsman; Posocco, 2014, p. 27).



Fassin (2014) revisits the story of Magda – a woman who, like Bill T. Jones, almost dies from HIV/AIDS albeit in the context of the epidemic taking place in post-Apartheid South Africa – he calls attention to the limitations of her own account with regard to the “social structures and political events” that frame the impact of sexual and racial violence on her life-story. What I find perturbing in his account (within which hers is folded) is, in a sense, its very failure to perturb, however: it is as if the wounds written into her story could be *sutured* through their sociological and ethnographic contextualization. In the case of *Last night on Earth*, I would suggest that to read that book as primarily a “testament to life” would not only miss the creative use of juxtaposition therein to perform interruptive tensions between life, death and dancing, but would also render the gesture with which it begins incomprehensible as a forcefully ambivalent index of justifiable *anger* regarding unjustifiable deaths – past, present and future.

Actually, that still wouldn't do justice to that gesture, insofar as it imputes some particular meaning – however ambivalent – to it, or an intention to communicate something in particular to it. My point here is not that reading Jones's autobiographical dance to life-and-death somehow explains or “makes sense” of the violence of the gesture directed toward the reader with which it begins. As I read it, searching for an explanation for that textual gesture in the rest of the book that follow in its wake would miss how its subjunctive framing in and through language places the responsibility for how to respond to it *in your hands*.

In making use of this particular body idiom, I mean to do something more than gesture to what literary critics have termed *reception theory*, wherein apparent textual ambiguities are understood to constitute the “productive matrix” enabling “the text to be meaningful in a variety of historically changing contexts” (Iser, 2006, p. 67). Through that idiom, I suggest that the opening passage in Jones's autobiography could be read as in some way akin to the parable around which Toni Morrison (2022) elaborates her 1993 Nobel Lecture – a parable also directly involving both the hands and a bird, it so happens. The parable involves two children who mischievously ask an old blind woman reputed to be a sage whether the bird in their hands is dead or alive; after a long pause, she responds: “I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands.”

Morrison reads the bird, in this parable, as standing for *language*, and its life-affirming propensities. “The vitality of language,” she affirms in this regard, “lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.” (Morrison, 2022). The apparently malicious intent of the question posed by the children points, in turn, to the potential violence done both *to* and *through* language: when language is deployed in ways that imprison or effectively *kill* its vitality, language itself may be turned into an instrument of oppression and of the propagation of unnatural death. Such oppressive language, Morrison affirms, “does more than represent violence, it is violence.” Proceeding to describe some of the varied forms that the violence of language may take – from “obscuring state language” or the “faux language of mindless media” to “the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science” – she implicates the reader in accepting, rejecting, reproducing, redirecting, and transforming these varied forms.

Writing in regard to an otherwise unrelated epidemic involving a large number of sudden deaths from an outbreak of cholera among indigenous communities in Venezuela in 2007, Charles Briggs (2021, p. 287) notes how the circulation of lethal microbes “went hand in hand with that of narratives that purported to explain why some people died and others lived.” Proceeding to link that epidemic with the pandemic of COVID-19 taking place at the time of his writing, Briggs has this to say about similar narratives at work in the present to cover over the equally virulent and unequally violent impact of systemic racism on resulting mortalities:

Such racist stereotypes as the threatening Black man, the overly fertile, welfare-mongering Black woman, brown bodies flooding across the US-Mexican border, and exotic but alcoholic Native Americans have been often – but not consistently – amplified by white politicians, journalists, and scholars, thereby providing whites with defense mechanisms for transforming stories of racial violence into confirmations of unequal social standing, or, at best, gruesome but easily forgotten exceptions. (Briggs, 2021, p. 289).

Far from reducing such discourses to the matter of their content – or, for that matter, of turning questions of discursive form into what amounts to further “content” to be analyzed, as in scientific approaches to discourse analysis – Briggs turns his attention to the political implications of the ‘poetic’ processes through which the deaths resulting from COVID-19 and police killings alike come to be remembered, communicated and mourned, and their resistance to erasure, or containment within conventionalized forms and distancing strategies aimed at displacing blame and neutralizing their affective charge.

It is with these stereotypically inflected texts and poetic textures and contexts in mind that I took up Morrison’s turn-of-phrase to suggest that the gesture iterated at the beginning of Bill T. Jones’s autobiography places that demand for a response – over against the yes/no, dead or alive, fact or fiction answer implied by the children’s question – in the hands of the reader. As I read it, for one, the gesture’s iteration of what could otherwise be taken as a racist stereotype, when placed in the context of Jones’s life-and-death story, sabotages the possibility of taking the autobiography as a whole as one more comforting narrative of “racial uplift,” as in: the life portrayed might be Black and gay, but the story it tells (that of a renown dancer and choreographer) and the fact that he is telling it (hence as an author) clearly distinguish him from a “threatening Black man” with which he might otherwise be confused. Here, it is the very possibility of that confusion that the gesture subversively bodies forth in writing, thereby preempting such an imagined response even while opening others. Whatever the expletive-added slashing gesture opening Jones’s autobiography is taken to *mean*, it is in part the necropolitical assumption implicated in everyday life and language which distinguishes between those who come to “merit” life from those presumed to “deserve” death (or incarceration, or other normalized modes of social death, including the foreclosure or overdetermination of their stories being told), that it cuts across or interrupts.

In beginning this essay with the opening passage from Bill T. Jones’s book, and thence redirecting its deictic address from the reader thereof to that of an article in an anthropological journal, the bird-turned-gesture cited in the passage also passes through *my* hands. It certainly matters that in this case, those hands are *white*. It matters, likewise that “the problem of ideological and cultural whiteness in anthropology itself” – a problem pointed out by Faye Harrison (1995, p. 65) in a paper published the same year as Jones’s book, it so

happens – remains with respect to the present-day disciplinary context of the journal within which that gesture is re-cited herein. To presume otherwise, in either case, would be to re-iterate the very violence of “race-blindness” that the gesture repeatedly interrupts – whether that of the United States, as so far addressed, or the no-doubt different form it takes in Brazil, to which my attention will shift shortly. Still, in and across these and other differences that comprise it, the question remains: Will the *bird*, in each case, *live* or *die*, *contribute* to or *disrupt* the “powers of death” implicated in language and gesture alike? That depends on how we receive and hold it, as well as how we pass it on, whether we let it die, or fly – even if the bird in this case threatens to kill.

## **Part II: Cutting into the “circle” of capoeira – or, how much history fits on the tip of a finger...?**

In turning in what follows from the perhaps exhausting but hardly exhaustive response to Bill T. Jones’s throat-cutting gesture delineated above, toward ethnographic and historical iterations thereof, the question arises as to what sort of *anthropology* could possibly be implied thereby. Leaving the matter of anthropological import of that gesture for the last part of this essay, in this section I delve into what could be respectively termed its ethnographic and historical contexts. Rather than treat these as complementary instances of contextualization, however, I have opted to counterpose two such “scenes” linked to that gesture – one ethnographic, the other historical – interrupting the first through the second.

Prior to presenting the “ethnographic” scene, I should point out that what first drew me to write in regard to the gesture invoked by Bill T. Jones is the way it resembles a gesture I first encountered in all-too-tactile form while practicing and doing fieldwork on the Afro-Brazilian danced martial art and ritualized game known as Capoeira Angola in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Here, as elsewhere, context comes to be construed *through* the ethnographic encounter (see Faier; Rofel, 2014), not prior or external to it.

João Pina-Cabral makes something like this very point in a particularly provocative manner through figuring the “ethnographic” in specifically *gestural* terms. The “ethnographic gesture,” as he first termed it, involves “the movement,

at once physical and intellectual, that leads the [social] scientist to decontextualize oneself socially so as to recontextualize oneself in the field” (Pina-Cabral, 2007, p. 191). Skipping over numerous subsequent iterations thereof, we find the “ethnographic gesture” recently rephrased by him in equally provocative terms as “the decision to engage intensively with a particular form of life in order to situate it within a more common world” (Pina-Cabral, 2022, p. 64). Following this latter iteration further, we find the “two analytical moments” taken to comprise that gesture – “going out there” and “returning” – to involve the combination of “two contradictory dispositions: (i) the indeterminacy and underdetermination of the actual events one experiences and (ii) the need to measure some things by relation to other things in order to determine a ‘field’ and write an ethnography.” (Pina-Cabral, 2022, p. 66). As Pina-Cabral (2022, p. 66) proceeds to point out, “there will never be a seamless fit between the ambiguity of uncertainty and the disambiguation of determination. Therefore, by its very nature as a historically situated practice, ethnography will ever remain incomplete.”

Taking up Pina-Cabral’s phrase regarding “the need to measure some things by relation to other things,” let me proceed by offering two such “things” in the form of extended citations. Counterposing the scenes presented in these citations prepares the temporal terrain and figurative field wherein *anthropology’s* “ethnographic gesture,” as just delineated, could be refigured along the lines of that gesture, as a necropoetic interruption of necropolitics (namely, how the everyday reality of unnatural deaths continues to pass itself off as more of history as usual). My first citation takes the form of a description of Capoeira, quoted from “Nomination file no. 00892” submitted as part of the application for the Capoeira “circle” to be “inscribed” on UNESCO’s (2014) “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,” in response to the following request as posed in that nomination file: “Provide a brief summary description of the element that can introduce it to readers who have never seen or experienced it.”:

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian cultural practice with many facets and dimensions. While it is a fight, it is also a dance; it can be understood as folklore, as a sport and even as an art form. Regardless of its classification, however, it conveys an ancestral philosophy. It appeared in the 17th century, during the period of slavery, as a form of sociability and solidarity between enslaved Africans,

a social strategy to help them deal with control and violence. It is now one of the greatest symbols of Brazilian identity, and can be found in over 160 countries. The “Circle” is a structural element of Capoeira. It is where the “game” happens. Two dimensions are always present: its playfulness, marking it as a celebration, a game, and its spirit of resistance, of reaction against an oppressive system. Capoeira players will sing and clap hands. They will sound percussive instruments. At the centre, duos will play in alternation. The movements require great dexterity. They may be subtle, vigorous or even acrobatic. The steps are very difficult and require remarkable physical skills. The beauty and energy of the music and movements captivate and enrapture the participants and the public alike.

It so happens that this citation gestures toward the principle “form of life” that has directly and indirectly instigated most of my anthropological ruminations over the last thirty years since I first began to “engage intensively” with it. The use of this term, “circle,” is not so much a rough or inaccurate translation of native term *roda* as an overly smooth and static, geometric one, failing to convey the movement or liveliness, unpredictability and occasional roughness implied by *roda*. Here, I would take this excessive smoothness and atemporality of the “circle” so described as metonymic of the overall problem with the citation: the way it effectively occludes potential indices of dissonance and dissensus regarding both Capoeira’s historical trajectory and its present cultural form. Similarly, although Capoeira is initially termed “Afro-Brazilian”, and its practice is first tied to “enslaved Africans” as a “social strategy to help them deal with control and violence” – whose control? whose violence? – in the very next line, that identity is subsumed in the very next line to a symbol of *national* identity, exported far and wide overseas – yet another iteration of white folks’ lullaby regarding “universal progress”.<sup>7</sup> Still, to treat these as problems of the description itself, thereby implying that it could be described in a *better* or more accurate or convincing way, would be to miss out on the reason for smoothing over such potential indices of adversity to begin with, already indicated in the UNESCO’s stated goals for the inscription on that List as

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7 Not that I have anything against lullabies in general; I use the term here only to get at the presumption within such iterations of progress: ‘Be quiet, go to sleep now, and we’ll wake you up when we determine you’re ready to be included in it’.

“ensuring visibility and awareness [...] and encouraging dialogue which respects cultural diversity.” (UNESCO, 2014).

Rather than debate the potential value of the benefits which those responsible for requesting this gesture of “Inscription” on UNESCO’s Representative List no doubt hoped would eventually result in (on this, see Braga, 2017), let me turn to the second, more indirect and extended *historical* citation. It consists, in this case, in my translated and broadly paraphrased rendition of historian Sydney Chalhoub’s (1990, p. 220-227) seven-page finely honed re-description of a court proceeding, as first presented in my doctoral thesis (Head, 2004, p. 164-167) and here further recut and revised – at the risk of removing yet more of the ever-so varied details that render the very confusion between the event and its recountings so compelling:

“It was the 17th of February, 1885, end of the afternoon on the Rua da Carioca street on a *carnaval* Sunday” (p. 220). The incident recounted revolves around a stabbing – more precisely, a *navalhada* or razor slashing – that took place during *carnaval* that year. A group of men went out on the streets, masked, costumed, and playing musical instruments, only to encounter another such group, similarly attired; the result of that encounter was a fatally stabbed Black man, whose identity was never discovered. The man accused of this homicide – apparently having confessed to it – was named Adolfo Ferreira Nogueira. According to the confession he purportedly gave, he had killed the man in self-defense after first being threatened by him with a knife – but this claim would be treated as irrelevant, once witnesses identified members of the group he was with as being *capoeiras* – social types conflated with the practice going by the same name at the time; the implication being that this proved his penchant for knife-fighting and innate homicidal tendency alike.

Ironically, things proved somewhat more promising for the accused when he was discovered to be a “slave”, as his owner, an aged woman, hired a lawyer to defend her “property.” Once this lawyer entered the (court) scene, a competing account emerged, based on a report made by an assistant to the chief of police investigating the crime prior to the confession having been made – or forced, according to the lawyer. This report concluded that two other men were responsible for the killing, who – upon finding themselves outnumbered by soldiers who arrived on the (street) scene – gave themselves up to those soldiers, who

took them to a police-station. Yet, strangely, both men were released shortly thereafter, and the report would not have made it to the trial had the lawyer not discovered it.

The court proceedings would go on for some three years, during which those accused in this latter account were locked up and quickly released numerous times, as Adolfo's lawyer demonstrated with certificates annexed from the local jail. From this and other evidence, Adolfo's lawyer accused these men of the same overall crime that the slave he was defending had been accused of – that of being razor-wielding capoeiras. Only in this case, the capoeiras were not portrayed as figures outside and diametrically opposed to the “respectable” institutions of the police or the government, as such “marginal” and predominantly Black social types were generally portrayed, but as thoroughly enmeshed within a corrupt system, protected not only by the ranks of the police but also by “big-wigs”, or *figurões* – a term which Chalhoub presumes to have referred to politicians of the time.

To distance Adolfo from his own labelling as a *capoeira*, his lawyer proceeded to portray him as both an exemplary slave and self-employed worker – an odd conjunction no doubt connected to the fact that although Adolfo was technically a slave, he nonetheless practiced a profession of sorts. Basically, Adolfo fended for himself, in his case selling cigarettes, and was largely left alone by his owner – so long as he gave her a stipulated sum on a regular basis. Still, as such *escravos ao ganho* or “slaves for hire” had themselves become known as some of the principle practitioners of capoeira, the lawyer presented a signed letter from the owner of the cigarette supplier for whom Adolfo indirectly worked, explicitly attesting to Adolfo's *not* being a capoeira.

Nonetheless, although Adolfo was initially found innocent by the jury, that decision was overturned by the judge presiding over the case for “conflicting with the evidence”, and Adolfo was sentenced to six years in prison, in December 1887.

Chalhoub, sifting back through the details of this case, surmises that the most plausible explanation for the judge's ultimate verdict was that the case was considered a direct challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the legal and judicial apparatus. As the historian points out, one further irony was that Adolfo would officially become “free” – as a result of the officially declared abolition of slavery – only a few months after beginning his term in prison, where he would nonetheless remain.



Offering a rare, “up-close” glimpse of the social world in which the capoeiras were enmeshed, the increasingly blurred distinction between enslaved and “free” blacks in Brazil toward the end of the nineteenth-century, and their ambivalent relation of the capoeiras to the police and legal system as a whole, the material from that court proceeding, as narrated by Chalhoub, also offers insight with regard to just how thoroughly the forces of “order” and “disorder”, no less than the police and the capoeiras, were entangled with one-another. In pointing equally to the inextricable entanglement between slavery and its afterlife so dubiously termed ‘freedom’, that history points equally to the ongoing afterlife of slavery, the past that has not passed (Hartman, 2007; Sharpe, 2016): who could fail to see current political trends and their enmeshment in divergently racialized – my automatic corrector, not unlike the mainstream media, incessantly “corrects” this term to “radicalized” – socialities, as refracted in and through its illuminating darkness?

Not so much despite as because of their highly incongruous nature with respect to one-another – including although far from limited to the incongruous use of *capoeira* to name both the present-day cultural practice and the historically specific social type – placing these two citations in sequence serves here to set the stage for the last part of this essay. If the first citation offers a semblance of the more immediately surrounding ethnographic and/or cultural context in which the necropoetic gesture considered herein is about to resurface – namely, that of a *roda* of Capoeira, the second extended citation offers a semblance of the historical context to which that gesture does not merely “refer”, but rather concentrates tangibly as if it were poised on the sharp end of a knife about to be used...

### **Part III: “We kill people, they kill peoples” – counter-fabulating violence, whiteness and the “human”**

While playing a close-pressed game with Mestre Angolinha to a relatively quick-paced percussive rhythm known as the *jogo de dentro*, or “inside game”, along with the call-and-response singing closely accompanying that play by those watching the game and waiting to play themselves, my teacher-turned-opponent and I move back and forth and in and around one-another on our hands,

feet, and heads, ducking and returning kicks, headbutts, and sweeps, with little actual physical contact but plenty of (all-too-)close calls, moving upright and upside down, twisting around from one side to the other and back again, seeking to occupy each-other's no-less-mobile blindspots.[...] As the ribbed center of my opponent's body twists back and to the side to avoid my attempted head-butt, he takes his index-finger and slides it across the front of my neck, exhaling in what sounds to me something like a screamed giggle as he does so, followed by the whispered exclamation, "*Dançou!*" – Literally, "You danced!" but here he was clearly voicing the popular meaning of the term, "You're dead!"

Caught up in the pressure of the moment unable to turn my head to witness the facial expressions of our audience, I am unsure of how public his gesture of mock assassination is, but I sense quite clearly the razor-sharp meaning of this sign, aided by the iconicity of his finger-nail with the cutting edge of the razors with which capoeira and its practitioners were once inseparably associated. I sense this sign quite tangibly as it circumscribes the front of my neck, too unexpectedly for me to respond with what would have been a good defensive move of grabbing his finger-turned-knife and twisting it; but the gesture is gone as fast as it came, the imaginary (but potentially real) razor retracted back into its handle and returned to the back pocket of his trousers; he had no doubt earlier "taken out" that same razor through a preceding gesture whose failure on my part to notice it contributed to my getting "killed".

We continue to play as if nothing had happened, as if my life-force had not been performatively ruptured even as that gesture recalled the violence of times past. We play on [...], continuing a corporeal conversation initiated only minutes ago, yet stretched out into eons through the intensity of the moment. And then, just as our game begins to slow down in response to a change in the call-and-response singing, my opponent performs the "same" movement on my neck once again – this time with two fingers instead of one and minus the pressure of the fingernail – and whispers to me as he does so in an accented English, "band(e)-aid(e)."

In the inverse side of the very gesture he had used to slash my throat, he makes me laugh, and yet lets me know that I'm still playing too open, as he managed to accomplish the "same" attack once again. And this time, it is evident from the gargled laughs of certain members of the audience to that game that his gesture has not passed otherwise unperceived. I recall Tereza, the woman leading the

call-and response singing as we played – whose refrain ran, *O ai ai, meu sinhô está chamando* (O ai ai, my master is calling”) – making an explicit reference to the gesture, calling out in counterpoint to the chorus, “*O, ai ai, tiriri faca de ponta, faca fina de cortar, ô ai ai*” (“Oh... pointed knife, fine-edged blade for cutting...”). (Head, 2004, p. 190-192).

Through this ethnographic vignette, cited from my doctoral thesis and recut for present purposes, let me return to the matter of what sort of anthropology could possibly be implied if one were to imaginatively align oneself with that gesture and any number of histories recalled and/or interrupted thereby.

Clearly, this does not imply imaginatively aligning oneself with anyone who might wield a knife: besides confusing the gesture with the act and the act with the actor, this would be to separate the gesture from the history or histories imbuing it with the potential to *cut* into the present in the first place. The tragic death of Mestre Moa – a master of Capoeira Angola killed just over four years ago as I presently write, on the verge of the first round of the presidential elections in Brazil, when he was stabbed multiple times in the back shortly after a dispute regarding “politics” at a bar in Salvador, Bahia – renders this fundamental difference violently clear (see also Head, 2020). What if the act of knifing implicated in that act of brutality had not itself been *separated* – through equally brute ideological and material forces operating over time – from the history of Capoeira with which that act was once so indelibly associated? Perhaps the knowledge of that history, and/or of capoeira’s own historical and cosmopolitical links to black struggle, could have averted the aggressor, another Black man – at least in Mestre Moa’s eyes as conveyed by his cousin, Germino Pereira, who was wounded while attempting to defend Mestre Moa<sup>8</sup> – from carrying out his deadly action. Only perhaps. Nonetheless, as Nascimento (2019) fleshes out in detail, Mestre Moa’s own widely recognized involvement in fomenting cultural, bodily and historical knowledge

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8 Germino Pereira was responding in this regard to his interviewer’s questioning during a television report, as to whether Mestre Moa had “cussed at” (“*xingado*”) his aggressor by calling him a black man (“*negro*”), to which Germino responded no, he had clearly not cussed, and yes, he had called him Black, like himself (Bahia Meio Dia – Salvador, 2018).

regarding Capoeira's long involvement in black social struggle would continue, redoubled by others, in response to his senseless death.

In any case, gesturing toward what sort of anthropology could be entailed through that necropoetic gesture might well involve taking up Stuart McLean's (2017, p. xii) call for a *fabulatory* approach to anthropology, aimed not only at describing reality, but also at "intervening in and reshaping" it.<sup>9</sup> Here, the problem is not with anthropology's alignment with the *real*, but with the limited and limiting conventions of the "realist" model such descriptive efforts are often presumed to entail, wherein even a modicum of "poetic invention" is "denied any direct purchase over the real" (McLean, 2017, p. 153). In this regard, the passage by Bill T. Jones from which this essay has proceeded resonates, in part, with McLean's (2017, p. xi) claim regarding anthropology as "a fabulatory art that plays not only at the interstices between human worlds (the more familiar spaces of ethnographic encounter or intercultural comparison) but also at the thresholds of emergence or dissolution of the human [...]." And yet, even while calling for the need to extend fabulation beyond human-centered worlds, McLean unfortunately does not include in his purview the *previously* fabricated *limitations* as to what counts as *properly* "human" – and the often deadly reality-effects of such exclusions.

Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007), in *Toward a global idea of race*, exhaustively demonstrates how notions of the "human" and its presumably principle attribute, "reason," rather than emerging as a response to previous racial conceptions, instead repeatedly posited racial difference and racial subjection as their necessary precondition. I would suggest that the opening lines of Silva's book could themselves be read as contributing toward imagining what might – refiguring McLean's terminology – be termed a *counter-fabulatory* approach to the reality of violence:

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9 This point resonates partially with that of Ssorin-Chaikov (2017, p. 91-93). As Sansi (2015, p. 15) puts this matter, what Ssorin-Chaikov terms "ethnographic conceptualism" (in a different text) "explicitly constructs the reality it studies, as opposed to aiming to represent an already existing reality." Another way of putting this, in line with how Ssorin-Chaikov (2017, p. 82) comes to reconsider "the contrast between the cyclical time of Evenki ecology and economy and the event-time of transformations," would be to rethink reality and its representations as involving – like gestures, I would add – "complex assemblages of repetition and difference."

That moment, between the release of the trigger and the fall of another black body, of another brown body, of another... haunts this book. What is there to do? To capture, to resignify as one remembers, reconfigures, disassembles what lies *before* those elusive moments. (Silva, 2007, p. xi).

Here, the *phrasing* of these lines – the way in which they invoke the dire need to anticipate the ever-returning necro-time induced by momentarily flexed fingers – points to one impossibly possible way of refiguring the lethal implications of the endlessly repeated gesture of *shooting* – a gesture to which certain politicians (like Bolsonaro and Trump) and political groups (like the “Bancada da Bala” in Brazil and the N.R.A. in the United States) have become inseparably attached in recent years.<sup>10</sup>

What sort of writing might such a counter-fabulatory approach toward gestures and their relation to violence entail? Placed or dis-placed between the relative quickness and idiosyncrasy of gesture and the seeming inertia of slow and/or repetitive violence in its varied forms (gendered, racial, class-based, ecological – always variously entangled), one might treat writing as a stage on which the temporal criss-crossing of gestures and the inchoate forces that precede and succeed them might both play out and be critically confronted. But if so, what sort of stage? The scene or scenes of writing, as imagined herein, would certainly not take place on an empty or smooth space, as has long been imagined and put into practice in dominant Western figurations of theatre and dance; as André Lepecki (2013, p. 113) says with respect to the latter, to imagine a dance floor as a smooth, flat space, without cracks or bumps or varied textures and rough spots, is to “erase and deny the brutality and violence always contained in the act of neutralizing a space.” The River and Fire Collective (2021, p. 101), in their collaboratively written essay, “The fires within us and the rivers we form,” make a similar point with regard to the anything-but-neutral role played by language in anthropological and social scientific writing more broadly:

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10 For more on the political uses and implications of the gesture of *shooting*, see Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram. (2016) and Hristova (2013); I have also counter-posed that gesture to the gesture of cutting elsewhere (Head, 2020).

Writing and thinking in colonial language(s) means being entwined in the histories and presents of white supremacist, colonial, capitalist, ableist, cis-hetero patriarchal systems of power that condition our (im)possibilities for existence and self-determination. Our histories cross space and time often in contexts of forced removal, diaspora and new imaginings of community.

More than point this out, the writing of that collective – composed between thirteen “Black, Indigenous and POC, queer, nonbinary and trans anthropologists” careful not to efface the pronounced differences between them, perhaps ‘united’ only against the pretense of “delivering one universal truth or statement” vers (The River and Fire Collective, 2021, p. 103) – performs that very point, writing against the implications of power within the very language in and through which they compose themselves *as* a collective.

Not just any writing is entailed here, then, but a mode of writing itself emulating at once the call-and-response form and the interruptive potential of gesture and citation over against the pretense of a neutral language or “scene of representation” (Silva, 2007, p. xvi, 38, 49, 54). That form, as Schneider (2018, p. 288, 289, 296, 297, 305, 306) repeatedly remarks with ever-changing inflections, need not be linear: “The antiphonic back and forth among bodies across different times and different spaces disturbs a mythic linear flow of time with the possibility that the past may yet have another future” (Schneider, 2018, p. 288). Ishmael Reed (1972, p. 135), writing some fifty years earlier, makes much the “same” point in his time-bomb passing for a novel, *Mumbo jumbo*, first as voiced by Haitian revolutionary, ship captain, and practitioner of Vodun, Benoit Battraville, while visiting New Orleans at some unspecified time after the United States’ invasion of Haiti in 1915, already anticipating that future still in the making:

Deluxe Ice Cream, Coffee, 1 cent Pies, Cakes, Tobacco, Hot Dogs and Highways.  
Highways leading to nowhere. Highways leading to somewhere. Highways the  
Occupation used to speed upon in their automobiles, killing dogs pigs and cattle  
belonging to the poor people. What is the American fetish about highways?  
They want to get somewhere, LaBas offers.  
Because something is after them, Black Herman adds.  
But what is after them?

They are after themselves. They call it destiny. Progress. We call it Haints. Haints of their victims rising from the soil of Africa, South America, Asia.

Fred Moten (2017, p. 1), discussing the centrality of poetics to his understanding of blackness and black radicalism, foregrounds how phrasing, “where form – grammar, sound – cuts and augments meaning in the production of content, is where implication most properly resides.” The phrasing of Reed’s text, as I read it, consists in the repetition of the Highway – a concrete (or more accurately, asphalt) instantiation of linearity – only to have the direction in which it purports to head diverted through those voiced introjections, hooking it back to where it came from, and then closing that time-loop through a necropoetic twist; it thence refigures “progress” not as a universal desire benefitting all, but rather as a specifically white/Euro-American desire or delusion propelled by fear of the fantasmatic figures emanating from black/non-European bodies strewn along its global wayside.

In its very resistance to determination (of its meaning), the gesture(s) addressed herein can be taken as calling for what John Jackson Jr. (2005, p. 67) terms a “darkened” mode of reading text and reality alike, which realigns knowing from *seeing* or a demand for *clarity* toward something more akin to *seeing in the dark*. As Jackson describes it, and paraphrased here, such a mode of reading takes on what could be termed a more *gestural* quality: *feeling* or *groping* for the real, one’s awareness attuned to its potential treachery even while attempting to make out where one is headed with outstretched arms and fingers, feeling out nooks and crannies of meaning and perception that the equation of knowledge with *seeing clearly* would clearly miss out on. It also gestures towards a mode of writing not only in regard to *forms of life*, but also *over against* the *powers of death* and the interpretive frames, engrained habits and discourses that naturalize, occlude, legitimate and perpetuate necropolitical regimes and practices. At one point in Jackson’s text, Damon – a twenty-two year-old construction worker who Jackson purposefully calls his ‘informant’ to highlight the dubious nature of that relation despite their shared Blackness – tells Jackson, while on their way to eat a hamburger at a fast-food joint in Harlem: “When we steal, we take tangible shit. [...] A TV, a stereo, and shit. Objects and shit. When white folks steal, they steal souls and shit, they steal cultures. We kill people, they kill peoples. That’s the difference” (Jackson Jr., 2005, p. 105).

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