

# Troubling Trans: Necropolitics, Trans Bodies, and Genealogies of Governance<sup>1</sup>

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

Blackboard chalk, sidewalk chalk, chalk dust, chalk-boards, and chalk lines. These are the objects that haunt me. Over the past few years, I've found myself inspired, and some might say obsessed, by chalk's inherently paradoxical qualities. On one hand, chalk animates the psychic pulse of life; its powdery residue evoking memories of fiercely-contested hopscotch games, the velvety echo of blackboard erasers, or the stained remnants of childhood's innocence outlined in the hopscotch grids gradually fading on sun-bleached sidewalks. Chalk-marks surface the stories of our presents too as transitional objects that, through their ubiquitous presence in institutional life, prop our authorities as trans scholars, or undergird our work as trans activists in the symbolical carving out of public space

for a politics of liveability.

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

As a template for harnessing affect—

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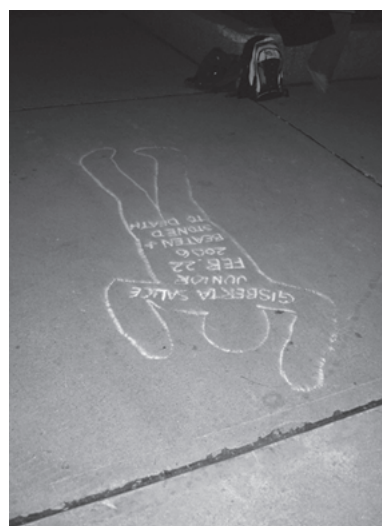
for inviting a sort of public intimacy that around the universal hard-wired fear of mortality—the chalked outline marks the symbolic abdication of space once occupied by the now-deceased body. However, because the outline can only represent a void left by the corpse, the chalked outline imputes presence while simultaneously conjuring up absence. Put simply, when one knocks at the door of these chalk outlines, what one finds is that there is and is no body home.

So let me begin by tracing a rather zig-zaggy path back from an unfinished end: Between March 2008 and December 2018, almost 3000 trans people were murdered globally as a result of anti-trans violence. The brutality of their deaths serve as a stark reminder of the expendability of trans lives: 1,145 trans people shot, 577 stabbed, 306 beaten, 104 strangled or hanged, 72 stoned, 59 asphyxiated or suffocated, 45 decapitated or dismembered, 44 tortured, 40 burned, 37 cut along the throat, 36 run over by a vehicle, 36 other, and 481 not stated (TGEU 2018). These figures represent the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Absent from the list are those whose deaths were unreported, mis-categorized, or those who, by virtue of their expendability, simply went missing.

Years ago, I had been actively involved in organizing, and speaking at, “Transgen-

der Day of Remembrance”<sup>2</sup> vigils— colloquially referred to as TDOR— in Kingston, Ontario and the Greater Toronto Area in Canada. In Kingston, the usual practice was to organize volunteers to lie on the ground so that chalk outlines could be traced around their bodies. Once an outline had been traced upon the ground, the name of a deceased trans-identified person—and, occasionally, the means by which their life was brutally cut short— was usually written in the empty void created by the lines. Although the number of outlines drawn varied from year to year, the victims of transphobic violence were always overwhelmingly trans women of colour.

It was during these first few events that



*Figure 1: Chalk outline, 2006. Photo by author.*

2 To provide some brief contextualization, TDOR vigils began in San Francisco in 1999, are they are now international events that commemorate and memorialize the lives of trans people who have died as a result of anti-trans violence. While accurate worldwide estimates of anti-trans violence are still hard to obtain what we *do* know is that the victims of transphobic violence are overwhelmingly trans women of colour.

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

In the very act of offering my own body as a placeholder whose traced outline represented an ‘other’ body, I was also faced with the traces of a representation that could not be contained within the outlines of my own body contours. In that moment, the chalk outline was both a literal tracing of my body and an abstracted sign whose traces exceeded their intended utility—an instant where my body, to transpose a Brian Massumi-ism (2002), was as immediately actual as it was virtual, and where that virtual body was simultaneously rendered actual. The chalked outline, in other words, literally re-membered, re-virtualized, and made hypervisible the body as a spectacle of both life and death—a spectacle that illustrates how the TDOR vigil,

like many acts of remembrance, is always haunted by what it cannot contain.

What emerged from these early encounters with chalk outlines at TDOR events were a series of tentative questions about the necropolitical value of racialized trans death in structuring trans politics: How do narratives of racialized loss construct trans liveability? How are these losses—and, by extension, the memorials they engender—constitutive of identitarian politics? Whose bodies are conjured up at the same time as others are consumed? In short, what is the work of racialized trans death in indexing whiteness and trans life?

In “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe suggests that “becoming subject...supposes upholding the work of death” (2003, 14). So inextricable is the politics of race from the politics of death, argues Mbembe, that one truly becomes a subject through confrontation with the death of an Other. Mbembe’s formulation of necropolitics has been of great interest to critical race theorists in examining how dead or dying marginalized bodies have been fetishistically inscribed into the order of power within state narratives to justify the geopolitical landscape of torture (Alves 2013; Dillon 2012; Haritaworn 2015; Puar 2017; Smith 2013). Several trans scholars, too, have explored the place of the racialized trans body using a necropolitical critique (Cardenas 2017; Shakhshari 2013; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). These convergences illustrate that there is a pressing need to theorize trans politicality through an intersectional framework that goes be-

yond static formulations of “gridlocked” (Massumi 2002) identity and takes into account the affective intensities that circulate around, through, and within the dead or dying trans body. As this article illustrates, although trans lives are expendable, trans deaths are not. The afterlife of trans death is a time of intimate politicality: memorials and vigils are at once performed enactments of mourning and formative elements of melancholic worldings predicated upon the mobilization of spectacularized and racialized trans death.

### **Chalked Up: Expendability and the Limits of (Ac)countability**

Chalked up [chawked up] *n. Brit.* A score, tally, or record.

— Oxford English Dictionary

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

It is this haunting concept of human expendability that I find myself drawn to, and, as such, I must ask questions that are necessarily uncomfortable: What is an expendable life? How does any community (ac)count for its own expendability? Expendability, it seems, describes that sudden point at which the stubborn potentiality of human life edges into the realm of objectification. Indeed, Black’s observation about the ways in which trans lives have been “judged expendable” suggests that trans liveability is always already foreclosed by the predestined fate of a necessary<sup>3</sup> sacrifice. The disposability of Pickett’s life allows for an appreciation of the multiple arcs of expendability that characterize the narratives of trans women of colour as marked by a banal disposability that Giorgio Agamben calls the “state of exception” (1998, 12). What is especially peculiar about the privilege of these states of exception is their indispensability to the project of communal meaning-making. To this end, I argue that first, it is only in premature death that these disposable (trans) lives have surplus value, and second, this is the case precisely because of their affective capacity to produce political effects within the trans community.

### **Necrointimacies: Affect and the Virtual Reverberations of Violent Intimacy**

*The face on my laptop screen is frozen*

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3 My use of “necessary” here is deliberate as I seek to highlight the ways in which racialized trans deaths are positioned as always already constitutive of trans political life.

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

*In the second picture, the woman has clearly already been beaten for some time. The ground beneath the sky blue of her denim shorts is wet with the errant droplets of blood that completely obscure her swollen face. In the foreground, the bodies of the men have been frozen in a moment of malevolent deliberation. The third picture in this frame remains the hardest to look at. Because I now know what will happen next. In this final screenshot, there are five men in the process of lifting the woman's limp body and dumping it into a wheelbar-*

*row. As two men wrestle with her legs, another man clutches the drenched collar of the woman's t-shirt in order to gain better leverage over her body. Partially obscured by the others, the last man in this frame carries a large plank of wood.*

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

Within a month of her death, these images of Santos' battered body appeared on my social media feeds. The most commonly shared link was to an article published by the *Daily Mail*. Titled “Transsexual woman is beaten to death in Fortaleza, Brazil,” this article included both video stills of Santos' murder as well as the streamable, uncensored video of her final moments (Al-Othman 2017). Shared publicly by trans-identified and gender-nonconforming friends and acquaintances, the real-time spectacle of Santos' death

became an instantaneous anchoring point for reactions that ranged from the immediacy of communal outrage to disclosures of individual anger. Shaken, trans people in Canada reached out publicly and reaffirmed the need to keep fighting for the passage of Bill C-16.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, peppered amongst reflections on the precarious nature of trans rights under the Trump regime, many comments from American allies also alluded to the barbarism of the cultural heritage of the Brazilian men responsible for Santos' murder.

Sifting through these comments and reactions, many of which cemented the brutality of anti-trans violence as characteristic of life 'over there,' another pattern emerged: an intimacy, or sense of belonging and a "shock or relief at being 'in' something with others" (Stewart 2007, 27) that can only be wrought from the unassimilable nature of proximity to a spectacle of violence. Nowhere was this clearer than in a Facebook post that encouraged everyone to watch the video and "tell a trans person you love them."

Posted by a white trans man living in Canada, this public status update subsequently appeared on my Facebook's newsfeed because it had garnered over 261 reactions, including expressions of anger or sadness. What was immediately startling was how many times this post had been shared. Together with the embedded video, the screenshots of Santos' final moments

TW: Violence, Murder

Please, folks, stop sharing the video of Dandara dos Santos being killed. Stop. There are articles online that don't have this video if what folks are doing is trying to share this news. Yes, we need to bare witness to the fact that trans folks of color are being killed. We also need to bare witness to the fact that trans women of color are also living and thriving. Be careful about which stories are circulated and which aren't, who circulates them, and why. Be careful about why you want to see these images. Ask why this video is going viral. There's a terrible history here of images of folks of color being brutalized used as a commodity. Companies are getting clicks based on this--it doesn't feel that different to me than postcards of lynchings. Just don't.

In Struggle, Qwo-Li

*Figure 2: Facebook screenshot, March 9, 2017. Included with author's permission.*

in this call to "[g]o tell a trans person you love them" was circulated 69 more times within the span of a few days.

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

4 Colloquially known as the "Transgender Bill," Bill C-16 was passed in June 2017 and added gender identity and gender expression to the prohibited grounds of discrimination enshrined under the Canadian Human Rights Act.

## Viral Necrointimacies and Spectacularized Violence

Chalk [chawk] *n.* a white soft earthy limestone (calcium carbonate) formed from the skeletal remains of sea creatures.  
— Oxford English Dictionary

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

While it is important to bear witness to the undeniable fact that trans women of colour are being killed in record numbers, what does it mean that the trans community often coalesces in feelings of belonging and communality via the virtual 'shareability' of the spectacularized, dis-membered racialized corpse? How can we think through these intimacies of belonging that can only ever be affirmed from the safe distance that is granted by the banality of ordinary trans violences that are emblematic of a place that is 'over there'? How do we make sense of the violent intimacies that are evoked in the remembrance, or reverberative ritual, of wit-

nessing bare life at its barest end? What then becomes of the possibility of racialized trans life when its value is produced always and only through death?

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

While Lamble's text is notable for its critique of the rehabilitation of the unrepresentability of racialized anti-trans violence through universalized whiteness, since 2008, the politics of trans remembrance has been transformed from one that decontextualizes the unrepresentability of violence—via Lamble's notion of genericization—to a consumptive spectacle that now reterritorializes the trans body of colour via repetitions of virtualized vio-

lent intimacy. The TDOR website is now peppered with media links that invariably spectacularize the murders of trans women of colour in particular via graphic descriptions and uncensored pictures.

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

### **Necrointimacies**

In *The Affective Fabrics of Digital Culture*, Adi Kuntsman (2012) traces the virtual banality of everyday violence in digitized spaces. Pointing to “the ways in which feelings and affective states can *reverberate* in and out of cyberspace, intensified (or muffled) and transformed through digital circulation and repetition” (1; emphasis mine), Kuntsman’s thought-provoking ethnographic exploration of reverberation signals the importance of at-

tending to the affective and political work of violence while remaining ‘attuned’ to the potentiality of movement. Kuntsman writes,

Reverberation is a concept that makes us attentive to the simultaneous presence of speed and stillness in online sites; to distortions and resonance, intensification and dissolution in the process of moving through various digital terrains. For example, it allows us to see how the movement of violent words in online domains can intensify hatred and hostility through what Sarah Ahmed describes as ‘affective economies’ (2004a), where the power of emotions accumulates through circulation of texts. But reverberation also enables us to see how the injurious effects of online violent speech can be muffled. For example, it can momentarily dissolve into ‘smileys’, ‘winks’ and laughter (although not disappear entirely!). (Kuntsman 2012, 2)

Spectacles of violence, as Kuntsman illustrates, leave traces of themselves not unlike the gradually fading vibrations left by an echo’s reverberations. This linkage between ‘reverberation’ as a prolongation of sound and the affective economies of violence allows for an appreciation of the reflective continuity of effect, of those ripples and vibrations left in the wake of violent encounters that can be felt or sensed despite their remove.



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

Reverberation allows for an appreciation of the links between ordinary violence and intimacy, but it does not fully account for the way in which the intimate proximity with brutalized racialized bodies prefigure the “affective charge of investment” (Cvetkovich 2003, 49) that mobilizes trans communities within discourses of whiteness. Reverberation is an emergent expression of belonging prefigured through visual economies of a violent intimacy with racialized abjection. In other words, the desire to ‘reach out’ in trans-personal affirmation is a re-active response to the displacement of yet another form of intimacy—one where the racialized Other is consumed for the purposes of community building (hooks

2006). In consuming the Other, the material realities that structure bare life are effectively effaced while structuring a de-racialized intimacy forged through proximity with racialized violence.

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

death that one is

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

Practices of memorialization are symbolically and affectively mediated by discourses of inclusion and exclusion, yet, all too often, the consumption of racialized death is offered as a stand-in for the former while justifying the material struc-

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

Extending Mbembe’s focus on the disposability of bodies via the right to kill and reflecting upon the spectacle of the dying/dead trans body in the order of power, I return to my concept of *trans necrointimacies* to describe this spectacular affective economy of trans-homonationalism and the cannibalization of racialized decay upon which the former is dependent.<sup>5</sup> As an object *par excellence*, the brutal-

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5 This attachment to the dead actually gives the corpse power over the living, an ironic instance

ized corpse of the racialized Other contains a resonant quality that is predicated on economies of fantasy and pleasure. By virtue of violence's distance from the immediacy of real-time proximity, the racialized figure that is Santos is at once excessive and erased, allowing it to first be claimed as an object for trans memorialization, then be consumed in the service of whiteness, and then be further utilized as evidence of a distant barbarism. Thus, we see that together with the embedded video, the screenshots of Santos's racialized body reverberated at an intensity through which the circulation of the consumable intimacy of her death tentatively resonated in the form of appeals to belonging within neoliberal frameworks of (trans)sexual citizenship (i.e., via recourse to Canadian or American nationalism, necessarily positioned as safely removed from the barbarism of 'elsewhere').

As the provisional end-product of an affective circulation of the violent intimacies so necessary to the political project of re-

membrance, "resonance" extends Kuntsman's acoustic metaphor to describe a turn to a kind of trans-normativity that is dependent upon the spectacularized violent intimacy of racialized, trans(gender) bodies as the living dead. The intimate spectacle of the dead or dying racialized body invites the witnessing white body into an affective citizenship that requires that the Other be simultaneously possessed and repudiated. To behold the corpse of the Other is to flirt with the exotic—with the possibility of being 'changed' by *trans necrointimacy*—while remaining securely attached to the tether of trans-normative positionality. What resonates is not trans identity as a point of affiliation but, rather, whiteness and trans-normativity as emergent forms of belonging through the scopophilic consumption of the racialized body. Resonance is thus the retrospective reproduction of reverberation,<sup>6</sup> and 'likeness,' or trans-normativity, is formed retroactively through the chalky necrointimacies of racialized trans memorialization.

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where we see the "subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe 2003, 39)

6 Forgive the alliteration.

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