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Life, Death, Ethnography: Epistemologies and Methods of the Quasi-Event

Abstract

What is the relation between the biopolitical and necropolitical terrain in and through which experience unravels and the conceptual apparatuses which hold the promise of analysis and critique? What analytics, methods and ethics do contemporary life-and-death formations and intersecting precarious modes of existence elicit? What difference, if any, does it make to appeal to the ordinary and the everyday, the situated and always-already-in-relation, the emergent and the quasi-event (Povinelli, 2011), as simultaneously sites, objects and frames? In this article, I approach these questions ethnographically, with reference to debates in social and cultural theory and drawing on long-term anthropological research in Guatemala. The article aims to make an original contribution to debates on biopolitical and necropolitical processes and dynamics, by reflecting on the implications for epistemologies, methods and infrastructures.

Keywords: biopolitics, necropolitics, exception, immunity, camps, terror formations, drones, infrastructure, ethnography, Guatemala

I - Introduction

What is the relation between the biopolitical and necropolitical terrain in and through which experience unravels and the conceptual apparatuses which hold the promise of analysis and critique? What analytics, methods and ethics do contemporary life-and-death formations and precarious modes of existence elicit? What difference, if any, does it make to appeal to the ordinary and the everyday, the situated and always-already-in-relation, the emergent and the quasi-event (Povinelli, 2011), as simultaneously sites, objects and frames? In this article, I approach these questions ethnographicallyⁱ and with reference to debates on the status of biopolitics and necropolitics in social and cultural theory. I aim to think through fragments of experience and the production of new vulnerabilities in ‘zones of abandonment’ (Biehl, 2005) and surveillance – and their relations to knowledge formations, methods and infrastructures.ⁱⁱ Biopolitics and necropolitics are analytics that grapple with the co-constitution, imbrication and co-presence of modes of governance and existence that are centered not exclusively on the management of life – as Foucault lucidly argued (Foucault, 1977; 1981; 2001) – but are also constituted in and through ‘contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death’ (Mbembe, 2003: 39). In the influential essay ‘Necropolitics’, Achille Mbembe offers an important corrective to the Foucauldian notion of biopower and the related focus on the ‘administration of bodies and the calculated management of life’ (Foucault, 1977:140). Mbembe (2003) foregrounds instead the centrality of death to the contemporary organization of social and political life. Through the analysis of specific ‘terror formations’ and their genealogical unfolding, Mbembe draws attention to the historical emergence of ‘death-worlds’, that is, ‘new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead’ (Mbembe, 2003: 40). Mbembe illustrates these dynamics through the analysis of specific ‘topographies of cruelty’ and camp formations – the plantation, the colony, and Gaza and the West Bank, the latter as prime examples of the current regime of late-modern colonial occupation. ‘Necropower’, for Mbembe (2003:

25), marks the articulation of sociality, subjectivity and agency in relation to death-worlds which necessarily require a reconfiguration of these analytics themselves. In this article, I dwell on these questions, in the light of ethnographic research in Guatemala that I have pursued intermittently since 1999. More specifically, I focus on the implications for transnational analysis that may be drawn from it. I am interested in figuring the interface between biopolitical and necropolitical reflection and experience, and in the implications for the domains of theory, analysis *and* method.

II - '*Me Duele Gaza*': Fieldnotes from *Kilómetro Cero*

As I walked through the city center in Guatemala City in September 2016 to wait for a friend in front of the National Palace, I looked intently at the square and its surroundings. The façade of the palace seemed disheveled. This imposing building is the symbolic seat of the Guatemalan government. It is said to be the origin of all the roads in the country and the site of 'Kilómetro Cero' – or Kilometer Zero, the point from which distances are measured. The building looked unkempt, with a cornice molding precariously hanging off and a moss veneer encroaching on the textured walls. To my right, the Cathedral also seemed to be in disrepair, as the shopping arcade behind me. The scene of ruinationⁱⁱⁱ before me stood in stark contrast with my memory of the same place from my previous visit three years earlier: a crisp and freshly painted National Palace under the watchful eye of military personnel intent on washing off any graffiti that might appear during the almost daily demonstrations and sit-ins. As I sought to piece together the terms of this contrast, I tentatively entertained the possible reasons for the sense of incipient decay. I associated this shift to a notable development that took place in the country since my last visit, namely the end of the presidency of Otto Pérez Molina and the inauguration of the presidential term of Jimmy Morales Cabrera. The election of a new government and a new president therefore marked another stark distinction, this time between two men: Pérez Molina, a retired military officer with direct links to the massacres against Maya Ixil villages in the Maya Ixil-speaking area of the region of Quiché in the 1980s, and whose term was abruptly ended by his arrest on fraud and corruption charges, and Jimmy Morales Cabrera, a man with limited prior political experience and a former career as a comic actor. Whilst Pérez Molina campaigned under the slogan '*mano dura*' – iron fist – and embodied the engrained links between the military and the Guatemalan state, Morales Cabrera seemed to personify the culmination of the political process into spectacle, with a former television comedian now fronting the performance of politics. A related effect was to make the military recede from foreground to background, as it seemed to take on a more veiled, though no less influential role in determining political life in the country. The decay of the buildings suggested a shift from the military's proclivity for pageantry and sleek hyper-nationalistic performance, to the emphasis on empty simulacra proper of the rhetoric of the new president and former clown.

Continuities, however, were also clear. The security cameras installed during the Pérez Molina years were still in place in September 2016. The entrance to the National Palace seemed also as busy, though those standing in front of the main gates on the day of my visit were not protesters but government employees working for the government department dealing with sexual violence, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.^{iv} These civil servants stood in front of the palace with their stands, banners and flyers to promote the campaign '*No Me Dejo Engañar: Yo Denuncio*' – 'I will not be tricked: I will report it' – the latest anti-trafficking initiative. Oddly, they gave out glossy leaflets to other government officials

entering and exiting the building on that busy Monday morning. Occasionally, they also handed out publicity materials to the sparse constituency of passersby and researchers hanging around in the square. The sight of government employees raising awareness about sexual violence, exploitation and human trafficking *among* fellow civil servants, and of a government department seeking to raise visibility for their activities not in relation to the general public as such, or particularly 'at risk' groups, but vis-à-vis the state itself, seemed significant. For one, it pointed to the self-referentiality of governmental initiatives. Further, it revealed the heady mix of irony and acumen in play in the implicit diagnosis that the problem with regard to sexual violence, exploitation and human trafficking might lay *within* and not outside the structures of the state. This seemed to me a perhaps unintended and yet astute commentary on the mutual imbrication of biopolitical and necropolitical dynamics in the country: it returned the question of life-and-death formations to the symbolic center of government, placing it right there, in front of the National Palace, at the symbolic core of the state. The subversion seemed more remarkable still when considering the gendered and sexualized dimensions of the oblique critique and challenge posed by the government department raising the question of sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking in relation to the state itself – an anomalous, somewhat ventriloquist, and yet pointed demand made by the state to the state.^v The performance taking place in front of the National Palace on that rainy morning in late September may have just have been a simple case of a misdirected, ill-conceived, or simply self-serving governmental program squandering resources on a public display of outreach activities that was obviously missing its most relevant intended audiences. It was, nevertheless, both apt and prescient. It publicly staged the nexus between sexual violence, exploitation and human trafficking and the state, with historical and anticipatory salience. On 8th March 2017, forty-one teen-age girls held in a children's home run by the government department Secretary of Social Welfare (Secretaría de Bienestar Social) died in a fire. The deaths of these girls, who were effectively detained in a locked facility and therefore unable to flee the fire, poignantly foregrounded engrained gendered and sexual dimensions of routinized state violence and forms of captivity. Myriads of violent quasi-events subtended this catastrophe. In 2012, however, the debate in and around the square of the National Palace was of an altogether different order. The place was packed with researchers, social justice activists, university students, and intellectuals. Many lived and worked within walking distance, so they would join impromptu political demonstrations. During the bombing of Gaza on 11th November 2012, for example, groups of people swiftly gathered in direct response to a call circulated on social media to show solidarity with the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian communities under attack [see Figure 1]. The traffic in people, megaphones, banners and other items of the material culture of protest was intense and often accompanied by large gatherings seeking to raise the profile of local and transnational struggles. Protest tackled a wide range of issues, including land rights, violence against women, state corruption, and the numerous judicial processes seeking to indict high ranking military officers and former presidents for genocide and crimes against humanity before the country's courts. However, on rare occasions, some of my interlocutors and participants in these gatherings wondered about the nature and status of the drive, thrust or impetus underpinning this frenzied choreography of protest. Far from cynical dismissals, they queried the exact location of agency in the protests, as bodies seemed to be regularly and ritualistically summoned in the square through a centrifugal force which might transcend cause or grievance. More sinister still was the consideration that, by engaging in public protest in front of the National Palace, the crowds might be literally performing for state authorities,

responding to compulsory interpellatory dynamics well suited to the development of ever more sophisticated techniques of policing, surveillance and repression. Such paranoid sentiments seemed to connect with the broader political climate. Rodas Maltés (2015), a member of the activist team of journalists of Prensa Comunitaria, reported how intense protest in Guatemala during the Pérez Molina years was accompanied by the introduction of new techniques and technologies of warfare and surveillance associated with the 'wars on terror' in the Middle East. These dispositifs included the localized suspension of mobile phone signals during demonstrations and the deployment of drones. The suspension of mobile phone signals, reported Rodas Matés (2015), was cynically seen by protesters to have been more effective when it came to policing protestors in the public square, than in the country's prisons. This also suggested that, through wireless technologies, the public square itself may have been turned into an efficiently policed carceral space, that is, and a new paradigmatic site of capillary surveillance and open-air detention. In turn, the use of drones radically and substantively reconfigured the terrain of the political, materially, spatially and conceptually.

Figure 1. HERE PLEASE

III – Camps, Topographies of Cruelty and Drone Sensoria

In practice, Rodas Maltés' report (2015) was quite scathing of the drones that were seen hovering over the crowds of protesters in the square of the National Palace. On closer inspection, these 'electronic eyes', with a moderate range and poor resolution, might turn out to be quite short-sighted. The toy-like objects resembling miniature models of the Star Trek Enterprise mother ship rather than deadly weapons, might have limited capacity for concrete fine-grained surveillance such as face recognition. Rodas Maltés aptly noted (2015) that the use of drones could be a bluff, especially as in the demonstration participants were not hiding, but rather, they were openly showing their faces. Nevertheless, in the light of the long history of political violence in the country and the role of security forces in quashing popular dissent and civil society organizing (CEH 1999), the appearance of drones might have been effective as a preemptive threat against unrest, irrespective of whether any turmoil was indeed forthcoming (Roda Maltés, 2015). The 'ethnographic effect' (Strathern, 1999) ensuing from the appearance of drones on the scene, however, was no less potent, in that these objects turned a square crowded with protestors into an emergent necropolitical topography. The sight of drones generated the conditions of possibility for figuring the square in the form of an open-air prison or a camp. In this emerging necropolitical imaginary, the site of protest immediately connected to a scene of mass surveillance and detention, raising new questions as to exactly what processes and genealogies may be in play, and what implications there might be for this novel configuration of life, vulnerability, exposure and latent violence, control and repression.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben (1998:166) asks: 'What is a camp, what is its juridico-political structure, that such events could take place there?' Agamben shows that the camp – the concentration camp of Auschwitz, paradigmatically – is not, strictly speaking, outside the political

domain. On the contrary, it marks the very 'hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living' (Agamben 1998:166). Camps are therefore integral to the articulation and constitution of sovereignty specifically through the mechanism of exception, that is, through the productions of 'bare life', or life that is included in the juridical order through exclusion (1998:18). Bare life, or naked life, is fostered in zones of indistinction that are included within the *polis* through the mechanism of exclusion. Bare life, then, exemplified by the figure of *homo sacer* – that is, the one who can be killed without the killing constituting murder or sacrifice – is expendable life which has no legal status, is stripped of citizenship (or could never gain access to the the domain of citizenship) and is therefore exposed to the 'unconditional threat of death', indefinitely (Agamben, 1998:183). Agamben carefully charts a succinct and yet incisive genealogy of the camp and points to the long history of topographies of detention and death illustrated by the concentration camps established by the Spanish in Cuba and by the British in South Africa. These camps are examples of the unfolding of what Mbembe aptly calls 'topographies of cruelty' (Mbembe, 2003:40). Moreover, for Mbembe, the nexus between biopower, exception and terror ought to be framed in relation to 'race' and racialized and racializing practices specifically. For Mbembe, social practices and epistemologies concerned with 'eugenics, prohibition of mixed marriages, forced sterilization' and extermination point to the convergence between, and imbrication of, killing and statecraft, slaughter and bureaucracy (Mbembe, 2004: 22-3). This theoretical and analytical configuration of the terrain of biopolitics and necropolitics in relation to the camp elicits a further reframing of the scenario unfolding outside the National Palace carefully drawn by Rodas Maltés (2015). Not only does the square appear as a camp, but the inherent possibility of extending these new technologies of surveillance and control beyond the square itself elicits a vision of ever-expanding, ubiquitous encampment. In other words, the workings of the mechanism of exception are potentially no longer confined to the public square, but may engulf other places and spaces, indefinitely extending and propagating.^{vi}

That social life more generally might be unfolding within a camp – and that the establishment of the camp may not be a temporary arrangement but a more permanent condition – is not, in fact, such a farfetched proposition. First, Guatemalan sociologists have put forward the expression '*estado-finca*' to convey the way in which historically, the state in Guatemala has been modeled on the *finca*, the plantation that since the liberal reforms of the 19th century has paradigmatically referred to coffee plantations for export – spaces of capillary exploitation, indentured labor and death (AVANCSO 2006). Second, the prospect of temporary and indefinite suspensions of constitutional protections is not at all an implausible scenario in Guatemala. In recent years, the 'state of siege', with the suspensions of constitutional guarantees that it entails, has been used to curb popular protest against mining and hydroelectric developments and enact violent state repression against civil society leaders. During the presidency of Pérez Molina (2012 – 2015) more specifically, the 'state of siege', or '*estado de sitio*', was invoked in Santa Cruz Barillas in 2012 and in Santa Rosa in 2013 (Bastos and de León 2014). A further example of continuity between the two presidencies, on 21 September 2016, on the occasion of a spell of bad weather, President Jimmy Morales declared a 'preventive state' or '*estado de prevención*' (Prensa Libre 2016) and severely restricted constitutional guarantees. Third, and most importantly, it should be stressed that any notion of citizenship is always-already differential, fragmented and partial depending on gender, 'race', ethnicity, sexuality, ability and many more axes of articulation of difference. As

Stanley (2011) insightfully shows in their analysis of the over-kill of working class, trans people of color in the United States, non-conforming subjects occupy spaces of non-existence or 'near death', including within liberal democratic regimes. The frenzied forms of violence that befall those living at the margins are, according to Stanley, 'not an aberration but are central to the reproduction of liberal democracy in the United States' (Stanley, 2011:1). In Guatemala more specifically, citizenship has been substantively and structurally skewed by race, ethnicity and gender (Casaus Arzú, 2007) through a racism that has benefitted upper class Ladinos^{vii} and disenfranchised the Maya population and other Indigenous peoples in the country. This complex predicament speaks to the resonance of the topography of the camp and the related mechanism of exception in Guatemala specifically. However, by summoning the image of temporary and indefinite suspensions of constitutional guarantees in a range of spatial arrangements, the establishment of the 'state of siege' and 'states of prevention' also elicits a range of connections to global processes, notably to the proliferation of camps, carceral arrangements and 'topographies of cruelty' (Mbembe 2003) transnationally, in and across national borders. Many examples of these dynamics can be offered, for instance Gaza and the West Bank as open-air prisons (Mbembe 2003); 'the Jungle' in Calais and the many more migrant and refugee camps across Europe; and, most dramatically, the Syrian city of Aleppo under siege and bombardment in the days of late September and early October 2016. In view of this, the nomos of the political might be the square and the nation-state, but these are no longer figured as the agora, polis or polity; rather, they are figured as camps. Within these fragmented operations of inclusion into the polis through exclusion, zones of the living dead and social spaces of non-existence multiply. Further, they increasingly appear to be as heavily populated and crowded as the square in front of the National Palace during the demonstrations of 2012.

The arrival of the drone also ties events in this seemingly peripheral and out-of-the-way place to broader transnational and global dynamics, repositioning Guatemala at the center of geopolitical and global processes and dynamics (Posocco 2014) Gusterson (2016) charts the emergence of drone technology in warfare in the latter part of the 20th century. Gusterson shows how technologies of remote killing engender new configurations of proximity and distance among subjects and argues that drones scramble categories, engendering both fragmentation and new configurations and reassembling. One way of figuring these processes, Gusterson suggests, is to consider how spatial and psychic topographies may be reconfigured in drone operations. Notions of place, especially as they relate to ideas of 'the battlefield', are augmented and globalized, as drone operators and their targets are often thousands of miles apart. In turn, this means that war is no longer framed by the boundaries of nation states. Forms of remote intimacy connect the drone operators to their targets, engendering a prying voyeurism that can be exercised from afar often without the subjects of surveillance and remote assassination fully grappling with, or gaining an awareness of, the deadly gaze that hovers over them. These drone sensoria raise important questions concerning the new modes of subjectivity, sociality and relationality thus engendered, and the methods and infrastructures that subtend them. Most fundamentally, and as argued by Chamayou (2013), drones produce a radical blurring of the distinction between war and peace. On the one hand, there is the integration of potentially lethal surveillance in the daily routines of the drone operators, who seamlessly move between operating drones and engaging in mundane daily tasks. Gusterson (2016) paints an insightful picture of these ordinary lives where the commute between work and home is one between distant killing fields and domestic chores.

On the other hand, drones entail the progressive normalization of a new regime of remote killing, surveillance and interventionism for the body politic more broadly, their implicit though unexamined justification, and a radical reconfiguration of who might be deemed to be expendable. Within this necropolitical scenario, Mbembe's diagnosis acquires renewed force, as it draws attention to how 'under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom' may become blurred (Mbembe, 2003:39). These highly situated necropolitical arrangements are also tied to traffic in technologies, techniques and modes of knowledge. They are therefore transferable between and across sites and cannot be dismissed as the aberrations of a malfunctioning failed state. On the contrary, they point to the ways in which the necropolitics of the square as a camp and of the nation-state as a camp may become generalized conditions that are central to liberal democracies (Stanley 2011), albeit ones that take particular local inflections. The range of subjects – or, rather, non-subjects – whose status is progressively unclear and whose inclusion within the polis is through exclusion, also proliferates to engulf protestors, migrants, the undocumented and those in varied social categories tied to confinement and expendability. As Fassin (2005) has argued, perceived 'threat' to the security of the nation, or a sense of generalized 'risk' can be deemed to be sufficient justification to grant the suspension of guarantees. In turn, forms of 'indefinite detention' can also be invoked, leading to the undermining of certain rights, rather than to the outright suspension of the law (see Butler 2004). Other common contemporary manifestations of these dynamics are, for example, techniques and practices of social cleansing notably in urban settings in the democracies in the Global North where 'prostitute free zones' and other policies aim to clear neighborhoods from sex workers and migrants (Sanchez 2004, Edelman 2014). In all these complex and varied instances, the nexus between social practice and knowledge practice is fundamental. Material-semiotic entanglements animate camps, drone sensoria, surveilling objects and epistemologies.

III – Immunity, Community, Infrastructures

Within these biopolitical and necropolitical horizons, what difference, if any, does it make to appeal to the ordinary and the everyday, the situated and always-already-in-relation, the emergent and the quasi-event (Povinelli, 2011), as simultaneously sites, objects and frames? Situated surveillance and infrastructures of confinement and death unravel in and through contexts. They punctuate and pattern the everyday, shaping experience and sociality in complex ways. As Lockrem and Lugo (2012) point out, 'the everydayness of infrastructure' allows insights into the intimacy of power and its unfolding in and through ordinary events, encounters and interactions. New forms of proximity and estrangement, distancing devices and bordering practices continuously redraw the boundaries of community.

Roberto Esposito has raised questions regarding the status of the relation between biopolitics and necropolitics, particularly with reference to the conditions of possibility of community. Esposito asks, '[h]ow do we explain that the culmination of a politics of life generated a lethal power that contradicts the productive impulse? This is the paradox [...] How is it possible that a power of life is exercised against life itself? ... Why does a power that functions by insuring, protecting, and augmenting life express such a potential for death? ... Why does biopolitics continually threaten to be reversed into thanatopolitics?' (Esposito 2008:39). Esposito addresses these questions through a reflection on the place of immunity, that is, a negative form of protection of life, in these dynamics. Like the immunity mechanism in

medicine, immunity for Esposito entails creating a defense against an external pathogen by introducing a fragment of such a pathogen and thus halting the development of harm. The body politic, according to Esposito, functions in a similar manner: it seeks to preserve itself through immunitarian logics and within an 'immunization paradigm' (2007:49). Further, Esposito argues that the relation between community and immunity is central. Immunity establishes a subject position that is exempt from the gift relations that are central to community. Those with immunity need not engage in acts of gift giving and reciprocity at the heart of community life; they are defined in the negative as those who are not, and do not have in common: '[t]o survive, the community, every community, is forced to introject the negativity of its own opposite, even if the opposite remains precisely a lacking and contrastive mode of being of the community itself' (Esposito 2007:33). According to Campbell (2008:2), it is specifically the relation between community and immunity theorized by Esposito as part of the broader question regarding the nexus between biopolitics and thanato-politics that makes his contribution to the debate so insightful. For Campbell, 'Esposito uncovers in immunity the unthought (or indeed repressed) that returns in the current discussions of biopolitics, be they in the obsessive emphasis on the negative figure of the homo sacer and the state of exception or the incantations of a vital biopolitics of the multitudes' (Campbell 2008 :2). Immunitarian dynamics and mechanisms offer new insights into the infrastructures of multiple and intersecting contemporary life-and-death formations. They generate novel perspectives on the ways life may be preserved through the introjection of negativity and the related production of variegated forms of life and expendability. The structuring of the body politic depends upon dynamics of inclusion, exclusion and difference in the articulation of individual and collective identities. Exclusion, inclusion, exception and immunity are not benign but rather, violent dynamics. They connect to knowledge formations, methods and infrastructures through which identities are generated, populations demarcated, fostered for life, destined for death or 'overkill' (Stanley 2011) in and across shifting regimes of governance. Such processes unfold within the historical frame of modernity, within social and political formations which ought to be accounted for and should not be taken to be self-evident.

The focus on epistemologies, methods and infrastructures, however, presents a novel set of challenges. Whilst on the one hand epistemologies, methods and infrastructures point to the everyday and the ordinary, the situated and always-already-in-relation of life-and-death formations, they require a subtle consideration of the material cultures of protest, surveillance, detention, and abandonment – and their figurative and theoretical purchase. As Appel et al. point out,

'We speak of making concrete arguments, those (like infrastructure) that seem to offer tangible evidence of their claims. But what happens when infrastructure is no longer a metaphor? What happens to theory-making and ethnographic practice when roads and water pipes, bridges and fiber-optic cables themselves are our objects of engagement? In part, we need new tools—tools that allow us to think infrastructure's metaphorical capacities with its material forms, and to think those material forms along with their capacities to generate aspiration and expectation, deferral and abandonment' (Appel et al. 2015, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/714-introduction-the-infrastructure-toolbox>).

In other words, what happens when suspended phone signals, surveillance cameras, and drones become ethnographic objects? When the materiality of protest exemplified by banners, megaphones, and flyers is replaced by the glossy leaflets and brochures of the latest anti-sexual violence and anti-trafficking government campaign, what are the implications? The figurative capacity of this debris is already at work in the analytical relations elicited by the objects, and in the shifts in scale and form they produce. This is particularly apparent in the transnational connections they elicit in and across sites, to the extent that the infrastructural character of life-and-death formations appears ever more clearly and unambiguously as a situated project that always-already exceeds its own context. The emergent infrastructure of surveillance, targeting, detention, and death also suggests its own method, namely one that is as open to tracking the concrete systems that underscore experience, as much as the 'quasi-events' that dwell alongside facticity and have such a strong hold on social life. According to Povinelli (2011), '[i]f events are things that we can say happened such as they have objective [or objectified] being, then quasi-events never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place. They neither happen nor not happen' (2011: 13). A commitment to grappling with the domain of experience as one that entails facticity as much as paranoid or anticipatory affects seems crucial in contexts where power operates simultaneously through hyper-visible performance and hyper-visible concealment, and where it remains unclear what forces, drives or thrusts are propelling bodies to gather up in the square in new formations of heightened vulnerability and exposure.

IV - Conclusion

Squares and cities are increasingly appearing to be highly securitized sites where old and new technologies of surveillance, detention and death are being deployed. At these junctures, subjectivity, sociality and community are also subtly reconfigured, in ways that entail the blurring of notions of distance and proximity – such is the case with the 'remote intimacy' enabled by drones (Gusterson 2015). At the same time, a range of shifting immunitarian logics and mechanisms of exception determine how lines of difference and bordering are drawn and how the infrastructures that subtend social life in these zones of abandonment and vulnerability operate. In these complex predicaments and wide range of life-and-death formations, the domains of experience, the ordinary and the everyday foreground the importance of thinking through sites, objects and frames simultaneously, to figure the complex relations between epistemologies and infrastructures in the making of events and quasi-events (Povinelli 2011). The task also lies in imagining methods which may at once be attuned to the factual, the figurative and the anticipatory as the material-semiotic stuff of life, death and ethnography.

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ⁱ I have undertaken ethnographic research in Guatemala intermittently since 1999. This article is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out in 2012-3 and 2016.

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ⁱⁱⁱ See Gordillo 2014, Navaro-Yashin 2012.

^{iv} Secretaría Contra la Violencia Sexual, Explotación y Trata de Personas.

^v For an in-depth analysis of the state rhetoric and policies on sexual violence and femicides in Guatemala, see Fuentes (2016).

^{vi} Judith Butler has addressed the relation between public assembly and precarity (2015), stressing presence and persistence alongside vulnerability. In this respect, Butler is critical of Agamben's formulation of the notion of 'bare life' and emphasizes modes of agency over and above repression and effacement (see Butler 2015: 80).

^{vii} The term refers to Guatemala of mixed ancestry, see Hale (2006).