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**THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY
FROM OMELAS
+
ECONOMIES OF ABANDONMENT**



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ursula k. le guin // elizabeth povinelli

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THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS

Ursula K. Le Guin

one kind and mode of eventfulness into another. They transform borders, qualities, scale, and agency of one kind of eventfulness—if we can even use the term event in the domain of the chronic, slow, but as of yet unrealized form of lethality found in indigenous worlds—into another. Yet, as I am sure Das and Berlant are well aware, the deployment of a statistical imaginary to awaken a slumbering critical public and reason faces a central paradox. By transforming the invisible, dispersed, and uneventful into the visible, compact, and eventful, statistics obliterate the very nature of this kind of death. Rather than understand this kind of lethality within its own terms (its dailiness, ordinariness, livedness), we demand that it conform to the spectacular event and the ethical dictates of empathic identification. As a result, nothing new happens. No alternative ethical formations are initiated. It is not even very clear how these statistics puncture the inured nature of suffering in local communities. Many indigenous friends of mine do not see the deaths in their communities as a form of state killing unless an agent of the state—such as a police constable—literally kills them. The cruddy, cumulative, and corrosive aspects of life have spread so deep into the everyday that, as Ludwig Wittgenstein says, nothing more I can say other than that is what is.

This takes me to the second avenue that we might pursue. On this avenue life is defined not by some redemptive future but by the understanding that this is what is. No future will have made it anything else. No present can be divided in such a way that what I have—my body and its health, my things, my affects—is not cosubstantial with what you have and do not have. We hardly have to have the same things, the same desires, tastes, languages, or aspirations. But the tighter the neoliberal market ties us all to one scale of value, the looser the post-Fordist state's grip on any ethical obligation to the health and welfare of its citizens, and the more wakeful late liberal subjects are to what time it is, the more gripping Le Guin's simple ethical paradox becomes. Everyone must decide if his or her happiness is worth the suffering of those within the fetid broom closet. And in this world where we live, there is no exit. We can only change the distribution of life and death so that some have more and some have less.

WITH A CLAMOUR OF BELLS that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights, over the music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the North side of the city, where on the great water-meadow called the Green' Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all but a halter without bit. Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the North and West the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding through the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a cheerful faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great joyous clanging of the bells.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How to describe the citizens of Omelas?

Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however — that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc. — they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming in to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked trams, and that the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas — at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be?

I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of drooz may perfume the ways of the city, drooz which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and

they need to be understood not merely in terms of the facts on the ground but also in terms of our scholarly attachments to certain modes of time, eventfulness, and ethics. The security state's ability to capture countervailing energies and imaginaries is not restricted to those who march, protest, and organize against the security state, but also includes those who think critically inside and outside the universities.

But how do we critically reflect on the conditions of lethality in late liberal societies when life and its imaginaries are located at the catachresis of these strong and weak states? It seems to me that two avenues need to be pursued. Along the first, we would examine violence and lethality from a perspective that does not assume the qualities, vitalities, and borders on which neoliberalism defines life itself. Several scholars have been pursuing this project. In her recent book, *Life and Words*, Veena Das notes the anthropological attachment to the kind of violence that characterizes the catastrophe. Concentrating on social being in the wake of two catastrophic events— the gendered violence during the partition of India and Pakistan and the massacre of Sikhs in the wake of the assassination of Indira Gandhi—Das argues that it is not only the events themselves that are world-annihilating but other modes and slow rhythms of death in their wake.³² How do scholars find the right distance or right scale from which to sketch the “slow rhythms” of this lethal violence? This is indeed the question: How do we focus attention on the broom closets of late liberalism in the context of the spectacular machine of the killing state? Likewise, in a recent essay, Lauren Berlant juxtaposes forms of biopower within the current regime of capitalism to the forms of sovereign power accumulated by the terror state.³³ Her case study is obesity. Her aim is to make visible endemic forms of death that are experienced as the attenuated background conditions of ordinary life and are resistant to typical accounts of causality, subjectivity, and life-making.

One tactic all of us use to make visible and compelling the nature of dying in these zones of slow death is statistics. By design, statistics transfigure

32 Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

33 Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33.4 (Summer 2007): 754–80.

small pain in the chest. But unlike Omelas, these kinds of deaths only periodically fix the gaze of national and international publics. When they do, they don't do so in a way that unambiguously concretizes their ultimate, or immediate, cause, agent, and effect. Who is killing these people? What is killing them? Answers must yield to the complexity of an entire system. How might a subject within late liberal society dream of something decisive, clear, sublime?

Late liberal subjects do not have to be lulled to sleep to see deathscapes with much clearer borders, agencies, and intensities. In contrast to cruddy, cumulative, and chronic lethality are special forms of enemies and spectacular forms of death that capture and rivet the imagination of late liberal societies and act as an alibi for the concentration and consolidation of state executive power. Certain kinds of enemies, events, and history are seen as having a spectacular, even sublime, quality: they cut time into two present decisive ideological struggles and demand that exceptional measures be taken. Those within late liberal societies seeking to increase state surveillance powers cite these decisive kinds of enemies and devastating images of airplanes, nightclubs, and towers exploding and vomiting forth singed and dismembered bodies. The lethal state of indigenous life hardly competes with the society of the terrorist spectacle: bodies in hoods, in naked piles, attached to real or fake electrodes. Bodies disappear only to reappear with drill marks. These forms of violence seem to oppose and stand outside of the everyday uneventful forms of misery and dying that characterize indigenous life. These new terrorist forms of death are spectacular in outward form. In appearing to be spectacular, they seem to create the ontological necessity to respond ethically—a demand that we take sides. And citizens and their governments do.

No Exit

Any attempt to understand the social imaginaries characterizing lethal conditions within late liberal societies must take into account the two very different forms, modes, and qualities of killing found there: strong and weak state killing, and the modes and forms of agency, causality, and eventfulness on which they rely.

It is at the intersection of these state and market forms and forces that the lethal condition of late liberal societies must be understood. And

wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond all belief; and it is not habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer; this is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I really don't think many of them need to take drooz.

Most of the processions have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky; in the benign grey beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men, wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute. As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks and soothe them, whispering, "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope..." They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits haunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes—the child has no understanding of time or interval — sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance

...We should not be surprised by this way of assessing failed forms of state welfare. After all, the neoliberal weak state and strong market do not produce and distribute life, its qualities, vitalities, and borders, evenly or equitably. Nor do all forms of lethality produce the same qualities, visibilities, and intensities as others. Lethality is apprehended and perceived and is discussed, explained, and managed in terms of historically fluctuating accounts of agency, eventfulness, sociality, and normality. Even tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes that generate terrific waves of empathy and generate moral capital for those who demonstrate outrage leave in their wake a nonplussed public. When the waters recede and the ground stops shaking, empathy also evaporates as ethical sense settles back into doxic accounts of poverty, its causes and consequences. Cost reemerges as a central issue for how to calculate who can or should be protected, relocated, cared for. Here we see how prescient Le Guin's suspicion of the ethics of empathy is. Empathy asks us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. What would it be like to be them? To be in this tidal wave, that fetid broom closet, that cultural condition? And yet, this very act—this ethical gesture—initiates a separation between you and me. I am not substantially the result of your tsunami or your staphylococci. As a result, to give to you can end up seeming like a taking away from me because mine seems to be mine. Never has Le Guin's basic point that all goods are generated in a system of distributed misery seemed so hard to fathom, so impractical, and yet so close to liberal reality.

I would be surprised if most Australian citizens would confuse their mode of happiness with the mode of happiness of the fictional citizens of Omelas. Although they share some of the same characteristics, the broom closets perforating Australia do not work the same magic on Australians as they do on the citizens of Omelas. Things are not that good. The middle class is being squeezed as a new gap emerges between rich and poor. There are mortgages to worry about. There are new individual labor contracts to negotiate. In Le Guin's imaginary society, nothing but a robust happiness acts as a comparative backdrop to the everyday abuse of the small child. Not so in Oz. True, like the fetid space in Omelas, indigenous communities are often cruddy, corrosive, and uneventful. An agentless slow death characterizes their mode of lethality. Quiet deaths. Slow deaths. Rotting worlds. The everyday drifts toward death: one more drink, one more sore; a bad cold, bad food; a

of grief. She was not saying, “I will mourn you as an individual.” Her brother was this young man’s father. Thus, she and he share “one body”: They are both *murru-murru* (long yam), an ancestral being from which they both substantively descend as surely as an average nonindigenous Australian believes that he or she shares the genetic substance of his or her mother and father. In other words, the woman was attempting to mobilize a discourse of socially cosubstantial corporeality against her nephew’s social imaginary of individuated bodies engaged in private wagers. His language of privatized loss, and its incumbent discourse of individual risk, was not met by the risk of another private loss but by an appeal to a cosubstantial distribution of life, health, and social being—a position much closer to Le Guin than to the young man.

The state and businesses do not greet these social imaginaries of lethality, individuality, and responsibility in the same way. They amplify and channel the nephew’s rather than the aunt’s social imaginary into agencies of social life in such a way that the one is sensible, practical, and productive, while the other is insensible, impractical, and sterile. By the time the aunt makes her argument, the language game of individual risk has already organized social, economic, and political life increasingly around the neoliberal view of her nephew—that bodies and values are poker chips in individual games of chance and that the social is an impediment to the production of value. This view has social ramifications that are especially hard on the poor. As Craig Calhoun puts it, privatizing risk makes “individuals bear the brunt of hardships that are predictable in the statistical aggregate without effective mechanisms to share the burden, let alone reduce the risk.”³¹ Privatizing risk creates and fosters a language game in which the social is practiced as nothing more than an aggregate of individuated risk calculators working according to mathematically predictable econometric models. I am not in you. You are not in me. We are merely playing the same game of chance whose truth lies not here and now between us but there and then in who wins and who loses. No one is killing me. I am killing myself. Maybe . . . we’ll see . . . the future will tell. “Are you killing yourself, yes, you are. And we will no longer help you do so.”

31 Craig Calhoun, “The Privatization of Risk,” *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006): 257–63. See also Tom Baker and Jonathan Simon, eds., *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its

existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go West or North, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

To understand how this separation sinks into various social worlds in such a way that those who suffer most from the socioeconomics of poverty take the most responsibility for this suffering, we need to move more closely into the nitty-gritty of everyday social life within the broom closets of late liberal states. Take, for instance, an interaction between a young indigenous man in his late thirties and his family. The young indigenous man's social profile is typical of most people his age living in the community. Despite the horrific nature of the following account, if you met him, you would often see him in good spirits. This young man characterizes himself as an alcoholic. Like everyone in his family, he has had "sores" (staphylococcal and streptococcal infections) on and off since he was a child, bearing the scars on his body. He has high blood pressure but does not take his medication regularly. He was hospitalized for congestive heart failure, as his mother was in her last stages of oral cancer. His father died of a stroke when he was in his teens. His mother's youngest brother died years before of kidney failure associated with septicemia. His younger brother has a congenital heart condition. Three weeks after he was released from the hospital, his eldest sister was taken to the hospital with septicemia. The treatment resulted in massive congestive heart failure. Although told by doctors and family to stop drinking, this young man started drinking within a week of his release from the hospital. Further, what would perhaps be more surprising to the sensibilities of many Australians, he demanded that his family members drive him to a local shop to buy alcohol with the money he had saved during his hospitalization. When family members refused, he angrily told them he could do what he wanted with his body. He knew the risks. They were his to take. How he gambled with his life was his business. These were his words, risk, gamble, my body. Only the future could say whether he won or lost his gamble, was right or wrong in his approach to this world of misery.

Forty years his senior, his aunt vehemently disagreed not only with his account of the location of his risk but also with the underlying logic of his social imaginary. To his statement that his body was his alone, she replied, "No, that is not your body; that is my body. When you die, my body will suffer and die."³⁰ When she referred to her physical risk, this woman was not simply referring to a generalizable empathic form

30 Conversation with author, at Belyuen, Australia, August 2005.

ECONOMIES OF ABANDONMENT

Elizabeth Povinelli

1. The Child in the Broom Closet

In the Broom Closet

Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" tells the tale of a city, Omelas, where the happiness and well-being of its inhabitants depend on a small child's being con ned to and humiliated in a small, putrid broom closet. It is critical to Le Guin's fiction-based ethical wager that Omelas's happiness is not ideological in Louis Althusser's sense, nor naive. It is experientially unmediated, materially substantive, and morally desirable. This happiness is what every average Joe and moral philosopher might wish for. But it is, nevertheless, dependent on a child's being naked and constrained in a cramped space and being covered with festering sores from sitting in its own excrement, and on these facts being known by all Omelas inhabitants. Some actually visit the child's fetid chamber. Some have merely heard of it since they were children themselves. But every member of Omelas must assume some relationship among his or her present personal happiness, their solidarity with the present happiness of the millions inhabiting Omelas, and the present suffering of one small human being. A child is being beaten, and unlike Freud no one in Omelas can pretend it is mere psychic fantasy. Some o er facile excuses for preferring their happiness to the child's. At this point, they reason, the child is "too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy." She is so destroyed and so used to her destitution that liberating her would do more harm than good. Others face the true paradox. For them "their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it."¹ Others leave Omelas. Not en masse. They leave one by one: "The place they go is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."²

¹ LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," 866.

² Ibid.

other words, this book is interested in the quasi-events that saturate potential worlds and their social projects. If events are things that we can say happened such that they have a certain objective being, then quasi-events never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place. They neither happen nor not happen. I am not interested in these quasi-events in some abstract sense, but in the concrete ways that they are, or are not, aggregated and thus apprehended, evaluated, and grasped as ethical and political demands in specific late liberal markets, publics, and states, as opposed to crises and catastrophes that seem to necessitate ethical reflection and political and civic engagement. Crises and catastrophes are kinds of events that seem to demand, as if authored from outside human agency, an ethical response. Not surprisingly then, these kinds of events become what inform the social science of suffering and thriving, the politics of assembly and dispersal, and the socially constituted senses of the extraordinary and everyday, as the work of Veena Das and João Biehl have helped make clear.²⁸ What techniques, such as statistics, allow nonperceptual quasi-events to be transformed into perceptual events, even catastrophes? What are the temporal and epistemological presuppositions that foreclose an anthropology of ordinary suffering and thus an anthropological understanding of the dynamic by which extraordinary events of violence are folded into everyday routines—and visa versa? How and why do things move from potentiality to eventfulness to availability for various social projects?...²⁹

2. Sweeping Out the Broom Closet

Late liberal societies hardly lack the kinds of dingy broom closets that so interested Le Guin. No less than the citizens of Omelas, members of these societies are fully aware of the existence of such situations in their polis and make decisions about the relation between them and their own well-being. These fetid spaces are often the occasion for public hand-wringing, outrage, and scandal. In Australia, for instance, indigenous rural and urban communities are open broom closets of poverty, disease, and despair.

²⁸ Das, *Life and Words*; Biehl, *Vita*.

²⁹

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” was conceived as a fictional engagement with William James’s “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” and more broadly to the moral philosophy of American pragmatism, of which James was a leading voice. James begins his essay with the position that “there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say.”³ is ethical position was deeply influenced by the semiotic musings of James’s colleague Charles Sanders Peirce. More specifically, James broadly borrows Peirce’s understanding of the temporal and modal structure of the “final interpretant” and applies it to the question of ethical truth. Ethical readings of the kind that interested James have a specific temporal and modal structure; a variant of the future anterior. Ethical readings are the “toward which the actual,” as the sum total of all interpretants, “tends.”⁴ But this actual is already in the durative present. The future anterior is what will have been the ultimate truth, good, and justice of this existing action, event and experience, after every last man has had his experience and his say. This truth might only become available with the point of view of the last man. But this last man is supposedly simply standing where we are standing, seeing what is front of our eyes but outside our field of vision.

Regardless of her agreement or disagreement with James, Le Guin’s account of temporality, eventfulness, and ethics opens a productive avenue for critically engaging the affective attachments and practical relationship of subjects to the unequal distribution of life and death, of hope and harm, and of endurance and exhaustion in late liberalism, a phrase I will elaborate below. One reading of Le Guin would alter three ways in which liberal subjects normally understand and experience the social tense, eventfulness, and ethical substance of thriving, suffering, and lethality. First, as opposed to those who would read ethics from the perspective of future ends, this reading of Le Guin would insist that there is no horizon in which a changed material version of this child could be incorporated into the material and emotional good of the city without that good being compromised. The ethical nature of the relationship between the residents of Omelas and the child in the broom closet cannot, therefore, be deferred to some future anterior

3 James, “The Moral Philosopher and Moral Life,” 141.

4 Peirce, “Letter to Lady Welby,” 111.

the endurance, let alone the survival, of alternative forms of life in the gale force of curtailing social winds opens a set of new ethical and political questions. If the possibilities of new forms of life dwell and are sheltered within the variation between the force of existing and the power of acting within these intensified zones of being and not being, then what does immanent critique demand of those who live in these zones? This problem becomes particularly clear if we think of potentiality as the ethical substance of immanent critique. If, as Michel Foucault defined it, ethical substance is the prime material (*matière principale*) of moral reflection, conduct, and evaluation, then the ethical substance of immanent critique would be intensified potentiality, insofar as intensified potentiality is the material on which ethical work (*travail éthique*) is carried out.²⁷ But this ethical work is distributed across different social groups. Thus it is important to note, again following Foucault’s reading of the use of pleasure among the Greeks and the practice of critique more generally, that pleasure and critique are generally available materials and practices, irrespective of the fact that only some people make use of them. But the general availability of intensified potential doesn’t seem to be equally available in the same way. Certainly all subjects exist in the variation between *vis existendi* and *potentia agendi* and between modes of being and not being. But the intensity of this variation and its zoning are neither uniform nor uniformly distributed. As a result a gap seems to open between those who reflect on and evaluate ethical substance and those who are this ethical substance...

Tense, Eventfulness, Ethical Substance

The aspect of tense that interests me is broadly social rather than strictly linguistic...While time and the event have an internal relation vis-à-vis tense, there is another aspect of the event and eventfulness that concerns this book. Like Le Guin, I am interested in forms of suffering and dying, enduring and expiring, that are ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime. In

27 Elsewhere in *Economies of Abandonment*, Povinelli defines Foucault’s concept of ethical work and substance thus: “The ethical work (*travail éthique*) of the self was to establish proper conduct in relation to this ethical substance—a substance that was material (*matière*)—so as to bring into being the self that was the object of one’s behavior.” -ed.

where life and death enter “zones of indistinction.”²¹ The American comatose patient Karen Quinlan exemplifies such spaces: “Karen Quinlan’s body—which wavers between life and death according to the progress of medicine and the changes in legal decisions—is a legal being as much as it is a biological being. A law that seeks to decide on life is embodied in a life that coincides with death.”²² Death and life, “far from having become more exact, now [oscillate] from one pole to other with the greatest indeterminacy.”²³ Failing to be actual, death and life become pure potential. They can be or not be. And it is in these maximally intensified zones of oscillation and indeterminacy that new forms of life and worlds will emerge and the “ways and the forms of a new politics must be thought.”²⁴ But rather than answering our question of how new forms of social life can survive the perpetual variation of being, Agamben’s examples intensify it. How can new forms of life, let alone the political thought they might foster, persevere in such spaces? How can new social worlds endure the “wavering of death” that defines these spaces?²⁵ Indeed, so unlikely are the possibilities of new life surviving in these spaces that, cribbing off Brian Massumi, we might describe instances of survival as moments of “miraculization.”²⁶

The social projects that interest this book may not have the force to act in the sense of making anything like a definitive event occur in the world (becoming a counterpublic is an achievement), but they exist, nevertheless, in the Spinozan sense of persisting in their being. And insofar as they do, these alternative worlds maintain the otherwise that stares back at us without perhaps being able to speak to us.

But if the point is not to discover the eternal or the universal, but to find the singular conditions under which something new is produced, then two specific aspects of social life need to be emphasized. This is of special concern to those trying to write an anthropology of the otherwise. On the one hand, attempting to address the question of

21 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 187.

22 Ibid., 186.

23 Ibid., 162.

24 Ibid., 187.

25 Ibid., 163.

26 Massumi, *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, 25.

perspective—what will have been the positive outcome of this suffering from the perspective of a future interpreter we cannot as of yet know. In late liberalism, as opposed to Omelas, the future anterior is sometimes marked by the perfective, sometimes the imperfective. But in both cases the ethical nature of present action is interpreted from the point of view of a reflexive future horizon and its cognate discourses, such as that of sacrificial love.⁵ The child’s suffering disappears when seen from the perspective of what it will have been—or been for. Because Le Guin refuses to grant to Omelas the truth of this ethical point of view, the ethical relationship that links the citizens of Omelas to the child in the broom closet cannot be removed from the durative present of her suffering. Hers is not so much a sacrifice in the city as an organ of the city. To be sure, whether the political life of the city should be based on an alternative ethical tense—the durative present—and whether the question of politics should bear any relation to the question of ethics are important, if separate, questions that I explore later.

Second, the nature of the suffering that interests Le Guin is ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime. Granted the child in the broom closet is covered in sores and, every so often, is given a kick. But for the most part her misery is a quieter form of abjection, despair, impoverishment, and boredom. She is not a part of a system of disposability because she cannot be disposed with. In the oscillation between this state of neither great crisis nor final redemption there is nothing spectacular to report. Indeed, nothing happens that rises to the level of an event let alone a crisis. The small child’s life-assuering will drift across a series of quasi-events into a form of death that can be certified as due to the vagary of “natural causes.” As a result any ethical impulse dependent on a certain kind of event and eventfulness—a crisis—flounders in this closet. How does one construct an ethics in relation to this kind of dispersed suffering?

Finally, any goods generated from the kind of misery found in this broom closet must be seen as socially cosubstantial as well as temporally nontransferable. The happiness of citizens of Omelas is substantially within the small child’s unhappiness; their well-being is part of a larger

5 See, for instance, Bernard Williams’s discussion of the critical importance of the project for the health of the subject. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*.

mode of corporeal embodiment in which her carnal misery is a vital organ; the usefulness of the child is inseparable from the distension of her body through the bodies of the citizens of Omelas. And these are not metaphors. She and they are not like a shared body; they are a shared body. Or, as I have put it previously, they share a mutual, if distributed, form of enfleshment.⁶ The solidarity the citizens of Omelas share with each other must, as of necessity, loop through her. As a result, the ethical imperative is not to put oneself in the child's place, nor is it to experience the anxiety of potentially being put in her place. Le Guin's fiction rejects this ethics of liberal empathy. Instead, the ethical imperative is to know that your own good life is already in her broom closet, and as a result, either you must create a new organization of enfleshment by compromising on the goods to which you have grown accustomed (and grown accustomed to thinking of as "yours" including the health of your body) or admit that the current organization of enfleshment is more important to you than her suffering.⁷

That Le Guin allows some people to walk away from Omelas rather than stay and fight its injustice may seem a cop-out. That Le Guin is unable to describe the place they go seems even more of one. How to come to grips with Le Guin's refusal, or inability, to provide a substantive alternative to her devastating paradox of the good life—and [after] Derrida, a philosophy of ends more generally⁸—is the last point that this book will address. Other issues about Le Guin's short story and her opus more generally will be raised through a set of encounters with a number of alternative social worlds and their social projects. Of particular emphasis will be the contrast between Le Guin's interest in the emergence of "the liberatory novum, of individual initiative, of understanding and communication," which correspond to the "classical utopian aspirations of Western philosophy" and, say, the science fiction writer Samuel Delany's interest in "the dominance of dispersion, of compelling convention, of statistical typicality, of delusion and a systematic distortion of communication," which emerged from his

6 Povinelli, *The Empire of Love*, 6–9.

7 Or, as one critical reading of this story suggests, one must be willing to annihilate oneself. See Simon, "William James's Lost Souls in Ursula Le Guin's Utopia."

8 Derrida, "The Ends of Man."

one considers these ideas in their objective extrinsic reality or in their formal intrinsic reality.¹⁸ Ideas and affects are "two kinds of modes of thought" that differ "in nature." An idea represents something while an affect does not. An affect is not nothing, but it is also not something in the same way as an extrinsic or intrinsic idea. An affect is a force of existing (*vis existendi*) that is neither the realized thing (an idea), nor the accomplishment of a thing (an act, *potentia agendi*). This perspective on the force of existing is clearly engaging Spinoza's claim that things, finite and determinate kinds of existence, strive (*conatus*) to persevere in their being. For Deleuze, the perpetual variation between *vis existendi* and *potentia agendi*—between striving to persevere and any actual idea or action that emerges from this striving—provides a space of potentiality where new forms of life can emerge. But it is exactly in this ontotheoretical spacing that a different, sociological question emerges: How do new forms of social life maintain the force of existing in specific social spacings of life? How do they endure the effort it takes to strive to persevere? And how in answering these questions do new, if not ontotheoretical, then political and ethical concerns emerge?

The question of how new possibilities of life are able to maintain their force of existence in specific organizations of social space becomes especially acute in the wake of Giorgio Agamben's reflections on Deleuze's immanent philosophy and his own work on the biopolitical. In his reflections on Deleuze's "Immanence: A Life," Agamben calls for the development of a coherent ontology of potentiality (*dynamis*) that would upend the primacy of actuality (*energeia*).¹⁹ For Agamben potentiality has a dual nature: while the actual can only be, the potential can be or not be.²⁰ And it is exactly within this ontological duality of the potential that new possibilities of life are sheltered. But for Agamben, not all potentialities have the same potential when it comes to the kinds and degrees of difference necessary to disturb current biopolitical formations. In the di cult last few sections of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben turns to a series of "uncertain and nameless terrains"

18 The idea may have an objective (extrinsic) reality insofar as it represents a thing. It also has a formal (intrinsic) reality insofar as it is a thing independent of what it represents. See *ibid.*

19 Agamben, "Absolute Immanence."

20 See *ibid.* and Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 44.

quite difficult. What composes a human social world may be anything but proximate to it, let alone human. The dissemination of various forms of sociality and meaning vis-à-vis various emergent communicative and market linkages creates anonymous and yet intimate linkages and supports across social worlds. Moreover, no social world is simply organized or unorganized, coherent or incoherent, unified or fractured. Instead, social worlds are multiply partially organized and thus always multiply partially disorganized. Social projects disaggregate aspects of the social worlds and aggregate individual projects into a more or less whole—a definable and describable thing. But social projects are not fixed things. Indeed, they are not “things” so much as aggregating practices, incessantly fixing phenomena and cosubstantiating practices.

This book is particularly interested in a certain moment, or condition, in the life of alternative social projects—those moments, or those conditions in which a social project is neither something nor nothing. This indeterminate oscillation—the virtual space that opens up between the potentiality and actuality of an alternative social project—has attracted the attention of a range of immanent critical theorists even as Foucault presented his lecture on heterotopia in 1967.¹⁴ Since the mid-1960s, immanent critique has sought to conceptualize the source and space of “new possibilities of life” independent of philosophical notions of transcendental consciousness.¹⁵ In his Vincennes lectures on Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, for instance, slowly differentiated between a mode of thought defined by its representational character (ideas) and a mode of thought that is not defined representationally (affects).¹⁶ Deleuze concedes that affects can have an ideational form (“there is an idea of the loved thing, to be sure, there is an idea of something hoped for”) and that ideas have a chronological and logical primacy in relation to the affects (“In order to will it’s necessary to have an idea, however confused or indeterminate it may be, of what is willed”). But he insisted that affects like hope and love “represent nothing, strictly nothing.”¹⁷ Affects may be ultimately determined by the given system of ideas that one has, but they are not “reducible to the ideas one has,” whether

14 Foucault, “Des espaces autres.”

15 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 101.

16 Deleuze, “On Spinoza,” n.p.

17 Ibid.

encounter with Michel Foucault’s notion of the heterotopic.⁹ My reading of “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” and Le Guin’s ethical reflections on civic responsibility merely provides a convenient narrative starting point for the concerns of this book: How do specific arrangements of tense, eventfulness, and ethical substance make affectively and cognitively sensible and practical, late liberal distributions of life and death, of hope and harm, and of endurance and exhaustion across social difference? Given these arrangements, what are the conditions in which new forms of social life emerge? And, if we believe that all potential social life is material, that it is embodied, then how does the materiality of the social otherwise matter to critical theory?

This is especially pertinent since outside of Omelas no one is simply happy. Citizens in actually existing states do not live in the perfect grace that prevails in Omelas. Nor is the difference between those who have and those who have not as precisely defined and located.

Obviously this is a large and unwieldy set of concerns. And the meanings of the terms I have already used—“projects,” “social projects,” and “alternative social worlds”; “events” and “quasi-events”; “tense,” “eventfulness,” “ethical substance”; “sacrificial love”; “late liberalism”—demand some initial specification. So let me begin by describing the specific social worlds and projects that interest me; why I am interested in these kinds of worlds and projects; and what of this has to do with tense, eventfulness, and ethical substance. I will then describe how the general space and time in which this book was written has made understanding these kinds of concerns unavoidable and explain why I use the chronotope of late liberalism rather than other available chronotopes such as liberalism, neoliberalism, postcolonial liberalism, or diasporic liberalism. And finally I will describe how the following chapters slowly unpack late liberal techniques of power and the concepts I use to understand them.

Spaces of Otherwise

My analysis of the social worlds and projects that provide the

9 See, for instance, John Fekete’s reading of Le Guin and Delany. Fekete, “*The Dispossessed and Triton*.”

sociographic core of this book emerges from very longstanding friendships—for instance a twenty-six-year relationship with friends in north Australia—and much shorter ones—I have been in deep conversation with members of alternative queer projects for only six years. Throughout this book I discuss how my friends in Australia have been working on an augmented reality project as a way of maintaining within late liberalism an ethical relationship to themselves and their country. My discussions of alternative projects of embodied sociality have a more diffused focus. But what interests this book about these social worlds is fourfold. First, I am interested in them as projects, a term that is loosely modeled on the meaning that the moral philosopher Bernard Williams gave to the concepts of moral projects and actions. Responding to utilitarian understandings of the good, Williams argues that moral projects cannot be measured, as many utilitarian approaches would have it, by assessing happiness or pleasure, or any action for that matter, from the point of view of a systemized impartial perspective. Happiness, goodness, and justice are never judged by a set of impartial decisions or from the perspective of “the view from nowhere.”¹⁰ And this is because happiness depends on a person “being taken up or involved in any of a vast range of projects” and commitments.¹¹ “To be taken up” and “to be involved” has a much stronger meaning for Williams than to be merely interested in something. Projects are the thick subjective background effects of a life as it has been lived; and these thick subjectivities provide the context of moral and political calculation. All judgments and views always occur within thick and particular life projects—a point most anthropologists would take as axiomatic. But it is also a point that foregrounds the fact that in any given social world, multiple moral and political calculations proliferate because no one ever lives the exact same project—in Omelas, for instance, the good life would be the contested space between the child in the broom closet and each and every citizen’s project, including those who decide to remain in the city and those who walk away from it.

Whereas Williams is interested in projects from the point of view of individual moral agents, I am interested in them from the point of view of the social worlds in which these projects are situated, and not all

10 Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*.

11 Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, 112.

of these equally. I am interested in those social projects that attempt to capacitate an alternative set of human and posthuman worlds. (The “view from nowhere” is from this perspective a social project that has as its background assumption that background assumptions can be emptied out.) When I say I am interested in social projects I am gesturing to specific arrangements (agencements) that extend beyond simple human sociality or human beings. As will become clear, a social project is dependent on a host of interlocking concepts, materials, and forces that include human and nonhuman agencies and organisms. Focusing primarily on the human dimension of these social projects, critical social theory has used many phrases to describe these worlds. Michael Warner has used the term “counterpublics,” Charles Taylor “new social imaginaries,” and Nancy Fraser “subaltern counterpublics.” I have used the phrase “radical worlds.”¹² Much earlier, Foucault coined the term “heterotopia” to refer to a set of countersites that are real localized sites in the world and yet contested inversions of the world.¹³ Some of these worlds may, from one perspective, seem more voluntarist than others. Alternative spiritual publics that I discuss in subsequent chapters might seem to be this sort of voluntarist counterpublic. It may appear that members of these social projects choose to place themselves within this or that alternative world. Others may seem to be structurally located within normative worlds in such a way that their everyday actions are heterotopic whether they intend them to be or not. My Indigenous friends in Australia would seem good candidates for this less voluntary form of the otherwise. But I hope the following chapters give lie to such simple divisions of the will—and put serious pressure on the quasi-mystical concept of “the will” itself—but there is nevertheless a discursive power of the fantasy of the will and its volitions that needs to be noted.

In any case, we have social worlds, social projects, and individuate projects, each of which conveys a slightly different aspect of human life as this life unfolds in equally complexly organized material compositions. Social worlds are the most encompassing. But specifying even the location and composition of contemporary social worlds is

12 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*; Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*; Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition”; Povinelli, “Radical Worlds.”

13 Foucault, “Des espaces autres,” 47.