



Necropolitics and American Hype-Power

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ABSTRACT

In a 2009 essay titled “Hyper-Power or Hype-Power,” Tim Luke prompted us to think about American foreign policy and national security as being in the process of transitioning from hyper-power to something Luke called “hype-power.” Luke sought to explore the extent to which post-Cold War American hyper-power was the product of and, in a way, becoming increasingly indistinguishable from hyped-up displays of might and prowess in the sphere of security and international affairs.

What Luke did not address but cannot be ignored is the relationship between hype-power and death or death making, that is to say, modalities of power and violence, whether hard or soft, that often amount to putting bodies to death and, sometimes, through various means and methods, to a proliferation of dead bodies. To put it differently, if we go along with Luke’s provocative argument about hype, a question that needs to be asked is: what modes or regimes of necro-power—a power premised on killing and putting to death—correspond to today’s US hype-power?

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In a 2009 essay titled “Hyper-Power or Hype-Power,” Tim Luke prompted us to think about American foreign policy and national security as being in the process of transitioning from hyper-power to something Luke called “hype-power.”¹ Luke sought to explore the extent to which post-Cold War American hyper-power was the product of and, in a way, becoming increasingly indistinguishable from hyped-up displays of might and prowess in the sphere of security and international affairs. American hyper-power was supposed to be the outcome of the end of the Cold War and of the United States having been left as the sole superpower. Crucially, hyper-power (or *hyper-puissance* in French, since the term was coined by then French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine²) was, to quote Luke, a wish “to exceed the superlativity of superpower by attributing far greater, or actually even more excessive, reserves of power to the USA as it prepared to preside over a world remade by the collapse of its worn-down ideological enemy.”³ And yet, as the rhetoric of hyper-power was deployed, many scenarios about America’s vulnerability, its possible decline, the twilight of its hegemony, or the fatal revelation of the “end of its triumphalist culture”⁴ were offered too and sometimes passionately discussed in the media, among scholars (historians, cultural theorists, and even some national security experts), and through various popular cultural formats (including blockbuster Sci-Fi films that depicted various catastrophic scenarios for the American state and nation). The confrontation between America’s professed hyper-power and the possibility of the decline of the “American Empire,” fueled by all sorts of domestic and international insecurities at a time when the United States was supposed to be hyper-secure after the collapse of the Soviet Union, got more pronounced after the attacks on 9/11.

There were two main ways of explaining and justifying the seeming incongruence between the discourse of hyper-power, hyper-strength, or hyper-security and increasing feelings of insecurity. On the one hand, one could understand it through the prospect of a US decline (or an “imperial overstretch,” a “blowback,” a global “fiasco,” and so on);⁵ on the other hand, among some international relations, foreign policy, and security studies scholars and pundits, the notion of “soft power” helped to soothe anxieties about growing international insecurity. As Joseph Nye, in particular, claimed, absent any ideological antagonist (the former Soviet Union), America’s power actually no longer needed to be demonstrated by way of military arsenals, ammunition stockpiles, or quantifiable capacities of deterrence (nuclear or otherwise),⁶ but rather through the global impact, global appeal, and global “seduction of its cultural exports” (as Niall Ferguson derisively put it).⁷ Admiration of, and envy about, American social, political, cultural, and moral values were allegedly now the true mark of hyper-power, hyper-strength, and hyper-security on a global scale.

What Luke intimated in his 2009 essay was that visions of hyper-power (either as unmatched brute force or as soft coddling through the appeal of one’s desirable values and cultural products)—designed to steer the focus away from declinist or imperial overstretch perspectives—were slowly, but surely, made possible because of a morphing of hyper-power into hype-power. As Luke put it, American power and security politics were now primarily about hype or hyping (hyping oneself, one’s capabilities, one’s potential, one’s abilities, even one’s appeal). Hype was about “purposeful exaggeration, excessive emphasis, extravagance of overstatement, or ‘hyperbole,’ which literally means ‘overshooting’ in Greek.”⁸ Luke added that, with hype, the idea was to “boost public attention and engagement with exaggerated claims.

1 See Timothy W. Luke, “Hyper-Power or Hype-Power: The USA after Kandahar, Karbala, and Katrina,” in eds. François Debrix and Mark J. Lacy, *The Geopolitics of American Insecurity: Terror, Power, and Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 18–33.

2 See “To Paris, U.S. Looks Like a ‘Hyperpower,’” *New York Times*, February 5, 1999, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/05/news/to-paris-us-looks-like-a-hyperpower.html>.

3 Luke, “Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?,” p. 19.

4 Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

5 These terms and phrases were actual titles of popular books written by US-based national security scholars in the 2000’s.

6 Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

7 Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 21.

8 Luke, “Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?,” p. 21.

Excessive coverage, extravagant marketing, or extended publicity are the tactics of hype.”⁹ Thus, from the George W. Bush era and the US claims of victory and “mission(s) accomplished” in the Global War on Terror, through Barak Obama’s triumphalist and revenge-loaded rhetoric of his taking down of Bin Laden, his proclaimed ending of the war on terror and its transformation into a struggle against Islamic fundamentalism, the so-called military successes of the drone warfare program under his watch, through Donald Trump, the US president who made “America great again,” and allegedly more secure with a “beautiful big new wall” on the southern border, and finally respected and feared internationally, to Joe Biden’s often noted “bravado and bluster” speeches in matters of foreign policy (particularly Biden’s speeches on Putin and Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, but also on China over Taiwan and Chinese military threats in East Asia), the last 20 to 25 years of American power and security politics have witnessed their fair share of hype/hyping, hyperbolism, extravagance and exaggeration, and publicizing of national and global exploits that do not always match everyday (geo)political realities. Often, they do not fully manage to dispel people’s (including American people’s) sense of insecurity either, and sometimes they produce even more insecurities. It is also possible that what Luke referred to as hype or hype-power was not new or unique to the last 20 years or so. After all, as some have argued, there is something about the United States as a nation, as a geopolitical vision, or as a “victory culture”¹⁰ (whether it is called American Manifest Destiny or US exceptionalism) that always has been, to some extent, about hype-power. And yet, it also appears that 24/7 news outlets, the expansion of visual media platforms, the internet, and the emergence of social media have not only heightened US hype, but also made it fairly common, normal, and almost expected.¹¹

What Luke did not address but cannot be ignored is the relationship between hype-power and death or death making, that is to say, modalities of power and violence, whether hard or soft, that often amount to putting bodies to death and, sometimes, through various means and methods, to a proliferation of dead bodies. To put it differently, if we go along with Luke’s provocative argument about hype, a question that needs to be asked is: what modes or regimes of necro-power—a power premised on killing and putting to death—correspond to today’s US hype-power?

Preliminarily, in this essay, I want to argue that if super-power (starting towards the end of WWII and continuing during the Cold War) and hyper-power (after the Cold War) were modes of US power, foreign policy, and national as well as global security¹² reliant on the production, mobilization, or projection (even if for deterrent purposes) of massive, large-scale, and often spectacular modes of death and death-making (world wars, cold wars, nuclear holocausts, political killings in the name of global ideologies, human rights violations and atrocities on massive scales, etc.), then today’s hype-power—at least in its American configuration—seems to be about less spectacular, more mundane, often banal, sometimes commonplace or ordinary, and, crucially, endemic ways of putting to death or of killing populations (perhaps even one’s own). Hype-power sometimes operates through neglect, negligence, incompetence, or indifference, particularly as the focus must be placed on the hype, and thus also away from the daily insecurities that hype-power regimes must ignore, forget, and overlook even as, or when, hype-power actually causes these insecurities (sometimes as a result of hype’s “overshooting”).

Put differently, today’s necro-power under conditions of US hype-power is primarily about the maintenance or cultivation of power and security through the production and management of endemics, often leading to the common but also non-spectacular deaths (thus, often not talked about as much) of many individuals and populations the world over. There is nothing soft, benign, benevolent, attractive, or appealing about hype-power. Hype-power can be and often is just as deadly as super-power or hyper-power. Like super-power or hyper-power before, hype-power is dependent on necro-power, even if this necro-power is about so-called soft killing, slow violence or slow death, disappearance, abandonment, or social decay as a result

9 Ibid., p. 21.

10 See Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*, p. 15.

11 Several years ago, I addressed these issues under the rubrics of “tabloidism,” tabloid culture, and tabloid realism. See François Debrix, *Tabloid Terror: War, Culture, and Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2008).

12 With the alleged goal of making the United States and its population secure first and foremost, something that, as Morgenthau once argued, was meant to be the core component of the US national interest. Hans Morgenthau, “The Primacy of the National Interest,” *The American Scholar*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1949), pp. 207–212.

of endemic conditions that, in today's age, are at once about the use/abuse and the neglect/indifference of local-to-global vulnerabilities, precarities, and disposessions.

In part, I derive my understanding of necro-power from Achille Mbembe's now well-known reworking of Michel Foucault's notion of biopower (or the power over life, a power that is premised upon the management or governance of the life and living conditions of certain populations, including the maintenance of their well-being and health).¹³ For Mbembe, biopower is always about necro-power since, as Foucault already stated, a power that makes life live is also a power that must decide whose lives or which forms or even ways of life must be superfluous, sacrificed, and potentially done away with.¹⁴ Mbembe suggests that Foucault does not go far enough in his analysis since, even under biopolitical conditions, sovereign power, authority, and force often remain in place to guarantee the continuous "subjugation of life to the power of death."¹⁵ Thus, the management of populations, including the maximization of their health and well-being, which is supposedly the goal of biopower, still involves the "making of death worlds" and ensures the proliferation, particularly in the Global South, of what Mbembe has called "living dead" bodies.¹⁶

While it is useful to make sense of several configurations of violence leading to death, particularly outside the west, Mbembe's notion of necro-power is too simplistic and rather crude.¹⁷ Among other things, it remains attached to the rule, force, and violence of the sovereign (or its agents), and its prerogative and authority over death. Relatedly, it tends to privilege a focus on spectacular and often mass-scale forms of death making (for example, Mbembe points to colonial violence, apartheid regimes, forms of political violence and torture in the Global South, most of which result from colonial/neo-colonial/post-colonial modalities of rule, empire, and hegemony). Thus, the forms of necro-power Mbembe points to are very much in line with the kind of death making that accompanies super-power and hyper-power (even if Mbembe shifts hyper-power's focus from western geopolitics to the concerns of the Global South).

My understanding of necro-power takes issue with Mbembe's emphasis on high visibility, high quantity, and potentially high measurability configurations of death or death making that result from the exercise of a power that often remains for Mbembe a centralized (and hegemonic or monopolistic) sovereign power. Instead, I suggest that there is another way of understanding necro-power as a type of death-making force connected to the need to make some populations live and/or thrive that is aware of the always possible occurrence of massive and spectacular death and destruction. Crucially, this does not occlude and, in fact, takes into account "the multiple, endless, far-too-common, and often banal and seemingly trivial operations of death making that...regimes of biopolitical governance regularly undertake and that, furthermore, render a wide range of bodies superfluous, unnoticed, vulnerable, and often readily subjected to various forms of destruction and disappearance."¹⁸

For example, what Caroline Alphin has referred to as the "uneventful everydayness of slow deaths"¹⁹ is more prevalent and pernicious for, but also more socially and culturally relevant to, many bodies and populations than the spectacular deaths (even when these amount to large numbers) resulting from the exercise of hyper-power. Yet, these necro-political operations and the deaths that result from them are by and large occluded or overlooked in narratives in and about US national or global security or foreign policy (or even in international relations, more generally) that, typically, do not derive any political utility out of any accounting of

13 See, in particular, Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life," in M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 133–159; and Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the College de France, 1975–1976* (New York: Picador, 2003).

14 Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2003), pp. 11–40.

15 Ibid., p. 39.

16 Ibid., p. 40.

17 For a critique of Mbembe's notion of necro-power related to this point, see Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, "Introduction: Necrogeopolitics and Death-Making," in eds. Caroline Alphin and François Debrix (eds), *Necrogeopolitics: On Death and Death-Making in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 4–5.

18 Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, "Introduction: Necrogeopolitics and Death-Making," in eds. Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, *Necrogeopolitics*, p. 3.

19 Caroline Alphin, "Not a State of Exception: Weak State Killing as a Mode of Neoliberal Governmentality," in eds. Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, *Necrogeopolitics*, p. 26. See also Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

these deaths.²⁰ This is so even when (or perhaps because) contemporary policies and politics of and about security are what causes the deaths, again often through sheer neglect of the consequences of policies/politics, through incompetence, ignorance, or indifference, but also at times through direct targeting of vulnerable populations. So, for example, in a recent volume dedicated to this topic, some of the studies examined the link between necro-power and regimes of economic and fiscal austerity,²¹ policies of urban aestheticization or beautification in cities of the Global South that wipe away (from the map, but also through “urban genocide”) lower class neighborhoods to better attract tourism or corporate investments,²² or global health and demographic statistics gathered by international organizations and how these collections of data take some health crises or diseases to be exceptional (and thus globally actionable) whereas other health conditions and related deaths are deemed unfortunate yet common, normal, and acceptable in certain places and among certain groups.²³

In “*Society Must Be Defended*”, Foucault came up with a term that would encapsulate much of the concern with rampant, deeply nested, but often ignored or invisibilized forms of decay, disappearance, dispossession, ill-health, or violence leading to ordinary and typically unnoticed death making. Foucault referred to these conditions as “endemics.”²⁴ Interestingly, during the 18th and 19th centuries in western Europe, biopolitical modes of governance emerged with the objective of identifying these endemics, of highlighting them, and of tackling them, often for the sake of the general health of the population. These endemics, with all their various illnesses resulting from social neglect, poor hygiene, lack of proper nutrition, or the so-called bad habits of certain classes, were to become the object of power and government and the subject of modern forms of scientific knowledge. The inevitable deaths tied to these endemics were to be given priority even though this kind of death making “was now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it,” as Foucault put it.²⁵

Yet, it appears that this turn to endemics and to its particular focus on certain types of death-making were never about ensuring that these conditions and forms of decay or disappearance would be eliminated. Rather, biopower’s gaze on endemics and endemic death was about realizing two key objectives. First, it was about establishing the power of new forms of governance, knowledge, assessment, and management of the social domain, and relatedly about encouraging the birth of new institutions, new administrative networks and procedures, new domains of study, newly enforced uses of and for science, and new areas of expertise. Second, as previously noted, it was about figuring out how the new emphases, the new procedures, the new methods, and the new modes of knowledge would guarantee that some—but not all—populations would live, and perhaps thrive, while others had to be ignored, abandoned, and sacrificed (thus, new forms of valuation of life, of lifestyles, and of life-worlds emerged as well). In other words, the link between endemics and death was severed in some cases, in some places, and for some populations. But it was maintained, reinforced, and allowed to spread even further across society and to plunge deeper into the social fabric for many other bodies, other lives, and other living conditions. Ongoing and, in some situations, exponential death making as a result of endemics was not what the biopolitical gaze was supposed to be oriented toward, as doing so would run counter to the objectives of biopolitical governance and management. And crucially, it would be detrimental to the kind of political subjectivities and subjects that these biopolitical regimes were seeking to produce or promote.

In some ways, the forms and modes of necro-power that take place through the governance (or lack thereof) and management (or mis-management) of endemics that we see today, the world over, are, in part, the product of the regimes of biopolitical governance of endemics found

20 On this topic, see Jessica Auchter, “Paying Attention to Dead Bodies: The Future of Security Studies?” *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2016), pp. 36–50.

21 Alexander D. Barder, “Political Incompetence and Death-Making: An Outline of Unsuitable Governance,” in eds. Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, *Necrogeopolitics*, pp. 34–50.

22 Francine Rossone de Paula, “The Violent Management of Peace and Beauty in Rio de Janeiro,” in eds. Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, *Necrogeopolitics*, pp. 68–84.

23 Jessica Auchter, “‘Death in this Country is Normal’: Quiet Deaths in the Global South,” in eds. Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, *Necrogeopolitics*, pp. 68–84.

24 Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”, p. 243.

25 Ibid., p. 244.

in late 18th century and early 19th century western Europe that Foucault analyzed. Endemics, and, critically, how they are managed, constitute forms of necro-power that are not the product of super-power or hyper-power. Endemics are not about a power to put to death at any time, as the sovereign desires or sees fit to do. Instead, endemics are the result of a power that has been decentralized or dispersed throughout the social body, and that dispenses authority, governance, knowledge, management, and administration through an array of agencies and institutions. Necro-power is a power over life and death (a biopower) that, in a sense, is soft and slow, and the death making it perpetuates is often also soft and slow. Necro-power is a power that is still engaged with life and death, to be sure, and that gives rise to multiple experts and multiple domains of expertise. But it equally operates by means of neglect, incompetence, inadequacy, and ineptitude in certain contexts (particularly in matters or with bodies deemed to be outside normal social domains or categories of knowledge production). Thus, it is a form of power/governance that encourages the rise and prowess (actual or imagined) of what one might call “micro-sovereigns” or “micro-powers”²⁶ that often vie amongst themselves to claim authority, expertise, procedural/bureaucratic superiority, or normative (legal) prevalence. Here, we can already start to see how such a regime of disseminated management, governance, and (bio)power can encourage hyperbole, exaggeration, inflation, and overstatement (of skills, of capacities to produce, of effectiveness and efficiency, of potential). In a way, one might say that hype-power is always already part of the production and maintenance of endemics and endemic death making.

Similarly, of late, regimes of US-based hyped-up security and insecurity have been concerned with the production and management of a mode of necro-power characterized by a proliferation and deepening of endemic death and death making. From immigrant bodies at the US border, along the treacherous paths and journeys leading them to the border, or even after they have entered the United States’ territory to the tens of thousands of collateral civilian victims of the US War on Terror (and later, of the crusade against Islamic fundamentalism) during the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, as a result of the Bush-initiated and later Obama-supported US drone warfare campaigns, and through the ongoing fight against terrorism (ISIS, Al Qaeda, etc.) in the Middle East and Africa, endemic necro-power and US hype in security and foreign policy matters seem to have gone hand in hand. Either purposefully (by directly targeting bodies and populations that must be surrendered to endemic death) or, perhaps more frequently, through ignorance, negligence, indifference, or incompetence, early-21st century US hype-power has been a way of relinquishing to death whose main effect has been to target some bodies and populations that nonetheless must be invisible, unnoticed, or made to disappear, often because their invisibility, neglect, or disappearance gives credence or is convenient to regimes of hype-power.

At the same time, in a time of hype, when invisibility is less and less a guarantee (since hype requires that power, even when exaggerated or overshot, be seen and publicized), hype-power’s production of endemic death is always risky. Indeed, as much as it is (and must be) spectacularly and brashly announced, depicted, recounted, and displayed, US hype-power’s strategies and their turn to endemic necro-power are constantly at risk or threatened. They are always potentially undermined at the same time as they are triumphantly exposed, since hype-power cannot always manage to keep the bodies and populations it hopes to make invisible and superfluous (and that it sacrifices to endemic death) simultaneously invisible and superfluous. In fact, as a result of its exaggeration, excess, or overshooting, US hype-power produces more and more conditions of endemic decay, dispossession, and death, more and more insecurities, sometimes amongst its own population, that increasingly cannot be ignored. In a way, this is the key paradox of today’s US hype-power regimes and strategies.

International relations scholarship is often insufficient, inadequate, or indeed incompetent (sometimes conveniently so) when it comes to articulating the paradox of contemporary American insecurity, or, in other words, when trying to make sense of why the more the United States hypes up its power, prowess, and strength, the more vulnerable, precarious, and exposed to necro-power and endemic deaths populations—including the US population—can be and often are. Outside of international relations, the work of some critical anthropologists, critical

26 On Foucault and micro-powers, see Bob Jessop, “From Micro-Powers to Governmentality: Foucault’s Work on Statehood, State Formation, Statecraft, and State Power, *Political Geography*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2007), pp. 34–40.

geographers, and critical humanities scholars in fields such as literary studies, cultural studies, race and gender studies, and American studies has been useful in teasing out the implications of the connections between American power and death making.²⁷ In particular, insights offered by cultural anthropologist and critical ethnographer Zoe Wool have been productive in helping to make sense of what I have called the paradox of US hype-power. In her 2015 book, *After War*,²⁸ Wool provides a detailed account of the “lives,” including the affective interactions, of US soldiers who have returned wounded or traumatized from the US wars in the Middle East and are being treated—and often left to linger until healing or recovery takes place, if it ever does, or until death arrives—at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. There, at Walter Reed (but also at several other Veterans Affairs hospitals and in private homes throughout the United States where wounded and traumatized soldier bodies have to find a way to live on), a limbo zone, a zone located somewhere between life and death, a space of endemic suffering, destitution, poverty, despair, or illness, comes into view, at least if one cares to look at it. As Wool notes, in this zone or space of necro-power (since life is no longer about fullness, and death is often a possible outcome, sometimes an always anticipated reality), “the fragmentary character of life here and now is a way of being that is saturated by devastation and ruin.” She adds: “Soldiers have moved on from the place of war, but they still live with it, often literally carrying pieces of it with them.”²⁹

Through her ethnographic accounts, interspersed with critical theoretical reflections on the meaning of life/living in necro-political contexts derived from the writings of Foucault and Mbembe, but also of feminist decolonial scholars like Elizabeth Povinelli,³⁰ Veena Das,³¹ and Jasbir Puar,³² Wool juxtaposes American hype-power—here, the United States’ War on Terror rhetorics from the past two decades, the inflated claims about US global geopolitical dominance, the mantra about America’s unmatched military feats and its soldier heroes returning home to great acclaim—to necro-power and to the reality of endemic insecurity and death vulnerability that has been the fate of many, whether they are soldiers or not, Americans or not, over the last 20 to 25 years of US hyped-up security politics. Wool deploys a term or concept that tries to capture this mundane conflation of US hype-power with US necro-power: the “extra/ordinary.”³³ The “extra/ordinary” describes the limbo zone where wounded and traumatized bodies reside.

But I believe that the “extra/ordinary” is also the name that one can give to the condition of endemic precarity and often death making today, when forgotten or invisibilized bodies and lives are always already on the threshold of destruction, when the heroes or champions of America’s hype-power become the incarnation of its necro-power, and when the hyped-up renditions of US power, force, and security produce superfluous and sacrificed bodies that are abandoned to a life that is no longer quite a life but is also not yet death (perhaps a slow death, in a way). Or, to quote Wool, the “extra/ordinary” can help us to “explore what it is like to be blown up as an American soldier and to then be pulled toward an ideal American ordinary of non-soldiering life, while stuck in a place that, for all its proliferating claims about the injured soldier as a hero... seems to protest so much that all possibilities of life are called frighteningly into question.”³⁴

27 For example, see Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2009); Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); M.G.E. Kelly, *Biopolitical Imperialism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015); Jennifer Terry, *Attachments to War: Biomedical Logics and Violence in Twenty-First Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Inderpal Grewal, *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Robert Rosenberger, *Callous Objects: Designs against the Homeless* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); and Cristina Beltran, *Cruelty as Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

28 Zoe Wool, *After War: The Weight of Life at Walter Reed* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

29 Ibid., p. 56.

30 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

31 Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

32 Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

33 Wool, *After War*, p. 5 and pp. 22–25.

34 Ibid., p. 7.

The “extra/ordinary,” I suggest, is what binds hype-power and necro-power together. Here, the “extra” in hype-power’s excess, exaggeration, extravagance, or over-extended public displays and claims of, and about, heroic exploits meets and reveals the “ordinary” of necro-power’s endemics and slow death. Bodies and populations—even those that have been designated to be some of the main agents of the USA’s hype-power—are primed to become vulnerable, superfluous, and killed (or, at least, ignored and forgotten, and thus condemned to social abandonment and disappearance). Over the past few years, in the wake of America’s wars on terror (although these wars have never really ended, of course), other sites and other conditions of “extra/ordinariness” have materialized.

For example, since February-March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has allowed us to uncover quite a few dimensions of US hype-power, and crucially of US hype-power’s connections to necro-power. As medical humanities scholar Erik Larsen has argued, Covid-19, in the United States and in many other places too, has been characterized by the combination of the pandemic logic (that is to say, the exceptional, the unexpected, the spectacularly viral, but also the hype of media and public discourses about it) with an endemic logic (the common, the ordinary, the banal, the pernicious, the long-lasting or ever present), at least in the domains of epidemiology and public health.³⁵ But this combination of the pandemic with the endemic is true to the social and political spheres as well. In the United States, during the first two years of the pandemic, the hype about the security threats presented by the coronavirus (often cast by pundits and politicians as a national and geopolitical security threat as much as a human or health security matter) often gave way to more heightened forms of hype-power, whether it was about fighting and defeating an enemy sent to the United States by China (the “China virus”) or, as Trump claimed over and over, about having controlled and pretty much vanquished the pandemic on US soil (Trump’s repeated claims that the United States had finally “turned the corner,” that the United States under his watch was testing more individuals for Covid-19 on a per capita basis than any other country in the world, that his efforts had led directly to the creation and launch of new vaccines that would save Americans, or that he had managed to rescue the US economy by “keeping it open” throughout the crisis). Moreover, soon after Biden took over the presidency, the hyped-up discourses about the pandemic continued, particularly around the effectiveness and superiority of the US-made vaccines, which would become the pathways to returning the United States and the world to a sense of normality (and, crucially, to business as usual).

The flip side, however, of the hyped-up and sometimes extravagant statements and beliefs about the virus, its security threats, or the vaccines has been the realization that many Americans—the poor, racial minorities, the elderly—have been exposed to endemic abandon, to poor health, and to death for decades, if not for generations, abandoned to conditions of vulnerability and insecurity that Covid-19 did not create, but certainly exacerbated and brought to public light. Referring to Foucault’s work on biopower and endemics, Larsen writes that “American ‘endemic’ biopolitics remain[s] consistent with its ‘pandemic’ variety: those already ‘allowed to die’ in American life perish rapidly and *en masse* because the state has long exposed them to conditions leading to poor health.”³⁶ Indeed, the low quality of the US healthcare system for many Americans, the lack of decent (or any) health insurance for many, the absence of readiness, planning, or preparation of many health districts and hospital systems throughout the United States (including a lack of vital medical equipment and protective gear for doctors and nurses), bureaucratic gridlock in federal agencies (starting with the CDC and the FDA), and the disastrous conditions of quite a few nursing homes and long term-care facilities are some of the forms that the pandemic’s necro-power have taken in the United States. Hype-power’s assurances, in both the health security and the geopolitical security domains, have been that the United States possesses the most advanced medical system in the world, with the best doctors, the most prestigious medical institutions and research facilities, and the most cutting-edge and successful biotech and pharmaceutical companies and products. But all these have been typically accessible to or have primarily benefitted the wealthier Americans, the

35 Erik Larsen, “The Endemic Pandemic: Ruminations on American Biopower under COVID-19,” *Synopsis*, May 15, 2020, available at <https://medicalhealthhumanities.com/2020/05/15/the-endemic-pandemic-ruminations-on-american-biopower-under-covid-19/>.

36 Ibid., no page given. See <https://medicalhealthhumanities.com/2020/05/15/the-endemic-pandemic-ruminations-on-american-biopower-under-covid-19/>.

biologically fit, and the already healthy. In a way, the triumph and proclaimed superiority of the American biomedical, perhaps even healthcare, model—and crucially the hype about it—has been based both on the good health, the good biological condition of the healthy and wealthy, but also on the poor health of and absence of proper healthcare for the less wealthy and the less able. The economic, educational, and infrastructural investment away from universal healthcare, away from certain groups, away from certain areas of the country (some inner-city neighborhoods, some rural zones), away from certain health conditions (even if pernicious or endemic) is, in large part, what has allowed the US medical and health science research and economic sectors to do well and, in some cases, to thrive so as to achieve what some have claimed is global medical prowess and prestige. This is what the hype has been about, but also what it has sought to occlude. And this is also not a very new story. Recent hyped-up rhetorics about defeating the virus or making America’s economy and national security “great again” are not the only culprits here. In fact, at some level, US hype-power, under Trump in particular, has been a symptom of a long established system of hype, exaggeration, and extravagance in public health matters that provides security (and healthy life and living conditions) to some, while it condemns other groups and individuals to continuous poor health and poor living conditions (including malnutrition and hunger, for example), to vulnerability to viruses, to lack of access to basic medical treatment and care, to social insecurities, and to endemic death making. Here again, we can see that, through the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, American hype-power is closely tied to American necro-power. If nothing else, beyond the absurdity of many US hyped-up renditions of the coronavirus, Covid-19 has revealed some of the holes in the US model of over-inflated foreign policy, national security politics, and (geo)politics more generally as it may now become a bit more difficult for the US government (as well as local governments) to ignore the fact that America’s seeming good health is actually dependent upon the endemic bad health and, sometimes, the exposure to death of quite a few individuals, and not just outside US borders, but within the United States too.

As the Covid-19 pandemic years have shown us, endemic death and necro-power are not antithetical to US hype-power. Rather, US hype-power and US necro-power are “extra/ordinary.” They go hand-in-hand. And hyping is also about occluding, ignoring, or denying the various commonplace regimes of death-making, the multiple death-worlds and their daily vulnerabilities, that have been caused by US power, at home and abroad, and that US power (whether we choose to call it super, hyper, or hype) relies on to produce and maintain the extravagance, the exaggeration, or the rhetorical excess. But perhaps, as hype-power’s pairing with endemic death-making becomes less and less easy to hide, as more and more bodies are made insecure and exposed to necro-politics, the specter of US political decline, blowback, or imperial decay will not remain a specter for long and will be seen for the real security and foreign policy tragedy that, in many ways, it already is.

Put differently, with hype-power, the United States is always operating in over-drive mode. And it may already be beyond slowing down, too late to avoid the crash or collapse. In a recently released volume on catastrophism, disaster, and collapse (the title of the book is *How Everything Can Collapse*),³⁷ agronomist Pablo Servigne and ecologist Raphael Stevens mobilize a simple metaphor to describe today’s global order, an order (or, better yet, a disorder) that is still largely fueled (but for how much longer?) by US power. I think their metaphor could apply to US hype. They write: “To resume the metaphor of the car, while the rate of acceleration has never been so high, the fuel levels indicate that we’re falling back on our reserves and the engine is drawing its last breath and has started smoking and coughing. Intoxicated by speed, we leave the marked trail and, in conditions of near-zero visibility, we plunge down a steep slope riddled with obstacles. Some passengers realize that the car is very fragile but apparently not the driver who continues to press the pedal to the metal.”³⁸ To somewhat clumsily complete the metaphor, I would add that perhaps the time has come for those who are increasingly placed in danger of crashing by those who are, or think they are, in the driver’s seat to scream and be heard. Or, if not screaming for help, they could attempt to denounce and reveal hype and hype-power for what it is, so that it may be possible to remove the driver, before it is too late, in order to get in the driver’s seat and turn off the engine.

37 Pablo Servigne and Raphael Stevens, *How Everything Can Collapse: A Manual for Our Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

38 Ibid., p. 89.

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