

“The bodies are on the beach”: Daniel Borzutzky’s Speculative Necropastoral

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Chilean American poet Daniel Borzutzky has observed that the body in his work is both “a unit of measurement, the most objective way to describe human atrocity and state-sponsored violence,” as well as an illustration of “the way that personality and personhood are erased when it comes to talking about deaths and disappearances” (McSweeney 2017, 103). Given Borzutzky’s understanding of the body as a multi-valent political vehicle, a powerful synecdoche, it is thus fitting that the first section of his long poem *Lake Michigan* (2018) begins with a description related to a real body who engages these meanings: “There are 7 of us in front of the mayor’s house asking questions about the boy they shot / 22 times” (3). The “boy” in question is Laquan McDonald, a 17-year-old African American adolescent who was shot and killed by Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke on October 20, 2014. Van Dyke and accompanying officers asserted that he had fired at McDonald in self-defense, even when dash-cam video footage of the incident clearly showed the teenager walking away from the police. The “mayor” in question is then-Chicago mayor Rahm Emmanuel, against whom protests were held when he postponed the release of the footage of the shooting until November 24, 2014, after his re-election to a second term as mayor.¹ Occurring just a year after Trayvon Martin’s murder ignited the Black Lives Matter movement, McDonald’s death was seen—particularly by many Chicagoans—as symptomatic of both nationwide issues of violence against

Black people and of Chicago’s specific histories of systemic racism, racialized violence, and police corruption.

Yet even as he anchors the scene in concrete, “real,” events, Borzutzky’s poem, structured in acts like a theater piece, has already begun to shift, introducing elements of the unreal and the speculative alongside the factual and concrete. By the section’s end, the protesters have been taken to “Lake Michigan to the prisons on the beach on the northern end of the city on the border with Evanston on the sand they imported from Indiana” (5, spacing in original). With this description, Borzutzky begins his conjuring of a nightmarish speculative scenario: a detention camp set up along Chicago’s lakeshore in which prisoners are repeatedly subjected to various acts of torture, terror, and dehumanization.

Like its companion texts, the National Book Award-winning *The Performance of Becoming Human* (2016) and the recently published *The Murmuring Grief of the Americas* (2024), *Lake Michigan* is concerned with excavating what Kristy Ulibarri has described as the ways in which “market violence walks hand in hand with national security, nationalisms, and border fortification” (4). An exploration of the physical and social effects of political violence is a central theme in Borzutzky’s work, and as Harris Feinsod has observed, his poetry makes no secret of its relationship to the long tradition of *poesía comprometida* in the Americas (6). Yet in its focus on the material, specifically the connections it

¹ Van Dyke was later found guilty of second-degree murder and aggravated battery but sentenced to just seven years in prison. <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/03/1077574977/jason-van-dyke-chicago-police-released-laquan-mcdonald>

establishes between physical human suffering and environmental degradation, Borzutzky's dystopian lyric is also what poet and critic Joelle McSweeney has called a Necropastoral. McSweeney understands the Necropastoral, which contains in its construction a reference to Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, as a making visible of the uncanny elements of the pastoral form born from our Anthropocene moment; it is, in her words, "a political-aesthetic zone in which the fact of mankind's depredations cannot be separated from an experience of 'nature' which is poisoned, mutated, aberrant, spectacular, full of ill effects and affects" (2014).² Yet McSweeney also recognizes the Necropastoral form as a medium for placing seemingly disparate elements into a new kind of relation, at once productive and decadent:

Never inert, the Necropastoral is defined by its activity, its networking, its paradoxical proliferation, its self-digestion, its eructations, its necroticness, its hunger, and its hole-making, which configures a burgeoning textual tissue defined by holes, a tissue thus as absent as it is present, and therefore not absent, not present – protoplasmic, spectral. It is in this sense that we find the political force of the Necropastoral, its ability to stage strange networks and "strange meetings." (McSweeney 2015, 3).

The connections that the Necropastoral enables, its "strange meetings," are brought to the fore in Borzutzky's use of the form in *Lake Michigan*. Indeed, he employs the speculative within the realm of the Necropastoral to comment on the effects of neoliberalism throughout the Americas, as the cognitively estranging nature of his text brings the reader into a visceral experience of neoliberal dehumanization that might otherwise be rejected or impossible. At the same time, the "strange meetings" staged by his Necropastoral's environmental-aesthetic zone allow the poem to forge transnational connections between the

history of Chicago, environmental degradation in the Midwest, and the Necropastoral work of Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, in whose writing on Chile's dictatorship Borzutzky finds parallels to Chicago's neoliberal present.

What Is and Is Not Speculation: Homan Square

Borzutzky's speculative imaginings impact precisely because they are both simultaneously unreal and rooted in documented events, a duality evident in the poem's first scene. Although the poem's veiled reference to Laquan McDonald's murder is clear, McDonald was shot 16 times, not 22, a significant detail that became a rallying cry—"16 shots and a cover up!"—for those protesting his murder. In the protests that erupted after McDonald's murder, including those staged at the mayor's house, the protesters never numbered fewer than several dozen.³ The mayor's response to the protesters, to "prop[ose] a plan for privatizing all of the bodies of all of the residents of Chicago" (5), is something too hyperbolically literal to be real, but the detention camp to which the arrested protestors are taken is and is not speculative. As it sets up the imagined detention center, Borzutzky's poem makes several references to Homan Square, the all-too-real domestic equivalent of a CIA "black site" run by the Chicago police out of a former Sears-Roebuck warehouse on the city's West Side. For years, prisoners detained at this "off-the-books" detention site (overwhelmingly Black and Latino men) were effectively disappeared—deprived of their civil rights, unlocatable by both lawyers and family members—for hours and sometimes days, and were subjected to various kinds of torture and abuse. Despite a long history of activism to end use of the site, Homan Square was only terminated in 2015, after journalist Spencer Ackerman published an exposé of the site in *The Guardian*. Borzutzky has stated that he "was very much thinking about Homan Square" as he composed his long poem (McSweeney,

² Mbembe defines necropolitics most succinctly as "subjugating life to the power of death" (91).

³ See Feinsod for a more detailed analysis of Mayor Rahm Emanuel's role, his reaction to the McDonald case, and its treatment in Borzutzky's poem.

“Borzutzky”).⁴ Although it never identifies Homan Square by name, *Lake Michigan* references it directly several times, most notably in “Scene 0,” in the line “They [i.e., the police] tell us cautionary tales about the secret prison on the West Side where they once killed a man by chaining him to a radiator that fell on his head” (5). For a reader aware of this Chicago history, the future possible space of *Lake Michigan’s* speculative horror is thus animated by past realities; it traces a kind of post-apocalyptic time loop between the real present and a possible future.⁵

Borzutzky’s text constructs the horrors of Lake Michigan the detention camp in two ways: through concrete, repeated descriptions of action and effect and through the spectral.

They beat me even though I did nothing
I don’t know what day it was
But they beat me on the beach
They beat me with iron paws
The mayor ordered the police superintendent
to beat me
The police superintendent ordered an officer
to beat me
The officer ordered his dogs to attack me
Then someone beat me with iron paws
Then someone kicked me with iron boots
Then someone shot me
Then someone buried me in the sand
Then someone scooped me out of the sand
and dumped me somewhere
And I was dead. (13)

In this long series from “Scene 1,” the violence is sudden, concrete, total. The poem’s short lines couple a frequent use of anaphora with layered acts of violence, intensifying the visceral impact. The poetic speaker, at times a singular “I,” at times a communal “we,” is clearly metonymic;

when they declare in the last line of “Scene 1,” “It was only the beginning of the war that would kill me again and again” (16), the reader knows the “me” contains multitudes. By naming this violence as “war,” the poem’s speaker creates a context for the layering of excess and repetition—“again and again”—to communicate the effects of violence.

As in the quote from Scene 1 above, Borzutzky’s poem relies on a poetics that is in many ways stripped of figurative language. One of the epigraphs to “Act II” of the poem is a line from Pablo Neruda’s poem “Explico algunas cosas” from *España en el corazón*, his collection about Spain’s Civil War (in Spanish): “y por las calles la sangre de los niños / corría simplemente, como sangre de niños” (and through the streets the children’s blood / ran simply, like children’s blood). Neruda’s line creates a tautology that renders the line’s simile unnecessary—children’s blood can be compared to nothing but children’s blood, a rhetorical device that “Lake Michigan, Scene 10,” the poem that immediately follows the epigraph, takes up: “The police shooting boys are like police shooting boys / And the nazis burning Jews are like nazis burning Jews / And the police protecting nazis are like police protecting nazis / And the prisoners who are tortured are like prisoners who are tortured” (48). These similes—that-are-not-similes (the thing can only be what it is) connect the “war” that is the Lake Michigan camp and the violence in Chicago—both real and speculative—to other wars, other conflicts, revealing a reverberating proliferation of violence.

Yet into this concrete language that rejects figurative flourishes, effects that could only be described as spectral and uncanny begin to appear: “The bodies are on the beach / And the bodies keep breaking / And the fight is over / But the bodies aren’t dead” (22). The description of victims of the detention camp’s violence as “bodies” transforms them into zombies, the

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/feb/24/chicago-police-detain-americans-black-site>

⁵ I borrow the idea of the post-apocalyptic time-loop, from James Berger’s work on post-apocalyptic fiction. As Berger puts it, “Apocalyptic writing takes us after the end, shows the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath. The writer and reader must be both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world and then paradoxically ‘remembering’ the world as it was, as it is” (6).

undead, spectral presences existing in what ethnographer Alfred Métraux described as “that misty zone which divides life from death” (Métraux 282). The conjuring of “that misty zone,” which is also Mbembe’s necropolitical zone, “in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*” (Mbembe 91), might be understood to be the beginning of *Lake Michigan’s* deployment of the Necropastoral. The physical bodies, the result of concrete violence at the detention camp (echoing back to the real violence of Homan Square and elsewhere), are here transformed into part of the Necropastoral landscape, spectral and grotesque, haunting Chicago and the reader.

The conjuring of the zombie bodies as part of the lakeshore’s Necropastoral landscape creates the space that allows the poem to establish a connection between the political world and the natural environment, which has itself become sickened and degraded. In “Scene 4,” the following section, what begins as a human role call—“A was here / B was here”—moves into a role call for parts of the natural world, many of them ill or dying: “The dying lake was here / The weeping willow was here / The dead sand was here / The lost coyotes were here...” (24), before moving back to the neoliberal human environment: “The tear gas was here / The immigrants exchanged for petroleum were here / The diplomats were here” (24). Although later scenes will focus on the anthropogenic contamination of the natural environment—“The chromium spilled from the US Steel plant in Portage, Indiana was here”—the counterpoint that is the “strange meeting” between human tragedy and environmental death is cemented in the following section, “Scene 5,” which creates an anthropomorphic figure of “the city” that simultaneously wreaks havoc on and mourns the “infected” beach: “The city screams to the dying beach Stop! Being! Dead! / The city empties its glocks into the beach and weeps / The city lights candles sings ceremonial songs to commemorate its own death / The story begins and ends with the infected beach collapsing” (29, spacing in original). In these lines, both city and beach are depicted as dying, human environment and natural world

locked into an abusive, codependent relationship in which the city mourns the violence and degradation it has itself inflicted.

In its exploration of the relationships between political, economic, and environmental violence, one of the connections—or “strange meetings”—Borzutzky’s work repeatedly highlights is that between the neoliberal violence of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile (1973 – 1990), ideologically anchored by the economic theories of the “Chicago Boys,” and the violence and the neoliberal policies that are visible in Chicago, in ways that echo the Chilean dictatorship, albeit not on the same scale. In housing the detention camp “on the beach” of Lake Michigan, Borzutzky references Chilean history—in particular the Chilean internment camp Pisagua, used before and during Pinochet—and the work of Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, who Borzutzky has himself translated and who serves as a constant interlocutor for this poetic project. Zurita, who came of age as a writer in the first decades of the Pinochet dictatorship, employs the natural landscape in his writing in a way that Candace Amich has also characterized as “necropolitical” (121), signaling allegorically to those disappeared and killed under the Pinochet regime. “Las utopías” (“The Utopias”), the first section of Zurita’s collection *Anteparadise* (1982) includes a series of poems entitled “Las playas de Chile” (“The Beaches of Chile”), that, while they do not name particular events, use the natural landscape of the beach to put forward a sense of collective mourning—and sometimes complicity—in an unnamed event. Scott Weintraub has observed that “floating, ghostly specters” haunt Zurita’s beaches, less active but no less present than the zombie bodies on the beach in *Lake Michigan*. Yet Zurita’s poem cycle ends with the suggestion of a future redemption, even if the realization of that future Utopia is still/always deferred (Weintraub, 233).

Initiated through the “future possible” of the speculative form, Borzutzky’s use of the beach as the site of both violence and mourning ends on a much more ambivalent note:

And the joke turns into a mystery novel about
 how god keeps his hands from
 shaking when he is about to destroy
 the universe

I need my burdens sing the bodies
 on the beach

I fight for my burdens scream the bodies
 on the beach

I know the blankness of my burdens is a battle
 for love and country

I know the blankness of my burdens is a coda
 to the death of the city

I don't know why I can't see the moon anymore

I can't see the stars or the sky anymore

I don't even bother to look up (76)

In these last lines, the “I” spoken by the undead bodies on the beach and the “I” of the poetic speaker fuse, as if the speaker himself occupied a space of “undeadness.” Where the last poem of Zurita’s “Utopias” is entitled “Y volvimos a ver las estrellas” (“And We Saw the Stars Again”), *Lake Michigan’s* speaker admits that he not only cannot see the stars but that he has given up trying—he “doesn’t even bother to look up” (Borzutzky 2018, 76).

Although McSweeney asserts that the Necropastoral “is not an ‘alternative’ vision of reality” (2014, 2), it is a mode that exposes the hyperbolic and spectral dimensions of life under neoliberalism. In *Lake Michigan*, the speculative dimension is precisely what allows Borzutzky to make visible “the farcical and outrageous horrors of Anthropocenic ‘life’” in both its human and nonhuman dimensions. If the reader ends the poem weighed down by this vision, the poem seems to insist, may that be motivation to confront the all-too-real horrors currently facing us.

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