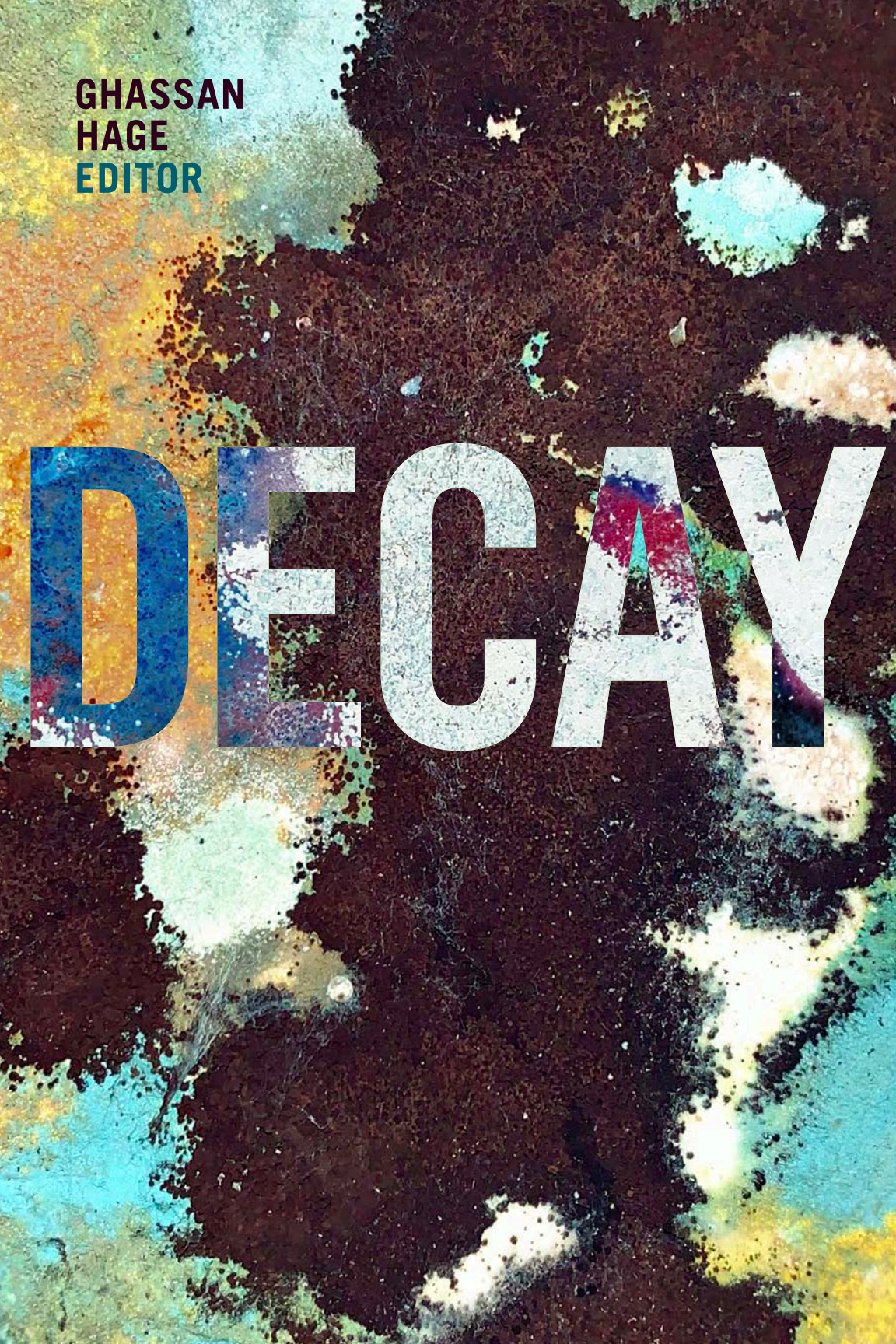
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DECAY

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CONTENTS

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This volume is the product of a writing project initiated within the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Melbourne. Some of the participants, namely, Michael Herzfeld and Akhil Gupta, are affiliated to other international institutions but have been yearly visiting professors to Melbourne. Bart Klem, Elise Klein, and Cameo Dalley, who were in the department when the project began, are now affiliated elsewhere. Still, the idea of a book written by members of the same department might appear parochial for a superficial gaze. We are all very grateful to Duke University Press for never gazing at the project superficially. We want to thank Ken Wissoker, specifically, for his enthusiasm and support, and the anonymous readers for their helpful and productive comments.

One key idea common to many chapters of the book is that the pace of decay is dependent on maintenance labor and external mechanisms that slow the inevitable processes of disintegration and decomposition. In a way, a departmental writing project is precisely one of those mechanisms in the era of neoliberal education where the intellectual culture of the university is rapidly decaying. It is no secret that, for many academics today, often one manages to live a rewarding life of intellectual pursuit despite rather than because of the university as an institution. As the project was underway, many of my colleagues were reflecting on the importance of the space created for and by the writing of this book. The notes of thanks accompanying many of the chapters clearly show the amount of collegial interaction that this space allowed. Carving out such spaces is a matter not only of skill but also of capacity. It can also be a matter of having support from within the university's administra-

tion. This is all the more so in a sociopolitical environment where successive neoliberal governments of all shapes see themselves in a state of enmity with the humanities and the social sciences. Here we want to thank Karen Farquharson, head of the School of Social and Political Sciences, for her unwavering moral support. Karen was also willing to support the writing project by financing a final retreat that could bring the writers together to finish the final draft. COVID-19 disallowed this from happening.

We have finished writing this book in what has been, by any standard, one of the most extraordinary years of our lives. In Australia, it began with the most lethal and extensive series of fires in Australia's history, which has forced many to come face-to-face with the effects of global warming and environmental degradation. This was followed by the global pandemic, which has altered and continues to alter our lives in fundamental ways. COVID-19 has forced us to further confront the ease with which whatever little control we have over the natural world can crumble. And as we write these acknowledgments, the Black Lives Matter movement has both shaken the United States and turned into a global movement that has awoken a broad and critcal consciousness to many traces of social decomposition and accelerated decay marking our lives. And as always with decay, amid the rot, new forms of life announce themselves at a macro and micro level. Three of us have given birth to, or seen the birth of, a child during the making of the book. The open-ended dialectic between the decomposition of old life-forms and the composition of new ones continues.

INTRODUCTION

STATES OF DECAY

Ghassan Hage

A statement such as "We live in an era of unprecedented social and moral decay" makes immediate sense today. But even though it "rings true," it is hard to substantiate empirically. This is hardly surprising. Decay, in the above sense, is not easily definable, let alone measurable. And it is not at all clear what "social" and "moral" reality one is referring to as "decaying." Still, if you make the above statement, you are less likely to be ridiculed than if you make a statement such as "We live in an era of unprecedented social and moral regeneration."

The mood of our time is depressive, and we are more likely to hear of social, moral, and urban, not to mention ecological, degradation, decline, and atrophy than the contrary. Especially when it comes to ecological decline, there is a sense that the very things that were the basis of modern expansion and development are now the drivers of contraction and dissolution: self-devouring growth, as Julie Livingston (2019) has put it. Interestingly, except for some marginal right-wing groups, not many speak of "national decay," as fascists did in the past. If you google "national decay," you quickly get to national statistics on tooth decay. Otherwise, serious and frivolous speculations concerning social and natural decay seem to be thriving. The imaginary of decay and the semantic field around it, conjuring experiences of ruination, decomposition, rot, disrepair, deterioration, decline, and disintegration, de-

lineate what one can posit as a current "structure of feeling," in Raymond Williams's sense of the word. As Williams intimated in his classic piece on the subject, a "structure of feeling" works like an experientially grounded "hypothesis" (this is Williams's term) pointing to what things "are probably like" or are "experienced to be like" by a collective of people in their everyday lives (R. Williams 1977, 131–35). Violeta Schubert's description of the various ways the discourse of decay operates in Macedonia in chapter 1 offers an excellent illustration of this. As Claude Lévi-Strauss argued, this order of experience, and the meaningful world it gives rise to, is what anthropologists are interested in. Importantly, Lévi-Strauss (2013) did not oppose the order of "what it feels like to people" to a more "objective" order of "what things are actually like." He argued that both everyday experience and the more scientific objectivist gaze capture—or, better still, bring forth—actual dimensions of reality. Similarly, this book's chapters oscillate between these two orders of the real—between decay as observed by the analyst from the outside, and the sentiment of things decaying generated by people living through that process.

Decay: Normal and Pathological

But what is really meant when we say we are in a period of social, moral, or ecological decay? Or even, in a less general or abstract sense, when we note that our body or a building is decaying? This requires some reflection, given that most peoples of the world take it for granted that decay is the normal order of things. This is so even if some, like Charlotte Brontë's Shirley, might deplore this state of affairs: "Your god, sir, is the World. . . . All that surrounds him hastens to decay: all declines and degenerates under his sceptre. *Your* god is a masked Death" (Brontë 1993, 414). As Masashi Kishimoto's famous manga character Orochimaru tells us: "All things that have form eventually decay." The normality of this process of decay is accepted by most and incorporated into various cosmological conceptions of the world. When the Amazonian tribes first encountered the Spanish colonists, they were not sure whether they were spirits or bodies. They dumped the first Spanish people they caught in water to see whether they putrefied.[1] As far as they were concerned, decay was proof of bodily existence. For Christians around the world, Ash Wednesday (or Monday among Eastern Christians) marks a day of ensuring that believers remember that they exist in decaying bodies, that they are "of dust and to dust they will return." That we need to be reminded of this indicates that even our body's decay is not something that continuously preoccupies us.

Given that everything is decaying all the time, and with the exception of ethico-religious or philosophical reasons such as the above, making a point of spelling out that "things are decaying" seems banal. Yet, in what can ostensibly appear as a paradoxical fact, we do often tend to spell out that "things are decaying." Thus, the question arises: What kind of experience of decay makes "decay" come into our consciousness? Even a quick reflection immediately shows that this it is not the "routinized" and "normalized" processes that attract our attention when we declare things to be decaying.

Nietzsche, for one, differentiated between "normal" and "pathological" decay. For him, the latter was a specifically modern disease. It had to do with the generalized *ressentiment* and "slave morality" diffused by modern Christianity. The latter, he argued, created "mortals" who are now "physiologically deformed and deranged" and whose deformity is "an expression of the physiological contradiction—of being modern." As he put it: "When seriousness is deflected from the self-preservation and the enhancement of the strength of the body—that is, of life—when anemia is construed as an ideal, and contempt for the body as 'salvation of the soul'—what else is this if not a recipe for *décadence*?" (Nietzsche 1967, 292). One can note the etymological connections between decay and decadence here. As Heike Schotten explains, Nietzsche's "prognosis for modernity was terminal because the very definition of *décadence* entails death: it is a decay that has exceeded its healthy boundaries and convulsed the entire organism" (Schotten 2009, 52).

Schotten's interpretation of Nietzsche's passage touches on something important: as with the Huli people's experience of an earthquake detailed by Minnegal, Main, and Dwyer in chapter 4, decay has "healthy boundaries" that when exceeded "convulse the whole organism." It seems to me that this puts us, more generally, on the right track toward what brings decay into people's consciousness. Being a process, decay has a temporality, a pace or a tempo, and a spatiality, a mode of occupying and evolving in space. "Pathological" decay, the decay that marks us experientially such that we end up noticing it, is a decay that is happening at what we consider an unusual rhythm, often too quickly, but sometimes too slowly, and a decay that is progressing outside the confines of where we expect it to exist. We are therefore speaking of a decay that is either, as Mary Douglas famously put it, "out of place," or a decay that is "out of tempo," or both, as in the case of plastic that is decaying way too slowly in places where things ought to be decaying quickly, as examined by Debra McDougall in chapter 2. In both cases, decomposition and disintegration are no longer happening imperceptibly, where and how they should. "I can see things crumbling before my very eyes," say exasperated

people witnessing their institutions decaying (we academic anthropologists inhabiting the university system need not go on a long ethnographic trip and live in an exotic culture to recognize the experience behind such tropes). Martin Demant Frederiksen has written a rich ethnographic piece detailing the oppositional politics triggered by public renovations that have decayed too soon in Tbilisi. As he put it: "The central issue was that any of the newly built structures began to decay shortly after having been built, turning immediately into ruins despite being envisaged as political visions of the future" (Frederiksen 2016, 50). Frederiksen's piece conjures the specter of so many housing, agricultural, or industrial development projects in the world that begin as a vision of a better future but then decay too soon. It also conjures images of the new consumer products that capitalism increasingly produces and that are purposefully designed to disintegrate too soon, so as to ensure that economic activity continues in the industries producing them—though here one needs to differentiate between and examine the complex relation among malfunction, mechanical disintegration, and decay, as they are not the same.

But of all the pathologies of decay, none has activated the macabre side of the modern imagination the way the idea of an "advanced but arrested decay" has. In its "normal" mode of existence, bodily decay indicates a direct relation to dying. It does so in that, the more "advanced" the living body's state of decay, the more it is a sign of its approaching death. However, this relationship is made more ambiguous by two facts. The first is the fact that decay continues after death: while an increasing decay brings us closer and closer to death, death itself does not bring an end to bodily decay. Second, and related to the above, is that even in old age our conception of ourselves is more that of an ageless soul than of an aging body—an imaginary played out in the opposition between embalming and crematory practices. It is the fissures created by these ambiguities that open the imagination to the figure of the not-yet-dead, or, more ominously, the zombie, the figure of the should-be-dead-but-isn't. Here we have the pathology of an extreme state of decay that stops being a process—a transitional state that actually becomes a permanent condition. The entire resources of the anthropologies of liminality and in-betweenness can be productively brought to bear to deal with such a figure and the questions it raises. As zombie film fans often ask: "Zombies must have a half-life. They exibit [*sic*] signs of decay as soon as they transform into the undead. Their rotting flesh would attract decomposers, like flys [*sic*] and beetles. Those insects should be able to quickly break down rotting zombies and reduce them to bone through the action of their maggots, but

they don't. Why do the Walking Dead zombies stop decomposing?" (Major Stackings 2012). Although we might seem far from any sociological or anthropological concerns, we are not. A not-so-different question has haunted radical political theorists for whom capitalism is the ultimate manifestation of the should-be-dead-but-isn't zombie: on the one hand, it seems to be increasingly rotting and decomposing, ready to die in any moment, as it moves from one crisis to another; on the other, it seems to be able to last in such a decomposed state forever.

In Marxist thought, the idea that material conditions must be suitable for a revolution was crucial. Capitalism was bound to increasingly crumble and decay under the weight of its own contradictions. This is an imaginary that radical political theory has largely inherited and originally accepted. However, as capitalism continued to evolve without such a revolution taking place, the more pessimistic idea started to materialize that capitalist decay might be itself an alternative future rather than a road to revolution and a better future. Thus, in some of the voluntarist trends of Marxism that emerged in the 1960s around figures such as Herbert Marcuse (2007), which also fed into the left-wing terrorism of the Baader-Meinhof Group and the Brigate Rosse, capitalist decay was indeed the sign of a capitalism that was "overripe" for a revolution that had failed to come. No one managed to pick the ripe fruit at the right time, so now it's become overripe and is starting to rot, as Marcuse often argued. It is at this point that we see the emergence of a zombie capitalism that should be dead but that continues to live in a state of arrested decomposition. While this conception of capitalism lacks the optimistic teleology of the classical Marxist theorization, it is nonetheless not totally pessimistic. For the revolutionary "voluntarism" that has marked this period, one can still opt for a Hegelian optimism in the face of such decay and hope for something unexpectedly new arising from the decaying present. This something new, however, will not come simply because the structural conditions for its emergence exist. It will come because certain people are willing to push the decaying zombie down the cliff. It is not "history" but the action of these revolutionaries that ignites the Hegelian fantasy whereby "the gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world" (Hegel 1977, 6–7).

In the above, Hegel's optimism is expressed in a sense of differential scale; the decay happening at one level is not showing at another level. This multiscalar perspective is crucial for gaining a better understanding of all forms of decay, for not thinking them uniformly as a downhill process of disinte-

gration. We can watch a rotting leaf on the ground and speak of decay. But from the macro perspective of the rainforest where the rotting leaf is located, it is part of the process of the forest's regeneration. Likewise, from the micro perspective of the rot itself, decomposition is an effervescence of a multiplicity of forms of life. In that regard, Charles Baudelaire's (1869) famous "Une charogne" (A Carcass) is an avant-garde text. In it Baudelaire sees decay not merely as a process of decomposition but one where nature gives back "a hundredfold all she together join'd":

> The flies the putrid belly buzz'd about,
> Whence black battalions throng
> Of maggots, like thick liquid flowing out
> The living rags along.
>
> And as a wave they mounted and went down,
> Or darted sparkling wide;
> As if the body, by a wild breath blown,
> Lived as it multiplied. (Baudelaire 1869, 12)

Because scale joins space and tempo as an analytical dimension, decay is a fertile ground for thinking through the agency of microorganisms of the kind that multispeciesist and chemo-ethnographies are increasingly highlighting today (Shapiro and Kirksey 2017). But the fact that what is decaying and disintegrating is teeming with new life is something that can also be captured at the level of human experience. This is highlighted in Tamara Kohn's chapter.

Toward an Analytics of Decay

The above makes it clear that the knowledge that "everything decays" is hardly enough from a socioanalytical perspective. Things decay in very different ways, and knowing the principle behind particular kinds of decay is important. Some things decay quicker and more extensively than others, some processes of decay are welcome and some are resisted, and we need to know the many internal and external factors that shape such differences. Things can decay because they are too exposed, and they can decay because they are too closed. There are processes of endo-decay, where things decompose from the inside, and processes of exo-decay, where disintegration is caused by external environmental factors. This differentiation between endo-decay and exo-decay is hardly ever neat, and the two processes can often be

entangled in the making and unmaking of social processes. In a way, all the chapters of this book are concerned with these differential processes and the ways they are experienced, though the chapters by Michael Herzfeld and Bart Klem are most explicitly so.

Given the pervasiveness of the differential experiences of organic, physiological, physical, organizational, moral, and social decay in everyday life, it has attracted relatively little explicit social scientific attention. One strand of thought, influenced particularly by Norbert Wiener's theorization of cybernetics (1948, 1950), has shown an interest in entropy. In anthropology, the work of Gregory Bateson (1972) clearly stands out, but so does the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. In sociology, one also finds reflections on entropy influenced by Wiener, but also partly inspired by Bateson's and Lévi-Strauss's work. In France, Edgar Morin's work on "complexity" (2005), which has included reflections on entropy, has been developing from the 1970s and well into this century. In the United States, Kenneth D. Bailey has specifically developed a "social entropy theory" (1990) that aims, according to one reviewer, to "measure the natural decay of the structure" (François 2001, 537). Because of the influence of cybernetics and systems theory in all these works, entropy, as the very idea of "decay of the structure" indicates, speaks more of organizational entropy. Even biological entropy is thought of in this "systemic" way in that, from this perspective, biological entities are conceived as organizational systems. To be sure, decay does involve such formal entropic dissolution, though this is only one dimension of the process, and not necessarily the richest ethnographically. Georg Simmel, in his essay on ruins, has offered us a descriptively richer and more substantial (as in "associated with substances") sense of decay. He sees decay as a taking over by natural forces of architecturally inspired spaces (buildings), where a kind of balance between human design and nature prevail.

> Decay appears as nature's revenge for the spirit's having violated it by making a form in its own image. The whole history of mankind is a gradual rise of the spirit to mastery over the nature which it finds outside, but in a certain sense also within, itself. If in the other arts the spirit bends the forms and events of this nature to its command, in architecture it shapes nature's masses and inherent forces until, as if of their own accord, they yield and the artistic conception is made visible. But the necessities of matter submit to the freedom of the spirit, and its vitality is expressed without residue in nature's merely weighing and carrying forces, only so long as the building remains perfect. The mo-

> ment its decay destroys the unity of the form, nature and spirit separate again and reveal their world-pervading original enmity—as if the artistic formation had only been an act of violence committed by the spirit to which the stone unwillingly submitted; as if it now gradually shook off this yoke and returned once more into the independent lawfulness of its own forces. (Simmel 1965, 260–61)

More recently, there has been an interest in modernity-driven processes of ruination, influenced or inspired by Simmel's work (see Hell and Schönle 2010). Akhil Gupta's chapter explores some ramifications of thinking this ruination in terms of decay. I also critically engage, in chapter 9, with an important anthropological work that deals with the relation between colonialism and ruination: Ann Laura Stoler's article on imperial debris (2008).

Despite the above, it can still be said that analytical, and particularly ethnographically oriented, works showing an interest in the differential modes of decay traversing the entities that make up the social world are rare. And while we started this section by saying that "the knowledge that 'everything decays' is hardly enough from a socioanalytical perspective," the fact is that most social science and social theorizing seem oblivious to that basic truth and its analytical consequences. Social scientists seem to need more than anyone else the Christian injunction to remember that we are "of dust and to dust (we) will return." In fact, the absence of a preoccupation with questions of decay is so systematic that one begins to suspect that mechanisms of repression, avoidance, and displacement might be at work there. Take, for instance, the various theories of reproduction and social change. While the absence of a focus on decay in theories of reproduction might perhaps speak for itself, one would think that the same cannot be the cases with theories of social change. Yet theories of social change touch on every possible form of social change other than decay.

One begins to suspect that the first part of Antonio Gramsci's famous formula, the "optimism of the will," continuously overshadows the second part, the "pessimism of the intellect," in this domain, and thus makes analysts blind to the obvious. Even the sociology and anthropology of aging,[2] which one would think is most confronted with the decaying human body, evades this confrontation. It is more centered on the overcoming of the limitations of aging (e.g., persistence of agency, relations of care) than on describing aging itself.[3] In the previous section, we noted how decay draws attention to the not-yet-dead: how decomposition highlights the living by continuously pointing to its future disintegration. However, one cannot fail to note here

how the figure of the not-yet in social theory is the figure most associated with hope in the work of Ernst Bloch. For Bloch, the not-yet is the future that is already present, that is, the potentialities that the present is already pregnant with. As a figure of hope, the not-yet for Bloch meant the "not-yet-born." To be sure, no one is arguing that it is wrong to see such traces of a hopeful future in the present. It nonetheless takes a particular form of blindness to see the present as pregnant with the "not-yet-born" without also noting that it is equally pregnant with the "not-yet-dead," a more certain not-yet than any of the intimations of hope that the body can carry.

The blindness to this one-way-traffic-to-oblivion type of social change that decay represents is all the more manifest when we consider how the interest in the way things perpetuate themselves has been elevated to the highest meta-philosophico-theoretical order today. This is particularly so thanks to the way social theory has taken up Spinoza's concept of *conatus*, famously announcing that "each thing, as far as it lies in itself, strives to persevere in its being" (Spinoza 1988, part 3, prop. 6). From Louis Althusser and then Gilles Deleuze's ways of taking the concept on board, to the current debates between Judith Butler, Jane Bennett, and Caroline Williams on subjectivity and humanism that it is generating (see C. Williams 2016), *conatus* is seen solely in terms of the power to exist that it represents. Yet, for all the talk about perseverance, the concept cannot be understood without an implicit understanding that "each thing is bound to decay." Indeed, even more so, it cannot be understood without understanding that, tragically, the tendency for things to age, decay, and disintegrate will always, in the long run, win over their tendency to persevere in their own being. If not for an inexorable force toward disintegration, persevering in one's being would not be a "striving." Both the ideas of "persevering" and "striving" imply a force "trying to" achieve its aim in the face of another force operating in the opposite direction. In this sense, *conatus* is in fact an indication of how slowly a thing, "as far as it lies in itself," decays. It is the core variable affecting what we called above endo-decay. It tells us the extent to which a thing's inner constitution influences its mode of decay.

The Book's Chapters

It is against this backdrop that the uniqueness and inventiveness generated from centering on the problematic of decay—qualities that mark all the works that make up this book—come to the fore. Given the novelty of the space being investigated, the contributors were encouraged to think of their

pieces as mixing formal ethnographically grounded style of academic work with a more free-flowing essay form that raises issues and invites the readers on new thinking paths. The chapters oscillate between an analytic and a lay experience of decay, though they differ in how they oscillate and where they tend to dwell. In much the same way, they explore a terrain located between decay as a condition or a property of the social and decay as a history or a materialization of this condition. Some are more interested in decay's significance as a material process of infrastructural decline, and others are more interested in it as a phenomenology and as a condition of social and personal demoralization, but most are interested in both. Because of the entanglement of this multiplicity of issues within them, the chapters can be arranged in many ways. I have aimed to maximize the feel of an overall narrative flow. As indicated earlier, I've chosen to begin with Violeta Schubert's chapter because it offers a good sense of the way a discourse of decay constitutes a "structure of feeling." The chapter examines the way varieties of modes of talking and thinking with and against decay circulate within Macedonian national space. For those Makedonci and Balkanci with whom Schubert is working, the sense that everything is corrupt and malfunctioning creates an experience of perpetual coming-apartness. This, in turn, is invested into the sociopolitical realm, and decay becomes a characteristic of all national politics at all times. Her chapter works in a general way in relation to all those in the book. But in its Macedonian specificity, it works particularly well in conjunction with Fabio Mattioli's more particular investigation of a specific type of decay that he shows to be flourishing in Macedonia.

After Schubert's chapter, I have tried to arrange the following pieces as a movement from chapters treating the way certain features of decay in society are attended to, or are experienced, in broad political and cultural terms, to chapters that center on individual experiences of social decay. Mediating between the two sets are chapters with a stronger sense of a politics of decay. I'll briefly detail what each of the remaining chapters entails and the issues they give rise to.

The ungovernability of waste, whether in the form of toxic chemicals in rivers and soil or greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, is one defining dimension of the global ecological crisis (see Hage 2017). This ungovernability can be caused by the increased volume of waste and the inability of the earth's environment to absorb it, transform it, and dissipate it, and it can be caused by the undissolvable nature of the waste itself. In chapter 2, Debra McDougall traces the penetration of plastic packaging to a rural island of the southwestern Pacific. If Spinoza's *conatus* refers to the ability of things to perpetuate

their own being in the face of decay, it can be said that plastic, because of its inner constitution, has a particularly healthy *conatus*. What is of interest to McDougall, however, is not simply that plastic does not decay easily. Plastic packaging is designed to perform a function and then be disposed of. It is here that it emerges as a practical and a classificatory problem. For most people, what is valorized and what is devalorized coincides with what to keep or exchange as a gift, and what to dispose of, which also coincides with what should endure and what should decay quickly. Plastic packaging however is something devalorized, to be disposed of, but nonetheless does not decay. This is at a time when people under the assault of globalization see their cultural values, something they like to imagine as durable and even as eternal, begin to decay (see also the chapter by Bart Klem).

A short piece in the *New Yorker* revisits the 2007 book *The World without Us* and its author, Alan Weisman. One of the book's chapters is said to describe "how quickly nature would reclaim New York City if humans were removed. The decay would likely begin from below. Every day, the MTA pumps millions of gallons of water out of the subway system; if the pumps stopped, within half an hour tunnels would begin to flood. Soil under pavement would leach away. Streets would buckle." According to the author, "The unstated but absolutely resonant message throughout that book is how important maintenance personnel are to make sure that these things don't fall victim to entropy" (Khatchadourian 2020, 13–14). It is this work of maintenance that is of concern to Akhil Gupta in chapter 3.

If decay is the natural order and direction of things, what has always stopped it, or at least slowed it down from the outside, are structures, institutions, assemblages, and forms of labor whose function is maintenance. As such, just as there are external and internal factors that induce, facilitate, and accelerate decay (what we termed endo- and exo-decay), there are internal and external factors that slow it down. And if, as we have already seen, the *conatus* is the main factor that affects endo-decay, it is the work of maintenance that is the main exo-factor that slows it down from the outside. Gupta thinks through the issue of maintenance in relation to infrastructure. He examines two interlinked registers for thinking the relation between infrastructure and decay. One concerns how infrastructures decay over time because their materials rust and wear out; the other points to the ruination caused by the infrastructures of the Industrial Revolution, which in turn were literally fueled by decaying organic matter (fossil fuel). Maintenance keeps infrastructures functioning, staving off decay, but maintenance is seen as unglamorous and uninteresting compared to the heroic masculinized activity of invention and

construction. Gupta finishes by asking: What would giving priority to the loving care of maintenance imply for the ruination engendered by the infrastructures of the Anthropocene?

The problematic of maintenance also raises the issue of human agency in the face of decay. In a way, the distinction between endo-decay and exo-decay differentiates between the decay that can be influenced by human agency (exo-decay) and the decay that, short of changing the very nature of things, cannot (endo-decay). But the boundary between the two is hardly a stable cross-cultural matter. In chapter 4, Minnegal, Main, and Dwyer explore the way this question of agency played out in a remote mountainous area of Papua New Guinea when people had to deal with the devastating consequences of a magnitude 7.5 earthquake in February 2018. As the physical world around them collapsed and decayed, many sought to understand what had happened within ontological frames grounded in science and Christianity. Both these speak of decay in physical or moral order, and an inexorable end without human cause. The ultimate effect of these new schemas negated the possibility that earthquake-affected local people might view themselves as agents of cause and control with respect to natural disasters, contrasting profoundly with traditional beliefs and practices.

A different dimension of the relation between decay and agency has to do with attributing responsibility for something decaying. Particularly in the face of a decay attributed to external elements, we often witness a whole political field where creative strategies of blame are produced and propagated. In chapter 5, Michael Herzfeld offers us an excellent example of such a process as it plays out in Rome. In a city famed for its durable and visually impressive monumentality, many locals view migrants' presence as both the cause and the essence of what they consider an evil degradation of the city's material and social fabric. Cosmological models as well as economic and demographic change thus together drive the disturbing current drift toward a racist and embittered populism.

In chapter 6, Bart Klem also treats a situation, in postwar Sri Lanka, where social change is experienced negatively as a process of social and moral decay. If in Rome's case the undesirable decay is the result of outsiders inside the gate, in Sri Lanka's case they are outsiders who are actually located outside the nation but whose influence is seen to have increased as a result of increased openness and interaction with the outside world. Drawing on Jonathan Spencer and Karl Mannheim, Klem argues that we must interrogate the political work that such narratives do. The dominant narrative interprets the sudden changes at war's end in terms of decay and purity: the opening

floodgates to the world bring unwanted mixture and require purification. To confront the implied exclusivist, patriarchal, and potentially xenophobic positioning of this narrative, he suggests an alternative reading: rather than decay, exposure breeds fresh contact.

In chapter 7, Fabio Mattioli, treats creatively a kind of decay that disturbs a neat separation between exo- and endo-decay. Here the cause of decay is something external, a recurring experience of crushed hopes, that ends up lodging itself into the social body in the form of "a seed of decay." As indicated above, there are important connections between Mattioli's chapter and Schubert's chapter 1. Mattioli offers an analysis of a specific kind of decay that emerges in the discursive landscape that Schubert analyzes more generally. The chapter shows how, in the Republic of (North) Macedonia, decay germinates from fragments of broken social expectations, nested within the social imaginary of working- and middle-class citizens. In the postsocialist context of an endless transition, decay appears as a constant existential state that feeds on the delay of future progress and on the impossibility of equality and democracy—a burdensome structure of feeling that Macedonians try to address by embracing nihilist politics. If Macedonians gave up on hope, Mattioli argues, the material conditions that gave birth to their abnormal lives would not disappear. But the Macedonians might stop hurting.

Attributing blame for decay can take the form of scapegoating, but that it is not always what happens. There are many historical instances, particularly in colonialism, where social disintegration and decomposition was a willful strategy. Ann Stoler rightly preferred the active verb "ruin" to refer to the "ruins" produced by imperialism. This allows her to ascribe agency to colonialism and imperialism and to assign blame for such ruinous states. We noted above that while decay is a natural process, social spaces are clearly dependent on that whole battery of mechanisms, apparatuses, and labor aimed at slowing down decay that we have referred to as the labor of maintenance. With this in mind, decay's acceleration can be induced simply by withdrawing maintenance. As Simmel noted in the case of ruins, while decay is indeed the work of nature, sometimes nature does its work unhampered because humans let it do its work. Reflecting on what "characterizes a good many urban ruins, like those, still inhabited, often found in Italy off the main road," Simmel notes: "In these cases, what strikes us is not, to be sure, that human beings destroy the work of man—this indeed is achieved by nature—but that men *let it decay*" (1965, 263).

This seems to me important in thinking settler colonialism in places like Australia and Israel. Thinking the tempo and speed of decay as dependent

on the labor of maintenance makes clear that the politics of public health is a technique of maintenance of the human body. Because such biopolitics is at its core a politics concerned with the differential decay of bodies, it is a politics concerned with choosing which population is given which resources to slow down its decay. In Australia, we have a settler colonialism that began like any other, with robbing the colonized of their lands, along with acts of extermination through killings and massacres, then through attempts at cultural eradication. Yet what characterizes the exterminatory nature of this colonialism today is that it precisely takes the form of "let it rot," "let it decay." Having destroyed Indigenous people's own maintenance mechanisms, the social and cultural forms that propelled them into the world, British colonialism and later Australian governments failed to replace those mechanisms. This withdrawal of maintenance works to "let Indigenous people decay." It is a form of extermination that resembles finding a spot on the farm to hide a truck that you have broken, that is no longer working, and leaving it there to rust and rot. Clearly, Indigenous people in Australia have more agency than such a truck and are still struggling to produce their own maintenance mechanisms to prevent their decay.

"Let them decay" is therefore a form of active colonial racism remains with us today. However, what interests Elise Klein in chapter 8 is something more insidious. Having initiated the forces of accelerated decay among Indigenous people, the Australian turns this decay into a characteristic of the Indigenous people themselves. That is, they discursively transform what is a colonially inflicted exo-decay into an endo-decay, blaming it on Indigenous people themselves. The chapter is about how this discourse of endo-decay has been deployed by the Australian state to legitimize punitive interventions and further attempts at assimilationist politics in First Nations communities. These programs actually perpetuate and even accelerate the very social decay that they purport to stop. It is clear in Klein's chapter that individual bodies just as much as collective ways of being are equally implicated in this politics of decay. This is true of all the remaining chapters.

In my own chapter, though looking at a very different social phenomenon, I also examine the way that the gradual disappearance of maintenance mechanisms leads a process of accelerated decay. The Christian Lebanese ex-militiamen I work with are left with very little social or economic support. What interested me in their situation is the role of social fantasy, as a less enduring variety of myth, in slowing down their decay as social and bodily subjects. In the early stages of my research, listening to the militiamen define themselves as "defeated," I simply took their experience of defeat as hav-

ing a causal effect on their sense of social decline and even on their bodily decay. At a later stage in my interaction with them, I came to realize that a discourse of defeat that still constructed them as warriors actually worked to give meaning to their lives. I thus came to analyze "the defeated warrior" as a fantasy that works as a technology of maintenance against decay. But what happens when the assemblage that is slowing down the subject's social decay itself begins decaying?

Cameo Dalley's chapter 10 also deals with decaying bodies. Her chapter explores the lives of non-Aboriginal helpers who live and work in remote Aboriginal communities in Australia and the various ways they end up relating to the ambient decay. Tasked with providing programs and services addressing decay among Aboriginal people, these Whitefellas often embody through their own ill-health the dominant culture's disappointment at the inability to enact desired change. These experiences result in ambivalent relationships to those whom they are tasked as helping, typified by kinds of "relational decay." This relational decay is rooted in historical settler colonial relationships and symptomatized in socio-spatial distributions of people and the kin relations they form to one another. In an interesting twist on the topic, Dalley takes her own decaying body as a starting point, raising methodological issues concerning the body of the anthropologist working with people who are themselves suffering from severe decaying social conditions. She argues that understanding how relational decay frames experiences allows a refiguring of relationality on Australia's colonial frontier.

In chapter 11, Tamara Kohn is also concerned with people subjected to a type of "let them rot" governmentality. Her work, however, focuses on US maximum security prisons and the people "inside" on life or death sentences. While many do perish there, some rise to the challenge of defying institutionally maintained physical and mental decay through their own productive and creative practices. Her chapter describes how decay, mold, and rot are produced, interacted with, and resisted. It asks readers to recognize and question their own expectations about the bodies and places hidden from public view that foster decay as well as their own participation in reproducing those expectations. Through long correspondence with an individual who has survived thirty years in solitary confinement by "calling out" mold and evil wherever it presents itself, decay becomes reframed (beyond entropy) as a structural condition that invites an active political response that contains elements of hope. As the whole collection makes for some rather grim reading, I felt that it was good to finish with Kohn's chapter, which explores the possibilities of resistance and hope amid the rot.

Notes

1. "In the Greater Antilles, some years after the discovery of America, whilst the Spanish were dispatching inquisitional commissions to investigate whether the natives had a soul or not, these very natives were busy drowning the white people they had captured in order to find out, after lengthy observation whether or not the corpses were subject to putrefaction" (Lévi-Strauss 1976, 329).

2. Andy Dawson's piece (2002) on the aging body of miners is an exception to the rule.

3. In sociology see Higgs and Gilleard 2016; and Grenier, Phillipson, and Settersten 2020. And in anthropology, Buch 2015 provides a good summary of the existing scholarship.