

HUMANITY'S RUINS

ETHICS,
FEMINISM,
AND
GENOCIDAL
HUMANITARIANISM

Danielle Bouchard

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Durham and London

2025

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Bird Williams

Designed by David A. Rainey

Typeset in Minion Pro and Real Head Pro

by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bouchard, Danielle, [date]— author

Title: Humanity's ruins : ethics, feminism, and genocidal humanitarianism / Danielle Bouchard.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024050768 (print)

LCCN 2024050769 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478032069 paperback

ISBN 9781478028796 hardcover

ISBN 9781478060994 ebook

Subjects: : LCSH: Humanitarianism—Political aspects |

Imperialism—Moral and ethical aspects | Feminist ethics | War and society | Human rights and globalization | International relations | Genocide

Classification: LCC BJ1475.3 .B683 2025 (print)

LCC BJ1475.3 (ebook)

DDC 361.7/4082—dc23/eng/20250519

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024050768>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024050769>

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Acknowledgments

It has felt very meaningful to get to work on this project for the last decade, and I have many people to thank for the fact that it now exists in this form. It's a commonplace of Buddhism that everyone—really, every being—is a teacher. The communities of teachers I am a part of make everything possible.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have gotten to work with Courtney Berger and Laura Jaramillo. I had never dared to imagine that I might have a chance at publishing with Duke, but Courtney's support right from the beginning helped me to accept that yes, it was really happening. Courtney is a brilliant and dedicated editor; her feedback on my work was both incisive and supportive, and she knew exactly what I needed to hear in order to do the work that would most benefit the manuscript. This book is immeasurably better because of it. As a team, Courtney and Laura struck a perfect balance between very clear and specific guidance, and trusting me to use my own good judgment. And their patience and enthusiasm for the project carried me through when my inner voice of doubt spoke up; I can't thank them enough. Many thanks, too, to Bird Williams, project editor extraordinaire.

This book would quite simply not be what it is without the generous, incisive, and deeply thoughtful work of two anonymous readers. They could see clearly what I could not, and it was only after receiving their comments that the project fully crystallized for me. And they read it not just once, but

twice, in an eminently committed and thorough way both times. They offered me the best kind of intellectual engagement one could hope for.

Getting to think with Jigna Desai over the years has helped to remind me of why I am here in the first place. When I think of how I want to move in the world and in my work, and what kind of a place the university can be at its most ethical, intellectually curious and rigorous, creative, and revolutionarily just, I think of Jigna.

Qadri Ismail, who passed away suddenly in 2021, asked me during my dissertation defense what books should be arranged next to my dissertation on a hypothetical bookshelf. I take that question, along with many others that he posed, as one to practice and learn with, rather than one to be definitively answered. It shaped how I thought about what it meant to write this book, as it did my first one. I continue to learn from the questions he asked, and by what I have come to see as his hope for the possibilities opened up by a committed critique.

This book has benefited greatly from audiences at the many conferences where I have workshopped my ideas. Ann Braithwaite and Catherine Orr generously offered me the opportunity to write a chapter for their most recent edited collection; writing that piece allowed me to develop my thinking about the concept of humanity in a way that would become foundational for the book. A UNCG College of Arts and Sciences research assignment in the spring of 2017 afforded me crucial time for new research and a lot of reading. Participating in a National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity coaching program in the spring of 2021 gave me new tools and a lot of confidence at a time when I sorely needed both. And it has been so lovely to get to know Katie Kent as we have helped each other hold on to the skills we developed in the program.

At UNCG, I continue to have the great fortune of getting to work with many dedicated, compassionate people. In the WGSS Program, I am proud to be one member of a core faculty power trio that includes Tiffany Holland and Sarah Cervenak. Lisa Levenstein, our incredible program director, is both brilliant and kind. She is an expert at making people feel seen, appreciated, and trusted, just as she is at seeing exactly what the moment calls for and how to get it done. Kelly Taylor has been the driving force in helping WGSS fulfill its full potential as a vibrant presence at UNCG and in the wider community, and she has helped me in innumerable ways over the last several years. Faye Stewart, Gwen Hunnicutt, Silvia Bettez, Risa Applegarth, Heather Adams, Leila Villaverde, and Mark Rifkin have helped me to

better understand who I am and what I am capable of, and they, along with the broader group of WGSS faculty, generously and enthusiastically make WGSS a strong and thriving center of engaged research and pedagogy on campus. I am grateful for Janine Jones's intellectual engagement and our conversations over the years. I feel honored to have gotten to work with Teresa Walch, Mark Elliott, John Stehlin, Anne Parsons, Denisa Jashari, Claudia Cabello, and many others—some of them still at UNCG, some now elsewhere—who show me how to engage in skillful livelihood and stand up for each other. I still have a lot to learn, and I am grateful to get to do so with them. I have been happy to keep up with my colleague Kathy Jamieson from afar—if there is a more thoughtful, generous, principled, and committed person and academic out there, I haven't met them.

The best part of this job is getting to meet, spend time with, and work with students. Every semester, I feel overcome by how special it is to have a room full of strangers trust me and each other enough to try out new ideas, ask the most important questions, and share their joys and fears alike. I have learned much of what I know from them, and I regret that I cannot remember or name all of them. When luck is really with me, I get to keep working with a former student and maybe even over time be called their friend. I'm so happy to get to be on Danielle LaPlace's dissertation committee even though she's no longer at UNCG. Zac Johnson inspired me with his astonishing intellect as an undergraduate student, and continues to do so. I love being able to call both Caitlin Spencer and Eric Toler my colleagues. Kelton Hollister is a fantastic pedagogue and I'm grateful for our many conversations about teaching and everything else. And getting to write an article with Aalih Hussein has been a true joy.

In the Chapel Hill Zen Center sangha, I have discovered that there is space for quiet in this world. My feeling of gratitude for getting to practice with this group is just not expressible in words. When I first started practicing there, I needed a lifeline; now it has become something more, as I am inspired by these friends and their dedication to finding the capacity for a nonviolent way of being together.

Dad, Josh, and Minori have shown up for me more times than I can count. I'm so lucky to have their friendship in addition to being able to call them my family. It means everything that I spent so many hours working on this book at Dad's house. Our relationship has been a safe place for me; he has kept me grounded and oriented over the years. His and Mom's presences show up in this book in so many ways. Sheryl Ketner has become a

true and trusted friend. In the times when I have been in the most pain and my hope has been at its lowest, she has compassionately shown me how to reconnect with the part of me that knows that I can make it.

Diane Detournay, with her cloak of stars, has been at my side for over twenty years. She is the very definition of kindness, joy, commitment, and dazzling intellect. I just wouldn't be the person I am or be doing the work that I do without her. The many hours and days we spent together on video calls during the pandemic, when we couldn't visit each other, were the most special time. She and Brian Johnson have shown me that I always have a place to go. And Daniel Rhodes makes life sweeter than I knew was possible. Getting to live life with him has made the world open up into something newly beautiful. He is lovely beyond words. His very presence, his seemingly infinite patience, and our many conversations kept me going in the final stretch.

All faults, oversights, and omissions are my own.

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X ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Introduction

CYNICISM, DEATH, AND HUMANITARIANISM:
THE AESTHETICS OF RUINATION

Ruin, n.

- I. The state or condition of collapse or downfall. . . .
 - I.1.a. The state or condition of a fabric or structure, esp. a building, which has given way and collapsed.
 - I.1.b. The state or condition of a person who or society which has suffered decay or downfall. . . .
- II. The action of falling down; collapse, destruction, downfall. . . .
 - II.4.a. The downfall or decay of a person or society; complete loss of resources, wealth, moral or social standing, well-being, etc. . . .
 - II.5.a. Destruction; complete overthrow or devastation of a thing. . . .
- III. That which remains after collapse or downfall.
 - III.8. Material which remains after the decay and collapse of a structure; ruined buildings (cf. sense III.9b); debris, wreckage, remains. Also in extended use. Now *rare*.

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III.9. In *plural*. The remains of a person who or thing which has suffered collapse, destruction, or downfall. Frequently in **in ruins**.
—“Ruin (n.),” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*

**“We Have Reached the Last Threshold
of the Human Heartbeat”**

Abderrahmane Sissako’s 2006 film *Bamako* stages a trial in which the plaintiff, African Society, accuses International Financial Institutions of certain crimes. The trial unfolds over the course of the film before it is revealed, in the closing argument made by a lawyer for the plaintiff, that the specific charge is “crimes of inhumanity and cynicism.” The charge of inhumanity is perhaps expected, even as that expectedness is the proof of its abiding truth. The additional charge, of cynicism, catches the attention. In everyday use, “inhumanity” suggests a deep and enduring deficit, and “cynicism” something more like an attitude that might be ephemeral or contextually bound. But cynicism is also about an inability and/or unwillingness to imagine, to hope, or to admit that something else is possible. To be cynical is to claim that humanity writ large is incapable of kindness and compassion; for the cynic, humanity is, by definition, selfish and violent.¹

This cynicism about humanity is anchored in the killing logics of colonialism and conquest, according to which theft and destruction are just what humans do to each other. In charging the global economic infrastructure not just with inhumanity but also with cynicism, *Bamako*’s representatives of African Society—who are not simply actors, but a professor, a lawyer, a refugee, a teacher, and a griot, among others, playing versions of themselves—call for its very concept of humanity to be put on trial, given that it requires that Africa, and Africans, die. The witnesses for the plaintiff all speak to the many and various forms of death they have been made to endure, witness, and at times themselves embody. Mr. Keita, a professor, is asked by a lawyer for the defense whether he can imagine a world without “funds or banks”—a question posed with an answer in mind, one that reveals the asker’s own failure of imagination. When Mr. Keita responds that “absolutely” yes, he can, the lawyer suggests that Africa should accept death rather than be released from the debt it cannot pay back. Mr. Keita’s own ability to hold both in mind—the death he has witnessed, as well as the possibility for a different world—and the necessity of not seeing these as mutually exclusive, becomes apparent in the rest of his testimony. He notes that colonization “took everything,” that “they don’t just take our resources, our

work, and our money, they take our minds too. We have reached the last threshold of the human heartbeat,” implying that “they” will try to take this too, the final human thing remaining, the very thing that keeps the body and the spirit alive and also where, perhaps, a non-cynical experience of humanity could be located. Mr. Keita concludes that the World Bank’s policies are predicated on the teleological assertion that “some countries are destined to disappear,” that is, to be eliminated as the ultimate fulfillment of humanity’s quintessence.

Bamako exposes the aestheticizing—the artistic and sensorial rendering, and the onto-political categorizing—of Africa as destined to disappear precisely by those discourses and projects that declare the intention of saving it, as the testimony given by the witnesses for African Society focuses on the necropolitical depredations wrought by development’s extractivism and the humanitarian legal apparatus that supports it. The trial’s staging in a neighborhood courtyard is itself a sustained visual reminder of the law’s positioning of human bodies in relation to each other in a highly prescribed and hierarchical way. The witnesses for the plaintiff stand in this makeshift court, speaking of their humanity, while signs of the deep presence of “International Financial Institutions” in their lives abound. It becomes clear that many forms of suffering create the conditions for the very law that the trial’s proceedings are meant to embody and express. These forms would be exceedingly familiar to anyone who has imbibed popular Western media about Africa—the economic refugee who perishes on her way to Europe, the silent and sickly young child, the man slowly succumbing to an unnamed illness at home—and indeed the film implicitly poses multiple questions about the stakes of filmmaking, especially for those whose appearance within this juridical/political/media scenography is structured in relation to violence and ruin. In doing so, it allows us to see the aesthetic conjunction of artistic and political practice: The distribution of bodies in space, the type and tenor of sensorial experience, and the enforcement of “proper” social roles for different subjects that both imperial legal logics and “coherently” structured films rely upon and reproduce are very much the same.

Perhaps one of the most striking features of *Bamako* is the emphasis on the practices of looking of so many of the people in the film itself, and how those practices describe the ordering of social and political space—sometimes reifying the given places of individuals in that order, sometimes disrupting that order, and sometimes doing something more ambiguous. Looking is thematized as contextual and deeply complicated, guided and oriented by the literal and symbolic architectural features of various social

milieux. The character Falaï, frequently seen with a video camera recording various goings-on, describes himself as a criminologist who takes photographs for the police and also for family events, noting that “There’s another market now—funerals. There’s money in that,” and that “The faces of people who talk don’t interest me. There’s no truth in them. . . . I prefer the dead. They’re truer.” This conversation occurs outside the walls of the courtyard, during the testimony given by a witness for the plaintiff, who notes that development is a system based in deception that makes those subject to it into unwitting accomplices in their own “pauperization”: “pay or die. That’s the West’s lesson that we inflict on ourselves.” After the witness completes this part of her testimony, as if to confirm this analysis, Falaï states to his friend, “Death is good.” Later, we see a sequence from a film, titled *Death in Timbuktu*, being shown on television while young children watch raptly, laughing. Featuring an absurdist plot in which cowboys shoot and kill each other for no reason, murdering a woman while her young child looks on, its setting in the streets of a town echoes the courtyard-as-courtroom, the only difference being that the courtroom represents legal rather than extrajudicial killing (even as the moral calculations used to justify the killing effectively remain the same).

Yet these death-oriented practices of looking are not the only ones. Many shots show people looking at the witnesses providing testimony, at each other, at the people who go about their daily lives in the courtyard, or off into the distance as they listen to the trial proceedings—sometimes nodding in affirmation and support, sometimes prompted into deep thought of their own. Their attentive presence is perhaps the organizing thematic feature of this film, as it describes a relational space in which imperial geopolitics do not define all. Two key scenes movingly highlight this. The first takes place right before the title screen, at the end of an establishing sequence; here we see a witness, Zegué Bemba, gain entry into the courtyard and present himself before the chief judge. Bemba, via a translator, is informed that it’s not yet his turn to speak; Bemba lingers for a few minutes though, noting that “Words are something. . . . They can seize you in your heart. It’s bad if you keep them inside.” In a second scene, toward the end of the film, he returns, standing up from the audience right after the chief lawyer for the defense, Rapaport, has given his closing argument. Once again speaking out of turn, Bemba interrupts the proceedings by acting as a griot. Notably, Bemba’s speech here is not in French, the language of the court, but rather in Bambara; and not only does no one translate, it is not subtitled (unlike almost all of the rest of the dialogue). In this long and

deeply affecting scene, we witness many people witnessing him, silently watching and reflecting, some of them crying. This is, to be sure, a very different silence than the kind that is imposed, even as it highlights what cannot be heard and who cannot be seen by the law even when it is stated loudly and clearly by a living, breathing, and very present person, because it breaks open the aesthetic and indeed ethical order on which juridical knowledge is founded. The terms of this order are laid out in lurid detail by Rapaport as the chief lawyer for International Financial Institutions. After spending the trial blaming the plaintiffs for the harm his own clients have done to them, Rapaport makes an appeal for humanity to come together as a single global community to address “common threats” to its existence, namely, global warming, nuclear weapons, and terrorism—and he argues that development and its (ostensible) alleviation of poverty is central to this project.

I begin with this extended discussion of *Bamako* because it so brilliantly traces the intricate intertwining of modern humanitarianism with genocidalism. As Rapaport invokes the welfare of humanity as a means to deny the realities of the witnesses for African Society, and ultimately to suggest that their suffering is necessary to the preservation of humanity writ large, his argumentative logic epitomizes the particular relationship to death that, I argue, invests modern humanitarianism. This relationship is one of management and ownership, an attempt to determine who dies, under what circumstances, and what that death means, by claiming the right to intervene on behalf of humanity as a whole. *Humanity's Ruins* exposes humanitarianism's founding on an explicitly Eurocentric, white-ascendant conceptualization of humanity that was produced within and for the purposes of the specifically Western project of conquest. As such, humanitarianism is not simply the convenient cover for neo-imperial governance, which is the argument that many extant analyses of humanitarianism ultimately structure their critique upon. Rather, it is animated by and expressive of a fundamentally genocidal aesthetic and ethical order that itself predates, and has created the conditions for, Western imperial governance in the wake of World War II and in the ensuing long Cold War/post-Cold War era. In its contemporary iterations, humanitarianism is not exclusively engaged in and propagated by social actors who could be described as paradigmatic Western subjects or as inhabiting the space of the West. Nonetheless, and precisely because its use is not confined to actors with specific identities, humanitarianism can be described as a Western discourse. I refer to the “Western” because it historically precedes other ways of indexing shifting geopolitical configurations (First/Second/Third World, or Global North/

Global South), for the humanity that modern humanitarianism takes as its object was formed along with “the West” itself. Humanitarianism’s mobilization by variously situated actors within changing geopolitical relationships of power demonstrates its continued attachment to genocidal figurings of racialized humanity, even as its differential and shifting use speaks to the ungroundedness of race itself.

I compose my inquiry in this book by tracing the lineaments of the aesthetics of ruination that structures humanitarian logics, cultural objects, and political projects. I invoke aesthetics in terms of the particular characteristics of the humanitarian cultural and media texts I take up and the sensory experiences that engaging with them produces, as well as in the particular sense that political philosopher Jacques Rancière describes, that is, aesthetics as the “distribution of the sensible” that orders perception and the organization and assumed placement of the members of a given political community.² My analysis along these lines is about how the aesthetics of humanitarian discourses—characterized by a sensorial archive of devastation and a genocidal management of onto-political grouphood—produce a humanity whose identity can only be realized through actual and imagined eradication. In other words, the genocidal project of *extermination* comes to be aligned with the *survival* of humanity in a variety of contemporary discourses and projects that are predicated on humanitarian ideals and ethics. Fear of extinction and the presumed need to ensure humanity’s endurance has long been intertwined with the presumed necessity of the eradication of some human beings to the realization of humanity’s ostensible essence. In modern humanitarianism, this longer-lived and intense preoccupation with the possibility of civilization’s (indeed, humanity’s) decay and downfall finds new sustenance and inspiration in the advent of massively destructive events and technologies, and new capacities for the assertion of its own will in the same. Ultimately, I am interested in the current resurgence of a variety of imaginings of humanity’s end—through nuclear warfare, runaway environmental devastation, advanced capitalism, or artificial intelligence—and how humanitarian ideals have become a predominant means through which to mobilize arguments for humanity’s survival, arguments that are constructed on a heavily militarized and deeply violent repertoire of logics, ethics, and affects. It is telling, to say the least, that these imaginings simultaneously ignore the histories of devastation and world-ending faced by, and instrumentalize as agency-deprived figures of ultimate suffering, those peoples who have been subject to the eradictory drive of Western imperial conquest. Those who are authorized to tell the story of human-

ity's possible end and to propose how "we" might save ourselves betray a fascination with destruction, such that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the false sense of mastery provided by the effort to save humanity and by the tools of destruction themselves.

In order to consider the many and various sites where meaning about humanitarianism is produced and humanitarian projects are undertaken, I read broadly, across a variety of textual genres—fiction film and documentary, news stories, organization websites, popular essays, scholarly writings. Reading in this way, we can see how humanitarianism is formed as a multiplicity of codes, discourses, and institutions: as a moral imperative, a legal concept, an informatics, a visual order, and a tool for making a variety of different political claims. I attempt to trace the ebb and flow of their coherence with each other and the radical disagreements that well up in the spaces between these texts and articulations, to acknowledge the violent force of that coherence, and to attend to the possibilities opened up by those disagreements. Often invoked apparently unintentionally, genocidal aspirations appear in diverse humanitarian discourses and projects, and seem in many contexts to have overdetermined the possibilities for thinking about humanity. It is for this reason that I take the broadly defined media landscape of humanitarianism as my archive, because such an approach perhaps allows a reckoning with the various and subtle ways in which many of us are called into humanitarianism's work, and what we may do to refuse to participate in that work.

In the rest of the introduction to the book, I situate humanitarianism within the historical context of post-World War II geopolitical reorganization and the rise of human rights frameworks and laws, looking at how humanitarianism reappropriates and reproduces a longer-lived understanding of humanity born and sustained in the heart of the Western imperial project, and illuminating the violent forms of knowledge production that underlie the equally violent actions often done in the name of humanitarianism. I engage critical scholarship on the rise of human rights instruments, policies, and broader discourses in the long Cold War/post-Cold War era and their centrality to the reconfiguring and reassertion of imperial modes of governance and warfare in response to unfolding anti-colonial movements. In this, I consider what the framework of biopolitics/necropolitics offers in terms of illuminating the relationship between human rights and warfare, as well as what I am identifying as the genocidal formation of "humanity" that defines the content and character of modern humanitarian projects and discourses. Diverting the concept of genocide away from its common

use to diagnose the putative expression of racial/ethnic hatred, I instead understand it as an assertion of the specific form the onto-political order of humanity “should” take, which I argue opens up the interpretive possibility for a more thorough inquiry into how humanitarian discourses conceive of the very makeup of the world (indeed, the universe, existence, and nonexistence), often in deeply troubling ways that might not be readily apparent.

To establish my contention regarding the genocidal underpinnings of modern humanitarianism’s conceptualization of humanity, I unearth and explicate what I argue are its two major defining conceptual formations: “humanity as a whole” and “human suffering.” While there is an increasingly substantial body of scholarship that offers serious historically grounded critiques of various humanitarian endeavors’ expression of violence against those humans whose suffering they claim to have an interest in alleviating, there is as of yet not much sustained inquiry into the thought apparatus that simultaneously gives rise to and is remade by humanitarian projects and discourses. “Humanity as a whole” and “human suffering” emerge as conjoined concepts across a variety of cultural texts, producing “humanity” as an ostensibly internally coherent category. Making a differentially defined category (that is, any category) *appear* to be internally coherent requires unceasing effort. Given the impossibility of “humanity’s” internal coherence, violence is the outcome of the imperialist/racist drive to achieve the illusion of that coherence. What surfaces from my reading of these texts is that humanitarianism has been mobilized to manage this problem of humanity’s conception, that is, its fundamental failure as an internally coherent, self-same category. Those who threaten to expose this failure—either by presenting the possibility of a variety of different humanities, by “inappropriately” claiming to be part of humanity and/or to be able to define humanity writ large, or by refusing to recognize humanity as a valid category—become the targets of this management. Within this targeting, humanitarian modes of knowledge production align with neo-imperial warfare in their emphasis on totality and control.

I am thus deeply concerned about the iron grip that humanitarian logics now seem to have on social justice projects in general and, more specifically, on endeavors to put an end to warfare. Indeed, the paucity of the humanitarian epistemological and ethical tool kit for an anti-war project—a project which I hold near and dear—and the dire need for something else describe the origins and aims of this book. As I discuss later, “humanity as a whole” and “human suffering” produce a conceptualization of humanity as defined by vulnerability, and this vulnerable humanity appears

in explicitly racist/civilizationist war ethics, reckonings with the threat caused by human-induced climate change, and feminist anti-violence efforts alike. The recognition of human individuals' shared exposure to vulnerability has been increasingly taken up for the new anti-violence ethical possibilities it seems to offer. But it is this very idea that also continues to form the core justification for the genocidal use of atomic bombs and the maintenance of nuclear weapons arsenals with world-destroying potential. It is in this conception of humanity as essentially vulnerable that, I will argue, humanitarian investments in protection and preservation come into alignment with genocidal aspirations.

Postcolonial feminist cultural theorists provide incisive analyses of the kinds of epistemological and ethical technologies that I see as comprising the aesthetics of ruination. While this book is not solely about feminism, it takes feminist modes of inquiry to be essential to understanding humanitarianism as a Western imperial formation that proliferates racisms anew, in particular through the genocidal notion of humanity it both relies upon and reproduces. I align with scholars who argue that processes of racialization and the targeting of racialized communities and polities are less about designating some humans as not full or real humans, and more about the convoluted and contradictory processes of recognition that define humanity. In other words, I do not pursue the kind of argument that attempts to rectify a false distinction between the human and nonhuman; rather, I analyze the workings of what I see as the pervasive attempt to enforce a synonymy between human being and humanity. It is precisely the shifting relationships of various racialized groups to humanity, and the very necessity for these relationships to never reach a point of clear and precise definition, that renders the category of humanity ever-vulnerable to dissolution. A major contention of *Humanity's Ruins* is that modern humanitarianism takes the forestalling of this dissolution as its main project—often by any means necessary. Its abiding, brutal, and profound antagonism toward the possibility—much less desirability—of the nonhierarchical, noninstrumentalized, and noncoherent *simultaneous* existence of various different forms of human life shows up in many places. It feels like it cannot help itself. Thus, in picking my way through humanitarianism's cultural landscape of death and decay, I attempt to refuse to follow the defined path it lays out. If I myself linger in the debris, it is in the interest of dismantling and rearranging the reality constructed by the architecture of the ruins.³ Indeed, because the humanitarian discourses I examine in this book are oriented toward the preservation of a given social structure, I am not interested so much

in assessing the accuracy of humanitarian discourses as I am in disrupting their very ordering of reality. It is in the interest of disruption, then, that I turn toward these authors, attempting to think alongside and with them about the relationship between humanity and violence in a way that humanitarian discourses cannot seem to do without reverting to severely compromised lines of argumentation and logics.

Human Rights and a Genocidal Humanity

What happens when we understand humanitarianism not just as a practice of alleviating human suffering, but rather as central to Western and Global North neocolonial governance and militarism? To address this question, I take up an exploration of humanitarianism's role in post-World War II geopolitics from the perspective of two lines of scholarly inquiry: critical histories of the development of human rights, and the theoretical construct of biopolitics/necropolitics. I seek to show that the institutionalization of human rights is a primary way in which humanitarian principles have become central to the authorizing of Western, Global North, colonial, and imperial forms of governance (including military interventions, development, economic policies, peacekeeping missions, etc.) in the wake of World War II. I also seek to show how the development of modern humanitarian principles is indebted to a longer-lived, genocidal configuration of humanity; inextricably connected to the Western project of colonialism, humanist epistemology and ethics serve as the supporting structure for a hegemonic post-World War II vision of a global humanitarian order.

Rather than continuing to uphold the common definition of human rights as a set of values or principles, one important body of scholarship helps to shift our frame of reference by redefining it as a moral/juridical/political technology for codifying neocolonialism in the face of ongoing successful anti-colonial liberation movements. This work moves against a pervasive discourse according to which the atrocities witnessed during World War II led to some kind of elevated consciousness of the universal nature of human suffering and of the need for ways to mitigate future suffering. This is precisely the narrative that authorized calls for world governance (headed by the United States and/or select Western nations) and led to the founding of the United Nations.⁴ This is not to say that Western and Global North actors have been the sole agents of human rights laws, policies, and paradigms. Authors like Balakrishnan Rajagopal and Sylvanna Falcón insist on the need to attend to the fact that the continued development of international

political and economic institutions has been driven by multiple, dynamic Third World, Fourth World, and Global South justice movements.⁵ Indeed, this was exactly why in and around World War II, the UN and allied institutions were established—because of these movements’ strength and insistence on being involved in the UN itself, even as this institution proved too resistant to change to allow radicalization efforts to succeed.⁶ For this reason, a definition of human rights like Inderpal Grewal’s, as a “regime of truth” that has come to shape a variety of everyday cultural practices, acts of moral reckoning, and relationships characterized by governmentality—related to but extending well beyond the realms of law and politics proper⁷—is useful for contending with its broad reach, deep entrenchment, and the serious complexities it poses to any negotiation of access to resources and justice.

Randall Williams illustrates the rise of human rights as this seemingly inescapable regime of truth by focusing on how it serves as a primary means of managing authoritative uses of violence and, indeed, as “the privileged epistemic form for political violence”⁸ in the current geopolitical context. Given its emergence “as a key concept in the discourse of the post-war international with the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted December 10, 1948),”⁹ human rights principles and legal instruments became a way to delegitimize and attempt to suppress a variety of anti-imperial movements.¹⁰ As Rajagopal reveals, human rights doctrine developed as a reiteration of rather than a break with colonial-era laws that criminalized anti-colonial movements;¹¹ thus, “though it is commonly (mis) understood to be a pacifist philosophy . . . human rights discourse imposes obligations upon the state to use violence in order to secure basic rights—such as rights to life, personal liberty, physical security, equality, freedom of religion, or ‘compulsory’ education.”¹² Talal Asad adds that with the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “the universal character of the rights-bearing person is made the responsibility of sovereign states,” thus effecting “a direct convergence between ‘the rule of law’ and social justice” and *necessitating* that violence be committed against certain people in the name of the humanity of other people.¹³ What is at stake here is not just the use of the authority of the law to uphold powerful interests in the name of human rights, but more insidiously, the multiple ways in which individuals and groups must prove their humanity—specifically, Asad implies, through the demonstration of adherence to the law and to the Christian emancipatory mandates that invest a presumptively secular political and juridical apparatus.¹⁴

That human rights principles necessarily involve hierarchical differentiation is a core tenet of a body of feminist scholarship that treats these principles as a primary mechanism through which gender norms and gender-based exploitation have been proliferated and codified in the post-World War II era, having particularly deleterious outcomes for women. Examining human rights' inception within the UN, what Sylvanna M. Falcón reveals is that the UN's formal structures for addressing gender inequality, for example the Commission on the Status of Women and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, have been sites for promulgating the hegemonic feminisms that are premised on a monolithic womanhood and a willful neglect of anti-colonial and anti-racist analyses of power.¹⁵ The global reach of human rights as a paradigm informing, and demanded of, feminist work is of deep concern in many senses. The very fact that, according to Inderpal Grewal, "gender was stabilized through practices articulated as human rights violations essentially linked to gender, for example widespread domestic violence or the vulnerability to rape for women by militarized or nationalist power"¹⁶ is a problem because of the centrality of particular codifications of gender, especially the gender binary, to hegemonic definitions of humanity. Moreover, the hailing of "women" by human rights discourses has been a key imperial militarist tactic in the post-Cold War era. In an analysis of how women are invoked as signifiers within the representational landscape of post-9/11 politics, Leela Fernandes argues that the fact that the so-called war on terror has been persistently framed as a war for human rights has serious implications for "a global, international, and transnational feminist human rights approach," which has no choice but to "navigate within the representational terrain" of this war.¹⁷ The representational terrain created by the militarized apparatus of human rights has had a variety of insidious effects. Examining the role of gendering in the latest iterations of what they refer to as accumulation by dispossession via "debt-based financing to the global South from the global North,"¹⁸ Christine Keating, Claire Rasmussen, and Pooja Rishi show how the attempt to empower women through various development schemes that intensify global capitalism's reach ultimately relies on an abject predation upon these very women. In other words, human rights is the profoundly cynical mechanism through which the recognition of *some* women as deserving human compassion is used to fold them into imperial warfare, neocolonial extractivism, and indeed genocidally inspired projects.

These studies lead me to consider the very development of human rights as biopolitically/necropolitically motivated, and as such as indebted to the

formation of the modern conception of humanity within a fundamentally genocidal worldview well before World War II. The understanding that the deaths of some humans have been made vital for other humans is, of course, central to the scholarship on biopolitics and necropolitics, which sees the former—a form of governmentality focused on the management of the biological characteristics of a population (including the active cultivation of certain forms of life)—as part of the same construct as the latter. Bringing to light some of the inadequacies of Michel Foucault’s formulation of biopower, Achille Mbembe’s famous articulation of the concept of necropolitics has inspired wide-ranging scholarship arguing that the intertwining of biopolitics and necropolitics is foundational to Western colonialism, chattel slavery, and empire.¹⁹ While Mbembe’s work has been widely used to analyze the operations of power in an array of contexts, I would like to emphasize his less-remarked-upon argument that in Western thought and politics, humanity is defined by the capacity to master death itself. Rerendering European political philosophy as animated not by the principles of reason and freedom but rather by death, Mbembe shows that the subject of this philosophy achieves his humanity by imposing death on others,²⁰ and it is thus that “terror and killing become the means of realizing the already known telos of history.”²¹ Apart from the act of killing, the other means of attempting to achieve a mastery of death is through the creation of “*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.”²² What Mbembe is highlighting here is a social scenography of devastation, the production and (attempted) orchestration of which is a principal means for the assertion of onto-political sovereignty on the part of the Western subject of humanity.

In his crucial work on the West’s abiding investment in racist/colonialist destruction, Sven Lindqvist further illuminates the kind of logical bind animating a thought system that has organized itself around death—and the terroristic coping mechanisms that have been the result. In arguing that extermination forms the very “core of European thought,”²³ Lindqvist insists that humanism relies on the concept and practice of extermination,²⁴ and he demonstrates this reliance by tracing the codevelopment of humanism and extermination within the context of evolutionary theory. He provocatively suggests that the dread and horror produced by evolutionary theory’s introduction of the possibility of human extinction was managed by the racist codification of extinction as a biological inevitability for some humans but not for humanity—indeed, by the idea that that inevitability was a pre-

requisite for humanity's survival.²⁵ Extinction not only served as the alibi for extermination practices, but came to be seen as a mercy, an end to the suffering of those humans whose very existence was seen as being defined by it.²⁶ Thus extermination became a way to attempt to master death, materializing as "fact" the premise of extinction as a process naturally suffered by a subset of humans. For Lindqvist, the posing and answering of the grand question "What is it that makes us into human beings?"²⁷ by the naturalists, psychologists, anthropologists, and medical men credited with defining modern Euro-American thought—Freud, Darwin, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss—was thus premised on genocide.

Mbembe and Lindqvist suggest the necessity of understanding genocide as both more expansive and more essential to Western epistemologies and ethics than it is sometimes characterized as being, as do influential genocide studies scholars Patrick Wolfe and Omer Bartov, who have worked diligently to illuminate genocide's embeddedness in the Western/European imperial project and in its social structure. In his famous article "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," Wolfe's specific interest is to elaborate on the various forms that the logic of elimination takes within settler colonialism as "a specific social formation,"²⁸ with genocide as one particular expression of the logic of elimination that characterizes settler colonialism broadly speaking.²⁹ Refusing to parse different "forms" of genocide as a way to describe systematized elimination in varying contexts—which would risk qualifying the genocide of Native peoples as a particular type and thus characterizing it as less consequential than the Holocaust (as the implied founding event defining what genocide is)³⁰—Wolfe insists on an understanding of genocide as not confinable to discrete events but rather as imbued in the political and social orders characterizing settler colonialism.³¹ Bartov also considers the saturated presence of genocidalism within the social order in another context, namely Europe in and around World Wars I and II and indeed in the continuing aftermath of the Holocaust. For Bartov, genocide is a core feature of modernity, and in its horrific development in the event of the Holocaust it refined the much longer-lived fear of extinction (as revealed by Lindqvist) into a technologically advanced practice of what Bartov names as industrialized killing. As Bartov puts it, "the organizers of the killing, and those who supplied the scientific rationale and know-how for extermination, were all members of an elite that perceived itself as taking part in a heroic, self-sacrificing venture aimed at the salvation of humanity from an array of Satanic forces threatening it with extinction."³² While Bartov's focus is such that he does not consider the

legal and political apparatuses and social and moral conditioning through which Western nations attempted to justify colonial horrors and no doubt instilled the capacity for mass murder, I note the importance of his analysis of genocide's key role in defining "humanity" as vulnerable to extinction and as requiring preservation by any means necessary.

Crucially, Wolfe also points our attention toward the fact that genocidal practices and logics do not just seek to eradicate individuals within (predefined) groups, but rather to define, adjudicate, and eradicate the possibility of certain grouphoods:

The etymology of "genocide" combines the senses of killing and grouphood. "Group" is more than a purely numerical designation. *Genos* refers to a denominate group with a membership that persists through time. . . . It is not simply a random collectivity. . . . Thus genocide has been achieved by means of summary mass murder . . . in the frontier massacring of Indigenous peoples, in the Holocaust, and in Rwanda. But there can be summary mass murder without genocide, as in the case of 9/11, and there can be genocide without summary mass murder, as in the case of the continuing post-frontier destruction, in whole and in part, of Indigenous *genoi*. . . . The question of degree is not the definitional issue.³³

Genocide is not necessarily about eliminating every member of a particular group, but rather eliminating the very notion of a people as a people: "the containment of Indian groups within Euroamerican society that culminated in the end of the frontier produced a range of ongoing complementary strategies whose common intention was the destruction of heterodox forms of Indian grouphood. In the post-World War II climate of civil rights, these strategies were reinforced by the policies of termination and relocation, held out as liberating individual Indians from the thralldom of the tribe."³⁴ In other words, in attempting to ensure a particular ordering of the political world at the levels of identity and ontology, genocide seeks not only to destroy, but to produce a specific onto-political architecture in the ruins of that destruction. This is to say that genocide aims at a certain kind of productivity, insofar as it imbues and structures sociality and the dynamics of relationality, and relies on the proliferation of discursive scenes of humanity's supposed presence (scenes that are heavily reliant on a grammar of devastation).

To that end, I propose that genocidalism is a defining characteristic of contemporary humanitarianism's aesthetics of ruination. Earlier, I invoked

Jacques Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible, which he describes as "an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics," where aesthetics is "the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience."³⁵ This "primary aesthetics" provides a basis for inquiry into the aesthetic characteristics of specific artistic practices and whether and how they might "intervene" in a given distribution of the sensible. Because the relationship between sense perception and its interpretation or intelligibility within a given distribution of the sensible necessarily describes "a form of hierarchy among sentient beings,"³⁶ aesthetics is vital to the reorganization of and reorientation to the given social order that is the essence of true politics. Rancière's analysis as developed over the course of many works centers a distinction between the police and politics; the former includes "the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution,"³⁷ while politics unsettles and rearranges the police distribution of the sensible. Crucially, politics is only possible through the assertion of what is perceived as excessive to the human social order yet is in fact fundamental to it—an "equality of anyone and everyone";³⁸ it happens when those who have no right within the prevailing order to speak or to describe themselves as part of a community nonetheless claim that they do have a part in that community, that they *are* that community.³⁹ Likewise, "politics ceases . . . wherever the whole of the community is reduced to the sum of its parts with nothing left over."⁴⁰ To truly engage politics, then, is to invoke disagreement as a fundamental and, crucially, irresolvable disruption in the nature of human social reality.

Rancière sees the current and frequent invocation of humanity as the ur-subject of a consensus-based global political system as in service to a project of radical depoliticization. Describing consensus as "one of the master terms of our time,"⁴¹ he articulates a deep concern regarding its deployment to preserve the existing social order at all costs:

Some interpret it as the global agreement of governing and opposition parties over the great national interests. Others see it more broadly as a new style of government that gives precedence to discussion and negotiation to resolve conflicts. Consensus, however, means a lot more—properly understood it signifies a mode of symbolic

structuration of the community that empties out the political core that constitutes it, namely dissension. A *political* community is indeed a community that is structurally divided, not divided between diverging interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself. A political “people” is never the same thing as the sum of a population. It is always a form of supplementary symbolism in relation to any counting of the population and of its parts.⁴²

Consensus is a kind of totalizing and infinite effort to secure humanity against the forms of grouphood that, through the lens of consensus, can only be seen as existentially threatening in their excessivity to humanity itself.⁴³ In this, Rancière has much to offer the critique of a widespread and entrenched mode of thought according to which humanitarian ethical considerations—how to best help a target population, how to discern who is in need and deserving of help in the first place, how to prioritize the distribution of limited resources so as to provide maximal relief for the most intense suffering—are seen as requiring a fundamental ideological agreement about the interest of the greater good that transcends and hence obliterates different understandings of reality. In a 2006 article, “The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics,” he describes the post-9/11 Euro-American sociopolitical landscape as a flattened and featureless one in which consensus defines the foundation and end goal of (putatively) ethical action. Rancière defines “ethics” here as “the kind of thinking which establishes the identity between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action,”⁴⁴ and argues that it is the presumption of a necessary and complete synonymy of what is perceived as right and what is perceived as reality⁴⁵ that produces the kind of ethics that advocates for humanitarian warfare—that is, warfare the purpose of which is to achieve a sociopolitical community in which there are no distinctions or divisions. Conceived as an undivided whole, such a community requires a kind of radical exclusion that, terrifyingly, registers as no exclusion at all.

Following Rancière, we could say that in the reality created by a genocidal distribution of the sensible, a basic essentialism creates an orderly alignment of biological/cultural identities with political positions, and determines who is recognized as part of humanity (and what their “proper” place in it is). Indeed, humanitarian efforts to understand and restore societies that have experienced genocide tend to reinforce this distribution of the sensible. As Mahmood Mamdani reveals in his inquiry into the Rwandan genocide, the standard ways in which such events are critically analyzed

are themselves indebted to the same colonial logics that created the very conditions for those events, and that persist in widespread and deeply entrenched sociological epistemologies about ethnic and cultural distinctions that supposedly inexorably lead to violence. For Mamdani, it is only possible to understand what happened in Rwanda—the fact that so many members of a society participated in the most brutal and intimate forms of violence, in the sort of killing that is “hard work”⁴⁶—by breaking with the typical explanations given.⁴⁷ These typical explanations rely on the Western colonialist construction of ethnic and racial groupings, which are in turn seen as essentially determinative of one’s worldview; as Mamdani puts it, they tend to “*naturalize* political difference as a simple and unproblematic reflection of cultural and biological difference.”⁴⁸ For Dylan Rodríguez too, writing in regard to the long US imperial relationship with the Philippines, “the conventions of empirical social science do not offer an adequate methodological lens”⁴⁹ to understand and contend with either the true scale of genocidal destruction enacted by the United States or the lasting implications of the fact that “the process of genocidal conquest was utterly *labor intensive*”⁵⁰ in the massive violence required to create a new version of onto-political reality. Genocide cannot be understood here as a discrete historical event located simply in the past, as the logical outcome of the encounter with difference, or as based in an antiquated racism that has since been transcended; rather, Rodríguez sees “the ongoing inscription of racist genocide *as the condition of possibility* for the Filipino’s sustained presence in (and proximity to) the United States.”⁵¹

What I am naming “humanity’s ruins” is this socio-onto-political order in which genocide regulates the distribution of the sensible via an intensive labor that many everyday people have been and continue to be engaged in. This labor takes many forms, including the consumption of scholarship, media, and news, through which many of us—albeit, and crucially so, in various and often incommensurate ways—participate in the production of humanitarian discourse and indeed the construction of a humanitarian ethos. The architecture of humanity’s ruins is premised on the achievement of an ostensibly consensual organization of bodies, subjects, and roles—although this desired consensus is at best only ever extremely tenuous. Indeed, the definition of “ruin” is itself internally contradictory, as “that which remains” of a “complete loss.” This tension, between the potentiality of a complete loss and the desire to nonetheless secure some kind of remainder in the aftermath of such loss, animates humanitarian renderings of the projects of alleviating human suffering and ensuring

human survival. Ruins have an architecture, one that appears to allow for the destroyed structure (whether physical or social) to have some relation to what came before, a predeterminable meaning. Its usefulness for facilitating a knowledge project defined by control and guaranteeing some kind of continued presence for a predefined humanity is also what makes it such an attractive trope for genocidal regimes (as I will discuss later). In the next section, I will elaborate on the two core concepts of contemporary humanitarian ethics—humanity as a whole and human suffering—and the particular imagining of the human world they produce, so that I can then return to a further explanation of how the aesthetics of ruination manifest in a variety of discourses and media forms.

Humanity as a Whole and Human Suffering

The entry for “humanitarian” in its adjectival form in the *Oxford English Dictionary* highlights the two intertwined conceptual formations—humanity as a whole, and human suffering—that vitalize humanitarian ethics: “2.a. Concerned with humanity as a whole; *spec.* seeking to promote human welfare as a primary or pre-eminent good; acting, or disposed to act, on this basis rather than for pragmatic or strategic reasons. . . . 2.b. Designating an event or situation which causes or involves (widespread) human suffering, *esp.* one which requires the provision of aid or support on a large scale.”⁵² An understanding of humanity as defined by and for itself, with no remainder or outside, is suggested by the definition of “whole”: “complete, undivided, total”; “lacking no part, element, or essential characteristic; having its entire extent or magnitude; perfect, complete.”⁵³ And suffering, while implicitly posited as a fundamental and defining feature of human existence, gestures toward unequal and potentially hierarchical delineations internally and externally defining humanity in the invocation of taken-for-granted processes of discernment and definition—namely, about what counts as human suffering, how the necessity of aid is determined as a particular response to suffering, and indeed who should provide that aid and in what form and to whom.

Histories and examinations of humanitarianism take up these two conceptual formations to varying degrees—though to my knowledge, there has been no systematic inquiry into them and their relationship to each other, or into their association with a genocidal understanding of humanity. Scholarship problematizing the universalism that humanitarianism presumes and requires does not exactly critique the formation of humanity as a “whole,” but it does importantly emphasize the serious problems

with the idea that there are fundamental shared qualities that define all humans and that can serve as the basis for humanitarian work. As Julietta Hua explains so clearly, universalism relies on the demarcation of essential hierarchies in order to define humanity:

The modern regime of power established in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment projects that sought to explain the nature of man and his difference from things, animals, and slaves posited the notion of humanity as universally defined by his capacity to reason, his ability to exist as self-conscious, and his recognition of the rule of law. . . . As the philosophers of man reasoned about those attributes distinguishing man, they were most concerned with describing the conditions around them: the condition of Europe. . . . The writing of this subject as the model of humanity envisioned this subject as universal—a standard against which all other consciousnesses and subjectivities could be measured.⁵⁴

The violence of universalism is not just due to the fact that it refuses to recognize and appreciate difference, but is also due to what wholeness demands: dominance, ownership, and the (attempted) eradication of other ways of being human that would threaten the illusion of wholeness. Sylvia Wynter elaborates on this violence further in her description and indictment of the “overrepresentation of Man,”⁵⁵ in which the particular “Western bourgeois” conception of the human is posited as synonymous with humanity as a whole. She emphasizes the fact that this understanding of humanity is parochial, its very claim to totality indicative of a fundamental failure to see its own locality.⁵⁶ In this, she flips the normative racist script according to which some humans are too enthralled by the particularities of their own identities and socialities to have a conception of or commitment to humankind as a unified whole. But more than this, Wynter argues that what she calls the secular “liberation” that led to the rise of Man made the dehumanizing and domination of other humans into a logical necessity, given secularism’s institution of the idea of a homogeneous and universal natural order. “The West would therefore remain unable, from then on, to conceive of an Other to what it calls human. . . . All other modes of being human would instead have to be seen not as the alternative modes of being human that they are ‘out there,’ but adaptively, as the lack of the West’s ontologically absolute self-description.”⁵⁷ The concerted, forceful, and never-complete *work* of realizing a hierarchy of humanity is evident in the philosophical machinations

and material brutalities—indeed, the various forms of suffering—required to reproduce the universalist human subject.⁵⁸

As such, what are the stakes and effects of humanitarian invocations of suffering? Based on what kinds of discourses, beliefs, and ideologies are certain events designated as involving “(widespread) human suffering” and requiring “aid or support on a large scale,” and what kinds of actions does such designation enable? Who is understood as unable to alleviate their own suffering (much less that of others) and thus as requiring aid? Conversely, who is seen as causing such suffering and thus as requiring management and/or punishment—and as being dangers to a humanitarian world order? And what kinds of methods and aims of social justice, or liberation, or freedom, are made invisible or illegible by the understanding of suffering advanced under the mantle of humanitarianism? One of the first issues that arises in considering these questions regards the very recognition of suffering, as such recognition has been central to the institutions of genocidally aimed settler colonialism, imperialism, and chattel slavery. Discussing the writings of John Rankin, a white man who arrived at a critique of slavery by imagining himself and his loved ones in the place of the enslaved, Saidiya Hartman considers how in his expression of empathy, “Rankin must supplant the black captive in order to give expression to black suffering.”⁵⁹ Not only does empathy serve to produce a white-ascendant form of subjectivity, it also undergirds the authority of the white-ascendant state. Indeed, in her rereading of *Heart of Darkness*, Neda Atanasoski reveals how colonizers’ self-critique, in the form of the call to “recognize a common and universal humanity against which the excesses of imperial subjugation must be condemned,”⁶⁰ has long been part and parcel of the ongoing project of US empire. And Miriam Ticktin sheds crucial light on this phenomenon in the current moment, in relation to the French government’s implementation of special humanitarian measures to admit certain and very few migrants, based on the official recognition of particular forms of suffering—namely, those that would not require a questioning of the operation and legitimacy of the French state.⁶¹ In this sense, the very work of the humanitarian project to alleviate suffering is to construct the figure of the deserving recipient of aid, that is, the “victim.”

Offering a critical genealogy of the rise of what she calls a “transnational regime of care,” Ticktin expresses a concern with the centrality of this figure of the victim to “the new doctrine of the responsibility to protect [which] merges the benevolent responsibility to intervene in times of suffering with a right to employ force.”⁶² Insofar as the victim is aligned

with the side of the good and the moral via their depoliticization, then conversely, those who are not legible as such “morally and ethically untainted” actors, or who refuse such positioning, can be characterized as immoral and unethical.⁶³ As targets of Western militarism are charged with committing inhuman forms of violence, then “fighting to bring inhuman geographies into the fold of historical progress, humanitarian wars against terror, or atrocity, are regarded as a sacrifice necessary to humanize the world.”⁶⁴ It is in these zones designated for the commission of not only legitimate but necessary violence that humanitarian “action based on the moral imperative and grounded in benevolence and compassion”⁶⁵ reaches its terroristic apogee. Not only does suffering—both as an analytic category and as a presumed state of being—supplant other ways of resisting and experiences of socially sanctioned violence; moreover, the legible indicators of suffering of those who are in fact the targets of oppression/legitimized violence get grossly distorted to signify entirely the opposite, that is, that they are not the targets of oppression.

This use of suffering is investigated by scholars who look at how, at the sites of the most concentrated military operations, humanitarian principles come into synonymy with ongoing orchestrations of terror. Here, care *is* violence, operating as one type of “state force” on the minds, bodies, and hearts of its targets.⁶⁶ Treating Guantánamo as a palimpsest of US imperialisms, Neel Ahuja revisits the early-1990s incarceration of HIV-positive Haitian refugees there, “the world’s first HIV concentration camp.”⁶⁷ This camp, where people were made to live in—as they also rebelled against—horrific conditions, was described by the United States government as humanitarian, as protecting the lives of the imprisoned. For Ahuja, the fact that this characterization was at best cynical “does not mean that the state was incorrect to associate it with the practice of humanitarianism.”⁶⁸ “Caring” for these people was a way to justify the supposed need for a military response to disease threats, which in turn became its own justification for the ongoing colonial/imperial state project of securitization.⁶⁹ Ahuja reveals how the vitality of humanitarianism itself—as a discourse, as something debated and as evolving through this debate—is produced by the deadly conditions of the camp:

The open-air prison camps repeatedly constructed as emergency detention facilities at Guantánamo accelerated the biological precarity of those quarantined through practices of concentration, deprivation, and exposure, making normative political contestation

over camp life most often centered on whether the camp accomplishes the simple biological provision of life itself. . . . This very situation of deprivation quickly makes the camp into a site of contestation and reform, an emergent space of humanitarian intervention and the introduction of new disciplines of care. As such, the camp has an intimate if conflicted relationship to the expansion of liberal humanism under empire.⁷⁰

This description speaks poignantly and urgently to just this situation in another context—Israel’s occupation of Palestine. As Palestine is subject to continuing radical control and destruction, the resultant extreme “biological precarity” of the people living there has become the object of focus of humanitarian arguments and efforts.⁷¹ In a kind of horrific tautology, the Israeli state itself has mobilized that synonymy of “Palestine” with “humanitarian disaster zone” to retroactively justify the continuing occupation. Jasbir Puar reveals how this invocation of humanitarianism has a precise aim: to turn the politics of the occupied—of survival, of living, of anti-occupation, of resistance, of freedom—into an impropriety.⁷² Suffering becomes the ultimate trap, a setup, as in this context it will inevitably be taken by the occupying force as a sign that its violence is moral, just, and necessary.

This should lead us to critically consider the stakes of humanitarian invocations of suffering in social justice approaches to ending racist statecraft and imperialist warfare. For example, Judith Butler has developed a widely popular argument that locates the problem of war in the refusal to acknowledge all humans’ equal capacity to experience suffering: “Those we kill are not quite human, and not quite alive, which means that we do not feel the same horror and outrage over the loss of their lives as we do over the loss of those lives that bear national or religious similarity to our own.”⁷³ As I will assert in a more detailed argument about Butler’s larger body of work and the related work of other thinkers later in the book, to posit that the way to end war is to achieve a shift in consciousness that will allow for a recognition of all humans’ humanity—based in the recognition of the shared experience of suffering—is to promote an understanding of humanity as an internally coherent category. The internal difference that in fact defines humanity (as indeed any category is defined) must thus be externalized, projected outside in a kind of faux maneuver whose inevitable failure is proven by the fact that it needs to be reiterated again and again. “Humanity” is not simply an exclusionary category, but is dependent upon both an internal differentiation (of distinct kinds of humans and human qualities) *and* an indistinction

from other things in the world, both of which inexorably point to the non-self-sameness of humanity. As Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, the establishment of “distinct kinds of human beings, namely, the self-determined subject and its outer-determined others”⁷⁴ could only be achieved “by tying certain bodily and mental configurations to different global regions: the subject of transparency, for whom universal reason is an interior guide, and subjects of affectability, for whom universal reason remains an exterior ruler.”⁷⁵ But there is a founding paradox here, as the supposedly self-determining “transparent I” must appeal to the exterior in order to establish itself as such: “without the idea of exterior things, the mind’s distinguishing attribute, interiority, cannot be articulated.”⁷⁶ This is what Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance* captures, “the transparent (interior/temporal) I as an effect of differentiation or relationality, of the symbolic regimen where ‘being and meaning’ emerge always already in exteriority and violence, out of the erasure of other (im)possible beings and meanings.”⁷⁷

For Ferreira da Silva, this violence through which the “transparent I” is established has serious implications for how racial oppression, and emancipation from it, are commonly understood. Because fully achieved humanity is configured as the “transparent I” within the kinds of anti-racist arguments that treat race as primarily an essentialist construct, racial oppression is often conceived as the natural outcome of what are coded as pre-given differences. This is evident in the prevailing “view of subjection (domination or oppression) as exclusion from universality resulting from unbecoming sociohistorical (cultural or historical) strategies motivated by physical (sexual or racial) traits.”⁷⁸ The answer to subjection as exclusion is figured as inclusion, but as Ferreira da Silva shows, the problem of racialized subjection cannot be solved by being recognized as fully human. Precisely because “it is always already the exclusive attribute of a transparent I, the racial subaltern’s desire for emancipation, for inclusion in the dominant (white Anglo-Saxon society), is fundamentally a desire for self-obliteration.”⁷⁹ In other words, the presumed need for inclusion within humanity that is the common humanitarian response to the problem of imperial/racist warfare relies on an implicit and obfuscated obliteration of the other-than-white racialized subject.

This obliteration manifests in humanitarian discourses as a demand imposed upon those polities positioned in the lower reaches of the geopolitical distribution of power and authority. In the realm of international governance, the mandate to adhere to human rights and to prove a commitment to a universal conception of humanity has been a key strategy for severely restricting what are seen as legitimate modes of resistance to oppression.⁸⁰

This demand—to demonstrate a consciousness of and an orientation toward humanity as a whole—becomes a death sentence, due to the institutionalized and predefined failure of certain groups of humans to meet this demand. If, to reiterate a key claim of Wynter's, the Western/Eurocentric conception of humanity produces its putative universalism by eliding its actual parochialism, the latter must be projected onto various others. Across a great variety of humanitarian discursive and textual sites, parochialism is located again and again within certain subsets of humans: people engaged in socialities and/or politics referred to as tribes; Indigenous and/or Fourth World peoples; villagers in various parts of the so-called Third World and/or Global South; those living in poverty; and so-called Muslim extremists, among others. Placeholders for the local, the narrow, and the limited in view, these peoples are figured as what humanity must come to exist beyond. How that beyond is achieved is what concerns me. Often, it is through the instrumentalization and use of such peoples as figures in a scenography of a disaster that is posited as in *humanity's* imminent or possible future. Their actual and/or figurative disappearance, their violently enforced figuring as divested from futurity, is what enables a reflection on the possibilities for the preservation of a whole human community. Here, genocidal actions, ideologies, and fantasies of disappearance serve to actively produce humanity as well as that which humanity cannot abide.

Planned Ruins: Vulnerability and the Aesthetics of Ruination

The investment in defining humanity as an internally coherent, self-same category is manifest in the commonly invoked humanitarian trope of vulnerability. This trope has found purchase in a wide range of epistemic contexts as a primary means to characterize specific populations in relation to their exposure to threat and to the need for care, and as such it cuts across blatantly imperialist/racist and progressive discourses alike, charting the many indistinctions of humanitarian and war ethics.⁸¹ Within scholarship specifically devoted to questions of social justice, vulnerability appears in a variety of roles: as a hermeneutic, a way to explain the phenomenon of individual and societal investments in violence; as the central concept of a theory of social positioning and relationality; and to name a state of being that is ostensibly characteristic of human existence. An attunement to humans' shared experience of vulnerability is meant to provide a new way of being with each other, of accessing and engaging ethical responsibility toward

those who may be (perceived as) profoundly different from oneself. On this understanding, the capacity to know and act from the personal experience of vulnerability becomes a goal and a virtue, as it is deemed to offer a way to understand others' similar experiences of vulnerability and thus to not perpetuate harm.

But the act of defining humanity on the basis of a characteristic and fundamental vulnerability has a longer and deeply disturbing history. In regard to the formation of Western biopolitical epistemologies in the nineteenth century, Kyla Schuller's work reveals the conceptual and material history of vulnerability's racialization as a feature of a whitened ontology. Schuller reminds us that "the subject is constructed in Western philosophy *as a highly vulnerable* entity, for it is wholly dependent on sensory impressions from the environment for its own self-development and acquisition of knowledge."⁸² It was precisely this understanding of the civilized subject as uniquely vulnerable that was expressed in the concept of impressibility, the capacity to receive and be affected by sense impressions generated by appropriately managed interactions with external objects.⁸³ Sentimentalism was what allowed for this appropriate engagement with the external world, "by cultivating the ability to respond to sensory stimulations on the basis of emotional reflection, rather than instinctive reflex. Together, impressibility and sentimentalism distinguished civilized bodies as receptive to their milieu and able to discipline their sensory susceptibility and as such in possession of life and vitality that required protection from the threat posed by primitive bodies deemed to be impulsive and insensate, incapable of evolutionary change."⁸⁴ As Schuller goes on to argue so persuasively about the capacity of impressibility ascribed to civilized subjects, "affect . . . depends on the notion of impaired relationality as its constitutive outside."⁸⁵ This understanding of affect has also undergirded the characterization of colonized peoples racialized as other-than-white as actively threatening to a humanity conceived of as vulnerable. I would add that the ostensible qualities of the white civilized subject are also the qualities so often ascribed to the modern humanitarian subject: morally attuned to their own suffering and the suffering of others, able to emotionally process and respond to that suffering in an appropriate way, and possessed of a sensory and intellectual awareness oriented by and aligned with the particular distribution of the sensible that characterizes a whitened and civilized social order.

Perhaps more than any other, the event of the invention of nuclear weapons technology has been used to reproduce the trope of a vulnerable humanity whose continued existence can only be ensured through the development

of a universal consciousness of threat, which will then be the basis for the elimination of that threat—a threat that is characterized as certain other human beings. This is strikingly apparent in the instrumentalization of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki for the purposes of ostensible world peace. Lisa Yoneyama writes about this in relationship to Hiroshima in particular, brilliantly showing how bombing produces a particular kind of knowledge that not only informs humanitarian arguments for peace, but becomes formative of the experiences of those it targets:

Almost without exception, the survivors' accounts include the distance they were located from the hypocenter, precisely given in meters or kilometers, at the instant of the bomb's explosion. The witnesses' memories are mediated by the visual image of a city map on which the by now familiar concentric circles, radiating outward and measuring distance from the hypocenter, have been superimposed. . . .

At the same time, the image of concentric circles radiating outward over a map of the city replicates the vision of the pilots who dropped the bomb and inspected its aftermath. The power of the bombsight to objectify, determine, and name everything that survived beneath it was such that hardly anyone has been able to narrate postnuclear Hiroshima from outside this perspective. This gaze from above, a transcendental sight, was forever inscribed on the landscape and came to condition any subsequent attempt to represent the incident. It has also subsumed survivors' diverse experiences and subjectivities under the universal and anonymous identity of *hibakusha* [bomb survivor].⁸⁶

This use of the atomic bomb on civilians has played a central role in producing a modern aesthetics of ruination, in which the most radical violence is codified as necessary to preserve humanity. In his indictment of the “necro-economy” that undergirds international law’s humanitarianism,⁸⁷ Eyal Weizman details the ideological machinations set in motion by this conceptualization of massively destructive nuclear technology as definitively humanitarian. Tracing the logics of the conceptual apparatus of the “lesser evil” used to justify Global North/Western military actions as supposedly necessary for the prevention of “greater evils,” he notes that “in one of its more macabre moments it was suggested that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima might also be tolerated under the defence of the lesser evil. Faced with a humanitarian A-bomb, one might wonder what, in fact, might come under

the definition of a greater evil.”⁸⁸ The abject absurdity of the lesser/greater evil principle and its expression in the legal precept of proportionality is expressed in a variety of forms: a “death ratio,” the number of civilians expected to be killed in a military strike, as determinant of whether the strike is justifiable; a mathematical formula, developed from an equation measuring molecular entropy, used to calculate the likelihood of an organization collapsing if a certain number of its members are assassinated; the measurement of the potential proportion of harm to civilians versus harm to soldiers.⁸⁹

Here we arrive at a characteristic feature of genocidal humanitarianism: The process of making meaning about, of evaluating the severity and degree of purposefulness of destruction, is appropriated from those who face its severest effects in service of humanity as a whole. In other words, destructive capacity itself, and control over what that destruction *means*, has come to be seen as the required foundation for a developed understanding of humanity, of the unique capacities and potentials that define it. This kind of thinking achieved a particularly bizarre refinement in Nazi Germany: Albert Speer, the Nazi Party’s chief architect *and* planner of total war (war without destructive limits, which explicitly aims for the devastation of civilian centers), imagined that the very goal of civilized architecture was to leave behind ruins—ones of the sort that would be immediately recognizable to humans of the future as the remains of an advanced civilization. About Speer, Paul Virilio notes the following:

For Speer, the architect had a cinematic function similar to that of the military commander—namely, the capacity to determine in a building *what is permanent and what is impermanent*. In the last analysis, he argued, to construct a building is to foresee the way in which it will be destroyed, and thus to secure ruins which, thousands of years later, “will inspire as many heroic thoughts as the models of Antiquity do today.” In the same year Hitler and Speer, no doubt impatient to imagine the future décor of the tragedy on which they were working, ordered the demolition of the centre of Berlin. Before becoming a battlefield, it was to be a premature field of ruins.⁹⁰

In the chapter of his memoir titled “Architectural Megalomania,” Speer explains that it was in observing the rusted remains of a streetcar depot being demolished to make way for the construction of his first major commission under Hitler—a huge stone amphitheater—that it occurred to him that “buildings of modern construction were poorly suited to form that

'bridge of tradition' to future generations which Hitler was calling for."⁹¹ Speer's answer to this problem, his "theory of ruin value," proposed that "by using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or . . . thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models."⁹² Speer's theory of ruin value thus articulated not simply a fantasy of permanence but also a management of the very process of decay, of impermanence itself. To wit, he had "a romantic drawing prepared" of the proposed building, depicting it "after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outlines still clearly recognizable," which prompted Hitler to order that all important buildings were to be constructed according to this theory.⁹³

The theory of ruin value exemplifies how the project of securing humanity against disappearance is conceived as necessitating genocide: In the construction of planned ruins, the ability and willingness to wage total war is made into the sign and definition of humanity's presence. But more than this, total war becomes the very means of ensuring the transmission of humanity's legacy into the future by controlling the meaning to be made about humanity's end. Thus humanity's ruins—exemplified by Speer's "romantic" crumbling amphitheater, an enclosed circle devoid of human life, empty seats bearing witness to nothing human—have a strange and impossible architecture. They index a humanity whose self-coherence could only be achieved through the eradication of all those who might dare to disrupt its desired order and to expose the impossibility of its attainment of self-definition. But such radical homogeneity requires nothing less than ultimate destruction; the hidden message of humanity's former presence that the ruins carry into the future would have no one to receive it. In this sense, a major effect of the imagining of humanity's end in the humanitarian mode, where the goal is to save humanity, is to quite literally destroy the possibility of disagreement, that is, to mandate a fundamentally depoliticizing approach to the response to human suffering that ultimately necessitates utter devastation as the price of epistemological certainty and ontological stability. I would suggest, then, that humanitarian discourses of ruin are not just about a sort of responsible expression of horror at the world-targeting technologies developed during twentieth-century warfare, but also a longer-lived project in which knowledge of and about violence is claimed over and against the "unknowing" state of those who have been made to experience its severest effects. The condition of possibility for the concept of the ruin is a cosmology in which "the end" can and

must be defined, by and in the name of a humanity characterized by its capacity to *document and understand* vulnerability, over and against those who are seen as simply *being* ontologically vulnerable. Humanitarianism's grammar of anti-violence critique is structured around the treatment of the targets of violence as symbolic supply for the subject's intellectual engagement with the problem of how to save humanity as a whole.

Indeed, the aesthetics of ruination is founded in massive Western colonial/imperial violence against peoples across the globe as a grim historical continuity that those of us here and now are located firmly within. I am interested in how deeply and variously this aesthetics permeates a variety of media forms and fields, the distribution of the sensible it produces, how it orders our understandings of reality, and how it calls so many of us into its production. It is from postcolonial cultural studies' critical inquiry into the relationship between media, aesthetics, and colonialism as an onto-social-political project to fix the world into a hierarchical arrangement of being that I draw my discussion and analysis of specific material, epistemic, and affective technologies that constitute the aesthetics of ruination. In the scholarly and popular texts and cultural objects that I take up in this book, the following technologies emerge as especially common, cutting across the otherwise disparate interests, points of view, and approaches that make up the diverse landscape of humanitarian discursive production: the privileging of militarized visual knowledge systems that figure seeing *as* the capacity for destruction; the alignment of documentary and ethnographic modes of knowledge production with eradication; the narrativizing of human extinction due to the contemporary threats of environmental devastation and nuclear warfare via racialized imperial tropes and logics; the symbolics of poverty as a central concept and condition of the post-World War II project of development; and the hermeneutic functions of systemized violence that produces visible wounding. While each of these technologies has been critically analyzed in its own right, I am interested in how they work synergistically within humanitarian texts, projects, and discourses to produce a profoundly violent ethics where it is perhaps least expected. Indeed, by looking at a variety of media, I engage humanitarianism not as a specific set of acts by a circumscribed set of social actors, but rather as the very warp and weft of the socio-onto-political order in which many of us are in some way enmeshed.

As scholars such as Lisa Cartwright, Rey Chow, Akira Mizuta Lippitt, Jonathan Mirzoeff, and Fatimah Tobing Rony (to name a few) have shown, vision has held a privileged place within Western imperial epistemes as the

sense best capable of demonstrating the supposedly heightened knowledge capacities of “civilized” human societies.⁹⁴ Postcolonial and critical military studies scholars have also made much of the historical and epistemic concurrence of the development of advanced photographic and motion picture technologies and airplane technology during the age of high imperialism; both have been imagined to grant those using them the reassurance of their own physical safety, technical and moral precision, intellectual superiority, and godlike powers of perception. Paul Virilio charts this concurrence in the development of high-capacity weaponry (like machine guns) and serial photographic technology, with designs for the latter directly inspired by the former,⁹⁵ while Caren Kaplan traces the alignment of aerial visual technologies with militarized modes of perception further back in history, to the development of military cartography, balloon aerostation, and building-sized panoramic paintings in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, revealing how thoroughly it has infiltrated common understandings of human reality in general: “This view ‘from the heavens’ has powered various representations of not only terrain and individual communities but the Western, modern state as a political institution. . . . By the twentieth century, the concept of a universal, all-seeing perspective became thoroughly incorporated into colonial, state, and military modes of organization, management, and planning.”⁹⁶ Within the specific conjunction of human flight and visual sensing technologies, the project of destruction came into alignment with the drive toward totalizing knowledge. Reflecting on the synonymizing of the supposedly unique powers of visual perception with the capacity for massive, horrific destruction on a scale not previously possible, Virilio notes this paradigmatic articulation: “‘If I had to sum up current thinking on precision missiles and saturation weaponry in a single sentence,’ said W. J. Perry, a former US Under-Secretary of State for Defense, ‘I’d put it like this: once you can see the target, you can expect to destroy it.’”⁹⁷

To this discussion, Ronak Kapadia adds the concern that current aerial sensing and warfare technologies efface the variety of other-than-visual sensations, experiences, and modes of living that the “US global security state”⁹⁸ both produces and relies upon for the continuation and justification of warfare. He notes that it is the alignment of visual technologies and discourses with an ostensible epistemic mastery that should prompt us to ask, “What do the people on the ground who are targeted by the so-called signature strikes of the drone age see, think, feel, and sense when they encounter this swarm in the dystopian here and now? How have early

twenty-first-century technologies of aerial warfare and remote surveillance disordered and rearranged people's collective sense of place, space, and community across the expanding scenes of American warfare in South and West Asia, North and West Africa, and the Greater Middle East?"⁹⁹ Here, Kapadia asks after the experience of inhabiting the deadly ground on which humanity's ruins are being constructed and the sensibilities it enforces and those it makes difficult or impossible to access, revealing some of the multiple tactics employed to produce an aesthetics of ruination. For example, the use of the "double-tap" method in drone warfare (in which the same target will be hit multiple times in quick succession) has the effect not only of inducing an experience of constant, intense fear, but of "disaggregating" groups of people from each other as it "disorganizes and destroys communal bonds."¹⁰⁰ I would argue that such violent alterations of the structures and sensibilities of human life become the material and epistemological fodder for humanitarian subjectivity and ethics.

Theorist and filmmaker Fatimah Tobing Rony exposes the history of ethnography as precisely such violent consumption in her short video *On Cannibalism*, a commentary on the experience of her development of the "third eye," the capacity to see how one is being seen within a racist/imperialist sociopolitical order. The video covers the history of ethnographic visual technologies—chrono-photography, films, live ethnographic displays, museum dioramas—using overlaid images that emphasize the material and epistemic violences of ethnography's grammar of cultural knowledge. When at the end of the video Rony intones, "I haven't yet learned how to see. I haven't yet begun to believe," I take her to be pointing out that Western imperial modes of perception are not natural (despite the constant and forceful repetition of their supposed naturalness) but must be learned, an acknowledgment of seeing as destructive in ways less overt but no less dangerous than military targeting, an ironic jab at common understandings of who is presumed capable of seeing, and perhaps also a commentary on the conditions that give rise to the third eye and what they require of those who have the third eye experience.¹⁰¹ The images of skeletons and dismembered body parts with putatively scientific labels highlights the synonymy of ethnographic documentation with the project of eradication. Trinh T. Minh-ha's classic and still crucial works on ethnography thematize this as well—the ethnographic project's consuming desire for total knowledge drives a project of complete capture and incorporation, aiming for the "skin, flesh, and bone" and indeed the soul of the ethnographic subject, the very

“*marrow of native life.*”¹⁰² I understand both Rony and Trinh as offering commentary on the impossible onto-philosophy of imperial ethnography, which seeks to establish a form of literal and figurative cannibalism in which the consumer accrues presence and sovereignty over the consumed, in some sense attempting the impossible task of escaping death. In this, we can trace the alliance between documentation and eradication back to well before the advent of planes and photographic/motion picture technology, locating it as a fundamental feature of the Western imperial episteme.

The extractivism that is at the heart of the project of development can also be understood as a kind of cannibalism or eradication, a vampirism, which precisely through extraction defines humanity as the achievement of civilizational advancement beyond poverty—that is, beyond dependence and lack. Indeed, Balakrishnan Rajagopal argues that in the wake of World War II, development became the new “ideology of governance”¹⁰³ for Western states and institutions rearticulating their authority in the face of rapid decolonization and Third World liberation movements. According to Rajagopal, “the discovery of poverty emerged as a working principle of the process whereby the domain of interaction between the West and the non-West was defined.”¹⁰⁴ Here, Rajagopal names poverty not as a preexisting material reality but rather as a conceptual invention that would become a primary way in which the necessity for humanitarian intervention would be articulated and the extractivism of the post-World War II economic order would be elided.¹⁰⁵ Insofar as “*the objective of poverty reduction provided the moral, the humanitarian dimension*” to the creation of the Bretton Woods institutions (those UN-backed institutions of the current global economic order) “*as ‘development’ institutions,*”¹⁰⁶ humanitarianism becomes mercenary. Offering a similar line of inquiry into the concept of poverty, Sylvia Wynter indicts the definition of Man as “*Homo oeconomicus*” and its particular other, the poor and more especially the “underdeveloped.”¹⁰⁷ For Wynter, *Homo oeconomicus* imposes a specific form of memory, a memory of human history as evolution and progress, where humanity expresses itself in its highest form by mastering “natural scarcity” through “material redemption,” or the “unending production of wealth.”¹⁰⁸ The underdeveloped are, of course, unable to achieve this mastery.¹⁰⁹ This articulates with the common portrayal of the “underdeveloped” as having an improper relationship to the plethora of objects produced under advanced racial capitalism; often cast as fetishistic enthrallment, I see this characterization of the relationship to objects as a reiteration of the supposed dependency of those

peoples subject to development, a kind of sublation of the vast project of *taking* that brings those objects into existence, and indeed the voiding of an array of differential cosmologies and modes of human life.

A similar kind of onto-socio-political absenting is also effected by torture and wounding. While the instrumentalization of images of suffering for the purpose of justifying Western humanitarian military interventions has been very well analyzed across a broad array of scholarship, I am particularly interested in the specific functions of acts of wounding themselves, as well as of the circulation of images and narratives of certain kinds of physical and psychological wounds within humanitarian reckonings with warfare. Wounding and indeed torture serve not just to inflict harm and suffering, but also to create bodies and subjects and solidify social positions, and serve as modes of racialization, gendering, sexualization, and indeed of defining humanity. I recall here how Hortense Spillers positions chattel slavery as the founding event of the modern Western episteme specifically due to its employment of torture: Spillers argues that it was the torture of enslaved people that enabled the territorialization of the white American body and the putative consolidation of the same's subjectivity.¹¹⁰ And while posed in regard to the particular situation of the postcolony, Achille Mbembe's notion of "death-worlds"¹¹¹—involving the production of grievously wounded bodies "in the form of human shapes that are alive, to be sure, but whose bodily integrity has been replaced by pieces, fragments, folds, even immense wounds that are difficult to close"¹¹²—is helpful in understanding some of the perhaps less-obvious functions of the circulation of media displaying injured subjects. Mbembe posits that the function of these wounded bodies "is to keep before the eyes of the victim—and of the people around him or her—the morbid spectacle of severing."¹¹³ Following Talal Asad's argument that torture is a main technique of the so-called war on terror for producing "the terrorist" as an ostensibly real and socially legible category of person, I would add that such wounded bodies also serve a pedagogical and a hermeneutic function,¹¹⁴ impressing upon us that some people are especially ontologically vulnerable and that others of us—we humanitarians—have the duty to witness and make sense of this vulnerability for the sake of humanity.

How does one live with and in the aftermath of violence and continuing violence, committed and/or made sense of for humanitarian purposes, while dismantling the distinction between those who merely experience suffering and those who truly understand it? I read Rony as speaking to this question in her recent development of the concept of the fourth eye. Here, she

references the experience and position of the young daughter of Philando Castile's partner, as she watches her mother confront Castile's murderers:

When the mother sees herself and her boyfriend Philando being seen by the police officer as black, and therefore vulnerable to violence and death, she is seeing her situation with a third eye.

The fourth eye witnesses that constitution of the third eye. The fourth eye not only sees that the emperor has no clothes, she sees that everyone is pretending that the emperor does have clothes. The fourth eye is profoundly collective: an inclusive "we," a communal "I," a black daughter comforting—and observing—her mother and how she constitutes herself in the face of police violence and a nation's visual biopolitics. The fourth eye requires us to be both the patient and the doctor: the patient who has to constantly explain to the doctor what the psychic trauma is and what is required to heal from that.¹¹⁵

In theorizing the fourth eye as communal, Rony shows that the humanitarian distribution of the sensible does not have a monopoly on reality, that a form of relationality that does not conform itself to the terms of humanity is already being lived. Here, the sense of "we" and indeed of "I" is formed via the witnessing of the radical lack at the center of what passes for given reality. Rony's invocation of the patient who must teach the doctor also points toward a foundational critique of humanitarianism's regime of care, which cannot offer healing or indeed anything other than a continuation of violence. Over and against this regime of care, I invoke Jinah Kim's exploration of the experience that she calls "postcolonial grief." Using the concept of the postcolonial to name "the complex processes through which decolonization is deferred after formal colonialism ends," she draws attention to "the productive nature of unresolved or unresolvable grief" in the face of this continuing deferral.¹¹⁶ Kim is interested in the "insurgent" qualities of postcolonial grief, its capacity for remembering that colonialism is not over and for enacting an antiteleology in which "what is to come does not have to be defined solely by what was lost."¹¹⁷ Working from Frantz Fanon, she argues that "the idea that subjects under colonialism can be healed is itself a colonizing idea. . . . Healing prepares the colonizer to wield violence for the state, and for the colonized to accept being terrorized as a regular state of being."¹¹⁸ The commitment to holding on to grief, to resisting the alleged resolution of healing, keeps us attuned to the ways in which anti-colonial critique has at times itself been enacted

as a form of overcoming, control, or mastery.¹¹⁹ Perhaps insisting on holding on to grief is a way of practicing survival and enacting the fourth eye as a communal project in the name of forms of grouphood that are decidedly and importantly not folded under humanity.

Alongside particular material practices of racism and racial capitalism, genocidalism lives within the discursive, the affective, the imaginary. It drives cultural and political meaning-making, even where it does not show up as an actively articulated aim. We could say that it is an object both repressed and desired, feared and fantasized over, characterized as an inevitability only to be cathected onto others who end up figurally and literally bearing its brunt. Perhaps, too, this is precisely because the very notion of a discrete population is the illusory product of the idea that it could be completely and finally eradicated. The means through which a population is defined are constitutionally imperfect; genocide is always bound to fail to live up to its own terms of articulation. But beyond that, genocide is a self-negating project on the grandest of scales: were it to actually achieve the total eradication of human difference to preserve actual/real humanity, humanity in fact would no longer be able to define itself. It would cease to exist, too. It is this founding paradox, and the desperate attempt to cover it over, that I seek to elucidate in this book—by turning toward thinkers who, like Kim, insist on the irresolvability of the problem of humanity's demise.

Chapter Overview

In the first part of the book, chapters 1 and 2, I trace the role of nuclear weapons technology in the reconfiguring of a racialized conception of humanity around and after World War II. Chapter 1 takes on the ethical ramifications of the absurd fact that nuclear weaponry has come to be considered a paradigmatically humanitarian technology. Rendered as both a signal achievement of exceptional human capacities and as a primary means for ensuring world peace, I argue that “the bomb” has been mobilized to produce a post-World War II humanitarian ethics of what historian John Dower has called “idealistic annihilation”—“whereby demonstrating the appalling destructiveness of an atomic bomb on real, human targets” has been rendered as necessary for securing the survival of humanity.¹²⁰ Here, I look at how the humanity envisioned by various acts of meaning-making about the bomb (news stories, films, scientific reports, press releases, political science, philosophy) is also taken up and reproduced within a perhaps unlikely location: the discourse on the Anthropocene. I consider the stakes of the appearance

of bomb ethics in this other register, namely in the form of the characterization of humanity as fundamentally vulnerable and as achieving a global cohesiveness through its exposure to the possibility of species-ending peril. The concept of the Anthropocene has become incredibly popular and is referenced in a diverse array of contexts, with many authors finding it a useful way to quickly index climate catastrophe produced by human actions. My focus is not on critiquing this particular use of the “Anthropocene,” but rather on the concerning patterns that emerge from a critical reading of those texts that invoke the Anthropocene as a specifically philosophical concept. On my reading, as the predominant hegemonic discourse of human survival of our time, the discourse on the Anthropocene epitomizes the epistemological maneuvers through which some people are prescribed the state of ontological vulnerability so that others can make meaning about the vulnerability of humanity as a whole.

Working from the premise established in chapter 1 that Anthropocene discourse trades in imperialist precepts, in chapter 2 I look to how two films provide crucial alternatives to Anthropocene discourse itself. Kidlat Tahimik’s *Mababangong Bangungot* and Souleymane Cissé’s *Yeelen* are two highly regarded works deeply engaged in a critical postcolonialism that has always understood the perils to humanity of an imperial world order. Precisely because of their different contexts, engaging these works together honors the rich genealogies of transnational critical engagement with humanitarianism. Breaking with the tendency to read such films by using what is taken to be their national and/or cultural contexts (the Philippines and Mali/West Africa) as a primary guide, I highlight what they offer in the way of alternative genealogies of the role of bomb ethics within the post–World War II humanitarian management of so-called postcolonies. Focusing in particular on Tahimik’s thematization of what he calls “overdevelopment,” Cissé’s indictment of nuclear colonialism, and their shared critique of the time frame of progress, I consider what these two films offer in the way of an alternative to the imperial conquest aesthetics of a humanism that is fundamentally premised upon a civilizationist/racist rendering of humanity’s past and future, which Anthropocene discourse itself often reproduces.

In the second half of the book, I turn toward an examination of contemporary instantiations of genocidalism and the aesthetics of ruination within several different humanitarian projects and discursive sites. In chapter 3, I look at the circulation of figures of injured women from Muslim-majority nations subject to US military incursion as a key site for the re-production of humanitarian aims as imperial aims. I focus in particular on

cultural texts depicting women who have been subject to face-altering gendered violence as in need of rehabilitation: the Academy Award-winning 2011 documentary *Saving Face*, which features Pakistani women who have been the targets of acid attacks; and popular media portrayals of Aesha Mohammadzai, an Afghan woman who became famous after being featured on a 2010 *Time* magazine cover with her facial injuries on full display. Feminist scholars have tended to focus their critiques of such texts on the treatment of the women they depict as non-agentic objects of empathetic recuperation. I offer a different analysis here, focusing on the specific functions of the long-standing, explicit violence targeted at women in societies subject to Western imperialism. Thus, my inquiry in this chapter is focused not on the failure to fully implement humanitarian ideals in the mediatization of suffering, but on the necessity of violence to the production of the humanitarian subject and to the codification of a humanitarian distribution of the sensible. In other words, the circulation of representations of these women demonstrates the reliance of humanitarianism on suffering in a way that exceeds its usefulness for a project of putative care. In its propagation of the expectation that the targets of such imperial racism move on and relinquish any resentment they may hold against their aggressors in the interest of achieving racial peace, the humanitarian media I look at in this chapter are, I argue, a main mechanism for the simultaneous elision and justification of the intense and ongoing targeting of Muslim women and girls by counterinsurgency and counterterrorism tactics.

Beginning in the 2000s and early 2010s, a reconceptualization of the Amazon rainforest as both the product and remains of extensive precolonial civilizations (rather than a wilderness that never sustained large human societies) has coincided with a taking up of so-called uncontacted tribes as the objects of widespread public fascination. Coffee table books about jungle explorations and scientific articles about the terraforming that created the Amazon forest circulate alongside *National Geographic* articles and NGO press releases about how the remaining descendants of what is often described as a vanished civilization are on the brink of dying out. Indeed, a key characteristic of arguments and efforts to help uncontacted tribes to live is their portrayal as degraded, almost dead, or already vanished. In chapter 4, I consider the implications of uncontacted peoples' figurality in discourses focused on the larger fate of humanity in the midst of climate crisis and global capitalist entrenchment. Across a variety of discursive locations, these peoples continue to serve as ciphers for the depredations wrought by technological and civilizational advance-

ment, rendered largely in relation to absence and as having lost the knowledge of their own past—thus requiring others, namely those with the self-designated capacity to understand the history of humanity writ large, to tell it. This, in turn, contributes to the conceptualization of the Amazon itself as a ruin, its remaining people rendered into objects of philosophical use for understanding how humanity as a whole can escape extinction. The production of media featuring the uncontacted has continued apace, as studies declaring the possibility that the Amazon itself has reached a tipping point of no return due to environmental destruction have recently come to cohere with an increasingly intensive mediatization of the Amazon as a war zone, in which it is proposed that only increased security efforts can stave off the ravages wrought by those humans presumed to have no sense of responsibility to humanity writ large. Even though these uncontacted peoples are not the targets of explicit military actions, the way in which they are figured supports the alignment of humanitarianism with securitization regimes that mobilize gender, sexual, and cultural deviance as indicators of inhumanity.

In chapter 5 I return to the concept of vulnerability, this time in order to consider its use in recent feminist philosophical work on how to achieve an end to warfare. I am curious about and, ultimately, concerned by some of this literature's tendency to emphasize individual openness to a shared human experience of vulnerability as the key to redirecting those psychological impulses that are posited as the basic cause of Western imperial war. I do take seriously what I understand as the call being made by these scholars: to grapple with the interface between institutions and individuals, and to offer deep inquiry into bringing about new modes of relationality. Yet insofar as some writers presume a kind of undifferentiated, universal human experience, they not only miss an opportunity to break with the model of vulnerable humanity born in nuclear humanitarianism (as explored in chapter 1); they also reiterate the very philosophical and discursive technologies of warfare and militarism that they aim to move past. Indeed, a variety of inquiries have been made by anti-racist and anti-colonial feminist scholars into whether humanity can admit everyone—and whether that admittance is desirable or viable. Crucially, in their critical assessments of and efforts to think beyond humanism and human-centrism, these scholars articulate a variety of incommensurable understandings of the human and humanity. As such, I engage this work for its critical insights into the problems of understanding humanity as vulnerable, and propose that it offers a conceptualization of humanity as differential—a humanity that is internally defined by difference and that can thus never be self-same. Reading their

engagements as necessarily multiplicitous and as irreducible to each other, I argue that, read alongside each other, they offer possibilities for an anti-war ethics that is not premised on a shared conceptualization of humanity.

Finally, in the coda, I return to the inquiry into bomb ethics undertaken in the first part of the book, this time in light of the argument I make in chapter 5 regarding the possibilities for a feminist anti-war ethics that is not rooted in humanitarianism, but that treats suffering and disposability as experiences and states of being that should not be instrumentalized for the purposes of making meaning or ascribing value in the name of humanity. As it came time to offer concluding thoughts about this project, I found myself thinking once again about Jinah Kim's contention that within a context of oppression, the expectation to heal serves as a means to enforce the acceptance of "being terrorized as a regular state of being."¹²¹ Countering bomb ethics might involve living with and within the break rather than repairing it, as suggested by Ocean Vuong in his invocation of fracture as a technique for refusing to embody suffering for the humanitarian subject to make meaning about. Reading hegemonic discourses of how to solve the inherent problems of nuclear waste storage as symptomatic of the desire for (and as epitomizing the impossibility of) humanity's mastery over its own end—such that these storage facilities are imagined as a type of planned ruins—I consider Vuong's invocation of debris as an aesthetic mode that disrupts genocidal humanitarianism's distribution of the sensible.

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40 INTRODUCTION

Notes

Introduction

- 1 “I.2. Originally: resembling the Cynic philosophers in having contempt for comfort, wealth, or pleasure, or in a tendency to be scornfully critical of others. Now *esp.*: inclined to believe that people are motivated purely by self-interest.” “Cynical (adj.),” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.
- 2 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12–13.
- 3 This thought was inspired by Ocean Vuong. Answering a question about his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, he noted that he “wanted the book to feel like debris,” to subvert a white gaze that would expect what he described as a “guided tour” through Global South pain. A ruin is tourable—debris is not. Ocean Vuong, virtual book reading and discussion, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, October 6, 2020.
- 4 As just one example, Michael Barnett characterizes the establishment of the UN in the following way: “The Geneva Conventions were less a breakthrough for humanity than a belated recognition that the brutality of war had exceeded acceptable limits. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was less a climactic moment in the indefatigable march of human rights than a mournful recognition of humankind’s deficit of humanity. These human rights institutions, and many of the edifices constructed after World War II, were testimony not to compassion but rather to the fear of further acts of barbarism” (Barnett, *Empire of*

Humanity, 102–3). While mournful rather than triumphalist, this kind of narrative is typical in generalizing and hence depoliticizing the “barbarism” of the war, and in recentring Western actors and eliding, yet again, the anti-colonialist movements to which those actors responded with such brutality.

- 5 Falcón, *Power Interrupted*; Rajagopal, *International Law from Below*, 43, 77.
- 6 Rajagopal, *International Law from Below*, 72.
- 7 Grewal, *Transnational America*, 121–22.
- 8 Williams, *The Divided World*, xx.
- 9 Williams, *The Divided World*, xvi.
- 10 Williams, *The Divided World*, xxi.
- 11 Rajagopal, *International Law from Below*, 9–13, 174–86.
- 12 Rajagopal, *International Law from Below*, 194–95.
- 13 Asad, “What Do Human Rights Do?,” 13.
- 14 Asad, “What Do Human Rights Do?,” pa. 27, 31, 50.
- 15 Falcón, *Power Interrupted*, 4–5, 8–10, 12–14, 22. See also Laura Hyun Yi Kang’s fantastic *Traffic in Asian Women* for a detailed inquiry into the development of the prevailing epistemologies that guide UN-related accounts of gender inequality, particularly in regard to the conceptual categories of sex, violence, and slavery.
- 16 Grewal, *Transnational America*, 137.
- 17 Fernandes, “The Boundaries of Terror,” 62.
- 18 Keating, Rasmussen, and Rishi, “The Rationality of Empowerment,” 154; Harvey, *The New Imperialism*.
- 19 See, for example (to name just a few), Ahuja, *Bioinsecurities*; Amar, *The Security Archipelago*; Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us*; Puar, *The Right to Maim*; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*; Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*; Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*. I also want to point out that the genealogy of biopower/necropower, so often anchored in the reference to Foucault, is also contestable. Brady Thomas Heiner argues that Foucault’s late-career interest in the investigation of power was a product of his engagement with the work of Black Panther Party thinkers—which of course was unacknowledged by Foucault (Heiner, “Foucault and the Black Panthers”). Relatedly, Orlando Patterson offers a different genealogical focal point for some scholars working on biopower/necropower. Patterson’s concept of social death, developed within his work on the institution of chattel slavery in the US, has been taken up by scholars investigating the continuing depredations imposed on Black life in con-

temporary institutions coextensive with chattel slavery; it has also been taken up by those interested in working through the co-construction of various racialized groups in relation to each other (Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*; Cacho, *Social Death*).

- 20 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 13–25.
- 21 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 20.
- 22 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 40 (emphasis in original).
- 23 Lindqvist, "Exterminate All the Brutes," 3.
- 24 Lindqvist, "Exterminate All the Brutes," 9.
- 25 Lindqvist, "Exterminate All the Brutes," 97–107.
- 26 Lindqvist, "Exterminate All the Brutes," 9; Bouchard, "Humanitarian."
- 27 Lindqvist, *Terra Nullius*, 126.
- 28 Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 401.
- 29 Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 402.
- 30 Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 402.
- 31 Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 399, 403.
- 32 Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, 32.
- 33 Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 398.
- 34 Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 400.
- 35 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 13.
- 36 Rancière and Engelmann, *Politics and Aesthetics*, 66.
- 37 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 28.
- 38 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 17.
- 39 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 8–9, 27.
- 40 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 123.
- 41 Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," 6.
- 42 Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," 6 (emphasis in original).
- 43 For Rancière's more extensive argument along these lines, see chapter 6, "Politics in Its Nihilistic Age," in *Disagreement*.
- 44 Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," 2.
- 45 Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," 6–7, 10.
- 46 Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 6.
- 47 Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 5–10, 14.
- 48 Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 43 (emphasis in original).
- 49 Rodríguez, *Suspended Apocalypse*, 135.

- 50 Rodríguez, *Suspended Apocalypse*, 138 (emphasis in original).
- 51 Rodríguez, *Suspended Apocalypse*, 30 (my emphasis).
- 52 “Humanitarian (n. and adj.),” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.
- 53 “Whole (adj., n., and adv.),” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.
- 54 Hua, *Trafficking Women’s Human Rights*, 17.
- 55 Wynter, “Unsettling.” Wynter distinguishes between Man1 and Man2, as two distinct forms of the “de-supernaturalizing of our modes of being human” (Wynter, “Unsettling,” 263–64). She makes this distinction on the basis of a periodization: Man1, in place “from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century,” enabled the development of the physical sciences; Man2, in place from the nineteenth century through the present, enabled the development of the biological sciences (Wynter, “Unsettling,” 264).
- 56 Wynter, “Unsettling,” 282.
- 57 Wynter, “Unsettling,” 282.
- 58 Lisa Lowe offers a detailed historical examination of this work in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.
- 59 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
- 60 Atanasoski, *Humanitarian Violence*, 82.
- 61 Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 2–6.
- 62 Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 80.
- 63 Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 8.
- 64 Atanasoski, *Humanitarian Violence*, 14.
- 65 Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 61.
- 66 In regard to the United States’ incarceration of refugees from Haiti during the early 1990s, Neel Ahuja describes “two types of state force” used against these people—“militarized exclusion” and “the exercise of a certain type of care” (Ahuja, *Bioinsecurities*, 171).
- 67 Ahuja, *Bioinsecurities*, 170.
- 68 Ahuja, *Bioinsecurities*, 170.
- 69 Ahuja, *Bioinsecurities*, 171.
- 70 Ahuja, *Bioinsecurities*, 178.
- 71 For an argument that the ongoing siege of Gaza has come to be enacted through “‘humanitarian management,’ exercised as the calibration of life-sustaining flows of resources through the physical enclosure, one meant to keep the entire population close to the minimum limit of physical existence” (81), see chapter 3 in Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*.
- 72 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 129–35.

- 73 Butler, *Frames of War*, 42.
- 74 Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xiii.
- 75 Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xxxix.
- 76 Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 44.
- 77 Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 26.
- 78 Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xxiv (emphasis in original).
- 79 Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 162.
- 80 Rajagopal, *International Law from Below*, 171–72.
- 81 Browne, Danely, and Rosenow, “Vulnerability and the Politics of Care,” 1–7.
- 82 Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 15 (my emphasis).
- 83 Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 3–4, 7.
- 84 Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 4.
- 85 Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 13.
- 86 Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 113–14.
- 87 Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, 8.
- 88 Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, 9.
- 89 Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, 11–14. For more on the concept of proportionality, see Dower, *Cultures of War*.
- 90 Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 70 (emphasis in original).
- 91 Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 56.
- 92 Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 56.
- 93 Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 56.
- 94 See Cartwright, *Screening the Body*; Chow, *The Age of the World Target*; Lippit, *Atomic Light*; Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*; Rony, *The Third Eye*.
- 95 “It was in 1861, whilst travelling on a paddle-steamer and watching its wheel, that the future Colonel Gatling hit upon the idea of a cylindrical, crank-driven machine gun. In 1874 the Frenchman Jules Janssen took inspiration from the multi-chambered Colt (patented in 1832) to invent an astronomical revolving unit that could take a series of photographs. On the basis of this idea, Etienne-Jules Marey then perfected his chronophotographic rifle, which allowed the user to aim at and photograph an object moving through space” (Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 15).
- 96 Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths*, 9.
- 97 Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 4.
- 98 Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics*, 29.

- 99 Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics*, 2.
 100 Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics*, 69.
 101 Rony, *The Third Eye*; Rony, *On Cannibalism*.
 102 Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*, 73 (emphasis in original).
 103 Rajagopal, *International Law from Below*, 26.
 104 Rajagopal, *International Law from Below*, 108.
 105 Rajagopal, *International Law from Below*, 112.
 106 Rajagopal, *International Law from Below*, 105 (emphasis in original).
 107 Wynter, "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture," 25–26.
 108 Wynter, "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture," 29, 32, 35–37.
 109 Wynter, "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture," 37.
 110 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 65–69.
 111 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 40.
 112 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 35.
 113 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 35.
 114 Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*.
 115 Rony, *How Do We Look?*, 187–89.
 116 Kim, *Postcolonial Grief*, 12, 19.
 117 Kim, *Postcolonial Grief*, 11, 12.
 118 Kim, *Postcolonial Grief*, 25.
 119 Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 223.
 120 Dower, *Cultures of War*.
 121 Kim, *Postcolonial Grief*, 25.

Chapter 1. Bomb Ethics

Epigraph 1. John W. Dower, *Cultures of War*, 269.

- 1 "The Clock Shifts."
 2 Rabinowitch, "Scientists and World Government," 346.
 3 Bromwich, "Doomsday Clock Moves Closer to Midnight."
 4 Krauss and Titley, "Thanks to Trump."
 5 Chan, "Doomsday Clock Is Set"; Mecklin, ed., "It Is Now Two Minutes to Midnight"; Mecklin, ed., "It Is 100 Seconds to Midnight"; Bulletin Science and Security Board, "Bulletin Science and Security Board Condemns Russian Invasion of Ukraine."
 6 Mecklin, ed., "It Is 100 Seconds to Midnight," 3.