

RETURNING THE GAZE: Representing poverty and precarity in a post-colonial world

To a greater power and a better nature you, free, are subject, and these create the mind in you that the heavens have not in their charge.

Therefore, if the world around you goes astray, in you is the cause and in you let it be sought.

~ Marco the Lombard's counsel, from Dante's *Divine Comedy*

Novelist Pankaj Mishra, referring to "the history of modernisation", observes how despite pretensions to rationality and order described by the American originators of the term in the 1950s and 1960s, modernisation's history "*is largely one of carnage and bedlam*" that disproportionately afflicts a targeted, "othered", dehumanised, inferiorised population invariably classified as poor, who by implication are also made responsible for the pathetic state in which they find themselves.

A polarisation of conscience means that little solidarity can be extended to those who suffer the greatest burden of the consequences of the worst of human impulses and choices. Do we imagine that the gaze infected by the paradigm in which it thrives can refocus its witnessing lens from a place of profound empathy for and with humanity, and see itself in the suffering of the other?

There is nothing objective in the human gaze. We know this. Yet we collude with this post-Enlightenment, neoliberal hubristic production system that even proposes its own transcendence and omniscience— and does so while denying or erasing the reality of the shared experience of suffering so that it can lay claim to transcendent objectivity. How can a corrupted witness purport to offer a truthful testament to human experience? How unbiased is the evidence (images, stories) that such a witness brings forth?

Humanity now thrashes about in a chasm of the absence of a real vocabulary of beingness today, while at the same time, makes excuses for a parasitic ideological structure that requires the stories of others' vulnerabilities in order to shore up

itself and its peculiar myths. An obsessive and pornographic preoccupation with the wounds of others serves two key purposes: one, it enables the observers to feel, what is that imbecilic word...*superior*, and two, it helps the observers to avoid engaging with their own internal contradictions and pathologies, it buries their fears.

Against such a backdrop, what does our own articulation of post-coloniality, social development, vulnerability and poverty actually mean here and now? What does “representation” become when forged through an epistemological structure that fragments the world so that it can elevate itself as the “universal” and the standard by which the human race measures its progress. In referring to this dilemma, the thinker Santiago Castro-Gomes calls it the problem of the “hubris of point zero”.

This is the epistemology that, despite its, yes, many virtues, treasures, and achievements on behalf of its select, could also declare those on the right of the screen as virtuous and righteous in their actions against those on the left, who are consistently classified as soulless, valueless, ungovernable and unmournable savages, barbarians, terrorists and heathens— not entirely human and, therefore, exploitable and dispensable. The mostly Euro-American collective societal imagination, in particular, was co-opted into this belief. The paradigm deliberately enlisted science and academia to develop a literature and theory to absolve itself from this, its public evil. The desecrated bodies on the left of the screen are rendered undignified and nameless even in their ancestral homes—and there are no plaques to commemorate their histories, achievements, their existence - while museums are built to enshrine the so-called exploits of those on the right.

An obsessive and pornographic preoccupation with the wounds of others serves two key purposes: one, it enables the observers to feel, what is that imbecilic word...superior, and two, it helps the observers to avoid engaging with their own internal contradictions and pathologies, it buries their fears.

What we see and hear now has a history and a template. Given this, what then should a person do with an array of stories and images embedded in a diminished, diminishing and disordered framing of life, that from its origins, and despite the evidence of its horrid impulses, has never been forensically interrogated?

In a 1999 *New York Times* article, Nigerian author Wole Soyinka reminded us

how “the great philosophical minds of Europe, like Hume, Hegel and Kant, bent their prodigious talents to separating the species into those with rights and those with none, founded on the convenient theory that some people were human and others less so. The Encyclopedists of France, products of the so-called Age of Reason, remain the most prolific codifiers of the human (and other) species on an ambitiously comprehensive scale, and their scholarly industry conferred a scientific benediction on a purely commercial project that saw millions of souls dragged across the ocean to serve as beasts of burden. Religion and commerce ... were reinforced by the authority of new scientific theories to divide humanity into higher and lower manifestations of the species. The dichotomy of the world was complete.”

I am compelled to ask how truthfully a person of this epoch can speak to precarity, poverty or marginalisation without making incisions into the profound moral and existential vacuum that are their sources and causes, which the human collective treats with amnesia. We are enduring a season of an unprecedented crisis of being and vision - and the devastation of lives we see and label as “precarious” are symptomatic of this.

Reality, they say, is relational, not representational. I retreat once more to Marco the Lombard’s counsel from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* for guidance:

*To a greater power and a better nature you, free, are subject, and these create
the mind in you
that the heavens have not in their charge.
Therefore, if the world around you goes astray, in you is the cause and in you
let it be sought.*

Do we really have the adequate tools of analysis that will lead us into an immersive experience of the realities to which we refer? We live a lie-laden *un-*reality where communities of the most resource-rich territories of the world are interpenetrated by the most devastating forms of poverty while those of the resource-consuming lands are lauded as the most advanced, the wealthiest, the best, when the questions that should be asked are: *How does the world’s wealth get to be transferred, from where, by whom, for whom and at what price? Who sets the rates? To what obscene extent are precarity, marginalisation and poverty in themselves a profitable by-product of a way of being in the world? How are these accepted by-products of an accepted global industrial ideology? Will we*

explore poverty in its multiple designs and constructions in Bretton Wood cults, in the numerous multinational boardrooms, and in all those resource-hunting, territory-scouring Trojan horses that first appear as non-governmentals and then collude with emasculated, lobotomised post-colonial governors masquerading as leaders of so many nations?

We find ourselves entangled in and by a culture that, for example, *knowing* there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, still allowed its privileged liars, those contemporary high priests of baal, a gateway to create and launch a grotesque unending war fifteen years ago that has since devoured an ancient civilisation and pushed our earth into the cusp of a human-caused apocalypse. This alleged “war on terror”, an abominable act, co-opted forty other nations, all of which fly the banner of democracy and human rights, and who have wilfully and continuously committed atrocities before slithering away to reconstruct a narrative of righteousness by evolving new euphemisms that deny the horror that their choices have visited upon millions and millions of innocents.

I am compelled to ask how truthfully a person of this epoch can speak to precarity, poverty or marginalisation without making incisions into the profound moral and existential vacuum that are their sources and causes, which the human collective treats with amnesia.

The abomination is today visited on Yemen for no real reason other than Saudi Arabia, this paradigm’s favourite pimp, wishes to test its war chops and spread its particular version of self-rightousness. Saudi Arabia is spending trillions of dollars on weapons sold to it by nations, that offer themselves as ‘paragons of human values’ weapons that are sometimes procured through second or third parties. Money gratefully received without question. Later, when the images of devastating Yemeni starvation hits your Christmas screens, some scrawny Englishman will compose a “*Do they know it’s Christmas?*” dirge so that we can all send our one pound to help the poor, the starving and the helpless. Meanwhile, it is Christmas every day in our weapon-manufacturing communities; the war in Yemen is a ceaseless bounty.

I ask you, are there any stories today, any images of the full Yemeni reality? Of course not. We will neither reveal the images of the generals overseeing the devastation of an already weak land, nor will we show what bullets and grenades

do to human bodies. Why should the truth of what sustains our economies and guarantees our lifestyles interfere with the pleasure of our morning cappuccino? But God help the ones who emerge from the inferno of our making. They become our revenants. Their bodies and haunted lives are fingers pointing at us, which without a single word, mock our presumed innocence.

Here is our world now, this massive entangled bruise of traumatised, alienated, marginalised, terrorised, impoverished hundreds of millions, a world offering itself to the possibility of self-annihilation as entertainment.

This epistemological framing by which we live has won for its adherents entire territories that are relabelled as, *for example*, the United States of America, Australia, Canada, and then elevated as “universal” beacons of high human values that also confirm the hegemonic paradigm’s transcendent delusions, those mythologies that are adorned with titles such as “civilisation”, “democracy”, “scientific”, “advancement”, “philanthropy” and “human rights”, so many gilded fig leaves positioned to conceal the wound and its questions, which may include:

What is the origin of this nation?

How did the current governance structure evolve? Who and how many had to die to invent this “country”? How did they die?

Who atones? Who does not atone?

This dominant system, including its knowledge systems, generates and reinforces a malignant Military Industrial Complex upon which entire economies depend. And it seduces us with amnesia. Forget! it suggests. In exchange we may frolic carefreely amidst the flowers of Orwellian doublespeak - *collateral damage*, for example, a euphemism for lies, transference, prevarications, perception management, propaganda, erasure and rewriting and rebranding of horrors. Meanwhile, in a world of abundance, how is it even possible that eight men from the same cultural paradigm have gained control of 80 per cent of the earth’s wealth? Is this the culmination of the so-called Age of Reason?

Today we accuse Kim-Jong-Un of impoverishing North Koreans, but do we also reflect on the meaning (today) of the American war in Korea (1950-3)? The wilful carpet bombing of a country by one set of humans until everything is rubble, as the generals casually cited that 20 per cent (a conservative estimate) population

death rate? Why do we act shocked when grieving, starving, devastated, traumatised people turn their backs on a world that turned its backs on them? And we suddenly have something to say about...*what?*

Please don't get me wrong; I am not excusing insanity. What I ask is if the prevailing global paradigm and its tributaries—modernism, post-modernism, post-post-modernism...with their penchant for laundering their darkness - are what can gainfully articulate the dimensions, meaning and language of profound human suffering. In the end, after we have described, or gazed upon, the poverty-stricken, the marginalised, the oppressed, the dehumanised, in whatever forms these take, *what actually changes for the common good as a consequence?*

A different point.

We neither see nor imagine the same thing when we say “poverty” or “precarity”, do we? Despite our preferred assumptions, there is no uber-state of poverty or precarity that is the universal template. Yet so very rarely do we allow an exploration of the varieties of consciousness that imbue human seeing, recognising, describing and attending; or the reality of philosophical and cultural divergences.

This alleged “war on terror”, an abominable act, co-opted forty other nations, all of which fly the banner of democracy and human rights, and who have wilfully and continuously committed atrocities before slithering away to reconstruct a narrative of righteousness by evolving new euphemisms that deny the horror that their choices visited upon millions of innocents.

To some, poverty is an asset in a world where shareholder profit is the Holy Grail, where consumption is the measure of nirvana. So valuable it is that should the economies of certain nations decline, wars must be manufactured. As long as weapons can be sold and jobs created, a necessary magic happens—these economies are rich and stable again and can hold themselves up as beacons of world development and order, right? But the blood-price that designated scapegoats have paid remain obscured and untold.

Precarity does, however, explain how humanity has turned vampire to humanity, feeding on its own lifeblood, its harrowing collective gaze always turned outward and elsewhere. Precarity (or what some might refer to as precariousness, which is

a less enduring/permanent condition) - a word that was apparently coined by the Catholic monk and anarcho-communist Léonce Crenier (1888-1963) - has been defined as “the *politically induced* condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks...becoming exposed to injury, violence and death”. Precarity is a condition that is often associated with neoliberal capitalism and its perverted logic of blaming the victim for his or her suffering, rather than examining the skewed power and economic relations that might have contributed to that suffering - a logic that relies on scapegoating to absolve the inflicter of suffering from any blame.

What the scapegoater’s target (the poor, the starving, the helpless, the victims) may have to give up is the power to name themselves. If they survive the struggle, they will be doomed to be spoken for, depicted, analysed and approached with the delicious frisson of Freud’s **unheimlich** — the uncanny. But sometimes, sometimes, it is true, that the monstered being growls back using the tools and technology of the paradigm against itself.

We, the inhabitants of this earth, are caught up in the matrix of a dark drama that services our fears, our violence, our silences, our looking away, and in some cases, our approval. This grotesque dance is justified with epic headers: Age of Discovery, War on Terror, Humanitarian Interventions. Weapons of Mass Destruction. Mother of All Bombs. Later, imagine our surprise when survivors from such expeditions flee their homes seeking refuge and peace in our midst. Having even been robbed of their names, we are now able to label them poor, marginalised, migrants, refugees, precarious, as if what befell them happened through their own fault. We negotiate encounters so that their suffering is kept as far away from our lives as possible.

Their courageous odyssey, their spirit and strength in the face of overwhelming intimate losses are rarely voiced, lest they expose our cowardice. Their desperation is often criminalised, as if it is infectious. We may safely look at their drowned bodies on television, but having seen enough of these, no longer notice them. We engineer them into concentration camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Kenya, Uganda, Jordan, Greece and Libya. Meanwhile, we neglect to act on the reality that we know that their powerless bodies are minute by minute being brutalised, experimented with and traded. Their organs are being auctioned, their children are being raped, their women are being violated, their men are emasculated, humanity is being brutalised by humanity using its most insidious weapons:

human absence and human silence.

To some, poverty is an asset in a world where shareholder profit is the Holy Grail, where consumption is the measure of nirvana. So valuable it is that should the economies of certain nations decline, wars must be manufactured.

In April last year, the American military dropped what they christened the “Mother of All Bombs” over the Achin district in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province, a public display of the same casual evil that created the Nagasaki and Hiroshima slaughter, a prelude of what is to come, perhaps? There is still to this day a terrible silence over the actual number of Afghani casualties, which have already been pre-stigmatised as ISIS, not to speak of the devastation of the landscape and environment. There are no independent verifications, no counter-checks, no accountability, no display of bodies other than those of living American soldiers standing in caves that are still intact and whose locations cannot be verified.

So, when a surge of humans in deep distress whose environment has been poisoned and shattered will flee Afghanistan trying to find new homes, will they be returned to the source? Will we try and find the reason for their fleeing and hold to account the responsible nation? Of course not. That would require what seems to have been leached out of the human collective: a will to truth and courage. Indifference has been made cool. “Post-truth” has been invented. When the desperate immigrant carrying his remaining child peers through a fence, won’t we line our words and images to articulate a preferred trope that reinforces our framing of poverty, powerlessness, and precarity regarding him and his country?

Shall I go on?

Weeks before the bombing and Donald Trump’s foray into Syria, American soldiers and their Saudi friends were implicated in the mass slaughter of a boat filled with innocent people escaping Yemen. After the announcement of the mistake, nothing. There was also the horrible and mistaken slaughter of innocents in Mosul involving the so-called coalition forces. After the initial alarm, nothing. You who study representation, have you heard anything more of these crimes against the earth, decency, morality and humanity that sink without a trace, without a second bleep? The silence, though, does make it simpler to rationalise

the sacrifice of humans to tomahawk missiles while the enabler eats chocolate cake—or was it vanilla?

It is to specific and targeted realms of anguish that we send our image capturers and story makers. The consistency of the ideology calls for the permitted symbols of doomed desires: the sacrificeable, the pitied and - despite the pathos - the unmournable body (preferably in a particular melanin shade and from a particular culture). This paradigm allows the media to use and expose them as the poor, the less fortunate, the marginalised, the victims. So the advantaged—and that is the adjective always used - might make meaning by pressing a forefinger on the donate button and dispatch two euros fifty to support one of a hundred thousand non-governmentals who promise the miracle of turning coins into medicine and water for the ones, who, fortunately, are not us. These days it is accompanied with a hashtag. But no questions.

So what do we have to show, we humans speaking about poverty and precarious lives lived in ineffable margins? What do we have to show that amplifies our abysmal and wilful unknowing of the actual and inner lives of those whose histories we choose to condense into a single, transient thumbprint, captured, edited, and distributed by a thinned-out imagination? In the academy's retelling of precarity, poverty and their representation, what room exists for a multidimensionality and multiperspectivity that breathes fresh knowledge and insight that might actually transfigure our humanity?

Let us change track and look at some art, okay?

The cover image of *Job's Friends* by Lenny Caccio is inspired by the biblical Book of Job. It features three friends - Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite - who show up to supposedly console a terribly afflicted Job. Encountering the extreme suffering and wounded spirit and body of their friend, they first choose to sit in shock. After a suitable interlude, now accustomed to the spectacle of suffering, they proceed to diagnose the disease from a safe space that does not require them to touch Job. They also evolve a branding plan in which they excuse everything but Job, who is somehow made responsible for his fate. They offer a scholarly treatise on meaning, suffering and Job's responsibility. They wonder why Job is not more like them, they who are favoured by God. If he were, such suffering would not be his fate. Nay indeed, since they know the mind of God, actually, in a way, this makes them, like God...if

not God Himself.

Meanwhile, we neglect to act on the reality that we know that their powerless bodies are minute by minute being brutalised, experimented with and traded. Their organs are being auctioned, their children are being raped, their women are being violated, their men are emasculated, humanity is being brutalised by humanity using its most insidious weapons: human absence and human silence.

Suddenly, certain of their transcendence, they authoritatively proceed to make decisions for Job. They go on and on until Job became a scientific and social development project. They discuss the alleviation of Job's poverty, precarity and disease. Dear Job is sucked into the eye of the cyclone of stupidity and is compelled to reclaim a semblance of humanity by trying to explain the inexplicability of his existential harrowing.

In the eyes of the three idiots, Job, the scapegoat, must not be perceived as innocent, for through this judgment he is designated as the carrier of the pathologies and terrors that afflict the human journey; upon him rests the entire mystery of human suffering. Now Job is the heathen. The savage. The pagan. The terrorist. The infidel. The Third World hordes...or was it swarms (David Cameron). The extreme other from whom our lives are detached, whose suffering is alien to our righteous ease. Behold this, the detached collective observing human suffering, not as witnesses, but as judges and gossips. They fail to see that Job is a mirror and witness to the reality of life. These idiots (*yes, I am judging them*) look and look and turn blind.

It does end rather well, with a *schadenfreude* twist. The mysterious Source of Existence in whose name much was suggested by the trio shows up from out of the whirlwind, the storm, the chaos, and is in a very bad mood. He stormily affirms and underlines the truth of human unknowing before the immensity of life. Some paraphrased bullet points from within the storm: *You are not the authors of nature or life. You are all subject to the mystery of suffering, pain, death, and the unknowing.* In other words, as a millennial friend once put it to me, you know shit about life.

The three self-appointed dunderheads get their knuckles thoroughly rapped by a God who makes them dependent on Job for a dramatic gesture of forgiveness and sacrifice that will release them from the hell their presumptuous babblings have

driven them into, thus demonstrating another useful point: *You need one another other in order to get yourselves out of your self-created hell.*

Back to earth.

On January 24, 2017, a 22-year-old human being, a man named Pateh Sabally, either jumped into or slipped into Venice's Grand Canal. Witnessing this were about two hundred men and women. They were cited as cursing, mocking and abusing him as he flailed and cried.

What did Pateh see? What did he experience as he started to die? To know that the last human gaze Pateh experienced was the gaze of hatred is such a weight on a sensitive human conscience. What looks out of the gaze of this mob in Venice, finding satisfaction in the slow death of an ebony-bodied stranger in a canal?

A dying man entered the doorway of death with the sound of over two hundred apparently "sane" human beings mocking his life, urging him to annihilation, amused by his suffering. What did Pateh see? What did he experience as he started to die? To know that the last human gaze Pateh experienced was the gaze of hatred is such a weight on a sensitive human conscience. What looks out of the gaze of this mob in Venice, finding satisfaction in the slow death of an ebony-bodied stranger in a canal? And death and dying are such a private, intimate happening, even among creatures. So, what has become of a people and their interior values who seek and find intense porno-visual satisfaction in the death of a stranger? What turns these people into a howling beast, a mob that has lost access to the grammar of life? What is in the gaze of the human in the canal looking at his audience?

We have been here before, haven't we?

I was surprised, and then not surprised, that the horror did not generate greater contemplation in the media or in societal reflections and that the only images published were those of the drowning Pateh, with the mob offered as a faceless mass without a shape that melts into the day when invited to account for their manner of witnessing. I am struck by the length of time that the mob spent observing, archiving, recording and commenting on Pateh's dying, and the eerie idea of profound satisfaction in the experience. The mob is so preoccupied with

their perception of Pateh's otherness, his immigrant-being, that nothing of his humanity penetrates their gaze. What is this epistemology of life that makes of human beings a thing that finds pleasure in the dying and death of a man? Why has it not been hacked to pieces yet? Unless, of course, its diminished conceptualisation of who a human being is has its worshippers. In this event, who in our epistemological structuring would be the subject of our reflections on poverty, precarity and pity? Pateh or his mob?

Second case: On September 8, 2015, a woman who had veiled her face, protecting herself from the contagion of encounter, filmed the flow of human sufferers crossing into her country, Hungary. She would at some point drop her camera to focus on extending her foot to kick two children and their father, a former Syrian football coach, Osama Abdul Mohsen, who carrying one son, stumbled to the ground. It is not possible to list the many ways that this man, travelling without his wife, was humiliated. A man has lost his home through no fault of his own, has lost his country, is compelled to impoverishment, and struggles with life in ways that not many in the world can. He traverses unknown worlds, deserts, storms, wars, water, death, displaying the noblest human spirit and its will to live and hope.

This human seeks refuge among other humans, strangers. Reduced to scrambling across a man-caused frontier, he runs in the direction of a camerawoman, who is masked to preserve herself from the diseases he purportedly carries. Let us think carefully about the gesture as she pauses her filming and puts out a leg to trip a man carrying his son, who flails and falls. That fall, friends, is a wounded gong in the deepest soul. A warning. This episode is enshrined as the Petra László incident. It travelled as a cold slithering shiver across the world. In our house in Nairobi, when we saw it, no one could speak. But it was recognised for what it was.

I am struck by the blank in the place where people have absented themselves from, or even worse, have become so paralysed by human uncertainty that they do not know how to be hospitable to and receive, perhaps through an embrace, the wounded among and within them.

My own gaze stays on the camerawoman Petra László. I want to meet her. I have questions to ask. What drives a human being to this place of cruelty? I have

traced her narrative of defence. Her first explanation: "I just snapped." The second: "The man lied." The third: "I am in danger." The fourth: "I shall sue Facebook, I shall sue the witnesses." It goes on.

The discomfort for us is this, the reason for our unspeaking witnessing: Here is the public revelation of the disintegration of humanity, the evidence of the wound. And no, this is not about privilege. Petra is a mirror, you see. Here also is my emptiness. Here is my terror of the mysteriousness of another. Here is a symbol of my impoverished humanity. Here is the sign of the unspoken wound that tears through my own soul, that if unattended for much longer will turn septic and evil—for here precisely is what I do not wish to be.

So who are these people? And why does society and popular media collude in an act of amnesia and erasure, not of the dead or suffering, but of the agents who amplify the suffering of others? It is not labelled as anything, is it? There is no name offered for this precarious condition. Why? There is the gaze. But what is heard? What is told and repeated? What gets muted so that an image can be explained differently?

In August 2016, police in Rome received a phone call from a stranger asking them to investigate a situation. An 84-year old woman and her 94-year old husband were in their apartment. They had been wailing so loudly for a good part of the day and their cries were now disturbing their neighbours. When the police entered the house, they found an elderly couple who were so overwhelmed by an existential loneliness, who having watched the news were horrified by the state of the world, that all they could do was wail, and wail, and wail. The media story slides quickly to the part where the police cook pasta for them. But I am interested in the spaces of silence and absences of neighbours, of family, of community. I am interested in the gaps occupied by this profound human keening, the sensitivity of a man and woman who feel the wounds of the world so profoundly.

But I am mostly struck by the communal unhearing and unseeing and unfeeling and unregarding. The story is not only about the police and pasta, but also about the meaning of that human cry, and the reactions of those who heard it. I am struck by the blank in the place where people have absented themselves from, or even worse, have become so paralysed by human uncertainty that they do not know how to be hospitable to and receive, perhaps through an embrace, the

wounded among and within them. Yet here are the kind of people who would press the contribute button on the computer to send one euro to pay for a borehole in Timbuktu.

The worst of these are the leaders of nations whose people are compelled to flee to find life elsewhere, despite the wealth and treasures of home. Each of these leaders, through their incompetence, cowardice and collusion, are culpable and accountable for the extremes of suffering experienced by their people.

What has happened? Do you know? I don't. But does our lexicon for poverty and precarity encompass this, the marginalisation of persons from themselves? The meaning of lives no longer at ease with embracing, holding, comforting, or mourning each other?

For the Bretton Woods and United Nations indices on global well-being, this scene scores high on the wealth index. It shows evidence of the consumption of pasta. Poverty or precarity, under the dominant paradigm does not figure, does it?

There is an adjunct to this that often skips our global headlines: The state of the elderly in European and American societies, evidenced in excessive winter mortalities, is a reality that is carefully left out of developmental indices and global conversations about precarity. Yet the paradigm to which our world has pledged its visioning will implode before it admits that its mythology is erasing the top end of its generations. It would be cynical to imagine, I guess, that the wild reaping of a generation judged as no longer productive is a desired outcome for a worldview obsessed with human usefulness, wouldn't it?

What I am trying to say, perhaps not too eloquently, is that perhaps, primarily, for me, this conversation we are having about 'precarity' is about humanity and its choices, this is an examination of a communal consciences in an attempt to see a way to engage that is transformative to our humanity and its dignity.

Allow me to make brief references to two key aspects in the global value chain of the misery economy that have a role in informing our constructions and perceptions of poverty and precarity:

First, the matter of forced philanthropy, one of the studios and markets for the representational images of poverty and devastation that social development paradigms offer. The business of imposed philanthropy is a fascinating study of human delusion to omniscience, the exercise of power through the mask of pity and the subversion of genuine human compassion for the purposes of profit and personal glory. It too has a history that reaches deep in the roots of the alleged Age of Discovery that I do not need to go into now. Its patterns are the same. The designated beneficiaries are always rendered choiceless, voiceless and nameless and subject to the character profile the philanthropist imposes upon them. Their most intimate lives are exposed to an irresistible gaze. The philanthropists have the power to speak for and represent an entire people and their experience. It is like the ventriloquist who seeks dummies into which he can throw his voice and reiterate his agenda.

Deus ex machina. I will not name.

Caught up in a devastating existential struggle, the targets rarely fight this denudation of their humanity—because, admittedly, some coins to alleviate immediate suffering are made available. Those who object to this business model are often labelled as out of touch, people who are denying or manufacturing reality. For the patron society must always reaffirm its intrinsic goodness. Its people are good. Its intentions are good. And the vulnerable are a blank canvas upon which stories can be repackaged. And if the images are from the imagined African milieu, I promise you a fly on the face shot, even if it has to be photo-shopped in. But this imposed philanthropy serves its most potent purpose: it offers the paradigm a messiah, or many messiahs.

We lament the body of Aylan but immediately censor our awareness about the link between his sea-washed body and that of the CEO of the weapon-making factory that supplied the manufactured rebels with the guns and bombs that destroyed the Kurdi family life in Kobani, Syria.

An overview of this ecology of suffering would be dishonest if it did not refer, at least once, to the role played by the useful idiots, those too-numerous colonial (they pretend to be “post-independent”) governments - those impotent venal agents of collaborative coloniality, betrayers of hopes, repellent homeguards. The worst of these are the leaders of nations whose people are compelled to flee to

find life elsewhere, despite the wealth and treasures of home. Each of these leaders, through their incompetence, cowardice and collusion, are culpable and accountable for the extremes of suffering experienced by their people. Entangled in a grammar of violence and oppression, they have woven their individual lives into a life-destroying global economic paradigm at the expense of a vision for the world and their own people; they create new demons and excel in the creation and sustenance of a hell that destroys even the future of their land and generations of people. They engineer displacement, and do so in the name of social development. Yet their governments spend twenty times the resources allotted to national development to buy weapons abroad for incompetent armies trained to turn their weapons inward. These caretakers of disaster have nothing to say about a reality that has turned their people's bodies into the most tradeable and the most disposable, mere containers for other people's organs. (Many of their people now lie on the bed of the Mediterranean as undersea ghosts.) What a wreckage. What an abysmal poverty of spirit and imagination.

Is there a repository of more profound ideas, values, and words that can engender transformative human relationships so that we do not have to bear the burden of human anguish and injustice alone?

We lament the body of Aylan but immediately censor our awareness about the link between his sea-washed body and that of the CEO of the weapon-making factory that supplied the manufactured rebels with the guns and bombs that destroyed the Kurdi family life in Kobani, Syria. In the representation of poverty, precarity and alienation, where are the images and stories of the weapon factories and the military or prison industrial complexes? We side-eye bodies that have drowned attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea but block our ears to the reality of a multi-billion-dollar human trafficking/slavery network owned by an amoral global elite for whom business has never been better, certainly in the supply of human organs that had been a problem before but is no longer an issue in most of the world now.

How can one enter the soul of this theme without a life-giving mythology of presence so that when we speak of human poverty and precarity we do so justly, and in a way that shelters all that is shamed, broken, unjust, flawed, deaf, blind, lost, wounded or sad? What framework do we have that can call out the normalisation of unmitigated evil and our human dalliance with a violence that

excuses itself and erases the voices of the most vulnerable?

Is there a way to interrogate the entrenchment of a seemingly omnipotent economic complex that mocks humanity by calling itself not only humanitarian but also just? What do we do with processes and ideologies with which we cohabit that glorify hatred, injustice, fear and violence that turn others into bogeymen? What ideologies of being exist that are capable or brave enough to hold perpetrator predatory systems and cultures accountable for their wilful desecration of life and meaning? Is there a repository of more profound ideas, values, and words that can engender transformative human relationships so that we do not have to bear the burden of human anguish and injustice alone?

Paraphrasing Mignolo, it must be possible for our humanity to imagine “institutions at the service of life rather than life at the service of institutions.” There has to be a way of being and seeing that deepens the witness’s gaze, a daring to first love—yes, I said it, love - and, therefore, make representation a true gift, a grace of human encounter, of human discovery, dignity, enchantment and knowing.

This essay is adapted from a speech by the author at the Gesellschaft für Anglophone Postkoloniale Studien / Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies (GAPS) Annual Conference on the theme, ‘Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World’, held from May 25 - 27, 2017 - at the University of Bonn, Germany.

Author’s preamble:

*The ideas this essay puts forward are mined from many disciplinary spaces and are especially energised by proposals from thinkers like Enrique Dussel, W.D. Mignolo, Santiago Castro-Gomes, Arturo Escobar, among others, who dare to interrogate the reality of the extended and always-morphing life-cycle of **coloniality** existing in a dominant historical framework that informs the state of the world today. My intention is to exhume a few sacred graves, particularly those masked in silences. This is a basic exploration of, to borrow from Dussel, “**negated alterities**”.*

I want to now confess to you that writing this was a struggle for so many reasons,

some not too clear. For one, what really is an adequate analytical framework through which to enter a thorough exploration of the contemporary iconography of profound human suffering? In considering this question, I was forced to recoil before the dominant post-Enlightenment, modernistic ideology and paradigm that fakes its break with its myriad pasts, while embedding and consolidating its humanity-displacing values and intentions To pretend that the paradigm—modernism, post-modernism, post-colonial, neo-liberal, whatever - is not also a violence-based, suffering-denying, scarcity-inducing, wound-causing, human-dividing, difference-criminalising, consumption-adoring, crisis-creating, self-aggrandising, disordered belief system, with its prosperity gospel, slaughtering priests, elaborate infrastructure, instruments, and institutions that favour a pre-selected few would be ingenuous of me.

*In which case, how then does one truly speak about **representation**, for example, within the framework of this overarching epistemological ecology? How does one address its systemic propensity for blood-letting, dependency on the commodification of life, a habit that is soothed by an instinct to euphemise atrocities that include presiding over a protocol that governs which images and narratives are allowed, sought, desired, derived, edited, distributed, sold and pre-explained? This essay is my attempt to deconstruct the representations and present a life- and human-affirming mirror to those doing the gazing.*