



2-19-2015

Suspended Life

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Dalton Anthony and Jacques, Jacinthe (2015) "Suspended Life," *Landscapes of Violence*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.7275/R5CC0XM0

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol3/iss1/3>

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Suspended Life

Abstract

Dean Baker, of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, reminds us that globalization and the explosion in social inequality over the past half century have not “just happened” of their own accord, but have occurred by design. Free trade agreements, deregulation policies, corporate downsizing, the privatization of resources and the evisceration of the social safety net, “are carefully hammered out deals that determine which sectors will [be] exposed to more competition, which sectors will see increased protection (e.g. pharmaceuticals and Disney), and which sectors will largely be left alone.”¹ The resulting transformations in the fabric of human society mark a quite explicit attempt to dislocate previous social arrangements in order to impose and regiment — make permanent — new alignments of hyper-exploitation among the international labor force.

Suspended Life uses images to reveal the structural violence that informs the juridical, political and cultural relationship between property and bodies. The massive geographic and inter-personal dislocations that have resulted from the range of practices falling under the rubric of “neoliberalism” are often marked as an absence, a ghostly estrangement that has spread like a quiet cancer across the American heartland, leaving only the outlines of the social relations they have displaced. In the upheaval that has left an exhausted, desolate landscape in its wake, we are not only able to discern the outlines of an idealized past but also the more troubling remnants of colonial-settlerism, racism and the promises of an American dream that was always more horizon than reality.

Keywords

violence, property, space, place making, race, neoliberalism

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Author Biography

Dalton Anthony Jones is an Assistant Professor in the School of Cultural and Critical Studies at Bowling Green State University. He received his PhD from Yale University in American and African American Studies. Jacinthe Jacques has an MA in Sociology from the University of Quebec in Montreal. Working in collaboration, their words and images place a special emphasis on contemporary forms of spatial and interpersonal alienation under late capitalism. Their aim is to foster reflection and provoke debate by exposing the “post-social” landscape of global communities grappling with the consequences of neoliberal divestment strategies. For more information on the artists visit our webpage: <http://www.shadopix.org/>



Detroit, Michigan. 2010

All photos credit: Dalton Anthony Jones and Jacinthe Jacques



Detroit, Michigan. 2010



Detroit, Michigan, 2010



Detroit, Michigan, 2010



Detroit, Michigan. 2012.

Some forms of violence are best captured in the eyes and gestures of the suffering; in the subtle tilt of a cigarette dangling from a limp wrist, in the slump of a worker's weary shoulders or even in the fleeting expressions of joy we can recognize in an innocent child at play. But there is something deceptive lurking behind the power of the empathic moment. Personalizing human trauma can mask the larger structure of our dispossession. A sentimental identification with the living runs the risk of missing those histories of institutional violence that frame and suspend our lives between the ability to dream and the ability to realize and sustain our aspirations – for love, for social justice, for prosperity. We run the risk, in other words, of failing to recognize the long train of predatory policies that devalue the social good in favor of the impersonal demands of private property and capitalist accumulation. The promise of the American Century, as it turns out, was quite brief. And while it is true that in the here and now, in the midst of the rapid and radical transformations that have shorn the fabric of our communal relationships, lives hang in the balance, the precarity of life is nothing new. It inherits and leaves its legacy. The traces of social insecurity's evolution – rooted in genocide and enslavement and the attendant tug of war between domination and resistance – are etched into the landscape, leaving marks, scars on the infrastructure of our world that may be covered up but are impossible to permanently conceal. Estrangement, for many, is a structural prerequisite to life.



Weston, Ohio. 2013



Northwest Ohio. 2009.



Northwest Ohio. 2010



Central Indiana. 2012.

In the ongoing upheavals of our age, an exhausted, desolate landscape has been exposed. Like an avalanche or a receding tide, the destruction of the old order allows us to see the emotional and material contours of suffering that lays exposed in its wake. *Suspended Lives* is our attempt to record the testimony of hidden voices at tension with the structural violence that surrounds them. Beachcombers in search of shells that tell stories about the past and present, we have scanned the landscape in search of those objects cast upon the shore, evidence of life but also a system of dispossession and constraint. Some of these artifacts are quite beautiful, lined like a seashell with intricate, colorful patterns glistening under the sun – others have been broken, surviving only as decaying fragments and shards. Either way, they have a story to tell. Our photographs, taken over a five year period and stretching from the Great Lakes to the southern states, attempt to show the continuity between the urban geography of deindustrialization and a rural America reeling from monoculture, genetic modification, the growth of factory farms and home foreclosure. Despite its brutality, there is something tender to be found in the sad and quite tragic disorientation that has settled upon the landscape of the “homeland.” Looking at it, we are not only able to discern the outlines of an idealized past but the more troubling remnants of the violent encounters that have been the trademark of colonial-settlerism, slavery and imposed scarcity. A traumatic archeology of alienation, terror, bondage and deterritorialization emerges from the sediment, the skeletal remains of a society built upon racial hierarchy, patriarchal domination and the raw imperatives of capital, revealing an American dream that has always been more horizon than reality.



Memphis, Tennessee. 2012.



Northern Kentucky. 2012.