

**when the witnesses in war
stop waiting for a necrotic
peace: a contemplation
on nelson maldonado's
against war**

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WALKING THROUGH THE CENTRAL PROJECT(S) OF *AGAINST WAR*

In his book *Against War*, Dr. Nelson Maldonado Torres (Nelson M-T) sets himself the task of explaining the essential entanglement of the development of Western modernity with the formal structuralisation of social relations of conflict and violence. Through his characterisation of “*the death ethic*” behind modernity’s settler colonial projects and the presentation of a “*paradigm of war*,” Nelson M-T lays out why it is that modernity necessitates a state of perpetual violence: to set apart the Other from the dominating citizen of modernity. It is through perpetual violence inflicted by a colonising “warrior,” “modernizing” class that the Other

can be named, maintained in a subordinate status, and made a fungible object (non-subject). By placing our social relations and epistemic footing in a perpetual conflict, the everlasting war of modernity captures people in an unrelenting state of coloniality.

In his text, Nelson M-T pushes us to understand that the endless reality of violence present in our contemporary lives can be traced through the living legacies of western modernity and coloniality. Tracing a genealogy of modernity's violent inception of rendering subaltern "Others," *Against War* works between history and theory, and indeed deploys a meta-analysis of the historicity behind modernity's theorising that enables practices of violent domination.

But Nelson M-T's book is not solely propelled by an interest in merely understanding how modernity's ethic of death, of war, underpins the rendering of Others. Rather, Nelson M-T's project of understanding the paradigm of war in modernity is moved forward by his interest in presenting a means of resistance to such a dire state of affairs. To struggle against a reality of war imposed by colonial modernity, one must look towards violent structures of otherisation and seek to upend them. To speak up against the violence of modernity, is to speak to and engage in the recognition of the Other. Nelson M-T sees the need to reach the subalternised Other in a radical politics of recognition and becoming which he coins *altercity*. By building up a counter politic of becoming the Other and being moved to act through their death, altercity extends itself beyond a mere fraternity to pose a radical, decolonial notion of solidarity between the peripheralised. It is in altercity that Nelson M-T's project extols the capacity of people to engage in decolonial work through a potent love. It is this love, this altercity, that stands to dissolve the death ethic of coloniality, and bring about liberation from modernity's stagnating violence of otherisation.

In what follows of my meditations on Nelson M-T's work in *Against War*, I hone in on the centrality of altercity in understanding his project, and the potential of the marginalised to boldly speak truth to power through love.

THE INTERVIEW, INTERROGATING THE PARADIGM AND THE PLAYERS

A Conversation with Dr. Maldonado-Torres around Violence and Vocal Love (Altericity)

Surely, we are not talking about the paradigm of war anymore.

This was my, perhaps too brash, first question to Nelson M-T as we sat over zoom discussing his book *Against War*.

I came into the conversation with a series of rejections. A rejection of the usage of dominant western academic works from figures like Levinas, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Hegel to build a framework for hearing the subaltern. A rejection of the lack of engagement with critical Marxist¹ projects despite their seeming relevancy. A rejection of operating through the paradigm of war itself as both a relic and a counterproductive yielding to the western neo-liberal ways of understanding that the book seems to want to shake free from.

When it came time to talk with Nelson M-T, screen to screen, I was ready to push this third and most central rejection. How could we be talking about this paradigm of war, still, to make sense of what seemed so abundantly to be a different articulation of mass violence, misery, and exploitation? In my question, there contained an implicit, burning criticism, which asked why should we care about “war” as conceived as a fundamental way of ordering the world given the onslaught of modernity when the sheer violence of our surroundings demands a linguistic paradigm shift to take full stock. We have entered into spectating violences that transcend the language of war.

It is to his credit that Nelson M-T responded to the central rejections I posed without ambivalence. Instead, he offered an invitation to further understand his project.

Nelson M-T spoke at length about the dangerous misstep to seek a “newness” to the violence manifesting across the world. He said the paradigm of war in his project purposefully acts to speak of what the malicious false promises of modernity and

the impact of coloniality make us: people content with the violence and corrosive processes of othering that surround us. The unique “nowness” I was trying to put forward neglected to recognise that what we were seeing now was and is as colonialism intended.

Nelson M-T calmly offered the following rebuttal to my rejection:

While there is a qualitative transformation of the state of war, the core paradigm persists.

Throughout our conversation I did not back down from my concerns.

But again, Nelson M-T was equal in his resolve to help me understand the key motivations of his project, and the usage of the language of war. What we were talking about in war was for him, the reduction of the othered masses via coloniality, liberalism, capitalism, into combatants who qualified for extermination for the sole purpose that they stand in empire’s way. The language of war was the “language of catastrophe to which coloniality is bound.”

After our conversation ended, I realised I had mislaid the most important part of Nelson M-T’s project in my commitment to my critique: altericity.

While discussing the violence of coloniality is important in *Against War*, the key task in the book is not to muddle through a purely intellectual project that devises the perfect label for the atrocities that come from coloniality. Rather, what Nelson M-T brings forth in *Against War* is a call to action, a call for love, that stands to upend the colonial reality of normalised atrocity. To focus on finding a newness to war, and not on love, on the altericity that stands to challenge it, is a grave misreading of Nelson M-T’s project.

Nelson M-T defines the concept of altericity thusly:

I find in this period a turn from fraternity to *a more radical ethical conception* that I term altericity. *Altericity refers to a radical act of giving that is driven*

by an unequaled concern for the death of the other person. The path from fraternity to altericity sees an intensification of Levinas's discourse on responsibility, on the difference between Being and the Other, and on the biblical theme of "giving to the Stranger. (Introduction, 14-5)

Alericity, or rather an unflinching love that makes mere spectator of violence into vocal witness, into kin, is what needed to be focused on to make sense of Nelson M-T's ambitions in *Against War*. An augmentation of Levinas's radical love for the Other, Nelson M-T's conception of altericity goes beyond the catalyst point of a face to face encounter with the Other, and instead takes up an intrinsic concern for the Other and their death even when they are not physically present. This investigation of the intrinsic concern for the Other's death in altericity oscillates between unpacking the abstract and the socio-historical contexts in which the Other finds themselves dominated under the weight of modernity. Nelson M-T's altericity goes further than Levinas's understanding of fraternity and the ethical responsibility to care for the Other, because it does not demand that we "know" the Other; instead we can understand the large scale systems of violence that afflict the Other and in recognising all potentialities of suffering, pain, and barbarity that could befall the Other, we come to occupy a shared space, a shared being, with which we seek to love the Other and change their material conditions despite our distance from them.

To appropriately process the sheer scale of the violence, is in turn to understand how the world arrived at this current condition and hold space for the hope of liberatory possibility. The project in *Against War* is built on a foundation of love and solidarity that cuts through the bitter but necessary discussion of what brought us to our current state of affairs.

In my reappraisal of the text and Nelson M-T's project, I recognized, in the paradigm of war, a means of naming those who engage in altericity in a bid for liberation and those who look on and allow war to unfold: the *witness* and the *spectator*. Witnesses are those who become kin and fight against the paradigm of

war through love. Spectators are those who enable the death ethic of colonialism by disengaging with those othered and allowing their maltreatment. To arrive at alterity in Nelson M-T's text, to arrive at speaking out as loving witness, there must be an understanding of the death ethic that comes with war and the enforcement of depersonalising othering through the silence of the spectator.

Using the characters of the witness and the spectator as a lens by which to understand the alterity posited by Nelson M-T shifted my reading of the text. The "nowness" of the violence that permeated my initial critique of the paradigm of war, became instead a recognition of the moment we live in and the relevancy of Nelson M-T's project. This is a moment where the roles of spectator and witness have become hypercritical in delineating who is or is not contributing to the liberation of those enduring violent dispossession and erasure. Now, in the age of screens and Twitter feeds, there is a reckoning that must be made with how the colonial death ethic that Nelson M-T articulates has mutated to suit our contemporary conditions. Our processes of othering may remain much the same, but the mediums available to engage in such practices have shifted. But, as we must keep in sight of the central project of *Against War*, even if there is a need to understand the violence of othering, we must never lose sight of the potential for decolonial love.

SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE, MUNDANE ATROCITY, ROUTINE BRUTALITY

The Spectator's Role in Upholding the Colonial Death Ethic Central to War through the Borders erected between Other and Self

The colonial death-world becomes the ethical limit of human reality. It is a context in which violence and war are no longer extraordinary but become instead ordinary features of human existence. This perverse expression of the conversion of the extraordinary into the ordinary represents a "limit" situation, or perhaps even a post-limit situation in the sense that the excess of abnormality goes beyond its climax and begets another reality in which it comes to define the normal. (Chapter 3, 100)

The above excerpt is what I believe Nelson M-T was trying to get me to interrogate more critically in our conversation. The “nowness”, the “newness” of the extraordinary violence I was fixated on was in fact the normal *modus operandi* for human behaviour under colonialism. Mass death has become routine; it is necessarily a part of the fabric of “modern” civilisations. But why did I feel in my seeing of it a newness? What was I recognising in the world that speaks to an undercurrent in the project of Nelson M-T’s book? It was how, in the social media age, those “spectating” violences hold a distinctive position in the death ethic for which their silence amplifies and further enables the systemic harms being done.

The death ethic behind the paradigm of war is an essential facet to in-group-out-group formation and a justification for eradication of the so-called “uncivilized” peoples seen to be incapable of properly engaging in western practices of modernity. So much of *Against War* fervently pursues how the Self-Other distinction enforces a normalisation of the institutionalisation of overwhelming violence. Nelson M-T’s meticulous working through theories of othering, from Heidegger, to Hegel, to Fanon, is one of the most robust analytic pillars of his book.

However, where this othering manifests in the role of the spectator is something I myself will tease from the text of *Against War*.

Spectators are those who silently consume the violence being done to colonised and marginalised, and thus play into the game of recognition in the death ethic while simultaneously denying that such a game is even taking place. To the spectator, the structural reality of war is absolutely non extraordinary. The spectator’s silence and their avoidance of acknowledging the violent reality, as evident in their refusing to join in protest with the marginalised, speaks to how critical they are in maintaining the inner workings of colonial death ethic.

Locating the centrality of violence and othering to the maintenance of colonial realities, one must carefully engage Nelson M-T’s first chapter of *Against War*, “From Liberalism to Hitlerism, Tracing the Origins of Violence and War.” It is

in this chapter that the silent spectator can be teased out as contributing to the colonial death ethic of war through practicing othering. Like Aime Cesaire² before him illuminated in his vital text *Discourse on Colonialism*, Nelson M-T takes up the mantle in explaining how western calls for universalizing liberal humanisms and abstract conceptions of freedom inevitably birth violence. In his discussion of Hitlerism, Nelson M-T moves fluidly between Heidegger, Levinas, Nietzsche, and Husserl to paint a trajectory for how a stagnating western picture of a universalising “self” paves the way for developing the forever foreigner: the Other in need of removal. But in a discussion of Hitlerism, it seems impossible to make sense of the historical precedent of the Nazis without apprehending what it takes for there to be a “buy in” to large scale atrocities that involve both ideological and material commitments. You need the spectator, the bystander, to not say or see anything, to pursue only the “truth” of the new reality of normalised brutality (Chapter 1, 24).

It is here, where I have drawn out the spectator, that I see a resurgent need to understand the continual “nowness” of Nelson M-T’s work. The silent spectator in the contemporary is one who has access to all the resources to see the Other otherwise, and still refuses. In pursuit of necrotic peace, where there remain the hushed screams of the othered, the spectator of today looks at their Instagram, their TikTok, their Twitter, and filters out all that does not resemble themselves. The silence is deafening, the gaps in knowledge and knowing the world almost untraversable. The spectator of today takes themselves to be free in the western abstract sense. They believe they freely choose their non-engagement with the othered in their curated slurred feeds of monotonous “apolitical” content. The spectator takes news, any news, as entertainment divorced from reality. This supposed freedom holds in it a latent fear of finding themselves othered. This is a so-called freedom where there lies no potential for liberation, because there is no desire to see oneself in the Other, the marginalised.

An example of the logic of such spectatorship can be found in the Western academics’ bureaucratic responses to the violence of settler colonial genocide

unfolding in occupied Palestine and the pro-Palestinian liberation movements taking place across the world. At various institutions, Cornell, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, etc., the dominant sentiment among those in the bureaucratic rungs of power is to stay silent on Palestine and vocally endorse the settler state of Israel, for fear of losing donor support and appearing “too extreme.” To this end, the silence propagated at many of these academic institutions relies on a glib spectatorship that plays into dominant narratives that erase Palestinian aliveness and legitimacy. These academies co-sign the ruling death ethic that relegates Palestinian people and their resistance to the margins. To speak on Palestine in the western academy is to risk becoming a danger to the status quo, and so any dean, chair, provost who wishes to maintain their career rather than be unceremoniously dismissed stays stumm.

But we must not remain mere silent spectators.

To move into becoming vocal witnesses is to move into bringing liberation about by a reverberance of the death and dying of the marginalized in one’s own flesh. The witness remembers and (re)members the bodies and memories of the marginalized. With this we arrive back to the need for altericity.

Nelson M-T writes:

Desire is the upsurge of the loving subjectivity. It is a Yes, or a radical affirmation of sociality and interhuman contact. *Altericity is the Yes of love expressed as non-indifference toward the Other, primarily toward the Other who is “below” (also sub-Other or sub-alter).* The Yes of love thus leads to a conception of ethical struggle against the dehumanization of the sub-alter. In this sense, *altericity is another way of conceiving the de-colonial attitude, out of which the de-colonial reduction emerges and is sustained.* As simultaneously affirmative of generosity and critical of damnation, altericity and the de-colonial attitude are both affirmative and negative:” (Chapter 4, 158)

To speak now of the witness, is to speak of a person engaging in altericity. The

spectator enables death and mass violence, while the witness sees those relegated to Other status and instead chooses to say “yes” to their very being. The witness in their love, in their willingness to bring those “below” out of subaltern status, participate in the praxis of a liberatory de-colonial ethic. In understanding “witnessing” death vs merely “spectating” it, we must be attentive to how the former entails a decolonial attempt to make human and heard the Other, where the latter entails a viewership that does nothing to challenge the dominant order of modernity.

ON THE BECOMING OF THE “WITNESS” TO WAR, TRANSFORMING INTO LOVING RADICALISED KIN

*Liberation through Altericity and the Refusal of the Colonised to Die by Speaking Life
into One another*

Moving towards Home (excerpt)

BY JUNE JORDAN

“Where is Abu Fadi,” she wailed.

“Who will bring me my loved one?”

The New York Times, 9/20/1982

—

I need to talk about living room
where I can sit without grief without wailing aloud
for my loved ones
where I must not ask where is Abu Fadi
because he will be there beside me
I need to talk about living room
because I need to talk about home

I was born a Black woman

and now

I am become a Palestinian

against the relentless laughter of evil
there is less and less living room
and where are my loved ones?

It is time to make our way home.

In this now viral fragment of a June Jordan poem, there exists the following question: what is it when a witness to war takes up the death of the Other, wades through it, understands it in their own body, and from this understanding seeks to take liberatory action?

The spectator does not grieve. The witness not only grieves but holds a strong affective tie to the Other. The spectator does not see themselves as occupying the same space as the Other.³ The witness sees themselves as occupying the same space, the same home, the same body as the Other for whom they feel kinship. Jordan's becoming, is a coming into the liberatory decolonial ethic that Nelson M-T exalts in *Against War*. In the poem Jordan shows us altericity in its purest form. This is again why Nelson M-T's conception of altericity is distinct from Levinas's ideas around fraternity, as the kind of love entailed in altericity insists on a sort of "becoming" the Other despite physical and epistemic distance.

Maldonado Torres offers the following useful passage to make sense of the kind of love, the altericity, present in Jordan's poem:

Love is just another name here for the paradox of the gift and for what I have called before altericity. *Altericity advances a distinct conception of peace, of interhuman contact, and of the very meaning of the human.* The gift of the self represents, beyond the solipsistic achievement of truth and knowledge, the point of entry of the existent into the human. *The self is only able to see (theoros) and grasp (comprehend), because it first hears and gives. Hearing the "cry" of the wounded and the afflicted becomes, in this sense, the enlightening*

act par excellence. At this point the neutralizing and impersonal trend of the process of signification is reoriented by its reference to the *interhuman realm, and more particularly, to the one-for-the-Other.* The suspension of the priority of the universal by (de-colonial) love represents in this way the effective exorcism from the hypnotic glare of Being. (Conclusion, 241)

June sees and comprehends herself in the struggle of the Palestinian people for freedom. Hearing the cry of the besieged people of Palestine she produced her own cry, an acknowledgement of their shared humanity, of being “one-for the Other.” Here, peace comes only with interrelation and connectivity, with witnessing as actively invested in the Other’s existence rather than a disinterested spectating role. Altericity, and witnessing, is a matter of connection, emotional resonance, and recognition.

Indeed, a non-reductionary recognition of the Other is requisite to being able to see and comprehend them. In Chapter 4, “Recognition from Below the Meaning of the Cry and the Gift of the Self in the Struggle for Recognition,” Nelson M-T works through Fanon to construct a picture of recognition that extends beyond the trap of the traditional Hegelian master/slave dialectic. It is the “phenomenology of the cry” that we come to understand the paradox of altericity and the pursuit of liberation despite all available evidence pointing to such a pursuit’s futility. The cry is one uttered in a bid for attention, for action, when injustice is endured and not spoken of. It is here that we come to see that there is a refusal to die. And more still, it is a refusal to die in silence. Even with the realities of the colonial death ethic imposing limitations on the imaginaries of the colonised, the colonised still cry out. This cry is a denial of the supposed futility of resistance.

The cry, as outside of the subjectivities of spoken language, brings with it the potential for recognition where the witness need only be open to feel deeply. The cry of the othered and the altericity of the witness manifest together to produce a brave act of speech, where both parties connect with one another through themselves to affirm each other’s humanity and demands for existence. In the cry,

and in the altercity of the witness, we arrive at what Jordan's becoming means to understanding Nelson M-T's conception of liberation.

In the cry and the witnesses becoming of the Other, there lies an affirmation and an acknowledgement of wrongdoing that demands the witness be moved to speak, to act, in a way that ensures that all selves are recognised, and all worlds included. This is what constitutes the witness's role in liberation

On such liberation Nelson M-T provides this clarification and definition:

Dussel holds on to the idea of rationality, while he also criticizes an abstract and univocal concept of universality. It is here that *the difference between emancipation and liberation is relevant*. What emancipation is to modernity and universality, liberation is to transmodernity and the call for a diverse world. For while *European emancipation refers to a singular process of coming to maturity, liberation refers to the many attempts, especially by formerly colonized subjects, to affirm their own selves and to create a world in which many worlds can fit*. Liberation claims liberty, equality, and fraternity, but also *solidarity and the embrace of alterity, including epistemic diversity*. (Chapter 6, 230)

Liberation mandates that the witness embrace the selves of many.

The witness, then must embrace the memory, body, and knowledges of those fighting the colonial death ethic and their attempted effacement. To engage in liberation, for Nelson M-T, is to open oneself to the many possibilities and many struggles of the world. There is then the openness to working outside of dominant structures to attempt to attain freedom, and it is this attempted externality from the logics of modernity and coloniality that sets liberation apart from emancipation done only on and in the terms of those in power.

But what is it for the witness to actually engage this liberatory de-colonial ethic?

The "speech" of the witness alone is not what matters. Their looking towards

and recognising in the cry of the othered a person is not the only thing altericity would demand if it truly brings us into a space of liberty revelation.⁴ It is action that is demanded of the witness. Refusal to let die the Other is an act. And such an act goes beyond nebulous illusions to radical speech and recognition. This act entails the witness putting themselves against the otherising gaze of erasive ideologies and systems of extermination and saying that there will be no more forgetting. This action takes place in many forms of practice, as is expected of love. The witness can protest in the streets, can speak out in public forums such as classrooms and workplaces, can boycott.

Even if all these methods prove unsuccessful, and perhaps unsatisfying, the witness must still never let the true reality of the barbarity the Other undergoes in the global systems of violence and dispossession be forgotten. Altericity, after all, is the many ways that one can make kin relations in confronting the death, be it social or physiological, of the Other. To build kinship relations takes an enormous amount of work and imagination.

To engage in Nelson M-T's liberatory de-colonial ethic is to engage in love. To love in altericity is to give oneself willingly to the constant act of germinating relationships. The project in *Against War*, while a meticulous analysis of literature and circumstance, holds at its core a demand from a bleeding, beating heart; that those who witness this world of death be moved by it to act.

The witness looks upon Other, murdered and ensnared by coloniality's impositions of death, and is roused by audacious love.

The witness refuses to let the Other die.

The witness sees in the death of the Other their own death. The witness screams, the Other cries, and through this howling in spite of threats of annihilation, a sort of speech is born from pure emotionality, rendered from souls unwilling to be extinguished.

Against War gives the reader the gift of reflecting on their spectatorship, and insisting that they take up a witnessing, an altercity, that will help build our decolonial tomorrow.

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NOTES

1. I would be committing a grave injustice if I did not mention and thank Dr. Jennifer Ponce de Leon for our conversation around the animosities present in many decolonial texts around Marxist ideologies and frameworks.
2. Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.
3. While it may appear that the distinction drawn between the Witness and the Spectator may give rise to another situation in which one party is rendered Other (namely the Spectator), I would challenge such a critique by returning to what the act of othering implies. Otherisation to some extent is done with the impulse to name one of the categories identified as inferior, irrational, non-agent; in the case of the spectator I do not take them to be such an Other who is unable to act and in speak in the world. Indeed, it is their active choice to turn away from the marginalised given their rational risk/benefit assessment of their own position in society. So it is that in identifying the silence of the Spectator I am not seeking to make them other, but instead point out the Spectator's silence to exalt the action, the speech in spite of dangerous circumstances, of the Witness.
4. "The 'serenity' of organized discourse is not preceded by a period of contemplation or neutral observation of reality, but by a time of urgency in which the subject cannot take his recognition as a human being for granted and has to attract attention simply to the fact that he is there. The cry is, indeed, precisely that, a sound uttered as a call for attention, as a demand for immediate action or remedy, or as an expression of pain that points to an injustice committed or to something that is lacking. The cry is the revelation of someone who has been forgotten or wronged. Before the word reaches the horizons of meaning, where the world is unveiled and the meaning of reality becomes clear, the cry becomes a call for the recognition of the singularity of the subject as such. The cry indicates the "return of a living subject" who impertinently announces his presence and who by doing so unsettles the established formations of meaning and challenges dominant ideological expressions" (Chapter 4, 133).