

Fragmented Time, Erased Existences

Divided along meridians and spanning across borders, time is considered an objective source of reality – a globalized truth that cannot be altered nor erased. This assumed “universal truth” has been reestablished through the construction of standardized time, a component of what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing refers to as a “global dream space,” requiring said universal truths and “involving neoliberal economic principles and the standardization of property law,” like time itself. ¹This standardization is used as a tool to create “objective” and normalized social constructs free from “subjective” perspectives and narratives – the latter which the dominant culture views as faulty and irrelevant. The overall “globalization” of truths found those who were subjugated by these erasures “hemmed in by the specificity of rules and practices, with their petty prejudices, unreasonable hierarchies, and cruel exclusions.”² Such constructs and experiences directly impact the existences of oppressed peoples: These restrictions on their inhabited spaces constantly and repeatedly affect their subjective, fragmented experiences of time.

¹ Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. “Let a new Asia and Africa be born: Global Vision.” In *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005. 86.

² Tsing, 85.

Universal claims about the globe, established through scientific “logic,” were created through what Tsing terms as “generalizations,” forging compatibilities by finding and creating similarities between different “facts” and judgments. Such a process, according to Tsing, “standardizes differences,” erasing said differences, their contexts, and histories.³ One of these generalizations is the “universality of capital-N Nature,” wherein the “globe [acts as] a node for the expression of universal logic.”⁴ Botanical classification is a prime example: “The first science concerned with” universalizing and classifying Nature into a “singular global knowledge,” it depended on the “erasure of collaborations [to make] global collaboration possible.”⁵ This particular European search for knowledge in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries strove to “construct a rational system to account for diversity,” or rather, create a subjective science/rationale without any regard for the context of this “diversity.”⁶ The erasure of outside knowledge and dialogue, a color-blind epistemology, was equated to “God’s plan”: This objective, universal truth dependent on a homogenous, Eurocentric idea of capital-G “God.” These European scientists co-opted foreign knowledge as their own, “[writing] not of the people” and instead “emptying out the landscapes they studied of [their] human inhabitants.”⁷

These generalizations, dependent on a “variety of [man-made] universal standards,” assume that Nature itself can be systemized – that the globalization of this universal truth, of the chaotic

³ Tsing, “Let a new Asia and a new Africa be born,” 89.

⁴ Tsing, 88.

⁵ Tsing, 90.

⁶ Tsing, 88.

⁷ Tsing, 94.

world and its existences, “can be quantified and located” through the construction of Nature as something that can be limited and predicted.⁸ Again, this generalized rationale erases those outside of this pre-existing system, outside of the condensed assumptions that are integral to the “scientific” Nature of prediction. Science itself cannot be a purely objective perspective through which to view the globe: the models presented by so-called scientists “[supercede] nations, classes, cultures, or specific business interests” that do not fit their subjective mold of a “global Nature.”⁹ The politics of science benefit those who are already privileged: Tsing pinpoints this in her examination of global climate models, where the generalization of countries has led to the generalization of issues surrounding climate change. This has led to an obscured context of the problems behind greenhouse gases, with the global models erasing the emission inequalities between the wealthier northern countries (which emit much more “luxury emissions”) versus their southern counterparts.

The separation of this biomatter and its contexts can be defined through what Nicole Starosielski, in her book *The Undersea Network*, coins as “islanding”: this “isolation and boundedness [of knowledge] regards the in-between as a void.”¹⁰ This epistemic “islanding” of knowledge serves to alter and shift flows, channels, and formats of information, creating “networks”: “sets of rules and standards that enable exchange.”¹¹ As such, those who dominate this flow are able to manipulate the spread of information and content as they traverse through

⁸ Tsing, 105.

⁹ Tsing, 103.

¹⁰ Starosielski, Nicole. "A Network of Islands: Interconnecting the Pacific." In *The Undersea Network*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. 170.

¹¹ Starosielski, 172.

these networks. This island-network binary, a distinction between disconnect and connection, is defined by a dominant, Eurocentric network which relies on silencing and excluding certain subsets of people. The result: An otherizing of outsiders, considered “temporary” and therefore insignificant, is “insulated from the feedback loop of democracy,” existing in a separate time-space warp from those holding power. This reestablishes a “naturalized colonial dominance”—one defined through “geopolitical [imagination] and [extensions].”¹²

Islands, whether they be physical, digital, or ideological, are seen as strictly transitory through the construction of these spaces as peripheral and temporal. “A set of imaginations that play to Western fantasies of disconnection,” the local and global are “wrapped together, [instantiating] global space and time.”¹³ This abstraction “[simplifies] and [reduces] the social and natural world to geophysical laws,” viewing the world as one that is “unified, neutral and understandable through the collection and manipulation of information.” Through viewing the global through local knowledge, the assumption deletes the specificities and nuances of the globe, where “the global scale is privileged above all others.”¹⁴ This “global scale” benefits those already in power – the authoritative colonial and imperial systems set in place through the manipulation of generalizations such as knowledge, capital, and borders. These fluctuations are rationalized through global Nature – by what has been deemed “objective” knowledge.

Starosielski’s “islands” are analogous to what Madiha Tahir refers to as “frontiers” in *The Containment Zone*: “zones with depth, ambiguously marked spaces that ebb and flow with the

¹² Starosielski, 177.

¹³ Tsing, 98.

¹⁴ Tsing, 102.

political tides.”¹⁵ These imagined spaces are set through the “experimental governance” of land – or more accurately, a form of authoritative technology used to dehumanize the peoples residing there. These borders are “internally fragmented, broken up,” and always in flux – this constant, ever-changing control extinguishing power through lack of capital, knowledge, and, as a result, agency. An example of this is the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA): “A narrow territory along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border,” movement in these territories are constantly regulated and surveilled through established “posts and checkpoints.”¹⁶ Through the “war on terror,” or the war on culture itself, ground and air policing of these areas, like air raids and starvation of the population’s access capital and labor, have led to their reliance on resources from imperial powers and regulations. As such, this lack of agency has led to the “abstracted engagement” of the Westernized “epistemological-ontological divide,” whereby “our principles of governance are reflected in [our perception of] nature”—that is, human dominance over the otherized (27 Watts).¹⁷ This knowledge and agency (or lack thereof) can be linked to the erasure of personal identities and existences and, therefore, directly linked to the subjugated population’s experiences of time and temporality.

“Sometimes people don’t know... they [didn’t] give [enough] time.”¹⁸ The interviewees Tahir mentions recall their inability to conceptualize time and space, their surrounding borders

¹⁵ Tahir, Madiha. "The Containment Zone." In *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, by Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan, 220-40. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 220.

¹⁶ Tahir, Madiha. "The Containment Zone." 225.

¹⁷ Watts, Vanessa. "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)." In *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 1st ed. Vol. 2. 27.

¹⁸ Tahir, 228.

constantly shifting and transforming – a modern Panopticon. These “multiple, fluid jurisdictions” directly influence these inhabitants’ bodies: their perception of reality is that of constant “anxiety, even fear.”¹⁹ The privilege of gaging time in surrounding spaces requires one to be able to know when “to slow down, to stop, or to get off the road”²⁰—but the combination of the lack of agency of these civilians and the invisible architecture of impending violence prevents them from accessing this prerogative.

This phenomenon is exemplified in Vanessa Watt’s exploration of indigenous epistemology: In *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society*, she defines the localized knowledge of indigenous thinking as being based on a circular concept of time, a “process of boundary implosion,” versus Western linear time, “an abstracted tool... by which borders are constructed and solidified.”²¹ This abstraction is reflected in the human-Nature binary: the Cartesian dualist thought of body-mind that permeates Western thought processes reinstates that “humans are uniquely distinct from nature in their thinking capacities,” and therefore superior to Nature. Whereas the Indigenous historical accounts saw the world through “Place-Thought,” through interactions between the natural worlds, the colonial gaze views said conceptions of the world as something “imagined or fantasized... lore, myth, or legend.”²² Instead, the Western gaze assumes the human-nature binary, a man-made distinction between “the *how* and *why* [removed]

¹⁹ Tahir, 229.

²⁰ Tahir, 230.

²¹ Watts, 29.

²² Watts, 21.

out of the *what*.²³ This epistemological-ontological divide establishes human agency and authority over nature – that the Earth, dirt, animals, and living organisms are “[actants] at best... that humans are different based on our ability of will and purpose.”²⁴ This assumed superiority is used to “rationalize and justify mass violence, biological racism, sexism and de-culturation” in the name of objective Science.²⁵

The operation of power itself is dependent on these epistemic technologies, with what Foucault terms the “Panopticon” being one of such tools: With the dynamics of the binary of light and dark embedded in this assumed superiority over Nature, the Panopticon strives to “[individualize] over a multiplicity in movement,” through which those in power “see everything while remaining unseen.”²⁶ This play with light and dark, a form of racialized surveillance, depends on an “architecture of control,” whereby bodies are isolated and unable to communicate, a “blinding light” manipulated to observe their every move. This surveillance and manipulated agency (or lack thereof) is magnified in places like the FATA, where “anxieties and the anticipation of risk... at borders, on city streets, and other spaces” prevents these residents from movement, from communicating – from *existing*.²⁷ These anxieties constantly perpetuate a transitory state of being, where the surveilled cannot live beyond that of actuality: They simply

²³ Watts, 24.

²⁴ Watts, 28.

²⁵ Watts, 29.

²⁶ Browne, Simone. "Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness." In *Notes on Surveillance Studies: Through the Door of No Return*. Duke University Press, 2015. 32.

²⁷ Browne, 38.

exist in a state of survival, in a constant fight, flight, or freeze mentality – this trauma reducing them to rely on their reptilian brains.

This panopticon is produced in conjunction with the “banopticon,” an infrastructure that “excludes certain groups [through profiling and] normalizes the non-excluded through its production of normative imperatives.”²⁸ Whereas the panopticon utilizes Foucauldian illusions of light and dark, power in the banopticon is manipulated through the silencing and erasure of the “other,” of those who are different from the prescribed norms set through dominant culture and authority. By objectifying these “others,” this normalized gaze seeks to maintain subordination through mechanisms of social control, like through the establishment of the U.S. census categories: whiteness is claimed as the normative racial category, while subcategories like “Mulatto” and “Mexican” were and are used to diminish those of “non-white” status.²⁹ This racial gaze is constantly manipulated to justify white supremacy, like the erasure and denigration of “black womanhood [through] the circulation of stereotyped images and ideologies.”³⁰ These bodies, perceived as lesser-than compared to their white counterparts, are de-humanized – seen as dirt to be claimed, land to be destructed, resources to be corrupted: these hegemonic borders serve to extinguish their existences, their voices, their temporal perceptions.

These banopticonal structures take shape in different forms, constantly transforming as it seems fit to the dominant culture’s priorities: In the containment zones of the FATA, the banopticon presents itself as arbitrary, generalized laws – in which “islands of heavily fortified

²⁸ Browne, 39.

²⁹ Browne, 56.

³⁰ Browne, 58.

barracks and check posts are anchors in a sea of chaotic disorder.”³¹ This lawlessness is one where systematic authority takes precedence, where the global model is prioritized over the local. A façade, this imagined governance is one of feigned “tribal autonomy” – “[The inhabitants] are free to kill each other if [they] like as long as [they] don’t do anything to the government.” It is through such nuanced spatial structures that territories like FATA are “[engineered into] containment zones and filter points... areas of temporal and spatial closure”³² through which they are policed through both ground and air surveillance. These closures act as panopticonal borders: through the establishment of specific curfews where “no one can travel at night,”³³ the absence of light is used to signify the absence of personal agency and security.

Because of this inability to see beyond the scope of the panopticon’s “blinding light,”³⁴ the lack of knowledge and agency of the residents of the FATA directly impact their fragmented experiences and, as such, their experiences of temporality. Rather than focus on their individualized perceptions of time, those that are stuck in these territories are forced to reconcile their localized agencies for the global: an abstracted tool for their already abstracted experiences. Filter points, an integral part of these containment zones, only amplify these isolating existences: “[mediating and transforming] the relationship between space and time,” they “elongate embodied distance”³⁵ – temporal agency is a foreign concept to those waiting to pass through

³¹ Tahir, 230.

³² Tahir, 231.

³³ Tahir, 234.

³⁴ Browne, 34.

³⁵ Tahir, 235.

these containment zones. This doubled distancing of the space-time duality is a mechanism for manipulating the fragmented perspectives of these passersby: they are stripped of hope, of a future, of individualized identities – whereas the outside political powers subjective these tribalized natives as “ethnic pluralisms,”³⁶ an effective erasure in dominant Eurocentric cultures.

Time is proven to be a subjective perspective of one’s existence in the spaces they hold: for those subjugated by dominant cultures and their reductive technologies, the globalized Nature of these authoritative powers have erased their agencies, their identities. As such, the “islanding” of these underrepresented and other-ized populations are forced into the dark, their internal temporalities flushed out through the panopticism and banopticism of the normalized gaze. Not able to distinguish light from dark, subjugated populations are forced to exist in a limboed perception of time: fragmented and in-between, with nowhere to go. Enclosed by constantly shifting frontiers and borders, these peoples are not given the privilege of sight in their surrounding architectures of control. They are seen by colonial and imperial powers as part of global Nature itself, stuck in a chaotic sea of disorderly movement – this constant trauma forcing them into a state of survival. Life for those left in the dark is just that – life itself, as darkness is the only space they have been forced to occupy.

³⁶ Tahir, 236.

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