



Castellated Abbeys, Fortified Enclaves: Immunity and Sovereignty in Edgar Allan Poe's 'Masque of the Red Death' and Contemporary Brazil

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
UNMASKING THE RED
DEATH

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ABSTRACT

This essay uses elements of Roberto Esposito's immunitary paradigm to shed light on Edgar Allan Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" and, in parallel, to think through social and spatial stratification in contemporary Brazil. I argue that racial anxiety is at the heart of both Poe's story and the particular spatial tendency in Brazil's cities of elites to live in "fortified enclaves" (Caldeira), comparable in many ways to the "castellated abbey" of Poe's story. In examining the effects of the "Red Death", or Covid-19 in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro's government, I observe that Bolsonaro's status as a democratically elected official (unlike Prince Prospero) has forced him to give certain concessions to the population, in the form of aid payments, that maintain his power. However, I demonstrate that this is not incompatible with an active thanatopolitical strategy, which encourages the most marginalized in society to expose themselves to the virus (and thus to death). Finally, I turn to Jean-Luc Nancy's short essay "Communavirus", which outlines the ethical potential of community-in-isolation but which does not take into account places such as the favelas of Brazil, where isolation is often not practically or materially possible.

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“There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not.”

—Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death”

“Tell me how your community constructs its political sovereignty, and I will tell you what forms your plagues will take”, proposes philosopher Paul B. Preciado in a recent essay “[Learning from the Virus](#)”, which draws on the thought of Michel Foucault, Roberto Esposito, and Emily Martin. In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842) Prince Prospero, in the face of plague in his lands, decides to “self-isolate” with one thousand of his closest knight and dame friends in an “extensive and magnificent” castellated abbey (300). This immunitary strategy buys the autocratic prince a few more months of revelry before the Red Death inevitably catches up with him and his privileged friends. This essay uses this story, alongside Esposito’s immunitary paradigm, to think through social and spatial stratification in Brazil, and the ethics and politics of isolation. I examine the legacy of slavery revealed in both the story and Brazilian society; and, in response to Preciado’s question, I demonstrate that Brazil’s contemporary popular sovereignty fails to guard against an active thanatopolitical strategy by the president Jair Bolsonaro in the face of Covid-19.

I examine three interrelated elements of Brazilian society and their uncanny likenesses to the story: first, the first person to die of Covid-19 in Brazil was a domestic worker whose employer returned from Italy and failed to warn her that she had symptoms of the virus. As commentators have invoked the legacy of slavery to explain the lack of care and responsibility for this household helper, so too I revisit the racial anxiety at the heart of Poe’s story, with its “gigantic clock of ebony” and the “blackness of the sable drapery” that “appals” in the seventh of the decorated chambers (301–02). Second, in São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, the deep stratification of society and modern-day racial anxiety manifest themselves in a particular spatial phenomenon – “fortified enclaves” ([Caldeira](#)), where the upper classes choose to live—that are comparable, in many ways, to the castellated abbey of Poe’s story. Third, the economic inequality that is directly manifested in, and reinforced by, spatialized immunitary logics determines the way in which Covid-19 has spread there. Brought into the country by the super-rich flying from London, Belgium, Italy, and the US to attend the engagement party of the great-great-great grandson of the last emperor of Brazil, the virus inevitably spreads like illegal Amazonian fires in the densely populated and marginalized favelas, as well as in the overcrowded buses that take the working-class people that live there to earn their day wages ([Phillips & Barretto](#)). Finally, I refer to an article by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, “[Communavirus](#)”, that argues that the breakdown of community is not inevitable in the face of Covid-19 but that, indeed, community might be *enabled*, if we all act ethically to protect each other.

1. RACIAL ANXIETY, STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Esposito argues that the phenomenon of “immunization” is at the heart of modern politics. Immunization is broadly defined as “a protective response in the face of a risk” and can be applied to diverse situations: from computer threats (viruses) to epidemics to the policing of immigration ([Esposito 1](#)). “The Masque of the Red Death” is, straightforwardly, an account of a “protective response in the face of a risk” and yet there are different interpretations of what this “risk” might be.

In his article “Entropic Imagination in Poe’s ‘Masque of the Red Death’”, Hubert Zapf reads the “Red Death” in Poe’s story not as a literal plague or “outside force” but as a metaphor for the violence inherent to human society and its “self-consuming tendencies” (213). In turn, the response of Prospero, not least his retreat into aestheticized architecture and revelry, is understood as society’s attempt to impose control upon life and the universe’s chaos (which can be interpreted as Poe’s meta-commentary on art).

In “Bells of Freedom and Foreboding”, [Paul Haspel](#) reads Poe’s story as a response to a more specific type of violence: that of slave revolt, a phenomenon that Poe had witnessed a number of times in his life in the antebellum South. Here, the Red Death is understood as a cypher for “an apocalyptic force that overwhelms and brings down all of the rich and powerful people of an entire society”, which articulates Poe’s “fears for the future of the American South” (46–47). It is thus not simply the threat of slave revolt itself that produces the anxiety contained in this

gothic story, but the threat that abolition would pose to the *way of life* in the Southern states from which he hailed.

While race, slaves, or people of colour are not mentioned in “The Masque of the Red Death”, “blackness” features heavily: the melodramatic climax takes place upon the “sable carpet” in the “black apartment” of the seventh chamber (Poe 304). Paying particular attention to the signification of the clock in the story, Haspel suggests that “It seems noteworthy, in terms of antebellum American racial typology, that the tolling of an *ebony* clock in a *black* chamber with *blood-red* windowpanes causes the revelers at Prospero’s masque to grow *pale*” (60). He also notes the significance of the fact that Prince Prospero is named after “one of the few characters in William Shakespeare’s work who is specifically described as a slaveholder” (54). Esposito, for his part, reminds us of the “founding relationship between property and plunder” (28), and also relevant to our concerns here is the fact that Roman “rights” were founded upon the fact that “the property owner has the right to use or abuse at will [...] human beings” (26). In Portuguese, Prospero means “prosperous” and it is clear that, whether Prospero were to be American, European, or Brazilian, the blood of black slaves probably underpins the very *prosperity* and vitality of his circumstances. This fact is reflected in the colour code of the elaborate chambers, most significantly the enigmatic and exceptional chamber that combines red and black together.

“Plunder” is suggested in other material details of Prospero’s abbey, such as the “profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro” (Poe 301). Similarly, the ebony of the clock—a wood known for its extreme hardness and durability—was also the term often used to describe the faces of African slaves (Molineux). Ebony was, moreover, imported from Mozambique, Tanzania, and India, hence representing symbolically and materially the violent acquisition of people and natural resources, and indeed the many unequal exchanges that took place as part of the broader histories of conquest and imperialism.

Haspel further argues that Poe’s tale embodies conflict over the name of Pennsylvania’s “Liberty Bell”, previously named the “State House Bell”, which was a symbol of American Independence. When renamed the “Liberty” Bell, connotations shifted to represent the ongoing struggle for the liberty of slaves in the South. This very debate was emblematic of the profound divisions in the United States over slavery at the time of writing of this story. When it comes to Brazil, however, Teresa Caldeira points out that “the Brazilian national elite was not deeply divided over slavery, and it was never involved in a civil war over this issue. This unity allowed various institutions inherited from slavery—including physical chastisement—to persist largely unchallenged” (Caldeira 143). As a result, structural racism and virtual segregation is visible everywhere in Brazil, the most unequal democracy in the world. As noted by Canzian and Mena, black Brazilians are found in lower-socio-economic strata, a patrimonialist system seizes state resources and privatizes them in exclusionary ways, and a regressive tax structure collects proportionally more from those who have the least.

In this context, Esposito’s reminder of the origins of the word “immunity” is relevant: “*immunitas*”, the negation of *munus*, the obligation to pay tax or tribute—or, in other words, to contribute or give back to the community (5). So, for Preciado, following Esposito, “Biopolitics implies a hierarchy with the immunized at the top and the de-munized, who will be excluded from any act of immunological protection, at the bottom” (n.p.). This is true of Brazil, where the top 1 per cent holds the highest concentration of wealth in any democracy (and are immunized from paying tax), while those at the bottom have no social safety net. Economists, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett show, in their seminal *The Spirit Level*, that high inequality is correlated with a lack of trust in other members of society, poor life expectancy, and much higher instances of homicide, drug trafficking, and other forms of crime. By extracting profit from privatized would-be-social services and refusing to pay tax, Brazilian elites are structurally responsible for the social violence that emerges because of inequality in their society.

2. FORTIFIED ENCLAVES, CASTELLATED ABBEYS

Attempts made by the elites to isolate themselves from the social violence that they have structurally created take a particular spatio-architectural form in Brazilian cities, described by Caldeira as “Fortified Enclaves”, a term that could also be used to describe Prince Prospero’s

castellated abbey (256). In her book on the subject, Caldeira finds the Brazilian elite's immunitary fantasies revealed in the real estate advertisements of the 1970s that, she argues, *produce* a notion of urban insecurity before crime actually becomes of real concern to residents of the megacities. Even now that crime rates are, indeed, high, it is not the elites and middle classes that suffer, but the poor and marginalized who feel the effects of the Brazilian "Red Death".

For Caldeira, the adverts reveal, and help to construct, what she describes as an "aesthetic of security" (291). She finds that "The use of literal means of separation is complemented by a symbolic elaboration that transforms enclosure, isolation, restriction, and surveillance into status symbols" (259). Consider the following examples of Brazilian real estate advertisement copy set next to quotations from Poe's story:

Fortified Enclave: "Sophisticated finishing, condominium enclosed by walls and iron fences, guardhouse with guards on duty 24 hours a day, intercom, garage. Permanent tranquillity" (qtd in Caldeira 266).

Castellated Abbey: "A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. This wall has gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts" (Poe 300).

Fortified Enclave: "Four swimming pools [...] saunas. Room for ballet, fencing and exercise. Massage and tanning room [...] Mini *drugstore* with books, magazines, tobacco, etc." (qtd in Caldeira 266).

Castellated Abbey: "The abbey was amply provisioned [...] The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisati, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within" (Poe 300).

Fortified Enclave: "The right not to be bothered [...] Total security for you and tranquillity for your children. The residences form a complex totally protected by walls. Access allowed exclusively for residents" (qtd in Caldeira 266).

Castellated Abbey: "With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself" (Poe 300).

Like the Brazilian "Fortified Enclaves", Prospero's architecture is "a power-structure against the lower classes and against the Red Death" (Zapf 213). While the prince "summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court" (Poe 300), Caldeira notes that people who choose to live in fortified enclaves "value living among selected people (considered to be of the same social group)"—in other words, the knights and dames of Brazil—"and away from the undesired interactions, movement, heterogeneity, danger, and the unpredictability of open streets" (Caldeira 258).

Yet, the latter part of the last advert reveals one of the inherent fallacies in the logic of fortified enclaves and in the strategy of segregation in urban planning: the middle- and upper-class inhabitants rely entirely upon working-class people to provide all of the services that keep their life functioning smoothly. They hire cleaners, nannies, cooks, and gardeners; and, as Calderia puts it, "They give guns to poorly paid working-class guards to *control their own movements in and out of their condominiums*" (271). This apparently paradoxical situation exemplifies what Esposito terms immunization in its medico-political form: "Evil must be thwarted, but not by keeping it at a distance from one's borders; rather, it is included inside them" (Esposito 7). "Alphaville" in São Paulo is particularly emblematic of this illogical tension: a gated community covering an area of 26km, with a residential population of around 20,000 people, and yet serviced by around 75,000 *non-residents* who pass into the community *daily* to work (Caldeira 262). As such, one might question who is actually being kept out by this 3.5m gate and single controlled entrance.

3. COVID-19, THANATOPOLITICS

For Zapf and Haspel, the "Red Death" represents social violence, but what if we now read the "Red Death" *as plague*, or, in the present moment, Covid-19? Brazil is, at the time of writing, second only to the United States in numbers of deaths from the virus and this can be attributed, in large part, to the anti-scientific and dismissive approach that President Bolsonaro has taken.

He was one of the first high-profile global leaders to contract the virus, but, luckily for him, this Prince Prospero did not fall “prostrate in death” through his encounter with the plague (Poe 304).

The reliance of upper- and middle-class Brazilians on their domestic workers, as discussed above, means that the “fortified enclaves” in which they live are by no means isolated from the rest of the city. However, the risk of the spread of Covid-19 is many times higher in the crowded favelas where the lower classes live, and on the crowded buses on which they travel to and from work on—something over which they have no choice, given that they often earn day-to-day what they need for food and bills.

The reality of the effects of the spread of the coronavirus has continued to reveal class and racial tensions in Brazil. As *Der Spiegel* reports, “Like in many other countries in the southern hemisphere, the coronavirus was brought to Brazil by a wealthy, predominantly white middle and upper class—people who have the means to travel” (Blasberg “Coronavirus” n.p.). On April 4 it was reported that Brazil’s most exclusive club (to which 0.00041 per cent of the population have access) had found that at least sixty of their 850 members had contracted Covid-19 (Phillips & Barretto n.p.). Another castellated abbey breached by the Red Death. Nonetheless, the first person actually to die of Covid-19 was not from the Brazilian elite. This was Cleonice Gonçalves, an *empregada* (a domestic worker) whose employer had just returned from Italy, had tested positive for Covid-19, but had failed to warn Cleonice, who suffered from diabetes and who tragically succumbed to the virus a few days later.

The stance that Bolsonaro took in the face of a growing death toll has been denounced as a strategy that “deliberately acts to spread the disease” (Lotta et al. n.p.), in particular among the most vulnerable:

“So what?” Bolsonaro asked after 5,000 deaths. “What are you afraid of? Face it!”, he commanded when we reached 91,000 deaths; after all “everybody dies”. At 100,000 deaths, he felt only that “we have to go on”. And days ago, with 162,000 Brazilians dead, he used a ceremony at the presidential palace to warn that “we can’t run away from it, run away from reality; we have to stop being a country of faggots”. (Lotta et al.)

Aside from the commonalities between Prince Prospero’s disregard for his subjects “when his dominions were half depopulated” (Poe 300), and Bolsonaro’s thanatopolitical pontifications, there is one major difference in the nature of the sovereignty that their regimes emblemize: Bolsonaro (for the time being) presides over a democracy. The fact that elections are coming up in 2022 means that he has to do *something* to secure a chance of re-election. This has translated into emergency aid payments of £83–166 per month for around 67 million Brazilians. This gesture is, of course, highly meaningful for those that receive it, especially in a country where the number of people in extreme poverty has grown by 6.3 million since the Worker’s Party (PT) were ousted in 2014, not just because of Covid-19 but because of the regressive social and economic policies pursued by the subsequent governments (Canzian & Mena n.p.). Of course, perversely, this aid payment does not conflict with his parallel strategy of encouraging the population to place themselves at risk of dying from Covid-19. If more people die, there are fewer people to financially support. This shows, in the starkest way, the limits of the democratic model of popular sovereignty in guarding against thanatopolitics.


CONCLUSION

The spatial division in both Brazil and in Prospero’s lands “contradicts the ideals of openness, heterogeneity, accessibility, and equality that helped to shape both modern public spaces and modern democracies” (Caldeira 4). Instead, as we have seen, “Privatization, enclosures, policing of boundaries, and distancing devices create a public space fragmented and articulated in terms of rigid separations and high-tech security: a space in which inequality is an organizing value” (Caldeira 4).

Moreover, looking beyond Poe and Brazil, one could argue that, in times of “lockdown”, the ideals of “openness, heterogeneity, accessibility, and equality” are quickly jettisoned anyway; that community breaks down; that all is lost. But is this inevitably the case? The ethical potential of Covid-19 to communize us has been addressed directly by the philosopher of community Jean-Luc Nancy. His recent article puts a new spin on the pandemic, renaming

it “Communavirus”. Indeed, playing on the theme of sovereignty, he points out the positive implications of “communo” dethroning “corona”, “if not decapitating it”. With regards to the communizing potential, Nancy says: “It essentially puts us on a basis of equality, bringing us together in the need to make a common stand. That this has to involve the isolation of each of us is simply a paradoxical way of experiencing our community” (n.p.). Of course, “The Masque of the Red Death” is precisely about the negation of this communality and the creation of a closed community that seeks privileges and benefits over those excluded. Rather than “togetherness, interdependence and solidarity” in the face of death, Prince Prospero chooses privilege, disregard, and frivolity. As has been shown in this essay, in the case of Brazil, the elite’s pre-existing immunitary strategies preclude millions of Brazilians from isolating safely, placing real-world strain on Nancy’s scheme. The lesson is perhaps ultimately the following: from now until the vaccine, and thus real immunity, arrives, we must self-isolate if we can, and, following that, strive to construct a more equal world.

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