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SET Theory
Place-Discipline
Jose-Luis Moctezuma
Omnidawn, 2018

TPRI

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Jose-Luis Moctezuma. Place-Discipline. Omnidawn, 2018.

The potential fusion of capitalism and animism presents a further implication: the very distinct possibility that human beings will be transformed into animate things made up of coded digital data. (5)

Achille Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason

In beginning to discuss Jose-Luis Moctezuma's *Place-Discipline* (Omnidawn, 2017) it might be helpful to define the title of its longest poem, "Megapolisomancy." Megapolisomancy, a word invented by the science fiction writer Fritz Leiber in his 1977 novel *Our Lady of Darkness*, describes a fantastical form of city planning practiced by an esoteric cult that designs cities, "of the monstrous sort," according to secret underlying principles, with the purpose of concentrating human bodies for the eventual extraction of their energy. Thus, the secret design of a city constructed using Megapolisomancy is effectively *readable* by the expert diviner of this occult science. This trained sage is a special reader that can present the secret of the city's underlying purpose to us by careful analysis of its surfaces. Moctezuma's poems take this fanciful idea as an actual description of current urban design, and a contemporary function of poetry. The poems ceaselessly uncover the deliberate organization of human bodies into concentrated forms for ready capital-expropriation (segregation, spatial flows, geoengineering, social media, electronic devices, etc.), creating a negative image of globalized racial financialized capitalism. The cosmopolitan disciplinary conditioning of human life finds a lively and frightening voice in the ultra-surveilled

paranoiac speaker(s?) of *Place-Discipline* who is (are) like an archaeologist presenting to us heretofore unseen symbolic crystals that have been opaquely embedded in the language of design, the history of colonial empire, US/Kanada policy, and a certain strain of poetics (Pound, Olson, and Duncan are mostly silent interlopers). Indeed, the language is more like an emergent conditioned and conditioning surfacing as the page than it is a singular *voice*.

As a local chaotic site, the book refuses the totalizing representative strategy that Heriberto Yépez identifies as North America's relentless production of "pantopias of space," such as short stories that "in their miniscule site...pretend...to house the totality of beings" (24). In *The Empire of Neomemory*, Yépez associates this *pantopia* with Charles Olson's projective verse. By contrast, *Place-Discipline* operates somewhat *like* Charles Olson (as in analogous but not identical or imitative), even approaching what might occasionally appear as an appropriation of "projective verse," but it does so in counter-time, reverse-discursively militating against any possible *pantopia* of space, any "pseudo-All" or "intention to impose as cosmic model [an] anti-temporal inventory" (31). The book ventriloquizes the all-panoptical surveilling eye of contemporary racial financialized capitalism (and to

a certain extent Olson's *Maximus*) by hypostatizing its pantopic machinic vision, while asserting its own irruptive irrecoverability and inappropriability as a poetic force outside any pantopia's claim to totalization. A reader will not find any "absolute (or selective) topological accumulation" that subordinates time to space here (or the subordination of difference into any totalitarian general law), instead, this poetry suggests that even the seemingly all-pantopic surveilling eye cannot finally totally capture time in its images. This poetry "impede[s] the formation of images, thereby destroying *spectacle*" by increasing language's virtual *chaosmos*. As Yépez writes, rhyming with Walter Mignolo's oft-used concept of *linguaging*: "Languages are the primordial defense against the pantopia, as each language is its own chaosmos" (248, emphasis mine).

Instead of a totalizing pantopia of space, Moctezuma's poems imagine (or simply posit) Chicago, the poetic subject, and/or the neutered "Place" of *Place-Discipline*, as a city created by unseen forces (as all current cities are) and composed by an urban design organized by the occult sciences of white supremacy, colonialism, and global finance/computational capitalism. Here we find that today's affective/noopolitical geopolitical form of finance capitalism has intensified the Megapolisomancy initiated by the colonial project, a project predicated on the invention of race as the ground for imagining a surplus of life that can be wasted and spent without end. As Achille Mbembe notes in *Critique of Black Reason*, "race is one of the raw materials from which difference and surplus—a kind of life that can be wasted and spent without limit—are produced" (34). You can see this point refracted midway through Megapolisomancy, in the section titled "Chicago School":

"they call it 'human / kapital' the closing of the gates / closing / of the schools closing / of the vertical)) (mindscapes...." (55).

Here we momentarily catch a glimpse of one of the book's many formal idiosyncrasies: the indeterminate parenthetical. Opening and closing with abandon and accumulation, the parenthesis that cannot finally be cast as an aside intrudes into the main discursive structure, an irruptive abeyance

positing an alternative syntactic-diacritical (non)universe that, as Yépez writes, is a "diachronically heteroclite chaosmos... disappear[ing] and appear[ing], separated...by an uncrossable abyss, by a pulsating irregularity" (251). If the poems hypostatize the surveilling eye's violent desire for pantopic space in order to reveal pantopia's identity as a pathological fixation in the service of empire and coloniality, they also offer an irreducibly singular heteroclite chaosmos, opening an incommensurable ravine between pantopia and chaosmos that we never arrive at: a pulsating irregularity inappropriable by hegemonic "reality's" fantasy. We might understand this as the reverse shape of a constitutive exception that defines the polis — a negative sacred. If contemporary finance capitalism's new sacred is the human kapital that was once the slave and is now the bare life of the refugee, the impoverished subaltern left to perish on the open sea, the precarious miner that dies so that iPhones might live, the homeless of Los Angeles, and all those that remain forever locked out of the same world they in fact make function, then it is by this sacred's constitutive exclusion that it persists as an irruptive challenge to the polis, a pulsating irregularity *actually tearing the fabric of the city's imaginary borders*. We might never have access to this countervailing veiled shape because it refuses access, but nevertheless we might be able to read the consequences of its immortal propulsive raging against its expropriation in the signifying desecrations of the city: broken windows, graffiti, banks set aflame, advertisements.

With infrared vision *Place-Discipline* x-rays the invisible infrastructure of our violent metropoli (or "citadels of Empire" as Kamau Brathwaite frequently referred to them) and its absurd technicist language, while the poetry simultaneously produces a unique form of singular, generative opacity. The opposite of a commodity that conceals in its ghostly fetishism the truth of its processural identity, *Place-Discipline* prepares a negative commodity for the purposes of decathecting our attachment to the metropolis's cruel machinations. In place of the smooth functioning of the "smart-city," poetry like Moctezuma's proposes a torn, ragged, re/de-stitched fabric of the refused that rejoins and expands the visible relationship between consequence and action in the geopolitical situation by refusing the illusion of separation

between commodity, its site of manufacture, labor power, its site of purchase, its consumption, the mining of its materials, its supply chains, advertisements, etc; this is a poetry that leaps between immediate materiality and distant dependencies to find a simultaneity uncapturable by pantopia's totalitarian thought-regime.

The title "Chicago School" alludes, if sub-ironically, to Chicago as a perennial experimental social laboratory, such as it being the site of John Dewey's experiments in pragmatic education, as well as being the eventual settling place of the exiled Bauhaus artists/architects László Moholy-Nagy and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, making Chicago an ambivalent emblem of conscious urban design and development, and a site of failed hauntological utopias. But it also alludes to a different Chicago School: Sun Ra's diffuse afrofuturist laboratory that manifested from outer space in and around Chicago's South Side from 1946-1961, a place and time that William Sites has noted "Afrocentric philosophies flourished, storefront prophets sold 'dream-book bibles,' and Elijah Muhammad was building the Nation of Islam." This miscegenated double-schooling of American Pragmatism/Bauhaus on the one hand, and The Radical Black Tradition on the other, is the counter-disciplinary non-institution that *Place-Discipline* brings as a fantastical counter-reformation to the relentless enforcement of violent biopolitics that ravages the city. In this way, *Place-Discipline* renders poetry into a heterological counter-history of functionalist architectural design, social planning, afrofuturist transrealism, and jazz's mercurial stam-stutter cry, as if Asger Jorn's International Movement for an Imaginary Bauhaus and Guy Debord's Lettrism/Situationism actually sprung up on Chicago's South Side and joined forces with the "reasonable faith" of Gwendolyn Brooks's "Boy Breaking Glass" "Whose broken window is a cry of art...not an overture, a desecration" and made it their goal to collaboratively uncover the genocidal ambiances of the USAmerican midwest in "a hymn, a snare, and an exceeding sun."

Along with the psychedelic non-knowledge of Sun Ra's immeasurable equation, Situationism and Psychogeography are dunc windward fluxes blown through the collection (under the pavement, the

beach!), and they are alluded to many times, such as on pg. 25, "interpellate / the ism of situation / as to where / terrorists manifest parasitic flows / what you call *difference engine* / what they call *geopolitics* nodes / detoured from a cast net vibrato..." (25). Here Althusserian hegemoic interpellation, Babbage's *difference engine* (an early computer), detouring, and a paragrammatic situationism scrambles time-space (and is scrambled in time-space), evoking a dark precursor to what global politics now is: a giant computational capitalist apparatus seemingly invented only to murder the oppressed poor, and, finally, the planet. This passage characterizes Moctezuma's kaleidoscopic high-velocity fractured fragmented constellatory ragged-fabric "cast net vibratory" poetics that soulfully evokes ghosts of radicalisms past and present, from The Black Radical Tradition to an irruptive mestizo Spanish, from the SI to the Bauhaus in exile to the civilizing mission of USAmerican Pragmatism, while incommensurably folding into its uncapturable origami Sun Ra's Egyptology just as intricately as it does the shimmering feather work of the Aztec Feathered-Serpent Quetzalcoatl horrifically transmogrifying into the "Dharma of DARPA" by way of a miniscule tardigrade.

("what ratchet's kin's concomitants / to foreign cormorants / perched / on death's arborescence ((...transforming wing / into scale, slows living systems down / sprouts serpent-feather, turns / tardigrade / bcuz / the Dharma / of DARPA...))

The architecture and design theorist Keller Easterling argues that urban metropolis construction, what she calls "medium design," comes pre-loaded with productive *dispositions*: social, ideological, and historical tendencies that organize behavior and action according to determined interests. In this spirit, *Place-Discipline* can be read as a sounding of the dispositions embedded in Chicago's urban design, from its beginnings in indigenous genocide, through its history of violent segregation. But the book also emphatically sings the screaming song of Chicago's radical traditions. Like a hallucinatory poetic *dérive* through the necropolitical psycho-physical infrastructure of the contemporary capitalist megalopolis of ongoing colonial genocide, *Place-Discipline* energetically leaps through the language of finance, poetics, history,

race, coloniality, time and space to conjure the hysterical message of a heretical divining sage able to read the horrific message signified by the city's violent Megapolisomancy, all the while singing its own unstoppable chaotic music of perseverance, life, vitality, and poetry.

The text's formal inventiveness and exploration of the page enact a psychogeography of the line and stanza, breaking words over enjambed lines, evocatively regulating and distorting the time and space of reading so as to create a multiversal omnidirectionality of thought, time, space, and architecture.

(foot- / less activisms, be- / hooved /
tremored in their in- dividuations / she + he
who are // *They* / the cyborgian // *We* / the
unpersoned *they* of our *us* / *genus* /
automata mille- nnial / androids / the them
// of *You* / we, who are)

Such a page takes a charged scalpel to language in its cyborgic play of pronouns, calling to mind Donna Haraway's classic essay, Felix Guattari's enunciative aesthetic assemblages, and Fred Moten's theorization of Kant's fear of swarms. And yet, there is a fundamental ambivalence churning under the fractured signification at play throughout the text as it spectacularly uncovers the geo-psychic condition of infrastructure while indicting itself as yet another cognitive machine of the present, never fully-detached, never totally autonomous. In this way the text is a recursive, reflexive fold upon the present, an immanent topology that shifts according to a given word's placement, re-placing givenness in its use of words that always seem to be on the move from use, even if they are also to a certain extent fixed to the page (no words are). Breaking words into prefix and suffix causes reading to become subsumed by its own material-semantic relational semiotic production, making visible while scrambling language at the level of its proto-semantic undertow, as if here language dons the mask of an LED Privacy Visor jamming the intrusive surveillance camera's eye, evoking something like Gilles Deleuze's signaletic material, or Johanna Drucker's distillation of Julia Kristeva's material semiotics into a theory of reciprocal material/phenomenal co-creation: "relational, insubstantial, and non transcendent difference and that of a

phenomenological, apprehendable, immanent substance" (43). Distended and scrambled prefixes and suffixes, like the poems' detourned punctuation, tend toward becoming extralinguistic, redoubling and challenging signification's punctual regulation as meaning, as language. As previously mentioned, *Place-Discipline* frequently and undecidably constructs parentheticals into blinding technical structures that seem to bring a reader deeper and deeper into a world that turns out to be parentheticals all the way down, where surfaces and depths become identical. This labyrinthine cavern of deepening echoes can suddenly burst open out of unclosed parenthesis, suggesting something like a "SET's theory" (SET=Egyptian god of war/chaos) in superposition to Cantorian *set theory* (a rationalist mathematization of infinity). This SET that refuses to be contained in any set, even the empty set, something like what Alain Badiou might call a "pure multiple," calls to mind, for me, a passage from Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*: "When the racist sees a Black person, *he does not see that the Black person is not there*, does not exist, and is just a sign of a pathological fixation on the absence of a relationship" (32, emphasis mine). *How do we see this inexistence that is not there?* To see the impossible, undecidable set (to see the limit of one's sight, the limit of all sets), that is, to see with clarity that racist cathexis forces a relation where there is none other than the subordination of the human (as infinite potential) to the racial (i.e. that the "Black Person," to the racist, is "a pathological fixation") *is to see through the images* produced by the racial capitalist surveillance machine, and onto a baser univocity that ultimately defies experience and cathexis.

The double colon "::" is another recurrent punctual figuration in *Place-Discipline*. It forms a suggested square; an infernal, impossible, interminable analogy. This:That::That:This. :::: As if to throw up commensurability itself into irreconcilable contradiction, an incommensurability that irrupts into language as language's refusal to cohere or "finish" (slang, vernacular, internet speech, finance babble, metalinistic play), thus be consumed by any pantopia. *Place-Discipline* makes language's many opaque substrates appear by forcing them back into the invisible as a kind of reminder, then, of what Yépez might call "rememory," memory's ineluctable temporality. Suppression of memory might return us

to an alterversal vision of that surplus sacrificed to produce normative meaning, what poststructuralism might call the “reserve” of language, a latent disordering every order suppresses, but also depends on. By offering a poetry immersed in excessive significations, allusions, and extra-semantic gestures, *Place-Discipline* becomes a non-site of rememory, and a productive assemblage of non-memory, perhaps even a non-site of non-knowledge. It is poetry deeply attendant to the infrastructural invisibility of language’s usual function. This calls to mind Language Poetry’s theorization of poetry’s disruption of language’s standard operating procedures, while infusing this disruption with the transreal immeasurable equation of Sun Ra, a possible poeticity lacking in Language’s abyssal critique.

The ascending and descending triangular columns of asterisks adorning the top and bottom of many pages in *Place-Discipline* direct the eye on and off the page before they are even noticed, reminding the reader of the perceptual syntagm reading quickly hallucinates us into, and showing us in action a *transreal* (to use N.H. Pritchard’s concept) Other hovering spectrally beside reading’s “real” suture. Other asterisks line the tops and bottoms of pages like incomplete frames of orthographic suggestion, enframing us within a page we understand extends to include our hands as much as it does our phenomenal experience. Here verticality and horizontality themselves, indeed all orientations, become mere suggestions of buildings and expanses (the verticality of the skyscraper, the horizontality of the ‘frontier’) that the omnidirectional poem can undo with a magical realist wave. These poems expand and contract the page and the imagination, sounding and instancing themselves as super-dense objects of late-capitalist vanta-black.

What is a place? Moctezuma’s book interrogates the notion of “place,” unfolding a

complicated topology around its signifying process. If “place” is generally thought of as a geographical location (space made toponymic) it is also a temporal conditioning of experience. Much of Moctezuma’s book, like Sun Ra’s poetry, thought, and music, deals with a time-space continuum that refuses the linear in favor of a complex plicative palimpsestic time-space constituted by evolving matter that *remembers* all of history in its designs, while offering a profound possibility of material forgetting that we might carefully understand as emancipatory. I call this tendency for myself “topological” to mean a contingent understanding of space as a non-absolute logical paradigm that we might use to help forecast determinate but changeable futures registered by what we call inertia, a force that generalizes tendencies that can always be re-routed in time. The topos, like all concepts, is essentially a formed pattern of spatialized durative time. A place is only a place, really, with the understanding that it persists in a recognizable state over time. In this way PLACE, the *idea* of “a” singular fixed place (rather than the palimpsestic *places* unearthed in magmatic motion by Moctezuma) is a colonial thought *par excellence*, a pre-condition for the carving up of the world into the Global North and Global South (places), a pre-condition for the artifice of Greenwich Meridian Time, a pre-condition for the persistence of nation-state boundaries, a pre-condition for the pathological creation of a “savage” elsewhere fantastically lost in time whose incommensurability of substance (to quote Sylvia Wynter) makes it (them) ripe for pillaging, civilizing, killing, genocide; a pre-condition for the irreversibility of racial determinations, a pre-condition for the overrepresentation of man.

These conceptual abstractions of Place *discipline* Space (or the topos’s potential) into substanceless forms of colonial fantasy, and murder time in the process.

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