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Necropolitical Landscapes: Queer Death and Resistance in *My Government Means to Kill Me*

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Abstract: This article presents a queer necropolitical re-reading of Rasheed Newson's My Government Means to Kill Me by placing the novel within the framework of state-sanctioned abandonment, racialized queer vulnerability, and resistance. Even though the novel is often looked at and read as a work of historical or LGBTQ fiction, this article tries to reread it through the lens of queer necropolitics, drawing from the theoretical contributions of scholars like Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe, and Jasbir Puar. It tries to analyse how institutions like the state, the prison-industrial complex, the medical system, and even certain segments of the queer community participate in regulating life and orchestrating slow death for marginalized queer subjects, especially poor and Black individuals. The analysis demonstrates how the novel exposes mechanisms of biopolitical neglect. This article argues that My Government Means to Kill Me does not simply document the AIDS crisis, or gay history in America. Rather, it offers a way to look at the necropolitical logic that continues to determine which lives are grievable and which are rendered disposable.

Keywords: Queer, LGBTQ, Historical Fiction, Gay Fiction, Necropolitics, Power

Queer lives, positioned at the margins of power, refuse to be erased. In the act of survival itself, these lives, consciously or otherwise, become a form of resistance and it challenges, questions and confronts the structures that seek to suppress them, as well as the very notion of power as it is defined and dominated by the mainstream. This observation that echoes throughout the pages of Rasheed Newson's *My Government Means to Kill Me*

(2022), draws attention to a reading that combines together the ideas of individual survival against the threat of state violence.

Written in the form of an annotated memoir, the novel talks about many important Queer historical movements in America in the late 1900s, when the HIV/AIDS crisis was at its peak. The novel tries to lay bare the systemic failures and indifference of the state toward queer lives. Through a re-reading of the novel using the arguments proposed by the theories of Queer Necropolitics, this article aims to identify the ways in which the governmental structures encroach the lives of queer individuals, particularly those belonging to the racial minority groups, and contribute to the systemic marginalisation, devaluation, and finally, the state-sanctioned neglect or erasure of their lives, which, is a fundamental aspect of this framework. This article attempts to analyse how Newson's narrative, which presents the lived experiences of a Black gay man, exposes the necropolitical control exerted upon queer Black lives in 1980s New York and how systemic neglect and institutional abandonment construct unlivable spaces for queer subjects. This novel, though often categorised within genres such as historical fiction and LGBTQ+ literature, yields a more comprehensive and thorough understanding of the socio-political forces at play, when re-read from the standpoint of queer necropolitics. Such a theoretical framing stresses on the ideas of systemic marginalisation, institutional neglect, and racialised queer death that ring through the text, as well as

deconstructing the mechanisms through which state power shapes and governs the boundaries and parameters of livability.

My Government Means to Kill Me is set in the 1980s and it revolves around Earl Singleton III, who is also known by the name Trey. Trey is a seventeen-year-old boy when the readers are first introduced to him. He has just moved from Indianapolis to New York with

$2,327 he made from saving up and summer jobs. He has moved away from home, rejecting the trust fund from his parents, to find a fresh start.

Looking at the historical and socio-political contexts that are laid bare in the novel itself, it can be observed that the AIDS crisis of the 1980s serves as the backdrop. The AIDS epidemic, which emerged in the United States in the early 1980s, quickly became a defining

public health and socio-political crisis. The novel tries to expose the fact that it was a crisis that disproportionately affected gay men, transgender women, people of colour, and those living in poverty. Initially labelled as "gay cancer", the disease was heavily stigmatised and often sensationalised in the media and this led to the reinforcement of the existing homophobic and racist ideologies. The federal government, especially during the Reagan administration, responded with silence, inaction, and a lack of concern; The President did not publicly address the crisis until 1985, by which time thousands had already died (Lopez). This lack of institutional urgency pointed towards a broader cultural belief that the lives lost to AIDS were not worth saving, and queer bodies were, in effect, made disposable. As such, the crisis became a key site of what theorists later identified as necropolitical governance: the power of the state not only to let die but to do so selectively. In response, grassroots organisations such as the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) emerged to fill the

void left by government inaction by advocating for healthcare access, pharmaceutical transparency, and dignified treatment for those living with HIV/AIDS.

Queer necropolitics can be traced back to Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, which laid the foundation for the development of biopolitics. This, in turn, paved the way for the theory of Necropolitics, formulated by Cameroonian historian and political theorist, Achille Mbembe.

The theoretical framework of queer necropolitics subsequently emerged from necropolitics.

Rather than focusing solely on visible aspects of state violence, queer necropolitics examines how queer bodies are subjected to slow death through systemic neglect and cultural erasure by the authorities and the governing bodies. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant and useful to be used as a lens to read the novel, as it brings out the power structures and the imbalance of power and where such marginalised communities are placed in a society run by these powerful governments that dictate their lives.

According to Foucault, biopower is a modern form of power that takes hold of human life. Foucault traces a shift from classical, juridico-sovereign power, which had the "right to take life or let live," to newer forms like discipline and biopower, which involve

"the right to make live and to let die" (Foucault 240-41). Sovereign power, according to him, could withdraw wealth, labour, or life. It has the sole authority to take life, put an end to it, deprive it of its resources, or enslave it; it leaves everything else alone. The right to life that belongs to a sovereign power is just the right to withdraw, not the right to regulate or control (Taylor and Taylor).

Foucault introduced biopolitics in lectures at the Collège de France in the late 1970s, examining how power in the 18th and 19th centuries began to focus on life at the level of populations. This was part of his broader move beyond traditional Marxist conceptions of power and the State (Means). Biopolitics, which develops alongside sovereignty and discipline, aims at managing entire populations. It emerged with new ways of measuring and categorizing life using tools like statistics, birth and death rates, agricultural and health data, which made populations visible and governable. These tools created arbitrary categories that became tied to racial classifications, colonial practices, and even modern genocides (Means).

Foucault's early ideas on biopolitics set the stage for future theorists. Decades later, biopower and biopolitics remain central in analysing power in neo-imperial, neoliberal contexts marked by displacement and violence. With increasingly pervasive technologies of destruction, Achille Mbembe's work on necropolitics becomes especially relevant to understanding the modern global politics of life and death.

Necropolitics is a term coined by Mbembe, which refers to the concept of who gets to live and who must die. *"Necro" is* derived from the Greek word *"nekros" which* means corpse. Hence, necropolitics becomes the politics of death. A critical engagement with Mbembe's concept of necropolitics necessitates an initial examination of the structural implications of modern liberal democracies. Modern democracy is praised as the flag bearer of equality and liberty.

This notion, however, presents several conceptual challenges. According to Dr. Andrew Moore, the politics of space looks at the way geography is distributed and organised, as well as how populations move and are moved by power and this concept is very important in that it talks about who is able to freely move around and who is not. Modernity has been defined by the movement of large groups and can be seen as a contest over control of space. This kind of movement can be done in two ways: by choice and against the will of the

people. European colonisation is an example for this kind of movement by choice whereas the fleeing of refugees,

people displaced by war and other natural and man-made disasters are examples for movement against their will. The pattern of these movements is crucial in understanding how these have changed the world. Liberal democracy has always been about space. According to Moore, this should be seen in contrast to the theories of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes
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It is in this context that Mbembe's theoretical contribution becomes significant. Mbembe argues that the common division of political life into neat categories fails to account for spaces like colonies, plantations, refugee camps, and concentration camps. These are not anomalies.
These spaces are not outside history, nor are they rare exceptions. They are enduring parts of political systems, which are moulded and shaped by control and violence rather than protection. Far from being exceptions to democracy, they are embedded in its foundations. They are a persistent, even necessary, part of how democracy has often worked, and still works today.
Mbembe states that "No democracy exists without its double, without its colony - little matter the name and the structure. The colony is not external to democracy and is not necessarily located outside its walls. Democracy bears the colony within it, just as colonialism bears democracy, often in the guise of a mask" (27).

Mbembe argues that modern democracies do not simply protect life through law but create categories of people who can be destroyed and spaces where law is suspended to enforce control (86). These are not exceptions but central to how democracy functions. Expanding on Foucault's *biopower*, Mbembe introduces *necropolitics* as the power to dictate who may live and who must die. Through *necropower*, vast populations are reduced to mere existence in
"death-worlds" (92), where violence is constant and the line between life and death blurs. The spaces like colonies, plantations, camps, according to him, reveal how power

reconfigures

resistance, sacrifice, and terror, and how it blurs the boundaries between martyrdom and freedom.

Mbembe describes necropolitics as “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (80). His idea is that necropolitics is a framework that shows us how governments assign differential value to human life, that is, the closer one is to dominant power structures, the more one’s life is worth (Verghese). However, according to the logic of necropolitics, one’s life is worth less and their existence becomes more insecure the further they are from those axes of privilege. The idea of Collateral Damage is also closely related to the concept of necropolitics. The governments rationalise the death of certain, particular communities of people, as the only means by which the rest of the populace can live or lead better lives. It can be seen as a person's life coming at the expense of a more vulnerable person's death (Verghese), or as Mbembe puts it, “the calculus of life passing through the death of the Other” (72). Necropolitics operates through systems of violence like white supremacy, colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, and the prison-industrial complex, and is very much related to capitalism. It is evident in events like the HIV/AIDS crisis, where queer and trans people of colour were abandoned, or in U.S. eugenics policies targeting marginalised groups. It is also seen manifesting in the Uighur camps in China and the persecution of queer people in Russia. These are some of the instances where certain lives are deemed disposable (Verghese). In short, necropolitics helps to maintain the social status quo. It is a sort of slow violence.

According to Mbembe, people from the marginalised communities, those who are distant from the dominant norm, are trapped in “Death Worlds”. “A death world is a form of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (40). Necropolitics teaches us the deadly workings of power.

Theoretical explorations of biopolitics and necropolitics have also been taken up within the field of Queer Studies. In the article titled *Biopolitics, Necropolitics, Cosmopolitics – Feminist and Queer Interventions,* the authors say that Queer studies have also taken up the concepts of biopolitics and necropolitics and have offered new and

meaningful ways to talk about the overlapping and intersecting points of power, life and death. Jasbir K. Puar has played a crucial role in moulding this branch of study, by opening the door for a growing body of work that critically engages with the idea of queer necropolitics. Building on Puar's foundational analysis, the edited collection *Queer Necropolitics* by Haritaworn and others, extends this framework further. Here, queer necropolitics is introduced as "a tool to make sense of the symbiotic co-presence of life and death" (qtd. in Quinan and Thiele), especially in how certain queer individuals are welcomed into the sphere of life, while others, specifically, the most marginalised people, are cast out and marked for death. This tension between inclusion and abandonment talks about the uneven ways in which power operates across and within queer communities. It can also be seen that similar lines of thought have emerged in trans studies, where scholars have drawn on biopolitical and necropolitical theories to better articulate the painful reality that even as trans and non-binary people gain increased visibility and representation, there is a simultaneous rise in violence directed at trans communities, particularly those made even more vulnerable by race, class, and other structures of oppression. These discussions make it clear that recognition and violence are not opposites, but that they often exist side by side and they form the conditions of survival for queer and trans lives today (Quinan and Thiele).

In the work, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), the author Jasbir Puar talks about the ideas and implications of Mbembe's concept of necropolitics and

relates it to Queer theory. Applying this concept to queerness, she examines how heteronormative and cisnormative systems construct queer identities as threats to social order, national security, or "traditional" values and also how this framing can justify violence, discrimination, and even extermination, as seen in historical and contemporary examples of state-sanctioned persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals. She also talks about the spaces Mbembe calls death worlds, where the boundaries between life and death become blurred and individuals are subjected to conditions that make them perpetually vulnerable to violence and death. She then analyses spaces which are particularly hostile to queerness, such as areas with strong anti-

LGBTQ+ laws, social stigma or high rates of violence against LGBTQ+ individuals (Quinan and

Thiele).

Haritaworn and others in *Queer Necropolitics* further the arguments put forward by Puar and Mbembe by assembling "various ways of queering the necropolitical and of interrogating claims to queerness in the face(s) of death, both spectacular and banal" and "thinking through necropolitics on the terrain of queer critique brings into view everyday death worlds, from the perhaps more expected sites of death making (such as war, torture or imperial invasion) to the ordinary and completely normalized violence of the market" (21).

The concept of "Homonationalism" was proposed by Puar, in *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times.* Homonationalism, according to Puar, refers to how certain

LGBTQ+ individuals and rights discourses are absorbed into nationalist and imperialist projects. Some queer subjects, particularly, white, middle-class, cisgender, and apolitical, are accepted by the state, rather than the usual way of being excluded from state power, only because they support an image of national progress and tolerance. This national acceptance depends on the rejection of other LGBTQ+ people, who are particularly racialised, Muslim, or non-Western

queer individuals, and these people are labelled as backwards, threatening, or uncivilised. This allows nations to present themselves as progressive nations while justifying violence or control against other communities, which are portrayed as homophobic or regressive. LGBTQ+ rights become a marker of civilisation and are even used to judge other nations' worthiness for respect or sovereignty. This logic is being used to rationalise foreign interventions under the disguise of promoting human rights.

An important example of homonationalism is "pinkwashing". It is when a state's pro-LGBTQ+ stance is promoted to distract from or justify other forms of violence, such as

colonialism, apartheid, or war. Even though the concept of homonationalism is widely adopted in scholarly and activist work, critics argue that it can be overused or applied too broadly without context, and this can risk weakening its political usefulness (Masri). "Sexual Exceptionalism" is one of the three ways in which homonationalism manifests (Puar 2). It expresses itself in the representation of the USA as exceptionally tolerant toward sexual

diversity and incorporating LGBTQ+ into nationalism (Polkov).

In *My Government Means to Kill Me,* this concept appears most clearly through the portrayal of "assimilation gays". The Assimilation gays "kept their homosexual lifestyles discreet and their politics mild for the comfort of their tolerant straight neighbors." They "prided themselves on attending dinner parties in the Hamptons, where the topic of their homosexuality was never broached," and even in 1987 they "wanted to frame the AIDS pandemic solely as a public health crisis," ignoring how it was "killing gay men at a genocidal pace." Above all, they "yearned to reassure the hetty population that they shared its concerns about radicalism," so that "if the assimilation gays declared that a group or campaign was out of bounds, mainstream opinion followed suit" (Newson, ch. 13).

This talks about how this section of people are wealthy, apolitical gay men, who strategically suppress their queerness to maintain comfort and privilege among the elite heterosexual circles. They represent a class of queer subjects who are absorbed into the national imaginary as acceptable citizens. Their reluctance to acknowledge the AIDS issue as a political and racialised crisis, and their preference to narrativise it as only a neutral public health issue, reaffirms the logic of sexual exceptionalism, where LGBTQ+ inclusion is celebrated only in very sanitised, depoliticised forms. Newson's narrator tells the readers about these people whose caution and pragmatism work not just to appease straight society, but to actively sabotage radical queer activism. Their wealth, social capital, and influence in media and politics lets them be the cultural gatekeepers and to police which queer lives deserve visibility, care, or legitimacy.

Through these lines, it is clear how queer necropolitics works by means of state abandonment, and through intra-community complicity, where privileged minorities get to live and thrive while the others are left to perish.

"Diffuse violence", another key concept, is described as a pervasive climate of fear and insecurity that emerges when high rates of crimes, mostly homicides and property offenses, become a part of everyday life. Rather than a single criminal act, it can be seen more like a structural and omnipresent act: it can affect how people move through the city,

whom they trust, and which neighbourhoods they avoid. An important thing to be noted is that this fear is not shared equally. Marginalised groups like poor residents, racial minorities, and queer people etc. experience it far more intensely due to under-resourced services, aggressive policing, and social stigma (Moraes et al.).

This idea is seen in the novel where Trey feels hunted in the city. When he goes to the bathhouse, Mt. Morris Baths, he is trying to explore his sexuality and the newfound freedom. But then, he comes across the man he dubs as "All-Star", and after a dangerous encounter with him where he tries to get Trey to submit to him sexually and he is rescued by the other members of the bathhouse, it is very clear how frightened Trey is. Later, it is revealed that he was a psycho serial killer. After the serial killer tries to attack Trey, he is rescued by Marcel Kincaid, who assumed the role of the General Manager at Mt Morris Baths. Marcel frightens All-Star with a gun so that he will leave Trey alone and when he leaves, Trey asks Marcel if he was going to call the police to report the man. When Marcel says no, Trey is seen thinking:

> I immediately understood why. A gay man attacked in or coming out of a bathhouse couldn't expect sympathy. Besides, the police hated us two times over. The white cops were driven by racism and homophobia; the Black ones were motivated by shame and rage at brothers who "debased themselves". Instead of investigating the assault, the cops would search every room and locker for an excuse to arrest, abuse, and humiliate as many of us as possible. Cops were latter-day Gestapo (Newson, ch. 2).

In another instance in the novel, Trey is seen thinking, "I was living in a wild and dangerous city, and random violence had a knack for striking you if you were poor, gay, or Black" (Newson, ch. 3).

Moraes et al. also talks about the framing of the LGBTQ+ body as a dissident body, which includes sexualities understood as "dissident, sinful and perverted by moralizing, religious, and cultural speeches". These are most often non-heteronormative bodies. Dissidence is linked to the deviation from the universalisation of heterosexuality as a social and reference model. It is also described as a dissenting body for biological reasons and it suggests that the perceived difference itself is the basis for the label. These bodies are seen

as having transcended sexual binarism and escaping the hegemonic principles of social organisation. Now, what can be

seen here is that this concept of dissidence challenges the "homogeneous and universalized standard" (Moraes et al.) that defines who a "citizen" is, in urban spaces. This could potentially lead to the marginalisation of such social groups. According to Moraes et al., being identified as a "dissident body" makes one a target of necropolitics. This concept, described earlier as a sovereign state power that determines "who is subject to live or die" is specifically applied to bodies marked by difference and disincorporation that are not regulated by biopolitics.

The state is described as advocating for death zones and the annihilation of bodies, including LGBTQ+ bodies, through systemic violence like queerphobia. This very death policy acts on dissident bodies and sexualities, and it aims to decimate these populations.

In Chapter 1 in the novel, Trey is seen talking about his life in Indianapolis, and there the emergence of this concept of dissidence becomes evident: "I was gay and notorious. Mind you, I didn't come out as a homosexual while living in Indiana. Given my mannerisms, that step wasn't necessary. I was fooling no one, and before I reached puberty, I stopped denying the playground taunts" (Newson, ch. 1). In the same chapter, he says:

> But I managed in short order to dash the sympathy that people held for me, and I seemingly confirmed, to all who suspected, that my homosexuality was indeed a sign of my depraved soul. Since it was already clear what my fate would be on Judgment Day, the good people of my hometown wouldn't dream of associating with me. I was a social leper (Newson, ch. 1).
>
> For years, I ingested so much hate, and in a thousand painful ways, I prepared myself to be the subject of whispered gossip, the target of gay bashings, and the recipient of shameful sex (Newson, ch. 1).

After going to Mt. Morris Baths, Trey is amused as he is wanted by other people since he was not seen in such a light, growing up. He "wasn't accustomed to being wanted." With his

"slight build and timid manner," he was branded a "'sissy'" and left to endure isolation so profound that "it wasn't uncommon" for him "to attend school for days without another student speaking" to him. He "got beat up whenever hateful straight boys needed a punching bag," but what hurt him the most was that he "grew up starved for affection," never receiving "love letter[s], slow dances, [or] kisses" (Newson, ch. 2)

Another instance of this social stigma is seen when he talks about how the other tenants started to approach him after he solved the rent problem at their apartment complex with Fred Trump: "I remember some of them wouldn't even share an elevator with me. Suffice it to say, I was suffering from a deprivation of civility. So whether they wanted to celebrate the news or fret about the future, I found it intoxicating to be treated like a person worthy of courtesy" (Newson, ch. 8). This is important because he also shares how they were towards him and Gregory before this, when they started living there. Living at 22 Mercer, Trey says he "could count on one hand the number of times my fellow tenants behaved toward me in a way that could be described as neighborly." Initially, as a Black man, he was "viewed as a walking suspect," forced to prove he belonged in the building. Once accepted, many of them noticed that he "was gay, and not just gay but a flaming faggot," hearing his "theatrical intonations and florid vocabulary" and seeing him in "tight pants, mesh T-shirts, booty shorts, or crop tops." Even his more modest clothes "failed to conform to the frumpy dress code of straight guys," so most of his neighbors simply gave him "a wide berth" (Newson, ch. 8).

This also points to the way the racialised queers were looked at. The "gay panic defence", which will be discussed in a later section, is relevant in the above-mentioned context

as well and a general idea of what it is, is conveyed to the readers using a footnote. Newson is seen incorporating a lot of footnotes to convey the historical context to his readers. Through an examination of these footnotes alone, one can understand the degree of dysfunction and systemic instability that characterised the period.

The article, "Queer Investments in Punitiveness: Sexual Citizenship, Social

Movements and the Expanding Carceral State" by Sarah Lamble in the work, *Queer Necropolitics* (2014), talks about the idea of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) and how it becomes a "death world". The PIC is termed as "the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems" ("What is the PIC?"). As explained by Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*, the

U.S. is seen incarcerating more people than any other country, with people of colour disproportionately targeted, that too, under the War on Drugs: "convictions for drug offenses are the single most important cause of the explosion in incarceration rates in the United States…more than 31 million people have been arrested for drug offenses since the drug war began. Nothing has contributed more to the systemic mass incarceration of people of color in the United States than the War on Drugs" (qtd. in "Prison Industrial Complex"). Despite declining crime rates, incarceration has increased by 700% since 1970 and this tells us that prisons function less to protect society and more to contain, punish, and profit off socially devalued bodies. The Prison Industrial Complex can thus be considered as a modern necropolitical institution: a space where racialised, queer, and poor populations are warehoused in death worlds under the guise of justice.

Sarah Lamble, in her article talks about how the prison is not simply a site of punishment but a space that creates conditions of slow death through isolation, inadequate medical care,

social disconnection, and psychological trauma. These institutions are seen targeting the poor, racialised, and queer bodies, which are already deemed dispensable by the state. The consequences of imprisonment extend beyond their release, as the social stigmatisation and barriers to employment or housing, confine these prisoned individuals to precarity long after their sentence ends (Lamble 161, 162).

The novel presents instances of these concepts as well. After the ACT UP protest, Trey is seen imprisoned. Trey describes how "the cops weren't actually trying to clear the entire crowd," but instead "would select one protester and drag that individual away," even though "easily 90 percent of the ACT UP demonstrators were white." He watched as they

grabbed “a Korean man,” then Theodora, before “two white cops zeroed in on me.” One officer “ripped the button off my jacket and jabbed me repeatedly in the ribs,” then they cuffed him and “tossed [him] inside the van face-first.” In the end, “seventeen ACT UP protesters were arrested,” and tellingly, “fourteen of them were people of colour” (Newson, ch. 16).

Soon after this incident, an FBI agent comes to meet Trey in the jail. After a conversation with him, reality dawns on Trey, “My suspicions that I was under surveillance were confirmed, and I felt vindicated, then violated. How long had the government been examining my life without my consent?” (Newson, ch. 16).

From these instances, it is obvious that Trey’s incarceration is not incidental; it is a part of a system that marks dissenting queer Black bodies for exclusion, containment, and death.

Here, Trey’s political resistance is met with harsh institutional punishment and what this says is that the carceral system is a necropolitical mechanism that punishes as well as functions as a filter which decides whose lives are worthy of rehabilitation and whose are not.

The AIDS epidemic is the central necropolitical crisis in the novel. The Reagan-era policies criminalised queerness through neglect by delaying funding, withholding treatments, and stigmatising victims. Trey's work at Angie’s hospice is an example of this — how men are abandoned by families, communities, and healthcare systems.

The novel makes it clear that AIDS is not just a medical issue but a politically constructed death sentence. In the second chapter, when Trey goes to Mt. Morris Baths, the readers also get to know the necropolitical implication of why that particular bathhouse was not closed yet: “I always suspected that city officials didn’t bar the doors to Mt. Morris because the patrons were Black, and city officials didn’t care a lick if Blacks caught AIDS” (Newson, ch. 2).

Trey critiques the government for using the AIDS crisis as a means of oppression, saying that “closing the bathhouses passed for prudent public policy… but it was a moralistic act of oppression.” Since “the battle against AIDS was never going to be won by getting humans to quit fucking bareback,” and because “sex is a desire as natural and strong

as hunger," he argues that "the government should have been pouring resources into efforts to develop drugs that helped those infected survive and that prevented the spread of HIV." Tragically, however, "all that came later — much too late for many" Newson, ch. 2).

In another instance, Trey is seen talking about how normalised these AIDS deaths were and how he was, like many others, ignorant towards it until Bayard Rustin told him all about it: "If the bald gay cashier who never charged me for gum stopped coming to work at the corner store, I didn't wonder why. If I no longer crossed paths with the cute queer dogwalker on my way to the Strand Book Store, I figured he changed his route. I was blind to the magnitude of death and the politics responsible for so many lost lives until Rustin educated me" (Newson, ch. 2). Some of the most disturbing and unsettling results of the AIDS crisis are presented in the novel when Trey goes to work at Angie's home hospice. Angie was a lesbian who had devoted her life to care for the gay men who were dying of AIDS, who had nowhere else to go, "Peter explained that there was an informal network of dozens of home hospices operating in the five boroughs. Almost all of them run by lesbians, and every single one of them an illegal operation, given that they were unlicensed and that regulations, such as occupancy restrictions, were ignored" (Newson, ch. 9). Trey continues, "there, of course, was more at play than I initially realized. Angie's home hospice was different from many of the others, and that difference created an affinity between me and the men in her care: the vast majority of Angie's patients were Black. Sixteen of the twenty, when I arrived" (Newson, ch. 9). He then comes to the realisation that "even during a pandemic, racism never fails to insert itself into the equation" (Newson, ch. 9), which is a very necropolitical statement.

Angie explains to Trey why she started the home hospice, recalling how she " used to go out to dinner parties," where "over cocktails, a guest would tell a sob story about a friend of a friend who was very sick." Despite the suffering, "even in that crowd, hardly anyone had the guts to say AIDS." The stories were always the same, someone would lose their job or their lover, fall behind on rent, and end up "homeless. Dying on the street like a goddamn animal." Everyone "agreed it was horrible," and then a bell would ring, and they would all "go to the dining room and stuff our faces with filet mignon" (Newson, ch. 11)

All of this points towards how normalised and ignored a crisis like this is and how people are either unaware of it or choose to be that way on purpose. The role the system and the government play to trivialise such a crisis is evident in the novel. Another important thing to be noted is the disease narratives in the novel. From these narratives, it becomes apparent how laws

and rules change when it comes to such people, and how issues like insurance denial affect them. An example for this from the novel would be Dale Tharpe who is introduced to the readers in Chapter 18. He was an elementary school teacher. “Dale, who was the only Black teacher at the school, was beloved by students and staff until sarcoma appeared on his hands. He confessed to the school principal that he was HIV positive, and the holy priests, compassionate nuns, and enlightened educators of Cathedral terminated Dale’s employment, stripping him of an income and health insurance” (Newson, ch. 18).

Marcel Kincaid is a victim of this, as well. “A fifty-one-year-old ex-Marine with a compact bod, Marcel served two tours of active duty in Vietnam before he was dishonorably discharged in 1967 for being a Class II homosexual” (Newson, ch. 2). It could be observed that under Class II regulations, many service members were discharged from the military simply for allegedly seeking out same-sex relationships. This was just one of several discriminatory policies used to force out over 100,000 individuals based only on their sexual orientation. These discharges did not just end careers, they stripped people off their military benefits and this made them have very limited employment opportunities.

Yet another example of such laws interfering with and making the lives of these marginalised people difficult is seen when Newson talks about the passage of DOMA. DOMA is the Defense of Marriage Act, and it established that the federal government recognised marriage solely as a union between a man and a woman. The problem with this was that it allowed individual states to decline recognition of same-sex marriages legally performed in other states.

The gay panic defence, mentioned in chapter 17 needs to be analysed as well. Newson talks about the gay panic defence, which is a legal strategy used in courts in the US

to excuse or justify the responsibility for assault or murder committed against homosexual individuals. At the heart of this defence is the claim that the perpetrator, while admitting to the violent act, experienced temporary insanity or a loss of self-control triggered by an unwanted same-sex advance from the victim. The use of this defence has been highly controversial. Even though sixteen states and Washington, D.C., have formally prohibited it, the gay panic defence remains legally permissible in thirty-four states and in federal courts across the United States (Newson, n. 81).

One of the most important plot points of *My Government Means to Kill Me* is Trey's encounter with Bayard Rustin. Rustin was a figure whose real-life contributions to the Civil Rights Movement have long been minimised or erased. Rustin was a key strategist behind the 1963 March on Washington and an advocate of nonviolent protest and he was systematically pushed out of public-facing leadership roles due to his open homosexuality, past arrests, and associations with communism. In the novel, Newson reclaims Rustin as a mentor to Trey.

Through Rustin, Trey is seen inheriting a legacy of activism that resists the necropolitical logics of exclusion. Newson also talks about how Rustin and his partner, as well as other queer people at the time used to do a legal workaround before the times of marriage equality, "Walter Naegle was Rustin's partner from 1977 until Rustin's death in 1987. Because gay marriage was outlawed during Rustin's lifetime, he legally adopted Naegle in 1982 to create a legal bond between them that would afford Naegle rights ranging from hospital visitation to inheritance" (Newson, n. 24).

In another instance, Trey is seen talking about Leland McCaffrey, a man he met after joining ACT UP and about how he supported the "Sip-In". The Sip-In was arranged by the Mattachine Society, in collaboration with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), in 1966 and they organised a protest to challenge a discriminatory policy enforced by the New York

State Liquor Authority. This policy prohibited bartenders from serving alcohol to individuals identified as homosexuals. This was a regulation that frequently served as justification for police raids on gay bars. During the Sip-In, three men openly declared their

homosexuality at Julius', a well-known bar, and attempted to order drinks. When the bartender refused to serve them, the ACLU filed a complaint for discrimination. The New York City Commission on Human Rights later upheld the complaint and this helped in effectively dismantling the policy and securing the right of homosexuals to be served in public establishments (Newson, n. 73).

How the Government and the conservative public intellectuals, many of them white, closeted homosexuals, respond to the AIDS crisis can be seen in the novel. When President Reagan took office in 1981, doctors first identified a rare cancer among 41 gay men, which was initially called GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) before it was renamed AIDS (Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome) in 1982. Despite the rapidly increasing number of infections and deaths, the Reagan administration ignored the epidemic. White House press secretary Larry Speakes even joked about AIDS during briefings and often stated that Reagan had no comment on the issue. It was not until April 1987 that Reagan gave his first major speech on AIDS. By the end of that year, more than 50,000 cases had been reported in the United States, and over 40,000 people had already died (Newson, n. 38).

Angie is seen asking, "'President Reagan and his Christian followers wouldn't care if gays were wiped off the face of the earth. Explain to me how that attitude isn't evil? Where's the humanity in wishing for the extermination of millions of other people?'" (Newson, ch. 9). In another instance in the novel, the readers are introduced to Marvin Liebman, a conservative politician, telling Trey that "'AIDS can be snuffed out in its tracks if we have the courage of our convictions. All that's necessary is forearms of the drug addicts and on the buttocks of the

queers. Do that, and there won't be a new case of infection among anyone worth keeping alive'" (Newson, ch. 4). Here, Trey learns that the administration's refusal to act was not ignorance but ideology. Something to be kept in mind while reading about this is that *The New York Times* published an article talking about this, which will be discussed later. In concentration camps, "Nazis used pink triangle badges on prisoner uniforms to identify homosexual men, bisexual men, and transgender women" (Newson, n. 61). Yet another instance of such people in power invalidating and making their lives seem insignificant is

seen in a footnote by Newson- "Senator Jesse A. Helms (1921–2008), a Republican representing the state of North Carolina, minced no words when expressing his homophobia. He called homosexual people 'weak, morally sick wretches,' and in his opposition to federal funding for AIDS research and treatment, he maintained, 'There is not one single case of AIDS in this country that cannot be traced in origin to sodomy.' As to stemming the AIDS epidemic, Helms predicted an ominous solution: 'Somewhere along the line we're going to have to quarantine people with AIDS'" (Newson, n. 77).

These are the kinds of dehumanising tendencies which are thrust forward by the institutions in power and the implications of it are seen in the way these marginalised communities are made vulnerable to all kinds of harm and oppression, forcing them to attain a slow death.

In the novel, mainstream media outlets like *The New York Times* are seen covering AIDS in a sanitised, delayed, or sensationalised way, thereby playing a crucial role in queer necropolitics, by shaping public perception. This is seen first when Trey meets Marvil Liebman and William Buckley and, in the footnote, Newson talks about an article that was published in
The New York Times, written by Buckley "in which he proposed tattooing "AIDS carriers." In the same op-ed, Mr. Buckley also suggested that if a woman was willing to marry a man living with AIDS, she should be sterilized before being issued a marriage license (Newson, n. 19)". Newson also tells us about the first article published by *The New York Times* on HIV/AIDS on July 3, 1981, quoting the headline, "*Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals*" (Newson, n. 69).

Another way in which media exerted its pressure in this issue is being discussed when Trey talks about the "assimilation gays". "Elected officials consulted them for their advice on how to deal with "the gays," and publications like The New York Times printed think pieces from them about "gay issues and trends" (Newson, ch. 13).

Pharmaceutical companies also become important in queer necropolitics through their delay in research, inflated drug prices, and cooperation with regulatory bodies to restrict access of the drugs to the patients. ACT UP's protests in the novel underscore this.

Drugs like AZT were priced beyond reach, and drug trials excluded the most vulnerable, "We also took specific aim at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), a rat's nest of bureaucrats that could take up to nine years to approve a promising new drug, and the rapacious pharmaceutical company Burroughs Wellcome, who manufactured the only approved AIDS drug available at the time, AZT, and charged $10,000 for a year's worth of the medicine" (Newson, ch. 16).

A clear identification of queer necropolitics can be seen in the novel when Trey listens to Dorothy Cotton at the ACT UP meeting, "'Who among us didn't know of a colored woman who had been raped by white men? Who among us didn't know of a colored man who was lynched to entertain white families? Who among us hadn't already lived through pain greater than what old Bull Connor could throw at us?'" (Newson, ch. 12). The reference to "Bull Connor" too is important. Newson adds a footnote to the actual historical account as to what really happened.

Connor was a Democrat who served as the elected commissioner of public safety in Birmingham, Alabama, first from 1936 to 1954 and again from 1957 to 1963. In this role, he had control over both the police and fire departments. Known for his racist views and opposition to the Civil Rights Movement, Connor authorised the use of fire hoses and police dogs against peaceful protesters, including children (Newson, n. 50). It is through Dorothy's speech that Trey gets the realisation that the government means to kill him, or in other words, that is when he realises the institutional power and how the government uses it to regulate the lives and deaths of people like him.

Newson's work is not merely historical gay fiction: it constitutes reimagining and a counter-archive of history. It seeks to reveal the realities of the time. It brings to the forefront the people who had shed blood, sweat and tears, only for them to be erased from mainstream history. This article contributes to queer literary criticism by reading a contemporary work not through the concept of identity alone, but through a lens of state violence and necropower and it allows us to grasp how literature fights and subverts marginalisation. In conclusion, *My Government*

Means to Kill Me is not just a literary narrative. It is a memorial, a protest; it is a restoration, a reacquisition, of queer Black life against a system that has historically silenced it. Using queer

necropolitics, this article has tried to analyse the structural forces that decide how queer lives are lived, how they are mourned, forgotten, or refused mourning altogether.

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