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Fictions of (Dis)Incorporation: José Saramago and the People's Two Bodies

Marco de Waard 

Fictions of (Dis)Incorporation

Saramago's early short story 'The Chair' delights in spinning language out of an intriguing historical fact: making ample use of the figure of *synonymia* to prolong its descriptive effort – indeed, to stress the autonomy of its style – it contrives to stretch to some twenty-five pages an account of the fall of the chair that held the Portuguese dictator Salazar on a day at his summer house in 1968 – that is, until it didn't.¹ While it does not mention Salazar by name, 'The Chair' makes comment on the form of state power which Salazar had stood for and which, while nominally Prime Minister, he had embodied in his person and his party until the chair's collapse induced a brain haemorrhage that was followed by a coma. The displacement of the reader's attention from body to thing (the chair), and from thing to language (did the chair 'fall', 'topple', 'crash down', or 'come to bits', the narrator wonders), affirms the cracking of the existing order to the point of staging a demonstration of its non-identity with itself, of its being limited by an externality eluding its control. A bombastic, faux-serious comparison between the chair and the pyramids of old (and by implication, between Salazar and the Pharaohs!) hammers home this point: 'we need not be surprised if this pyramid called chair sometimes not only refuses its ultimate destiny, but for the duration of its fall becomes a kind of farewell'. It is the chair's 'fall' and/or 'farewell', its fa(rewe)ll, if you will, that opens up a different kind of world. All Saramago's story wants to do, it seems, is extend 'the time of [this] falling'.²

I open this essay with 'The Chair' because it illustrates powerfully the democratic quality that has long attracted readers and critics to Saramago's writing.³ What gives the story its force, and what makes it pertinent to the question of the relationship between literature, the democratic imagination, and the world-making powers of readerly publics is that it wrests a political effect out of a redistribution of relations between bodies, language and things, with bodies understood here both in their mortal, all too vulnerable, corporeality and as sites of a symbolic (dis)investment. That language 'itself' is mustered against an authoritarian logic of incarnation would seem to be clear. Its games of displacement make 'The Chair' a textbook example of *littérarité* – literarity or literariness – in a Rancièrian sense, as associated with a form of writing, essentially democratic, that 'proclaims the indifference of the form with respect to its content' and might to this extent be

emancipatory in its effect.⁴ Indeed, we could do worse than turn to Jacques Rancière on literature in the ‘aesthetic regime’ to account for the paradox that precisely this kind of staging of literature’s autonomy is capable of acting back on – and in – the world to potentially transform it. The point is that it affirms the possibility of a different ‘partition of the sensible’, a different linkage between ways of seeing, doing (including writing), and being⁵ – one, for instance, in which the subject of heroic characterisation need not be the leader figure on his chair but can also be the woodboring beetle, Saramago’s ‘conquering Anobium’, who works slowly to advance the chair’s rot.⁶

Equally, however, the details of Saramago’s story and the circumstances it revisits – the beginning of the end of ‘the dictator who refused to die’⁷ – bring to mind another critical perspective which, while likewise grounded in a nineteenth- and twentieth-century archive of political and historical culture, probably does more to help us gauge the democratic valences of the image of the body at the point of (dis)incarnation. I am referring to Claude Lefort’s conception of democracy as marked by a notion of power as an ‘empty place’, the consequence of a historical evacuation of the seat of sovereignty which traditionally was occupied by royalty and marked by the trappings of divine and absolute rule.⁸ One of Lefort’s key insights is that in the post-1800 Western world – the world of Tocqueville’s ‘democratic revolution’ – the ‘symbolic dimension of the political’ does not exactly vanish or wane in importance; it rather undergoes a profound mutation.⁹ On the one hand, what disappears is the image of the sovereign whose figure would embody society the way an organic whole may incorporate all its parts. Without the sovereign as a symbolic guarantee of social unity and wholeness – or put differently, as a transcendent reference point to symbolically close the social space – what the post-revolutionary order needs, according to Lefort, are new forms of political *mise en scène* by which the social body may render itself visible to and for itself. On the other hand, then, the burden of symbolisation shifts to the image of the people as the new, putative bearer of sovereignty, even if this produces a representational conundrum on account of the state of pure immanence into which democratic society has been thrown. If leader figures sometimes phantasmatically plug the void, as if to reinstate the old incarnational logic, this is *as* part of political modernity as mass democracy itself – the other side of the coin that binds democratic and totalitarian political ‘forms’ together.¹⁰ It is the work of Lefort and those, like Eric Santner,¹¹ who write in his tradition – at the intersection of political theory, psychoanalysis, and literary and art history – that has underlined the role that corporeality continues to play in this fraught context where a ‘surplus of immanence’ puts elusive representational pressures on the body politic and its ‘fleshly’ dimensions.¹² Saramago’s work, I propose, bears testimony to the persistence of these pressures into our present – post-political – times, negotiating them in novels that comment allegorically on some of the fragile forms of collectivity and world-making that mark contemporary public life.

Saramago, Lefort, Rancière ... In bringing these names together, this essay opens up an angle on the dynamics of literary world-making in the context of the ongoing crises of publicness to which this special issue is devoted. In doing so, it stresses the complexities of embodiment and symbolisation that beset public-political life insofar as 'the people' are never one, and cannot be seen or shown as one, but rather have a constitutive heterogeneity which complicates any attempt at representation – a conundrum that is aesthetic as much as it is political, as Jason Frank reminds us in his recent (and very Lefortian) book *The Democratic Sublime*.¹³ The aim will be broadly twofold. First of all, I turn to Saramago's fictions of (dis)incorporation, as I call them, to trace some of the ways in which corporeality – especially *collective* corporeality – figures and takes on a political charge within his texts. Showing how the articulations of collectivity and solidarity in Saramago result from a critical engagement with a nation-state notion of 'the people' as a supposed political body, I argue that they ultimately affirm the capacity of the people to *appear otherwise* – outside and in tension with existing governmental scripts – by virtue of their qualities of resistant physicality. What kind of subject the people are when they manifest themselves in public is often enigmatic in Saramago; yet they are not as governable as they would seem, as attending to their modes or styles of public appearance reveals.

Secondly, the other aim here will be to demonstrate, albeit critically and questioningly, the relevance of Lefort's conceptual framework for the study of the novel qua democratic form. Lefort continues to be little-known among literary scholars, in spite of his ongoing influence in democratic theory and the astute literary sensibility which inflects his work not only in political philosophy but in essays on authors ranging from Orwell to Rushdie.¹⁴ Far from making a case for 'Lefortian theory' by adopting it wholesale, however – as if that were an easy task to begin with – I also turn to Rancière on the question of literary community as a way to counterbalance what is often seen as the problem of Lefortian holism – that is, the way Lefort's thinking is 'pulled [...] towards thinking society as a structural totality, even if it is [one that is] sutured by an empty space of power at its centre'.¹⁵ In sum, I hope to demonstrate the critical purchase that might be gained from a perspective on the political that includes an understanding of the literary text as working under the sign of social disincorporation, while also inflecting it with a Rancièrian sense of literature's historically achieved autonomy in the 'aesthetic regime of art'. To illustrate the polemical notion of community to which this leads us, the uptake of Saramago's novel *Blindness* during the Covid-19 pandemic is a case in point, as we will see.

The focus in what follows will be on Saramago's later work, specifically on some of the allegorical novels written during the second phase of his career, of which *Blindness* was the first.¹⁶ While some of the early stories evoked the incarnational failure of leaders or kings – in either a satirical key ('The Chair') or a fantastic one ('Reflux', from the same volume) – some of the later novels inscribe themselves in the logic of disincorporation by turning to

the (impossible) object of ‘the people’ and their (unrepresentable) image: to what, in the language of my theoretical interlocutors here, I refer to as ‘the people’s two bodies’.¹⁷ Revisiting *Seeing* (the sequel to *Blindness*) and *Death at Intervals*, both from the mid-2000s, I am interested not only in locating these novels in the post-political conjuncture from which they spring – and which continues to be ours¹⁸ – but in exploring their resonances with our post-pandemic situation, which I take to be characterised by an enlarged sense of the collective vulnerability of populations qua subjects of biopolitical governance but also by new possibilities for agency and resistance that have surfaced from within the experiences of precarity and embodied relationality during the Covid crisis.¹⁹ *Seeing*, as the sequel to *Blindness*, imagines an electoral public that stymies its government by casting a massive blank vote – what the novel calls a ‘plague of blank ballot papers’.²⁰ *Death at Intervals*, published the following year, develops the fantasy of a country where death goes on strike, rendering the population a biopolitical test case for its authoritarian regime on account of the fast rising excess of undead bodies, of unmanageable social ‘flesh’. If neither novel offers a straightforward image of the political agency of crowds or public assemblies, the elusive movements and behaviours of Saramago’s publics complicate their ‘normal’ state of disempowerment, to constitute modes of appearance which rupture the existing political order of things. Building on Lefort, I consider how these modes of appearance work here at the limits of figuration, as if to stage the crisis of legibility provoked by modern, late- or post-democratic life. As I argue, it is by virtue of his understanding of the opacity of the social that Saramago may be read as a writer who grappled with the ‘difficulty democracy has in reading its own story’²¹ – using his own means, of course, which are those of a self-confessed ‘essayist who needs to write novels because he cannot write essays’,²² and those of a contrarian allegorist for whom narrative form was a privileged means to reflect on global currents.

‘A Plague of Blank Ballot Papers’

On the face of it, establishing how *Seeing* speaks to – and inscribes itself in – the post-political conjuncture would seem no difficult task. For one thing, Saramago himself cast his *Zeitdiagnose* in unmistakably political terms; in many public interventions, he placed the idea of a democratic deficit at the heart of his assessment not only of the condition of contemporary Portugal and Spain but of that of the neoliberal, globalised world order of the early 2000s.²³ The financial crisis of 2008 provided one occasion among many for his critique of institutional structures which, while nominally passing as democratic, pre-empt change towards greater social justice. Here is how he put it in October of that year, speaking as a lifelong libertarian communist: experience has taught him, he says, ‘how little use a political democracy will be, however well-balanced it may appear in its internal structures and institutional functioning, if it is not constituted as the basis for an effective and real economic democracy and for a no less real and effective cultural democracy’.²⁴ In the same passage he protests how

it becomes ever more absurd to speak of democracy if we insist on [...] identifying it exclusively with the quantitative and mechanical expressions of it that we call political parties, parliaments, and governments, without paying any attention to their actual content and the distorted, abusive use they tend to make of the vote that justified them and placed them where they are.²⁵

Some of the main ingredients of the so-called post-political thesis are clearly there: that representative democracies have come to work as façades for the forces of finance capital; that under conditions of neoliberalism, political institutions have been hijacked by technocratic elites who have no truck with notions of popular legitimacy or democratic accountability; and that the vote as such is hardly a safeguard against the ‘abusive use’ that is made of it in this constellation of anti-political forces. At the same time, Saramago pits a broader notion of ‘cultural democracy’ against the erosions of post-politics, even if the passage quoted here maintains priority for a substantive, revitalised notion of democratic politics as a ‘basis’ for sustaining that cultural life. In this sense, too, Saramago’s thought chimes with a long-established theme in the critique of present-day post-politics – one that would posit a robust political public sphere against the neoliberal elimination of all political conflictuality or even of *homo politicus* as such. If the novels sometimes engage more classic Marxian (and humanist) themes such as the dignity of *homo faber* – the potter Cipriano in *The Cave* would be a case in point – Saramago’s pithy conjunctural diagnostics express a pessimism that is nearly unrelieved. For him, ‘[w]hat we call democracy is beginning, sadly, to resemble the funeral cloth covering the urn in which rest the remains of a putrefying corps’.²⁶

Secondly, apart from the author’s political commentary and his novels, there is the fact that *Seeing* is a persistent reference point in the larger – academic and public – debate on post-politics or post-democracy, as it is also sometimes called. Slavoj Žižek, ending his book on violence by turning to the novel, construes its theme as that of the power of refusal to participate in ‘democratic rituals’ that are as hollow as they are ‘compulsive’.²⁷ Similarly, an anthology on the post-political thesis as seen through a range of theorists opens by recalling *Seeing*’s plot, seen as a satire on ‘the disaffection of a growing number of people with the instituted rituals of representative democracy’.²⁸ Although they don’t develop this reading further, Japhy Wilson and Erik Swyngedouw might have cast *Seeing* as emblematic of post-politics not only as a state in which, as they describe it, ‘political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts’ and ‘legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance’, but also as one in which, as they go on to explain, “[t]he people” – as a potentially disruptive political collective – is replaced by the population – the aggregated object of opinion polls, surveillance, and bio-political optimisation’.²⁹ Indeed, building on this last point, I argue that *Seeing* speaks to the post-political diagnosis also and especially in its biopolitical inflection.

This involves attending to the body, or, to the language and image of the body politic and its rearticulation in the text: while Wilson and Swynedouw, like Žižek, stress the contrary act of voting that kickstarts the plot – the casting of a majority blank vote as a form of resistance – I find significant the corporeal behaviours through which the people’s cat-and-mouse game with the state plays out. In my analysis, the novel treats its collective protagonist on a spectrum where they are both ‘the people’, the putative subject of political representation, *and* the ‘population’, subject to emergency measures and a securitising logic of containment which aims to silence their vote *qua* political act. In addition, as we will see, the novel features moments where they also, and foremost, emerge as an embodied public – a term that gets us closer to the agentic powers freed up, albeit ephemerally, in their flashes of self-manifestation.

Seeing’s association of collective corporeality with political agency and protest takes us to a third sense, then, in which the novel both belongs to and seeks critical distance from the post-political *Zeitgeist*. Let us consider the fraught language in which the blank vote is spoken of in *Seeing*, for it is the enigma of this collective electoral act – seemingly spontaneous, yet carrying a whiff of secret coordination – that makes it a site where various forms of political meaning-making collide and where the novel projects their tensions with each other. *Seeing* opens on a rainy election day in an unnamed capital city that might or might not be Lisbon. At polling station fourteen, representatives of the ‘party in the middle’, the ‘party on the right’, and the ‘party on the left’ are in attendance to see to it that no irregularities ‘would corrupt the free and sovereign political will of the people’ – an understanding of their mission that is shocked by the result when more than seventy per cent of the votes cast turn out to be blank (blank votes being recognised, that is countable votes, as they are in some electoral systems, and thus not to be conflated with voting abstention).³⁰ The state’s response is to declare a state of emergency that will eventually include a siege, a quarantining, of the city and its inhabitants. Interestingly, the administrative rhetoric around these events, rendered through lengthy dialogues between cabinet ministers and bureaucrats, resorts to virological language to condemn the expression of popular will, which is repeated during a hasty rerun of the elections. It refers back to it as ‘the moral plague that had infected a large part of the population’, as ‘the virus that had attacked the majority of the capital’s inhabitants’, and as ‘a plague of blank ballot papers’ on a par with the ‘plague of white blindness’ of four years previous – a glance back at *Blindness*, in which the same city was visited by a months-long epidemic.³¹

While the analogy with a virus is not quite endorsed in the novel – it is mouthed by bureaucrats who are relentlessly satirised – the association is also not dispelled. It hovers over the novel as a reactivated trauma with a strong affective charge, even though its explanatory force remains dubious. It is as if *Seeing* gives us two incompatible sociopolitical ontologies at the same time: one in which the social body is seen as diseased, with a whole political

symptomatology being harnessed to match it within the discourse of the state (in essence, a biopolitical discourse, for it turns the people into a 'population' which it holds to be 'infected'); and one in which the blank vote and other public acts reveal a social body whose reality eludes the sovereigntist notions of the 'people' and its supposed 'public spirit' to which the state makes appeal, but which constitutes a collective body nonetheless on account of the modes of appearance it deploys as disorder and division are threatening their city. Crucially, in neither ontology do the social and the political body coincide. Rather, the gap between them is structural and generative. As Saramago stages the figurative breakdown by which the people is never 'one' – what Pierre Rosanvallon has analysed as the 'challenge of figuration' besetting *any* modern democratic image of the people's political body³² – what he achieves is greater awareness and affirmation of this perennial gap between the 'people' and its referent, between the statist image of the body politic and the plural public of subjects. In the process, critical distance is obtained from the immunising biopolitical reflexes of the state, even as the narrative pushes on to ever darker levels of state violence. Paul Preciado's words are resonant here: 'Tell me how your community constructs its political sovereignty and I will tell you what forms your plagues will take.'³³

It is at the heart of *Seeing's* project, then, to prise the notion of the people open and to interrogate the logic of exclusion and foreclosure – its dependence on a 'constitutive outside' – that attends its use as a political category.³⁴ Instead of a congealed, totalisable image of the people, what *Seeing* offers is a series of glimpses of embodied publics – indeed, *bodies in public* – appearing outside the terms of visibility and recognition held out by the prevailing 'partition of the sensible'.³⁵ Consider, for instance, the strange scene of public self-manifestation which follows the state's use of espionage to gauge the furtive acts of coordination which it suspects are behind the overwhelming blank vote. Just when the espionage effort has failed to yield evidence of popular scheming, let alone decode something like the people's 'message', the latter make an appearance in the full sense of a manifestation of their excess of plenitude vis-à-vis the instituted system of representation:

One morning, the streets of the capital were filled by people wearing stickers on their chest bearing the words, in red letters on a black background, I cast a blank vote, huge placards hung from windows declaring, in black letters on a red background, We cast blank votes, but the most astonishing sight, waving above the heads of the advancing demonstrators, was the endless stream of blank, white flags, which would lead one unthinking correspondent to run to the telephone and inform his newspaper that the city had surrendered.³⁶

Note how this stunning act of self-choreography does not explain what compelled these voters to vote as they did; the novel's emphasis is on the 'depth charge against the system' itself and what it triggers, not on any reasons that

might have motivated it.³⁷ Indeed, to see the public use ‘blank, white flags’ as their defining (non-)sign is to be reminded that what is staked out here is nothing less than a claim to appearance as such, linked to a refusal to lend legitimacy to a supposedly democratic system that would take its popular mandate for granted. Note as well how it would be imprecise to speak of a crowd or a mass in reference to this scene of post-political public life. The fleetingness of the public’s action – together with the knowledge that it stands for a majority of the electorate with which it is yet not coincident – caution against any totalising approach or understanding, just as the media are discredited here when they falsely equate the people in the street with ‘the city’ *tout court*. There are no hints of mimetic contagion, for instance, that would open up the people’s ‘behaviour’ to analysis in the well-worn terms of crowd or mass psychology:³⁸ no such analysis is invited or even possible, for the only dynamic of mimesis which is there in *Seeing* is on the level of the political system itself, where each party is alike to the point of emptying out any meaningful kind of choice. The emphasis is firmly on the people’s non-identity with itself, its illegibility, and on the constitutive supplementarity of its bodies as the regime’s disavowed ground of life.

I have already noted how *Blindness* and *Seeing* have been eagerly read by political (and legal) theorists as well as literary scholars.³⁹ Commonly, these either foreground the notion that both novels stage a political state of exception, to be read along Schmittian or Agambian lines, or associate them with a kind of crisis imaginary that is meant to shore up a message of solidarity, notwithstanding the dystopian cast.⁴⁰ What too easily falls outside either strand in the reception is the extent to which embodied publics in Saramago function as reminders of the constituent power behind any instituted order – the forgotten ‘ground’ to which I have referred, and which becomes fleetingly visible whenever the people assemble to protest their non-coincidence with the signifiers of sovereignty that use their name. Let us return to the scenes of jeopardised, fearful public life of which the novel gives us several. In each case, the people’s bodying forth of themselves is pitted against the authoritarian state in its attempts to immunise itself against them:

[T]he square was already full, but all that could be heard was the great breathing of the crowd, the dull whisper of air entering and leaving lungs, in and out, feeding with oxygen the blood of these living beings.⁴¹

What amazes me is that there isn’t a single shout, a single long live or down with, not a single slogan saying what it is the people want, just this threatening silence that sends shivers down your spine.⁴²

The people arrived and filled the square, they stood for half an hour staring in silence at the closed-up palace, then they dispersed, and, some walking, others in buses, still others cadging lifts from supportive strangers, they all went home.⁴³

What I just referred to as the illegibility of Saramago's publics – his 'people' who refuse to incarnate the 'People' of the state – is developed here through highly sensory language involving, most especially, the unique auditory qualities of their being assembled in silence. Indeed the 'threatening silence' evoked here would seem to qualify as one of the 'phonospheres' of democracy, one of the soundscapes in/through which Adriana Cavarero has proposed that the people's plurality might be heard, as it is in sit-ins or demonstrations.⁴⁴ But what interests me above all here is the sense of mystery that attends the public's self-presencing. Strangely controlled, hardly 'revolutionary', and yet expressive of a form of collectivity that is forged by disidentification from the nation or the state, it takes us straight into the territory of the 'people's two bodies': on the one hand we have the people as a dispersed, heterogeneous mass of voters, initially brought together for a ritual – the election – that breaks their 'body' down into disaggregated parts; and yet, on the other, we have a string of collective actions and movements that appear to be in sync without any kind of plan or orchestration, and which, to this extent, point back to the stubborn physicality and aliveness of those in whom the right to vote is vested. It is essential to *Seeing's* vision that this never congeals into a new incarnational image. As in Italo Calvino's novella 'The Watcher', a distant precursor text to Saramago's novel – similarly set on an election day – the voting public is discovered to embody nothing more than themselves: their disincorporated flesh, their bare existence as bodies, both preceding and exceeding any political determination.⁴⁵ What if it is not the 'refusal' to cast a vote, but the uncanny sense of synchronisation that is the truly upsetting element – the true blow to the system? What if the people's flesh is a sign of what the political order cannot contain, of that which flows over its limits? What if the people's protest is not lodged in the blank vote as such but in the underlying ground of vibrant, embodied life?

The People's Two Bodies

In historical perspective, the image of the 'people's two bodies' has long been recognised as marking a problem, an insoluble conundrum, in the iconography of modern popular and democratic sovereignty. In the words of historian Enzo Traverso, '[t]he people's sovereign body is both an aporetic concept and an almost non-representable metaphor'.⁴⁶ Indeed, as Traverso's own work on the 'body politics' of revolutions shows, while conservative representations of the 'crowd' or the 'mob' – from Hippolyte Taine to Gustave Le Bon – typically obtained consistency and solidity by animalising the people, by depicting them as irrational or subhuman, the image of the people as 'the new bearer of sovereign will' is impossible, fraught with paradox, and invariably dependent on political and aesthetic substitutions as a condition of representation.⁴⁷ Likewise, Jason Frank describes a post-revolutionary political imaginary in which 'collective assemblies, crowds, and mass protests were no longer understood merely as factious riots or seditious rebellions but instead as living incarnations of the people's authority, sublime expressions of the vitality and significance of popular will'.⁴⁸ But in Frank's analysis, too,

difficulties of visual representation beset this image to the point that it is shown to be always fractured from within, always constructed in tension with the people's ineffable material presence and 'excess' of immanence in a democratic age. It is not surprising then that these discussions refer back to the tradition of political theology that links fullness and closure of representation to a vanished horizon of transcendence, with Ernst Kantorowicz, theorist of the 'king's two bodies', behind the thesis of disincorporation that has found its fullest expression in Lefort.⁴⁹ And while Frank seems ambivalent about the Lefortian framework with which he opens his book, his own enquiry into the aesthetics of popular assembly cannot escape negotiating its relation with the incarnational impulses so often complicating mediations of the people's political appearance. Even – or especially – the image of the immediacy, the 'there-ness' of the people must be mediated to be conveyed; even the most dynamic manifestations of the people's vitality work in fraught proximity to the process and aesthetic forms of their symbolisation.⁵⁰

Saramago's engagement with the phantasm of the 'two bodies' works precisely within this field of paradoxes and tensions. If the Lefortian tradition has been said to '[move] too quickly from the aesthetic-political problem of manifestation' of the people 'to the theological problem of incarnation',⁵¹ his fiction helps us see that this need not be an either/or. Simply put, there is no binary here: the problem of incarnation in an age of immanence *is* an aesthetico-political one, as Saramago's fiction demonstrates when it reworks images of sovereignty to deconstitute them as myth. Indeed, to put a bold point on it, I argue that *Death at Intervals* – the novel that followed *Seeing* – registers the persistence of the political-theological incarnational logic in post-political times, which are also, crucially, to be understood as times in which biopolitics complicates sovereignty models of rule. Using a highly fantastic premise – a thought experiment pursuing an impossible 'what if'⁵² – *Death at Intervals* imagines a country where death suspends its operations and thereby puts a spoke in the wheels of the biopolitical state. The issue of sovereignty is pertinent here as the novel links its plot about undying bodies to an imaginary of borders: the terrain where 'death' (imagined as feminine) withdraws her rule coincides with the national territory, where it upsets everyday institutional workings while life proceeds as normal in neighbouring states. It could be argued that just like the literary genre of the dystopia with which it has an affinity, *Death at Intervals* projects a sense of the spatial dimensions of modernity, as if to engage in a kind of cognitive mapping to train readers up for the phenomenological experience of a securitising state.⁵³ Alternatively, in the language of our preceding discussion, we might also approach this drama of borders and the limits of (biopolitical) statehood in terms of a 'plague' of undeadness. Samuel Weber has recently retrieved a forgotten meaning of the word 'plague' which links it, etymologically, to a 'blow' – one striking 'suddenly [...] and from without'.⁵⁴ Death's 'extinction' in this novel arguably does exactly that when it puts a halt to the state's power to 'make live and let die'; it is a plague insofar as it confronts the state with the surfeit of immanence within its borders.

As *Death at Intervals* is a fiction of both sovereignty and immanence, it makes sense for the first person to ‘refuse to die’ – to ‘remain in suspension’ at the threshold between life and death – to be the queen mother of the imagined nation-state.⁵⁵ The symbolism of monarchy is called upon, residually, to mark the liminal moment of death’s cessation, a move the novel repeats with heavy-handed satire when it offers a grotesque image of an excess of royal flesh – of generations of undead monarchs – to suggest a case for republicanism. The notion of the king’s two bodies is confounded here as in the novel’s fantasy it is precisely the ‘body natural’, not the ‘body politic’, that is ‘immortal’ or undead:

They said that it went against common logic for a country to have a king who would never die and who, even if he were to decide to abdicate tomorrow [...] would continue to be king, the first in an endless succession of enthronements and abdications, an endless sequence of kings lying in their beds awaiting a death that would never arrive, a stream of half-alive, half-dead kings who, unless they were kept in the corridors of the palace, would end up filling and finally overflowing the pantheon where their mortal ancestors had been received.⁵⁶

Equally, it makes sense for the narrative, given its satirical thrust, to place a strong focus on the media reporting and political handling of the ‘death strike’.⁵⁷ As political and religious authorities meet to debate the consequences of the situation for their respective institutions, the question ‘[w]hat will the church do if no one ever dies again’ is as pregnant as that of ‘what will the state do if no one ever dies again’.⁵⁸ Ultimately, the novel’s thought experiment suspends the existing order in time without overthrowing it for good. As a personified ‘death’ emerges as a character, she resumes her work within the state and even opens up lines of communication with the people. The original title’s reference to ‘intermittences’ works well to capture the special qualities these temporary suspensions free up: they suspend normality at random moments, just as they reinstate it somewhat randomly, as if to reveal the extent to which the prevailing order is invested in – and predicated on – the political mediation of physical, embodied life.⁵⁹ Put differently, these moments or periods of suspension reveal the join between the ‘normality’ of life within the state and the dimension of the symbolic; they underscore how challenging and unsettling it can be to think or see the body otherwise.

Let me illustrate this by turning to what is perhaps one of the novel’s most potent moments of suspension (more precisely, a moment of the suspension of the suspension of death). Just as the relationship between the ‘body mortal’ (or ‘natural’) and the ‘body politic’ is confused and contorted in the image of a long succession of undead kings, the relationship between the people’s two bodies is subject to a twist, a chiasmic convolution in the novel. I am referring to a sequence in the third chapter where, following a satirical account of the proceedings of an ‘interdisciplinary commission’

convened to address the crisis, we witness a ‘family of smallholders’ from a village near the frontier in their steps to take two fatally ill family members – a child and an elderly man – across the border,⁶⁰ ‘where death was still functioning and where [...] death would have no alternative but to accept’ them.⁶¹ What gives the narrated sequence its meaning is that the family, who clearly have Saramago’s sympathy in their struggle for a dignified end, fully own their mortality – that the deaths which transpire are fully theirs. Perhaps we do not need to (re)turn to notions of sovereignty to appreciate the tenderness, the love, the humanity involved in the scenes of farewell, burial – at night, under a full moon – and return to the community. But we are nonetheless confronted with the contrast between the people’s ‘natural’ and their ‘political’ body when the chapter shifts back to questions of biopolitical government: a media backlash against the family’s deeds is followed by the prime minister’s condemnation of the supposed ‘inhumane activities’, in which he ‘cit[es] the need to respect human life and announc[es] that the armed forces would immediately take up positions along the frontier to prevent any citizen in a state of terminal physical decline from crossing over’⁶² – a statement all the more self-serving as we learn that the government secretly condones the idea of ‘an exodus which would, in the final analysis, serve the interests of the country by helping to lower the demographic pressure’.⁶³ What does this chapter affirm, if not the ‘body natural’ of the people as the site where it remains for them to claim their freedom? How is it not a meditation on the importance of an outside, a domain of externality vis-à-vis the state and biopolitical control, in restoring to this body a sense of its integrity and worth?

From the perspective of the post-political moment in which Saramago’s work inscribes itself, let me return to a question that has been hovering over our debate: Does the (impossible) image of the people’s two bodies always, invariably, point (back) to political theology? Is it always tied to an incarnational logic, even if it is demythifying in form? One voice from our constellation of authors who would answer decidedly in the negative is Rancière. In one of the few places in his work where direct reference to Lefort is made, he has argued that ‘[w]e need to dissociate democratic disruption and disidentification from this theater of sacrifice that originally ties the emergence of democracy to the great specters of the reembodiments staged by terrorism and totalitarianism of a body torn asunder’.⁶⁴ For him the duality of the people’s two bodies does not need the tradition of political theology – where all key concepts would appear as secularised religious concepts – to be understood; it ‘is not the Christian duality of the celestial body and the earthly body: it is the duality of a social body and a body that now displaces any social identification’.⁶⁵ In ‘Ten Theses on Politics’ he resumes the point and gives an alternative version of the ‘people’s two bodies’: ‘It can be argued that the people’s two bodies are not a modern consequence of the act of sacrificing the sovereign body, but instead a constitutive given of politics itself. *It is initially the people, and not the king, that has a double body*’ [my emphasis].⁶⁶

This reworking would seem consistent with Rancière's understanding of the sphere of 'appearance' as distinct from that of the prevailing modes of 'visibility' which parcel out roles and positions in a given social order, leaving room, in the interstices, for what he calls 'the part of those who have no part'.⁶⁷ However, the notion of the 'two bodies' arguably also sheds some of its critical leverage when it is severed from its historical association with royal sovereignty and its trappings. Rancière's refusal of the historical-symbolic perspective associated with Lefort speaks to the much-rehearsed criticism of the latter's holism to which allusion has been made: the charge of a totalising presupposition which Frank reiterates when he writes, in one of his own Rancièrian moments, that Lefort's 'association of democracy with [...] the disincorporation of power' 'too quickly reduces [popular assembly] to dangerous tendencies to reincorporate the space of political power through sovereign incarnation'.⁶⁸ Yet Rancière's move also makes it more difficult to see how scenes of the doubling of the people's body – scenes that would stage the excess and lack of self-identity attending acts of the people's 'boding forth' – may constitutively depend on the remediation of inherited historical scripts, and indeed, may stake out new claims to appearance precisely by taking on the trappings and spectacles of sovereignty whose public stages are (re)deployed. Far from a throwback, the historical phantasm of the two bodies might thus be the very site for a new performativity of sovereignty, seen as a sign that is never to be matched with the fullness of embodiment.⁶⁹

Far from taking sides in this confrontation between Rancière and Lefort, then, I find it more productive to hold both perspectives on the paradoxical structure of democratic body politics together (which is not to contend they are wholly assimilable). What Saramago's fictions of corporeality affirm, in my view, is that what Rancière sees as literature's polemical 'indifference' with regard to its subject matter – an indifference of which the novels under discussion here give ample demonstration, in their strange and sudden shifts of tone and style, their constant indulgence in their own discursivity as a means to intensify the satire – must ultimately be seen as coincident with the historical process of social disincorporation itself. It is not accidental to Lefort's thesis that 'writing', for him, equals an experience of indeterminacy which is akin to that of the character of modern democracy as such,⁷⁰ while for Rancière, similarly, '[t]he modern political animal is first a literary animal, caught in the circuit of a literariness that undoes the relationships between the order of words and the order of bodies that determine the place of each'.⁷¹ Taking my lead from both authors, with their highly literary understanding of democracy (and democratic subjectivity), I read Saramago's novels as instancing a form of literature that works under the sign of (dis)incorporation in a double sense: with its autonomy understood as concomitant with the social body's dissolution and fragmentation, but also, as charging the body and its image with new political-symbolic weight – even or especially as it affirms what might be called incarnational breakdown. It is qua literary image of the body politic that Saramago's work holds out an

imaginary of publicness, allowing publics to retrieve a sense of today's precarious – and often toxic – forms of publicness as still inhabitable worlds.

Conclusion: 'The People Everywhere'

By way of closing, let me turn to a recent Saramago adaptation to suggest the power of a political imaginary that would work under the sign of incarnational failure – and to associate this possibility with the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath. In summer 2020, after lockdown, London's Donmar Warehouse reopened with an 'immersive sound installation' based on Saramago's *Blindness*. A small-scale theatre in Covent Garden, the Donmar had found a way to work around the suspension of live performances: socially distanced seating and the use of headphones permitted a return to theatrical public space, with Juliet Stevenson's narration lending power to the sound and light experience received by each viewer in their isolated seating space.⁷² Given how *Blindness* tells a tale of societal breakdown full of bodily discomfort and proprioceptive challenges, the installation made it speak to its own crisis-ridden moment by means of its unique – occasion-specific, public-health minded – theatrical apparatus. Indeed, the reconfigured theatre space worked together with the novel's insistence on tactility, loss of sight, and unsettled or diminished powers of orientation to construct an experience of the physicality of viewing and listening from the position of isolated-yet-assembled bodies. In so doing, it intensified and re-modulated awareness of the complexities of embodiment and togetherness in public space at a time when 'community', precisely in its corporeal dimensions, seemed increasingly a matter of submitting to a highly regimented distribution of forms or modes of bodily life. With biopolitical regulations in overdrive, the Donmar's choreography of its audience and their bodies offered a creative – indeed, in the Rancièrian sense, a *literary* – way of putting the existing community 'out of itself', or so I would propose.⁷³ What was achieved was something like greater experiential and imaginative distance from the prevailing 'body politic' that had emerged, as well as from the logic of community and immunity that was operating through its image.

On a speculative note, then, I want to propose the relevance of the people's two bodies in post-pandemic times, and to highlight the world-making powers involved in the potential for disidentification that is inherent in the notion. For sure, there is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic intensified many longstanding crises of democratic publicness: it has often been pointed out that far from forming a moment of rupture, an emergency out of nowhere, the pandemic disclosed 'pre-existing conditions' of a political and social kind (the underfunded state of health care infrastructures, among other public services, being a dramatic case in point).⁷⁴ Yet even as it revealed much systemic dysfunction, the pandemic also fostered a new ontological attunement to the relational aspect of our shared vulnerability, of the corporeal predicament which raises anew the question of what world we inhabit in common. Judith Butler has put it like this: 'Pandemic is etymologically *pan-demos*, all

the people, or perhaps more precisely, the people everywhere, or something that crosses over or spreads over and through the people. It establishes the people as porous and interconnected' [original emphasis].⁷⁵ This cautiously affirmative phrasing is helpful: even as the pandemic offered occasion for states to intensify the exercise of biopower – and even as people were affected differentially across the globe, as Butler is at pains to stress – the experience of 'pan-demos' was also one of connection across barriers and borders, and a highly physical one at that, centred on the 'interconnection and interdependency' that we share by dint of being creatures who breathe the same air.⁷⁶

In my terms here, this body of theoretical work – and the sensibility it expresses – holds out a post-pandemic imaginary in which the body's public exposure is the site for new thinking about world-making and change in a condition of plurality. Nor is the stress that is placed here on the body as a site of relationality in tension with what we have seen about the *disincorporation*, at the symbolic level, of the social: precisely in its formlessness, 'all the people', 'the people everywhere' offers a complex figure, perhaps a paradoxical anti-figure, of the very incarnational surplus – the excess of flesh – with which this essay opened, suggesting that a potential for resisting closed and totalisable figures of self-identity may have been freed up from within the experience of the pandemic crisis itself. If Saramago's fictions speak to this, it is because they keep the challenge of figuration open: because they affirm no other body politic than one in which the people are not one.

Notes

¹ 'The Chair' is part of the short story collection *Objecto Quase* (1978), which appeared in English as José Saramago, *The Lives of Things: Short Stories*, trans. by Giovanni Pontiero (Verso, 2012).

² José Saramago, 'The Chair', in Saramago, *The Lives of Things*, pp. 1–25 (p. 7).

³ For a discussion that places Saramago's early work in the context of post-dictatorship Portugal after 1974, see Mark Sabine, *José Saramago: History, Utopia, and the Necessity of Error* (Legenda, 2016), pp. 1–28.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. by James Swenson (Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 36. For discussion of Rancière's concept of *littérarité*, see Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 88–122.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004).

⁶ Saramago, 'The Chair', p. 9.

⁷ Tom Gallagher, *Salazar: The Dictator Who Refused to Die* (Hurst, 2020).

⁸ The classic statements are in: Claude Lefort, 'The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?', in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. by David Macey (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 213–55; and Claude Lefort, 'The Question of Democracy', in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. by David Macey (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 9–20. For discussion, see Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, 'Claude Lefort: Democracy as the Empty Place of Power', in *Thinking Radical Democracy: The Return to Politics in Post-War France*, ed. by Martin Breugh and others (Toronto University Press, 2015), pp. 121–40.

⁹ Lefort, 'The Permanence', p. 215.

¹⁰ Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. by John B. Thompson (MIT Press, 1986).

¹¹ Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), passim; cf. Adriana Cavarero, *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought*, trans. by Matthew Gervase (Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 4.

¹² Santner, *The Royal Remains*, p. xxi.

¹³ Jason Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁴ See the essays assembled in Claude Lefort, *Writing: The Political Test*, trans. and ed. by David Ames Curtis (Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Frank, *The Democratic Sublime*, p. 35.

¹⁶ See for example Carlo Salzani and Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte, 'Introduction: Proteus the Philosopher, or Reading Saramago as a Lover of Wisdom', in *Saramago's Philosophical Heritage*, ed. by Carlo Salzani and Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), where they speak of an 'allegorical cycle' dedicated to exploring what Saramago himself called 'the possibility of the impossible' (pp. 7–9).

¹⁷ The phrase 'the people's two bodies' obviously alludes to Ernst Kantorowicz's famous discussion of the doctrine of 'the king's two bodies', and thus holds a place in the tradition of political theology in which Kantorowicz participates. It has been used by such different Lefortians as Pierre Rosanvallon and Eric Santner, but also in Rancière's 'Ten Theses', as we shall see below. See Pierre Rosanvallon, 'Revolutionary Democracy', in *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. by Samuel Moyn (Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 79–97 (p. 82); Santner, *The Royal Remains*; Jacques Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics', in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. by Steven Corcoran (Continuum, 2010), pp. 27–44.

¹⁸ For discussion of 'post-politics' as a theoretical paradigm for understanding the present (late-)neoliberal conjuncture, see pp. 7–9 of the introduction to this special issue.

¹⁹ Cf. Judith Butler, *What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

²⁰ José Saramago, *Seeing*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (Vintage, 2017), p. 77.

²¹ Lefort, 'The Permanence', p. 255.

²² José Saramago in 1998, qtd. in Salzani and Vanhoutte, 'Introduction', p. 3.

²³ I mention Spain here as Saramago spent his final years in self-chosen exile in Tías, Lanzarote.

²⁴ José Saramago, *The Notebook*, trans. by Amanda Hopkinson and Daniel Hahn (Verso, 2011), p. 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (Profile Books, 2008), pp. 180–83.

²⁸ Japhy Wilson and Erik Swyngedouw, 'Seeds of Dystopia: Post-Politics and the Return of the Political', in *The Post-Political and its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics*, ed. by Japhy Wilson and Erik Swyngedouw (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁰ Saramago himself was insistent on the distinction between voting abstention and casting a blank vote. See his interview with *The Guardian* on the occasion of *Seeing's* publication in English: Stephanie Merritt, 'Still a Street-Fighting Man', *Guardian*, 30 April 2006.

³¹ Saramago, *Seeing*, pp. 38, 67, 77.

³² Rosanvallon, 'Revolutionary Democracy', p. 81.

³³ Paul B. Preciado, 'Learning from the Virus', *Artforum*, 58.9 (2020).

³⁴ Bruno Bosteels, 'Introduction: This People Which Is Not One', in *What Is a People?*, trans. by Jody Gladding (Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 1–20 (pp. 2–3).

³⁵ In making this point, I am thinking in Rancièrean terms about the tension between a dominant mode of 'visibility' (part of an existing partition of the sensible) and the democratic sphere of 'appearance' where the former might be contested or even displaced. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), chapter 5.

³⁶ Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 65.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 50.

³⁸ Cf. William Davies, *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World* (Vintage, 2019), pp. 10–12.

³⁹ For example, Thomas P. Crocker, 'Constitutive Visions: Sovereignty, Necessity, and Saramago's *Blindness*', *Constellations*, 24.1 (2017), pp. 63–75; David Jenkins, 'Traumatic Counterfactuals', in *Saramago's Philosophical Heritage*, ed. by Carlo Salzani and Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 211–32.

⁴⁰ For example, David Jenkins seems overly rationalist to me when he writes: 'The various crises Saramago envisages enable us to throw into doubt our collective, institutional abilities to effectively respond to any of the crises and exceptions with which we are not infrequently confronted'

(Jenkins, 'Traumatic Counterfactuals', p. 218).

⁴¹ Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 122.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁴ Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, pp. 57–85.

⁴⁵ What *Seeing* shares with 'The Watcher' is that the narrative shifts its focus from electoral proceedings to the bodies, the 'flesh', of the people. See: Italo Calvino, 'The Watcher', trans. by William Weaver, in Italo Calvino, *The Watcher and Other Stories* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 1–73. In a crucial passage, Calvino's protagonist Amerigo, an observer at a local election office, 'felt the boundary line he was supposed to check was now another: not that of the "people's will," long since lost from sight, but the boundary of the human' (pp. 56–57). Saramago's admiration for Calvino is well known and makes it interesting to think of both texts together.

⁴⁶ Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (Verso, 2021), p. 101.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴⁸ Jason Frank, 'The Living Image of the People', in *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept*, ed. by Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr (Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 125–26.

⁴⁹ Cf. Saul Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* (Polity Press, 2019), pp. 17–20, 83–109.

⁵⁰ Cf. Frank, *The Democratic Sublime*, p. 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵² Jenkins, 'Traumatic Counterfactuals', p. 212.

⁵³ For this point about genre, I am indebted to Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (University of California Press, 2002), pp. xv–xxvi.

⁵⁴ Samuel Weber, *Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague* (Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 20.

⁵⁵ José Saramago, *Death at Intervals*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (Vintage, 2017), p. 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁹ *Death at Intervals*, also known as *Death with Interruptions*, was originally published in 2005 as *Intermitências da Morte*.

⁶⁰ Saramago, *Death*, p. 35.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶⁴ Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 100.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶⁶ Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics', p. 34.

⁶⁷ On 'appearance' versus 'visibility' in Rancière, see *Disagreement*, chapter 5.

⁶⁸ Frank, *The Democratic Sublime*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Cf. Judith Butler, *Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015), most especially chapter 5.

⁷⁰ Lefort, *Writing: The Political Test*.

⁷¹ Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 37; see also Jacques Rancière, 'Literary Communities', in *The Common Growl: Toward a Poetics of Precarious Community*, ed. by Thomas Claviez (Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 93–110.

⁷² Chris Wiegand, 'Donmar Warehouse to Reopen with José Saramago Installation Blindness', *Guardian*, 14 July 2020.

⁷³ For Rancière, 'literary community' is defined by disidentification. The quote is from Rancière, 'Literary Communities', p. 105.

⁷⁴ See Myria Georgiou and Gavan Titley, 'Publicness and Commoning: Pandemic Intersections and Collective Visions at Times of Crisis', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25.3–4 (2022), pp. 331–48. See also Benjamin Bratton, *The Revenge of the Real: Politics for a Post-Pandemic World* (Verso, 2021), p. 8; and Weber, *Preexisting Conditions*.

⁷⁵ Butler, *What World Is This?*, p. 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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