

Demanding Empathy through Depictions of Crisis: Activist Artists React to the Trump Administration's Family Separation Policies

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On February 3, 2020, as Iowa residents prepared for caucuses, the city of Des Moines was confronted with the visual dilemma of children in cages [Fig. 1]. More than a dozen of these cages were installed by the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), an organization that provides free and low-cost legal and social services to immigrants and refugees.¹ The chain-link cages housed lifelike dolls of children lying on a bare mat, tucked in a mylar blanket. Audio recordings of children held in detention at the United States border, including the sound of children crying, played in the background. Red signs reading “#DontLookAway” hung on the side of each cage.

As the hashtag #DontLookAway presupposes, these are sites of forced engagement that demand attention from the spectator not through a totalitarian mode of subservience, but rather as expository images offering

illumination. By entering public spaces like sidewalks and city parks, these artworks recreate a site of “situation tragedy,” defined by scholar Lauren Berlant as a moment when “the subject’s world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustaining its fantasies: the situation threatens utter, abject unraveling.”² These artworks relocate the tragedy of the immigration crisis that has mostly been geographically contained along the U.S.-Mexico border. They demand the thought space of spectators who, without any choice of their own and regardless of their personal beliefs or political leanings, have entered a moment of forced engagement at this site of situation tragedy.

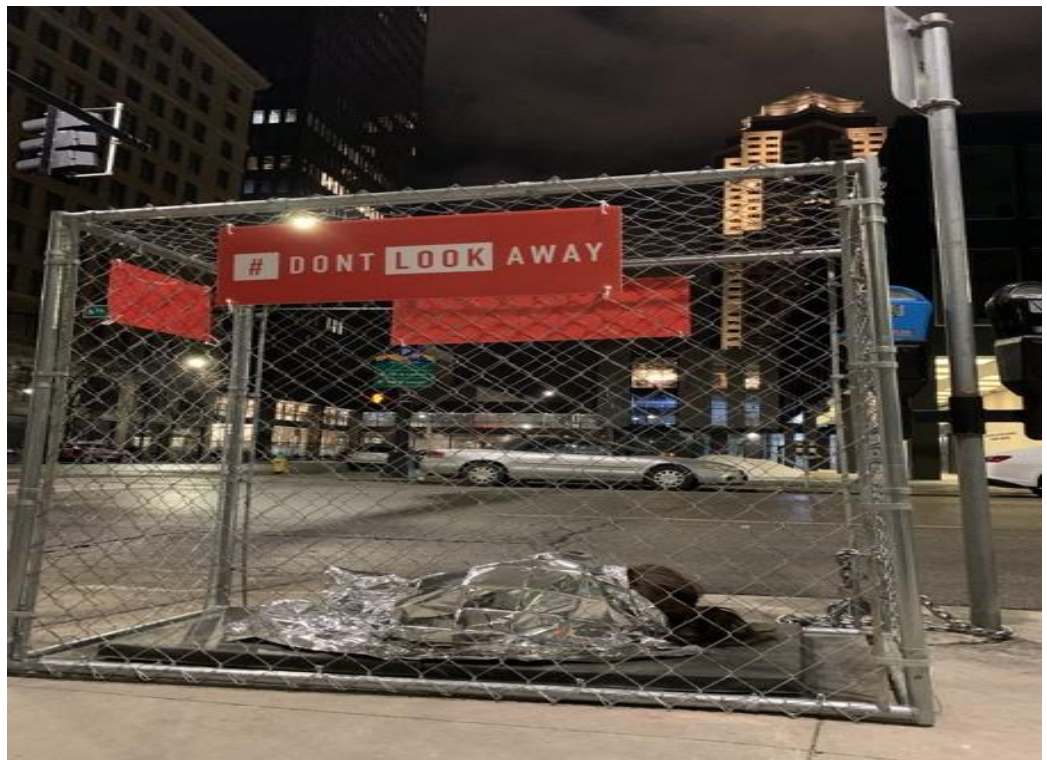


Figure 1: Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), #DontLookAway. Installation of chain-linked fence, mannequin doll, foam mat, and mylar blanket. Des Moines, Iowa. February 3, 2020.

In this essay, I examine three activist artworks created from the perspective of the American Progressive Left that all respond to the Trump administration’s family separation policy that has created a crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border. Through a Lacanian theoretical lens, as interpreted by cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, I identify this immigration crisis as the site of opposing cult-

ural and political fantasies in the United States. I will apply Lacan's theory of "Desire = Demand – Need" to identify these artworks as calling attention to a moment where, for the immigrant, Desire and fantasy have not yet formed because Need is yet to be fulfilled. It is this Need that is urgently calling out and demanding engagement. I argue that through the use of an abject aesthetic, these progressive artworks demand an engagement of empathy by re-asserting a situation tragedy, a tragedy that is capable of undoing a fantasy by emanating Need. I will then introduce Žižek's notion of 'traversing the fantasy' as a means of providing a reading of these artworks as transgressions of the 'symbolic order,' or the pre-existing culture and society, that allow for the emergence of an alternative form of claiming human rights and Need.

National Fantasies

Lin-Manuel Miranda, best known for his Broadway musicals *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*, writes, "Donald Trump came down the escalator to declare his presidential run, and in his first speech he demonized Mexicans [...] And now we're in a different age when, for some, considering an immigrant a human being is a political act."³ The immigration crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border designates the site at which the progressive and reactionary fantasies converge and collide. This crisis played a key role in Donald Trump's 2016 campaign when the show runners forged the slogan "Build the Wall," accompanied by depictions of Mexicans as "bad hombres." Slavoj Žižek offered an uncannily accurate account of the moment of Trump when he wrote: "if racist attitudes were to be rendered acceptable for the mainstream ideologico-political discourse, this would radically shift the balance of the entire ideological hegemony."⁴ The racist rhetoric of Trump's campaign brought the intimate public of the progressive left to a point of situation tragedy with the election of Trump, as the progressive fantasies met "abject unraveling" with the realization that a candidate like Trump, who had shown his racism, misogyny, and disrespect towards the most vulnerable communities across the United States, could win.

The opposing fantasies can be understood in terms of Slavoj Žižek's definition of fantasy that builds on Lacan's belief that fantasy is what fills that void created by the loss, or disconnect, from the Real as understood by the subject within the symbolic order. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory identifies three registers that exist simultaneously and in dependence upon one

another: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary concerns an individual's consciousness, while the Symbolic is the register where cultural customs, traditions, and norms reside. Lacanian theory identifies 'reality' at an intersection of the Imaginary and the Symbolic registers. However, what is commonly understood as reality is not in line with the register of the Real. The common understanding of reality is 'psychical reality.' The Real, on the other hand, is a register beyond one's comprehension; it is the enigma of the untouchable and the unattainable. In the process of coming into the Symbolic, and being able to identify one's self, there is an inevitable loss and something residual is left behind in the Real.

This loss can also be understood through Lacan's definitions of Need, Demand, and Desire. While Need is defined by things that humans require for their survival as living organisms, Desire is understood by Lacan as what remains after a Need is subtracted from a Demand. It is, in other words, the unmet surplus of the Demand. This unmet surplus gets left behind in the Real as an individual develops in the symbolic order. To put it differently, the Real is that which cannot be met and fulfilled within the symbolic order. The paradox is encountered at the point of understanding that one becomes cut off from the Real after one identifies with the symbolic order. As a consequence, one is never able to regain that surplus that was left *behind*. The Real becomes that inaccessible impossibility that only ever exists *beyond*. Fantasy, then, can be understood as that which conceals this knowledge of the impossibility of fulfilled desire.

In his theoretical structuring of fantasy, Žižek has argued that the identification of an 'other' as a negative threat emerges through a collective's belief that this other has appropriated the surplus that has been left behind and has created the impossibility of fulfilled desire. Such a process is evident in Trump's identification of the immigrant as that other who has disempowered his constituencies thus enabling him to frame the immigrant as a threat that must be forcibly excluded.

The alt-right conservative fantasy that follows Trump's rhetoric has constructed a form of fantasy that positions the immigrant as a scapegoat for what his constituents label as the deteriorating economic and social conditions of the United States. As argued by Donald Pease, the immigrant plays the role of "symptom figure" in order to "stitch up" the inconsistencies of their fantasy of restoring America to a moment *before* Obama's presidency, which the fantasy names as the site of disempowerment.⁵ Pease

argues that this fantasy was constructed through Trump's rallies in the creation of Trump as the figure who would act as the "decisive substitution and overthrow of the Obama state."

In a contradictory mode, the progressive fantasy, positioned around the rhetoric of Obama's "audacity for hope," imagines the immigrant as that figure who must be protected in order to maintain the United States as a nation of *hope* with the prospect of dignity and respect for all. The progressive fantasy can be understood through the words of activist artist Paola Mendoza, who served as the Art Director for the 2017 Women's March, when, in an interview, she said, "I fight against Trump and white supremacy because if I don't my story will no longer be possible in this country,"⁶ as she herself came to the United States from Colombia as a child. While pushing for radical changes to the immigration system, the fantasy is also at work in the agenda of RAICES, the organization that installed the cages in Des Moines, Iowa.

Fantasy Turned to Policy

The anti-immigrant "Build the Wall" rhetoric of Trump's campaign translated into on-ground policy under his administration. In April 2018, then Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced a Zero-Tolerance Policy for Criminal Illegal Entry that included a requirement that all children smuggled across the border would be separated from their families.⁷ However, even prior to the Zero-Tolerance Policy, this practice of family separation had already been enacted by the Trump administration. A Vox article statistic estimated that at least 2,700 children had been separated from their families at the border between October 1, 2017 and May 31, 2018.⁸

The discernible difference between the Trump administration's policies and those of his predecessors in the White House, President Obama and President Bush, is that the Trump administration sought to initiate prosecution of *all* illegal entry, including prosecution of individuals even before they were able to discover if they qualified for asylum. The other stark difference is that children are dying while caged in detention centers. A May 2019 report by *NBC News* states that "at least seven children are known to have died in immigration custody since last year, after almost a decade in which no child reportedly died while in the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection."⁹ In June 2018, President Trump signed an executive order ending family separation. However, that was not the end of this crisis for the families that were affected. It was also not the end of Trump's agenda against

immigrants, or the fantasy that labels them as the 'other' to an extreme that puts the immigrant's humanity into question. The immigrants affected by this crisis still had unmet Need, as addressed by the progressive left with artworks such as the installations in Des Moines, Iowa.

An Abject Aesthetic

The use of the lifelike doll in the RAICES installations effectively forces a viewer to stop and ask themselves, "Is that a real child in there?" One can see what appears to be the hair of a real child emerging from under the silver blanket, and then can see the shoes emerging at the bottom.¹⁰ Such a scene creates an anxiogenic dilemma for the previously unassuming spectator who must decide whether the scene unfolding before their eyes is in fact an installation artwork, or an actual horrific event that requires immediate responsive action. This dilemma of not being certain whether or not it is a real child forces the viewer to engage the scene more directly. It is this urgent question that renders the installation an activist site of demand. An assumed feeling of relief emerges when one realizes it is only a doll. However, that relief is only momentary, because just as one realizes that *this* is only a doll, one is forced to acknowledge the reality of the situation that the scene quite literally indexes: *this is happening to real children*.

This installation features a funerary replica of the child corpse activated through an image that seemingly captures their ghosts – a motionless body surrounded by the sounds of a prior moment's horror: the cries of the child. It can revert the viewer back to that initial dilemma of "does this require my immediate intervention?" only to realize that the true abject quality comes in the haunting realization that it might be too late to take action.

The ambiguity of the figure inside these cages oscillates between the precarious presences of real-life child, mannequin doll, and motionless corpse. This ambiguity creates the sense of an "obliterated image-screen," a stylistic trend that was first identified by art historian Hal Foster in abject artworks created at the end of the 20th century. Foster defines this "obliterated image-screen" through Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, with the *image-screen*, taking the place of the symbolic order, acting as a mediator between *the gaze* and *the subject of representation* in artworks.¹¹ Lacan understood the gaze to be a violent "force that can arrest, even kill, if it is not disarmed first" by the *image-screen*.¹² Foster argues that abject artworks lose this sense of disarming the gaze and allow the gaze to "not only attack the

image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn.”¹³ With the use of the hashtag “#DontLookAway,” it becomes clear that there is no “taming of the gaze;” rather, the gaze falls *captive* to the installation. The viewer of the cage is no longer just a spectator but has become personally invested in the scene and taken on the role of witness. Just as this figure of the child is detained in that cage, so is the viewer’s gaze now detained in the truth of the scene they cannot stop witnessing.

Prior to the cages being installed in Iowa, activist artist Paola Mendoza had already initiated the work of these progressive artworks with an installation on the lawn of the United States Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. [Fig. 2]. This artwork, installed in May 2019, one year after the Zero-Tolerance Policy for Criminal Illegal Entry was put into place by the Trump administration, shows two life-size sculptural figures, a mother and son, in an active moment of reaching out to one another. The sculpture of the child is positioned within the walls of a chain-linked fence while the sculpture of the mother stands a few feet away, outside of the cage, on a silver path. Draping over the mother’s figure is a silver mylar blanket, which has become a symbol of ICE detainment. Flowers grow up the chain-link of the cage, a detail that Mendoza added in order to reference the proverb that reads, “They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.”¹⁴ The artist imagines this to symbolize hope for those families who can continue to prosper even after facing this personal tragedy. Surrounding this scene are pairs of children’s shoes that have been laid out across the lawn. Mendoza uses these to reference all of the children who are still unaccounted for or have yet to be reunited with their families.



Figure 2: Paola Mendoza. Untitled art installation referencing family separation inspired by the proverb, "They tried to bury us, they didn't know that we were seeds." Installed at U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., May 2019; traveled to San Diego, CA, Se

While the installations by RAICES on display in Iowa depict the funerary replica of the child corpse, the installation by Paola Mendoza in Washington, D.C. depicts the victim of this practice as fully alive and active. However, while the sculptures are life-size and depicted in a natural manner, they are not life-like. The sculptures are fully white, with no detailing of features or any reference to race. This installation creates an 'obliterated image-screen' that demands the spectator to witness the unfolding of what cannot be prevented from happening.

The action taking place, that gesture of mother and child reaching to one another, is a frozen moment of unrequited embrace. There is undeniable anguish, a feeling of being "cut off," a feeling of loss of that excess that gets left in the Real and becomes unattainable. Philosopher Julia Kristeva defines the abject as the precise moment when one is cut off from their mother.¹⁵ It is in that moment of self-identification that individuals realize themselves as separate from the mother and thus simultaneously realize themselves as other. It is in this moment when Desire has not yet emerged as "Demand – Need," and the Need itself is still on full display.

A Radical Closure of the 'Symbolic Order'

The cages that were present in Des Moines and Mendoza's installation on the lawn of the Capitol recreate the site of the progressive left's situation tragedy while forcing the intimate public of this radical left to admit that their *hope* of America as a place providing dignity and respect for all – their fantasy – has not been realized. Simultaneously, the artworks expose the hypocrisy that is at the core of the conservative fantasy that boasts of morality and family values as foundational principles. By presenting the horrific truth of what a fantasy is hoping to disavow, the images of the cages bring the symbolic order to its limit point by asserting a demand that is outside of both the progressive and reactionary fantasies in order to expose the "falsity" (the Real) disavowed by each. These artworks expose the gaps in the symbolic

order through these demands from the Real. This can be understood through Žižek's definition of fantasy as a 'primordial lie' that can become exposed by 'true art.' He writes, "the artifice of 'true art' is thus to manipulate the censorship of the underlying fantasy in such a way as to reveal the radical falsity of this fantasy."¹⁶ The images of cages create a violation of the organizing symbolic order by situating themselves at a site of situation tragedy that is marked by the unraveling fantasies. This violation forms a rift of the symbolic order and becomes a meeting point of the Imaginary and the Real as the symbolic order is now made obsolete.

While the exposure of the reactionary fantasy is done as a process of negation, the exposure of the progressive liberal fantasy is accomplished through a 'traversal of the fantasy' that creates space for alternative ways of being in the world. In his discussion of the immigration and refugee crisis that has been ongoing in Europe, Žižek argues for "a need to 'traversing the fantasy'" by practicing a discourse that "touches/disturbs the Real."¹⁷ Žižek posits that fantasy, that which can organize an intimate public, relies on, what he calls, an 'empty gesture' between individuals in a social order. This empty gesture acts as an agreed upon relation that an offer exists and the offer shall always remain open by never acting on that offer. He understands the empty gesture to be an organizing principle of what maintains the social order as *normal*. However, Žižek defines traversing the fantasy as the "radical closure" of that empty gesture.¹⁸ Through the horrors that are exposed, the artworks recreate the site of this rift as a site that has forced a traversal of the fantasy through radical closure of the pre-existing symbolic order and allowed for the emergence of an alternative order that is presented by the progressive left.

On Empathy

These artworks, through a forced engagement that can undo a fantasy, demand empathy from the site of abjection. The visual emanation of empathy from an object, such as an artwork, is specific to the historical understanding of 'empathy' as a term, which emerges from the practice of aesthetic theory. While organizing an affective appreciation of objects beyond a physical appreciation of what an object looks like, aesthetic theory understands empathy as an individual's way of projecting their own affect onto an object. Similarly, but almost in a reverse sequence, empathy can be experienced as affective mimicry of an 'other' subject. These artworks, on the

other hand, emanate an affect that is neither from an object nor of a pre-existing subject, but rather an abject.

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, empathy is that which allows one to imagine the psychic state of the other, and thus come into relation with the other. Through the emanation of affect from an object or a subject, empathy can sustain the organization of our symbolic order as a balance between the Imaginative and the Symbolic. However, in these progressive artworks, empathy emanates from the abject while disorganizing the symbolic order through the rift caused at the meeting point of the Imaginary and the non-symbolizable Real.



Figure 3. Kisha Bari and Paola Mendoza. *I AM A CHILD series*. Photographed at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency, New York City. June 2018.

This demand for empathy becomes fully depicted in a series of photographs showing children holding signs that read "I AM A CHILD" while situated in protest format [Fig. 3]. The photographs, all depicted in black and white scale, reference the historic "I AM A MAN" Sanitation Workers Strike that took place in 1968 [Fig. 4], as well as the eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionist seal showing a man on his knees in shackles with the slogan "AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?" [Fig. 5].¹⁹

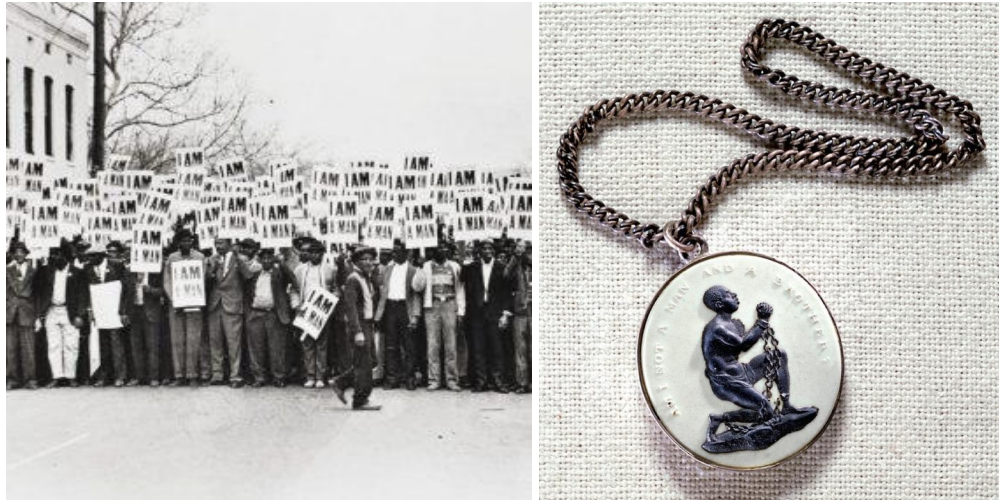


Figure 4 (left). Ernest Withers. *I AM A MAN: Sanitation Workers Strike, Memphis, Tennessee*. Photographed on March 28, 1968.

Figure 5 (right). Josiah Wedgwood. *AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?* Ceramic and metal medallion. Dated after 1787. Created for the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787 by Thomas Clarkson in London, England.

This series, created by Paola Mendoza in collaboration with Kisha Bari, the photographer for the Women's March, shows children grouped together in unity in some photographs, while split off into factions of only a few children in others. The children's affects are serious, as they gaze out directly at the viewer. With these photographs, the artists create an opportunity for the children to project their abjecting empathy from the site of the symbolic order in order to present an alternative form of claiming human rights.

The photographs were shot in front of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) in June 2018. Mendoza explains the message behind the series thus: "regardless of a child's immigration status, they are still just a child. Regardless of where they are coming from, they still maintain their basic human rights that must be respected."²⁰ The basic human rights that Mendoza asserts here are the rights that Hannah Arendt refers to when she pronounces "the right to have rights."²¹ Arendt claims that the paradox of human rights is in the requirement of an individual to be acknowledged and exist within a state that will bestow rights upon them. However, the modern nation state becomes an exclusionary institution where individual rights always come second to the nation. "The right to have rights" asserts

the precondition that individuals exist as protected citizens of a state or other embodying institution that will guarantee their rights.²²

An Alternative Order

Through the use of “I AM,” the photo series by Mendoza and Bari asserts the right to declare oneself a human being with the right to exist with respect and dignity in the world. The children are claiming their own humanity in a radical form of being as otherwise than the order that has abjected them when forcibly excluded by Trump’s rhetoric and his alt-right constituents. It is the primal demand of those who have not yet become subjects. They name themselves and assert themselves into space, so as to not disappear into the non-symbolizable Real, but rather to emerge from that space of situation tragedy formed by unraveling fantasies and a violated symbolic order. These photographs realize Žižek’s hunt for a traversal of the fantasy as the demand emanates from the radical closure of the symbolic order at a meeting point of the Imaginary and the Real. This is the moment an alternative order is coming into existence through the progressive left’s opening of an alternative relationship to the pre-existing fantasies. These photographs stand for all those children who have been unaccounted for through the Trump administration’s practice of family separation. They claim “I AM” for those children who have disappeared into cages.

All three progressive artworks demand empathy by asserting an unmet Need of the victimized immigrant within the crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border. While the installations in Des Moines and Washington, D.C. utilize an abject aesthetic that creates a violation of the symbolic order and exposes the primordial lies of both the progressive and reactionary fantasies, the “I AM A CHILD” series traverses the fantasy and allows for the formation of an alternative order in which immigrant children can claim their humanity. All three of these examples work in conjunction to generate the possibility of alternative ways of being for that which is not yet object or subject, but rather abject.

Notes

1. Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), *#NoKidsInCages*, <https://nokidsincages.com/>.
2. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.
3. Lin-Manuel Miranda, "What Art Can Do: The Role of the Artist in the Age of Trump," *The Atlantic*, December 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/lin-manuel-miranda-what-art-can-do/600787/>.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, first edition, 1997; second edition, 2008), 34.
5. Donald E. Pease, University College Dublin, "Trumped-Up Charges: The First 100 Days, Professor Donald E Pease, Trump's America (2017)", YouTube Video, 42:28. Posted May 25, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlcrAwaE_Og.
6. "Paola Mendoza One-on-One," *the Skimm*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.theskimm.com/live-smarter/career/paola-mendoza-hispanic-heritage>.
7. The United States Department of Justice, "Attorney General Sessions Delivers Remarks Discussing the Immigration Enforcement Actions of the Trump Administration" (May 7, 2018), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-sessions-delivers-remarks-discussing-immigration-enforcement-actions>.
8. Dara Lind, "The Trump administration's separation of families at the border, explained," *Vox*, August 14, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/11/17443198/children-immigrant-families-separated-parents>.
9. Nicole Acevedo, "Why are migrant children dying in U.S. custody?" *NBC News*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/why-are-migrant-children-dying-u-s-custody-n1010316>.

10. The imagery of shoes, typically shown in large numbers or in piles, has become a common symbolic reference to the lives lost during the Holocaust as representation of the countless unidentified dead, while evoking a sense of inconceivable loss.

11. Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (Autumn, 1996), 109.

12. Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," 109-110.

13. Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," 110.

14. This proverb has been traced back to 1978, written by Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulis who published it in a collection titled *The Body and the Wormwood*. It was translated into English in 1995. The origins of this proverb have been discussed in an essay by An Xiao titled, "On the Origins of 'They Tried to Bury Us, They Didn't Know We Were Seeds'," *Hyperallergic*, July 3, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/449930/on-the-origins-of-they-tried-to-bury-us-they-didnt-know-we-were-seeds/>.

15. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1992).

16. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 26.

17. Slavoj Žižek, "The Need to Traverse the Fantasy," *In These Times*, December 28, 2015, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/18722/Slavoj-Zizek-on-Syria-refugees-Eurocentrism-Western-Values-Lacan-Islam>, no pagination.

18. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 39-43.

19. Upon seeing this medallion, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to Josiah Wedgwood dated May 15, 1788 that read, "I am persuaded [the medallion] may have an Effect equal to that of the best written Pamphlet in procuring favour to those oppressed people."

20. Nadja Sayej, "Paola Mendoza Explains the 'I Am A Child' Protest Photos," *Teen Vogue*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/gallery/womens-march-artistic-director-paolo-mendoza-explains-i-am-a-child-protest-photos>, no pagination.

21. Hannah Arendt, "The Rights of Man: What Are They?" first published in 1946, republished in German and English in 1949; published in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951.

22. This paradox became apparent to Arendt during the world wars when those stateless people and refugees were suddenly no longer guaranteed their human rights.

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