

“Choosing Between Life and Human”:

Yoko Tawada and Biopolitics in the Anthro-/Capitalocene

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Towards the end of her 2020 short essay, published as “Der Weltbürgersteig” by the online German literary website *Stadtsprachen*,¹ Yoko Tawada concludes her musings on life during the COVID-19 pandemic with the piquing statement:

If no one had to die from it, I’d even praise the Coronavirus as a metaphor for the ideal world citizen, who effortlessly crosses the borders of countries and religions; who constantly transforms to adapt to new surroundings, and who survives through contact with humans, by having deep conversations, and by going to concerts, public readings, and the theater. In particular it loves to visit grandparents and sick friends. (my trans.)²

After this tongue-in-cheek comparison of the COVID virus with the “ideal world citizen,” the text reminds us that “*Er schadet uns*” (“it harms us”), with emphasis on the vulnerability of the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions. The essay concludes with: “the Coronavirus intends to overtake the planet as the superior world citizen.”³ Published in the relatively early days of the pandemic,

1 “Der Weltbürgersteig” is a Tawada neologism that combines “Der Weltbürger,” meaning “world citizen,” with “der Bürgersteig,” meaning “sidewalk.” The term combines key topics discussed in the essay: travel, human interaction, and border-crossing, together with restrictions and prohibition, being kept on the outside and denied entry, and an overall inability to take part.

2 “Wenn niemand daran sterben müsste, würde ich sogar den Coronavirus als Metapher für den idealen Weltbürger preisen, der mühelos Länder- und Religionsgrenzen überschreitet, sich stets verwandelt, um sich einer neuen Umgebung anzupassen und sich durch menschliche Kontakte, intensive Gespräche, Konzerte, Lesungen oder Theaterstücke lebendig hält.”

3 “Wenn auch ich eine Verschwörungstheorie verbreiten dürfte, würde ich behaupten, der Coronavirus habe vor, als ein besserer Weltbürger unseren Planeten zu übernehmen.”

Tawada's essay touches on coming to terms with minor to major changes in everyday life, such as the prohibition on kisses on the cheek as a form of greeting, to the public health measures that impacted human lives across the planet; e.g., social distancing, isolation, closed commercial and public spaces, and bans on international and even domestic travel. For an author and academic who not only lives as a global citizen giving public lectures at venues large and small all over the world, but who also regularly writes on themes dealing with physical, linguistic, bodily, and conceptual boundary-crossing, such limitations on movement and human interaction must have been deeply felt. Yet, unlike much of the polemical rhetoric that proliferated in Europe and North America during the first years of the pandemic, Tawada's essay is hardly a lament for the sacrifices she, and most others, had to endure in order to mitigate health risks. The brief but impactful line *Er schadet uns* that marks the climax of this short piece underscores this point clearly: we may be sacrificing many of the things that make life worth living, but given the potential danger of the virus, the alternative is to sacrifice human lives.

In addition to the highly consequential and politically fraught issue of sacrifice during times of disaster (e.g., a world-wide pandemic, or as we will see later, human-caused environmental collapse) there is a sagacity to this essay that highlights some of the other important social and political corollaries of COVID. Taking the following lines into account: "People who were already leaning towards autocracy have now taken a few more steps in that direction. People who already cared about democracy will now defend it all the more passionately. People who had wanted to separate from the EU are now even further away from Europe," it is apparent that Tawada's focus is on something more meaningful than restrictions to day-to-day living and international travel.⁴ Rather than decrying

4 "Wer sich schon immer in Richtung Autokratie dachte, machte ein paar weitere Schritte in dieselbe Richtung. Wer sich schon immer um die Demokratie kümmerte, verteidigte sie umso eifriger. Wer sich von der EU trennen wollte, entfernte sich weiter von Europa."

inconveniences, the text highlights how the COVID pandemic has exacerbated the already divisive political tensions fracturing societies in North America, Europe, and beyond. Owing to political, media, and anti- or pseudo-scientific conspiratorial agents, maintaining public health and safety came to occupy one end of a polar extreme, while upholding “freedom” at the expense of human lives occupied the other. These issues are by no means the only politically charged flashpoints triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, but they are ones that will have lasting implications once the pandemic is behind us. Possibly though, as I aim to show in this paper, the concept of “sacrifice” as it relates to how we value, and devalue, life, will endure as one of COVID’s most contentious legacies.⁵

Given the novelty of the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be misleading to claim that “Der Weltbürgersteig” represents a continuation of topics or content in Tawada’s oeuvre, since the text’s primary focus is on the recent experiences of living a circumscribed life during the pandemic. However, there is a discernible continuation of themes present in this short essay that can be identified in her work over roughly the past decade, beginning with the post March 11, 2011, short story “The Island of Eternal Life.”⁶ Although some of these issues were already present in her writing to a certain extent, Tawada’s post 3.11 fiction and non-fiction represent a much more wide-ranging and focused ecologically- and ethically-

5 Given that it was published relatively recently, few secondary sources have mentioned Tawada’s essay “Der Weltbürgersteig.” For one of the rare reflections on this piece, see Christoph Thouny’s “When Carps Can’t Breathe in Water: On Tawada Yoko’s Planetary Musings in Corona Times.”

6 For some of the secondary scholarship in Tawada Studies that focus on “The Island of Eternal Life,” see: Seungyeon Kim’s “The Fictional-Reality of Actual-Virtuality. Yoko Tawada’s *Kentoshi* (*The Emissary*);” Kathrin Maurer’s “Translating Catastrophes: Yoko Tawada’s Poetic Responses to the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake, the Tsunami, and Fukushima;” Tara Beaney’s “Confronting ‘Unforeseen’ Disasters: Yoko Tawada’s Surrealist and Animistic Poetics;” Katharina Gerstenberger’s “*Störfälle*: Literary Accounts from Chernobyl to Fukushima;” and Julia Walton’s “Yoko Tawada’s Post-Fukushima Imaginaries.”

centered exploration of “value” with respect to both human and non-human life: e.g., valuing life from anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives; the value of human life being contingent on its capacity to serve the nation or the economy; the value of human life being contingent on race, gender, age, or health; and the value, and devaluing, of human life in an age of environmental contamination and destruction.⁷ Part of this discussion of value and life includes the question of sacrifice; or to be more specific, to what extent, and under which circumstances, human and non-human lives may be sacrificed so that the existing (political, economic, and social) order can be maintained without significant interruption or inconvenience. The COVID-19 pandemic may even be regarded as the crucible that tested our threshold for sacrificing comfort and capital to save human lives, which eventually saw a tipping point when human lives were deemed expendable in order to resuscitate failing economies. The pandemic has served as a catalyst for understanding and critiquing ruling socio-political regimes as representative of biopolitics and biopower; two terms primarily though not exclusively developed by social and political theorists and philosophers from Michel Foucault, to Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, and Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller.⁸

7 Anthropocentric and biocentric views of value are somewhat self-explanatory, but I use them in reference to the work of George Sessions and Arne Naess, who are primarily responsible for developing the influential field in environmental studies known as Deep Ecology. Though often criticized for being impractical and extreme, Deep Ecology’s principles of recognizing the inherent or intrinsic value of all living and non-living entities, as well as the need for humans to rethink how we value and commodify the natural environment and non-human animals, are ethically sound principles that resonate, in many ways, with the ideas presented in Tawada’s texts.

8 The term biopolitics, and much of its intellectual substance, is traced to Michel Foucault, and in particular his lectures from the Collège de France published as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, as well as *The History of Sexuality Volume One*. Biopolitics now represents a vast interdisciplinary academic field comprised of sometimes discordant historical, social, philosophical, and ethical theories, but in this paper biopolitics has a few salient features: e.g., that the object of biopolitics is not individual humans but rather humans measured and aggregated at the level of populations, rather than as “people” (Lemke 5); that the value of human bodies and lives are contingent on various factors; and that the term *bare life* is central to contemplating how human and non-human life has been historically valued and politicized. The term biopolitics does not imply a positive or cynical politicization of life, but rather that the operationalization of human bodies and life has become the essence of politics.

Curiously absent from previous secondary scholarship in Tawada studies, I will investigate how representations of the value of human and non-human life in her recent fiction and non-fiction can be productively read in conjunction with certain concepts and characteristics in the diverse, and sometimes discordant, field known as biopolitics (which, it should be noted, is a term that denotes neither a positive nor negative historical development). In particular, I focus on the ways that human bodies, and by extension human lives, are represented as operationalized, instrumentalized, commodified, and otherwise administered by political and economic forces in select Tawada texts. Comprehending Tawada's multifaceted exploration of valuing and sacrificing bodies and life within a biopolitical framework can, furthermore, be augmented when considered within ecologically and economically grounded paradigmatic terms that aim to explain our current planetary predicament: the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene.⁹ Thus, these two complementary, though not identical, terms which describe present, and likely future, environmental and socio-economic crises will also feature in the following analysis of select Tawada texts.

On the Value of Life vs. Human

In a talk given at the University of Chicago in March, 2016, translated from

9 The Anthropocene is a term coined by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer to denote the current geological epoch. It marks a break from the Holocene by identifying humans and human action as a geological force that fundamentally altered Earth systems, biological diversity, and the physical environment. It, like the term biopolitics, has been taken up by disciplines in the natural, social, and human sciences. The term Capitalocene, which has enjoyed less uptake in academic fields and popular culture, has mainly been developed by scholars like the historian Jason Moore (see *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*), human geographer Andreas Malm, and interdisciplinary academic Donna Haraway. The term imitates much of the content of Anthropocene yet puts its primary focus on the system of capitalism, rather than an abstract 'humanity', as the main cause of the Earth's planetary changes, i.e., destruction and contamination.

Japanese and published in English as “Choosing Between Life and Human,” Yoko Tawada opens by relaying a discussion she once had with a middle-aged (60-ish) Japanese man after delivering a public lecture in Amman, Jordan. The discussion, in the beginning innocuous, transitions suddenly to the question of how human life should be valued; or more precisely, how the contemporary valuation of life as inherently valuable is an affront to the true essence of human value. The reason, according to the man, is that the real value of human life resides in our capacity to self-sacrifice for a greater political purpose. Although Tawada is unsure why the man has raised the issue, he tells her: “Nowadays in Japanese schools, it seems like they only teach that life is precious (*inochi wo taisetsu ni shiro*), but I think that’s a mistake. It’s not life that is so important, but rather being a person, a human (*taisetsu na no wa inochi de wa naku ningen desu*)” (1). Although she is still unclear why he is talking about this, the man then follows up with: “If we’re talking about *bare life*, even weeds and rats have life. But a person can deliberately choose to *sacrifice* their life for some higher purpose. That’s what makes being a person so precious. They all died as persons” (my emphasis). The final sentence in the man’s utterance reveals the true intent of his message: he seeks to justify and even sanctify the sacrifice of human life, as kamikaze pilots sacrificed their lives towards the end of World War II, for the higher ideals of the national (imperial) body. Conversely, those who are unwilling to sacrifice their lives for the national cause are simply bare life (in his words), like animals or plants. Tawada speculates that, while she said nothing about kamikaze pilots or even the war during her lecture, the impetus for the man’s claim that the “value of life” is equal to “the value of personhood” (2) was a playful reference she had made in her lecture to the Japanese flag, and an ironic comment on the word nationalism.¹⁰ Their

10 Highly critical interrogations of nationalism can be found throughout Tawada’s fiction and non-fiction. In the text discussed here, “Choosing between Life and Human,” there is an extended discussion of how modern nationalism has evolved from demonstrative

conversation comes to an end when Tawada questions whether these kamikaze pilots actually had any choice in sacrificing their own lives, which then undermines the man's assertion that their lives were made sacred by their sacrifice. To this he retorts: "That is an insult to the dead. They chose to die of their own free will." His rejoinder that kamikaze pilots chose to die "of their own free will" is at best a misleading and wrong-headed revision of the historical reality, and at worst an example of revering nationalistic fanaticism. Beyond this specific example though (self-sacrifice for military objectives), their discussion triggers reflection on the broader issue of how life worth living ought to be valued.

Worldviews that posit a duality of life (bare life) vs. personhood (uniquely human value through sacrifice) are no atavistic relics, but rather are very much part of contemporary biopolitics. This binary is even represented later in Tawada's essay mentioned above, "Choosing Between Life and Human," in reference to recent Japanese politics. Tawada cites a 2010 speech by Prime Minister Hatoyama in which he repeatedly refers to *inochi* (twenty-four times), which means *life*, in the context of defending human and non-human life—once it is born, once it grows up—as well as the lives of workers, and even the life of the world, and in particular the biosphere of the earth, among other examples. However, following the March 11, 2011, triple disaster in east Japan (which cost the lives of nearly 20,000 people), the new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, moved away from an inclusive and biocentric support of "life" in favor of an anthropocentric support of the "nation":

acts like flag-waving and hymn singing (although both are still part of it) to pride in more mundane, everyday national achievements, like nationally-produced products (such as food or brands). Tawada, for instance, cites the Japanese appliance brand that was known as "National" domestically and "Panasonic" when sold overseas as one such example. A more expansive discussion of nationalism in Tawada's non-fiction writing can be found in a 2005 essay titled "Is Europe Western?" published in *Kyoto Journal*, issue 61. Post 3.11 short stories, such as "The Far Shore" and "Journal of Trembling Days" ("Tagebuch der bebenden Tage"), question and even subvert the expressions of political and societal nationalism that flare up following natural disasters.

“I’m not a medical doctor; my job isn’t to defend life but rather to defend the nation” (10). Tawada, again, objects to this binary thinking that “sets up nation and life in opposition to one another, as if we had to choose one or the other.” It is this prioritizing of nation over life, as if the two were not mutually dependent, that forms the center of her criticism here and elsewhere in her recent texts. It is not, however, just the exclusionary and anthropocentric ideology of nationalism that is at issue here, but rather any ideology whose logic displaces life as inherently valuable.

An obvious but nevertheless fecund point of departure for discussing life within the context of biopolitics in “Choosing Between Life and Human” is the significance of *bare life* and the idea of the *sacred* considered in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, as well as within a wider understanding of the importance of nationalism in assigning value to life. Similar to Tawada’s essay that explores the etymology of the Japanese word *inochi*, meaning *life*, Agamben begins his text by distinguishing between the Greek terms for life: *zoē* (“the simple fact of living common to all living beings [animals, men, or gods]”) (1), and *bios*, meaning the “form or way of living proper to an individual or group.”¹¹ By way of Aristotle (and his understanding of polis as a combination of oppositions: life [*zēn*] and good life [*eu zēn*]), to Carl Schmitt (in particular his development in political theory of the “state of exception” and suspension of rights), and finally to Michel Foucault (namely, his influential discussion of *biopolitics*, which has at its essence the entanglement of life, politics,

11 “Choosing between Life and Human” contains an extended discussion of *inochi* with respect to how it is used, in which contexts, and how it is written. One informative passage reads “the Japanese word for life, *inochi*, does not include such meanings as ‘the life of a person’ or ‘daily life’. Unlike the life of a person, which is *jīnsei* in Japanese, the word *inochi* has no specific content. The meaning of *inochi* does not include such things as one’s love life, family life, or working life. *Inochi* means life only in the sense of respiration, breathing” (4).

and power), Agamben begins his treatise by exploring differing concepts and valuations of life within distinct “biopolitical and juridico-institutional” contexts. These valuations of life can be interpreted as loosely reflecting the contrary positions raised by Tawada and her interlocutor mentioned above. Agamben outlines how the meaning and valuation of life, especially when regarded as sacred, is subject to the peremptory judgement of a sovereign (be it a king, emperor, or comparable juridico-political head, like a president). The sovereign, like the *homo sacer* whom Agamben describes as both inconsequentially killable and immune to ritual sacrifice in ancient law, stands paradoxically both outside and inside of the juridical order (“the sovereign stands outside the juridical order and, nevertheless, belongs to it, since it is up to him to decide if the constitution is to be suspended *in toto*” (Schmitt 13; qtd. in Agamben 15). In the passage above from Tawada’s essay, the sovereign, or Japanese Emperor, sacrificed the lives of his subjects through their suicidal actions in service of the nation, which ultimately renders them as “human” and “sacred.” In other words, considered in this context, being “human” is prioritized over being “alive”, which may lend some validity to Tawada’s interlocutor’s statement that “They died of their own free will,” since death would be preferable to living without honor.

While the analogy is not one-to-one, there is an identifiable intersection between Agamben’s discussion of the concepts of *zoē* and *zēn* understood as a kind of pre-political, almost primordial, life,¹² together with the above-mentioned understanding of devalued forms of life (i.e., desecrating uniquely human value by comparing it with weeds and rats, which are bare life) that is criticized by Tawada’s interlocutor.¹³ So too can we interpret Agamben’s reading of *bios*

12 Horn and Bergthaller describe *zoē* as “purely biological life of the sort that humans share with all other living beings” (70).

13 Although there is ambivalence to the way it is used, bare life in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* is not equivalent to *zoē*. Bare life, or *nuda vita*, is a kind of qualified life, like the “good” life mentioned in the context of Aristotle, so unlike the implication made by

and *eu zēn* as a precondition of life worth living, i.e., sacrificing oneself for the sovereign (the emperor and by extension the nation and empire) as the apogee of value for human life. In Agamben's explanation though, *homo sacer*, or sacred man, has had his rights and personhood stripped by the sovereign, and in so doing has made himself invulnerable to ritual sacrifice, thus rendering him *sacred*. On the other hand, in Tawada's essay there is a dichotomous notion of life presented as either apolitical and bare life, or life as being human; the former means the inviolate sanctity of life (both human and non-human), while the latter indicates life particular to humans, especially those who sacrifice their lives on the altar of nationalist devotion. Not only does this nationalistic valuation of life demean and enervate the non-human (both living and non-living) entities of the earth, but it also problematically valorizes and even sanctifies the nation as a higher ideal. Those who object to sacrificing their lives for this ideal are derided as living a debased life. Tawada critiques this celebration of nationalistic sacrifice with: "it is a way of thinking that declares that 'the nation will die unless it is allowed from time to time to drink the juice that is the life of young people'" (6), thereby illustrating a violent, destructive, and almost vampirical image of the nation and its parasitic terms for self-sustainability.¹⁴ These examples from Agamben and Tawada convey conflicting ideas of life as infused with state-sanctioned meaning (albeit through suicide) versus all life as inherently valuable. Moreover, the politicization and instrumentalization of the human body revealed in the case of the kamikaze pilots, sacrificed as part of a biopolitical calculus that saw them

Tawada's interlocutor, bare life in Agamben's reading is still uniquely human. The point, though, is that those who sacrifice their lives for the nation are proof of the higher value of human life, which is a discussion relevant to Agamben's.

14 Elsewhere in the essay we read "If the national people, the *minzoku*, are unable to survive or revive without this sacrifice of life, and if the sacrificed have to be young lives in particular, then it seems that this people ... is like a dragon that lives on by drinking the fresh blood of the young" (5).

as a collateral loss to the “quantitative” population rather than as the death of “qualitative” people, is indicative of modern biopolitics in the Capitalocene and its focus on manpower and humans as labor power capacity.¹⁵ Tawada directly points to this later in the essay when, quoting a speech from a documentary film in which a Japanese commanding officer prepares pilots for their imminent death, the text reads: “The only hope is to turn our *bodies* into *weapons* and hurl them at the enemy” (5, my emphasis), further underlining the politicization of the body as valued relative to its sacrificial service to the nation and empire. This discussion of differing conceptions of life’s value, as either politically or inherently meaningful, serves as a kind of starting point for explorations of life, biopolitics, and biopower within the recent context of Tawada’s writing.

The Body and Biopolitics in the Age of COVID-19

Viewing valuations of life during the COVID-19 pandemic, when medical, political and ethical decisions regarding who may live and who may die became everyday occurrences, it bears noting how (a small sample of) discussions of bare life, sovereignty, and biopolitics have played out in scholarly discourse during this time of safety measures, e.g., isolation and social distancing, and of course risk of infection. In the early months of the pandemic in 2020, Agamben himself unsurprisingly raised his voice in protest to the lockdown and isolation requirements introduced by authorities in Italy through a series of articles that would later be published together in book form as *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*. In these short essays and editorials reprinted from online

15 Foucault cites as a key characteristic of biopolitics the idea that from the 18th century European regimes no longer treated their citizens as subjects or even people, but rather as a population which required a totalizing approach to maintaining growth, health, fertility, and productivity. Examples of this operationalization of the population provided by Foucault are “birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation” (*The History of Sexuality Volume One* 25).

news sites, he strongly criticizes public health measures as representative of how the state of exception has become the norm for governmental legislative decrees (“The Invention of an Epidemic”). He ultimately distilled his criticism into the rhetorical question: “what is a society that has no other value than survival?” (“Clarifications” 18). This question might be rephrased as “is life as bare life worth living?” Agamben essentially answers this question during an interview with *Le Monde* when he asserts:

Fear is revealing many of the things we pretended not to see. The first is that our society believes in nothing beyond bare life. It is clear that Italians are ready to sacrifice practically everything—their normal life conditions, their social relationships, their work, even friendships ...—when faced with the danger of getting sick. But bare life is not something that unites people: it blinds and separates them. (“The State of Exception Has Become the Rule” 29)

While compatriot Sergio Benvenuto comprehensively rebutted Agamben’s short-sighted screeds that made light of the threat of COVID-19 and refuted the efficacy of measures recommended by scientific experts and health authorities (“Forget about Agamben”), others have extended the discourse on biopolitics during this pandemic, and have even made efforts to tie in pressing environmental issues that have been displaced from the media spotlight. Appearing shortly after Agamben’s text, Bruno Latour published a brief online reflection in *Critical Inquiry* titled “Is this a Dress Rehearsal?” (originally published in French in *Le Monde*), in which he hypothesizes that the health crisis is a preview to a climate crisis in the age of the Anthropocene. Emphasizing that the COVID pandemic is “no more a natural phenomenon than the famines of the past or the current climate crisis,” and that the pandemic may also show an analogous interconnectivity of physiological, environmental, legal, and medical issues (as well as governmental actors) involved in current and future climate matters, Latour is ultimately highlighting

how a failure to mobilize at the national and international levels to prevent or forestall the pandemic is an ominous harbinger (and catalyst) for the coming crisis of environmental collapse. The most prescient part of the analogy may prove to be how governments and the public have failed to heed experts' mathematical projections and calls for stricter safety measures; a failure which has led to, and prolonged, the crippling worldwide pandemic. Given that projections credibly speculating on numbers just a few months into the future, and that sacrifices which include staying home and not gathering in enclosed spaces, could not be followed or even believed, the non-visible, incremental, and even intergenerational deterioration of climate collapse may be an impossible case to sell to unreceptive political leaders and a self-serving public before it is too late.

A key point then linking the response to the COVID pandemic with the response (or lack thereof) to the pressing concerns of human-caused climate change is the issue of sacrifice. As opposed to the Promethean free-market optimists who see human innovation and our capacity to overcome current and impending climate problems through technological solutions—solutions which will eventually replace the world's fossil fuel based energy infrastructures with green and clean energy to allow the global production and distribution of goods to continue flowing—a sober and skeptical camp of environmental scholars is convinced that a much more radical, and challenging, answer to the problem is necessary. In order for substantive and lasting change to be made to the natural environment and earth's climate, real and uncomfortable sacrifice has to first be embraced as a shared value necessary for survival. For this to happen though, as Cheryl Hall points out in the chapter "Freedom, Values, and Sacrifice: Overcoming Obstacles to Environmentally Sustainable Behavior" from the collection *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice*, we must collectively agree to see "the sacrificed thing as less valuable than the thing for which it is sacrificed" (65). This means that for humans, especially those in the global north living

relatively affluent lives, to sacrifice a certain level of comfort and consumption they must first agree that the “objects” they possess and seek, and the way of life so central to modern living in capitalism, are, in fact, less valuable than human and non-human lives. The COVID-19 pandemic, as Latour highlighted in the article discussed above, was a kind of global dress rehearsal that has tested the extent to which people are willing to experience daily discomfort (wearing masks), inconvenience (consumer goods unavailable in stores, entertainment events canceled, social isolation), and financial precarity (income and job losses, businesses and corporations going bankrupt). Unsurprisingly, the results of this test to determine whether humans will sacrifice time, money, comfort, and convenience to protect themselves, and especially others, have been mixed. What also became apparent during the pandemic is that the longer sacrifice is required, and if it is imposed rather than volunteered, then its viability is significantly compromised. The “freedom convoys” in Canada and the United States, the violent protests in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and France, to name some of the more high-profile events, and the ubiquitous everyday individual demonstrations of resistance to mask mandates in the name of “freedom” that were constantly shared as video on social media, are compelling pieces of evidence that show us how quickly the ethics of self-sacrifice can transition into a pragmatics of sacrificing others.

Following Latour’s triangulation of the pandemic, biopolitics, and environmental issues, University of California at Davis professor Joshua Clover responded in *Critical Inquiry* to Latour’s piece by confirming some points but also amending and clarifying others. What he most notably adds to the discussion is that the callsign of modern capitalist biopolitics and its sovereign needs to be updated from Foucault’s adage “*make live and let die*,” to the more apt “*make work and let buy*” (Clover). The racial biopolitics of National Socialism referenced by Agamben in *Homo Sacer* and *Remains of Auschwitz* have morphed into the racist, classist,

ableist, and ageist biopolitics of today's capitalist economies—where politicians (at the federal and state levels in the US) are forced to (or more precisely, choose to in order to score political points) make the difficult decisions about who will die so that others, and most importantly the economy, may survive. Clover cites two of the more prominent and absurd examples of politicians (former president Donald Trump and Lt. Governor of Texas Dan Patrick) who, in the relatively early days of the pandemic, vocalized the need to re-open society so as to revive the economy. Over the course of 2020 though, numerous political figures at the state and federal levels made similar pleas for safety measures to be lifted so that the flow of capital could resume. Considering this was before any vaccine was available to the general public, they did so with the knowledge that this would lead to out-of-control infections and a significant number of deaths, especially among the elderly, those with pre-existing health issues, and those in the lowest socio-economic category.¹⁶ This complex biopolitical calculus underpinning how life is valued accentuates the fact that, as Clover suggests, the sovereign is no longer sovereign, but rather the economy is. He is ultimately demanding we recognize the disturbing reality that “capitalism, with its industrial body and crown of finance, is sovereign; that carbon emissions are the sovereign breathing; that *make work and let buy* must be annihilated; that there is no survival while the sovereign lives.” Absent this uncomfortable acknowledgement, we are ensuring that a far more consequential sacrifice of lifestyle, and lives, awaits us in the near future.

Clover's provocative contention that capitalism is the new sovereign for whom life must be sacrificed, and made sacred, can be traced back to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's works *Empire* and *Multitude*, which combine

16 In the United States, as of September, 2022, there have been over 93 million cases of COVID infection, and over 1 million COVID deaths. Worldwide there have been almost 600 million cases, and 6.46 million deaths. See WHO's online Coronavirus dashboard, which is a live tracker of up-to-date Covid cases and deaths worldwide.

political theory and philosophy to reframe Foucault's biopolitics within a Marxist perspective. For Negri and Hardt, the sovereign has been usurped by an international amalgam of governmental and non-governmental, for-profit and non-profit, entities which they describe as a form of biopower known as Empire. The COVID-19 pandemic may have served as the powerful accelerant that forced biopolitics into a stand-off with an inseparably intertwined global capitalist economy that cannot survive for long without the constant free flow of goods and people. Stated differently, for all the misery it has wrought, one of the most cynical byproducts of this pandemic is that it has led us to seriously question which side we support: the survival of life, and especially the lives of those most vulnerable to succumbing to COVID, or the survival of capitalism and the economy. At this point the discussion begins to cross into a quasi-eugenics field of biopolitical ethics and policies, as some observers have noted. For example, in an article titled "In the Time of Pandemic, the Deep Structure of Biopower Is Laid Bare," published in *Critical Inquiry's* series on the pandemic, Lennard Davis reveals how biopolitics underpin decisions regarding who will receive the limited access to resources (especially ventilators) and health care. While it seems unconscionable to explicitly state that one group (e.g., race, class, gender, sex) will be deprioritized with respect to this access, Davis highlights how this is exactly what has happened to disabled people in the United States. Citing cases in Washington state, Tennessee, and Alabama, Davis shows how political and medical decision-makers have made disability an obstacle to receiving equal access to health care resources since the long-term viability of their lives is already in question. Again, the COVID pandemic as stress test for the extent to which we are willing to sacrifice financially in order to save human lives meets its limit when those lives lack the longevity threshold and purchasing-power potential of younger, able-bodied lives.

This now leads us back to Agamben's sardonic question "what is a society

that has no other value than survival?” Based on what has happened over the course of two and a half years of the COVID-19 pandemic, when biopolitical calculations have publicly exposed how certain human lives are valued very differently from others, Agamben’s question might be more productively rephrased as “what is a society that does not accept survival as its primary value?” Taking into account the current and impending environmental collapse, the answer might read: a moribund society—one that fails to see it is expediting its ruin by deluding itself into believing that some life is worthier, or more sacred, than others—and that anything other than a commitment to the survival of life as sovereign is complicit in its self-destruction. This realization, in fact, links us back with “Choosing Between Life and Human,” which at its essence is a defense of all life and all human rights, and an acerbic criticism of the belief that life is positively valorized by its sacrificial service to the nation, or its ability to produce and consume within capitalist economies.

Yoko Tawada on Valuing, Devaluing, and Sacrificing, Life

Representations of the human body, interpreted from phenomenological and embodied, cultural and performative, and queer, gender, and racial theoretical perspectives, have occupied a central role in the fiction and non-fictional textual worlds of Yoko Tawada’s literary oeuvre. Bodies in Tawada’s texts morph, leak, grow scales, lose tongues, are read as text, become contaminated, and most recently, cheat death or die early. They are coded and read through disparate cultural lenses, and as I have argued above, they are valued differently depending on various physiological, political, and economic criteria. In the modern era of biopolitics, the maintenance, but also the management and operationalization, of bodies and life, is of central importance. In addition to, and complementary to, the discussion of bare life, sacrifice, and how life is valued in a biopolitical context, Yoko Tawada’s essay “Choosing Between Life and Human” is also a literary

studies exploration of how bodies and life are valued, devalued, and sacrificed in select modern Japanese novels and films. What links these novels and films together is, of course, their focus on ailing and failing bodies of the infirmed, but also more specific issues that are particularly pertinent to Japan, namely: Hansen's disease, the elderly, and the threat (and accusation) of being a burden on society. Given Japan's well-publicized demographic challenges, whereby an aging population is coupled with a dramatically shrinking birthrate, as well as the country's unsavory history with the treatment of those suffering from Hansen's disease (and in particular forced sterilization of the afflicted), it is unsurprising that Tawada would explore these topics in her recent texts that often address the valuation and devaluation of human life. The discussion of life suffering from debilitating disease and degenerative aging that is represented in select modern Japanese novels and films, moreover, can be identified elsewhere in Tawada's fictional texts, such as the novel *The Last Children of Tokyo* and the short story "The Island of Eternal Life."¹⁷ I will therefore end this brief exploration of how life is valued, devalued, and sacrificed within a biopolitical historical and conceptual framework by connecting relevant parts of Tawada's texts to this broader discussion.

As a relatively current human rights and biopolitical ethics issue, Yoko Tawada has recently explored the social impact of discrimination against those suffering from Hansen's disease (formerly known as leprosy) in Japan. Japan's Leprosy Prevention laws (1907, 1931, 1953) legalized the segregation,

17 *The Last Children of Tokyo*, translated by Margaret Mitsutani and published by Portobello Books in the UK, is one of two official English translations of Tawada's novel *Kentoshi*. This novel was also published in English as *The Emissary* by New Directions in the US. The short story "The Island of Eternal Life" was published in a collection called *March Was Made of Yarn: Writers Respond to Japan's Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Meltdown* from 2012. This collection features works by other well-known Japanese authors like Yoko Ogawa, Mieko Kawakami, and Ryu Murakami.

isolation, and forced sterilization of people suffering from Hansen's disease, and it was not until 1996 that these practices came to an end upon the law's repeal. Sterilizations, which were carried out with increasing frequency after 1953 when the Ministry of Health accelerated its eugenic operations to address "concerns about overpopulation and a supposed deterioration of the quality of children being born" (Amy and Rowlands 126), were performed on patients afflicted with a range of psychiatric, and genetic and non-genetic conditions. These sterilizations could be legally performed against the patient's will, sometimes with the use of restraints and deception, which of course made them easier to conduct. And while Japan was by no means unique in its dehumanizing treatment and negative eugenics' initiatives against people suffering from various conditions, it bears noting that between 1949 and 1994, 11,356 women and 5,164 men were sterilized in Japan (Amy and Rowlands 126). Those suffering from Hansen's disease were subject to social stigmatization, as well as forced isolation and even sterilization, to an extent incomparable to other diseases and conditions. Because of the uniquely discriminatory treatment they endured, Hansen's disease patients have featured in a number of modern Japanese novels and films, and it is this cultural output that Tawada addresses in "Choosing Between Life and Human."

One novella she discusses that is particularly germane to the discussion of how life is, or ought to be, valued is *Life's First Night* (*Inochi no shoya*) from 1936 by Tamio Hojo, an author who suffered from, and wrote about, Hansen's disease until his death in 1937 at age 23.¹⁸ This novel depicts a fictionalized account of

18 In this paper I only discuss one of the literary and film texts that Tawada explores in her essay. The others that she includes are the film *An* by Naomi Kawase which deals with a Hansen's disease sufferer; the novel *Ningen shikkaku* (translated as *No Longer Human* and *A Shameful Life*) by Osamu Dazai; the novel *The Crab Cannery Ship* by Takiji Kobayashi; and the novel *The Ballad of Narayama* by Shichiro Fukazawa. Tawada highlights how these three novels examine opposing ideas of life and human, and especially with respect to the third novel, how sacrifice and the threat of being a social burden weighs on the elderly.

life at a leprosorium clinic, and even though, as Hojo's translator Kathryn M. Tanaka points out in "'Life's First Night' and the Treatment of Hansen's Disease in Japan," the text communicates, to a certain extent, the protagonist's attempt to regain some humanity and resist the state's heavy-handed biopower, it also effectively captures the devaluation of life experienced by Hansen's disease patients forced to live and die in social isolation. One scene in particular from the novella is quoted at length in Tawada's essay because it effectively illustrates the tension and contrast between being human (*ningen*) and life (*inochi*) explored earlier in this paper. During a discussion between two Hansen's disease patients, Saeki and Oda, who live in social isolation at a leprosorium clinic, we read the following explanation of what life becomes when one is afflicted with this disease:

"They're not human. It's life. Only *life*, life just as that.... The 'human' in these people has already died. All it is, is life, flickering life. What persistence! The moment a person gets leprosy, their humanness perishes. It dies. It's not just that his humanness as a social being dies. It's certainly not such a shallow death. It's not a crippled soldier. It's a crippled person. But, Oda-san, we're phoenixes. When we ... completely accept the life of lepers, then we are revived as human. Revival ... A flickering, living life has attained a physical body.... Oda-san, now you're dead. And being dead, you're not human." (8)

Despite the fact that they are relatively healthy both physically and mentally, their categorization as "lepers" and the social stigmatization it carries means that they live as *bare life*, "disqualified as a human" as Tawada later states (9), and thus they inhabit, through their physical and conceptual alienation, an interstitial space between death and living as a person. For those with Hansen's disease, their identity as human is supplanted by their identity as diseased and contagious. Even their identities as individuals with a name, family, and personal history—or in other words, who they were before entering the clinic—were often abandoned because

patients were “encouraged to adopt a hospital name upon admission, to both hide their own past and to protect their families from the stigma of the disease” (Tanaka 10). Against their will, and regardless of the extent of their physical decline, these patients become the victims of a biopower that sacrifices their “humanness” to protect the national body.

The connection of the above description of devalued life from Tamio Hojo’s *Life’s First Night* with Agamben’s development of *bare life*, and also *zoē* and *bios* (as the *excluded* and *included*, respectively; or the “biological body” and the “political body”) is fairly self-evident, yet a different discussion that Agamben introduces towards the end of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is particularly germane to the excerpt from the novella that Tawada quotes in her essay. In the book’s final section called “The Camp as Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern,” Agamben cites Primo Levi’s description of the *Musselmann* (a term for a particular type of Nazi concentration camp inmate) from “The Drowned and the Saved” essay, and reads this camp prisoner as exemplary of an interstitial existence (akin to that of the homo sacer himself discussed earlier in this paper) that is both inside and outside of what defines us as human.¹⁹ The *Musselmann*, a name which is believed to derive from “Muslim,” is an extreme example, even by the unprecedented conditions of a Nazi concentration camp, of a prisoner who has lost all social, political, and individual identity—he is bare life personified. These veteran camp inmates have seen the horror of extermination, they know their fate, and they have physically and mentally disintegrated to the point that other inmates pay them no attention, and even isolate them because they are contaminated with

19 Agamben discusses the significance of the *Musselmänner* in connection to his development of the term bare life in both *Homo Sacer* and *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Although there are different accounts of how this term came into use, some have written that, due to the physical and mental deterioration of some inmates, these emaciated and hopeless figures would kneel on the ground in a prayer-like pose looking for food, and it was this pose that other inmates equated with Muslim prayer.

the specter of impending death. They embody bare life, in Agamben's description, insofar as they are alive yet no longer human. All inmates in the camps were stripped of their citizenship, their belongings, their individuality, and often their families, but the *Musselmann* exists without those things plus any semblance of social, political, or emotional "humanness." In Levi's words, the *Musselmänner* comprise "an anonymous mass ... of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them ... One hesitates to call them living" (103). There is an enormous distance between the dehumanizing and murderous logic of the Nazi camps during World War II and the clinics that housed and treated Hansen's disease in Japan in the 20th century; however, there is a point of intersection when we consider how political leaders, medical practitioners, and a receptive public collaborated to stigmatize, alienate, isolate, and ultimately dehumanize people until they lost any sense of what it is to be human, and so resigned to exist as bare life until expiring. Tawada even suggests that absconding from what it means to be a socially or politically defined human (e.g., living as a *hikikomori* or refusing to sacrifice one's life for the nation) may be interpreted as a kind of survival technique and resistance to politically and socially determined expectations of "humanness" ("Choosing Between Life and Human" 9). The issue concerning Hansen's disease patients though that Tawada considers in her essay is also the issue of biopower: targeting a group of humans due to their medical condition, isolating that group physically and conceptually from the population in the name of public safety and under the guise of "medical treatment," regardless of the severity of the condition or better alternatives, and essentially rendering these lives as irredeemably inhuman; as bare life unworthy of the right to live as a human, subject to lifelong isolation and even forced sterilization. When life as a "human" becomes contingent on its social or political value—on its ability to serve the nation, fulfill its role in producing and consuming within the Capitalocene, or contribute to the perpetuation and hygienic maintenance of the

national body—then the “right” to be human is undermined. Tawada essentially sums up the essay’s ethical thesis on life in the era of biopolitics with: “What I want from politics and government is not the defense of life, but the defense of human rights” (11).

Building on the topic of life and/as human, but also transforming it to meet the changing context of anthropogenic climate change and environmental contamination, Yoko Tawada’s recent post 3.11 fiction has explored the issue of afflicted bodies and the value of human life as a malleable and contingent construct. *The Last Children of Tokyo* (2017), which is essentially an expansion of topics and themes developed earlier in the short story “The Island of Eternal Life” (2012), is Tawada’s first novel-length literary attempt to intertwine into a single narrative environmental issues, biopolitical issues, and the issue of valuing, devaluing, and sacrificing human (as well as non-human) life. Set in a fictional post nuclear disaster Japan—a disaster which has contaminated the majority of Honshu, and which has contaminated human bodies so that the elderly cannot die, and young people cannot live beyond their teens—this novel’s dystopian vision for a contaminated and (physically, politically, and economically) isolated Japan poses provocative questions regarding the health, viability, and survival of the country’s population. In fact, the management and operationalization of Japan’s population in a biopolitical context is an issue that appears throughout the novel. The country is cut off from the rest of the world in nearly every way that matters: there is no immigration nor emigration; there is no in-bound nor out-bound tourism; no information may leave or enter the country (no access to online news, domestic news is controlled by the government, no postal mail); and, no goods are imported or exported. In this environmentally, socially, politically, and economically transformed Japan, prefectures that had been historically considered economically and socially depressed (relative to the Kanto and Kansai areas), like Hokkaido, Tohoku, and Okinawa, are now the country’s desired locations

due to their “fertility” for growing desperately needed fruits, vegetables, and grains. However, in a manner as similarly uninviting as the country’s current policies towards accepting refugees, these suddenly “desirable” prefectures close their borders to the internal “disaster” refugees seeking to find a safer and more abundant life outside of Honshu and Kyushu. Describing Hokkaido, the text states: “Although the population of Hokkaido had long been considered too small for such a large expanse of land, when an expert in population issues from Asahikawa concluded that the current population was actually ideally suited to the land area, the local government decided not to increase the population” (46). Okinawa (which the text later reveals is again known as Ryukyu) is an even more sought-after destination for those trying to escape Honshu, so its government enacts a more explicitly biopolitical policy to control its population. Afraid of a population explosion of single male laborers, measures are introduced:

To prevent this, it was decided that people who wanted to work on farms in Okinawa had to apply as married couples. Single women could apply as well as same-sex couples, both male and female, but applications from single men were not accepted. Exceptions were made for single women who had a sex change operation after they became residents; they were allowed to stay as single men.... Because the government didn’t want immigrants to have children once they’d moved to Okinawa, women over the age of fifty-five and men who had had vasectomies were preferred. (47)

These excerpts convey the exclusionary policies and specific biological requirements which give policy makers a hand in determining the demographic numbers, and, to a certain extent, some of the biological characteristics (i.e., racial types) for the future population of the two prefectures. In these brief but information-rich lines, the text points to: matters concerning the manipulation of fertility rates by favoring women who could no longer bear children and men who were physically unable to procreate; the issue of policy-making based on

life expectancy, and; state-determined preferences for certain biological body types. The “immigrants” referenced above, of course, were Japanese but from other prefectures; the elderly, in a departure from current standards, are preferred due to their inability to have children. However, it is really their bodies that the policy-makers are after, as they are physically robust in comparison to the weak and moribund youth, and thus they can perform the physical labor required in Okinawan farming. And it is not only the explicit biopolitical operationalization of human bodies that we witness in this text, but also, within the suddenly and substantially transformed natural environment, there is a concomitant mutation of how human life is valued. While it was once the youth who were highly valued for their potential to carry the nation forward economically, politically, and culturally, they are now a social burden dependent on the financial, emotional, and physical support of the aged.

Finally, it is this dichotomy the novel establishes between the physical health and social utility of the elderly versus the bodily deterioration and social burden of the youth that needs examining in order to understand its ecological and ethical message within the context of contemporary biopolitics. Although the text does not clearly state the causes, it implies that human bodies have become altered due to radioactive contamination from a nuclear disaster, to the extent that the elderly continue living well into their hundreds (no indication is given as to what age is now considered nearing the end of life) while young people cannot live past their teenage years. The text is rife with examples of what ails young bodies: their weakened digestive system prevents them from eating various kinds of foods necessary for vitality; their fragile teeth make it difficult to chew most foods; their bodies are constantly feverish so that no one uses thermometers anymore; their bodies gradually degrade to the point that teenagers require a wheelchair for mobility; and the list goes on. Given the current demographic predicament facing Japan in reality, which will continue on its trajectory unless

significant demographic interventions are enacted, it is difficult to overlook how the novel's role reversal of the valuation of the elderly and the young might cause readers to reflect on how we value, and devalue, human lives based primarily on criteria related to productivity and profitability. It is not, however, a reversal that is welcomed by the novel's elderly. One of its two protagonists, an elderly man named Yoshiro, who is into his 110s and raising his great-grandchild Mumei, an elementary school boy, repeatedly expresses his exasperation for the responsibility of taking care of the young, but also his dread at watching the young perish. Moreover, in a moment illustrative of his dismay, he laments his interminable life with "Being able to see the end of anything gave him a tremendous sense of relief. As a child he had assumed the goal of medicine was to keep bodies alive forever; he had never considered the pain of not being able to die" (55). Suddenly, as a result of the unintended consequences of human-caused environmental desecration, there is a reordering in the hierarchy of human value, and essentially a reversal of who will be saved and who will be sacrificed.

Ultimately, the questions of "how do we value life?" and "what, or whom, do we sacrifice?" in the current epoch of the Anthropocene (or Capitalocene, if you prefer) lie at the center of this novel's themes (which is also true of other recent texts by Tawada). In its macabre representation of a moribund youth, who are contaminated from birth, whose bodies are programmed to degrade unnaturally fast, and who are sentenced to life without a future, the text makes the cynical but convincing argument that our current and continued actions towards the earth represent a kind of sacrifice of our children. These "last children of Tokyo" are the products of an unrelenting exploitation of the natural environment and an unstoppable contamination of earth systems, both of which are key factors in ushering in the Anthropocene. The Earth in this novel is even in a quasi-state of revolt, and this revolt is most concretely exemplified by how food, as sustenance for life and source of joy, has become an adversary to young people like Mumei.

Fruits like mandarin oranges, kiwis, and lemons are impossible to eat for various reasons related to digestion and discomfort; vegetables cause heartburn and dizziness (45); bread causes gums to bleed (100); and any living creature that comes from the ocean is likely to be teeming with poison. And since there are no cows, milk for infants must be human breast milk; however, “Breast milk contained, along with its life-giving nutrients, a high concentration of poison” (73). The parents, or in other words, the older generations, are responsible for creating life and sustaining it, but also for contaminating life once it begins. This caustic judgement squares with the overarching motif of “intergenerational theft” — a term deployed by environmental scholar Rob Nixon in his impactful book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* to describe the protracted yet devastating damage of older previous generations on those to come—which is depicted throughout this novel. In its concluding scene, Mumei, along with another wheel-chair bound teenager, roll down to the sea and fling themselves in. Trying, but unable, to smile, the youth in this novel sacrifice themselves—although they have already been sacrificed by the preceding generations—and are finally consumed by the Earth that they had no hand in destroying.

Conclusion: Towards a Revaluation of Value and Sacrifice

The 2022 Japanese film *Plan 75*, written and directed by Chie Hayakawa, presents a near future vision of Japan where one possible solution to the country’s aging population and associated social troubles is depicted.²⁰ In this uncannily

20 The plot of *Plan 75* bears some resemblance to the 1976 American film *Logan’s Run*, which represents a disturbing dystopian vision of life in 2274. In order to preserve limited resources, upon turning 30 years of age people are murdered. Apart from some of the obvious differences (time, place, and voluntary/involuntary aspect of the solution), what is most notable about *Plan 75* in comparison to *Logan’s Run* is how near and real it is; it is almost difficult to call it a “dystopian” vision because it is so easy to imagine this state-sponsored sacrifice of human lives as a viable solution to the issue of an aging population.

realistic vision, the Japanese government has created a program to relieve the country of its financial and emotional burden by offering people age 75 and over the opportunity to be voluntarily and painlessly euthanized at a state-run facility. Positive incentives are rolled out with Plan 75 to attract more elderly: they are given ¥100,000 to make their final weeks more comfortable; their home and belongings are cleaned and managed by the government following their death; and their bodies are cremated and disposed of without any ceremony, which means no need to burden family members with investments in cost, time, and mourning. Negative incentives, however, are also necessary to motivate those who are indecisive about signing up for their own death: park benches are fitted with metal inserts (ostensibly arm rests located in the center of the bench) so that homeless or otherwise destitute elderly cannot sleep on them; Plan 75 recruitment sites are set up next to outdoor soup kitchens for the hungry and needy (who are often the elderly); and, the elderly are forced to retire from their jobs, which, for those without family or savings, pushes them towards the desperate act of state-sponsored suicide. Plan 75 is presented as a humane solution to removing the burden on, and of, the elderly from an aging Japanese society. Yet it is mainly those without the financial means to continue living who are targeted by this initiative: women whose husbands have long since passed; those without savings and little to no pension; and, those without children. These people become disposable in a society in which value is a malleable and contingent construct, and where sacrificing the lives of people whose value has depreciated becomes a socially accepted, and even widely embraced, policy of modern biopolitics.

We can read *Plan 75's* message of devaluing human lives to the extent that they become expendable, and therefore ready for (self)sacrifice, in dialogue with the above discussion of biopolitics, bare life, and Yoko Tawada's essay on choosing between life and human. Though the contexts are divergent, there is a productive congruence between seemingly disparate representations of "life"

(as bare life, contaminated life, sacred life) and contemporary ideas of value and sacrifice (what, or whom, is sacrificed, and why?) that need to be considered within environmental and economic frameworks. These texts initiate reflection on a number of weighty issues in today's biopolitical regimes of the Anthropocene—from the devaluation of the lives of the elderly who have been deemed expendable due to their diminishing returns as a high cost/low profit drain on society, to the devaluation of people suffering from Hansen's disease who were forced into social isolation where they lived in the interstices between death and being a person, to the devaluation of the lives of the younger generation, whose future is being sacrificed in order to save our current sovereign (capitalism and the cult of consumption and growth)—the uncomfortable conversation about sacrifice during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered other, equally consequential, discussions of how life ought to be defended, or sacrificed, moving forward. Tawada's texts are not, in fact, asking us to make a choice between "life" and "human," as the title of the essay may suggest. This essay, as well as some of her fictional and non-fictional texts published in the last decade, highlights how ecological and economic factors inform, but also compromise, the development of a positive and productive politics and ethics of sacrifice necessary for confronting the perilous challenges of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene.

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