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# The bled ones: Biopolitical framings and scenes of interpellation in photographs from the Rockefeller Collection

*Os sangrados: Enquadramentos biopolíticos e cenas de interpelação em fotografias do Fundo Rockefeller**Los sangrados: Encuadres biopolíticos y escenas de interpelación en fotografías del Fondo Rockefeller*

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**Abstract**

The article examines photographs produced by the Rockefeller Foundation during health campaigns in Brazil (1930s–1940s), focusing on images of the “bled ones.” This qualitative, archival study identifies them not merely as technical records but as scenes of interpellation that reveal agency, astuteness and self-fashioning of those portrayed. The methodology combines social history, visual analysis, and theoretical approaches from Judith Butler, Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt, and Jacques Rancière. The discussion shows how these images, although inscribed in a biopolitical logic, display resistances and gestures that escape sanitary control. Results indicate that such photographs establish alternative scenes of appearance, enabling critical readings of the relationship between power, body, and visibility. The conclusion is that, even under coercion, subjectivities emerge that displace the exemplary function of the archive and open gaps for fabulations and alternative histories of epidemics.

**Keywords:** Photography; archives; biopolitics; critical fabulation.**Resumo**

O artigo analisa fotografias produzidas pela Fundação Rockefeller durante campanhas sanitárias no Brasil (1930–1940), com foco nas imagens dos “sangrados”. A pesquisa, de base qualitativa e documental, identifica nelas não apenas registros técnicos, mas cenas de interpelação que revelam agência, astúcia e auto-elaboração dos fotografados. A metodologia combina história social, análise visual e referenciais teóricos de Judith Butler, Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt e Jacques Rancière. A discussão mostra como as imagens, embora inscritas em uma lógica biopolítica, evidenciam processos de resistência e gestos que escapam ao estrito controle sanitário. Os resultados apontam que essas fotografias instauram cenas de aparência, habilitando outras leituras sobre a relação entre poder, corpo e visibilidade. Conclui-se que, mesmo sob coerção, emergem subjetividades que deslocam a função exemplificadora do arquivo e abrem-se brechas para fabulações e outras histórias das epidemias.

**Palavras-chave:** Fotografia; arquivos; biopolítica; fabulação crítica.

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## Resumen

El artículo analiza fotografías producidas por la Fundación Rockefeller durante campañas sanitarias en Brasil (1930–1940), con énfasis en las imágenes de los “sangrados”. La investigación, de base cualitativa y documental, las identifica no solo como registros técnicos, sino como escenas de interpelación que revelan agencia, astucia y auto-fabricación de los retratados. La metodología combina historia social, análisis visual y referencias teóricas de Butler, Hartman, Camp y Rancière. La discusión muestra cómo las imágenes, aunque inscritas en una lógica biopolítica, evidencian resistencias y gestos que escapan al control sanitario. Los resultados señalan que estas fotografías instauran otras escenas de apariencia, permitiendo lecturas críticas sobre la relación entre poder, cuerpo y visualidad. Se concluye que, incluso bajo coerción, emergen subjetividades que desplazan la función ejemplificadora del archivo y abren fisuras para fabulaciones y otras historias de las epidemias.

**Palabras clave:** Fotografía; archivos; biopolítica; fabulación crítica.

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## Introduction

A surprise, Arlette Farge (2009) reminds us, speaks of the act of surprising: of displacing the gaze, disrupting evidence, and breaking narratives. Archival research, she argues, must be conducted with an openness to the unexpected, avoiding the traps of tautological arguments and prior identifications. In the author's words: "this game of mirrors blocks the imagination, immobilizes intelligence and curiosity, leaving [the researcher] confined to narrow and stifling paths. To identify oneself is to anesthetize the document and the understanding one might have of it" (Farge, 2009, p. 72). This manner of handling an object is also what Jean-Luc Moriceau (2019) advocates in academic practice. As he postulates, good research should function like a trail (rather than a highway), where new paths are discovered and surprises are more likely.

This article stems from doctoral research on images produced in the context of yellow fever and influenza epidemics in Brazil, focusing on the photographic records of the Rockefeller Foundation's activities during the 1930s and 1940s. From the extensive corpus analyzed, I concentrate here on what most deviated from the established pattern – beyond the photographs of diseased bodies, relief teams, or landscapes framed under the sign of danger – I refer to the images of the bled ones (sangrados). Produced mostly in the interior of the state of Goiás, these photographs depict individuals identified as "blood donors" or "groups of sangrados."

The term *sangrado* caused me, from the outset, a sense of estrangement. What does it mean to be "bled" in the context of an epidemic? Investigation revealed that the practice related both to the collection of blood samples and the production of vaccines from human serum, as reported by José Fonseca Cunha (1999), a physician for the Rockefeller Foundation. These procedures, however, did not occur peacefully: accounts by Cunha himself and by Ilana Löwy (1994) evidence the resistance of local populations to sanitary missions, which involved coercion, surveillance, and punishment. Encountering this material was a methodological surprise that redesigned the very scope of the research.

Throughout this article, I propose a reading of some of these images. I start from the hypothesis that these photographs do not merely illustrate a historical process, but are scenes of interpellation – in the sense developed by Judith Butler (2015) – in which it becomes possible to glimpse gestures, gazes, and bodies that do not allow themselves to be fully captured by the frames of power. Concurrently, I also employ the notions of critical fabulation in Saidiya Hartman (2020, 2022), self-fashioning in Tina Campt (2017), and the politics of appearances in Jacques Rancière (2021).

Thus, the problem guiding this investigation lies in the tension between the documentary-administrative function of the Rockefeller Foundation's photographs and the irruption of subjectivities that overflow such framings. I question: in what way does the archive, conceived as a tool for biopolitical control and sanitary typification, harbor fissures where the body of the bled one becomes the subject of a scene of appearance? The objective is, therefore, to investigate how agency – understood here not as full autonomy, but as a relational and communicational positioning that alters the dramaturgy of the record – materializes in gestures and refusals that challenge the institutional visuality of sanitary campaigns.

I organize the analysis into two main movements: first, I focus on a more contextual debate, presenting the general lines of the Rockefeller Foundation's operations in the country, as well as some of the procedures adopted in the context of sanitary expeditions; subsequently, I present a set of images that potentially challenge previous interpretive schemes and hierarchical forms of typifying reality. In doing so, I seek to offer a twofold contribution: a historical study focused on photographs taken during the Rockefeller Foundation's sanitary expeditions, and a theoretical-methodological perspective that positions itself against the police order of archives.

### Bleeding and viscerotomy in the context of sanitary expeditions

The Rockefeller Foundation arrived in Brazil in 1916 on a mission to investigate the possibilities of implementing a program to combat yellow fever, in addition to diseases such as syphilis, tuberculosis, malaria, and hookworm, in both urban and rural areas. In 1923, the Foundation incorporated the Yellow Fever Prophylaxis Service in cooperation with the National Department of Public Health (DNSP). The Service carried out a series of research and prophylactic actions against the disease, which took shape through the expeditions of medical teams across Brazil.

The Foundation's insertion into the country occurred within the context of increased state interventions in public health and a growing nationalism, in which health was becoming a political issue (Hochman, 1998; Santos, 1989). Within this scope, the "salvation" of the country resided in the expansion of sanitary campaigns



which, until then, had only taken place in urban areas. In the words of Santos (1989, p. 106), “the sanitary movement demanded an intense campaign for the redemption of the rural man, for the ‘eugenic’ improvement of man and of the ‘Brazilian race.’” Thus, as Lima and Hochman (2000) argue, Rockefeller arrived in Brazil to establish sanitary programs that would help “overcome” Monteiro Lobato’s Jeca Tatu<sup>1</sup>, in alignment with the precepts of eugenics.

The Foundation’s actions were part of a bacteriological and hygienist tradition already prevalent in Brazil – exemplified by Oswaldo Cruz’s campaign at the beginning of the 20th century. In general terms, the negotiations between Brazilians and North Americans were marked by trust and distrust, accommodation and tension, and both harmonious and hostile coexistence (Kobayashi; Faria; Costa, 2009). These ambivalences also marked the relationship that the Foundation established with the people and spaces where it operated, especially in the context of the campaigns.

**Figure 1** - Group of blood donors



Source: Fundo Rockefeller – Casa de Oswaldo Cruz.

The images of the bled ones were produced between 1935 and 1944 and refer to the incursions of medical teams during sanitary campaigns, involving the detection of mosquito breeding sites, the performance of viscerotomies, mass vaccination, and the monitoring of the immunological conditions of the populations. Generally, these consist of a set of frontal portraits of groups or individuals posing in front of their homes or workplaces. They are referred to in the captions as “bled ones” or “blood donors”, and most of the images were taken by the medical team. It is interesting to note how the term “*sangrado*” divests the subjects of agency: they undergo an action; their blood is sucked, confiscated, extracted. In turn, the term “donor” restores agency and even establishes an aura of recognition for a noble gesture: that of donating, of offering a gift (*dom*), a boon (*dádiva*). There is an ambiguity inscribed within these two ways of naming.

Certainly, the bleeding (*sangria*) performed in the context of the images presented here refers to the monitoring of people’s immunological conditions. According to Cunha (1999), those who donated plasma for vaccine production were generally guards from the National Yellow Fever Service, summoned once or twice a year. Regarding the bleedings performed during sanitary missions, these were commonly carried out amidst

<sup>1</sup> Jeca Tatu is a character who became a symbol for the representation of the rural inhabitant in Brazil. Initially, Lobato portrayed him as an indolent man, resigned to his life. This perspective aligned with a social diagnosis that associated poverty and “backwardness” with laziness. However, Lobato later revised this interpretation as he drew closer to the sanitarian ideas of the early 20th century. Influenced by public health campaigns, he began to argue that Jeca Tatu’s condition was not a matter of his nature, but of his health: “The Jeca is not [essentially] this way; he is [circumstantially] this way.” From this perspective, Jeca Tatu is transformed by adhering to medical sciences and hygiene, becoming productive, prosperous, and even a sanitary educator (Lima & Hochman, 2000).

a certain level of resistance. In an interview, Cunha describes some of the difficulties faced by the medical team:

We vaccinated people in groups. There were a thousand and some, divided by age: from zero to four years old, five to nine, ten to 14, 14 to 19, twenty to 29, 29 and up. These different groups were vaccinated via intramuscular, subcutaneous, and intradermal routes. Other groups were vaccinated with five hundred particles, a thousand virus particles, and so on. At the end of thirty days, we received the venules and went to re-bleed the same people. Six months later, we returned to Pouso Alegre to bleed the same people. That's when things started to get complicated. We would arrive at someone's house where five people had been vaccinated and find everything closed up. After half an hour of knocking, we would give up, but when we walked fifty or a hundred meters and looked back, the windows and doors were crowded with people. Those people were fed up with being the bled ones (Cunha, 1999, n.p.).

On another occasion, the physician describes an anecdote involving a young man who, when faced with the possibility of having his blood drawn, claimed to feel weak:

Now, there were complaints. The first was that the fellow felt weak: "Ah, I'm already so weak, and you're going to take my blood..." I remember, for instance, an occasion when we were traveling along a road and a man was coming toward us carrying a dead jaguar on his back. We stopped the man, because he was a prime candidate to be a bled one! He said: "Ah, doctor, no, I'm very weak, doctor..." (laughter) "You are weak? You are carrying a jaguar on your back!" "No, I'm not healthy, I'm very anemic." But we ended up taking the blood sample (Cunha, 1999, n.p.).

Löwy (1999) also describes the practices of resistance to the blood collection process—stating, in fact, that coercive measures were necessary, such as the arrest of those who led the opposition. According to the author, resistance to the practice was framed by physicians as a product of "superstition" or the "backwardness" of local populations. This process appears closely aligned with the experiences in the country during the Vaccine Revolt (*Revolta da Vacina*), when, in 1904, the population of Rio de Janeiro rose against the regulation of the law that made the smallpox vaccine mandatory. According to Chalhoub (2018), the revolt took place within a context of long-standing distrust toward public hygiene officials, who were commonly backed by the police apparatus. Let us recall that the process of quelling an epidemic was often accompanied by forced disinfections, the isolation of the sick, evictions, and the demolition of tenements (*cortiços*) and poor dwellings<sup>2</sup>.

Beyond the bleedings, the detection of yellow fever included the practice of viscerotomy, which consisted of removing liver fragments from recently deceased individuals. This collection, performed by physicians, pharmacists, gravediggers, or municipal employees, was sent to histopathology laboratories where a diagnosis was determined: "yellow fever", "negative for yellow fever", or "probably positive". In the latter case, the team needed to return to the site of the death to gather new information – some of the photographs from the Rockefeller Collection record precisely these return visits.

As Löwy (1999) analyzes, the practice of viscerotomy also faced significant resistance from local populations. Yellow fever prophylaxis policy in Brazil mandated rigorous disease control measures, particularly through the surveillance of water reservoirs and sanitation in areas considered at risk. The decree, however, also institutionalized coercive devices such as fines, restrictions on movement, and the prohibition of burials without prior authorization from an agent of the Viscerotomy Service. Far from pacifying the sanitary field, such measures intensified conflicts. The requirement to extract liver fragments to confirm a diagnosis was widely perceived as a violation of the body and was frequently circumvented. Cunha (1999) reports that, on several occasions, health teams received, instead of human livers, samples from the organs of dogs, goats, oxen, and pigs – a fraud only identified later in the laboratory.

<sup>2</sup> For a more robust debate on new historiographical interpretations of the Vaccine Revolt, see the third part of *Cidade Febril* [Febrile City] by Sidney Chalhoub (2018).



These acts of resistance were not merely symbolic: in some cases, the tension culminated in open confrontations, including the murder of sanitary agents (Cunha, 1999; Löwy, 1994; Löwy, 1999). Beyond explicit refusal, other strategies were mobilized by families: clandestine burials, improvised interments, and negotiations with local gravediggers. Such practices reveal not only the clash between a centralized public policy and the cultural codes of the affected populations but also the way these populations employed tactics to maintain a degree of autonomy over the fate of their bodies, even amidst the institutional siege and sanitary surveillance. By challenging the legitimacy of the technical-scientific gaze upon the dead body, these episodes call into question the State's claim to fully regulate the boundaries between life, death, and dignity, exposing the fractures of a biopolitics that intended to be totalizing.

Furthermore, the relationship between rural populations and the Rockefeller Foundation team cannot be described in strictly conflictual terms. Although many episodes of resistance to sanitary practices were recorded, accounts such as those of Cunha (1999) also indicate that the vaccination process, for example, was widely accepted in various locations. This ambivalence is fundamental to understanding the ways in which sanitary power operated in the field: at times facing refusal and distrust, and at others establishing localized forms of adherence and negotiation. Löwy (1994) highlights, for instance, the cunning of the health agents themselves, who, aware of the opposition, went so far as to tell locals that the sanitary measures had the support of religious figures of great popular prestige, such as Padre Cícero<sup>3</sup>, Cunha also mentions direct coordination with local healers (*curandeiros*) as a recurring resource to ensure adherence to the campaigns.

I made use of the healers (*curandeiros*), who were very common in the interior. In many places, I utilized the services of the healers because they had much more credibility with the people than I did. If they said, "Don't vaccinate," I guarantee you that no one would have been vaccinated (Cunha, 1999, n.p.).

The testimony highlights how biomedical authority, far from being imposed unilaterally, depended on the intermediation of traditional knowledge and leadership to achieve effectiveness. These occasional alliances, marked by informality and everyday pragmatics, underscore the porosity of the sanitary modernization project.

Furthermore, despite formal restrictions on clinical practice during the missions, the physician reports that biomedical activity sometimes exceeded mere epidemiological surveillance. Minor surgeries, childbirth assistance, and abscess drainage were performed spontaneously in response to the population's immediate demands. Such practices reiterate that the Rockefeller Foundation's field of activity was shaped relationally, adjusting to local contingencies, established bonds of trust, and social expectations regarding the physician's role. Instead of a strict antagonism between technical imposition and resistance, what is observed is a field marked by ambiguities, negotiations, and circumstantial alliances – aspects that are also reflected in the images produced within the of these campaigns, which will be examined more closely in the next section.

### Agency and self-fashioning in the images of the Rockefeller Foundation

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler (2015) defines the scene of interpellation as that which enables the account one gives of oneself. Giving an account of oneself is not about telling a story about oneself, but refers to the ways in which the subject enunciates themselves, defining a kind of ethical scene. According to the author, an account is always a response to a demand made by an other, and it only becomes concrete when elaborated through dispossession – that is, the expropriation of the "protected domain" of subjectivity. In her terms: "in giving an account of oneself, the subject establishes or does not establish a relationship to the one to whom the account is addressed, and the two parts of the interlocution are sustained and altered by the scene of interpellation" (Butler, 2015, p. 70). Within this framework, the subject negotiates with a set of norms, codes, and prescriptions and is constituted therein – which means that there is no creation of self outside the norms that orchestrate the forms the subject can assume.

By observing the set of images of the bled ones, it is possible to perceive that these photographs do not merely register bodies but expose subjects in a process of negotiation with the norms that interpellate them. The photographic scene functions, in these cases, as a space of summons and response: those

<sup>3</sup> Padre Cícero was a Brazilian Catholic priest, politician, and religious leader, widely known in the Northeast region, especially in Ceará. Born in 1844 in Crato (CE), he is an iconic figure of popular Catholicism and is considered a saint by his devotees.



photographed appear before the camera, often with stiffened postures, tense countenances, or averted gazes (as in figure 1), composing ways of appearing that tension the codes of submission and docility usually expected in administrative records. If the caption names them “blood donor” or “bled one” – that is, if the apparatus seeks to reduce their appearance to the status of specimens of a governmentalized population – the bodies in the images frequently escape such strict framing. We can think that, in their small gestural inflections, in the way they position themselves or respond to the lens, a relational dimension emerges that translates the effort to constitute an image of self amidst a grammar that intends to circumscribe them. The images, thus, do not only reflect the biopolitical norms of the time, but dramatize the way in which these norms are appropriated, refused, and resignified by those depicted. Figure 2 offers us interesting clues in this regard.

**Figure 2** - Group of bled students



Source: Fundo Rockefeller – Casa de Oswaldo Cruz.

The photograph brings to mind images of school groups. We see twenty-five boys, one of them with a soccer ball; they appear to be friends. They are smiling and, at first glance, it is curious that such a photo is included within the scope of the Rockefeller Foundation’s photography. Unlike other, more synthetic captions, this one reads: “Group of bled students at the Anchieta Archdiocesan Gymnasium.” There is no information regarding the photographer, but it is known to be a 1936 photo taken in Bonfim, in the state of Goiás. They are at the center of the image, whose framing also allows us to see a large open field and a cloudless sky. The students’ smiles unsettle a preconceived reading – one that allows no indecision from the spectators.

It is a portrait situated between a staged pose and the spontaneity of a group that breaks with the performance. The smile, in this case, produces a mismatch that leads them to inhabit a space other than the one previously established in the consensual scripts of history, given that this is an image made to feature in a

medical report. The mismatch resides not only between the caption and the image, but between the image and the background/collection in which it is situated. It is interesting to note how this departure from the script of the “image of regulation” (perhaps because they are children?) establishes another legibility for history and for these lives.

The elaboration of another legibility is a procedure developed by Hartman (2020, 2022) through her critical fabulation. The author describes how the archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence – a violence that “determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well creates subjects and objects of power” (2020, p. 27). The archive, in this case, does not provide an account of a life, but a catalog of information settled within a grammar that, ultimately, authorizes death. Faced with such violence, Hartman exceeds the constitutive limits of the archive by proposing a series of speculative arguments: the subjunctive mood, which admits doubts, desires, and possibilities. Through this procedure, she retells a history of the impossible, just as she amplifies the impossibility of retelling these lives. The way of naming is also not fortuitous: fable, as Foucault (2003) reminds us, evokes the fabulous: the existences that deserve to be told.

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, this gesture is driven by the dissatisfaction Hartman felt toward the photographs and sociological research on Afro-descendant communities in Philadelphia and New York in the 20th century. In her terms, the photographs produced never “beheld the beautiful struggle for survival, glimpsed the alternative modes of life, or illuminated the mutual aid and communal wealth of the ghetto” (Hartman, 2022, p. 39). Generally, these are portraits that seek to document only the “problem” and the “ugliness.” The author continues: “everything good and worthy was in the ruins of proscribed modes of affiliation and forms of life” (Hartman, 2022, p. 39). Faced with reformers who sometimes used words like “progress,” “social improvement,” and “protection,” there was an entire erased universe, transformed into a homogeneous zone. And it is precisely against this framing and this police order, which hierarchizes and subalternizes, that Hartman rebels when developing her method.

Here, although I do not adopt critical fabulation in its narrative form, as proposed by Hartman, I consider that her procedure illuminates crucial aspects of archival analysis – both regarding the constitutive violence of the images and classifications produced there, and the ethical and political possibility of reclaiming these existences without reiterating the regimes that captured them. Particularly inspiring is the way her method operates through temporal juxtaposition, intertwining past, present, and future in a recombinant narrative that recounts what happened as if narrating the present, creating a critical opening in the dominant chronology. Similarly, her gesture reconfigures previous modes of typifying reality, destabilizing the explanatory and normative function that the archive intends to exercise.

More than seeking the truth contained within the document, it is a matter of asking: what does the frame show us, but also, and above all, what does it try to silence? What do these images still tell us, despite the use assigned to them? What can be perceived beyond the caption, the technical framing, the act of cataloging? By inverting the logic that transforms lives into examples of a governable population, Hartman invites us to imagine the detours, the alliances, the gestures of refusal, the scenes that were not recorded. This imaginative impulse is what allows us not only to resist the police order that structures the archive but also to reinscribe the lives that emerge from it into another grammar – marked by dissent, openness, and dignity.

Figure 3 also refers to a bled one. The photograph presents a young woman, standing before dense vegetation – likely a cornfield – in the municipality of Anápolis (GO). The caption informs us only that she is a “blood donor.” Nothing more: no name, no age, no family ties. Even so, what the framing reveals is enough for us to recognize the traces of a contained gesture, a look of displeasure, and a body that tensions the imposed choreography.

The photograph was taken in 1938, also by the physician G. Cesar, and shares the same aesthetics as the sanitary records of its time: a frontal pose, centered body, packed-earth ground, and a visible face. The young woman wears a light-colored, well-fitted dress and closed shoes; she keeps her arms extended alongside her body, with her hands interlaced in front. Her eyes, half-closed or lowered, avoid the lens; her countenance, marked by discontentment, seems to belie any notion of voluntariness. There is a presence there, but also a refusal. The dissatisfaction visible on her face can be read as a response to the actions of a hygiene service that fines, regulates, establishes prohibitions, arrests leaders, and extracts viscera and blood.

This attention to deviations, tensions, and minor gestures is also advocated by Camp (2017) when she postulates listening to images. In inquiring about the possibilities of constructing a visual archive of the African diaspora aligned with the dissatisfied, the undisciplined, and the dispossessed, Camp defends the

**Figure 3** - Blood donor

Source: Fundo Rockefeller – Casa de Oswaldo Cruz.

possibility of a counter-intuitive reading, despite an entire documentary corpus produced under the logics of surveillance, control, and accountability. To listen to an image is a practice of looking beyond, so as to tune our senses to other affective frequencies. It is a haptic encounter that foregrounds the ways images move, touch us, and connect us to the event of the photo.

This perspective also offers us a powerful horizon for the analysis of the collection of images of the bled ones. If, at first glance, these photographs seem merely to record administrative procedures – such as blood collection or the categorization of bodies under sanitary criteria – an attentive listening reveals another plane of meaning. It is possible to notice, for instance, small bodily hesitations, gazes that avoid the lens, and ambiguous gestures that do not fully fit within the frame of obedience. These elements function as noise within the documentary regime that sought to fix meanings and ensure a specific type of legibility of the population. By refusing the “truth” of the caption and turning toward the tensions inscribed on the surface of the image, we are interpellated by other stories: stories of weariness, of distrust, of reticent appearance, of tacit alliances, and of negotiation with the institutional gaze.

Finally, let us observe the following two images:

**Figures 4 and 5 - Blood donors**

Source: Fundo Rockefeller – Casa de Oswaldo Cruz.

In the images above (figures 4 and 5), two young women pose before the lens. Despite the caption, which summarily tells us “blood donor” for each of the photographs, we must remember that an image is the result of a series of operations, and yet it resists the will of the one who produces it (Rancière, 2021). In figure 4, we see a woman standing in the middle of a field, isolated before the lens. The setting is composed of a vast landscape of low vegetation, with the horizon in the background under an open, partially cloudy sky. The light-colored dress she wears contrasts with the green of the earth and the blue of the sky. She is barefoot, her feet firm on the ground of tall grass, her hands loose at her sides. Her gaze is direct, though it carries a slight shadow across her face. It is difficult to say whether there is firmness or resignation in her expression – perhaps both. There is a “remnant” here not contained by the accompanying caption, a trace that invites fabulation: who is she? Why is she there? What is she thinking as she faces the lens?

In figure 5, in turn, we see a young woman standing in the midst of a plantation. Around her, cornstalks and other plants rise, composing a dense and living setting. She wears a light dress, wears flats, and holds a small bouquet of flowers to her chest. Her body is slightly tilted, and her expression, though firm, carries a certain introspection. Her gaze does not focus directly on the lens but seems to pass through it.

Like the previous images, this one is also accompanied by a succinct caption: “blood donors” – an expression that seeks to impose a univocal meaning on a portrait that can tell us more. The gesture of holding flowers, for example, partially subverts the biopolitical logic of the record. There is an act of composition here that perhaps was not suggested by the photographer but invented by her: the desire to carry something beautiful, to inscribe another narrative gesture onto the image.

This type of rupture is precisely what Rancière (2021) helps us understand by considering the active role of appearances in the reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible. Far from being simulacra or illusions, appearances are litigious forms that challenge the dominant sensible order and open space for new forms of presence. There is an aesthetic and political power in appearances, since they determine how we perceive, interpret, and, consequently, participate in the world. In short, appearances act upon the distribution of the sensible – that is, the set of forms and configurations that structure our perception of reality and actively participate in determining who can speak, be seen, or be heard, and what is visible or invisible.

The young woman holding flowers activates her agency by interfering with the frame. It is possible to think that her gesture shifts the technical record of the photograph and transforms it into a scene of appearance. Appearances possess the capacity to challenge hierarchies and combat the hierarchical police order of the world: they multiply meanings and reconfigure the common; they are a field of dispute where diverse voices emerge, problematizing police narratives in order to enable other readings and world fabulations.

To look at the performative forms of appearance of the subjects in the image implies identifying an *appearing* (*apparaître*), in Rancièrian terms. It refers to the image's possibility of producing an alteration in the regime of perception and visibility. In other words, if the image of the bled ones tells us of a context of regulation that, *a priori*, is met with reservations by the governmentalized population, this same image tells us of performative gestures that point precisely to the violence of seeking to turn a population or group of people into a mere specimen. These are captions that, as Hartman (2022) prompts us to think, do not mention lives but the ways in which regulation operates. At the same time, it is precisely the encounter with power that enables the appearance of potency, as Foucault (2003) also reminds us.

In this gesture of displacement and opening, we find a meeting point between the thoughts of Butler (2015), Rancière (2021), Camp (2017), and Hartman (2022). If for Butler, the subject constitutes themselves by negotiating with a series of norms and codes – so as to deny strict mechanisms of subjection – Rancière postulates that the politics of the image does not reside in its capacity to faithfully represent the real, but in the possibility of reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible; that is, of altering the boundaries of what can be seen, said, and felt. Hartman, in turn, proposes an ethical gesture of reclaiming the archive from the margins, with an emphasis on the lives that were reduced to specimens, cases, or statistics. Her critical fabulation seeks to reinscribe these existences beyond the violence that gave them form in the record. Finally, Camp invites us to listen to images, to perceive in them affective frequencies, bodily tensions, and minor inflections that do not fit within the frames of power. From this crossing, it becomes possible to see in the photographs not only documents of a biopolitical logic of government over bodies but scenes that, even under coercion, make subjectivities appear that escape: in the posture of the body, in the shifting gaze, in the presence of the gesture. It is in this interval between what the image intends to show and what it actually reveals that a politics of appearance opens up, capable of inscribing glimmers of life where before there were only specimens.

## Final considerations

Although produced to assert a biopolitical framing and fix bodies to the status of specimens of a governmentalized population, we can consider that the images of the bled ones summon other readings and fabulations. These are photographs that tension the normative regime of the archive and potentially establish other scenes of appearance. Within fleeting gestures, it is possible to glimpse a political potency that, even if momentarily, interrupts the logic of exemplification and allows to appear that which was previously reduced to a function or erased under the weight of the caption. Let us recall, with Rancière (2021), that there are images that institute a type of operation transforming the distribution of the visible and the thinkable – images that open other paths of possibility against previously stable regularities, an imagining, dynamic potency that establishes other frames and other possibles. These are images that, in a way, cause an entire world to squeeze as they evoke a promise of insurrection, “the miracle of revolt” (Hartman, 2022, p. 28).

In synthesis, the bled ones prompt us to consider how transgressive experience redefines the coordinates of the experience of agency for the photographed individuals. Even if produced for the purpose of featuring in medical reports, before this collection, it is possible to open an interval in which the spectator places themselves and assumes a different position. In this process, our agency (as those who research and approach these lives) encounters the agency of the bled ones and opens up toward possible actions at the edges of a fabulating poetics. In other words, there is a connection between subjective agency and the need to reconfigure intersubjective relations that either empower or create barriers to action. Agency, in this sense, is defined not as individual will or capacity in the face of the encounter with power, but as the destabilization of more complex arrangements acting upon corporealities, spatialities, and institutionalities. I advocate for agency as something relational and communicational, requiring both subjective positionings and the creation of another dramaturgy or plot – so as to alter the surface upon which we arrange the heterogeneity of elements that, intertwined, tell us other stories about epidemics and lives.



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