

# Transcultural Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences

Print ISSN 4239-2636 Online ISSN 4247-2636

## Proceedings

of

The 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference: Future  
Contexts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives  
in Literature, Language & Translation  
15 & 16 October 2022

# TJHSS

BUC Press House



**Volume 4 Issue (1)**

**January 2023**

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**Proceedings of**  
The 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference: Future  
Contexts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in  
Literature, Language & Translation 15 & 16  
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**Transcultural Journal for Humanities and Social Sciences (TJHSS)** is a journal committed to disseminate a new range of interdisciplinary and transcultural topics in Humanities and social sciences. It is an open access, peer reviewed and refereed journal, published by Badr University in Cairo, BUC, to provide original and updated knowledge platform of international scholars interested in multi-inter disciplinary researches in all languages and from the widest range of world cultures. It's an online academic journal that offers print on demand services.

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To promote interdisciplinary studies in the fields of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences and provide a reliable academically trusted and approved venue of publishing Language and culture research.

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| ▣ <b>Print ISSN</b>  | <b>2636-4239</b> |
| ▣ <b>Online ISSN</b> | <b>2636-4247</b> |

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## A Comparative Study of Foucauldian Models of Discipline in Nazik Al-Malaika's "Cholera" and Camisha Jones's "On Working Remotely"

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**Abstract:** The Foucauldian conceptualizations of the disciplinary mechanisms implemented by the medical supervision of contagions and disability are noticeable in both Nazik Al-Malaika's "Cholera" and Camisha L. Jones's "On Working Remotely & No Longer Commuting with Chronic Pain." Written by an Iraqi poet about the 1947 cholera epidemic in Egypt, Al-Malaika's poem illustrates the characteristics of the social quarantine dictated by disciplinary governments. In *Society Must Be Defended* (2003), Foucault postulates that the confinement of citizens is a precautionary measure by which state power aims to overrule death. The ungovernability of death redirects power towards a dominance over the living. Jones's poem, compounding disability and a pandemic, depicts the intersectional disciplinary schemes which regulate illnesses during the Covid-19 crisis in the U.S. The poet's personal experience with hearing loss and chronic pain informs her knowledge of disciplinary mandates. Published in 2021, the poem evidences that governmental control over subjects naturally evolves into a morbidity-regulating biopower. Foucault's discussion of "panopticism" in *Discipline and Punish* (1995) suggests that the disabled speaker in the poem is an ungrudging perpetuator of an abstruse surveillance system. In addition, the poem proves the continuation of state regulation of plague-ridden places that is delineated in Al-Malaika's poem. Despite the contextual and authorial differences, both poems portray illness as an instrument wielded by disciplinary authorities in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

**Keywords:** state power; contagions; disability; biopower; panopticism

The Foucauldian conceptualization of the power politics immanent in the medical supervision of contagions and disability offers insight into the two poems "Cholera" by Nazik Al-Malaika (1923-2007) and "On Working Remotely & No Longer Commuting with Chronic Pain" by Camisha L. Jones. Inspired by radio reports about the cholera epidemic that was ravaging Egypt, the Iraqi poet Al-Malaika published her poem "Cholera" in late 1947. Translated into English by Husain Haddawy and Nathalie Handal and published in *The Poetry of Arab Women* (2001), the poem offers a concrete account of the calamitous event. Despite Al-Malaika's physical distance from the pandemic in Egypt, her dejected speaker depicts the ruthlessness of cholera while unknowingly illustrating the characteristics of the social quarantine dictated by the government. A variance of time, place, and ideology divides Al-Malaika's and Jones's poems. In 2021, Jones discusses the advantageous facet of the COVID-19 crisis. The American writer of colour's experience with hearing loss and chronic pain largely informs her work; her poem tacitly promotes disability justice while illuminating the implications of pandemic-induced state measures. The speaker's pre-pandemic commute to work bespeaks the politicization of the disabled body which promotes its economic productivity by enforcing its subjection; Jones's poem features the disciplinary mechanisms that are used to supervise both disability and pandemics; it is a testament to the subtlety of the disciplinary manoeuvres which the disabled community experiences during a global pandemic. Foucault's discussions in *Discipline and Punish* (1995) and *Society Must Be*

*Defended* (2003) suggest that the disabled speaker in the poem is an ungrudging perpetuator of an intricate surveillance system.

In his collection of lectures *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault postulates a rivalry between state power and death-ushering contagions: “Now that power is decreasingly the power of the right to take life, and increasingly the right to intervene to make live ... death becomes, insofar as it is the end of life, the term, the limit, or the end of power too” (248). The development from autocracy towards egalitarian systems has actuated states to defend their subjects’ lives, which Foucault designates as: “the right to make live and to let die” (241); accordingly, the rife death accompanying contagions deals a blow to the sovereignty of the state. Along the same vein, Al-Malaika’s speaker defines cholera as “the vengeance of death” (177). The revenge of the pandemic is, thus, against the dominion of the state: “Death was the moment when we made the transition from one power – that of the sovereign of this world – to another – that of the sovereign of the next world” (Foucault, *Society* 247). The speaker’s exclamatory invocation of Egypt, in the final line of Al-Malaika’s poem, communicates the ascendancy of death over the autonomy of the country: “O Egypt, my heart is torn by the ravages of death” (177). In the poem, the word “death” is repeated twenty-two times, while “dead” recurs six times, thus accentuating the predominance of death. The extermination brought about by death is evident in the speaker’s grief-stricken remark: “You have left nothing but the sorrows of death” (177). The brutality of extinction is emphasized by the animal imagery inherent in the word “claws” which is attributed to cholera. The anthropomorphism in the lines: “This is what the hand of death has done” and “Cholera has raised its head” (176) suggests the indomitability of the contagion. The statements “this is what death has destroyed” and “this is what death has done” underline the supremacy of death. The alliteration of “dawn”, which recurs in the first and third lines of the second stanza, and “death” disrupts any anticipations of salvation.

In retaliation for the brutalities of cholera, the state attempts to conceal any evidence of its defeat by the paramountcy of death, an action which results in what Foucault perceives as the privatization of death: “Power has no control over death, but it can control mortality. And to that extent, it is only natural that death should now be privatized and should become the most private thing of all” (*Society* 248). In “Cholera” the plague victims are “mourned/ without a eulogy or a moment of silence” (Al-Malaika 176). The traditional death rituals, which could be seen as a public testament of the triumph of death, are abandoned because “[p]ower no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death” (Foucault, *Society* 248). Claimed by death, the deceased are considered private individuals for whom the state is unaccountable. The interiority of the grief caused by the plague is notable in the phrase “a soul crying in the dark,” which indicates that the manifestations of mourning are kept out of sight. Similarly, the lines: “In every heart there is fire / in every silent hut, sorrow” (Al-Malaika 176) are suggestive of unannounced grief since private feelings and abodes are normally unexposed. It is, therefore, inferable that death is the “the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy” (Foucault, *Society* 248).

According to Foucault, state power, compromised by its loss of supremacy over death, is systemically reinforced by its overseeing dominance over mortals. It becomes a power that “exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (*History* 137). As power becomes a life-endowing entity, governments are intent on “the acquisition of power over man in so far as man is a living being” (*Society* 239). The medical supervision of contagions is one of the primary disciplinary methods by which

states exert control over their subjects. The surveillance of individuals is carried out by their enclosure in specified places. Quarantine, apart from being a medical necessity, is attributable to state-enforced confinement and partitioning; the curtailment of mobility grants the state the ability “at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual” (*Discipline* 143). Al-Malaika’s poem implies that its speaker is isolated behind a closed door. The phrase “cave of corpses and terror” (176)<sup>1</sup>, in the third stanza, is an allusion to the speaker’s seclusion. The repetition of “silence” five times throughout the poem - notwithstanding the described “cries” and “wails” - is a further indication of the isolation experienced by the speaker. Describing the silence as “cruel” and “bitter,” in the third and fourth stanzas, evidences the speaker’s repression. The progression of time - indicated by the lines: “It is night” and “It is dawn” - suggests that the speaker is interminably preoccupied with observing an invariable scene; as Foucault argues, the quarantine “is the protected place of disciplinary monotony” (*Discipline* 141). The one-word title of the poem further suggests the uniformity of its content and the constancy of the speaker’s focus.

From a disciplinary perspective, the verbs “listen” and “look” (Al-Malaika 176), in the first and second stanzas, are references to the surveillance which the state exercises. In addition, the verbs imply that the speaker’s observations of the outside world are through a window. Being non-action verbs, they suggest that the speaker is riveted to the spot. Undertones of helplessness are emphasized by the pitiable hyperbole: “my heart is torn” (177). The absence of the first-person voice from the poem is an allusion to the lack of agency. The powerlessness of the people is further emphasized as the speaker mentions a “peasant woman” and parentless “children” (177) who are commonly associated with frailty. The observations made about the devastation caused by the plague suggest that while the raging pandemic is potent, the speaker is immobilized. The only accomplishable actions are those which the “gravedigger” and the “muezzin,” who succumb in the fourth stanza, can carry out; however, given their demise, death reigns supreme. The described scene, therefore, exhibits a classic model of discipline which is described by Foucault as follows: “It is segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment” (*Discipline* 195). Although the phrase “mourning processions” could imply the absence of enclosure, the presumption is refutable by the line: “They are dead, dead, dead” (Al-Malaika 176). The emphatic statement suggests that the violation of the established system is punishable by death. The plague-stricken country, where state power battles death, embodies a primitive disciplinary model where life is “reduced to its simplest expression” (Foucault, *Discipline* 207). The shortness of the lines and the simplicity of the speaker’s expression are a reflection of the dismantled existence in the country where death overrules state authorities.

Foucault postulates that the development of disciplinary mechanisms results in a new “technology of power” which he calls a “‘biopolitics’ of the human race” (*Society* 242). The aforementioned power to “make live and let die” “the right to make live and to let die”<sup>2</sup> evolves into a zeal “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order” (*History* 138). Unlike unrefined disciplinary models which focus on adventitious events such as pandemics, biopolitics can be considered a regulatory system that addresses all the biological processes of the population, including its natality and mortality rates, as well as its average life expectancy. Concerned with the problem of morbidity, biopolitics includes biological disabilities within its field of intervention. According to Foucault,

<sup>1</sup> In 2021, psychiatrist Arthur Bregman coined the term “cave syndrome” to refer to a self-imposed isolation that springs from pandemic-related anxiety.

<sup>2</sup> See above, p.3.



states regard disabilities as “endemics” which could be defined as ineradicable illnesses; unlike epidemics, which have countless death tolls, endemics pose a permanent threat as they “sapped the population’s strength, shortened the working week, wasted energy, and cost money, both because they led to a fall in production and because treating them was expensive” (*Society* 244). To deal with these endemics, the state does not only resort to charitable institutions, but also to “subtle mechanisms that were much more economically rational than an indiscriminate charity” (244).

These mechanisms are glaring in Jones’s poem in which the speaker decries her obligation to commute to work, despite her disability. The poem illustrates that the speaker’s job is a pragmatic injunction that kills two birds with one stone; it enlarges the wage-earning class, allowing the disabled employees to make a living, thus eliminating their need for charity. Additionally, it is “an indispensable element in the development of capitalism” (Foucault, *History* 141). Politically speaking, this system enforces the politicization of disabled bodies and their subjection to the state:

This political investment of the body is bound up in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection. (*Discipline* 25-6)

The alliteration in “pierced with pain,” “pressure,” and “punctured” emphasizes the poignancy of the speaker’s subjugation. Describing the layers of clothes as “oppressive”, the speaker in Jones’s poem alludes to the constraints imposed by this disciplinary model. The implementation of this disciplinary mechanism is achieved by means of schedules; the speaker in Jones’s poem feels bound by the train, bus, and metro timetables, as well as her work schedule. The characteristic monotony<sup>1</sup> of the timetable manages to establish a routine, thereby bridling employees and securing their susceptibility to scrutiny. To put it in Foucault’s words: “The *time-table* is an old inheritance ... Its three great methods – establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition ...” (*Discipline* 149). Additionally, as part of a disciplinary mechanism, the timetable is predicated on a principle of efficiency and productivity: “Time measured and paid must also be a time without impurities or defects; a time of good quality, throughout which the body is constantly applied to its exercise” (151).

Jones’s poem describes a lot of toing and froing as the speaker mentions various means of transportation - such as the train, the bus, the metro, and the car – as well as her hurried steps, her late-night walks when she goes back home from work, and her waits at the stations. The capitalist state benefits economically from the speaker’s compulsory reliance on public means of transportation; her delighted statement: “i keep my cash / it doesn’t load my metro card and then another card when the first one’s lost” reveals her financial obligations. Evidently, the disciplinary system which she obeys monopolizes her time, thus allowing itself to monitor all her activities. Although burdened with a disabled body, the speaker is impelled to commute to work because she is incapable of rebelling against her prescribed role. As Foucault explains: “Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (*Discipline* 138). That is, the body has a physical capacity to work, but it lacks the moral energy to resist its subjection<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See above, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Jones remarks that the COVID-19 quarantine induced her realization that her pre-pandemic commute to work has demonstrated the inefficacy of disability justice, thus suggesting the inequities of biopolitics. Working remotely opens vistas of freedom from conformity ahead of her: “May we not return to ‘normal’



Foucault attributes this compliance to state dictates to “the power of the Norm” (*Discipline* 184). The speaker’s state-mandated pre-pandemic routine suggests that it was fashioned for able-bodied individuals; the speaker’s compliance is exacted by the lack of any alternatives that are tailored for the disabled. The outbreak of the pandemic relieves her of the commute to work; the pandemic, therefore, replaces the crude disciplinary model illustrated in Al-Malaika’s poem with Foucault’s model of “panopticism,” which is one of the instruments of biopower. Panopticism can be defined as a tactics of power that allows governments “to obtain the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost (economically, by the low expenditure it involves; politically, by its discretion, its low exteriorization, its relative invisibility, the little resistance it arouses)” (218). Jones’s poem illustrates the merits of panopticism. Like Al Malaika’s speaker, Jones’s persona becomes cooped up indoors because of the pandemic: “... i sit / and continue to sit / in this chair then that one.” The consistency of the speaker’s habits, implied by the word “continue,” is redolent of Foucault’s contention that a quarantine engenders a “disciplinary monotony<sup>1</sup>” (*Discipline* 141).

However, unlike the speaker in “Cholera”, who is solely preoccupied with the pandemic, Jones’s speaker divides her time between a “computer screen” and some restful time near a window, to which the speaker resorts when she needs to “escape” the “demands” of the screen. The transparency of these objects allows the “disciplinary gaze” (*Discipline* 174) to maintain its surveillance of the confined subjects. While it is surmisable that Al-Malaika’s speaker watches the ravages of cholera from a window that epitomizes her confinement, Jones’s speaker perceives the window as a diversion, which bespeaks the discretion of panopticism. The speaker’s relief of her commute to work, apart from revitalizing disability justice, could be an indication that she condones the governmental disciplinary strategies. Foucault postulates that panopticism impels the watched subject to “assume responsibility for the constraints of power” as “he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (203). That is, the speaker’s perpetuation of the disciplinary system is, in fact, one of its underlying schemes. The rest that the speaker enjoys while working remotely is her reward for sustaining her visibility. Therefore, panopticism involves a tacit agreement between a government and its subjects that guarantees “the automatic functioning of power” (201).

Therefore, the subtlety of panopticism results in the amelioration of the speaker’s grievances and her willingness to comply with the system. In addition, the speaker’s opportunity to work remotely is economically advantageous since it turns the wheels of capitalism and limits the disabled’s need for pensions. Her exultant statement: “i rest / and i rise” is an allusion to her conciliation as well as to the personal development facilitated by panopticism. While the classical model of discipline involves the reduction of life to its “simplest expression,”<sup>2</sup> panopticism is able to “strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply” (Foucault, *Discipline* 208); it allows a government to control its subjects without impeding progress or stalling production. While in Al-Malaika’s poem, the progression of life is arrested by the prevalence of death, as is indicated by the phrase “without future” (176), Jones’s poem ends on a progressive note that indicates the speaker’s hope for advancement, as she claims that her body “whispers the way forward.” However, the empowerment inherent in the speaker’s ability to work

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and its toxic expectations of productivity and hustle. May we all listen to the body for sustainable ways forward.”

<sup>1</sup> See above, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> See above, p.4.

remotely constitutes a threat to power. As Foucault argues, "What is at stake, then, is this: how can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?" ("Enlightenment" 48). A possible answer to Foucault's question lies in the subjects' awareness of the indispensability of state power.

While the five stanzas of "Cholera" are a reiteration of the deleterious effects of the pandemic on Egypt, Jones's poem is a personalized vent of the speaker's experience with disability before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The recurrent use of the first-person voice in Jones's poem indicates the speaker's heightened awareness of the particularity of her situation. According to Foucault, this is attributable to "the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the 'marks' that characterize him and make him a 'case'" (*Discipline* 192). That is, this variety of power categorizes individuals according to their characteristics, thus orchestrating their distinctive self-conceptions. Unlike "Cholera," Jones's poem does not lend any attention to the effects of the pandemic as it centres solely around the speaker's plight. The speaker's heightened consciousness of her disability leads to her belief in her dependence on the state, which consequently breeds her yielding subjection to it. In other words, "the power of the modern state to produce an ever-expanding and increasingly totalizing web of social control is inextricably intertwined with, and dependent upon, its capacity to generate an increasing specification of individuality in this way" (Tremain 6).

The subjectivity of experience is essentially a power strategy which warrants the speaker's subjection to governmental power. Arguing that this form of power subjectifies individuals, Foucault remarks that: "There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" ("Subject" 781); both meanings of the word denote the subjugation of individuals. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the "subjectification" of individuals confers on them the privileges of citizenship; the availability of a remote job in Jones's poem is one of its results. The speaker's gratitude for the possibility of working remotely - which obliterates her initial indignation - signifies that a discreet exercise of power can maintain its authority over the behaviour of subjects. That is, "the production of these seeming acts of choice (these *limits* of possible conduct) on the everyday level of the subject makes possible the consolidation of more hegemonic structures" (Tremain 8). Moreover, the speaker's unabashed reference to her disability throughout the poem indicates that the process of individualization, despite its demarcating effects, does not lead to stigmatization. The uncapitalized first person pronouns in the poem could be seen as an allusion to the equivocation of individualization; the speaker's selfhood, which is affirmed by the repetitive use of pronouns, is, nonetheless, undermined by her subjugation to the state.

In contrast, "Cholera" lacks similar subjectification. The descriptions "countless" and "without number" (Al-Malaika 176), in the second stanza, are used to describe the plurality of pandemic victims, indicating an identity-effacing collectivism. In addition to the absence of the first-person voice from the poem, the indeterminate words "a soul," "a voice," and "a corpse" in the lines "a soul crying in the dark," "A voice cries in every place," and "Everywhere lies a corpse" (176) imply the incorporeality of the subjects. The personification of cholera suggests that the anonymity of its victims contributes to the predominance of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> While the blanket title of Al-Malaika's poem spotlights the pandemic, the title of Jones's poem foregrounds her distinctive chronic illness. More importantly, her conviction at the end of the poem that she can "listen to the body that's

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p.3.

carried [her] here” implies that her individuality has led to the prioritization of her needs. Whereas “Cholera” is an unfaceted poem whose despondent speaker emphasizes the static circumstances engendered by the plague, Jones’s poem, written as a stream-of-consciousness monologue, celebrates the speaker’s deliverance from her predicament. The speaker’s newly earned freedom is reflected in Jones’s subversion of the rigidity of stanzaic organization and her use of informal structures. It is, thus, notable that individualization could be more emancipatory than inimical.

The two poems, thus, illustrate two models of discipline which arouse divergent responses. “Cholera”, unlike Jones’s poem, does not refer to any governmental interventions. However, the close reading of the poem could reveal that the speaker is confined within a closed space while the government is interlocked in a battle against the contagion. It is, thus, evident that in 1947, the state had to resort to rudimentary measures of enclosure to contain the pandemic. The absence of references to state action implies either the speaker’s lack of political awareness or the internalization of the necessity of confinement. The verb “protests,” in the line “Humanity protests against the crimes of death” (Al-Malaika 176), suggests that any signs of unrest are spurred only by the domineering pandemic. In “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault’s discussion of Kantian philosophy describes a pre-Enlightenment state of immaturity which “makes us accept someone else’s authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is called for” (34).

On the other hand, Jones’s speaker is visibly indignant due to the coercion she encounters as a disabled citizen. Her dissatisfaction is a manifestation of a development from the state of immaturity: “Humanity will reach maturity when it is no longer required to obey, but when men are told: ‘Obey, and you will be able to reason as much as you like’” (36). The freedom to reason does not pose a threat to authority because it is “a use of reason in which reason has no other end but itself” (36). Before the onset of COVID, Jones’s speaker had obeyed a social paradigm that compels disabled individuals to practice onsite jobs; however, her realization of the unfairness of the situation testifies to her reasoning capacities. Her compliant commutes to work evidence that “reason must be free in its public use, and must be submissive in its private use” (36). While the “public use” of reason results in the speaker’s ability to express her discontentment, its “private” use leads to her submission to employment regulations. That is, reason is privately acquiescent when a person “has a role to play in society and jobs to do” (36). According to Foucault, Kant proposes a social contract that would reinforce the public use of reason without impairing the mechanisms of power.

To put it in Foucault’s words, it is “what might be called the contract of rational despotism with free reason: the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason” (37). The implementation of ingenious panoptic strategies, as depicted in Jones’s poem, results in the placation of the speaker. The rationality of the imperative to work remotely – despite being prompted by the pandemic - accords with the public use of reason which had catalyzed demands for disability justice, thus guaranteeing the subjects’ compliance. The efficacy of panopticism lies, thus, in its justifiability; being a “functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion” (Foucault, *Discipline* 209), it entails an ambivalent relation between power and its subjects. Foucault recommends that individuals should free themselves from “the intellectual blackmail of ‘being for or against the Enlightenment’” (“Enlightenment” 45). By the same token, the subjects of panopticism tolerate its supremacy.

The analyzed poems embody two specimens of pandemic literature that demonstrate the development of power strategies. The primitive disciplinary mechanism

depicted in Al-Malaika's "Cholera" results in the powerlessness of the speaker and the suspension of progress. Governmental control over subjects evolves into a morbidity-regulating biopower. Fostered by technological advancements – as it is a computer screen which allows Jones's speaker to work remotely – biopower employs panopticism to sustain its surveillance of subjects and enhance their capabilities, thereby guaranteeing both economic advancement and social amity. Predicated upon the subjects' unspoken consent to its subtle mechanisms, panopticism is an expedient power scheme which does not depend on enclosed spaces to enforce discipline; its self-operating surveillance system produces individuals who, in addition to being politically conscious, demonstrate a willingness to cooperate with disciplinary paradigms.

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