

سياسات الجسد البشري: الاتجار بالأعضاء، والسلطة البيولوجية، وعدم المساواة العالمية
عدم المساواة في رواية "الحصاد" لتيس جيريتسن

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The Politics of the Human Body: Organ Trafficking, Biopower, and Global Inequality in *Harvest* by Tess Gerritsen

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المستخلص

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تحليل رواية "الحصاد" لتيس جيريتسن، الصادرة عام ١٩٩٦، باستخدام منظور مفاهيمي يستند إلى مفهوم ميشيل فوكو عن السلطة البيولوجية، ومفهوم جورجيو أغامبين عن تجريد الحياة من إنسانيتها، بالإضافة إلى مفاهيم اجتماعية واقتصادية من دراسات ما بعد الاستعمار والاقتصاد السياسي حول عدم المساواة العالمية. لا تُقرأ الرواية كعمل أدبي شعبي فحسب، بل كصراع ثقافي مستمر حول الأنظمة البيوسياسية التي تحدد ليس فقط أي الأجساد تُستهلك وتُباع في السوق العالمية، ولا سيما الأعضاء، "الأجساد الصلبة". باستخدام نقد فوكو للإدارة التأديبية للسكان، ومفهوم أغامبين عن الإنسان المقدس، وأعمال شيبير، هيويز، ولوك وكوهين حول تسليع الأعضاء، تجادل هذه الورقة البحثية بأن رواية "الحصاد" تُنتج جغرافيا سردية تُجسد الهشاشة من خلال اختزال جسد الجنوب العالمي إلى مادة خام يُولد منها رأس المال الحيوي الثري للشمال العالمي. كما تتناول الورقة كيف تستخدم

جيريتسن تقاليد أدب الإثارة، الواقعية الإجرائية، وبطلة الرواية المُهددة، والسياق المؤسسي الفاسد، للتحقيق في العنف البنيوي في سوق الأعضاء العالمي. ومن خلال وضع الرواية ضمن حوارات أوسع حول الأخلاقيات الحيوية، والسياحة العلاجية، وسياسات الموت في استخراج الموارد، تُظهر هذه القراءة كيف تُشارك "الحصاد" في خطاب أدبي سياسي آني حول استقلالية الجسد، والسيادة، وتسليع الحياة البشرية.

Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to analyse the 1996 novel by Tess Gerritsen, *Harvest*, using a conceptual lens based on Michel Foucault's notion of (biopower) and Giorgio Agamben's degradation to 'bare life' together with socio-economic concepts from postcolonial and political economy scholarship about global inequality. The book is read as much less than popular fiction but as an ongoing cultural contest around the biopolitical regimes that determine not only which bodies become used up and disposed of on the world market, particularly in organs sold. Using Foucault's critique of the disciplinary management of populations, Agamben's concept of homo sacer, and the work of Scheper, Hughes, Lock and Cohen on organ commodification, it argues that *Harvest* outputs a narrative geography that embeds vulnerability in terms where the Global South body is reduced to a raw material from which affluent Global North bio-capital will be born. The paper also examines how Gerritsen uses the conventions of the thriller genre, procedural realism, a jeo-paradised woman protagonist, and a corrupt institutional context to investigate structural violence in the global organ market. In locating the novel within larger conversations on bioethics, medical tourism, and the necro-politics of resource extraction, this reading shows how the novel engages in a timely literary-political discourse about bodily autonomy, sovereignty and the commodification of human life.

1.Introduction

When Tess Gerritsen's *Harvest* was published in 1996, the urgency among global bioethicists was especially fraught. The previous ten years had seen the rapid global expansion of organ transplantation, the beginnings of what academics would soon term "transplant tourism," and growing concern with the political economy shaping access to both organs and transplantation technology (Scheper, Hughes, 2000). Utilising this context, Gerritsen, a trained physician, was able to write a novel that functions both as genre entertainment and as an implicit critique of a global organ economy with its collective map spread onto the body of one endangered female surgeon. Though read in the tradition of the medical



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thriller on which it is loosely predicated, a contaminatory fiction conspicuous for its procedural realism, institutional venality, and embattled expert protagonist, this paper claims that *Harvest's* most pressing questions are biopolitical in kind, making those issues theoretically legible by Foucault (2003), Agamben (1987), and their interlocutors.

This analysis argues that *Harvest* builds and interrogates what Michel Foucault (1978) called the 'biopolitical' management of populations, that is, the regulatory apparatus by which modern states and their surrogates decide whose lives are livable, whose bodies should be optimised for life, and who may be sacrificed. Within the fictional world of Gerritsen, this biopolitical logic functions not through the state per se but through the market. Here, the global organ trade serves as a mechanism by which live bodies amongst the economically marginal are converted into resources that sustain life for those with greater wealth. The novel, therefore, visualises a type of structural violence that, in the world outside this novel, largely works under the radar.

This study is structured in five sections. The first develops the theoretical framework, using Foucault's biopower and Agamben's bare life to provide an analytical lexicon well-equipped for the text. The latter establishes when exactly *Harvest* fits into the medical thriller niche and the global organ trade scene of the 1990s. The third section analyses how the novel stages a particular form of bodily vulnerability and the kinds of biopolitical geographies it draws. Fourth, it considers how the novel implicates an entire systemic corruption of institutions and the medical establishment itself. The conclusion examines the novel's ending in relation to popular fiction's negotiation of ideological tensions as regards the commodification of human life.

2.Theoretical Framework — Biopower, Bare Life and Necro-politics

2.1. Biopower and the Management of Populations by Foucault

The notion of biopower has been most fully articulated by Michel Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (1978), as well as the lectures collected in *Society Must Be Defended* (2003), where there is a transition away from governance that employs simply the sovereign right to literally "take life or let live" towards one emphasising disciplinary administration over life itself. Modernity, for Foucault, opens with a mode of power that operates not so much in the way of prohibition



and punishment but through the optimisation, regulation, and management of biological life. In this paradigm, life becomes both the target and tool of power. The modern era, according to Foucault (1978), controls power over "life" between two poles: the disciplinary anatomo, politics of the individual body and biopolitics of the population (p. 139).

Most crucially for the current analysis, Foucault's paradigm insists that biopower is selective: improving some lives necessitates the abandonment or annihilation of others. As with Foucault's (2003) notion of "racism", that internal caesura within the continuum of biology which enables the state to mark certain populations as threats to the health of the body politic, it is this mechanism which allows us to grasp how biopolitical logics emerge from, and become indistinguishable from, biomedical ones and are articulated through subordinated lives into lethal inequalities. This biopolitical selectivity functions, in *Harvest*, through the global market as opposed to through state racism per se, but the structure is comparable: as the lives of economic surplus are governed and harvested for the biological betterment of wealthier bodies.

2.2. Homo sacer by Agamben (classic examples of bare life)

Whereas Foucault begins to delineate the contours of biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben extends this analysis in a radical direction with *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), bringing forth the figure of the homo sacer, an individual who has been stripped of political and juridical personhood and reduced into "bare life" (zoe), the mere biological fact of existence. For Agamben, the homo sacer is included in the political order only by virtue of its exclusion; it is the life abandoned, the life which can be killed without committing a crime or a sacrifice. Agamben is theoretically most original when he sees the state of exception as the secret heart of sovereign power, that in states of exception the sovereign can place certain populations within a status defined by 'bare life,' getting them out from any protections typically granted to political subjects.

The relevance of this framework with regard to the international organ market is obvious. The organ trafficking victims, the economically destitute, the politically powerless, the socially invisible, fall squarely in Agamben's zone of indistinction, neither fully inside nor totally outside the law. They are, as Cohen (2001) postulates regarding the kidney trade in India, simply bodies already constructed by poverty and structural neglect as possibilities for organ harvests. This theoretical insight is given



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imagined life through Gerritsen's narrative, where the characters are often drawn from the social margins, making them ripe for biopolitical extraction within the novel.

2.3. Necropolitics and the Death World of Mbembe

In this respect, Achille Mbembe (2003) is of enormous relevance with his concept of necropolitics, which identifies geographies of biopolitical abandonment in ways that are more direct and specific to the racialised notion of death than Foucault's analysis allows. As Mbembe puts it, the highest form of sovereignty amounts to "the power and all, encompassing capacity to determine who may live and who must die" (p. 11). Necropolitics identifies the political rationality whereby some populations are relegated to what Mbembe calls "death worlds"—social existences so bereft of political and economic resources that they amount to a kind of living death.

This means that Mbembe's framework is particularly generative for analysing *Harvest* because of how it foregrounds the spatiality of biopolitical inequality. The novel builds a geography in which the Global South is resourced as biological raw material for the rich North, a spatial structure that reflects what Mbembe has identified as the colonial and postcolonial territorial organisation structured around extraction. The organ farm in *Harvests* is not accidentally sited on the edges of this global economy; its sitedness is constitutive. Life is cheapest, state protection weakest, and economic desperation renders consent a fiction: these are the places where bodies are harvested.

3. Historical and Generic Context: The 1990s Global Organ Trade

It had been written during a decade when transplantation medicine was being expanded exponentially, and while a critical literature sprang up in scholarly venues and journalism documenting the dark underbelly of that expansion. This was especially evident in the writings of anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who wrote extensively on the global organ trade from the early 1990s onwards (published in multiple locations, including in Scheper-Hughes, Hughes & Wacquant, 2002), highlighting organ trafficking networks which operated out of Brazil and have been exposed as operating within Israel, South Africa, India and the Philippines. The organ trade was seen by Scheper-Hughes (2000) as delineated through a *techne*, what she termed "bio-piracy", the appropriation of the biological





resources of the poor by the rich, whereby practices often took formal forms, as tourism emerged as an important economic force in the 1990s. Patients from North America, Western Europe and the Gulf States were increasingly seeking to go abroad for medical services, including transplants, in low-cost, low-regulation settings (Cohen, 2001). This practice established a worldwide two-tier framework in which access to biotechnology that expands life was progressively identified as much more with financial status than medical need. But the transplant waiting lists that *Harvest* refers to, the sad, long line of patients in need of kidneys, livers, hearts, are not some philosophical abstractions but a genuine structural mismatch between organ demand and legal supply that illegal markets have been designed to remedy.

4. Analysis: *Harvest* and The Medical Thriller Universe

Consolidated by writers like Robin Cook and Michael Crichton in the 1970s and 1980s, the medical thriller as a genre typically commits to the procedural conventions of the hospital and laboratory as a site of horror/conspiracy. Hogle (2002), in her critique of Gothic Science and Medicine: Ethnographic Investigations, points out the way the genre plays off of an ambivalence already written into medical knowledge itself: those practices designed to heal can also pose a danger; the institution that promises protection/benefit can become corrupting. In many ways, Gerritsen is the most sophisticated practitioner of this type of fiction to date, applying real medical knowledge and a more fully developed critical eye than those who have gone before.

Readers are introduced to surgical resident Dr Abby DiMatteo, who is drawn into a conspiracy that starts with giving wealthy patients preference for donor hearts and ends with the operation of an illegal organ farm that gets its hearts from human trafficking. It follows the structure of a thriller: revelations build upon one another, the protagonist is more sequestered from assistance, and institutional betrayals occur at every tier. However, Gerritsen's use of these conventions is deliberate. The formal genre requirement that corruption must always be revealed and punished, even while the logic of neoliberal capitalism, which governs the organ economy, raises questions about any putative restoration of order, creates a narrative gap that allows the novel to make visible the structural violence of neoliberalism.





Theme Biopolitical geography: Positioning fettering vulnerability in *Harvest*

As a piece of analysis, one of *Harvest's* most impressive accomplishments is the way it carefully builds the social and political circumstances that make available for biopolitical extraction certain bodies. Gerritsen does not frame organ trafficking as the outgrowth of individual criminal pathologies; rather, she lays bare the structural conditions, poverty, state abandonment, immigration status, and age, which create a reservoir of potential victims. Its study subjects are culled methodically from groups that already exist on the borders of political and economic life: undocumented immigrants, vagabonds, Eastern European refugees. These are already, in Agamben's (1998) terms, figures that are in the zone of indistinction, deprived of the full protections accorded by political belonging.

This is instructive, especially in regard to the ramifications regarding Yakov, the Russian who appears as the hero of the novel. Displaced by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yakov is a body made disposable by the biopolitical transformations that emerge in response to that death rattle of Cold War II. We can hardly call him an arbitrary victim, rather historically produced: the evolution of geopolitical conflicts in the early 1990s featured precisely the figures of a stateless, desperate population that Scheper and Hughes (2000) claim remains a disproportionate supply for organ trade. The specificity of Gerritsen's attention to this issue implies a more nuanced political consciousness than is usually present in the genre.

4.1. Medical Authority and Biopolitical Power

Foucault's analysis of the clinical gaze, first articulated in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973), identifies modern medicine as a key instance of biopolitical power, where physicians' authority to classify, test and intervene on bodies goes hand-in-hand with more general matrices of social control. In *Harvest*, this insight finds a narrative expression in the form of the unscrupulous transplant surgeon whose medical power is mobilised as a mechanism for a fatal biopolitical discrimination. The authority to decide who will get a transplant, and thus who will live, is represented as continuous with the authority to determine whose body can be transformed into an organ, viable matter, and thus, who will die.



Intelligently, the protagonist of the novel, Abby DiMatteo, finds herself dragged to the centre of these biopolitical forces in a manner that is revealing in itself. Even before she starts unravelling the conspiracy, Abby is entrenched in a culture that has been coded as masculine and hierarchical. This makes her perhaps one of the most structurally vulnerable residents in the institution. Because she is both female and junior, she is of little political interest to the hospital; but this has the paradoxical effect of making her the moral centre of Meloy's critique: it is only because Abbye has not yet been absorbed into the hospital culture of privilege that allows someone like him to be horrified by what he discovers (Phelan, 2007).

4.2. Human Body as a Market: Exchange Value and Dehumanisation

Harvest's biopolitical critique centres around its analysis of the human body as a tool, or what Lock (2002) calls in her study of brain death and organ transplantation a "twice, dead" object that must be turned into a resource, something akin to so-called "spare parts." The novel imagines an organ economy where the body becomes a set of composite parts, each one little more than its designation, each with an exchange value pegged to the global market. As the titular character of a transplantable heart explains to another, his life is worth nothing compared to that of the person from whom he will be extracting it. It is not a contingent, but a structural fact, the organ economy, in its illicit dimension, rests on the reality of that population whose lives can be measured ahead of cost and value simply as less than their parts.

This is complemented by Marx's (1867/1990) analysis of commodity fetishism. Commodities hide social relations between people behind relationships between things, and the actual human labour (labour power also) that went into a commodity is concealed by abstraction, exchange value. In *Harvest*, this is taken literally, with particular horror: the organ commodity does not merely hide the suffering of its producer but is that suffering. The very death of the poor victim is the heart that saves the life of a wealthy recipient. Gerritsen insists that both terms of this exchange be held in view together, thereby refusing the fetishistic opacity enforced by the market.





4.3. The Hospital as Biopolitical Apparatus

The hospital in *Harvest* does not serve as a bastion of healing opposed to the violence of the organ trade, but is itself implicated in that violence through its institutional culture that privileges wealth and favours wealthy patients. The version of Bayside Medical Centre that Gerritsen describes is a well-known critique of the American class structure for health care: The rich patient gets access to scarce organs, not through overt corruption (though plenty exist) but structural discrimination. The leap from "giving preferential treatment to the families of wealthy benefactors" to the secret extraction of organs from human trafficking victims is expressed not as a categorical difference, but a quantitative one, an intensification of logic that runs through both.

This narrative strategy evokes the politics of the clinic identified by Foucault (1973): medical institutions are never merely technical arrangements; they are always simultaneously political, rooted in and reproductive of their contemporary social hierarchies. Gerritsen then adeptly applies this understanding to the current American context, where the quasi-market organisation of health care delivery has drawn the biopolitical selectivity of medical access into sharper focus than ever. The novel does not posit the organ trade as an aberration of a generally healthy medical system, but instead symptomatic of that system's deepest structures.

The text implicitly grapples with the discourse of bioethics, that disciplinary apparatus that developed in the late twentieth century to render medical practice and biotechnology intelligible. The characters who seem to represent ethical constraint in *Harvest*, the transplant ethics committee, and the senior surgeons who mentor Abby, are either complicit in the conspiracy or too entangled in institutional self-interest to serve as true moral arbiters. This is not just narrative convenience but a substantive argument: that the existing frameworks of bioethics fail to fully capture or attend to the political economy of the global organ trade since these frameworks are principally concerned with individual choices and institutional practices, rather than with structural conditions, neoliberal policies that make some bodies easier fodder for harvesting than others.

This criticism resonates with a larger academic dissent against canonical bioethics published over the same time period. Bioethicists like Carl



Elliott (2003) and Paul Farmer (2003) claimed that bioethics' individualism regarding autonomy and informed consent was structurally blind to the impoverished conditions, poverty, desperation, and lack of options. These warnings received institutional endorsement when Karlan & Lynskey's work prompted new Internal Review Board forms for approved verification of legitimate exceptions to consent as necessary. Here, we can especially use Farmer's idea of "structural violence": the violence perpetrated on the bodies of organ trafficking victims is not mainly a product of individual criminal decision-making but rather the glue that binds a global economic order in which certain populations systematically come out ahead while others fall behind.

4.4. The Abyss of Gender: The Inexorable Failure of The Female Protagonist

The use of a female body in the medical institution at the centre of this biopolitical concern is, for Gerritsen, not incidental. As Casper and Moore (2009) have argued, questions of bodily autonomy, vulnerability and institutional power in medical contexts are gendered: medical authority concerning the female body mirrors the class- and race-based biopolitics that govern organ trade. The limits to Abby's power in the hospital, her own sexual harassment, professional intimidation and risk of career destruction, place her, with some qualification and little comfort for those to whom this status applies more descriptively, within the zone of biopolitical precarity occupied by Kauffman and his victims.

While this structural analogy cannot erase the vast gulf between Abby's privileged position and the total unprotected status of organ farm victims, instead, it establishes a logic that builds to what the reader, focalising through Abby, can understand about diverse registers of bodily vulnerability and institutional power. As Abby finds out about the organ farm, she simultaneously discovers much about her own complicity, as a part of a medical system that normalises bodily hierarchy, and about the limits of such complicity. Her horror at the acts she uncovers is the novel's affective gauge of the distance from what, she says, institutions dedicated to medicine claim to be and what they do.

In most cases, the narrative logic of the thriller genre exerts an enormous formal pressure on its narratives to resolve: they must get the conspirator caught, reveal their conspiracy and bring order back established. This means that this generic imperative creates an enormous ideological





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tension within *Harvest*, since the structural violence towards which the book has spent its length directing your efforts cannot be countered through mere exposure of individual criminal networks by definition. As Gerritsen's own evidence shows, organ trafficking is a systemic issue linked to global inequity; the arrest of certain traffickers does not change the conditions creating a pool of disposable people. Indeed, the resolution of the novel, which does recover some sense of personal justice, is therefore both a structural requirement and a political cop out.

Such tension is not confined to *Harvest*; rather, as Jameson (1981) argues in his very well-known work on genre fiction, it is a common element in popular narratives that are expressive of structural social problems. This means the individualist logic of the thriller, its concern with both heroic protagonists and villainous lone individuals, its easily resolvable conspiracy, systematically tends to displace attention away from the structural conditions that particular crimes merely instantiate. *Harvest's* location on the cusp between genres facilitates and constrains its critical project: lending a broad readership to the novel's biopolitical issues while narrowing the scope of a structural critique that it can bear.

Even within these broad aesthetic limits, though, there is much here that he calls formal excess, sections and pictures that go beyond the thriller's comforting logics of individual resolution. Foremost among these is how the novel depicts organ farming as an almost dystopic literalization of a global body economy. This is the farm, a space where human bodies have been subsumed directly under the logic of commodity production: these living persons are kept alive in a state of suspended animation, their biological needs met only to the extent, and only so long as they contribute transplantable materials.

Agamben (1998) and his argument of the camp as the nomos of modernity is an inside/outside location that lays bare the reality behind sovereign power. The camp is, in Agamben's reading, where bare life is most starkly revealed, devoid of all political quality and reduced to the simple fact of biological life. The organ farm in the novel performs a similar service within its imaginary geography: it is a space where the biopolitical logic of the global body economy becomes legible, stripped of the ideologies which render it invisible in reality.

This study of *Harvest* as a kind of implicit biopolitical critique evokes further inquiries about how popular fictional works serve to mediate

collective perceptions of systemic forms of social violence. In her study of empathy and narrative, Keen argues that fiction's power to evoke an emotional identification with characters in circumstances of profound vulnerability can create kinds of political understanding which more ephemerally abstract modes of analysis cannot (Keen, 2007). This is a genre particularly well suited for inducing visceral responses to kinds of corporeal violence that might otherwise seem abstract, given the thriller's focus on physical danger and survival.

As a physician, Gerritsen gives *Harvest* procedural credibility that is vital to this effective, political role. The clinical detail of the novel, its portrayal of transplant procedures, immunosuppressive protocols, and outside guidelines for organ viability, makes it a reliable companion to this unseen world that most readers will never actually experience. This epistemic authority thus consolidates the exercise of political authority over the novel's critique: If the medical details are correct, so too may be the political diagnosis. As such, Gerritsen's identity as a physician is not just a biographic coincidence but rhetorical capital utilised for the sake of the novel's critique.

5. Conclusions

Through the theoretical prisms of Foucault's biopower (2003a), combined with Agamben's notion of bare life (1998), and Mbembe's necro-politics (2003), this paper has suggested that *Harvest* is a landmark work of popular biopolitical literature. The novel charts with substantial precision the topographical economy of bodily vulnerability generated by and in turn sustaining the global organ trade, indexing that which produces its generalised availability for biopolitical extraction: poverty, statelessness, economic desperation, and institutional corruption. The way it deploys the thriller genre both expands and narrows this important project: on one hand, producing broad affective investment while imposing a formal demand for individual resolution that partially displaces what would otherwise be the structural analysis in the novel. This reading has broader implications for the relationship between popular fiction and biopolitical discourse. Gerritsen's novel is taking part in a cultural discussion of the international body economy that academics, medical ethicists, human rights lawyers and investigative journalists are having at the same time. The argument of this analysis is that popular fiction is not a tardy or debased form of that conversation but rather part and parcel with it as one strand in a larger discursive weave capable by virtue of size, form, and fluidity to generate sources of political thought and subjective investment





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that can converse sometimes more effectively than the better articulated and generally less accessible academic theories. Finally, you must also acknowledge how much the novel continues to matter. With its emphasis on the hurdles that have kept transplantable organs scarce, the economic desperation out of which trafficking is born and the institutional cultures that maintain it, her novel has not shown its age in the nearly three decades since it was published. If anything, indeed, the transnationalisation of transplant tourism and opening new markets for organ sales, along with persistent inequities in global health financing, have exacerbated the biopolitical logics identified by Gerritsen's novel. Today, reading *Harvest* is not a measure of its historical value, but rather witnessing it as an immediate critical intervention in relations of power that still shape who lives and dies today.

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