

Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life

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If one is not a human being, what is one?
—Achille Mbembe¹

*Go get slaughtered and we promise you a long and
pleasant life.*
—Michel Foucault²

“If one is not a human being, what is one?” To the extent that one *is*, one is, obviously, a human being—one’s apparent humanity intimate with one’s existence, one’s subjective life. Or perhaps this is less than obvious, if existence and life are themselves rendered unspeakable or unthinkable, if existence and life are stripped of their salient meaning. Thus, in addition to asking “what” a human being is, a further question is echoed in Achille Mbembe’s question, in the repetition of the “one,” of a one that is many. There is perhaps no better preliminary definition of politics than this—the nature of the relation between the one and the many. What is a human being? In addition to this “what”-question, which we might call a question of content, the form of Mbembe’s question is also and foremost an address to us, his readers. Thus, his question is moreover implicitly a “who”-question, a question that interpellates us in a certain way and demands a response from each of us—a question that calls human being into question and asks us what it means to *be* human, since the identity of these terms cannot be presumed.

But as long as we ourselves are in question, so too is our access to the normative conditions within which any adequate response to the human question might be formulated. Mbembe’s question—both “what” and “who”—remains unanswered and in part unanswerable because it calls the oneness of the

one into question: “If *one* is not a human being, what is *one*?” Who or what is the singular referent here? Am *I* the one, is it unequivocally *me*? Or is it rather some abstract, unitary *human being* in general, some universal notion of *the human*? And so, when he asks me, his reader, this question, Mbembe’s formulation purposely begs the question of my own humanity, mobilizing a disturbing ambivalence in the very question of my life, right there where I thought it was most obvious, right there when I took myself as his unequivocal addressee. Shall I answer or remain silent? And if I speak, how can I be certain I will speak in the name of human being? What, Mbembe seems to ask, are the norms of my speech, and the norms of my being human?

Michel Foucault’s apostrophization of the sovereign voice invokes no less of a normative crisis: “Go get slaughtered and we promise you a long and pleasant life.” Here, with an ironic tone, Foucault characterizes the sovereign state as a power that both commands and promises. It is ironic because the promise directly contravenes the command: logically, if I am killed, my life will be anything but “long and pleasant.” Yet there is another sense in which the command/promise is *not* meant to stand as self-contradictory. The command/promise is spoken to a *you* who, like Mbembe’s addressee, is not one, a *you* whose oneness is radically put into play, whose oneness is spoken in the name of the many. The nameless “we” who both commands and promises speaks to an equally nameless “you,” a “you” who is only ambivalently included in the “we,” if at all. Clearly, the life that you are commanded to sacrifice, the existence you are commanded to revoke, is not the same as the life that you are promised. So how is it that my singular life—the only one I have to give—can be mapped onto a collective political life, the life of a nation or of a people whose oneness is meant to be unquestionable?

The strategic ambivalence of Mbembe’s and Foucault’s words calls to mind the well-known theory of the king’s two bodies.³ The king, the sovereign, is not one, and despite his death, his unending life is a sort of rhetorical and collective achievement purchased at the price of the many. The life of sovereign power is a life that is lived in the shadow of death—many deaths, nameless and innumerable, disavowed and forgotten. As Foucault remarks, “in terms of his relationship with the sovereign, the subject is, by rights, neither dead nor alive.”⁴ This paper will be about death, many deaths—ambivalent ones—not in the vain effort to name or enumerate them but to try to begin to understand how death informs our political life today. Admittedly, “death informing life” will seem counter-intuitive or even insane to us because, as Foucault has claimed, in the last two centuries we no longer properly *speak* of death. Discourses on death are as forgotten and disavowed as the nameless and innumerable deaths themselves. In the last two centuries, Foucault argues, political and sovereign discourses have focused instead on *life*. Life has eclipsed death. In the name of life, the “mass grave” has become popularized, making death(s) nameless and innumerable, obscure and obscured. In this vein, the sovereign command to “go get slaughtered” has nothing to do with (one’s) certain death; it is spoken in the name of life, from the exquisite purity and goodness of the life that is promised to come, either here on Earth or in some heavenly New Jerusalem.

Our age is, therefore, the age of life, the age of what Foucault calls “biopolitics”—a

politics that is organized by and for the control and regulation of life. Biopolitics is politics informed by a discourse on life that is *about* life as much as it appears, strategically, to *belong* to life itself, a natural extension of life's sacred—and thus unquestionable—value. Foucault summarizes the power of biopolitics as follows: “the endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race.”⁵ Biopolitics is, then, the rational, sovereign regulation and control of the population. This remains the dominant political paradigm in Western democracies today, while it is increasingly inflected by neoliberal ideology. Life itself is regulated, maximized, and harnessed through governmental policy, free-market global capitalism, ever-increasing juridicization, medicalization, etc.—the moral mission of a “secular sacred.” Such a view of life is promoted, discursively, as a universal good. It operates as a virtual cosmology for us, its subjects. And such a discourse makes it very comfortable, if not necessary, to disavow death as something almost immoral and alien, to forget that the price of life is often death itself. In the name of life, death is forbidden. What would it mean, then, to speak in the name of death? Is such speech possible?

Introduction: The Suicide Bomber

In this paper, I offer a modest discussion on the suicide bomber, whose own death, as well as those of his or her victims, necessitates a renewed discourse on death for our time. In recent years, a spate of books has appeared on suicide bombing, often focusing on the conflict in Israel-Palestine in particular. While these books frequently historicize the conflict(s), several of them are also very concerned to understand and to explain the causes or the “logic” of the suicide bomber. For instance, Robert Pape promises to deliver just such a “logic” in his book, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. And many of the books turn to an “insider” account: Barbara Victor’s *Army of Roses* treats Palestinian women who are suicide bombers, for example, while Nadia Taysir Dabbagh’s *Suicide in Palestine* lends a narrative voice to suicide bombers, as do Wendy Pearlman’s *Occupied Voices*, Christopher Reuter’s *My Life Is a Weapon*, and Anne Marie Oliver and Paul F. Steinberg’s *The Road to Martyrs’ Square*, to name but a few.⁶

Together, they deeply challenge the Western mass media’s oversimplification of events and their conditions, offering a more complex—and arguably more just—picture of the social, political, and historical dimensions of the conflict(s). In an effort to debunk a mediatized and Orientalizing⁷ discourse of the “typical” suicide bomber lustfully in pursuit of heavenly virgins, we find in these texts a whole range of themes, from a discussion of regional and global history and politics to relevant aspects of material, religious, and familial obligations. Here I cite from an empirical study by Scott Atran, whose conclusions are not atypical in this scholarship:

suicide terrorists span a population’s normal distribution in terms of education, socioeconomic status and personality type (e.g., introvert vs. extrovert). ... Overall, suicide terrorists exhibit no socially dysfunctional attri-

butes (fatherless, friendless, jobless) or suicidal symptoms (e.g., affective disorders, substance abuse, repeated suicide attempts). . . . They don't express "hopelessness" or a sense of "nothing to lose" for lack of life alternatives that would be consistent with "economic rationality" (i.e., if there is only one option, and no reasonable alternatives, you take it)—although despair is often the interpretation given by and to Western media in statements targeted for United States and European audiences.⁸

This image of the suicide bomber is probably not what first comes to mind for us. Indeed, the terrorist's very ordinariness might be shocking. But it is this ordinariness that the Western media must elide, or else it will be faced with questions it cannot easily answer. The media's fictions are more comforting.

Contrary to popular Western news media, then, discussions of suicide missions in "the Arab media emphasize expressions of hopefulness and 'everything to lose.'"⁹ Pape concurs: his remarkable study includes detailed empirical facts about "every suicide bombing and attack around the globe from 1980 through 2003—315 attacks in all."¹⁰ Based on his in-depth demographic study which probes the ostensible causes of suicide bombing, he concludes: "modern suicide terrorism occurs mainly in campaigns of suicide attacks carried out by organized groups for specific political goals and extending over a considerable period of time."¹¹ In other words, we are mistaken to emphasize the "psychopathology" or "religious fanaticism" of the suicide bomber him- or herself. Pape explicitly downplays the religious dimensions of the attacks, stressing that religion "is rarely the root cause."¹² Instead, he writes, "suicide terrorism is virtually always a response to foreign occupation."¹³ This conclusion would not be contradicted by the many attacks in Iraq since 2003 and also now in Afghanistan; indeed, we might see these attacks as a resistance to the U.S. occupation of those countries.

This is not to deny that religion can play a complex role in recruitment, training, and so on, but it is to say that religion is rarely *the* "root cause," it is rarely *the* motivating factor. In fact, according to Pape's study, the majority of the world's suicide attacks were carried out by the Tamil Tigers, a group that is expressly *antireligious*. Jacques Derrida, in a discussion of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, also succinctly expresses this view: "Every terrorist in the world claims to be responding in self-defense to a prior terrorism on the part of the state, one that simply went by other names and covered itself with all sorts of more or less credible justifications."¹⁴ The nature of such competing claims makes it impossible to arbitrate between them and therefore impossible to determine the root "causes" or "reasons" behind suicide terrorism once and for all.

The argument of this essay *moves toward* a different kind of discourse. Insofar as this is possible, it is perhaps even hopeful in the face of such manifest hopelessness. I address neither the "causes" nor the "reasons" motivating the suicide bomber—I prefer to follow Mbembe and Foucault and call human being into question rather than impose some colonizing vision of causality or reason. I take inspiration from Mbembe, who sets the following challenge for postcolonial studies: "we need to go

beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination, such as resistance vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony, totalization vs. detotalization.”¹⁵ I therefore turn to a discussion on death, whether we choose to call it suicide or sacrifice. In Mbembe’s words, we are forced “to discuss the status of *death-as-such* or, more precisely, of death’s life or *the life of death*.”¹⁶ Through such a discussion, we might find that death—death-in-life—drives a wedge between conventional binaries and opens us perforce onto something new, inaugurating a new discourse, new hope for our living together. Thus, how might the death of the suicide bomber him- or herself begin to change the face of political life today? What is the rhetorical force of such death, with its myriad social, cultural, and political effects?

I argue that thanatopolitics—the politics of death—is both a response *and* a resistance to biopolitical power and to the Western conception of rational sovereignty with which biopolitics is allied. But it is more than this. While the resistance of the suicide bomber is sparked within the circuits of power, this resistance also approaches the absolute: he or she destroys the very condition of possibility for biopolitical regulation and control. Because the suicide bomber usually dies in the blast, for instance, he or she cannot be brought within the mechanism of justice. While suicide bombing is destructive, while it is clearly a force of negation, I argue that we must also understand this act as *productive*—it produces something, it has independent rhetorical effects which are not easily comprehended within a biopolitical logic. These effects impinge on everyday life and extend beyond war zones; their symbolic valence is unable to be contained or explained by our current moral norms or codes. How do we understand such death, the homicide–suicide, when it is explicitly carried out as a political act, an ultimate—and productive—act of refusal? What is “produced”? And how might this prompt us to reconsider our own faith in those liberal-humanist notions of the subject that have founded ethics and politics for so long? To begin to answer these questions, I address the effects of suicide bombing, and I read them as rhetorical, as effects which produce a particular response, a response that cannot be grasped through biopolitical reason alone. The hope is both to avoid the impasse imposed by the sovereign subject of liberal humanism, bequeathed to us from modern Enlightenment philosophy, and (at the other end of the spectrum) a postmodern nihilism that seemingly destroys the ethic of responsibility that is traditionally aligned with sovereign agency. Rather than terminating in a well-worn discourse that would blindly condemn these acts by reaffirming the sacred value of (biopolitical) life, I argue that a discourse on death will both challenge the hegemony of biopolitical reason while opening onto a renewed way of conceiving what is sacred in political life today.

The argument that follows has four main parts. First, I begin with a discussion on Foucault’s concept of biopolitics: in particular, why a discourse on death will be a tremendous challenge for us today. In brief, our biopolitical terms are inadequate, and so, within this frame, the death of the suicide bomber will remain illegible and highly problematic. Second, I turn to Kant, who is one of the first philosophers in Western culture to discuss suicide. I look at how Kant views life and death vis-à-

vis sacred human dignity or worth [*Würde*]. Kant touches on one reason why the “suicidal” aspect of the suicide bomber is so horrifying, and yet the activities of the suicide bomber forcibly blur the Kantian distinction between “suicide” and “sacrifice.” In Kant, I argue, we find the roots of modern biopolitics as it has been taken up by the state—but, again, this is an ultimately fragile biopolitical logic that the suicide bomber threatens to disrupt absolutely. Third, in his work on the imagination and the sublime, once more it is Kant who helps us to think beyond the logical structures of biopolitics and to theorize the kind of disruption the suicide bomber’s death represents. This means reading Kant against the Kantians, perhaps, and it offers a rhetorical model for ways we might begin to think outside of or beyond the horizons of our liberal tradition. And fourth, finally, my argument considers the explicitly rhetorical dimensions of death as they relate to wider aspects of bodily integrity and community. Here my reading turns to death in the spaces of everyday life, as excruciating as this may be, with the abiding hope that together we might begin to imagine new possibilities for shared political life.

Foucault: Biopolitics and the Silencing of Death Today

We’re asked to live out our calling as Americans. We’re asked to honor our own standards, announced on the day of our founding in the Declaration of Independence. We’re asked by our convictions and tradition and compassion to build a culture of life.

—George W. Bush⁷

Death is unspeakable. It is silenced by the austere and pious rhetoric of nationalism, “honor,” “compassion,” and the “culture of life” itself. As he is signing the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003, President George W. Bush repeatedly claims that “We’re asked. . . .” However, we must ourselves ask: Who is this “we”? Who asks—or calls us? And in whose name? How are we interpellated by the sovereign doctrine of life itself? At the heart of such a discourse on life, death becomes the most intangible and invisible of problems—that which may never be asked. Even our best scientists, doctors, and jurists cannot say with certainty what death is as a concept or an event, and yet death casts a very long shadow over the history of our twentieth-century experience. In a Nietzschean vein, we might say that death hangs like a question mark, invisibly punctuating the lives of the living. And today, the conditions under which we might answer, by which we might properly *speak* of death, have become increasingly attenuated. Death never happens to *me*, never to *my* self. Death arrives as a veiled intruder, disguised as long-range military or police operations, televised terrorist acts, a virtual event, or as a “surgical strike.” When it happens closer to home, death is understood, again, not on its own terms; instead, it occurs under sanitary conditions, as the mere cessation of life, the failure or limit of medical and political technologies whose principal task is to keep the living alive.

Foucault has famously charted the historical shift in discourse from what was once a discourse on death to our modern ideology of life. Classically, in pre-moderni-

ty, the discourse on death was conceived under Roman law as the *patria potestas*—the power of the family father who enjoyed “the right to ‘dispose’ of the life of his children and his slaves.”¹⁸ This power is summed up in the following formula: “to take life or let live.” Here it was the sovereign’s prerogative to revoke the life of his subjects or to allow them to live—an economy of death, as it were. Thus, in the classical theory of sovereignty, the balance of power “is always tipped in favor of death,”¹⁹ with death as the rubric through which life was understood, almost by default. Life was that invisible-but-pervasive element that was always already there but announced only through its privation—by death, by the rule of the sword, the *gladius dei*.

In modernity, however, there is a reversal of sorts, and the balance of power is tipped in favor of life. “Life” or *bios* is now the rubric through which death must be understood. Life is no longer presumed as given but becomes discursively constituted in relation to political power—a biopolitics that is the purview of the modern sovereign state. Today, Foucault argues, the sovereign state exercises its control most explicitly by means of life, through the lives of the living. This takes the distinct form of regulating life and maximizing or prolonging it. The modern state intervenes with a self-proclaimed moral authority to affect the population’s birth and death rates, aging, disease, hygiene, public health, and welfare; we are governed by ideological marriage laws, “pro-life” policies, “faith-based initiatives,” and so on. The mechanism is technological as much as it is a self-righteous and onerous public morality. Thus, while classical sovereignty is summed up by the formula “to take life or let live,” modern biopolitical state sovereignty has its own formula, namely, the almost godlike power “to make live and let die.”²⁰ The shift from the classical to the modern must be stressed: from taking life to *making live* and from letting live to *letting die*.

Moreover, in modernity, *making live* and *letting die* become logical correlates; they go hand in hand, in proportion to one another. Life, we learn, must be produced and constantly tended. Life must be avowed; death disavowed. Life must be made; death is neither made nor unmade, it just happens, as it were. Thus it is only in modernity, Foucault writes, that we begin to properly *speak* about life—we are *compelled* to speak about it, while we fall silent on the subject of death. In Foucault’s words, “death now becomes . . . the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death.”²¹ In the United States, for example, the death of the convicted criminal on death row is politically constituted as invisible, while the “life” of life, “innocent” life, achieves an anxious and repeated hypervisibility through State legislation (e.g., The Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003 and The Unborn Victims of Violence Act of 2004), religious fundamentalist teaching, the mainstream mass media, and the like. Within this scheme, some lives achieve political value while others are effaced and depoliticized. In a remarkable instance, Terri Schiavo’s life was politicized through the promiscuity of State legislation, fundamentalism, and mass media saturation. Recall the histrionics of George W. Bush, the almost holy head of state, rushing to “save” the life of Terri Schiavo—“it is wise to always err on the side of life,”²² he said—while as Governor of Texas he was famous for signing execution orders and for refusing to grant even a single pardon to anyone on death row. Such

hypocrisies are themselves defended in the name of life. According to this logic, one can be ardently pro-life and yet just as faithfully committed to capital punishment: here the prisoner's death is rationalized first and foremost as that which will prevent the harm of life and save the lives of the living. It is as if the prisoner had already revoked his or her right to life, and, as such, in killing them we do no more than *let* them die—and for the greater good, at that. The prisoner falls back on himself, as Foucault would say, and his public and political death is cast as private and apolitical, a necessity best ignored. His life is life so patently unworthy of life that death is never death as such: he is *homo sacer*.²³

Thus, “life” is swept up in a discourse, produced in and through discourse, through a discursive power-knowledge, vested by the sovereign state. In this view, living individuals cannot be said to “exist” *de facto*, as paradoxical as this sounds, but they must be *made* to live, subjects whose lives are perpetually manufactured and whose livingness and salvation are indexed by regulation, control, normativization, and state administration. Through burgeoning governmental and medical technologies, the individual's life now counts first as a biological member of the state's population, one biopolitical entity among a mass of others, or, as Foucault sums up, “man-as-species.”²⁴ Effectively, the “individual” is displaced and becomes “regularized” by “a technology in which bodies are replaced by general biological processes.”²⁵ And here, finally, the Other is “allowed” to die in order to promote the sacred health and well-being of the population—“us against them,” those whose death is merely an unfortunate side-effect, quickly forgotten, disavowed: “the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer.”²⁶ In Foucault's apostrophization, we hear the ominous echo of eugenics programs, starting with Francis Galton in Britain at the close of the nineteenth century and adopted in the early twentieth century by the Nazis, but also in much of Europe, America, and Canada. We can begin to understand how, under this modern biopolitical logic, “life” itself can become the ultimate apologia for *Rassenhygiene*, compulsory sterilization programs, “mercy killing” or state murder, and even genocide. And yet we proclaim very loudly that we have not actually “killed” anyone, that *their* death has not occurred by *my* hand, and that according to *my* idea of responsibility, based on my sovereign reason and autonomy, their death has just happened, a side-effect, perhaps, and so I as a single individual am not responsible.

But we must interrogate this logic and unearth the conditions of our own sovereign rationality, of our hegemony. We must ask ourselves difficult questions concerning terrorism and responsibility, like the following, posed by Derrida:

[D]oes terrorism have to work only through death? Can't one terrorize without killing? And does killing necessarily mean putting to death? Isn't it also “letting die”? Can't “letting die,” “not wanting to know that one is letting others die”—hundreds of millions of human beings, from hunger, AIDS, lack of medical treatment, and so on—also be part of a “more or less” conscious and deliberate terrorist strategy?²⁷

Here, Derrida disrupts our biopolitical view that it is only the “terrorists” who take others’ lives, directly or indirectly. Derrida disrupts the self-satisfied position of Western sovereignty, inviting us to rethink what we normally classify as terrorism, and, at the same time, he calls on us each to imagine the forms of responsibility we have within current geopolitics. We are asked to evaluate the force of our intentions and whether we can be—or ought to be—held responsible for what we do not—or cannot—willfully intend. We can hardly entertain the idea that our merely “letting someone die” is tantamount to terrorism, though Derrida’s point is that we are ethically obliged to think in these terms—or to find the terms within which such a discourse could take place.

Here we arrive at a passionate critique of modern liberal humanism, including the brand of rational sovereignty with which it is coupled. In Mbembe’s words, it is “the critique of Eurocentrism—a sort of singular subject that, while trying to pass for the universal *tout court*, always ends up legitimizing the violence of its irrationality in the very name of reason.”²⁸ But such a critique does not entitle us to embrace wholeheartedly a free-floating sort of postmodern relativism as the cure. I do not believe that we ought to promote an empty and ultimately impracticable celebration of difference in which we can never say what is right and what is obviously wrong (even if this is a gross caricature of postmodernism positions). In the simplest terms, I would suggest that our current discourse is doomed, that we must try to work together to invent new ones, to find new modes of comprehension and communication, new ways of seeing. The challenge is to navigate a course *between* postmodern relativism and modern liberalism. On the one hand, relativism holds that ethical, social, and legal values will change across place and time and that we ought not to impose our own idiosyncratic values on others. On the other hand, liberalism maintains that *there are indeed universal human values* and that we can *know* them and must *act* upon them.²⁹ So here we are on the horns of a dilemma: it seems the choice is between a messy moral/cultural relativism that means we can never decide anything, or a liberalism, the very universals of which will always pose the threat of totalitarian violence. Although I have grossly oversimplified these positions, one of these two political models is all that seems tenable to many people today.

If we feel forced to choose between the rational sovereignty of modern liberalism, on the one hand, and postmodern moral/cultural relativism, on the other, this is because we lack political imagination, our thinking is monochromatic. How can we begin to imagine *new* forms of political subjectivity, *new* forms of political agency—maybe even a postsovereign subject? I would like to complicate things a little and set our imagination to work by asking whether the death of the suicide terrorist is really a suicide or whether it should rather be conceived as a sacrifice or some other emergent form of life. I turn now to the ambivalent death of the suicide terrorist because he or she captivates our imagination, but also because it is here that we might begin to imagine things otherwise.

Kant on Suicide

In honesty, if life is like this, and work is like this, death is more honourable.
 —Saeed, 21-year-old Palestinian male³⁰

Kant's depiction of life and personhood is important for us because it is a forerunner of the modern biopolitical discourse on life as this has shifted from the "religious" or "spiritual sacred" to a "secular sacred." In this view, biopolitics is a secularized state theology. Kant stands at the crossroads of theology and increasingly secular Enlightenment philosophies, precisely at that historical moment when spirituality and philosophy were going their separate ways.

Kant captures for us what is perhaps the additional or doubly incomprehensible horror in the act of suicide bombing—namely, the suicide itself. There is something about the suicidal aspect of these acts, I would suggest, that adds an inassimilable and morally grave dimension to the act itself—a "natural horror," as Kant calls it. Kant appeals to natural law, and, in this, his argument is at least implicitly religious. But his argument is just as applicable today if we understand that the divine prohibition on suicide has been secularized as a homologous prohibition on the part of the biopolitical state apparatus. In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant begins, significantly, by privileging the philosophical over the theological. He states: "Suicide is not an abomination because God has forbidden it; it is forbidden by God because it is abominable," which is to say, because it is "inherently heinous," because man "may not use his freedom against himself."³¹ Turning his freedom against himself is, according to Kant, self-contradictory: "To use life for its own destruction, to use life for producing lifelessness, is self-contradictory."³² Why? Because for Kant, freedom is the prior and enabling condition of life and, on principle, freedom cannot—must not—be abrogated.

Thus, for Kant, there is a higher principle than life. And this principle demands sometimes that I be willing to sacrifice my life. This principle is personhood, which is invested with dignity and a sacred value: "Humanity in our own person is an object of the highest esteem and is inviolable in us; rather than dishonour it, or allow it to be dishonoured, man ought to sacrifice his life."³³ Nevertheless, Kant wishes to maintain a sharp distinction between suicide and sacrifice, the one dishonorable, the other, supremely honorable. It remains impermissible, he writes, to commit suicide (defined as premeditated intent to kill oneself) in the course of self-sacrifice, however contradictory this sounds. When my death occurs as a sacrifice, it cannot stem "directly" from me, it cannot be by my own hand, but is understood, Kant claims, as the intervention of "fate." Thus, the soldier's death on the battlefield is "fateful." Insofar as it an invocation of Thanatos, this specter of death must not be conjured or willed by me. By these lights, we might fairly question whether the death of the suicide bomber meets the conditions of suicide in Kant's terms: is the suicide bomber's own death truly willed by him or her, or is this death a consequence of fate, part of a larger historical mechanism the particular effects of which are somehow beyond

his or her control? Is this death, paradoxically perhaps, a preservation of his or her “humanity”?

A close reading of Kant suggests that this is in part possible. When it comes to our own life and the dignity or sacred value of our humanity, the rational will and autonomy of the individual agent is beholden to these higher principles. Therefore, although the death of the suicide terrorist might *literally* occur by his or her own hand, there remains a question of will and of responsibility, a question of whose hand this really is, and a question of honor and dignity. We may even speak of this hand figuratively, as an instrument of “fate.” This suggestion might be outrageous to a Western subject who takes for granted the principles of autonomy and reason as the supposedly universal foundations of subjectivity. But, again, in his discussion of suicide terrorism, Derrida demonstrates that we must challenge this understanding of responsibility:

there are historical and political “situations” whose terror operates, so to speak, as if by itself, as the simple result of some apparatus, because of the relations of force in place, without anyone, any conscious subject, any person, any “I,” being really conscious of it or feeling itself responsible for it.³⁴

Derrida challenges our taken-for-granted view of the subject as wholly rational, autonomous, free, and responsible; in this case, he or she is also the subject of “some apparatus” and of the “relations of force in place.” There is nothing to suggest that any of us is ever wholly free from “some apparatus” or from the “relations of force in place.” Nor is it clear that such freedom, were it possible, would be morally superior or more “advanced.”

Kant writes: “If a man cannot preserve his life except by dishonouring his humanity, he ought rather to sacrifice it.”³⁵ It is a complicated judgment, indeed, whether the preservation of the life of the would-be suicide bomber is somehow “dishonorable” to his or her humanity, but Kant is clear, “it is no suicide to risk one’s life against one’s enemies, and even to sacrifice it, in order to observe one’s duties towards oneself.”³⁶ Many who have tried to understand the living conditions of an occupied people or the horror and humiliation of watching family members raped and killed in front of them have argued just this. Scott Atran emphatically concludes, for instance, that “*suicide martyrs are not suicidal*.”³⁷ He suggests instead that they die in order to preserve what they see as their humanity, their sense of a “common good.” Thus, suicide bombers comprise “an emotionally bonded group of fictive kin who willfully commit to die spectacularly for one another and for what is perceived as the common good of alleviating the community’s onerous political and social realities.”³⁸

It is of course impossible to catalogue a community’s political and social realities; more complex still is the set of judgments and perceptions that motivate actions in the name of the common good. The point here is not to exonerate the terrorist’s actions but to submit our own readiness to judge to an honest critique. We make a violent and narcissistic assumption when we take our own Western, individualistic approach to subjectivity as “natural” or “universal.” Such a subjectivity—so foundational for the West since the Enlightenment—is not easily translated into some other

cultures. For instance, according to one Palestinian author, the Arabic term that is commonly translated as “self,” *naf*, can equally “be used in the sense of ‘brother’ or ‘fellow Muslim.’”³⁹ She explains further: “the Islamic concept of the self is more collective and has more connection with the group or community than the Western individualistic, separated sense of self.”⁴⁰ So when Westerners like President Bush declare that “freedom is on the march” and that it is our civilizing and moral mission to “spread freedom” throughout the world,⁴¹ this is problematic on at least three counts: (1) it presumes that those in need of freedom are somehow less developed or primitive and that the Western notion of selfhood reflects a more advanced “historical progress”; (2) those who are the target of such freedom campaigns, if I might call them that, often correctly perceive “freedom” as thinly veiling what are in fact imperialist and neo-colonial objectives; and (3) this idea of “freedom” is itself based on the liberal humanist “self,” which may have little or no currency in a particular culture. Moreover, if unreconstructed notions of selfhood and freedom are the basis for understanding life as we do, it is obvious that “life” will also fail as a universal, transcultural, or transcendent good.

We can see, then, that the suicide terrorist disrupts or begins to deconstruct our sovereign and biopolitical order of things. Indeed, I have highlighted the moral and epistemological ambivalence between suicide and sacrifice, between self and Other and community. In an instant, these deaths wrest control of life from the grip of our hegemonic biopolitical state. There is, then, an ambivalent specter of death that remains inassimilable and incomprehensible within sovereignty’s hermetically self-referential discourse. Before working toward my conclusion, I would like to remain with Kant for a moment. In Kant, we find an unsuspecting ally when we turn to the *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant deals with an aesthetics of the sublime. I do not think we are wrong to see in the terrorist attack something sublime: the sublime can arrive as an incomprehensible beauty or an incomprehensible horror. The point is that here is something that *exceeds* the rational understanding. I also do not think we are mistaken in this moment to call for an aesthetics, which I take in its original sense as *aesthesis* or bodily “sensation.” We must imagine ways to bring politics and aesthetics together critically. Political life cannot be based solely on economic rationality or ordered according to abstract concepts because it is about relations between people, relations that are sometimes beautiful, sometimes horrific, but relations that cannot fairly be understood or guided through the imposition of a logical calculus alone.

Kant on Imagining Otherwise

The imagination is free, so that, over and above that harmony with the concept, it may supply, in an unstudied way, a wealth of undeveloped material for the understanding which the latter disregarded in its concept.

—Immanuel Kant⁴²

What is a death, when it is not one? How shall we begin to understand the added suicidal—or sacrificial—dimension of the suicide bomber? Is the body of this death

“unstudied” or “a wealth of undeveloped material” in Kant’s sense? And in what ways does the suicide bomber challenge our fixed concepts and capture our spirit, whether in sublime horror or in admiration? I am arguing that this added dimension is extradiscursive—or even nondiscursive, nonconceptual; it relies on a particular ethic or even an aesthetic.

For Kant, the imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] enjoys a kind of power or even an agency all its own. It *produces* something—in this case, images [*Bilde*]. Etymologically, the *Einbildungskraft* is a faculty or power [-*kraft*] that gathers the image [*Bild*] together into a kind of “oneness” [*Ein-*]; moreover, in German, *Bildung* means “education” or “formation,” which connotes an active process. And curiously, the term *Einbildung* means “conceit,” “fantasy,” “illusion,” or “fiction.” In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes:

The products of the imagination are of an entirely different nature; no one can explain or give an intelligible concept of them; each is a kind of *monogram*, a mere set of particular qualities, determined by no assignable rule, and forming rather a blurred sketch drawn from diverse experiences than a determinate image.⁴³

Thus, according to Kant, these images are of “an entirely different nature” than concepts, the products of reason and the understanding. The German word *Bild* loses something when rendered by the English translation, “image.” On the one hand, a *Bild* is indeed a straightforward image or picture of something, a representation, and here we are justified to speak of it as a “product” of the power of the imagination. But on the other hand, a *Bild* is also much more: it is “the look” or “the face” that something presents to us from the world—the way something strikes our eye, the way it impresses us. For example, “The town *looks* friendly” or “The movie star maintains a certain *image*.” Significantly, this “agency” does not wholly belong to the modern rational and autonomous subject. The imagination interfaces with the world, and the products of the imagination, Kant insists, *cannot* be understood conceptually—the imagination “schematiz[es] without a concept.”⁴⁴ Instead, the *contents* of the imagination are “a blurred sketch drawn from diverse experiences,” where the aspect of one thing suggests or conjures up a host of metaphorical relations to others. In the imagination, *content* relies on *form*; it is a way of seeing. Each image acts as a kind of “monogram.” So the power or “agency” of the imagination is not simply *in* the subject or even in the subject’s *mind*: it is not a *mental* power of representation, but almost a *worldly* power that takes place in between us and things.

The world in its pre-conceptual plenitude calls us to imagine new possibilities, different constellations, different relations—to see a new face, a new complexion, in those ultimately inassimilable faces that greet our own. The agency in question comes equally from the world, as it were—or perhaps even *in the first instance* it comes from the world, the way the world is presented to us, the ways in which the world mobilizes particular relations between its terms. This ethical work does not succeed when it fixes and remains steadfast to its definitions and conceptual structures, but is ethical insofar as it *keeps open* the space of imaginative difference, when

it *puts into play* the space between self and self, and between self and Other. As Kant remarks in the *Critique of Judgment*, “the imagination is playing, as it were, while it contemplates the shape.”⁴⁵ Such ethical work “at play” is a tremendously serious aesthetics; it should not laboriously close the gap by proposing “assignable rules” or conceptual legislation, but it operates through the implicit acknowledgment that this is impossible and that my reason reaches a *limit* here, that what I imagine is, as Kant says, a “monogram”—merely emblematic, partial, a truncated signature that bears the incomplete trace of my telling while motivating new interpretations and different signatures.

At the end of Kant’s discussion on the imagination, he makes an oblique but unmistakable reference to a familiar biblical passage: “The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.”⁴⁶ Appearing at the end, it comes as a kind of ultimate explanation—or “monogram”—for how the imagination works and its central importance in Kant’s critical apparatus. The imagination, he writes, is what is “conjoined with a given concept” or “add[ed] to a concept”⁴⁷ but not as a mere supplement. Here Kant seems to admit that the concept *alone* is no more than a *dead letter*. The concept alone would promise death, unless the imagination breathes life into it. As far as aesthetic ideas go, the concept is clearly inadequate. No determinate concept can successfully represent aesthetic ideas. And here Kant does not hesitate to speak of the concept as a rational linguistic form which ultimately fails to be true to life: “no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.”⁴⁸ Instead, he writes, we must “add to a concept the thoughts of much that is ineffable.”⁴⁹ Thus, the imagination is the domain of the ineffable, of that which cannot be spoken in the here and now. This is what the imagination does, marrying an aesthetic affect and a rational concept—remarkably, through tropes, such as metaphors, “aesthetic attributes,” and “kindred presentations.”⁵⁰ In Kant’s own words, the imagination works through a “feeling . . . which quickens [*beleben*: breathes “life” into] our cognitive powers and connects language, which otherwise would be mere letters, with spirit.”⁵¹ I find these passages remarkable for their sensitivity to the power of rhetoric as an essential and irreducible moment of human being.

Although we ourselves must breathe life into words in speaking them, the “we” here is not one; subjectivity is not sovereign. This “spirit” is not ours alone; it is not simply a “product” of the imagination, bestowed on an imaginary object through speech. It is a rhetorical spirit. Spirit comes from the world, and it captures us when we are in-the-world in a certain way. It is significant that Kant illustrates “spirit” at the beginning of this remarkable section through a discussion on fine art and human sexual desire. A poem, he writes, can be “quite nice and elegant and yet have no spirit.”⁵² Likewise, a story may be “precise and orderly,” or an oration “both thorough and graceful,” and yet neither may have “spirit.” “Even about some women,” Kant ventures, “we will say that she is pretty, communicative, and polite, but that she has no spirit.”⁵³ In these cases, the worldliness of the thing itself fails to convey a spirit, fails to capture our spirit, fails to engage us aesthetically, in a world somewhere between objects and our conceptual representations of them.

Applying Kant’s insight as a political commentary becomes essential if we are to

understand those sublime political acts that “capture our spirit” but that fail to be fully explicable according to rational, conceptual discourse. The death of the suicide bomber him- or herself poses as just such an inassimilable remainder in the politics of armed combat, and it is Kant, here, who prompts us to argue for a metaphorical reading, a reading which marries aesthetics, politics, and ethics. If we fail to remain sensitive to these rhetorical and imaginative dimensions, we will fail to do justice to the way that the death—or sacrifice—of the suicide bomber impresses us most intimately. Indeed, there is an ethical imperative to mobilize a rhetoric of the imaginary so that images or impressions never contract into mere mechanical productions.

Conclusion: The Language of Everyday Life

Dropping cluster bombs from the air is somehow deemed, by Western leaders at least, to be morally superior. ... Why dying with your victim should be seen as a greater sin than saving yourself is unclear.

—Jacqueline Rose⁵⁴

In her short article, “Deadly Embrace,” Jacqueline Rose offers a reading of the suicide bomber that pays close attention to the metaphorical dimensions of his or her act. This is *not* to argue that these deaths are “merely metaphorical”: they are *not* unreal deaths, but if we are to begin to understand them in our age of biopolitics, we will need an engaged analysis of their *rhetorical effects*. And we do consider the suicidal aspect of these attacks to be disproportionately “sinful,” as Rose suggests. But why? “Suicide bombing kills far fewer people than conventional warfare; the reactions it provokes must, therefore, reside somewhere other than in the number of the dead.”⁵⁵ Hence, our strong moral reaction is provoked less by the number of the dead than by the *kind* of death it signifies.⁵⁶ First, there is the suicidal dimension of the death itself, which I have discussed above, and second, the attacks take place in the spaces of everyday life.

Rose claims the following: “You can die, but you can’t commit suicide, on your own.”⁵⁷ Her statement might first strike us as paradoxical. If we die on our own, would it not be truer still to say that we commit suicide on our own? After all, is this not the very definition of suicide? But this view assumes that the act of suicide ends at the moment of death, that the suicide does not live to haunt the places of everyday life. Unlike “natural” death, the suicide never really ends; it is an act of cruelty that has far-reaching social and historical valences. It is a wound that never closes. Whether or not it results in the literal death of others, our suicide is never entirely our own, never merely our own death. “All suicides kill other people,” she writes, and we might add, the suicide continues to kill. It is not a trauma in the traditional sense; it is not an event that is strictly contained by the past, but its temporality is distinctly futural. It cannot, strictly speaking, be mourned. In his discussion on the suicide attacks of September 11, Derrida captures such a futurity, writing, “this weapon is so terrifying because it comes from the to-come, from the future, a future so radically to come that it resists even the grammar of the future anterior.”⁵⁸ Thus, the suicide attack is

an event that never *will have been*, and it is in this that it is so traumatizing, so inassimilable. “Traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is ‘over and done with.’”⁵⁹

For those who are haunted, this kind of death becomes a way of life. It represents what Rose calls an “unbearable intimacy” and a “passionate identification”: “you take the enemy with you in a deadly embrace.”⁶⁰ I would argue that our horror is, in part, deeply connected to bodily integrity and all that this vital integrity represents—from the dignity of the human person to the containment of political states and the imaginary inviolability of state sovereignty. Here it is not just the livingness of the body that is integral; death, too, has become a vital site around which personhood and politics constellate. This is not just the death of the body—the *nekros*—pure and simple, but much more. Honoring the dead extends across cultures, each in its own way. According to Jewish custom, for instance, the soul (*neshamah*) is said to remain close to the body until burial. The body therefore figures distinctly in the preparation and burial of the deceased, and the strict principle of *kevod ha-met*—dignity and honor of the dead—is followed. It is important for the body to be buried within one day of death; the body is ritually washed, dressed in shrouds of white linen, and committed to the earth. “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”⁶¹ The integrity of the body is of great importance. The sanctity of the body is maintained after mortal life has ended, and, for some, this means adhering to strict principles of bodily integrity after death.

I would like to conclude by turning to some graphic and disturbing images. These depictions and the experience they convey might give us some insight into the language of everyday life for the suicide bomber and for his or her victims. These images are not meant to be gratuitously violent, like those we have grown too used to seeing on television, nor are they meant to be easily dismissible, as, for example, through an argument about the “banality of evil.” I hope, for a moment, that they mark the interruption of all argument, in part through their incommensurable everydayness and the attack on integrity that these depictions convey. In this way, I hope they fire the imagination. We must dwell with these images, allowing the imagination to be met by the world. We must resist our sovereign will to impose too quickly a rational judgment on these scenes, to colonize them. In fact, as I suggested above, Kant’s point is that we *cannot* fairly impose our reason and that, in order to do so, we would have to turn away from this unbearable reality rather than face its truth.

First, I offer an account by one member of Israel’s volunteer police auxiliary called ZAKA, a Hebrew acronym that stands for “Identification of Victims of Disaster.” Comprised of volunteers numbering at least 900, this ultra-orthodox group arrives on the scene of suicide attacks not just to save the lives of the living—biopolitically—but to identify and gather the pieces of the dead so that the entire corpse can be buried on the day of death, if possible. The matter-of-factness of this volunteer’s account adds to its unbearable pathos:

The powerful C4 explosives now being used as the primary blast component in a Hamaside bomber’s attack are so powerful that the 5 mile per sec-

ond blast front generated by the detonation wreaks its destruction in about 1/1000th of a second. ... Mostly, C4 just blows things apart. Into tiny fragments. It even destroys finger nails so thoroughly that sometimes it can take a few days just to figure out how many people were blown apart by the blast. Body fragments can be rendered into pieces half the size of a dime. The bones of the Hamaside bomber are rendered into shards that themselves inflict damage on others.⁶²

Victims of suicide attacks are not merely “embraced,” to use Rose’s term, or cloaked in the exploded body of the bomber. They are penetrated by it. The attacker’s body is literally weaponized. Shards of bone become human shrapnel. The body of the bomber and the bodies of his or her victims become inextricable; it is impossible to separate one from the other. This is for many the language or currency of everyday life: finger nails and dimes lose their everyday familiarity, destroying the world as we know it. They become grotesque. Ritual cleansing of the deceased becomes impossible on two counts: not only are these bodies in pieces, but it will be impossible to determine where one body ends and the other begins.

One cannot help here but to conjure horrific associations to the Nazi death camps, where the dead were routinely referred to as “*Figuren*”—forms without a face, as it were, nameless and innumerable, nobody and everybody at once. The attacker is forever a part of his or her target. Blood has mixed with blood. In this light, the act of the suicide bomber can be said to *exceed* murder because the death is both literal *and* figurative. Arguably, the crime is not just against the victims and their loved ones but against all those for whom their blood is a powerful metaphor and for whom their splintered bodies represent the broken integrity of a people.

The attack destroys not merely the dignity of the living but the dignity that we assign to death itself as something absolute and irreversible, as something that is shrouded in ritual and symbology. As Scott Atran has written, “The primary target is not those actually killed or injured in the attack, but those made to witness it.”⁶³ The witness remains to try to make sense of the attack, ensuring its inassimilable futurity, not just in relation to his or her own life, which is implicitly threatened, but through the specter of death, death-in-life. But we need not assume that the witness is the one who remains alive. The dead can witness, too, and it is a thanatopolitics that comes from their “perspective.” In the Islamic context, the power of the dead as witness is made explicit in the language itself: “The Arabic word for a martyr, *shaheed*, means ‘witness,’ as in ‘a witness to the truth.’”⁶⁴ This is undoubtedly counter-intuitive. To begin to understand, we would have to fully comprehend the body as the intersection of innumerable synecdochal relations. In other words, the body stands in for but also participates in a textured and irreducible reality, part of an everyday language or way of life that feeds the imagination, with hope or with despair.

Synecdochal relations bind together ethnic groups in multiplex ways. Attacks do not just kill but also terrorize when it is these bonds that are shattered. To give yet another illustration, this time from Palestine, consider the life-and-death effects

of what some critics call “infrastructural warfare.” Here again we must dwell with images of quotidian violence, almost a litany of them:

fortified structures, military posts, and roadblocks everywhere; buildings that bring back painful memories of humiliation, interrogations, and beatings; curfews that imprison hundreds of thousands in their cramped homes every night from dusk to daybreak; soldiers patrolling the unlit streets, frightened by their own shadows; children blinded by rubber bullets; parents shamed and beaten in front of their families; soldiers urinating on fences. . . . [B]ulldozing: demolishing houses and cities; uprooting olive trees; riddling water tanks with bullets; bombing and jamming electronic communications; digging up roads; destroying electricity transformers; tearing up airport runways; disabling television and radio transmitters; smashing computers; ransacking cultural and politico-bureaucratic symbols of the proto-Palestinian state; looting medical equipment.⁶⁵

This kind of death exceeds biophysical death. It is not the mere cessation of life and not even merely an attack on the conditions of possibility for life itself, even though these attacks, from both sides, take place in “the spaces of everyday life.”⁶⁶ The effect is a form of death, death in life—a death that “labor[s] under the sign of the future.”⁶⁷ Our existential uncertainty in regards to death is here radicalized and made Real; the specter of death punctuates the language of everyday life through the perpetual threat of attack in the marketplace and in the home, where we ought to feel most alive, through unexploded landmines, and sometimes in the process of birth itself, as rape victims bear the enemy’s children, children who are a living testimony to a form of death, to blood mixed with blood. This is a death which is not one: it proliferates and remains, as “the possibility of being there when the others (in this case the enemy) are no longer there.”⁶⁸

These images wash over us and, I hope, suspend—for an instant—our role as intellectuals, disrupting the possibility for epistemological mastery, alienating us from our comfortable traditions and familiar tasks, interrupting the banalization of evil.

Dwelling with these images invites an ethic of discomfort,⁶⁹ a hesitant comportment towards that which cannot be contained by sovereign rationality: it is a wound that will not close. The point is not to try to explain or even exonerate the suicide terrorist after-the-fact but instead to try to work towards a communication of what life and death might mean under these conditions, a communication that draws on the language of everyday life and which has as its vital source these images. And so, if we start with these sublime and inassimilable images and work towards the communicability of the incommunicable, as Derrida might say, we might dwell in the openness of human language as a way forward. As Mbembe writes:

What is necessary is that we use the uncertainty as an epistemological asset in learning to read and to write and to act. . . . Radical politics consists . . . of patiently moving along the rift, throughout these sites that seem to have been deserted by the forces of life. For in these spaces apparently doomed

to nothingness and to radical negation lie unsuspected possibilities, those, even, that authorize us to resuscitate language and hope itself.⁷⁰

Against this fragile collective project, fundamentalisms of all stripes work tirelessly to close up our language, to foreclose on hope, in the name of the absolute. Indeed, the risk is always that the ambivalent and *poietic* openness of language will be exploited by sovereign power. In the place of this ambivalence and promise, where we might imagine a vital proliferation of discourses and distinctions, sovereign power works to displace and to silence the language of everyday life, obsolescing the political and replacing it with a majestic lie. So this is also a call for vigilance.

Admittedly, this vigilant communication is irreducible to some succinct idea or other; I am unsure what vigilance would look like here or what terms we might eventually share. We are wrestling here with disparate images and affects, far from the kingdom of reasonable ends and far from any heavenly New Jerusalem. In this sense, there is no prescription for communicative action because the future belongs to all of us, and has yet to be forged, together, from inauspicious moments like these. Our vocabulary, our comportment, and our vigilance must be anti-fundamentalist and must recognize universal values, perhaps, without imposing a project of universal morality. It means opening up language and communication in ways that do not presume epistemic certitude (this alone is a monumental task). It means that those who adhere to different moralities might imagine and eventually meet within a space of mutual understanding—without necessarily arriving at a consensus, without holding out for any preconceived project of “communicative reason,” and without committing ourselves—and each other—to such austere absolutes. Mbembe invokes the African tradition of the “shadow song,” the *chant d'ombre*: “a song that can only be captured and truly understood by the entirety of the senses, and not by hearing alone.”⁷¹ Inspired by this tradition, like Mbembe, we might imagine “a mode of writing that would lead the reader to listen to that shadow song with her or his own senses.”⁷² Our writing must learn to sing and to dance—and, if only such a gift were so easy, the reader’s imagination would suffer less abuse!

With Foucault, we might call this a “spiritual” rather than an “epistemic” or properly philosophical relation. Foucault offers us some preliminary clues in his last work on ethics as the care of the self. Of central importance for Foucault is the kind of relation the self has with itself as it crafts a life for itself, as it struggles with the terms of a meaningful life and, implicitly, a meaningful death. In some sense, we might even think of this self–self relation as what Kant calls “the duty to oneself”—a duty that can demand self-sacrifice—rather than the absolute preservation of one’s life over all else. In his lecture course from 1981–82, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault argues that there are two distinct ways to understand the self–self relation: (1) philosophically or conceptually, which is particular to the modern context, and (2) spiritually, as a relation of care, derived from the Ancients. In explaining these two modes of self-relation, Foucault returns to the self–self reflexivity of the Delphic injunction, which we moderns presume to be the wellspring of philosophical wisdom: “Know thyself” [*gnōthi seauton*]. Again, the kind of self–self relation that

Foucault has in mind here is not primarily epistemological; it is not first and foremost a modern relation of philosophical knowing, either cognitive or conceptual. Rather, it is a relation of being, a *spiritual* relation founded in care—“the care of the self” [*epimeleia heauton*].

This mode of care is irreducible to an epistemological statement, a code, or a succinct set of propositions or practices. An ethics of self-care cannot be prescriptive, cannot be codified. Instead, it is, as Foucault writes, “both exercise and meditation . . . , a number of actions exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself.”⁷³ We might think of this as the practice of “conversion” in the pursuit of truth: “in and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject.”⁷⁴ With this, Foucault has effectively turned the history of Western philosophy on its head, challenging the notion that the truth alone will set us free and that our access to this truth is mental rather than spiritual. With the Ancients, spirituality and philosophy go hand in hand; they have not yet been torn asunder, as they are, increasingly, by Enlightenment rationality. The self-relation is, then, an attitude toward both self and world, an embodied relation in the *Lebenswelt*, a social, political, and historical exercise [*askēsis*], an ethic and an aesthetic. The self–self relation is, therefore, an ethical relation for Foucault because the self must struggle to invent the terms by which it will relate to itself and to others—these terms are not ready-made, they are not simply prescribed as part of a moral code.

For my argument, the most important and provocative mode of self–self relation is the “meditation on death” [*meletē thanatou*]⁷⁵—a mode of self-transformation which appears toward the end of Foucault’s lectures. Like the relation of care, this “meditative” relation must not be understood as mere psychological contemplation or *noēsis*. It is not a simple mental exercise by which we would seek to gain mastery over a concept. Rather, meditation works to transform the subject in his or her entirety, precipitating a spiritual “conversion to self.” It is a kind of training, a spiritual putting-into-practice, and, above all, it is “to perform an exercise of appropriation”⁷⁵—the appropriation of one’s own death. It is never categorical, in the Kantian sense; it is never reducible to a normative practice. Significantly, meditation on death is “not a game the subject plays with his own thoughts,” Foucault writes, “but a game that thought performs on the subject himself.”⁷⁶ Death is, then, that “game” that is constitutive of the subject; it is that relation—an ultimately unmanageable risk—that will constitute the terms of the relation, of the relata, of the self reflecting on itself, a self which is not one. The “thought” here, the “thought” that plays with us, is a thought uncontained by our thinking, an unthinkable thought that is, if you will, the very condition for our thinking, that which sets the limits of the thinkable.

If this is true, we shall begin to see that the self is an activity of *expropriation*: becoming a self will involve ceding the self to a relation that marks the prior condition of its very selfhood. In Derrida’s terms, faced with a suicide terrorism that is itself “unappropriable,” the only way forward is through the “expropriation”⁷⁷ of the subject from itself—a form of death, surely. The event of death is not merely a limit to

my understanding and to the idiom that informs it; the event is not simply privative but is productive, actively separating me from my self-certainty and my particular and comfortable way of being-in-the-world. In such an intimate relation with death, death becomes the condition of life. The subject's own undoing is, at once, the intimate possibility of its existence and the meaning of its life as ethical life. Thus, meditating on the death of the suicide bomber, in its multiplex affective, rhetorical, and symbolic valences, might occasion a new departure in ethico-political discourse.

We must press forward into such a discourse, toward new mythographies, perhaps, or toward a postnational and postsovereign understanding of human relations. It is, perhaps, a time to mourn together, to keep a vigil, and to invent new symbols that will come to occupy the spaces of indescribable loss, the spaces of everyday life, to make this loss and this life somehow livable. And lastly, it is, perhaps, a time to contemplate our own death, the death of our sovereign subjectivity, the willful expropriation of who we think we are, the death of our own moral and intellectual narcissism, and the willful suspension of our will to contain the world as a piece of rational knowledge. Paradoxically, *this* death—you might even call it a suicide—may prove to be the ultimate condition of our continued life together. ■

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- 4 Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 240.
- 5 Michel Foucault, *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), 202.
- 6 The interested reader may consult Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and "Genesis of Suicide Terrorism," *Science* 299 (2003): 1534–39; Nadia Taysir Dabbagh, *Suicide in Palestine: Narratives of Despair* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2005); Philip B. Heymann, *Terrorism, Freedom, and Security: Winning Without War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press,

2003); Walter Laqueur, ed., *Voices of Terror: Manifestos, Writings and Manuals of Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Other Terrorists From Around the World and Throughout the Ages* (New York: Reed Press, 2004); Anne Marie Oliver and Paul F. Steinberg, *The Road to Martyrs' Square: A Journey into the World of the Suicide Bomber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Wendy Pearlman, *Occupied Voices: Stories of Everyday Life From the Second Intifada* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2003); Christopher Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004); Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (Rodale Press, 2003).

For a more theoretically inflected discussion, please see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthew, and Michael Watts (Retort Group), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the New Age of War* (New York: Verso, 2005); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004); Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides—A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85–136 and *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Diane Enns, "Bare Life and the Occupied Body," *Theory & Event* 7, no. 3 (2004); Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended"; Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40; Jacqueline Rose, "Deadly Embrace," *London Review of Books* 26, no. 21, November 4, 2004, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n21/print/rose01_.html, and *The Question of Zion* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005). This list is, of course, by no means complete.

7 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

8 Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 134–35.

9 *Ibid.*, 135.

10 Pape, *Dying to Win*, 3.

11 *Ibid.*, 20.

12 *Ibid.*, 4.

13 *Ibid.*, 22. In the Iraqi context, under American occupation, I would suggest that any religious/nonreligious distinction has become more difficult to discern. Naturally, the mainstream U.S. media prefer to depoliticize these events, assuring us that recent suicide attacks have been carried out by Islamic fundamentalists.

14 Derrida, "Autoimmunity," 103.

15 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 103.

16 Achille Mbembe, "On the Postcolony: A Brief Response to Critics," *Qui Parle* 15, no. 2 (2005), 18.

17 George W. Bush, "President Bush Signs Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, November 5, 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031105-1.html>.

18 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 135.

19 Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 240.

20 *Ibid.*, 240ff.

21 *Ibid.*, 248.

- 22 George W. Bush, "President Participates in Social Security Conversation in America," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, March 21, 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/03/20050321-7.html>.
- 23 Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 24 *Ibid.*, 246–47.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 249.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 255.
- 27 Derrida, "Autoimmunity," 108.
- 28 Mbembe, "Brief Response," 3.
- 29 More specifically, this points to a troubling paradox deep within liberalism itself. On the one hand, we each wish to be counted as equals, each with equivalent rights (and responsibilities, although this is perhaps too seldom remarked), while, on the other hand, we demand to be recognized in our uniqueness or difference because we understand that we will lose our dignity, as Kant would say, if our "equality" implies that each one of us is exchangeable for another. How, then, do we balance equality with irreplaceability, two presumably competing desires? If we stick to a rights-based view, there is a dilemma because the underlying substance of those rights is at once the basis of our sameness *and* difference; that is, there is a dilemma if we persist in conceiving of rights as *properties* or *predicates* of the "substantial" human *person* or *subject*. Sadly, much of modern analytic philosophy continues to hammer away in this tedious fashion, unable to break the spell of its own discourse.
- With neoliberalism, the paradox of liberalism persists in a particularly insidious and globalizing fashion. Here, we are supposedly free and equal according to the terms of the "free" market; indeed, some neoliberals will argue that it is thanks to the independent fairness of the market's terms that each can find in them a means for the expression of his or her uniqueness. But in this way, the market becomes both means and end at the same time. And the cruel myth, of course, is that there is equal access for all, that the market's terms are independent and fair. Neoliberalism must utterly disavow the often-criminal infrastructural inequalities it relies upon and perpetuates. Moreover, it must also deny the charge that any expression of uniqueness within its terms may ultimately ring hollow. Some have argued that a fundamentalist and increasingly politicized Islam is a response to just these hypocrisies of neoliberalism (e.g., see Boal et al., *Afflicted Powers*).
- 30 Quoted in Dabbagh, *Suicide in Palestine*, 200.
- 31 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1963), 119–20.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 34 Derrida, "Autoimmunity," 108.
- 35 Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 156.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 37 Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 134.
- 38 Atran, "Genesis of Suicide Terrorism," 1534. To give a sense of the numbers, in his book *In Gods We Trust*, Atran cites a survey of 900 Muslim adolescents during the first Palestinian Intifada (1987–1993) in Gaza: "For males, 81% reported throwing stones, 72% burned tires, and 29% tossed Molotov cocktails (vs. 51%, 9%, and 5%, for females, respectively); 73% of males reported being verbally abused, 66% were hit or kicked, 63% shot at, and 23% imprisoned (vs. 38%, 19%, 20%, 3% for females). Involvement in violence was not strongly

- correlated with depression or antisocial behavior. In fact, adolescents most caught up the Intifada displayed a strong sense of individual pride and social cohesion. This was reflected in their activities: for males, 87% reported delivering supplies to activists, 83% visited families of martyrs, and 71% cared for the wounded (vs. 57%, 46%, and 37% for females).” Atran concludes: “The studies indicate that both psychosocial (unattached males in supportive religious and peer groups) and socioecological factors (small cells organized under charismatic leadership) shape the causal network of interconnected representations, emotions, and behaviors that are broadly characteristic of contemporary suicide bombing. Individual psychopathology seems not to be an important factor here” (135).
- 39 Dabbagh, *Suicide in Palestine*, 25.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 41 George W. Bush, “President Participates in Social Security Conversation in America.” However, one need not look far for countless instances of “freedom” or “liberty” in Bush Administration rhetoric. For example, reading the Fifth State of the Union Address (February 2, 2005), we find 17 sentences containing the word “freedom” and 6 containing the word “liberty.” Cf. “State of the Union Parsing Tool,” [www.style.org](http://www.style.org/stateoftheunion/parse/?q=freedom&q2=liberty), <http://www.style.org/stateoftheunion/parse/?q=freedom&q2=liberty>.
- 42 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 185; §49, Ak 317.
- 43 Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), 487; A570/B598.
- 44 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 151; §35, Ak 287.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 77; §16, Ak 229.
- 46 2 Cor. 3:6.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 185; §49, Ak 316.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 182; §49, Ak 314.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 185; §49, Ak 316.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 184; §49, Ak 315.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 185; §49, Ak 316.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 181; §49, Ak 313.
- 53 *Ibid.*
- 54 Rose, “Deadly Embrace.”
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 Recall Pape’s study, which documents every suicide attack from 1980 through 2003 (see note 6 above). Pape documents a total of 315 attacks globally. The vast majority of these attacks would have targeted a civilian population. If we are just looking at the numbers, however, we might at the same time consider the number of civilians who have died as a direct result of the purportedly legitimate actions of states, including the U.S. To take just one small sample, according to www.iraqbodycount.org, to date “the minimum number of civilians reported killed by military intervention in Iraq” is 38,355. (“Iraq Body Count,” www.iraqbodycount.org, June 14, 2006, <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>.) This carefully documented figure says nothing of those who have died as a (more or less) indirect result of years of American-sponsored U.N. sanctions against Iraq from 1991 through 2003—sanctions that led to a lack of clean drinking water, malnutrition, disease, and a lack of medical supplies. In 1999, UNICEF reported: “under-5 mortality more than doubled from 56 deaths per 1,000 live births (1984–1989) to 131 deaths per 1,000 live births (1994–1999).” (“Iraq Survey Shows ‘Humanitarian Emergency,’” www.unicef.org, August 12, 1999, <http://www.unicef.org/newsline/99pr29.htm>.) According to these figures, more than 500,000

Iraqi children would have perished in the 12 years of sanctions. Also see David Cortright, "A Hard Look at Iraqi Sanctions," *www.thenation.com*, *The Nation online*, November 15, 2001, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011203/cortright>. While these remarkable figures cannot exonerate the suicide bomber, we are forced to conclude that some deaths count politically more than others and that this is not a numbers game. We must look elsewhere for the particular significance of thanatopolitics.

- 57 Rose, "Deadly Embrace."
- 58 Derrida, "Autoimmunity," 97.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 Rose, "Deadly Embrace."
- 61 Gen. 3:19.
- 62 William P. Welty, "The Healer of Souls," *ZAKA Rescue and Recovery website*, 2005, http://www.zakausa.org/zaka_press.cfm.
- 63 Atran, "Genesis of Suicide Terrorism," 1534.
- 64 Dabbagh, *Suicide in Palestine*, 30.
- 65 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 39, 29.
- 66 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 67 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 Cf. Michel Foucault, "For an Ethic of Discomfort," in *Power*, 443–48.
- 70 Mbembe, "Brief Response," 43.
- 71 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 72 *Ibid.*
- 73 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros and Arnold Ira Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 75 *Ibid.*, 357.
- 76 *Ibid.*, 357–58.
- 77 Derrida, "Autoimmunity," 90.