

“Let Us Eat Cake”: Speaking for the Dead

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In this world, two things have no voice: the rich man's faults, and the poor man's death.

Persian proverb

On April 6, 2017, while fifty-nine American Tomahawk missiles rained down on a Syrian airfield, Donald Trump informed his Chinese counterpart, President Xi Jinping, of the strike as both enjoyed “the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake that you’ve ever seen.”³⁷ The day before, from the White House Rose Garden, Trump spoke of the “women, small children, and even beautiful little babies” that had been killed in Syrian president Assad’s alleged chemical bombardment of civilians: “That attack on children . . . had a big impact on me—big impact.”³⁸

We are interested in how the dead, including “beautiful little babies,” are figured by Trump as the ethical and political justification for the American airstrike, ostensibly carried out in the name of life. In a press conference after enjoying his cake, Trump averred, “No child of God should ever suffer such horror.”³⁹ Suddenly these children were regarded no longer as foreign, Syrian, or Muslim, as they appear in the logic of his immigration-related executive orders, but as individuals inhabiting a vulnerable and shared (Christian) humanity. Trump’s “horror” at the loss of “beautiful” lives is transformed from an affective into a unilateral militarized response. Yet it is not Trump himself who hails us so much as the dead—babies, “beautiful little babies,” “child[ren] of God”—who are invoked here in direct appeal to “our” common humanity, meant to elicit moral outrage and to license the use of retributive force. There is the immediate question then over whose lives will appear worthy of protection, and how it is that the dead—for whom the missiles arrive too

late for salvation—are nevertheless rhetorically reclaimed by a mission that avows the sacredness of life itself. The speech act cuts two ways: it redeems these children in God’s name, and in so doing it implicitly articulates the divine right to kill, the authority to execute divine retribution. Such a power exceeds the sovereign prerogative “to take life or let live.”⁴⁰

Amid the clamor, the transgression itself is virtually inaudible. Yet it stands in reciprocal relation, whether causal or complicit, with those who are silenced and condemned to die in voiceless ignominy. Their deaths are unremarked in certain registers, unless and until they can be deployed as political currency by those in power. The biopolitical power “to make live and let die” here enters discourse in a violence iterated *as* discourse, in and through the right to speak.⁴¹ Those whom “we” kill are figured as voiceless and dismissed as collateral damage, like the Yemeni villagers killed in Trump’s first military foray. By contrast, those killed by the enemy are given voice through Trump entreating us to avenge their deaths. If they were unworthy of compassion while alive, unable to claim asylum or humanitarian assistance in their own name, they are summoned here to a posthumous political life.

The power to speak, defended as a human right and a “freedom,” is nevertheless exercised at times as a refusal to hear and, in a more ominous turn, as the power to usurp those without voice and to speak in their name. If the dead might be said to speak, here it is through the trope of prosopopoeia; they speak less as a *who* than a *what*, for it is they who have been rhetorically co-opted and colonized, they who are unable to speak back to power.⁴² The power to speak—in this case, to bestow voice on the voiceless—and belatedly to champion their human rights and freedoms is less a sovereign conceit than a biopolitical one that both “makes live” politically and “lets die” in flesh and blood. It is less the voice of one man than the inflection of a diffuse and reticulated network: neoliberalism, militarized capital, racism, and the alt-right, together with their protectionist fantasies of fragile whiteness, nationhood, Christianity, and manifest destiny. Life, in these rhetorics, is under perpetual threat: refugees, migrants, and victims of war are *potential* terrorists whose very existence threatens “our” economy, “our” jobs, “our” livelihood, “our” way of life. The “big impact” on one man and

his apparent “horror” notwithstanding, Trump’s speech is little more than the empty spectacle of sovereignty staged both for a domestic audience (raising approval ratings) and an international one (exhibiting American “leadership” and military prowess).

The shared consumption of the “most beautiful” chocolate cake seemed to mark a corporeal covenant, the currency of Trump and Xi’s mutual confrontation with North Korea. The lost lives in Syria, represented most forcefully through the image of “beautiful” innocent children, united Trump with leaders of Western democracies throughout the world, who appeared to temporarily bracket misgivings about the US regime to prevent further loss of life. At last, so it seemed, decisive action could be taken in both of these intractable conflicts, even if this was short-lived: Syrian military planes took off from the same airfield the following day, and North Korea has continued its missile tests.

The “beautiful” cake appears as cathected in the wider context of American and Russian nuclear rearmament and amid escalating tensions with North Korea. The nuclear option renders the power over life and death scarcely fathomable. In a lecture on biopolitics, Foucault speculates that atomic power is not simply the power to kill “in accordance with the rights that are granted to any sovereign”; rather, “it is the power to kill life itself.”⁴³ If we assume that this unfathomable possibility cannot be mitigated by cake alone, the sovereign invocation of “beautiful” babies—and the authority to speak on their behalf, to vocalize their human rights—might sound like a sweet salutation. While this power transgresses the sovereign prerogative “to take life or let live,” it is an excess that pales in comparison to the power to suppress human life on an ecological scale. Such a power is “in excess of sovereign right” but, more portentously, brings humanity to the brink of a power “beyond all human sovereignty.”⁴⁴ Distracted by spectacles in which so much is said by so many who seem not to speak or understand the language of political discourse, we have found it difficult to see or to hear that moment, on the not-too-distant horizon, when speech may well belong only to the dead.

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37. Donald Trump, interview with Maria Bartiromo, Fox Business Network, April 12, 2017, twitter.com/i/videos/tweet/852135930831843329.
38. Donald Trump and Jordan’s King Abdullah, joint press conference, White House Rose Garden, C-SPAN, April 5, 2017, www.c-span.org/video/?426566-1/president-says-syrian-chemical-attack-went-beyond-red-line.
39. *New York Times*, “Transcript and Video.”
40. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 241.
41. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 241.
42. Quintilian referred to prosopopoeia as the “personation of characters”: “In this kind of figure, it is allowable to even bring down the gods from heaven, evoke the dead, and give voices to cities and states” (*Institutes of Oratory*, 9.2.31).
43. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 253.
44. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 254.

Foucault, Michel. “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, translated by David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003.

New York Times. “Transcript and Video: Trump Speaks about Strikes in Syria.” April 6, 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast

Quintilian. *Institutes of Oratory*, edited by Lee Honeycutt, translated by John Selby Watson. rhetoric.eserver.org/quintilian.