UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

Ages of Cruelty: Jacques Derrida, Fethi Benslama, and their Challenges to Psychoanalysis

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0nn3p0rk>

Journal

MOSAIC-A JOURNAL FOR THE INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF LITERATURE, 48(2)

ISSN

0027-1276

Author

Weber, Elisabeth

Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed

Mosaic

Vol. 48 No. 2 June 2015

208 Tier Building
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3T 2N2
t: 204.474.9763
f: 204.474.7584

mosaic@umanitoba.ca
www.umanitoba.ca/mosaic

©Mosaic 2015. The University of Manitoba

Contents

Introduction <i>Dawne McCance</i>	v
Ages of Cruelty: Jacques Derrida, Fethi Benslama, and their Challenges to Psychoanalysis <i>Elisabeth Weber</i>	1
Between Life and Death: Representing Trafficked Persons in Chris Abani's <i>Becoming Abigail</i> and Justin Chadwick's <i>Stolen</i> <i>Pamela McCallum</i>	29
A Sense of Time: Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger on the Temporality of Life <i>William McNeill</i>	45
Queer Children, Queer Futures: Navigating <i>lifedeath</i> in <i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Riley McGuire</i>	63
Lifedeath and Suicide <i>David Farrell Krell</i>	77
"A vital, unliveable force": Rhythm through Nathalie Sarraute and Schizoanalysis <i>Fernanda Negrete</i>	83
L'apoptose selon Claude Régy : un dispositif scénique <i>Cyrielle Dodet</i>	99

Lines of Flight of the Deadly Nightshade: An Enquiry into the Properties of the Magical Plant, its Literature and History <i>David M.J. Carruthers</i>	119
Life(and)death in <i>Harry Potter</i> : The Immortality of Love and Soul <i>Andrea Stojilkov</i>	133
"Advancing necessarily askew": The Technology of Mourning in Joan Didion's <i>The Year of Magical Thinking</i> <i>Alyson Brickey</i>	149
Le demi-vivant : figuration critique d'une mutilation épistémique <i>Marie Cazaban-Mazerolles</i>	163
"Modern Death" in Don DeLillo: A Parody of Life? <i>Banu Helvacioğlu</i>	179
Conceiving a Subject of Mutation: Event, Plasticity, and Mutation <i>Nancy Nisbet</i>	197
livingdying <i>Charles E. Scott</i>	211

Introduction

DAWNE McCANCE

From October 1-4, 2014, at the University of Manitoba, *Mosaic* hosted its fourth international interdisciplinary conference, *A matter of lifedeath*. Over the months since the conference, I have come to appreciate, increasingly, just how fine an event it was. In part, my appreciation owes to memory—of the sessions I attended and of the many wonderful people I met. Some 108 presenters (50 of them students) representing 13 different countries participated in the conference, along with five featured keynotes speakers: Andrea Carlino, Histoire de la Médecine, Université de Genève; Françoise Dastur, Archives Husserl, École Normale Supérieure de Paris; David Palumbo-Liu, Department of Comparative Literature, Stanford University; H. Peter Steeves, Department of Philosophy, DePaul University; and Elisabeth Weber, Department of Germanic, Slavic & Semitic Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara. Good memories, added to which, given my duties as Editor, I have had the privilege of reading papers that were presented at the conference and submitted for publication in the journal. Despite my apprehension after issuing the conference Call for Papers as to whether the *lifedeath* theme might be too difficult or too specialized, I continue to be astonished at how diverse, intelligent, creative, and important the papers are. *Mosaic* offers readers a treat, then, with the three proceedings issues it is publishing, this special issue being the first.

The issue opens with keynote speaker Elisabeth Weber's "Ages of Cruelty: Jacques Derrida, Fethi Benslama, and their Challenges to Psychoanalysis," an unparalleled essay that treats the theologically informed political-subjective concept of sovereignty as pre-eminently the power to decide over life and death. In the ways that Weber draws on psychoanalysis through the work of Derrida and Benslama, she adds significantly and provocatively to our understanding of sovereignty and its inseparability from today's two "ages" of cruelty. The thirteen additional contributions to this issue are beyond what I can summarize in the few sentences I have at my disposal. Safe to say, this is an issue of which *Mosaic* is proud. Enjoy it, and look forward to the following two proceedings specials.

Mosaic wishes to acknowledge the financial support for the conference it received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which also supports the journal in its quarterly publications. *Mosaic* acknowledges as well the financial support it received for the event from units within the University of Manitoba. Finally, *Mosaic* acknowledges and thanks members of its Editorial Board, faculty members, and students who in various ways participated in and worked at the conference, contributing crucially to its success.

Mosaic dedicates this issue to Dr. Pleshette DeArmitt, Associate Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of Memphis, whose recent death has deeply saddened us all. Among her many scholarly achievements, notably *The Right to Narcissism: A Case for an Im-possible Self-Love* (Fordham, 2013), Dr. DeArmitt published "Resonances of Echo: A Derridean Allegory" in *Mosaic* 42.2 (June 2009), a special issue on *Sound*.

For Jacques Derrida, one of the most urgent tasks of philosophy today is to think "sovereignty" and the ways in which it is inseparable from the two "ages" of cruelty of today's wars: one techno-scientific, from which the "cruor" of blood seems to have been wiped away, and another, bloodily "archaic," reacting savagely to the first. Derrida and the French-Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama assert that these two "ages" of cruelty are closely intertwined, and that for both of them, today's media play a crucial role. For Derrida, the "revolution of psychoanalysis" would consist in addressing cruelty without alibi, without political, moral, theological, or other justifications, while refusing to neutralize ethics and politics, that is, the specific geo-political realm in which psychoanalytic theory and practice intervene. In this spirit, Benslama attempts an analysis of the particular new cruelty some Middle-Eastern countries are confronted with today.

Ages of Cruelty: Jacques Derrida, Fethi Benslama, and their Challenges to Psychoanalysis

ELISABETH WEBER

Cruelty: Philosophy

In 1968, Jacques Derrida succinctly named the stakes implied in the neographism which gave his most famous text its name, *La différance*. This word, he wrote, had "imposed itself" out of a double necessity: the necessity to think "what is most irreducible about our 'era,'" and the necessity that thought be "maintained in [. . .] a relationship with the structural limits of mastery" (*Margins* 7). All of Derrida's conceptual "provocation[s]" ("Provocation" xv) that followed in *La différance*'s wake obey the same impetus: "Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom" (*Margins* 22). From the first to the last text, Derrida's

work raises the question: what is it that *desires within* us a kingdom and any avatar of “kingdom”? His interventions are inventive engagements whose apparent playfulness operates on the level of the signifier, challenging what one could call the repressed in Occidental philosophy. What has sometimes been denounced by Derrida’s detractors as futile word plays is anything but: for example, the term “hantologie” or “hauntology” is a conceptual “provocation” in the most radical sense insofar as it accomplishes at least three things:

1. It undermines the traditional discourse of philosophy as ontology, the discourse of “being,” that validates “presence” only, be it past, present, or future “presence,” and thereby refuses to acknowledge the specters that always haunt it.
2. It challenges philosophy to “show itself hospitable to the law of the ghost, to the spectral experience and to the memory of the ghost, of that which is neither dead nor alive, [...] hospitable to the law of the most imperious memory, even though it is the most effaced and the most effaceable, but for that very reason the most demanding” (“Prolegomena” 259).
3. It alludes to a “hontologie,” introducing the element of shame (“honte”) into the very business of philosophy.¹

The first two aspects have garnered much scholarly attention, and I will not dwell on them, except to note that for Derrida, welcoming the law of the ghost is most explicitly at the heart of the philosopher’s (or, as he writes, the “philosopher-deconstructor’s”) tasks, to the point that ignoring this would amount to the impossibility of thinking, if ever thinking is inspired by a “love” of “justice” (*Specters* 221).² The provocation is here truly a call-for, and a call-forward: toward a commitment that would open a different “futuraity,” a futuraity in which those who have been silenced in death, and silenced beyond death, would teach the “scholar” how to address himself or herself to the other. As such, Derrida’s thinking has always been deeply political. As Derrida’s inventive interventions show, their provocations necessarily introduce elements of a new vocabulary of thought and new conceptual “sequences.”³ “Futuraity,” Amir Eshel writes, “marks literature’s ability to raise, via engagement with the past, political and ethical dilemmas crucial for the human future” (5). The same goes for philosophy-deconstruction’s ability, on the condition of not limiting this “future” to a “human” one.

As for the third aspect, philosophy as “hontologie,” or the “logos of shame,”⁴ it needs to be considered in light of (at least) a triple *scandalon*.

First, in his later work on sovereignty, Derrida underlines this “most stupefying” and most scandalous “fact about the history of Western philosophy”: “never, to my knowledge, has any philosopher *as a philosopher, in his or her strictly and systematically*

philosophical discourse, never has any philosophy *as such* contested the legitimacy of the death penalty. From Plato to Hegel, from Rousseau to Kant (who was undoubtedly the most rigorous of them all), they expressly, each in his own way, and sometimes not without much hand-wringing ([as in] Rousseau), took a stand for the death penalty" (Derrida and Roudinesco 146, *emph.* Derrida's).

Later on, what *La différance* called "kingdom" is relentlessly pursued under the concept of "sovereignty," exemplified for Derrida by the death penalty. In his later seminars, Derrida comes to identify sovereignty as the "cement" or "solder" of the "onto-theological-political," which he links directly to "cruelty" (Derrida and Roudinesco 148).⁵ Noting the "terrible ambiguity" that lies in the fact that "sovereign power" is understood as "executing power," Derrida asserts that if one were to ask the question "What is the theologico-political?" the "answer would take shape thus: the theologico-political is a system, an apparatus of sovereignty in which the death penalty is necessarily inscribed. There is theologico-political wherever there is death penalty." This realization yields for Derrida, as a consequence, a new outline of deconstruction's scope: "Deconstruction, what is called by that name, is perhaps, *perhaps* the deconstruction of the death penalty, of the logocentric, logonomo-centric scaffolding in which the death penalty is inscribed or prescribed" (*Death* 5, *emph.* Derrida's). As Derrida shows, this is a "scaffolding" linked to the "Abrahamic and above all the Christian history of sovereignty, and thus of the possibility of the death penalty as theologico-political violence" (23). A departure from the theologico-political principle of sovereignty, which has marked the entire Western tradition in philosophy, politics, law, economics, education, etc., would indeed effect a "mutation." This "mutation," Derrida says in the context of a reflection on the "war on terror," "will have to take place" ("Autoimmunity" 106). In Elizabeth Rottenberg's formulation, it is precisely because "philosophy (ontology) has been soldered (*soudée*), welded, *wedded* to the death penalty and to the principle of sovereignty from which it is inseparable" that a "deconstruction' of what is most hegemonic in philosophy must [...] pass through a deconstruction of the death penalty" (148, *emph.* Derrida's).⁶ Michael Naas places Derrida's observation in the context of two additional, and no less shameful, facts: "This sweeping claim about philosophy, however interesting in itself, might profitably be juxtaposed with Derrida's question in *Rogues* (2005), 'why are there so few democrat philosophers (if there have been any at all), from Plato to Heidegger?' and his claim in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) that no philosopher *qua* philosopher has questioned the single, indivisible line distinguishing man from the animal." In short, Derrida invites us to "ask along with him what notions of cruelty, sacrifice, or blood, what conception of the dignity of life or natural law, what

religion, would allow philosophers across centuries, traditions, and languages—though particularly in European modernity—to maintain a discourse that is at once *pro-death penalty*, *anti-democratic*, and overwhelmingly *anthropocentric*. [...] What is it about philosophy, then, philosophy as opposed, perhaps, to literature, where Derrida finds all kinds of exceptions on each of these points, that leads to these positions?” (52, *emph. Naas’s*).

Naas’s response leads us to heart of the “matter of life-death”:

Derrida’s answer would [...] probably begin by pointing out a common call to sacrifice or minimize life in the name of a value or a life greater than life. From Plato’s definition of philosophy as the practice of dying to Kant’s identification of the priceless dignity of man beyond phenomenal life, to Heidegger’s claim that only *Dasein* has a relation to death as such, philosophy identifies the confrontation or overcoming of death, the sacrifice of life, with the affirmation of a life beyond or greater than life, a life and thus a relationship to death that would be what is truly proper to man and *not* to any other form of animal life. (53, *emph. Naas’s*)

In essence, what links philosophy’s *pro-death penalty*, *anti-democratic*, and overwhelmingly *anthropocentric* stances for Derrida is their affirmation of what he calls “carno-phallogocentrism.” “Carno-phallogocentrism” is as irreducibly driven by the desire of sovereignty as it is by cruelty.

In the following, I want to focus on the question of cruelty, specifically, inspired by Derrida, on two “ages” of cruelty: one, a high-tech version from which, at first sight at least, the *cruor* or blood seems to have been wiped away, and another, bloodily “archaic” one, reacting savagely to the first. As I will show through the analyses proposed by Derrida and the French-Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama, these two “ages” of cruelty are closely intertwined, and for both of them, today’s media play a crucial role.

Cruelty: Death Penalty without Trial, Remote-controlled

Today’s news is awash in blood shed by the enemies of “the West” in the “war on terror”—the *cruor* of blood screams out of the headlines of news outlets, and understandably so. Yet the blood shed by the sophisticated, high-tech version of cruelty is all but erased from the news. If, as Derrida repeatedly asserts via Carl Schmitt, the sovereign is the one who decides over life and death, and the one who decides over the exception—that is, over the conditions in which national or international laws no longer apply—then the war conducted with “armed unmanned aerial vehicles,” commonly known as drones, is a deadly and triply remote assertion of sovereignty. This

war is far-reaching, far away from public perception, and conducted via remote-control, a remote-controlled death penalty without trial, and in the majority of cases without identification of the victim.

The CIA drone war has transformed a vast area in Pakistan into “the world’s largest prison,” with the constant “specter of death” looming inescapably from above, as described by American lawyer Jennifer Gibson, co-author of the Stanford University/New York University study *Living Under Drones*. The non-profit organization Reprieve has described the “CIA killer drones programme” as “death penalty without trial, and the new face of state lawlessness in the name of counter-terrorism” (Reprieve).⁷

According to data collected by Reprieve, to this date “the United States has used drones to execute without trial some 4,700 people in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia—all countries against whom it has not declared war. The US’s drones programme is a covert war being carried out by the CIA” (Reprieve).⁸ As journalist and filmmaker Madiha Tahir, director of the November 2013 documentary *Wounds of Waziristan*, puts it, the US “sees itself as the center of the world,” while Waziristan, the border region of Pakistan where most of the drones attack, “is at the margins of [the] margin.” Pakistan’s security forces and the insurgents “have killed many people here,” she says, and nobody would use the words “precise” or “surgery-strikes.” By contrast, drone attacks are “described as ‘neat,’ ‘surgical’ tactics in precision-based warfare,” suggesting that “you can take out the bad without disturbing the good. No consequences for anyone. No sorrow. No loss.” This is the reason why “drones are becoming acceptable among Americans as a way to kill in Yemen, in Somalia, and in Pakistan.” In an interview about her film, Tahir summarizes her conversations with psychiatrists who visited the region. Even though the Pakistani military and the insurgent groups are brutal, “whether it’s true or not, people feel that with militants, there is some degree of control. You can negotiate. There is some cause and effect relationship. But there is no cause and effect with a drone, as far as people in the area are concerned. [Drone warfare] creates an acute kind of trauma that is not limited to the actual attack. It has to do with the constant threat flying above” (Pasternack).

The researchers and lawyers from Reprieve expand upon the reasons why the “constant threat” from drones is especially traumatizing:

For communities living under drones, life is filled with constant terror. Nobody knows who the next target might be. Armed drones can hand down a death sentence simply because a person exhibited suspicious behaviour. Yet what that behaviour is, the United States refuses

to say. Other times, the death sentence comes simply because the person fell within the target demographic: all males aged 18 to 65. According to the United States, these men are not deemed civilians unless they can prove their innocence—posthumously. The drones, sometimes as many as five or six at a time, constantly circle overhead, terrorising civilian populations, nearly half of whom are children. A recent study carried out in Yemen by clinical and forensic psychologist, Dr Peter Schaapveld, reported severe post-traumatic stress disorder in children living in areas targeted for drone strikes. (Reprieve)⁹

Under the title “Drone Penalty,” David Wills analyzes the powerful link between the history of slave-trade, the perseverance of the death penalty in the US, and the latter’s increasing use of drones in strikes that violate the sovereignty of other states and that are “illegal whether or not they have been consented to by the local government,” since “a strike that takes place in an area [...] where there is no [declared] armed conflict, is by definition inflicted against civilians and constitutes a violation of international human rights law” (176). The so-called “kill list” is said to be consulted on a weekly basis by the US President himself, who decides, in sovereign fashion, “whom next to target on an ever-expanding extra-judicial death penalty list” (182). Such absolute sovereignty is asserted by assuming “the prerogative of a universal right of inspection,” the “power to see everything” (181). As Wills writes, carrying all this out in secrecy reinforces “the sense of divine justice” (185). Indeed, Derek Gregory cites a drone pilot saying “sometimes I felt like a God hurling thunderbolts from afar” (“View” 192)¹⁰ and Tom Engelhardt spells out “the metaphor’s implications: ‘Those about whom we make life-or-death decisions, as they scurry below or carry on as best they can, have—like any beings faced with the gods—no recourse or appeal’” (qtd. in “View” 192). Gregory also shows that far from reducing “war to a video game in which the killing space appears remote and distant,” the “new visibilities” provided by the latest drones’ “macro-field of micro-vision” actually produce “a special kind of intimacy that consistently privileges the view of the hunter-killer, and whose implications are far more deadly” (194). “The high-resolution full-motion video feeds from the drones allow crews to claim time and time again that they are not thousands of miles from the war zone but just eighteen inches away: the distance from eye to screen. The sense of optical proximity is palpable and pervasive,” so much so that journalist Mark Bowden could write that “the dazzling clarity of the drone’s optics’ means that ‘war by remote control turns out to be intimate’” (Gregory, “Drone” 9). This does not only affect the pilot. What Gregory calls the “time-space compression” entailed in drone warfare has brought all those in the “network” (“View” 193) of what the US Air Force refers to as the “kill chain” “much closer to the killing space” (196).

As Tahir's testimony shows, the drone war exemplifies a cruelty that is all the more lethal because it is covert. Not at all or hardly monitored by the citizens whose taxes pay for it, it is the result of the highest technological sophistication, and is operated with the claim of "surgical precision."¹¹ Seen from the self-perceived "center"—which is very remote from the actual "theater of operation"—it is hardly perceived and certainly hardly ever referred to as "cruelty." Perhaps one could establish the following parallel: The destruction inflicted by drones in predominantly Muslim countries is perceived as acceptable in the United States and the West because of its asserted "surgical" nature, similar to the way that the death penalty is acceptable to many in the United States on the condition of being executed under anesthesia, or, as Peggy Kamuf provocatively puts it, on the condition of being an "anesthetic," "a drug, and an American drug *par excellence*" (5). In both cases, "cruelty" is, in the public Western perception, numbed, anesthetized. In both cases, we need to raise, with Kamuf, the question of the "wholesale anesthetizing of public sensibility," and even of "anesthesia addiction" (12-13).

In contrast to the anesthetized experience at the "center," for the concerned population living at the "margins of the margin," drones are a permanent death threat looming above them. Drones constitute state-sponsored terrorism conducted against them at the push of a button from thousands of miles away, brutally arbitrary, wanton, and bloody, always threatening, out of the blue sky, to tear loved ones, friends, and neighbours into bits (Reprieve). During a hearing on Capitol Hill on October 29, 2013, attended by only five members of Congress, Zubair Rehman gave an account of a drone strike that occurred on October 24, 2012 on an open okra field near a village in North Waziristan. His grandmother was killed while picking okra. Rehman, then twelve years old, and his sister, then eight, were injured while helping her. Rehman testified: "Now I prefer cloudy days when the drones don't fly. When the sky brightens and becomes blue, the drones return and so does the fear. Children don't play so often now, and have stopped going to school. Education isn't possible as long as the drones circle overhead" (McVeigh). Since the introduction of a newer generation of American drones, ominously named "Reaper," cloudy days no longer provide relief. The Reaper "has an all-weather, day or night radar, linked to a sensor ball that houses image-intensified and infrared cameras" (Hussain). In his essay giving consideration to the other side of the "war on terror," aptly named "The Sound of Terror: Phenomenology of a Drone Strike," Nasser Hussain notes that "even this impressive surveillance ability will pale in comparison to the new generation drone called Gorgon Stare, which will increase the single video feed of the Reaper to 12 and eventually to 65 video feeds."¹²

In *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, P.W. Singer underscores that the rationale for war has always been linked to ideals such as ending tyranny or, today, ending “terrorism.” Yet drone technology changes the stakes dramatically (432). “Robotics starts to take these ideals, so essential to the definition of war, out of the equation,” to the point that Yale Law School professor Paul Kahn speaks of the “paradox of riskless warfare.” “As technologies have distanced soldiers more and more from the fighting, the risks, and the destruction,” the sense of “equality and fairness” implied in a “sense of mutuality” between enemy soldiers becomes “harder to claim. When it becomes not just a matter of distance, but actual disconnection, as Kahn describes, it ‘propels us beyond the ethics of warfare’” (qtd. in Singer 432).

The drone war thus exemplifies the utter delocalization and expropriation Derrida associates with modern warfare and its tele-technoscience, and doubly so: for the victim, killed by someone via remote control, from thousands of miles away, and for the perpetrator, killing someone via remote control, thousands of miles away. For the pilot, however, the delocalization materializes as “the intimacy of the time-space compression from Nevada to Oruzgan,” and oscillates between intense familiarity with the rhythms of the target’s life and an identification with US forces in the actual combat zone. An Air Force investigation into a drone attack that caused more than twenty civilian casualties, among whom many were women and children, concluded that it was the Predator pilot’s “desire to support the ground forces” that triggered “a strong desire to find weapons,” and “converted civilians into combatants,” detecting rifles where there were none (Gregory, “View” 203).

Gregory argues that the drone pilot’s intimacy with his or her targets’ life routines does not create a corresponding ethical intimacy: “‘Intimacy’ is thus cultivated within a culturally divided field [. . .] in which crews are interpellated to identify so closely with their comrades-in-arms that they are predisposed to interpret every other action—which is to say every Other action—as hostile or sinister, sometimes with disastrous consequences for the innocent” (“Drone” 10). The drone pilot’s “interpellation” is also very effective because it occurs, as Hussain observes, in a “mute world of dumb figures”: While “the pilots can hear ground commands” from fellow US forces, the “lack of synchronic sound” in the footage “renders it a ghostly world in which the figures seem unalive, even before they are killed.” Hussain points out another double asymmetry: “If drone operators can see but not hear the world below them, the exact opposite is true for people on the ground. Because drones are able to hover at or above 30 thousand feet, they are mostly invisible to the people below them. But they can be heard. Many people from the tribal areas of Pakistan (FATA) describe the sound as a low-grade, perpetual buzzing, a signal that a strike could occur at any time”

(Hussain). Because of the perpetual buzzing, the locals refer to drones as “mosquitos,” even though the sound triggers a “‘wave of terror’ coming over the community,” and even though there is no chance of incapacitating them. On the other side, both the military and the CIA seem to refer to those killed in a drone strike zone as mere “bugsplat.”¹³ The asymmetry of lethal force could hardly be stated more supremely.

Drones redefine war as “cynegetic,” that is, as conducted primarily by “hunter-killers,” replacing the “mutuality” model described by Singer and Kahn above. Consequently, “a new doctrine of state violence [has] emerged, finding its unity in the concept of the militarized manhunt” (Chamayou 2). This shift has far-reaching repercussions for the concept and assumption of sovereignty. As Grégoire Chamayou has argued, “The drone is the emblem of contemporary cynegetic war. It is the mechanical, flying and robotic heir of the dog of war. It creates to perfection the ideal of asymmetry: to be able to kill without being able to be killed; to be able to see without being seen. To become absolutely invulnerable while the other is placed in a state of absolute vulnerability. ‘Predator,’ ‘Global Hawk,’ ‘Reaper’—birds of prey and angels of death, drones bear their names well” (4).

Even though the newest drone surveillance system carries lethal asymmetry to new heights, it bears its name “Gorgon Stare” less well. As the website of its manufacturer specifies, “Gorgon Stare (GS) is a one-of-a-kind Persistent Wide Area Airborne Surveillance (WAAS) System. A Multi-Mission/Multi-Mode Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platform with a unique Electro-Optical/Infrared (EO/IR) toolset providing wide-area (city-sized), continuous ‘stare’ coverage” (Sierra). What the specifications don’t include is that the terror of the original Gorgon’s stare was caused by its inescapable deadliness, but only when the victim looked directly at the Gorgon’s face. Avoiding a direct face-to-face no longer protects from the Gorgon’s deadly reach. As Maj. Gen. James O. Poss, the Air Force’s assistant deputy chief of staff for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, explains, “Gorgon Stare will be looking at a whole city, so there will be no way for the adversary to know what we’re looking at, and we can see everything” (Nakashima and Whitlock).

Consequently, in Chamayou’s succinct analysis, “the zone of armed conflict, fragmented into micro-scale kill-boxes, reduces itself in the ideal-typical case to the single body of the enemy prey: the body as the field of battle.” In line with this new doctrine, the military and the CIA argue that, in effect, “because we can target our quarry with precision [...] we can strike them wherever we see fit, even outside a war zone” (qtd. in Gregory, “Drone” 14). The result is, in Gregory’s words, a “drone geography” definable as a “global hunting ground produced through and punctuated by ‘mobile zones of exception’” (14).¹⁴

If it is true, as Chamayou cautions in an elaboration of a thought by Nietzsche, “that this form of compromise that human societies call justice cannot exist without a certain balance of forces and a certain reciprocity of the power of aggression, it may be that the pretensions for just cynegetic war cannot become effective without terrible retaliation. This is in any case,” Chamayou continues, “the path opened, unwittingly, by those today who seek to legitimate the drone attacks by a certain ‘right to anticipatory self-defence against non-state actors’” (5). The “new” cruelty inflicted by technoscience, of which drone warfare is the epitome, is countered by what Derrida calls “reactive savagery.” To decipher either of them, one needs the tools of psychoanalysis, on the condition that “psychoanalysis” opens itself to be challenged in some of its fundamental assumptions.

Cruelty: Interventions in Psychoanalysis

While the drone war exemplifies the delocalization and expropriation of tele-technoscience and its weapon systems, it also exemplifies one of the two “ages” of cruelty that manifests, according to Derrida, in our “wars of ‘religion.’” In 1994, Derrida was already calling upon psychoanalysis to understand the “new cruelty” of today’s wars, and he wrote about the then-contemporary wars in ways that are profoundly illuminating for a reflection on today’s wars as well. Today, Derrida writes, our “wars of religion” are characterized by a “new cruelty” in which an

archaic and ostensibly more savage radicalization of “religious” violence claims, in the name of “religion,” [Derrida puts quotation marks around the words *religion* and *religious*] to allow the living community to rediscover its roots, its place, its body and its idiom intact (unscathed, safe, pure, proper). [This “new cruelty”] spreads death and unleashes self-destruction in a desperate (auto-immune) gesture that attacks the blood of its own body: as though thereby to eradicate uprootedness and reappropriate the sacredness of life safe and sound. [. . .] A *new cruelty* would thus ally, in wars that are also wars of religion, the most advanced technoscientific calculability with a reactive savagery that would like to attack the body proper directly, the sexual thing that can be raped, mutilated or simply denied, desexualized—yet another form of the same violence. Is it possible to speak today of this double rape, to speak of it in a way that wouldn’t be too foolish, uninformed or inane, while “ignoring” “psychoanalysis”? To ignore psychoanalysis can be done in a thousand ways, sometimes through extensive psychoanalytic knowledge that remains culturally disassociated. Psychoanalysis is ignored when it is not integrated into the most powerful discourses today on right, morality, politics, but also on science, philosophy, theology, etc. (“Faith” 89, *emph. Derrida’s*)¹⁵

The “new cruelty” is, in sum, one facet of a desperate attempt to return to the purity of origin, the “proper” (*le propre*), both in the sense of what is clean, unscathed, and of what is one’s own, in response to the radical expropriation in the wake of globalization, the accelerated capitalization of economies, and the explosion of media-technology. One question that needs the most urgent attention is why, in the words of the French-Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama, “the urge to return to one’s origins [i.e. the mythical original past] is accompanied by a terrifying wish for vengeance in the present” (*Psychoanalysis* 10).

For Derrida, it is indispensable to engage with psychoanalysis on these questions, since “the very aim, and I do say the *aim*, of the psychoanalytic revolution is the only one not to rest, not to seek refuge, in principle, in [. . .] a theological or humanist alibi” (“Psychoanalysis” 240, *emph. Derrida’s*).¹⁶ Furthermore, it is equally indispensable to acknowledge that this is not an unproblematic decision, especially when psychoanalysis risks remaining, as Derrida puts it, “culturally disassociated.” Such “dissociation” not only includes ignorance of another culture’s foundational texts and modes of interpretation, but also occurs when the institutional representatives of psychoanalysis remain silent about abuses such as the practice of torture, one of the “most spectacular ways in which psychoanalytical authorities compromise with political or police authorities,” of which Derrida accused the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1981 with regard to its public discourse—and silence—on Latin America. In this text, “Geopschoanalysis,” Derrida also warns of “more invisible abuses” in which psychoanalysis “may serve as a conduit” for “new forms of violence.” He writes: “Inasmuch, indeed, as psychoanalysis does not analyze, does not denounce, does not struggle, does not transform (and does not transform *itself* for these purposes), surely it is in danger of becoming nothing more than a perverse and sophisticated appropriation of violence or at best merely a new weapon in the symbolic arsenal” (211, *emph. Derrida’s*).

This passage is quoted by Joseph Massad in his scathing critique of Benslama’s book *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, accusing the latter of conducting a “foreign policy” of psychoanalysis via a fortification of the “language of individualism, freedom, and human rights” which accepts as “the only tolerable Islam [. . .] a liberal form of Islam that upholds all the liberal values of European maturity” and individualism (58).¹⁷ In the same 2009 special issue of the psychoanalytically oriented journal *Umbr(a)*, Stefania Pandolfo goes as far as to accuse Benslama’s book of conveying “a specific political position, one that participates actively in the ideological apparatus of the ‘war on terror’” (76). There is no doubt that Benslama takes considerable risks in approaching not only “Islam” and Muslim culture from the

experience of psychoanalysis, but that he does so compelled by the events that rock the entire Middle East, and that have profound repercussions in the Western hemisphere.¹⁸ In the midst of the risks taken, Benslama's work suggests that psychoanalysis has a productive—rather than reductive—role to play in our understanding of today's conflicts. Nathan Gorelick's assessment seems thus more just, when he points out that Benslama's *Psychoanalysis* "attempts to inaugurate the analytic relationship, to suspend the impulse toward solutions and to establish the terms of this absolutely vital confrontation within a rubric that both resists closure and at least attempts to evade complicity with the reductive and violent manifestations of either one of its objects of concern" (emph. Gorelick's). Moreover, Gorelick underlines Benslama's steadfast refusal of the often assumed "dichotomy through which the Islamic philosophical tradition and its European 'counterpart' are held in total distinction. [. . .] The effect of an encounter between psychoanalysis and Islam jeopardizes, through the very discomfort to which it gives rise, the self-assured identities of either party, causing the cultural and historical terms through which they have both been rendered intelligible, to themselves and to each other, to tremble with disquieting intensity" (190-91).

In addition, in the very text Massad turns against Benslama, Derrida castigates the psychoanalytical establishment for the "utter dissociation of the psychoanalytical sphere from the sphere of the citizen or moral subject in his or her public or private life," a dissociation which he characterizes as "one of the most monstrous characteristics of the *homo psychoanalyticus* of our time" and "a ghastly deformity" ("Geopsychanalysis" 215). Invoking the shameful silence by psychoanalytic institutions on the torture committed at the time in Latin America, Derrida goes on to remind his audience (mostly psychoanalysts from all over the world) that

this is precisely the subject of your theory, your practice, and your institutions. You ought to have essential things to say—and to do—on the matter of torture. Especially on the matter of the particularly modern aspect of torture. [. . .] Surely it is here that a properly psychoanalytical intervention should absolutely be set in motion—provided, of course, that there is such a thing as the "properly psychoanalytical" in this sphere. And if ever there were not, very grave conclusions would have to be drawn on all sides from that fact. Can one say that such an intervention, either direct or indirect, is occurring? I don't think so, for the moment. Is it possible? I don't know—I put the question to you. [. . .] The question is still open, but one thing is already certain: if the dominant and representative forces of psychoanalysis in the world today have nothing specific to say or do, nothing original to say or contribute to the thinking and the struggle that are proceeding in connection with the concepts and the crude or refined realities of torture, then psychoanalysis, *at least within the dominant forces that have currently appropriated its representation* [. . .] is nothing more and probably much less than those traditional medical health organizations to which the IPA distributes its principled protest. (217-18, emph. Derrida's)

Benslama's very considerable merit thus is to confront "psychoanalysis" with that "other" to which, as Benslama points out, Freud, regretfully admitting his ignorance, dedicated only a few sentences (*Psychoanalysis* 68-72). Benslama attempts to decipher the cruelty committed in the name of "Islam" with the concepts and experience of "psychoanalysis," thus taking up Derrida's challenge to refuse the "dissociation of the psychoanalytical sphere from the sphere of the citizen or moral subject." If psychoanalysis wants to remain relevant today, it has to name Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and all the other countries in which cruelty and sovereignty are most intimately intertwined. While in his 2000 address to the "States General of Psychoanalysis" (*États généraux de la Psychanalyse*)¹⁹ Derrida seemed to limit the "proper affair of psychoanalysis" to "nonbloody cruelty, psychical cruelty,"²⁰ his reflections on auto-immunity and the "war on terror" make it clear that he also considers psychoanalysis an indispensable discourse for understanding forms of cruelty other than the purely psychic. Benslama, then, accepts Derrida's challenge to the "States General of Psychoanalysis." Can the Freudian logic on "cruelty," Derrida asks,

induce, if not found (and if so, how?), an ethics, a code of law, and a politics capable of measuring up, on the one hand, to this century's psychoanalytic revolution, and, on the other hand, to the events that constitute a cruel mutation of cruelty, a technical, scientific, juridical, economic, ethical and political, ethical and military, and terrorist and policing mutation of our age? What remains to be thought *more psychoanalytico* would thus be a mutation of cruelty itself—or at least new historical figures of an ageless cruelty, as old and no doubt older than man. ("Psychoanalysis" 270, *emph.* Derrida's)

The difficulty of the task of thinking *more psychoanalytico* the "cruel mutation[s] of cruelty" of our age cannot be overstated, since it concerns not only psychoanalysis with regard to Muslim culture and the violence the Muslim world and, in different ways, the Western world are experiencing, but psychoanalysis in general. As Derrida underlined in that same address, psychoanalysis has not yet given any answer "in the very place where one expects the most specific response from psychoanalysis—in truth, the only appropriate response." He elaborates: "As I see it, psychoanalysis has not yet undertaken and thus still less succeeded in thinking, penetrating, and changing the axioms of the ethical, the juridical, and the political, notably in those seismic places where the theological phantasm of sovereignty quakes and where the most traumatic, let us say in a still confused manner the most cruel events of our day are being produced" (244-45). It is no consolation, Derrida continues, that psychoanalysis "is not alone, far from it," in not having thought through the concept of "cruelty,"

and its mutations, in those “seismic places.” It is no consolation “especially for those who, like myself, believe that psychoanalysis, having announced as much at its birth, should have something indispensable and essential not just to say but also to do on this subject. Without alibi. The decisive thing that there would be to say and to do on this subject should register the shock wave of one or more psychoanalytic revolutions. Notably on the subject of what is called, therefore, sovereignty and cruelty” (245).²¹ Benslama’s undertaking is thus enormous. For that very reason, his approach is inspired by what Adorno called “minima moralia,” namely, the sense that “one can no longer tackle with monumental frescos the domains of human reality.” The “short essay,” by contrast, “that is linked to personal experience,” may constitute “a mode of resistance to the great theoretical brutalities in which one prefers to gaze at oneself as in a mirror, in a cosmic system in order not to see the facts and effects of human desire which can be tracked down in the detail.”²² Benslama explains, “As a psychoanalyst, my trajectory and my experience have constantly led me to think the subjective and the political dimensions together. The clinical work with migrants and the confrontation with one of today’s most severe crises of civilization, the crisis of Islam, have convinced me that there is a geopsychanalytical research field in which I deposit as I go along what I find that is related to this articulation of the individual and collective ‘psychical’” (*Soudain* 12, *emph.* Benslama’s).

One example of what Adorno also called “micrology” offered by Benslama is an analysis of the self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi that triggered the “hurricane” of the “Arab Spring,” and an analysis of possible reasons why this particular “self-sacrifice,” but not similar suicides that had preceded it, set a revolution in motion (20, 32-33). Could it be, Benslama asks, that the name *Bouazizi* provided the “original scene of the Tunisian revolution with a powerful symbolic charge?” Benslama conjectures that

in pronouncing the name *Bouazizi*, Tunisians spoke of the man who had immolated himself but in doing so, they received without knowing a word whispered from the conjunction of the act and the signifiers of the name, that could be articulated as *the son of the priceless, cherished father has sacrificed himself for dignity*. Such a resonance is the fruit of an interpretation that assumes that language moves human beings between the possible and the necessary. The possible is the contingent, otherwise put what can be or can not be. In order for an upheaval to occur, the necessary, which is always looking for its chance, must encounter words which confer to it the possibility of a poignant truth. (33-34)

Benslama, then, seeks to find in the power of the signifier what moves people to acts that would be unthinkable under other circumstances. In the case of Bouazizi, the

“martyr” was “constructed” after the fact, but this was only possible because, as Benslama writes, he introduced “the possibility of a reversal of the relations by showing how a man can find power in his very impotence, can exist while disappearing, can make his right prevail while losing everything” (26).

Bouazizi’s act was motivated by utter despair and “the shame of being human,” by his realization that he was crushed by a recklessly arrogant and brutally oppressive government (30). When the tyrant, forced by the revolutionary events, visited the severely burnt Bouazizi in the hospital, the image circulating on social media confronted “the first personality of the State and the last of the last,” the sovereign and the “one who is nobody.” This scene caused the “human community’s gaze to squarely face the gap between the figure of cruel power and the figure of the burnt person reduced to almost nothing on his death bed. The opening of this gaze creates a decisive separation from the master of their alienation. This is why we say here that the unconscious cannot not be political” (27).

Cruelty: Media’s Pervertibility

The so-called war on terror is conducted on more than one front. Within the US and other Western countries, civil liberties are curtailed; in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and now also in Syria—predominantly Muslim countries—military operations are conducted in the form of declared and undeclared wars.

Given that the “resistance to the intelligibility of Islam” is widespread throughout the history of Western Europe, and given that, as Benslama puts it, this “ignorance has even increased, finding new pretexts in our tortured present,” a “metapsychological translation” of psychoanalysis is as difficult as it is urgent (*Psychoanalysis* ix).

A short detour to the question of media is here necessary. As indicated above, media provide the link between the two “ages” of cruelty and testify with particular clarity to the fact that the perpetrators of archaic cruelty are, in Abdelwahab Meddeb’s words, “as much children of their time and of a world transformed by Americanization as they are the product of an internal evolution, unique to Islam.” That is, they are also the children of the most media-savvy modernity (*Malady* 147).

In an interview given shortly after 9/11 entitled “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” Derrida underlined the “mutation” and (to use a concept introduced by W.J.T. Mitchell) the “cloning” of cruelty through endless repeatability via visual media. He argued that “the maximum media coverage was in the *common* interest of the perpetrators of ‘September 11,’ the terrorists, and those who, in the name of the victims, wanted to declare ‘war on terrorism.’ Between these two parties, such media

coverage was, like the good sense of which Descartes speaks, the most widely shared thing in the world” (emph. Derrida’s). This autoimmune “pervertibility” of media, while perhaps not taking the “form of an evil intention,” is, as virtuality, “enough to frighten, even terrify. It is the ineradicable root of terror and thus of a terrorism that announces itself even before organizing itself into terrorism. Implacably. Endlessly” (109).²³

Since that bright September morning, the “‘central nervous system’ of the social body,” in Marshall McLuhan’s language, or the “‘technoeconomic power of the media,” in Derrida’s, has, as Derrida shows, “been traumatized by an image—the spectacle, the word, above all the *number as enigmatic name*: 9/11. The image, the spectacular destruction of the twin towers, has been cloned repeatedly in the collective global nervous system. The mediatizing of the event was, in fact, its whole point” (Mitchell 51, emph. Mitchell’s)—something that has become brutally clear again in recent months, with the use of “social media as a weapon” (Carr). Commenting on videos showing the beheadings of two American journalists (and, six months later, one can add the videos of the beheadings of a British aid worker, a French mountaineer, a Japanese adventurer, a Japanese journalist, the burning alive of a Jordanian pilot, and the beheading of twenty-one Egyptian workers), David Carr wrote in the *New York Times* in September 2014 that “the videos deliver in miniature the same chilling message as the footage of the towers falling 13 years ago: Everything has changed, no one is safe and the United States is impotent against true believers. It is a memo from a foe that has everything to gain by goading America into a fight in a far-away land where its enemies are legion. The tactic worked back then,” Carr adds: “Video beheadings are a triple death—murder and defilement in a public way—and YouTube becomes the pike on which the severed heads are displayed”—endlessly.

Carr’s analysis confirms a thesis Derrida underlined in the interview given right after 9/11, in which he argued that the temporalization of trauma needs to be thought in terms of the future: “The wound remains open by our terror before the *future* and not only the past. [. . .] There is traumatism with no possible work of mourning when the evil comes from the possibility to come of the worst, from the repetition to come—though worse. Traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*” (“Autoimmunity” 96ff, emph. Derrida’s). In this sense, too, “the traumatic event *is* its future,” as Cathy Caruth writes in *Literature in the Ashes of History*; it “is its repetition as something that returns but also returns to erase its past, returns as something other than what one could ever recognize” (87, emph. Caruth’s).

Derrida’s concept of “auto-immunity” encapsulates the stakes: While the “new cruelty” justifies itself in a discourse of return to the purity of the origin, it uses the most advanced media to clone its archaic ferocity, and clone it endlessly, in the name

of “a future reduced to a concluded past” (Benslama, *Psychoanalysis* 10). Derrida’s concept captures this terrifying cycle. Mitchell explains in his book *Cloning Terror* that “in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and especially in the midst of the anthrax scare of fall 2001, the equation of terrorism with literal or metaphoric bioterrorism was unavoidable.” Yet Derrida offered, in that same moment, “an alternate biopolitical metaphor,” which, rather than focusing “on the usual picture of terrorism as a foreign invasion by alien microbes,” focused on the “defense mechanisms of the organism itself” (45).

The notion of “immunity” is all the more useful for Derrida because of its origins. It “is originally based in a sociopolitical discourse, not a biological one: ‘The Latin words *immunitas* and *immunis* have their origin in the legal concept of an exemption,’ a sense that returns in the notion of ‘diplomatic immunity.’” Mitchell comments on the importance of the word’s genesis:

The whole theory of the immune system, and the discipline of immunology, is riddled with images drawn from the sociopolitical sphere—of invaders and defenders, hosts and parasites, [. . .] borders and identities that must be maintained. In asking us to see terror as autoimmunity, then, Derrida is bringing the metaphor home at the same time he sends it abroad [. . .]. The effect of the “bipolar image” is to produce a situation in which there is *no literal meaning*, nothing but the resonances between two images, one biomedical, the other political. The impossibility of a literal meaning, of course, means that we literally “do not know what we are talking about” or what we are “literally” talking about. [. . .] For Derrida, this admission of ignorance is crucial, because the real politics of the autoimmunity metaphor, beyond its power to deconstruct all the easy, Manichean binary oppositions that have structured the War on Terror, is the restaging of terrorism as a condition that needs to be thought through analytically, systemically, and without moral tub-thumping. Even more far-reaching is the implication that “a mutation will have to take place” in our entire way of thinking about justice, democracy, sovereignty, globalization, military power, the relations of nation-states, the politics of “friendship” and enmity, in order to address terrorism with any hope of an effective cure. In other words, we have something to learn here. (47-48, *emph. Mitchell’s*)

Derrida’s reflections on September 2001 are just as relevant for understanding the “terror” of our day and age:²⁴

“Terrorist” acts try to produce psychic effects (conscious or unconscious) and symbolic or symptomatic reactions that might take numerous detours [. . .] The *quality* or *intensity* of the emotions provoked (whether conscious or unconscious) is not always proportionate to the number of victims or the amount of damage. In situations and cultures where the media do not spectacularize the event, the killing of thousands of people in a very short period of time might provoke fewer psychic and political effects than the assassination of a single individual

in another country, culture, or nation-state with highly developed media resources. And does terrorism have to work only through death? ("Autoimmunity" 107-08, *emph. Derrida's*)

Derrida rejects the Western bias that attributes much greater attention to death inflicted by "terrorism," as defined and portrayed by mainstream media, than to deaths that are not seen as such or that are presented as justified for reasons of "national security." After enumerating a long list of examples, including letting millions of people die of hunger and disease, Derrida concludes: "All situations of social or national structural oppression produce a terror that is [. . .] organized, institutional, and all these situations depend on this terror without those who benefit from them ever organizing terrorist acts or ever being treated as terrorists. The narrow, too narrow meaning commonly given today to the word 'terrorism' gets circulated in various ways in the discourse that dominates the public space, and first of all through the technoeconomic power of the media" (108). As Derrida points out in the same interview, "one doesn't count the dead in the same way from one corner of the globe to the other. It is our duty to recall this" (92). Among many possible examples, one may recall that the drone war conducted in remote areas in Pakistan and Afghanistan occurs in "situations and cultures where the media do not spectacularize the event," with the result that the killing of hundreds or thousands of people goes almost unnoticed in the very countries whose taxpayers finance the lethal attacks.

Cruelty: Our Day, Our Age

While the scope of this essay doesn't allow me to go into the rich analyses offered by Benslama in *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, his analysis of today's atrocities and their *mise-en-scène* (again, the acts cannot be separated from their mediated calculation) is illuminating. And it is an example, I believe, of what Derrida may have had in mind when he underlined the necessity of psychoanalysis for a reflection on auto-immunitarian cruelty. Indeed, Benslama approaches those "seismic places" where cruelty is taking on new forms and qualities. To quote Derrida again, Benslama turns his attention to "where the theological phantasm of sovereignty quakes and where the most traumatic, let us say in a still confused manner the most cruel events of our day are being produced," and thus confronts the question "what new forms of cruelty" a psychoanalyst of this day and age would have to "interpret at renewed expense, outside or within the institution" ("Psychoanalysis" 244, 257).

Benslama describes several major political conditions that form the broader context of the "civilizational mutation" taking place in the Islamic world (*Psychoanalysis*

51) that resonate with Derrida's analysis and are often neglected in the public debates in Western nations:

1. The encounter of Muslim countries and modernity occurred first through the brutal experience of colonialism: "Enlightenment arrived with gunboats. We need not forget that the culture of enlightenment, together with its scientific and technological apparatuses disembarked with military expeditions (Egypt 1798, Algiers 1831. . .), implanted themselves with colonialism and that they shook the very foundations, both material and symbolical, of the Muslim world. In a very short lapse of time, Islam became the reference of a dislocated civilization, whose members are dominated at home" (*Guerre* 18).

2. The importation of Western capitalism did not further political self-determination for the peoples of Middle Eastern countries. On the contrary, it allowed the ruling families of oil-rich monarchies to "ferociously" exploit their countries' resources, on the one hand transforming them "into a product of consumption for a minority," and on the other, leaving "desolate urban landscapes" (Lahbib; Benslama, *Psychoanalysis* 53) in which an "unheard-of demographic explosion" left "masses of people abandoned without care by those who govern them, human matter ready to be molded in all the forms of desperate and unregulated expression" (Lahbib). In other texts, Benslama frequently underlines the people's despair in Middle Eastern countries, in particular in Tunisia, where the regime had achieved a "political despair" so deep that the political speech of its opponents "limited itself to declarations of political impotence" (*Soudain* 49).

3. In the wake of the destruction of the Caliphate by Atatürk in 1924, and in the wake of the struggle for liberation from colonial power, brutal dictatorships were established, able to survive only with the complicity of the West, stripping their populations of justice and respect and imposing draconian censorship on cultural productions and political expression. The most egregious example, Saudi Arabia, is "the only state in the world whose name bears that of its leading family." For thirty years, the Saud family "has continued to eradicate argument, opposition, and creativity through the use of imprisonment, torture, murder, the corruption of elites, and the imposition of the most brutal norms on the planet [that include] aggravated archaic forms of male domination and sexual repression" (Benslama, *Psychoanalysis* 65). Other analysts underline this factor as well, including the acclaimed Middle East correspondent for *The Independent*, Patrick Cockburn, and the French-Tunisian poet, scholar of Islam, and novelist Abdelwahab Meddeb (*Malady* 188).

4. As a consequence of this political circumstance, the cultural process of modernization for many predominantly Muslim countries has been vastly different than

in the European context. Benslama asserts, “the acceptance of science and technology did not occur through a process of creative integration. [. . .] In the absence of any critical function, without any accompanying ethics or aesthetics, [. . .] modernization took place without the necessary work of culture (*Kulturarbeit*, as Freud expressed it);” resulting in an “expulsion of the function of language in the name of science” (*Psychoanalysis* 45).

5. Two “fateful decisions” by Paul Bremer also need to be listed here, which he made in May 2003 as the top civilian administrator for the Coalition Provisional Authority, and thus Iraq’s chief executive authority who was permitted to rule by decree. Among the first and the most fateful decrees were Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 1, which barred Iraqis who ranked in the higher levels of Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party from Government work, and Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 2, which disbanded the Iraqi Army, putting at least three hundred thousand men out of work in a country plagued by high unemployment. As James Pfiffner shows, both decrees were made “against the advice of military and CIA professionals and without consulting important members of the President’s staff and cabinet” (76). It is well known that many soldiers of the former Iraqi army joined the insurgency, and many former officers have been providing military expertise to the recently declared “caliphate.”²⁵

For Benslama, one of the causes of Islamist extremism—and one to which we as a scholarly community need to be especially attentive—is “the widespread liquidation of speech and political meaning” that has been enforced for decades, and the resulting “catastrophic collapse of language: language was no longer able to translate for people a particularly intense historical experience, that of the modern era” (*Psychoanalysis* 4).

The combination of these factors prepared fertile ground for the Islamist discourse, “a discourse that promises justice through identity, that offers vengeance and reparation through the reappropriation of the proper [*le propre*: the clean/one’s own]” (Lahbib), and promises “access to the ‘originary plenitude of politics’” by means of a “return to the golden age of the founding of Islam” (*Psychoanalysis* 4).

As an example of Derrida’s “auto-immunity,” Benslama explains how Islamist clerics in large numbers invoke science to prove the truth of the foundational religious texts. The revealed signs of the religious system whose truth “remains hidden from all proof” are replaced by religious writings “in which the discourse of science continuously vouches for revelation” (*Psychoanalysis* 49). Thus, “contrary to popular conceptions, what we are witnessing, far from being a simple return of the religious, is the confused manifestation of the decomposition of religion and its recomposition

as a new, modern totalitarian ideology: national-theo-scientism" (50). Or, in the dark light of recent events, one could actually say: national-theo-media-scientism.

When the "rupture" or "caesura" in the "identificatory anchorages" that "characterizes modernity as such" occurs without the corresponding cultural work, "it is transformed into a disastrous process of subjective revocation on a large scale ["révocation subjective à grande échelle"] which triggers the despair of the masses" (*Psychoanalysis* 54). Benslama underlines that such ruptures in identificatory anchorages are, wherever they occur, "high-risk process[es]." Poverty and the destruction of living spaces render this despair more devastating, but its causes "lie in the loss of unconscious individual-collective anchorages and are expressed in the identificatory fear of losing face" (55). However, it is the "denial" of this despair that will cause it to "reappear through unheard-of and aggravated forms of the aptitude at annihilation" (*Soudain* 43).

Benslama offers several perspectives on the ensuing violence, and its particular brand of cruelty. What fuels them all is an extraordinary literalism that is assumed to move backwards in time, in order to simultaneously produce the origin of Islam, the end of time, and divine vengeance.

1. The radical Islamist response to the massive and collective "subjective revocation" is to "re-Islamicize" Muslims, sanctioning along the way "violent extremist groups to kill and massacre" people denounced as "simulacra of Muslims whose deaths will be a service to Islam." In this logic, the accused pseudo-Muslims "have evolved backward and crossed the wall of time to a period before their beginning." As a consequence, "the emirs who are 're-Islamicizing' Muslims assume the position of being wrapped in a collective primal scene and clinging to the gateway of beginnings, where they can control death by taking the tithe of life and flesh" (*Psychoanalysis* 26). Graeme Wood's recent analysis of "ISIS" underlines the necessity of taking seriously the group's fervent endeavour to return to the origin and to understand its actions "in light of a sincere, carefully considered commitment to returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bringing about the apocalypse." In conversations Wood has conducted with officials of the group, they insisted that "they will not—cannot—waver from governing precepts that were embedded in Islam by the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers." Wood quotes Bernard Haykel, Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, who points out that the fighters of the Islamic State faithfully reproduce the norms of war of early Islam, including "a number of practices that modern Muslims tend to prefer not to acknowledge as integral to their sacred texts," such as "slavery, crucifixion, and beheadings." What is striking about Islamic State fighters, according to Haykel, "is not just the literalism, but also the seriousness with which they read these texts" (qtd. in Wood).

2. The literal adoption of seventh-century practices, however, can happen only on the condition of the “uprooting of metaphor and the destruction of interpretation” (Benslama, *Psychoanalysis* 26). According to Meddeb’s succinct assessment, “we have moved away from a voice that veils the text in a strangeness all the more delightful for its excess, and toward an articulation of triumphant meaning, a reign of terror that divides all acts between reward and punishment” (*Islam* 8).

3. According to Benslama, from its early days on, Islamism has assimilated “Enlightenment” with “new crusades” and found

confirmation of its thesis of the ablation of the Muslim subject from his/her confessional community. This is why the recurrent reactive figure of the subject at war in the modern Muslim world has not ceased to be that of the *avenger of the divinity*. The agony for justice does not have another meaning in this context than that of accomplishing Allah’s vengeance. The mechanism of voluntary death hinges here on a decision by which the subject fulfills himself in the perspective of a last judgment, through the sacrifice of his life for the survival of his God and the restoration of his empire. This means in the end that the subject is responsible *before* God only by having become responsible *for* God. (*Guerre* 18-19, *emph.* Benslama’s)

Indeed, the supporters and analysts of ISIS quoted by Wood leave no doubt that the group’s ultimate horizon is bringing about the end of time. Holding “the imminent fulfillment of prophecy as a matter of dogma,” its fervent adherents believe that they “are personally involved in struggles beyond their own lives, and that merely to be swept up in the drama, on the side of righteousness, is a privilege.” Furthermore, they will “receive divine succor” if they stay “true to the Prophetic model.” Benslama explains why, from a psychoanalytic perspective, such assumed responsibility *for* God paves the path for cruelty. Cruelty, he writes, “supposes the sadist *jouissance* [excessive pleasure or enjoyment] of the other’s suffering.” But in order for such *jouissance* to materialize, the sadist subject must imagine that through the other’s suffering, he, the perpetrator, causes the absolute Other’s, i.e., God’s, *jouissance* (Lahbib).

4. Reflecting on the “profound political breakdown” of the Arab world over the last decades, Benslama cautions against attributing this breakdown exclusively to “victimization” or “humiliation by outside forces.” Instead, he ascribes the breakdown to the fact that “the cruelty associated with the destruction of politics shatters human dignity,” leaving behind “derisory things [*choses dérisoires*]” (*Psychoanalysis* 64).

Since the 1960s, the ruling families have “financed the emergence of radical Islamist movements in order to destroy progressive forces, suspend the interpretation of ancient texts, and disseminate their own [corrupt] values” (*Psychoanalysis* 66). The

reduction of their subjects to “derisory things” deprived of the dignity of political self-determination is replicated and exploited by

instigators who lead the masses on a path littered with worn-out values, where the imperative is to reanimate those values by transforming oneself into their living fetishes. [...] The current proliferation of parades that exhibit bodies marked by the stigmata of subjection, and dress codes of disguise that wipe out personal identity to produce the gesticulation of religious automatons, [illustrate] that the desire of the avenger of the divinity correlates to being the instrument of God’s *jouissance* and, in many cases, to make his law. This is where the reversal occurs that allows the subject to pass from derision to the grandiose. (*Guerre* 19)

It is the assertion of absolute sovereignty, the sovereignty thought to be meted out by a cruelly punishing God. Benslama observes that in Arabic, the word for “sovereignty,” *siyaada*, shares its roots with the word for “blackness,” *sawuaad*: “This is the archaic meaning of this sovereign power: it wants to govern as the night that falls onto the world” (*Soudain* 46). In a footnote, Benslama recalls that the etymology of the word “sovereign” in the Latin tradition is not any better: *superanus* “indicates the most elevated, i.e. the solar position. The one who makes the day makes the night” (46n).

The quasi-divine power of making the day or the night is asserted in both the archaic and the techno-scientific manifestations of sovereignty which in both theatres of war descends cruelly, often lethally. The task of the deconstructor-philosopher is thus clear, as is that of the psychoanalyst: to disturb that which *desires within us* a kingdom, in all the forms this desire might take, in all the forms the “us” might take, and to analyze, without alibi, the cruelty that is intrinsic to all of them. This is for Derrida specifically the task of scholars working in the humanities, as can be deduced from the way he described the necessary work on the two sides of the history of the death penalty:

We are not here to simplify. We are here—permit me to recall this because it is essential and decisive at this point—neither in a courtroom or on a witness stand, nor in a place of worship, nor in a parliament, nor in print, radio, or televised news. And neither are we in a real theater. To exclude all of these places, to exit from all of these places, without exception, is the first condition for *thinking* the death penalty. And thus for hoping to change it in some way.” (*Death* 27, *emph.* Derrida’s)

Something similar could be said of terror and its wars.

NOTES

- 1/ For a francophone ear, it is impossible to miss the homophony between "ontologie" and "hontologie."
- 2/ "Could one *address oneself in general* if already some ghost did not come back?" (emph. Derrida's). Referring to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Derrida continues: "If he [or she] loves justice at least, the 'scholar' of the future, the 'intellectual' of tomorrow" should "learn" to address him- or herself to the other, and to learn it "from the ghost" (*Specters* 221).
- 3/ On the concept of "futurity," see Leslie Adelson's "Futurity Now: An Introduction" (*Germanic Review* 88 [2013]: 213. Print) and Amir Eshel's *Futurity*. Eshel discusses new "narrative sequences" (4).
- 4/ Derrida opens his reflections in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. Trans. David Wills. Fordham: Fordham UP, 2008. Print) with the question of shame and of "pudeur," modesty, or, as the English says it so tellingly, self-consciousness, in a commentary on the second chapter of *Genesis*. Self-consciousness starts with shame. As David Wills writes in his commentary on Derrida's text, "Shame is precisely that complicated system of self-reflection that begins with consciousness of our nakedness. No animal knows it is naked [. . .] from this perspective, [shame] is the conceptual machinery itself, a machine set in motion by itself, always already on. Before being the automatism of blood rushing to the face, the pure life of spontaneous blush, shame is the originary technicity that is the origin of technology, for it is on the basis of it that we inaugurate the technological drive" ("The Blushing Machine." *Parrhesia* 8 [2009]: 39-40. Print).
- 5/ "The keystone, or, if you prefer, the cement, the weld, as I just said, of the onto-theologico-political, the prosthetic artifact that keeps it upright." The alternative translation is proposed by Elizabeth Rottenberg in "The 'Question' of the Death Penalty" (*Oxford Literary Review* 35.2 [2013]: 267-69. Print).
- 6/ The quote in the quote is from Derrida's *For What Tomorrow* (146/88; trans. modified).
- 7/ See also "Jennifer Gibson: Drones Terrorize Populations, Victims Seek Justice at ICC" (*Talk Nation Radio*, 24 Feb. 2014. Radio).
- 8/ For the numbers of victims, see "Covert Drone War" (*Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, n.d. Web. 15 Feb. 2015). See also "UN Expert: Lethal Use of Drones Must Be Curbed" (Reprise. 19 June 2014. Web. 15 Feb. 2015).
- 9/ The Reprise website links to a Channel 4 website, "Drone Attacks 'Traumatising a Generation of Children'" (4 News. *Channel 4*, 5 Mar. 2013. Web. 15 Feb. 2015).
- 10/ Gregory speaks of "the ultimate 'God-trick' whose vengeance depends on making its objects visible and its subjects invisible" ("View" 204).
- 11/ As Gregory points out, "the suite of four aircraft that constitutes a Combat Air Patrol capable of providing coverage twenty-four hours a day seven days a week involves 192 personnel, and most of them (133) are located outside the combat zone and beyond immediate danger." However, Launch and Recovery crews "are stationed to handle take-off and landing," and "large maintenance crews in-theatre" are on hand "to service the aircraft" ("Drone" 7).
- 12/ See also Stephen Trimble's "Gorgon Stare Includes the USAF's Only Operational Day/Night Persistent Wide-area Motion Imagery (WAMI) Capability" (*Flightglobal Aviation Connected*, 2 July 2014. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015).
- 13/ However, Wills also notes that in spite of the geographical distance of the killing zones, "reservist terminators" at Hancock and Creech Air Bases in New York and Nevada report post-traumatic stress symptoms (184). See also see Jennifer Robinson's "'Bugsplat': The Ugly US Drone War in Pakistan" (*Al Jazeera Media*, 29 Nov. 2011. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015).
- 14/ The quote within the quote is again from Chamayou.
- 15/ The wars that received the greatest media coverage at the time were the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991), the Rwandan Civil War (1990-1993), the Algerian Civil War (1991-2002), the Somali Civil War (1991-present), the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995), the Bosnian War (1992-1995), and the civil war in Afghanistan (1992-1996).
- 16/ See also Elizabeth Rottenberg's "Cruelty and its Vicissitudes" (155) and Derrida's "Psychoanalysis" (240).

- 17/ Massad's second main argument is that Benslama speaks of "Islam" in terms that are too undifferentiated and thus make him conflate in strategic places "Islam" and "Islamism."
- 18/ Speaking about his book *Soudain la révolution! De la Tunisie au monde arabe: La signification d'un soulèvement*, Benslama himself writes that "I have taken the risk of writing this small book in closest proximity of the event, in order to contribute to take it out of the gossip, but also in order not to let drop again the unthinkable that is this event's radiant kernel" (10-11).
- 19/ As Elisabeth Roudinesco writes, "the States General brought together a thousand participants from thirty-three countries in the large amphitheater of the Sorbonne in Paris" (Derrida and Roudinesco 233n7).
- 20/ See Elisabeth Rottenberg's "Cruelty and its Vicissitudes" (155).
- 21/ A bit later, Derrida pushes the question and the challenge even further:
What new forms of cruelty would a psychoanalyst of the year 2000 have to interpret at renewed expense, outside or within the institution? With regard to the political, the geo-political, the juridical, the ethical, are there consequences, or at least lessons to be drawn from the hypothesis of an irreducible death drive that seems inseparable from what is so obscurely called cruelty, in either its archaic or its modern forms? Would there also be, a few steps further beyond the principles, a beyond of the beyond, a beyond of the death drive and thus of the cruelty drive? (257-58)
- 22/ All translations of Benslama's *Soudain la révolution!* are mine.
- 23/ Derrida adds a note of caution: "Let me add here as a reminder: there is nothing purely 'modern' in this relation between media and terror, in a terrorism that operates by propagating within the public space images or rumors aimed at terrifying the so-called civilian population" ("Autoimmunity" 109).
- 24/ One acronym and two proper names to allude to the most salient recent acts of terror, as seen from the Western perspective: ISIS, Charlie Hebdo, Copenhagen.
- 25/ See also Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt's "Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS" (*New York Times*, 27 Aug. 2014. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015) and Michael Gordon's "Fateful Choice on Iraq Army Bypassed Debate" (*New York Times*, 17 Mar. 2008. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015).

WORKS CITED

- Benslama, Fethi. *La guerre des subjectivités en Islam*. Paris: Lignes, 2014. Print.
- _____. *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*. Trans. Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 2009. Print.
- _____. *Soudain la révolution! De la Tunisie au monde arabe: La signification d'un soulèvement*. Paris: Denoël, 2011. Print.
- Carr, David. "With Videos of Killings, ISIS Sends Medieval Message by Modern Method." *New York Times*, 7 Sep. 2014. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Literature in the Ashes of History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013. Print.
- Chamayou, Grégoire. "The Manhunt Doctrine." *Radical Philosophy* 169 (2011): 2-6. Print.
- Cockburn, Patrick. *The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising*. New York: OR, 2014. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides." *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. Ed. Giovanna Borradori. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003. 85-136. Print.
- _____. *The Death Penalty, Volume 1*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2014. Print.
- _____. "Faith and Knowledge." *Acts of Religion*. Ed. Gil Anidjar. New York: Routledge, 2002. 42-101. Print.
- _____. "Geopsychoanalysis: . . . and the Rest of the World." *American Imago* 48.2 (1991): 199-231. Print.
- _____. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. Print.

- _____. "In Praise of Psychoanalysis." *For What Tomorrow. . . A Dialogue*. By Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco. Trans. Jeff Fort. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. 166-96. Print.
- _____. "'Prolegomena' to 'First Name of Benjamin.'" *Acts of Religion*. Ed. Gil Anidjar. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- _____. "Provocation: Forewords." *Without Alibi*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. xv-xxxv. Print.
- _____. "Psychoanalysis Searches the State of its Soul: The Impossible Beyond of a Sovereign Cruelty." *Without Alibi*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. 238-80. Print.
- _____. *Specters of Marx*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Elisabeth Roudinesco. *For What Tomorrow. . . : A Dialogue*. Trans. Jeff Fort. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. Print.
- Eshel, Amir. *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013. Print.
- Gibson, Jennifer. "Living with Death by Drone." *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Oct. 2012. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.
- Gorelick, Nathan. "Fethi Benslama and the Translation of the Impossible in Islam and Psychoanalysis." *Umbr(a)* (2009): 189-93. Print.
- Gregory, Derek. "Drone Geography." *Radical Philosophy* 183 (2014): 7-19. Print.
- _____. "From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28.7/8 (2011): 188-215. Print.
- Hussain, Nasser. "The Sound of Terror: Phenomenology of a Drone Strike." *Boston Review*, 16 Oct. 2013. N. pag. Print.
- Kamuf, Peggy. "Protocol: Death Penalty Addiction." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 50 (2012): 5-19. Print.
- Lahbib, Hella. "Entretien avec Fethi Benslama." *La Presse de Tunisie*, 30 Aug. 2014. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.
- McVeigh, Karen. "Drone Strikes: Tears in Congress as Pakistani Family Tells of Mother's Death." *Guardian*, 29 Oct. 2013. Print.
- Massad, Joseph. "Psychoanalysis, Islam, and the Other of Liberalism." *Umbr(a)* (2009): 44-69. Print.
- Meddeb, Abdelwahab. *Islam and the Challenge of Civilization*. Trans. Jane Kuntz. New York: Fordham UP, 2013. Print.
- _____. *The Malady of Islam*. Trans. Pierre Joris and Ann Reid. New York: Basic, 2003. Print.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011. Print.
- Naas, Michael. "The Philosophy and Literature of the Death Penalty: Two Sides of the Same Sovereign." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 50 (2012): 39-55. Print.
- Nakashima, Ellen, and Craig Whitlock. "With Air Force's Gorgon Drone 'We Can See Everything'" *Washington Post*, 2 Jan. 2011. N. pag. Print.
- Pandolfo, Stefania. "'Soul Choking': Maladies of the Soul, Islam, and the Ethics of Psychoanalysis." *Umbr(a)* (2009): 71-103. Print.
- Pasternack, Alex. "Life in the Dronescape: An Interview with Madiha Tahir." *Motherboard. Vice Media*, 29 Oct. 2013. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.

- Pfiffner, James. "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army." *Intelligence and National Security* 25.1 (2010): 76-85. Print.
- Reprieve. "Drone Strikes." *Reprieve*, n.d. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.
- Rottenberg, Elizabeth. "Cruelty and its Vicissitudes: Jacques Derrida and the Future of Psychoanalysis." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 50 (2012): 143-59. Print.
- Sierra Nevada Corporation. "Gorgon Stare: Persistent Wide-Area Airborne Surveillance (WASS) System." *Sierra Nevada Corporation*, 9 June 2014. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.
- Singer, P.W. *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*. New York: Penguin, 2009. Print.
- Tahir, Madiha, dir. *Wounds of Waziristan*. Parergon, 2013. Film.
- Wills, David. "Drone Penalty." *SubStance* 43.2 (2014): 174-92. Print.
- Wood, Graeme. "What ISIS Really Wants." *Atlantic Monthly*, Mar. 2015. N. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.

ELISABETH WEBER teaches German and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the author of *Persecution and Trauma: On Emmanuel Levinas' "Otherwise than being or beyond essence."* Most recently, she edited the volumes *Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and Peace*, and, together with Julie Carlson, *Speaking about Torture*.