

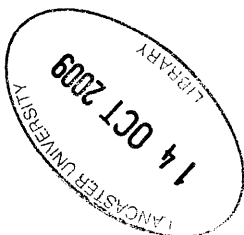
**The Singularity of Witness:
Memory, Poetry and the Refugee**

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*This thesis is submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in International Relations.*

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As always, this thesis is the product of my own work and should not, beyond the author's own interpretations, be taken to represent the views, opinions and convictions of those whose names have been quoted in it. The responsibility for any mistakes, omissions, or inconsistencies rests entirely with the author.

To Darren –

*for sharing names, keeping stories,
and being my singular witness.*

Abstract:

This thesis addresses the question of bearing witness. It hypothesizes that witnessing is singular in nature and as such, demands certain kinds of idioms. It problematizes modern politico-scientific conceptions of knowledge for their insistence on functionality, universalization and calculability. More specifically, it offers a systematic examination of witnessing in relation to the 'juridical,' the 'literary' as poetry, memory and the refugee. An underlying performative relationship between bearing witness, power and displacement will re-theorize the international order, defined by crises and liminality, as the condition of out-living sovereign, institutionalized security through negotiations borne out of the demands of lived experiences. An engagement with poetry and storytelling will engage the productive potential of language thereby challenging the scientific reduction of history, politics and memory to fact. Human beings, refugees more specifically, will be discussed as sentient in addition to being calculable and thus, as the very political agents, constituted and addressed through a rhetoric of responsibility, that inform the ways in which we as researchers comport ourselves in the world of humanity. Each chapter will address a specific component of witnessing in an effort to explain and understand better the nature of the productive, linguistic relationships that underwrite the practice of international relations.

Table of contents:

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	6
Introduction	10
situating bearing witness	14
coordinates: outline of the study	19
conclusion	29
Chapter One: <i>The extra-‘ordinary’ as homo sacer: Giorgio Agamben and the limit of testimony</i>	30
the Agambenian state	30
witnessing the limit: bare times, barely alive	35
on the quietism of the exception as a state of being	40
securing rationality as ‘norm’	43
the true witness – the Muselmann	45
deciding (on) the (extra)ordinary	47
problematizing the exception	49
trauma: testimony: truth	55
ordered subjects	58
<banned b="" testimony<=""></banned>	63
anoma-lous subjects	65
conclusion: poetic witness and subjectivity	71
Chapter Two: <i>‘Your question – your answer.’ Bearing witness, poetry, and the debt to life</i>	73
authenticity and witness	74
‘event’ and being in the world	76
bearing witness to ‘event’	81
on ‘being singular plural’	83
bearing witness with derrida	86
trauma and the repetition of language	90
truth claims and linguistic undecidability	94
first fragment: aporia	96
the literary witness	100
the poetics of bearing witness	105
on the romanticism of poetry as philosophy	109
the way of fable	114
second fragment: singular witness	116
third Fragment: daily accounts	118
conclusion: back to authenticity	123

Chapter Three: <i>“All is less than / it is, / all is more.” Paul Celan’s</i>	
<i>singular witness</i>	126
first fragment – why celan?	127
‘poetry of witness’ and the quest for truth	129
‘the real’ world and the event of writing	132
second fragment – from witness to poet to witness to	135
poetry at the limits of language	139
the poet and the law-giver or, ‘how do you bear witness ‘mute’?	140
the work of poetry	144
on the no-more-extraordinary-witness	148
hope and arriving	149
the extra-ordinary: poetry in no wo(man)’s land	153
your truth, my truth	156
third fragment – the philosopher and the poet	159
concluding remarks – on the way to memory	168

Chapter Four: <i>Memory, the ‘linguistic turn,’ and the ‘singularity of political</i>	
<i>novelty</i>	170
singularity remembered – the iterability of fact	174
derrida and the texture of experience	176
re-membering derrida	180
falling out with derrida	184
the linguistic turn, formalist beliefs and the ‘guarantee of meaning’	189
the post-modern center or, on the nature of productive difference	194
singularity of political novelty	197
theoretical impasse: postmodern and other pains	199
ceremonial encounters: agamben and the singular remnant	202
the exception as the source of sovereign power	205
excess and the remnant	209
rattling laws	210
being in flight	215

Chapter Five: <i>Refugee voices and voice-overs: On exile, an umbrella,</i>	
<i>and the question: “Who am I after the night of</i>	
<i>the estranged?”</i>	217
introducing the argument	218
defining refugees: the logic and the law	223
preliminary notes on ‘the refugee’: in lieu of a literature review	226
going places: vanishing points	235
the refugee problem: securing bodies	238
detention, definition, defiance	242
1. detention	242
2. definition: “who’s there?”	245
2.1. camp landscapes	247
2.2. pictures and seeing	250
3. defiance: hari’s umbrella	252

on being classified	255
the 'camp' as museum	256
time-lines as bubbles	258
on the politics of displacement: the discipline and its dissidents	261
on the (extra)ordinary nature of human experience	267
detours and right-of-ways	272
Conclusion	276
fault lines and measured dangers	278
what comes next ... the future of the project of witnessing	280
Bibliography	285

INTRODUCTION

The scientific obsession with the production and dissemination of knowledge as truth has recruited, for the academic discipline of political science, a multiplicity of modalities and idioms in service of certitude, security, legitimacy, and order. Bearing witness, in turn, has been welcomed for its suggested access to privileged personal information and experience, thus making ‘truth’ itself the product of a semi-sensationalist, semi-narrative, yet scientific reconstruction of ‘event.’ The underlying belief in the sanctity of truth-claims and their inherent role in realizing a Kantian idea of progress has led social science to an institutionalized and highly regimented notion of what the acceptable and reliable ways for accessing ‘truth’ are. The discipline of political science has been no stranger to these commitments.

The methodological conscription of textual and numerical interpretations in service of truth-claims has been supplemented by the idioms of language making up just one such appropriable network of forces, operations and data. In an effort to challenge this understanding of the linear relationship between language, representation, and knowledge, this thesis will be guided by the belief that how we evoke, use, and interpret language has important implications for the ways in which we engage, address and think of the human as the subject of politics. More specifically, this thesis argues that the assumptions and ends guiding our interpretations and operationalization of both theory and reality are made up of elements and idioms that defy simple summary or generalization. This invites us to think seriously about the potential of language to inform, represent and address the fact of being in the world beyond reducing the latter to structural imperatives.

This thesis addresses the productive, performative, and singular nature of bearing witness through the idioms of the juridical, the literary, poetry, memory and

the refugee. All claims made hereafter will be informed by a close textual engagement with the implications, demands and propositions following from a reading of bearing witness as a politically complex network of singular events. While informed by a mainstream international relations narratives, this thesis takes as its starting point an understanding of war, democracy, security, the state and the human based on a discursive-interpretative commitment to the messy, chaotic, disorganized and unpredictable nature of being.

The ultimate aspiration of this thesis amounts to nothing more than an initial attempt to work through, take seriously and address the political stakes of the question of being in the world when (re)read and (re)constructed through language. This thesis simply asks us to consider and think through the implications that a singular, performative operationalization of ‘event’ has for practising politics. In other words – to follow through with the demands that the specificity and materiality of being in the world places on the ways in which we comport ourselves regarding the production, packaging and distribution of knowledge.

This thesis asks a number of important questions regarding the production and disseminations of information. Namely: How do individuals access the kinds of information that define and delimit what are known as ‘private memories?’ How are these memories, in turn, recruited in service of theoretical commitments to be recorded, translated, typed, edited, published and analyzed in service of a particular understanding of the components of scientific knowledge? How are memories of trauma, suffering, and violence recovered without disrupting the make-up of everyday life or committing the latter to institutionalized appraisal and keeping? What is the responsibility of the researcher for the recording and representation of past events as singular occurrences, not universal deductions? What is the relationship between witnessing and the restoration of justice? How is human

agency understood, addressed and re-covered in instances of trauma, suffering, violence and death? Whose responsibility is it to mediate the transition between memory and witness, between trauma and reconciliation? In what ways does poetry disclose the singularity inherent in language, the academic variety included?

These are just a few of the questions this thesis hopes to address and by addressing, problematize further. The underlying hypothesis guiding these questions derives from an understanding of politics as a sphere made up of stories - allegorical, fablistic and unfinished in nature. These stories, however, and their interpretations have the potential to produce, justify, perpetuate and enact violence. A positivist, rational-scientific reading of these narratives not only overlooks their performative nature, but ends up reducing the multiplicity of life-truths to a reproducible world order. Through a careful and close reading of five different idioms of witnessing, this study will posit the political re-production of knowledge as an outcome of an institutionalized over-commitment to the security and stability of pre-determined ends. In this universe the human, too, has been recruited in service of formulaic realities.

This thesis will unfold in the form of a narrative. It will comment on the political and ethical implications inherent in an understanding of witnessing as an exegesis on the nature of 'event' beyond and after memory. That is, my engagement with bearing witness will be informed by a reading of experience alongside language.¹ A literary engagement with the political will alert to the changing dimensions of our understandings of history and politics beyond uni-dimensional and pre-determined.

¹ Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience" In *Practicing History*, 199-216. Edited by Gabrielle Spiegel. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 200.

Joan Scott discusses the evidential nature of experience as conditioned by the complexities and histories underwriting both our ontological and actual historical being in the world.

Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political. The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation.²

Bearing witness will be theorized as one such field of forces and practices, alerting to the unavoidable relationship between determination, decision and experience.

Because of the inherent complexities and multi-disciplinary commitments associated with a study on witnessing, the key terms of this study will be defined with explicit attention to their bearings in a discussion of the political implications of witnessing.

Three particular bearings will situate this study within international relations orthodoxy. First, a discussion of witnessing as a performative and singular engagement with 'event' will challenge the scientific insistence on producing rational subjects on the one hand while producing historically accurate accounts on the other. Second and following from this, history and (scientific) knowledge will be defined as an emerging field of forces underwritten by a similarly porous understanding of the processes we use to make knowledge commitments stick. As far as our understanding of the human is concerned, the latter's situational, experiential, and interpretative experience of reality will inform a shifting positioning of knowledge as fiction. Last but not least, this thesis will comment on the relationship between displacement and security, the latter understood as a grand narrative aimed at increasing control, order and predictability by reducing risk, insecurity and chance. A discussion of particular refugee experiences will challenge the sovereign positing of security as the bearer of stability, order and (human) rights, as if security itself was somehow possible independently of the very things that challenge and threaten the

² Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," 213.

security of security. The security of the sovereign state will be shown as derived from the insecurity of the foreign, the nomadic and “the other” in a move aimed at examining everyday individual practices based on adaptability, fluidity, flexibility and violence and aimed at ‘out-living’ the myth of security itself.

The rest of this introductory chapter will offer an overview of the basic reference points underwriting my discussion of bearing witness. Because of the latter’s interdisciplinary character and because of the definite political leanings of my study, this short overview should not be read as an exhaustive, authoritative commentary on all possible aspects and theories of witnessing. Rather, it should be seen as exemplifying one kind of reading of the particular implications witnessing potentially has for a politically-situated engagement with ‘event’ and knowledge.

situating bearing witness

While this thesis is informed by a range of readings across several academic disciplines, its end goal is to problematize witnessing from the point of view of international relations. The latter, theorized in the mainstream as an anarchical realm populated by legitimate, sovereign nation-states - controlling the means and the dissemination of power/knowledge and informed by an underlining desire for security, order and control – has remained the focus of the majority of theoretical, methodological and ontological exploits of international relations the discipline. In that regard, individual agency has been predicated and granted on account of the possession of a legitimate citizenship label with intergovernmental relationships demarcating and perpetuating the very rhetoric underwriting sovereign stability and power, and with the configurations of the politico-moral universe themselves informed and written in juridico-political terms aimed at taming, denying and reducing dissidence.

My reading of international relations through the prism of bearing witness will not be informed simply by a critique of the mainstream. Rather than position it as another methodological tool in a hierarchical universe populated by parsimoniousness, external/internal validity, theoretical replicability, necessary and sufficient conditions and causality, bearing witness will produce a reading of the discipline of international relations informed by the singularity of 'event.' This study will not critique only to re-introduce methodological constants, but will address the specific idioms of international relations through idioms of witnessing in an effort to recall and re-introduce a singular, performatively-informed reading of politics.

The idea of the unproblematic retrieval, interpretation and use of information and the latter's general application over different cultures, populations, geographic locations and political systems will be challenged for failing to problematize the institutional, theoretical, and practical violence responsible for the production, dissemination and abuse of knowledge-power-control systems. This should not suggest in any way that this study provides a definite answer, a solution to the potentially negative outcomes of these dynamics. It is this thesis' intention, however, to expose as fablistic the truth-claims underwriting international relations' obsession with security, order and progress.

Bearing witness, in this sense, will be discussed as a particular mode of address that accommodates singularity and evokes the performative nature of constant repetition. Derek Attridge offers an interesting understanding of repetition:

the singular work is therefore not merely *available* for translation but is *constituted* by what may be thought of as an unending set of translations – for each new context in which it appears produces a further transformation. Words irrecoverably change their meanings, historical hindsight shifts emphasis, generic expectations alter over centuries, and in multiple other ways the work continually becomes another work for its reader.³

³ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 73.

Bearing witness carries important transformative implications for any automatic invocation of narrative unity by disclosing language's potential to produce as well as record an event.⁴ This particular proposition is discussed in Jacques Derrida's engagement with the archive.

There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.⁵

It is important at this point to disclose the guiding principles behind this project. An interest in the relationship between knowledge, language and power, first originating outside political science, has not left the discipline of international relations untouched. Michael Dillon, Richard Ashley, R.B.J. Walker, Michael Shapiro, David Campbell⁶ and more recently, a number of topic-specific politico-anthropological studies have alerted to a number of serious problems inherent in purely quantitative renditions of the political realm. In addition, the mid-to-late-1990s constructivist turn in politics, the end of the Cold War and the subsequent attention to processes of technological, cultural and political globalization have left the realist, rational-choice strand of international relations with much to be desired.

⁴ Jacques Derrida introduces and explores further this idea with regard to religion and psychoanalysis in his *The Gift of Death*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995b). This particular idea comes from a discussion of the relationship between politics, media and the experience of technology that can be found on p. 17.

⁵ Jacques Derrida. *Archive Fever*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995a), 4.

⁶ For an in depth engagement with the original critiques of sovereignty, see Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security* (London: Routledge, 1996); Richard Ashley, "Untying the Sovereign State" *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 17, no 2 (1988): 227-262, "Living on Borderlines: Man, Poststructuralism, and War" In *International/Intertextual Relations*, edited by James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro, (Massachusetts, Lexington: 1989); David Campbell, *Politics Without Principle*. (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 1993); Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Jim George, "Realist Ethics, International Relations and Post-Modernism" *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 24, no.2 (1995): 195-223; Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989); Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Cynthia Weber, *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

It is important to note here that a study on the politics of bearing witness, the sheer fact of its taking place, testifies to the current temporal, theoretical and ontological climate testifying not only the very history making possible such a study, but also to the dynamics of the current theoretical debates enabling, but also challenging in repeated fashion the unproblematic positing of this development as norm. Though the times may be a-changing, the specific nature and direction of this change is yet to be revealed and understood fully.

One thing is for certain: the discipline of international relations has re-written itself and continues to re-write itself following the directives of the theoretico-methodological imperative of Kantian enlightenment. It is not at all clear whether an engagement with this orientation can actually deliver a new understanding of the human in post-modernity.⁷ However, it is beyond doubt that this same human can no longer be understood as the product of a determinist sovereign politics only.

What I mean by a politics of bearing witness is, more specifically, a different cosmology of relations uncovered through a critical re-reading of the human being as informed by a performative, situational relationship to language and 'event.' That is, examining the nature and implications of the specific idioms informing the process of bearing witness uncovers an emerging attitude toward international relations itself where theorizing the international is no longer possible without taking into account the effects and imperatives of the 'linguistic turn.' Commentators are thus obliged to conceive of politics

⁷ See Nick Vaughan-Williams. "Beyond a Cosmopolitan Ideal: The Politics of Singularity." In *International Politics* 44 (2007): 107-124; James Brassetta and Dan Bulley, "Ethics in World Politics." *International Politics* 44 (2007); Jenny Edkins, Veronique Pin-Fat and Michael Shapiro (eds). *Sovereign Lives. Power in Global Politics*. (New York, Routledge, 2004); Roxanne Lynn Doty. *Anti-Immigrantism in Western Democracies. Statecraft, Desire and the Politics of Exclusion*. (London: Routledge, 2003); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); J. Marshall Beier. *International Relations in Uncommon Places*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Elizabeth Dauphinee. *The Ethics of Researching War: Looking for Bosnia*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

as something which arises from human being as a possibility. To understand human being as a possibility, however, means understanding that it consists in the improbable feat of always containing more than it is possible to contain; understanding that there is always already in human being an excess of being over appearance and identity.⁸

What this demands, furthermore, with relation to bearing witness is an imperative to address the human with regard for the nature of this excess as the precise, singular manifestation of the performative nature of the political itself.

Bearing witness, thus, can now be defended not as the next frivolous, unscientific engagement (with)in international relations, but as a potential opening of the latter toward understanding itself in light of the underlying implications of its own rhetoric. Bearing witness has, for the most part, been engaged by disciplines interested in the human, culture, psychology and history, as if somehow the question of witnessing were, if I may be so bold, privy only to emotive, fictional, or literary disclosures. Because of international relations' scientific commitments, bearing witness has been reduced to the excavation and recovery of facts for the production of truth.

In this sense, if we were to theorize politics as the examination of events leading to the evocation of powerful feelings regarding our individual, singular engagement with the world, would it be totally scandalous to propose to read international relations as poetry? I have been told that such a proposition within academic politics is much like selling rock climbing to someone afraid of heights and that the latter, quite unnerving for a number of people, is altogether out of the question regardless of how hyped it may be. I would like to state from the very beginning: there will be no rock-climbing involved in this study. My invitation is of a different kind, namely – to provoke international relations to take seriously the

⁸ Dillon, *Politics of Security*, 1.

political implications derived from recognizing the singular nature contained within language, that of bearing witness especially. In an effort to move away from a purely speculative exegesis, allow me to summarize the specific coordinates of this study.

coordinates: outline of study

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Each chapter builds up on the one(s) before it. The first two chapters offer a theoretical engagement with the juridical and literary modalities of bearing witness. Chapters Three and Five offer two specific, though very different, examples that will help guide my discussion back to international relations. Chapter Four returns to the most interdisciplinary and risky idiom of bearing witness of interest here – that of memory.

Chapter One engages three of the most important juridico-political writings of Giorgio Agamben. It does not engage all of Agamben's writings, but limits itself to the few whose contribution to the discussion on witnessing, power and human agency seems to me to be the most significant. I realize that leaving out a number of Agamben's other writings might weaken my argument and prevent me from issuing a conclusive statement with regard to his work, but I do hope that my close reading of the texts I do engage will help guide the reader and myself despite bibliographical weaknesses. This chapter examines how, originated by the law's suspension, the "state of exception" and *homo sacer* as categories of identity turn into statically assigned states of being. Suspicious of Agamben's circular theoretical framework, this chapter re-reads his arguments through the lens of Veena Das' "descent into the ordinary." With reference to the discipline of international relations, this chapter makes clear the potential dangers of recruiting limit categories in service of affirmative pronouncements on the nature and unfolding of modern (human) life.

The chapter has two underlying hypothesis. The first one has to do with the relationship between *homo sacer*, the norm (as the normalized exception) and Agamben's conjugation of *potestas* and goes something like this: If being in the condition of the exception means not to remain in that condition, then *homo sacer* as a limit figure deconstructs the unproblematic positing of the "state of exception" as norm. The second hypothesis addresses directly Agamben's chosen witness: the Muselmann. It is here that Veena Das' engagement with 'the ordinary' as a performative re-enactment of being in the world challenges Agamben's theory of the limit as norm, where the figure of *homo sacer* is introduced through a generalization that effaces it. What is more, Agamben's over-commitment to binary oppositions does not allow him to explore the physical, material, and situational implications of living the exception.

In the end, Agamben does have a tendency to rely too much on a juridico-political understanding of being in the world which leads to a denial and a failure to acknowledge the reality of actual Holocaust testimonials as well as a thrust to supplement his discussion of the exception with a problematization of the latter. In that sense, Agamben is not always Agambenian enough, for he leaves to guess work or, at times, abstraction the fate of wo(man) when not defined as *homo sacer*. As will be discussed in Chapter Five, there are indeed very real and non-reducible material, physical and historical differences that separate a refugee from someone on welfare, from a disgruntled citizen of 21st century Europe, from the rest of mankind – itself heterogeneous, disparate and hardly made of the same stuff.

Agamben's writings are useful for an engagement with bearing witness if only because he comments extensively on the nature of the relationship between the human, power and the juridical. Furthermore, his writings alert to the heterogeneous, complex and often juridically-normalized and ignored fact of liminal

states as such: homelessness, statelessness, poverty, namelessness being only a few prominent examples. In addition Agamben, precisely because he fails to engage the corporeal and psychological complexity of being *homo sacer*, alerts to the fact that being in the world is actually defined beyond the juridico-political prescriptions of nation-state discourse. It is for this very reason that Agamben opens the discussion of bearing witness and serves as a guiding post for the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter Two continues the engagement with the idioms of bearing witness by addressing “the literary” as exemplified through the writings of Jacques Derrida. Because of the breadth of his philosophical work, this chapter focuses specifically on Derrida’s understanding of the role of language (more specifically poetry) for the communication of information. This chapter, though structurally parallel to the previous one, does limit the scope of its engagement to a few specific idioms, namely “singularity,” “the poetic,” and “aporia,” if only because these figure as central axis of Derrida’s engagement with the economy of communication and language in general.

The chapter begins with a casting of the Agambenian witness in light of Geoffrey Hartman’s idea of “authenticity.” Then, the discussion moves from the juridico-political to an engagement with the nature of the relationship between ‘event’ and the literary. This is especially important since Jacques Derrida’s work has been instrumental in thinking through ‘event’ as a dual ontico-ontological category (of being in the world). What is more, once the mutually constitutive relationship between history and ontology is established, a turn away from theoretical abstraction is accomplished, that is – a turn toward the exemplarity of Derrida’s oeuvre.

The idiom of singularity, in turn, sets up the process of bearing witness by helping define the latter as a unique, non-generalizable engagement with language on the one hand and by evoking the always performative, occurring, dynamic nature of

witnessing on the other. In a way, singularity's implications are extended to include not only literature, but also the discipline of international relations. This is important and relates to the opening chapter because of the linguistic provisions it makes regarding the nature of juridico-political discourse as well.

A reading of "aporia" accentuates Derrida's methodological toolbox by supplementing his discussion of 'singularity' with an insistence on the importance of repeated readings, writings, and translations of both text and 'event.' The latter, in turn, addresses the question of deciding as an inseparable part of the ethical imperative to engage undecidability. In light of this productive setting up of language, bearing witness cannot be understood either as unproblematic healing or as some sort of a mystic revelation. It is, rather, the result of a constant insistence on the non-replicability of experience and on the potential for violence definitive of every instance of both (re)presentation and repetition.

The third Derridean idiom addressed in this chapter is that of Paul Celan's poetry. What becomes apparent from his exegesis is a tendency to romanticize poetry as a special, untainted, purer and more authentic mode of linguistic expression. What is more, Derrida attributes a certain resuscitative power to poetry that is manifested in an effort to save language from mechanical repetition, from falling into apathy. The implications this has for our understanding of bearing witness will be explained in depth in the chapter itself, but allow me to say for the moment that a certain contra-Derridean tendency is apparent with respect to Derrida's reading of poetry.

Nonetheless, poetry does evoke and address the question of hospitality. In this way, it bears witness to the political implications of its art beyond metaphor, simile and allegory and by focusing the researcher's gaze on the actual, real-life

policies and actions taken up by governments and institutions. It is in this way that poetry makes clear the parallel between the decision language makes at the moment of bearing witness and the decision politics must make in the face of the call to justice. The danger remains, however, one of wanting to make the poetic mean too much. It is here than an engagement with Thomas Keenan's theory of responsibility showcases the mutually constitutive relationship between insecurity and responsibility, to be engaged in greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis. Keenan's 'fables' pronounce themselves not only on the groundlessness of language, but also on the very insecurity of language that allows for a decision to arrive, for responsibility to be had as the practice of addressing.

It becomes apparent that bearing witness realizes the fact that every singularity is contained within a universality, that the performative potential contained within the testimony of a Holocaust survivor, a refugee, a rape victim, a single mother, a prisoner of war, an academic is the creative aspect of memory that blurs the line between fact and fiction, making any appeal to Truth not only violent, but also impossible. Chapter Four of this thesis will offer another look at Derrida's writings on the function, political purpose and use of the archive.

Chapter Three offers a journey through the poetry of Paul Celan. I engage Celan and not any other poet or, for that matter, another case study, for two important reasons. First, I had already introduced him in my discussion of Derrida and what is more, it was precisely the example of his poetry that informed my critique of Derrida's tendency to romanticization. By engaging Celan's work myself, I have the opportunity to refine and test my own quarrel with Derrida against the poetic testimony of Celan. Second, the case of Paul Celan, at once a poet, a Holocaust survivor, a Jew and a philosophical writer, offers the chance to bring together the works of both Derrida and Agamben, fusing the central points of my theoretical

discussion so far while, at the same time, taking advantage of an opportunity to re-read this discussion more slowly and with greater attention to the nuances, force and body of language at work.

Paul Celan's poetry situates my earlier engagement with Jacques Derrida by commenting on the failure of any exclusively literary idiom to address the nature of writing about being in the world. This chapter moves to a specific operationalization of witnessing by offering a close reading of Celan's poetry and by making the case for the importance of practices of reading and interpretation not only with regard to literature, but also in a discussion of the workings of international relations.

The guiding propositions of chapters one and two are hereby tested by the poem. Undecidability, addressed by Agamben in the figure of *homo sacer* and then in Derrida, as the aporetic imperative for a decision, will here manifest itself by alerting once again to the singularity characterizing all language: international relations discourse included. The remainder of chapter three traces Celan's testimony to his own Holocaust experiences by taking the reader on a journey of the author's pained, minimalistic, almost incomprehensible language.

In particular, this chapter supplements the earlier discussion of performativity by commenting on the cyclical, repetitive, and experimental nature of Celan's language. As disclosed by Ulrich Baer, Celan's style - 'stuttering,' 'fragmentary,' 'self-evolving,' 'philosophical,' and 'abstract' - "may be understood as the wish to restore order by reducing to the most simple lines and shapes a world that seems to lack an inner principle and coherence."⁹ Each of Celan's poems casts witnessing as the relationship between experience, language and singularity.

⁹ Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song. Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 234.

Furthermore, Celan's language comments on the very concept of truth by exposing and accessing it at the limits of language. In fact, Celan's vivid, graphic descriptions of the universe of extermination emphasize the over-insistence on truth by engaging in an active way the otherwise empty spaces of painful experience. This is the performative aspect of poetry that Derrida likens to resuscitation. Perhaps the resuscitative power of poetry is contained in the fact that it frees itself from the functional demands of language and approaches, to the greatest degree, an address.

The single most telling quality of Celan's work is the way in which it comments on the experience of living in a post-Holocaust world. Among accusations of plagiarism, painful memories and the difficulties of re-inventing the German of the Nazis, Celan's poetry offers hope of a dual kind. On the one hand, he comments on language's power to resist appropriation while at the same time, sharing an obligation to keep the seeds of change alive for mankind. What is so politically potent in Celan's work is the force of the word that at once knows that it cannot stand for the history it has lived through and, at the same time, makes itself heard even at the limits of language as the text makes itself known, heard through its readers.

That word is memory's work. *Chapter Four* of this thesis engages the question of memory and the ways in which remembrance is summoned, recovered and translated as fact. After tracing Celan's own journey through this treacherous terrain, this chapter returns to a number of theoretical conceptions of what memory is and how it works. In a way, this chapter is perhaps the most speculative one of the whole thesis, for it is informed by a variety of anthropological, ethnographic, historiographic, sociological, literary and political commentaries. However, the one thing that unites them all is a commitment to a critical examination of the modalities and agendas underwriting the turning of memory into truth-claims, both within and outside of international relations. In an important way, this is also the most

provocative chapter of the thesis, for it attempts to bridge a ban on interdisciplinarity in an effort to arrive at a particularly singular notion of truth.

More specifically, the chapter examines the relationship between the recovery of traumatic memory and the implications this has for bearing witness. The former, because of its personal, emotionally-informed character does not necessarily serve as the best conductor of truth. Nonetheless, an engagement with the concept of memory as an idiom of bearing witness alerts once again to the performative character of ‘event’ as such. The processual nature of recovering memory is, in turn, discussed in light of the need to problematize the otherwise taken for granted, common-sensical and “natural” historical, literary and political conjugations of truth.

The chapter is also an exercise in repetition for it engages, again, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida in light of their specific treatment of ‘memory.’ A look back at chapters one and two will not simply serve as a regurgitation of information already covered, but will in fact fine tune my discussion of the idioms of bearing witness with specific attention to the question of memory. In addition, this engagement is triangulated with a more pointed discussion of memory’s implications for the practice of international relations. Memory, occupying the precarious space between fact and fiction, language and silence, past and present, offers a unique opportunity to engage these dichotomies not as rivalries but as equally important pieces of the puzzle of bearing witness. The dynamic, unstable, even self-contradictory character of memory points to the potential ways in which political science can recover the singular nature of experience without reducing or committing the latter to functional, rational, or progressive solutions.

That is not to say that every single engagement with the world is guided by a consideration for a narrative voice informed by universalizing truths, but by a poetic

engagement. The argument put forth in the previous chapters, revealing the inherent singularity of all language, is hereby substantiated by an engagement with the ways in which everyday experience figures in academic writings. Memories are discussed as points of reference, as instances of eventual unfolding, as an example of the difficulty of speaking of the dual nature of ‘event’ as theory and evidence.

The final, *Fifth Chapter* of this thesis offers an engagement with the refugee and more specifically, with the refugee exemplifying a desire to “out-live” international relations security.¹⁰ In addition to my longtime, personal interest in refugee studies, understanding the specific figure of the displaced person is absolutely pivotal to an understanding of the ways in which modern international relations works and (re)invents itself. The refugee both challenges and underwrites the nation-state desire for security and looking at specific examples of displacement helps us understand just how this is accomplished. In addition, the liminal essence of being displaced, together with the refugee’s central role in legitimizing sovereign power, alerts to the highly insecure, always emerging character of politics itself.

This chapter argues, engaging a few real-life examples, that while specific, practical and policy-informed singular solutions to refugee crisis are of immense

¹⁰ With particular attention to the question of refugees, see Inge Agger, *The Blue Room: trauma and Testimony Among Refugee Women*. (London: Zed, 1994); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press); Michael Dillon, “The Scandal of the refuge: Some Reflections on the ‘Inter’ of International Relations and Continental Thought.” In *Moral Spaces*, edited by David Campbell and Michael Shapiro. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999a); Emma Haddad, ‘Who is (not) a Refugee?’ European University Institute Working Paper, no.6 (2004); Ellen Laemmers, *Refugees, Gender and Human Security: A Theoretical Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*. (Utrecht: International Books, 1999); Liika Malkki, *Purity and Exile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer,” *International Migration* 42, no.1 (2004): 33-63; Fiona Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa*. (London: Pluto, 2003); Andrew Shacknove, “Who is a refugee?” *Ethics* 95, no.2 (1985): 274-284; Peter and Renata Singer, “The Ethics of Refugee Policy,” In *Open Borders? Closed Societies? The Ethical and Political Issues*, 113-130. Edited by Mark Gibney. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jacques Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-war World*. (New Haven: Yale University press, 1953); Roger Zetter, “Refugees and Refugee Studies – A Label and an Agenda,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1, no.1 (1988), and Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo (eds.) *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the refugee crisis in the developing world*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

importance in alleviating suffering, homelessness and death, instances of spontaneous, invented, unexpected and imaginative negotiating with displacement are just as valuable in affirming human life in the face of life-negating circumstances. It is important to stress that my choice of a particular case study was largely the result of access and resources in an otherwise open pool of case candidates. The example of the Bhutanese refugees is not an exemplary one and it does not speak for other refugees, nor does it aim at generalizing beyond its specific example. It is, however, an understudied case, a largely unknown and unspoken of refugee population that is thus doubly liminal and more compelling. Beyond this explanation, I offer no other defensive arguments against possible accusation of case selection bias.

An engagement with displaced people witnesses liminality and its bearings on an engagement with justice, power and life itself. Importantly, this chapter's re-reading of the question of "the refugee" is informed by a singular understanding of 'event.' Thus the chapter's hypothesis: The historicity of refugees is what makes them credible; that historicity is always singular. With regard for a discussion of international relations, the refugee is theorized as a political actor that understands security as the task of out-living the desire to be secure. That is, while questions of fear, insecurity, weakness and poverty are considered problematic, a careful engagement with the ways in which they teach about being in the world comments on what it means to be human and on how to address, engage and write about what it means to be human. In other words, refugees' everyday living in insecurity prompts us to think about the always changing nature of security itself.

conclusion

This thesis concludes by iterating a few of the numerous unposed and unanswered questions encountered on the path of its journey. These questions open avenues for future research, for similarly performative engagements with stories, lives, memories, locales and poems. The thesis returns to the question of bearing witness by summarizing this introduction, though it introduces a tentative note to its otherwise declarative tone. It is a tentative note that acknowledges the potential weaknesses of its position, indeed the potential weaknesses of any one position, without stepping down or giving up its insistence on the enlightening quality of all things and all beings unstable, insecure, liminal, and ‘homeless.’

This thesis is not just the product of countless hours spent over books, journal articles and other people’s conference papers. It has been difficult but only to an extent. It is not solely the product of an academic demand that, when met, rewards the candidate with the honors and joys of a doctoral degree. I will always remain an apprentice in the business of inquiring and addressing the world. This thesis is, above all else, the result of many years of reading, writing, and thinking about what it means to act politically in the world and about how we bear witness to this being. While I still have no single answer to these questions, I hope the reader will find my engagement with a number of possible answers at least as interesting, provocative and intellectually stimulating as my thinking through these answers has been for me. I invite you on this journey and urge you to challenge me and yourself while on it.

Chapter One

The extra-'ordinary' as *homo sacer*: Giorgio Agamben and the limit of testimony

“So it is with nations. There is a moment for them too, between the battle and the safety of the stockade, when men create the law to suit the circumstances.”

More than meets the eye, Carl Mydans

the Agambenian state

The theoretical writings of Giorgio Agamben have originated the re-birth of the modern edition of the discussion on the ‘exception.’ Carl Schmitt’s sovereign as “he who decides on the exception”¹¹ has produced, in Agamben’s writings on sovereignty and law, a parsimonious explanation that “seemingly captures our current political situation.”¹² Refugee, detention and concentration camps, *zones d’attentes* at airports, secret prisons, Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib have all been explained with reference to Agamben’s theory of the exception-become-rule cognizant of the ways in which the latter informs current political configurations and the ability of sovereign power to explain, perpetuate and impose its logic. Because of Agamben’s interest in the nature of juridical sovereignty and in the ways the latter’s (ab)use of power constructs, determines and frames the subject, his thought posits important links not only between the law and the sovereign center but also, between law and life itself. More specifically, this chapter addresses, though is not limited to, four of Agamben’s works: *Means Without End*, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, *Homo Sacer*, and *The State of Exception*.

Because for Agamben life in a “state of exception” is posited as *bare life* and because his understanding of the relationship between the two is rather a self-

¹¹ Carl Schmitt. *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

¹² Paul A. Passavant. “The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben” *Political Theory* 35 (2007): 148.

deterministic one, his theory bears important implications for the ways in which, on the one hand, representing the subject and reconstructing memory are accomplished within a “state of exception” and, on the other, for the ways in which the subject is derived from and isolated within a theory of the limit as the (extra)ordinary. In an attempt to challenge Agamben’s theory, I would like to suggest that *bare life* is at stake each time one apprehends it and that the latter carries within itself the potential both to challenge and underwrite the exception.

Since this thesis is informed by the problematic of bearing witness, my engagement with Giorgio Agamben, too, will take its bearings from a continuous reference to questions of memory, testimony, witness and language. Agamben’s close reading of the Holocaust in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, as well as his exegesis on the nature of the human in a “state of exception” in *Homo Sacer* will guide my discussion to a considerable, though not exclusive, degree. I will supplement my engagement with Agamben by bringing to my discussion secondary writings informed by a similar interest in the relationship between the juridical, the biological, the political and the exception. A central question guiding my discussion traces the relationship between the ‘exceptional’ and the ‘ordinary’ as figured both in theorizing the subject and in engaging the juridico-political. In an effort to avoid a reading of the human solely from the point of view of *homo sacer*, a witness capable of testimony will be foreseen and addressed. Thus, I will engage the Muselmann both as a limit figure and as someone who challenges the positing of the exception as limit precisely because the former is set apart and is not an explanation of the law of exception, that is, the Muselmann is witness and not simply *bare life* “constituted by what it itself produces.”¹³ For someone who, as claimed by Agamben, cannot testify or speak, the Muselmann has been surprisingly vocal as a resurrected figure in service of theory.

¹³ Peter Fitzpatrick. “Bare Sovereignty.” In *Politics, Metaphysics and Death*, 49-73. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 49.

A discussion of bearing witness, defined as a singular activity, will problematize the ability of a theory of the limit (exception) to address and engage the historically irreproducible nature of the event as well as an understanding of life as a derivative of an exclusively juridico-political, yet outside the law, view of the human. As Peter Fitzpatrick's insightful observation has alerted: "Being thus outside any mediating or endowing law, *homo sacer* is for Agamben the originating figure of 'bare life' or bare life as such.' Yet Agamben still sees *homo sacer* as a 'figure of the law.'"¹⁴ An engagement with the process of bearing witness will pose as problematic not only the relationship between the human being and language, but also the definition of the human being as *homo sacer* in *exceptio*. I hope to be able to show, referring to the work of Veena Das, that theorizing the human as victim of violence, suffering, and torture is neither determined by nor contingent upon an understanding of life either as sacred or as profane. Her metaphor of a "descent into the ordinary" will help counter Agamben's insistence on being able, at one and the same time, to affirm life by going beyond it.

Agamben's thought has, in recent years, become symptomatic of a number of engagements with the nature of ontology (Being) and with the (im)possibility of bearing witness to that Being. I hope that a critical examination of the universalizing potential of the exception will help clarify and alert to a possible incongruity between *homo sacer*, lived life and the monopolizing presence of the juridico-political regarding the practical implications for bearing witness that a theory of the exception has. This chapter will address the problem of generalizing the *exception* in ways that, rather than explain, make theoretically excusable and justified *homo sacer* as a monolithic category of identification. I will suggest that Agamben's juridico-political idiom is not only unable to think through and accommodate the real-life implications of bearing witness, but that it also represents a totalizing claim on truth and truth-

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, "Bare Sovereignty," 51.

telling derived from an operationalization of dichotomies. Thus *sacred life* as “presupposed and abandoned by the law in a state of exception”¹⁵ can be distinguished from *naked life* “abandoned to a kind of violence that is all the more effective for being anonymous and quotidian.”¹⁶ A definition of the human being as *homo sacer*, while informative of the experience of being a depoliticized subject during the Holocaust, fails to address two important aspects of living in the political everyday.

First, it does not challenge the assumed calculability of the human as a product of a decision made by law, nor does it unearth modalities of engagement with individual experiences that are predicated and constructed on a belief in the totality of knowledge and sovereign power. The human as a “limit figure” predicated on a negatively constituted relationship to the juridical represents, on the one hand, “the radical crisis of every possibility of clearly distinguishing between membership and inclusion, between what is outside and what is inside, between exception and rule”¹⁷ while, at the same time, the human is recruited to speak on behalf of the sacred “insofar as it is taken into the sovereign exception.”¹⁸ If “only bare life is authentically political”¹⁹ then *bare life* either includes all of humanity or is specifically reserved as an identifying category for some and not other individuals. Refugees, prisoners, detainees, the homeless are, as carriers of *bare life*, reduced to the violence that produces them while citizenship is still seen as something “one had to prove oneself worthy and which could therefore always be called into question.”²⁰ I will address the problematic nature of refugees’ rendition as ‘limit figures’ in the final chapter of this thesis. Allow me at this point to say that the political relevance of being a refugee will

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben. *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 113.

¹⁶ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 113.

¹⁷ Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 25.

¹⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 85.

¹⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 106.

²⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 132.

be theorized as irreducible to the latter's inclusive or exclusive relationship to a sovereign center. The question of securing the body of the refugee will be addressed not so much through the workings of a legitimately appointed sovereign apparatus but in terms of examples of out-living that security.

Reducing the Muselmann to a non-human because of the former's malnutrition and basic physical degeneration while, at the same time, using that as a basis for establishing the constitutive relationship of *bare life* to the bio-political make-up of subjects leaves the human at once "marking the limit of, and being beyond the human."²¹ An engagement with the process of bearing witness, I hope, will allow me to dispel the obsolescence of the human being by addressing specific instances of making life liveable independently of universalizing formulas. As Peter Fitzpatrick has observed, "Whether one could by way of induction plausibly arrive at a general condition of sovereignty or bare life derived from alleged instances could depend on the quantity and quality of these instances. The camp, rather obviously, is a monumental one, but its paradigmatic quality is not made out."²² Insisting on the inhumanity of the Nazi camp commanders on the one hand and on the non-humanity of the Muselmänner, on the other, falls dangerously close to positing a similar relationship of the biological to the juridical. Agamben does not address the implications this has for a positing of the human as void of the possibility to experience, outside law, life through affective, imaginative, and individually-informed faculties. The reason we rebel against life turning into a mechanized response to orders is not because orders themselves are always bad or because we prefer to live in chaos, but because we take guidance for the ways in which we comport ourselves in the world from a relationship to the sensual, ethical, moral basis of life. The 'non-human,' thus, cannot be a category of identification based solely on the latter's (non) relationship to the law.

²¹ Fitzpatrick, "Bare Sovereignty," 66.

²² Fitzpatrick, "Bare Sovereignty," 68-9.

witnessing the limit: bare times, barely alive

In what follows, I will examine the mutually-constitutive and juridically-positing relationship between *homo sacer* as a derivative of *bios* in a *state of exception* (predicated on the suspension of law and the unlimited power(s) of the sovereign) against the activity of bearing witness. Agamben equates *zoe* with life common to all living things or, with *natural life*. On the other hand, *bios* is the kind of life that is included in the *polis* or, in other words, *zoe* made political. In other words, “The life of the *polis*, for the Greeks, was *bios*, a form of living particular to an individual or group. The simple natural life of *zoe* was separated from the politically qualified life that was part of the *polis*.”²³ What is more, Agamben argues that *natural life* or *zoe* is included in the political life, implicated in the workings of the latter, by virtue of being excluded. Jenny Edkins suggests that “At the threshold of the modern era then, the realm of bare life begins to coincide with the political, and inclusion and exclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and left, enter into a zone of indistinction. In these zones of indistinction, bare life or *homo sacer* becomes both the subject and the object of the political order.”²⁴ The process of bearing witness will be discussed as a possibility of address predicated not on an understanding of (human) life as an exclusively juridico-political problem, but as an engagement with everyday practices and performances of bearing witness that recognize the dangers of theoretical abstraction. What I hope to offer is not a better theory of bearing witness, but a critically-informed engagement with the political nature of the human as an ethically and biologically posited being.

I open this journey with a question: “What becomes of bearing witness if we theorize the human being not only as a suffering, tortured, excluded presence (*homo sacer*), but also from within a discourse of address and responsibility predicated not

²³ Jenny Edkins. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 179.

²⁴ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 182.

on a totalizing singularity but on a contingent multiplicity?" I will trace the ways in which Agamben, in the works discussed here, moves through the highly precarious living terrains of "sacred" beings to derive specific, though monolithic in their nature, implications for the former's place in language as a remnant, whose "intimacy" is perhaps tellingly so, "the name that we give to a proximity that also remains distant, to a promiscuity that never becomes identity."²⁵ Though problematic, Agamben's project remains central to any enunciation of witness precisely because the figure of the human does problematize the often taken for granted ability of language to account for an event beyond mere summary. Interspersed throughout Agamben's discussion of sacred life is an insistent engagement with the relationship between politics, language, and life, the latter being that which, in the "state of exception," is "included by means of an exclusion."²⁶ In Agamben's discussion, singularity, defined as that which can never be generalized or decided upon in advance, the yet-to-come borne out of the repetition of the same that manifests itself for itself beyond representation, is made hostage to theory in which the human being (*homo sacer*) becomes a limit figure absorbed in the figure of law as a "potentiality that cannot pass over into actuality"²⁷ at the same time that "at the limit, pure potentiality and pure actuality are indistinguishable, and the sovereign is precisely this zone of indistinction."²⁸ What happens to agency then?

I would like to suggest that a(ny) limit figure exceeds the materiality of the "state of exception" that is its conception. This thesis also intends to exceed these limits. As Michael Dillon has observed,

As a possibility, human being is obliged to bring the possibility of its way of being into new possibilities of being. Its freedom as possibility is not only a difficult, it is therefore also an obligatory, freedom. There is no escaping it; because the human way of being is a responsive way of being, shared with others in Otherness, challenged by its very responsiveness as a being to

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben. *The State of Exception*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 125.

²⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.

²⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 45.

²⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 47.

assume its possibility of being. The political is the plural 'now' dedicated to keeping the taking place of that possibility open.²⁹

What is more, I am not convinced that "sacred" adequately describes either the status of language within a system of knowledge, or any one example in a discussion of the relationship between law, the human being and the exception. Agamben's "inclusive exclusion of *zoe* in the polis"³⁰ can be read as suggesting both that politics were the place in which life had to transform itself into good life and also, the place in which what had to be politicized was always already bare life.

Since mine is not a field-informed project, I am somewhat limited in my ability to analyze and/or present 'original' materials or case studies. Instead, I will make recourse to evidence already collected by others and relate the process of re-reading as one modality of bearing witness. This will pose Agamben's *state of exception* against the process of bearing witness in an attempt to show that the latter, as a singular engagement with a past event, is informed by repetition, reiteration and authenticity figured neither as exception nor as norm only. In a sense, the status of language and one's ability to testify to the past move into a realm of infinite repeatability where the authenticity of testimony is not dependent solely on eyewitness accounts but, also and more importantly, is always and continuously revised through the prism of singularity.

Giorgio Agamben's engagement with the juridico-political nature of the human being as survivor, victim and "remnant" in a "state of exception" touches directly upon the question of bearing witness, its relationship to language (power) and to a sovereign (center). The production and dissemination of knowledge, in the absence of a witness, becomes the prerogative of the sovereign center. "It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign

²⁹ Dillon, *Politics of Security*, 6.

³⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.

power.”³¹ If bearing witness announces an event, and if we take as working Jean-Luc Marion’s definition of the event as “the already of facticity”, “the right now of its occurrence”, and “the without end of its recollection,” its witnessing,³² then an event is never simply a stable referent regarding the question of temporality, nor is it just a (linguistic) commentary, a re-creation of a succession of facts by way of piecing together happenings recovered by memory. Bearing witness, framed and informed by an event, relates likewise to the already of facticity (past), the right now of its occurrence (remembering), and the without end of its recollection (witness).

That is, bearing witness defines the way in which truth is represented and decided upon both temporally and factually. An engagement with the remnant defined exclusively as *homo sacer* and posited as constitutive of modern day politics ends up simplifying the complex nature of “event” and allows Agamben to argue for the irreducible indistinction between *zoe* (natural life) and *bios* (natural life included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power). It is from within this zone of indistinction that the concept of *homo sacer* is derived and made synonymous with the condition of the human being in a normalized “state of exception.”

Agamben posits the exception in order to derive from it a prescriptive model applicable and generalizable to a larger group of examples. What is more, out of the exception he evokes the figure of *homo sacer* and equates it to the Nazi concentration camp inmate, more specifically, to the inmate who died as *Muselmann*. The latter can then be posited as a limit figure “beyond which no further division is possible, the figure that makes it impossible to distinguish life from death.”³³ Not only does this put in question the humanity of the survivor, but it also suggests a relationship between life, politics and language that is predicated on exclusion, silence and an understanding of humanity as predicated on an absolute and irresolvable necessity.

³¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 6.

³² Jean-Luc Marion. *InExcess*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 36.

³³ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 185.

Thus a theory conceived of to problematize the suspension of law subsequently assigns any and all discussion of the relationship between power and life to a strict juridico-political sphere, normalizing the exception into a Foucauldian 'norm' and making *homo sacer* into an "indeterminate and impenetrable"³⁴ category mediated by sovereign power. Interestingly enough, Agamben's displacement of questions of power, knowledge and language into a realm of ontology, as suggested by Peter Passavant (2007), ends up offering the possibility to think politics itself once again as a relationship between ordinary (natural) life and an ethics of address.

Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* as the being that can be killed but not sacrificed "and as such can be eliminated without punishment"³⁵ validates the statement: "Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now ... dwells in the biopolitical body of every living being."³⁶ The natural life of the species (*zoe*) turns into the initial vehicle for Agamben's theory of the exception. The former is reconfigured as a stable, ethically stripped category signed over to the authority of state power over politicized life (*bios*), making it possible for Agamben to move somewhat unproblematically between dichotomies such as "exception" and "rule," "victim" and "survivor," "man" and "non-man." "Exiled bare life, like the life of the camp inhabitant, the refugee, the bandit ... is without a voice in public affairs and may be killed or kept alive without ceremony and without criminality."³⁷

While the creation of the juridico-political category of enemy combatants, for instance, is an example of the actual and uncensored appropriation of life by the political exception, I would like to suggest that there is a danger of oversimplifying the relationship between the exception, law, the human subject, and the ways in which these figure and are con-figured in practices of bearing witness. In other

³⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 182.

³⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 139.

³⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 140.

³⁷ Thomas Carl Wall. "Au Hasard." In *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death*, 31-47. (Durham: Duke University, 2005), 39-40.

words, I will engage the actual implications the category of *homo sacer* has for the process of bearing witness and juxtapose Agamben's thought on the exception to a reading of the event "not as temporal punctuality or an instance of presence but, instead, a dynamic and open-ended field of forces, whose historicity prevents experience from closing into representational constructs, psychic spaces or lived instants."³⁸ *Homo sacer*, as the being that can be killed but not sacrificed, becomes the "originary activity of sovereignty"³⁹ predicated on an exceptional relationship to violence and the law. My initial question, "To what extent can we speak of *bare life*?" will be supplemented thus, "What becomes of *bare life* when measured against the activity of bearing witness?"

on the quietism of the exception as a state of being

If the "state of exception" has become the normalized condition of politics, then *homo sacer* turns into a juridico-political category of identification all its own: as immunized against opposition as it is abstracted and estranged from the practice of justice. Fixed in that way, *homo sacer* serves rather than challenges the sovereign by underwriting the latter's claims to unlimited power. Once derived as the product of the relationship between law in a state of emergency and the sovereign's will to the usurpation of power, *homo sacer* easily turns into a limit figure founded on the juridical vacuum of the "beyond the law." Alongside the rather monolithic picture of the concentration camp that Agamben presents in his *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the figure of *homo sacer* as the *Muselmann*, rather than problematize the relationship between the sovereign and power, only undermines the latter's role in accounting for and justifying violence. What is more, the human being as *homo sacer* becomes an exclusive political problem posited against few ethical demands and unproblematically committed to the care of a monolithic institution: the sovereign.

³⁸ Krzysztof Ziarek. *The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event*. (Chicago, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 13.

³⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.

Once life becomes the referent object of politics as *homo sacer*, modernity is crowned as the most politically charged of all preceding eras.⁴⁰ By implicating the figure of *zoe* in the workings of the sovereign state, Agamben is able to reformulate Foucault's biopolitics vis-à-vis the "state of exception" and claim that the "production of biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power."⁴¹

If we understood politics as a theory of the limit, then the relationship between the human and politics becomes predicated not on a theory of committed relation but on a reality where, once the state of exception overflows its boundaries to coincide with the normal order, everything becomes possible.⁴² The witness, then, is one example that characterizes *natural life* beyond *bios*. The concentration camp survivor as *zoe*, separate from his essence as a speaking being, makes the passage between silence and witness an impasse within the limits of Agamben's theory.

Central to Agamben's logic is a retrospective turn theorizing *bios* as a derivative of the "state of exception," the latter subsequently anchored in the being of *homo sacer* as the new norm. "The destitution of abandoned Being is measured by the limitless severity of the law to which it finds itself exposed. Abandonment ... is a compulsion to appear absolutely under the law, under the law as such and in its totality ... to be *banished* amounts not to coming under a provision of the law but rather to coming under the entirety of the law"⁴³ The powers historically vested in the sovereign to define the biopolitical project transgress the sovereign's obligation towards maintaining and upholding the singularity and security of *zoe* independent from *bios*. If politics is concerned with man and if human life exceeds the meaning that can be contained within a theory of exception or limit, then politics itself has to be thought differently: haman(e)ly. Far from oversimplifying Agamben, his

⁴⁰ Andrew Norris. "Introduction: Giorgio Agamben and the Politics of the Living Dead." In *Politics, Metaphysics and Death*, 1-30. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.

⁴¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 6.

⁴² Passavant, "The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben," 156.

⁴³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 58-9.

insistence on maintaining dichotomous categories of identification as reference points for criticizing the precursors to those very categories call for a careful reading of the politically-informed implications his writing has for a study of bearing witness.

In his *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben addresses the nostalgic and tragic figure of the witness as victim, suffering and rejected, inscribed in language as the always absent, impossible trace of (the dead) witness. Left to the philosopher, the former's testimony does not recover a voice as much as it mourns the subject's severed relationship to the law and the former's subsequent reduction to an object, a "no-man." Reverse engineering this relationship, being protected by the law becomes symptomatic of security, of a justified claim to (human) rights and freedoms while being outside the law is presented as rejection, abandonment, and insecurity. "And law, in suspending the concrete custom and usage of individuals, has been able to isolate something like a norm,"⁴⁴ so the representation of the human continues to be constructed with reference to a demand to be fragmentary. The relationship of the subject to law in a "state of exception" is explained as a reversal of the norm that would typically define the sovereign's relationship to his subjects. Agamben seems to exploit the ambiguity inherent in the productive relationship that defines the interaction between the state, its subjects, and the law by cashing in on the idea that the concept of a human being contains the potential for a biopolitical fissure. "In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference."⁴⁵

What's more, this fissure appears to be informed by a non-reversible relationship to an ethically-compromised norm. For Agamben to be able to claim that sovereign power is founded on the ability to decide on the state of exception, the

⁴⁴ Giorgio Agamben. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. (New York: Zone, 2002), 37.

⁴⁵ Agamben, *Remnants*, 40.

camp must be a structure in which the *state of exception* is permanently realized and where the human is defined from within a juridical void. In a state of exception everything is possible, making the camp a zone of infinite possibilities: both for violence and for security. The camp thus becomes “the inaugural side of modernity where public and private, political and biological life become indistinguishable,” “it is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a part as well as what cannot belong to the whole in which it is always already included”⁴⁶ Similarly, the “state of exception” can never simply be “the norm” or “the rule” and remain such, for it is in its very nature as a carrier of infinite potentiality to make possible dissolution, erasure, forgetting, silence, and testimony. Agamben’s theory of the exception seems to posit the state as unitary, sovereign and rational when in fact the state is comprised of a variety of institutions whose complex nature actually perpetuates the modern state.⁴⁷

securing rationality as ‘norm’

At this point, it is important to posit states of exception such as Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, refugee and detention camps as examples participating and defining a security dialogue introduced by a sovereign state first, in order to ensure its continued and varied use of power and only then, because of threats and the fear of terrorist violence. Peter Passavant’s summary of Kim Lane Scheppele’s analysis of US executive laws/measures post 9/11 suggests that “this emergence (and ruin) is hastened by those who seek to enhance surveillance and presidential powers, while diminishing the power of courts and legislative oversights as a response to September 11, 2001.”⁴⁸ What this makes evident is the purposeful funnelling of power in one branch of the government and/or in the hands of a single individual in an effort to legitimize, legalize and normalize the very same mechanisms otherwise antithetical to

⁴⁶ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 122, 32

⁴⁷ Passavant, “The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben”, 169.

⁴⁸ Qtd in Passavant 2007: 170.

the development and nature of democracy. Thus torture of enemy combatants, because they are not considered prisoners of war and thus, unprotected under the Geneva Convention, underwrites security and the law by a kind of violence that itself exists outside the law. It is no wonder then that US officials questioned by Congress with regard to this very torture would choose to enter self-imposed amnesia.⁴⁹

Once the “state of exception” becomes its own category of identification by claiming for itself a spatial, juridical (though defined through a lack) and human resource allotment, *homo sacer* comes to signify a way of life rather than a challenge to non-life. It is through such normalization that Agamben (using the examples of the prison, the refugee camp, and airport transit areas) posits the linear nature of the subject’s relationship to language (power). In the words of Peter Passavant, “In the state of exception law is in force even if specific legal prescriptions or prohibitions are suspended. When law is in force without significance, law is an empty potentiality that is so much in force without content that it becomes, as it did in the camps, indistinguishable from life.”⁵⁰ Agamben defines pure potentiality as the potential to be and not to be at the same time. If this were true, then the “state of exception” read as a pure) potentiality cannot be defined either in positive or in negative terms, but must be seen rather as “double possibility.”⁵¹ What this comments on is the productive potential contained within every possible decision, the potential to decide against deciding as well as the potential to decide in favour of a decision. In other words, “Agamben’s work enables us to analyze what is at stake in the politics of the decision. He elaborates how sovereign power operates through the state of emergency and how the very positing of the question through the trope of emergency is always already on the side of sovereignty.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Daniel Schorr. “Officials Change Tune on Torture.” NPR story: June 19th, 2008. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91703598>.

⁵⁰ Passavant, “The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben,” 156.

⁵¹ Passavant, “The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben,” 158.

⁵² Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 212.

Allow me to put forth a preliminary hypothesis for my discussion of the limit: If, following from Agamben's discussion of *potestas*, we agree that being in the condition of exception means not to remain in that condition, then *homo sacer* as a limit figure deconstructs the unproblematic positing of the "state of exception" as norm. "What emerges in this limit figure is the radical crisis of every possibility of clearly distinguishing between membership and inclusion, between what is outside and what is inside, between exception and rule."⁵³ The inability to distinguish clearly between these binary categories, even as they are instructive of the juridico-political nature of the sovereign exception, does threaten to universalize our thinking of the subject (as *bare life*) only from within the "exceptional" space of the political. Thus, in Agamben's world "one mode of existence is, territorially predominant, in being elevated or affirmed and another denied. There is exclusion here, but also inclusion. And for law, inclusion is irreducible."⁵⁴ If "inclusion always *exceeds* membership," if "the exception expresses precisely this impossibility of a system's making inclusion coincide with membership, its reducing all its parts to unity,"⁵⁵ then does one only recognize the singularity of *homo sacer* through a movement of generalisation that effaces it? In the pages to follow, I offer an affirmative as well as a negative answer.

on the true witness - the Muselmann

Agamben's engagement with Auschwitz interrogates a universe that exceeds the factual elements making it up.⁵⁶ He insists on the gaps, lacunas and cavities reserving for this universe a space that is forever and always somehow closed in upon itself, re-creating its own fragmentariness in order that it can bear witness to the latter's presence. Agamben must rely on the constitutive power of the law to represent the workings of power over *zoe*, so that "the Muselmänner document the

⁵³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 25.

⁵⁴ Fitzpatrick, "Bare Sovereignty," 70.

⁵⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 70.

⁵⁶ Agamben, *Remnants*, 12.

total triumph of power over the human being” where “the regime realizes its quintessential self.”⁵⁷ If Levi is correct in maintaining that the Muselmänner had no story, then bearing witness to their fate would have to come from an appeal to something other than language. Agamben is able to derive the nonrelational nature of language as something that is not “possible either to enter into relation or to move out of relation with what belongs to the form or relation itself”⁵⁸ only if he accepts that language, too, figures as a ban presupposed by an ambiguity of fact that is undecidable.

In order to make the relationship between the sovereign exception and life indistinguishable, Agamben needs the Muselmänner to occupy both the zone of “suspended” law in a “state of exception,” as well as oscillate between the inside and outside of the juridico-political constitution of biopolitical being. Only after the law has been suspended can Agamben name *homo sacer* as the real sovereign subject, the “true carrier of sovereignty.”⁵⁹ If, “the sovereign remains the one able to decide on whether and when” violence and law “will be distinguished,”⁶⁰ then if fact and law are indistinguishable yet have to be decided upon, they must also be distinguished and distinguishable.⁶¹ The subject that has lost her standing before the law, that has been reduced to a non-wo(man), whose life has entered the realm of unpunishable sacrifice, whose body represents the ability of the sovereign to materialize suspended law, turns into the being charged with bearing witness to the fact of her own erasure. It seems to me that the Muselmänner can only be defined as non-wo(men) by making their wo(man)-ness dependent on and defined by its relationship to the juridico-political. In the sense in which the rights and freedoms of the concentration camp inmates were nonexistent, in the sense in which there was no obligation on the part

⁵⁷ Agamben, *Remnants*, 48.

⁵⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 50.

⁵⁹ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 113.

⁶⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 64.

⁶¹ Fitzpatrick, “Bare Sovereignty,” 67.

of the German state towards granting or upholding any law accountable to these subjects, the Muselmänner were, indeed, *homines sacri*.

However, being human is not only a question of one's relationship to the law, though, ironically, the latter has been evoked exclusively and repeatedly to rectify and grant reparation to Holocaust victims (as in the Nuremberg and Jerusalem trials). Being human informs the choices one makes in meeting the exigent needs of the present – choices that are informed both by determination and by contingency (excess). The latter, brought on a pedestal by theorists of the excess/limit, can be read as overlooking the real-life implications that an over-reliance on potentiality can have for the actual practice of state-sponsored and state-authorized violence. Agamben's juridically-informed theory as exemplified in the four books of interest here, offers too restricted, too impoverished a portfolio of idioms. What, then, are the kinds of idioms that accommodate singularity without reducing it to terminology?

deciding (on) the (extra)ordinary

In an attempt to answer this question, I will borrow Veena Das' concept of a "descent into the ordinary." I would like to suggest that, though being a citizen is directly implicated on one's relationship to a sovereign center, being human, on the other hand, exceeds a person's relationship to the state and is not the foster child of politico-juridical guardianship. Speaking of the academic representations of Indian women after the violence of the India/Pakistan Partition of 1947, Das offers the following understanding of the nature of the human: "It appears to me that we render such acts as shocking and unimaginable only when we have a given picture of how the human subject is to be constructed. Thus, these descriptions seem to reaffirm the boundaries between civilized and savage, while allowing our picture of the human subject to remain intact."⁶² What this suggests for an inquiry into the relationship

⁶² Veena Das. *Life and Words. Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 79.

between subject and violence is that the two are mutually constituted as opposites that not only help explain one another, but that also essentialize and universalize our understanding of the ontology (nature) of Being. Likewise, violence is not always narratable through stories, other performative gestures or through numerical representations that have, for a long time now, been evoked either as non-biased acts of expression or as scientifically-potent tools. The *state of exception* itself is a construction and, rather than as an exclusively juridical problematique, will be discussed in relation to the question of making life live in ways that address the relationship between *norm* and *exception* practiced and negotiated daily beyond sovereignty.

To supplement Das' challenge of the unproblematic equation of violence with silence, the example of Paul Celan's poetry in Chapter Three of this thesis, will show that suffering neither compromises the possibility of witness nor reserves for itself a special status vis-à-vis the question of truth. In that sense, bearing witness partakes in a universe that exceeds the factual elements that inform it. As argued by Jenny Edkins, "There is a non-coincidence between the subject we are, or the subject we think we are, and the subject we would like to be. We are striving for an imaginary wholeness, when these things would be reconciled, but that is impossible. There is always something more, a surplus or an excess – what Agamben calls the remnant, what remains, perhaps ..." ⁶³ In that sense, to posit bearing witness to violence as a limit experience and *homo sacer* as a limit figure responsible only to the law of the exception exemplifies violence. According to Das, the unsayable that is often paired with trauma and suffering finds its expression in acts of ordinary, everyday life.

A question arises: can shuffling back and forth between the ontological and the historical be described in any systematic way? In the case of Veena Das, an

⁶³ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 187.

everyday engagement with the work and lives of women and men celebrates time doing its work of “reframing and rewriting the memories of violence.”⁶⁴ She recognizes that what is intolerable is not so much the violence against the body of woman but rather, the fact that the renewed interest in bearing witness as truth-telling has been reserved, within academic discourses, for trauma-stamped instances of torture, rape, suffering and war from within theoretically-constructed categories themselves intended to accommodate the former’s definitional boundaries. If Agamben’s *state of exception* has indeed become the underlying characteristic of modern life, and if the juridico-political suspension of law(s) has assumed real life dimensions, then what becomes of bearing witness to the *exception*? What could possibly be the truth-affirming power of a witness that informs of what it means to be human through the lens of inhuman, intolerable suffering?

problematizing the ‘exception’

Perhaps Agamben’s question, “What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion?”⁶⁵ ought to be read not so much as addressing the figure of *homo sacer*, but as an invitation to understand *bare life* itself as a state of being human that problematizes the project of the exception itself. In that sense, (human) life becomes predicated beyond a juridico-political relationship representing *zoe* and *bios* in the figure of *homo sacer* and instead, as a state of being informed by an irreducible, ethically constituted relationship to *natural life* as *zoe*. While the relationship between power, the law, and the subject (in a “state of exception” or not) is central to being able to establish and define a criteria for attributing blame and restoring justice, a discussion of bearing witness cannot limit itself to the juridico-political essence of testimony that, as long as it is recorded as part of a discourse informed by pairs such as “victim” and

⁶⁴ Das, *Life and Words*, 90.

⁶⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.

“perpetrator,” “guilty” and “innocent,” “man” and “non-man,” fails to account for experiences that are not as easily addressed by the language of “exception.”

Agamben’s *homo sacer*, though highly informative of the precarious and often ambivalent relationship between state-sponsored violence and the law, is a term of identification that cannot unproblematically be applied to any and all situations falling under the category of juridical emergency. A “state of exception” is what necessitates, nurtures and gives meaning to the term *homo sacer* and that, subsequently, validates and fills in the legal void that is the subject/citizen in a theory of the “exception.” While the being that can be killed but not sacrificed might be adequately applicable to those who perished in the concentration and work camps of WWII (and in other genocide camps), the testimony borne out of the historically specific event of the Shoah cannot be referenced just as liberally to other instances where law, water, food, or shelter have been suspended or put under the control of a sovereign center.

With regard to bearing witness, speaking by proxy about the concentration camps, while perhaps acceptable regarding the Muselmann, fails to take into account the anonymous, though not wholly unidentifiable, ways in which refugee testimony, for example, does little to account for or approximate the Muselmann and vice versa. I agree with Veena Das when she says: “I would submit that the model of trauma and witnessing that has been bequeathed to us from Holocaust studies cannot be simply transported to other contexts in which violence is embedded into different patterns of sociality.”⁶⁶ Likewise, if Agamben’s *exception* bears weight mostly as a juridico-political one, it ought to be reviewed and perhaps re-defined when applied to other categories of relationality. “He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed

⁶⁶ Das, *Life and Words*, 103.

and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.”⁶⁷ For Agamben to be able to say that, he not only has to define “he who has been banned” as a limit figure, but he must also be able to isolate *homo sacer* as a “way of life” from all discourses on “naked life” (*zoe*) and into a theory of “inclusive exclusion” which, in order that it traverse the field of specific historical references, must choose as its end point an aporetic condition partial to “the powers of law and myth.”⁶⁸

What is more, Agamben has to be able to equate life and the law, the exception and the rule, “*nature and right [as] the presupposition of the juridical reference in the form of its suspension.*”⁶⁹ If *bios* is given over to the *state of exception*, then *zoe* as natural life approximates Veena Das’ “descent into the ordinary,” where “time can be allowed to do its work of reframing or rewriting the memories of violence”⁷⁰ beyond the structures of representation, interrogation, and appropriation. “This aporia between speaking and not speaking, between the compulsion to bear witness and the impossibility of doing so, is for Giorgio Agamben the very structure of testimony. Survivors of the camps bore witness to something it was impossible to bear witness to.”⁷¹

The silence of Agamben’s *Muselmänner* and the spatial lacuna occupied by the Holocaust witness are both, when measured against the ability of language to make known, possible precisely because they are recovered, nurtured and engaged from within a space that exceeds the juridico-political universe of the *exception*. If testimony “founds the possibility of the poem”⁷² and if testimony is a singularly linguistic engagement with a past event, then the legal exception that founds *homo*

⁶⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 28.

⁶⁸ Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 88.

⁶⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 21, emphasis in the original.

⁷⁰ Das, *Life and Words*, 90.

⁷¹ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 177.

⁷² Agamben, *Remnants*, 36.

sacer becomes predicated also on the possibility of language to signify and exist as a sphere with no recourse to ends. Language as the third, the other of “event,” exists beyond the “pure undecidability of letters” echoing in “the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness”⁷³ without situating itself as an ethical subject implied in a rhetoric of limits. In order that one does not romanticize the Muselmann and his silence, one ought to beware of grounding or ungrounding the metaphysical subject in a language that produces the former out of a negative relationship to life.

The point of contention here is not so much that the suspension of law by itself does not belong to and define the “state of exception” but rather, that *homo sacer* as a category of identification be read as “the bare life of the citizen” now become “the new biopolitical body of humanity.”⁷⁴ The figure of the concentration camp inmate, that is, *bare life* within a now norm-alized “state of exception,” does little to challenge a reading of politics as the occasional taking turns of normal and abnormal periods. If anything, it underwrites an understanding of the state as a monolithic, unified and rational actor whose relationship to the exception is constituted by a parsimonious theory of the exception. Agamben does not often problematize the monolithically-posed nature of the categories of “norm” and “exception,” formally engaged as each other’s opposites.

The “state of exception,” as the norm overthrown by a sovereign center holding the monopoly over the use of power, disguises practices of power abuse already inscribed in the normal workings of state(s) as instances of emergent security only. This, in turn, leads to a state where the “exception,” now tracked, protected and modified exclusively by the sovereign center, stands for the law in a relationship that

⁷³ Primo Levi quoted in Agamben, *Remnants*, 39.

⁷⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8.

sooner or later grants legitimacy to the “exception” and inaugurates it as the new “norm.” This, it seems to me, is no different than a situation of international hypocrisy where the United States of America, calling itself a beacon of justice, can still refuse to submit its torture practices for review or grant those of its citizens suspected of terrorist activities due process of law. The political, made subject to such objectives, is thought solely as security. Thinking the political as a desire to out-live security⁷⁵ demands the kind of language that speaks on behalf of this insecurity.

Out of this new “norm” another exception is born in due time and then another which, in a Foucauldian universe, would represent all those instances of control on the part of the sovereign that, in the latter’s attempt to normalize and discipline his/her subjects, underwrites the everyday workings and dissemination of power. Within Agamben’s argument, the figure of the human being ends up being theorized as a limit figure that validates both the “norm” and the “exception,” the two related to it through mechanisms of security. The actual needs that the human living the political everyday faces are hardly accounted for by Agamben who would rather call for the termination of the state (in favour of a reality of “pure potentiality”) than recognize the actual potential that state institutions have to ensure, protect and perpetuate justice, democracy and equality.

While Agamben’s movement between the “norm” and the “exception” is clear enough theoretically, an engagement with the terms of “norm” and “exception” as such creates its own lacuna within the everyday life of human beings. As Michel Foucault has clearly shown, it is not necessarily the case that what is called the “norm” is, as such, normal or that there has ever been a political order whose organization and rules were exempt from the workings of power or, for that matter,

⁷⁵ I borrow the term ‘out-living’ from Michael Dillon’s *Politics of Security* (1996). An engagement with the larger implication of ‘out-living security’ will be offered in the last chapter of this thesis.

that such an order is ever achievable. Veena Das cautions, in a similar manner, against the unproblematic recalling of painful memories in language: “even the idea that we should recover the narratives of violence becomes problematic when we realize that such narratives cannot be told unless we see the relation between pain and language that a culture has evolved.”⁷⁶ Das alerts to the fact that ideas become institutionalized by certain historical, societal, and political practices and come to be understood only from within these very same inflexible boundaries.

In the sense in which the state (as sovereign, law-deciding, policing, legitimating actor) can exercise power in constructing the kind of truth that is made public, the practice of bearing witness becomes directly implicated in the process of power dissemination. What is important is that an officially recognized (theorized) *state of exception* fails to recognize the myriad of practices through which power becomes infiltrated and mutates, especially through and in language as present in everyday life. The *state of exception*, in the moment it recognizes and proclaims itself as the norm, enters into a relationship with power and truth-telling that abandons itself to the presumed autonomy and unity of the sovereign. As Jenny Edkins has suggested, “the testimony of survivors can challenge structures of power and authority”⁷⁷ that, when unchallenged, reproduce a certain social order. In a similar fashion, Edkins has suggested that, while helpful in certain instances, linear narratives end up depoliticizing and sterilizing trauma.⁷⁸ Her call for narratives “encircling the trauma” alerts to an interesting phenomenon. Truth-telling as bearing witness, predicated on the ability to make the past known, exposes not only the workings of sovereign power vis-à-vis language, but also the ability of the witness to construct, reshape and manipulate truth as well. This very possibility empowers.

⁷⁶ Das, *Life and Words*, 57.

⁷⁷ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 5.

⁷⁸ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*.

trauma: testimony: truth

This is important especially when dealing with instances of violence, torture and suffering that, in their attempted dissolution of the subject, alter and affect the subject's own testimony and perception of truth. The latter has been addressed by Dori Laub in his engagement with Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. To a survivor's (factually incorrect) testimony to the presence of three chimneys at Auschwitz, Laub responds in the following way:

It was her very talk to me, the very process of her bearing witness to the trauma she had lived through, that helped her now to come to know the event. And it was through my listening to her that I in turn came to understand not merely her subjective truth, but the very historicity of the event, in an entirely new dimension. ... She was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination."⁷⁹

A problematization of the process of truth-telling alerts us not only to the ways in which truth can be suppressed, rejected and/or constructed but also, to the ways in which truth-telling itself is a creative and not simply a reconstructive activity that anchors the witness in a similar relationship to power as that characterizing the sovereign.

A closer look at the witness as victim and survivor, as subaltern and a marginalized human being draws attention to processes of truth-telling within which the witness constructs her/himself vis-à-vis once, the perpetrator, then, the judge as representative of the institution(s) of reparation, then again, history written in the archive, then also, the need to construct a "first hand" narrative in the public sphere that will remember, pass on, recognize and grant the witness-as-survivor her due place in cosmologies of sympathy, healing, and recognition.

⁷⁹ Dori Laub. "Bearing Witness and the Vicissitudes of Listening" In *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 57-74. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 62.

These “response-abilities” are tasks the witness must perform in order that her subjectivity be restored from the realm of “othered subjectivity” through the process of bearing witness. What is more, “the process of witnessing is not reduced to the effects of trauma. So, too, subjectivity is not reduced to the effects of trauma”⁸⁰ or to one’s ability to make this trauma known, for the latter can erase subjectivity right after granting it. Whether, as Jenny Edkins has suggested, some ways of speaking are indeed more truthful to trauma (time) than others, the question of bearing witness is informed not so much by a sole insistence on the healing, recuperative and restorative properties of victims’ testimony but by a recognition that insisting on the prescriptive and deterministic nature of scientifically-informed testimony does end up presenting the state as a monolithic body, the reference object of which is a unified center. Of course all research, trauma research included, is influenced by dominant views and ideas, but these are not only the prerogative of states, but also the domain of the very victims we sympathize with and relate to.

While “trauma time,” as coined by Jenny Edkins, does alert to a memory informed by fragmented, painful and irreparable relationships to a past event, it should not be depoliticized in an effort to grant victims the chance to reveal and experience emotional authenticity which is itself a political tool that aligns spheres of influence, power relationships and story-lines one against the other. Linear chronologies do in fact help reconstruct a basic timeline that helps position the subject vis-à-vis a painful past. The telling of an event is, as such, always somewhat violent with relationship to the individual’s actual experience of that event. Therefore, how we choose to welcome, listen to and comment on both the event and the telling of it depends on being holistic and non-discriminatory in our methodological approaches. More specifically, this would mean accepting stories and

⁸⁰ Kelly Oliver. *Witnessing. Beyond Recognition*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 7

poems, to give one example, as uniquely positioned fact pieces. Memory, in that sense, is not always informed by an appeal to any one psychological category and becomes institutionalized and depoliticized when made to fit there. Memory is always political, though it is not always politically correct.

Similarly, the process of bearing witness is not simply contained within the juridico-political terms of the *state of exception* and must, in order that it remain possible, address the question of recognition beyond theoretical, juridical, or historical modes of engagement. Much like Judith Butler's argument that "no speech is permissible without some other speech becoming impermissible,"⁸¹ for Agamben the ability to bear witness becomes circumscribed within an economy of subordination of linguistic to juridical fact. The latter, in turn, ends up engaging the subject from within a realm defined by sovereign power. While, as Butler recognizes, one's ability to engage the world in language can be coercive, the choices the subject makes vis-à-vis language are not only and always directed by economies of power external to the self. If that were the case, overcoming violence would be impossible.

An alternative to this state of affairs would recognize that though the subject's position in the world is not always an autonomous one, though the subject is constructed by her longing and melancholia, the former's decision to speak and bear witness is a productive, performative, singular, and positive engagement both with language and with the world of juridical rule. Testimony, as Shoshana Felman has suggested, is *performative* and not just *cognitive*, as far as it "strives to produce, and to enable, *change*."⁸² It is a "relation of events," "bits and pieces of a memory," which figures as a "discursive *practice*" that does not, however, make up "a completed

⁸¹ Judith Butler quoted in Oliver, *Witnessing*, 63.

⁸² Shoshana Felman. "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching." In *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 1-56. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 53.

statement, a totalizable account of those events.”⁸³ The human being in a *state of exception* as a non-wo(man) figures mostly in relationship to what cannot be said, fulfilling the aporia of bearing witness as a lack, rather than as a possibility unfolding anew and on its own terms every time. Subordination, in the sense in which it destroys the subject, also denies the process of witnessing. In the same way in which the *state of exception* posits as opposites law and emergency, the sovereign and the subject, language and silence only so that it would have to choose one over the other, so does an engagement with bearing witness as a process/result of a traumatic past foreclose the ability to bring memory of more than traumatic events into language.

ordered subjects

The question of who gets to speak what, when and how is, in its essence, at the heart of the process of bearing witness, which occupies the precarious spaces inhabited by human beings living on borderlines, on the margins, between zones of belonging and among the legal subjects of a state. An exploration of the process of bearing witness must, necessarily, concern itself with the ways in which power figures in relation to who gets to speak but also, in relation to who does not get to speak and why. A juridico-political discourse might give a legal answer to both these questions, even in instances where the line between law and exception has been blurred. What interests me, however, is the proposition that bearing witness happens often and precisely despite exceptions, without being predicated on anything else but its own need to unfold its unique singularity.

If economies of power affect who says what, when and how, then language is a political activity. Bearing witness as an activity of truth-telling taking place within language carries the mark of this politicization as well, though it is a politicization that does not take as its reference point the juridical that contains within itself

⁸³ Felman, “Education and Crisis,” 5.

Agamben's exception. In this sense and contra Agamben, the nature of the political that is of interest here is contained within everyday acts of speaking and address that are not predicated either on the law or on the sovereign inclusion that brings the former into the focus of the exception. In this sense, bearing witness alerts to just such kind of a politicization. "As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is *action* that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is *impact* that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations."⁸⁴

Testimony affects the ways in which a story is told; the setting up of documented narratives about the past affects the ways in which histories are written; the passing of judgment on the past affects the ways in which ethical categories are established; the decision about who can say what, when and how determines which assignments of identification are constructed and which are not; the establishing of guilt, innocence, and culpability affect the ways and modalities through the medium of which the law sets up everyday practices of interaction between the sovereign, the citizen as human being, and the law. More specifically concerning the relationship between calculability and bearing witness, for what information can the poet, political scientist, journalist, archivist, investigator, lawyer be responsible? What kinds of factual information are they responsible for? And if not for factual information, what is their particular relationship to the process of memory reconstruction? In the register of the body, the process of witnessing and its relationship to truth-telling is hardly ever only an *exception*, an excess or a lacuna (lack) that is juridically situated.

For Veena Das, shocking narratives can never be recovered without disturbing the fabric of everyday relations that help sustain life's unfolding as such. That is, in order to bear witness to the horrors of violence, one must be taken out of the realm of

⁸⁴ Felman, "Education and Crisis," 5.

everyday relations and into a space on the border between madness and phantasmagoria. This is important because a positing of *homo sacer* as a limit figure makes the latter a spectacle. Much like the process of bearing witness, the status of the human being is not a question of all or nothing, of an exception or a norm, of language or silence, of truth or falsity. The condition of undecidability that necessitates a constant interrogation and exchange between dichotomous categories, when speaking a language derived from a juridico-political register, underwrites a state of affairs where opposites, in order that they be possible, must oscillate between “a rational mode and a magical mode of being.”⁸⁵ The realm of law becomes illegible, shot through with ambivalence, and referenced by the exclusions that make possible its regulatory character. Or, in Agamben’s terminology: “the sovereign decision traces and from time to time renews this threshold of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion, *nomos* and *physis*, in which life is originally excepted in law. Its decision is the position of the undecidable.”⁸⁶

As Veena Das recognizes, it is not that in a *state of exception* the law is suspended altogether, but that the line drawn between the legal and the illegal is highly blurred. Justice involves the re-drawing of the boundary between legal and illegal, rather than conceding to a state of affairs where the two are indistinguishable. For Agamben to be able to maintain that “life, which is thus obliged, can in the last instance be implicated in the sphere of law only through the presupposition of its inclusive exclusion, only in an *exceptio*,”⁸⁷ he must also agree to grant the “law that expresses itself in a ban”⁸⁸ a purpose that is largely negative and disabling relative to the possibility of positive, reparatory, socially-conditioned relationality.

⁸⁵ Das, *Life and Words*, 162.

⁸⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 27.

⁸⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 27.

⁸⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 29.

The *state of exception* is not a phenomenon that appears suddenly, alters the ‘normal’ ways of doing business and then, once it has run its course, gives way to a new normal way of being until another emergency sweeps through the registers of the juridical. For example, illegal immigrants have to negotiate their ability to remain in a country and work: a negotiation that is not always directly implicated in relations with the central government. Protests around the world (Myanmar, Georgia, and Pakistan in 2007) are unproblematically put down by police forces and defined as states of emergency. Hurricanes ripping through the Southern United States are dealt with so poorly by the United States federal government and its “emergency” and “security” agencies that “a state of emergency” might indeed be the norm in those parts of the land. The somewhat auspicious and ever increasing funnelling of resources into relief agencies such as FEMA seems to have become exponentially dependent on the same agencies’ inability to deal with natural disasters, turning their own *raison d’être* into a governmentally-fabricated “emergency.” Thus, attention is turned away from victims and the bodies of the dead and toward the unfortunate fate of ailing and inefficient bureaucratic structures. Nonetheless, to posit a *state of exception* as norm means to posit a world in which power’s hiding places become predicated upon the continuous (re)production of limit figures necessarily mediated by processes of exclusion and opposition, filtered always through the prism of the juridical that is beyond the human.

The nation-state has, indeed, always been founded upon its ability to exclude unwanted subjects, to create illegals (refugees, aliens, migrants) and define the coordinates of its proper (juridical and political) universe through the definition of difference as dangerous and foreign. The categories of territory, citizen, and nation have never actually represented the sovereign center as stable, at least not without always being subject to the exceptions borne within and outside of them. It is politically problematic that, in a *state of emergency*, *homo sacer* can be theorized as

a “whatever singularity” that is “no longer characterized either by any social identity or by any real condition of belonging”⁸⁹

Life in camps exceeds its own factual elements much like any bearing witness is more than a recollection of past events. Testimony, never simply generalizable, relates (to) a single event as a process of retrieval that yields case-specific summaries. Through it, the political is recovered and defined beyond the scope of any one academic theory, however strong the latter’s external validity and generalizability might be. Testimony is, as Shoshana Felman has suggested, a discursive *practice*, as opposed to a pure *theory*.⁹⁰

The sovereign, defined as the signifier of the “zone of indistinction” at the limit of the law, is a discursive practice himself, much like a law that is in force but does not signify or prescribe anything (as in Kafka’s parable of the law). Once we recognize this, sovereign power can be discussed and conceptualized as a dynamic performative that exceeds constative or affirmative limitations. Bearing witness, itself a performative engagement with a past, evokes the figure of the human being beyond generalizations and monolithic representations. The sovereign, thus, is a witness to his own humanity as well. The tension here is between the potentiality contained within language to testify and the inherent silences and lacunas (borrowing Agamben’s terminology) that accompany the work of memory. If “the gesture of assuming responsibility is ... genuinely juridical and not ethical,”⁹¹ the gesture of bearing witness is also genuinely a question of remaining faithful to the aporia contained in the “unassumability” and “unreliability” of witness in language. In the sense in which the process of bearing witness is non-generalizable, non-repeatable or

⁸⁹ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 87.

⁹⁰ Felman, “Education and Crisis,” 5.

⁹¹ Agamben, *Remnants*, 22.

identical to anything else but itself, it also figures as a singular engagement within language that shows itself in relation to a similarly singular event.⁹²

banned testimony

If Agamben is correct in maintaining that “sovereign violence posits law and conserves it, thus maintaining the link between violence and law even at the point of their indistinction,”⁹³ then the law in its totality works in an inverse relationship to the *ban*, the latter’s ambiguity not so very ambiguous to the living, psychosomatic even, bodies of human beings not as easily theorized as *homo sacer* or conceived of in relationship to the “drowned,” the Muselmänner. Testifying to a singular truth that at the same time must efface itself, bearing witness enters the political as it relates to and is conceived of as an activity not predicated on a juridical understanding of history and fact. Paradoxically, the singular has its own ways of being generalized in order that it can be said, which is why I will argue that poetry’s acausality offers the least bad way of operationalizing the aporetic relationship between the singular and the universal. Moving both language and law beyond mere functionality allows for an address that is the event of bearing witness to take place. Since, as Martin Heidegger knew well, language as representation is always only limited to a human system of signification (or, to the metaphysics of the subject) the world must always take place before and beyond translation in the very instance of the linguistic event itself.⁹⁴ Bearing witness as a singular event offers the possibility of remaining attentive both to the historicity and to the constant unfolding of what it means to be human.

What is paradoxical and, at the same time, axiomatic, is the fact that no matter how horrible, indescribable, unthinkable, inhuman, and cruel the treatments of the human being can be, s(h)e can and does adapt to them and still survives as

⁹² Marion, *InExcess*, 36.

⁹³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 64.

⁹⁴ Ziarek. *The Historicity of Experience*, 56.

human. That is, if we acknowledge that being human evolves, changes, mutates and defies definition then being human, in addition to being alive, involves also being adaptable, supple, and resilient. This means, in turn, that suffering does not reduce wo(man) to a category by removing us from the kind of stuff that makes us human.

What is tragic and, at the same time, also beautiful is one's ability to survive not only the most unspeakable horrors, but also to inflict them on others. Bearing witness tries to think through this seemingly shameful, horrifying, counter-intuitive, ethically-challenging state of affairs. It is in this sense that Paul Celan's realization that "nobody bears witness for the witness" makes it ethically problematic to distinguish dignity from dishonour, shame from self-respect, the human from the non-human. Any concept that deals with categories of Being is inherently both of an ethical and of a juridical nature. As a process of unfolding and bringing forth, I argue that bearing witness helps recover the humanity that has been lost, compromised or suspended (by victim as well as by perpetrator) in instances of war, rape, displacement, torture, death, and murder.

By creating the category of *homo sacer*, Agamben institutes a species of human being that, as a "non-man," makes thinkable (though not necessarily justifiable) the violence and sheer beastliness of 'normal' people doing things from behind the mask of orders, exceptions, weakness, survival, or madness. The figure of the human being outside law is contingently tied to the ways in which the former theorizes the politics of the event without constituting its own breed of sovereigns.

It is not out of a need to restore order and security that bearing witness can act as a cathartic or a healing process. As I have tried to show, in a *state of exception*, with the law suspended, the appeal to reparation needs to be to something other than the juridical. It is not in service of a juridico-political construction of normal

wo(man) that recalling the past does its work; and it is not in order to punish ‘perpetrators’ that ‘victims’ undergo the difficult task of sifting through and making known their (painful) past. Because every survivor also becomes a third party at the moment of bearing witness and because, though claiming special knowledge, the philosopher himself only ever remains a secondary witness, bearing witness testifies to the temporal fracture of an event and not to the erasure of subjectivity. In that it speaks for the excess of event over language, but also language over event, bearing witness uncovers the fractured nature of all enunciation. The process of recovery symptomatic of the ethical responsibility to speak inherent in being human cannot be limited to a juridical prescription predicated upon life as *bare life* in a *state of exception*.

Therefore, bearing witness to the Holocaust is not just a commentary on the Truth of the Nazi camps or on instances and methods of torture and violence. There is nothing in the nature of the concentration camp that, recorded and studied, evokes a desire or the need for replication. Its repetition serves, rather, as a challenge to the theoretical appropriation of naked life (*zoe*) as a zone of indistinction itself.

anoma-lous subjects

In an important sense, the category of *homo sacer* allows Giorgio Agamben to assign to it all those negative, excessive, abnormal, unthinkable characteristics otherwise attributed to madmen, the sick, or the possessed. What makes *homo sacer* even more problematic is the fact that, as the materialization of the *state of exception*, it allows Agamben to state the following: “Life and law, anomie and *nomos*, *auctoritas* and *potestas*, result from the fracture of something to which we have no other access than through the fiction of their articulation and the patient work that, by unmasking their fiction, separates what it has claimed to unite.”⁹⁵ The

⁹⁵ Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 88.

aporia informing the ability to bear witness, while informative of the mutually constitutive relationship between seeming opposites, suggests that the firm ground of language gives way under the philosopher's feet as the latter tries to recover the infallibility of enunciation, of bringing forth, of explaining events through theory. Agamben is correct to recognize that "if, as has been suggested, terminology is the properly poetic moment of thought, then terminological choices can never be neutral."⁹⁶ It is within the very excess of the signified over the signifier in language that the figure of the human being bears witness infinitely in excess of witness over every universalized signification.

Thinking beyond the juridical character of the concentration camps means engaging the "always singular historicity of the event"⁹⁷ of displacement, imprisonment, and genocide that cannot be unproblematically deferred to a universal, phantasmal framework of relating or to the law of violence in the "state of exception." At the same time, it also means thinking up the kind of language that can speak to this oscillation between the singular and the universal; thinking about the general medium through which witness takes place and testimony is delivered. It means thinking about the weight and final meaning of the many idioms of signification that accommodate the performative nature of bearing witness. Poetry, one such idiom, problematizes both the business of truth-telling and the figure of the truth teller, alerting to the close relationship between the activity of truth telling and the distribution of power.⁹⁸ Through the language of poetry, the witness "testifies to its own impossibility, its own cryptonymic opacity, and its serial persistence."⁹⁹ For Alain Badiou, this persistence is "where the subject perseveres, the unknowable within the truth event, the immanent gap of knowledge the *belated subject* of a truth

⁹⁶ Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 4.

⁹⁷ Ziarek, *The Historicity of Experience*, 41.

⁹⁸ Michel Foucault. *Fearless Speech*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 169.

⁹⁹ Ian Baucom. *Specters of the Atlantic*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 182.

can never entirely grasp, a gap that corresponds to the lacuna that both Agamben and Derrida situate at the heart of testimony.”¹⁰⁰

To suggest that the concentration camp inmates were nothing but *bare life*,¹⁰¹ to suggest that we are all refugees by virtue of the fact that the “state of exception” has been declared the “norm” can be read as overlooking the material singularity of the Shoah, of every instance of displacement one can name in history, and of the ways in which there is always a physical aspect of a specific someone being recalled, inaugurated as an example of the “exception” that surpasses any and all levels of normative or empirical universalization. What I am suggesting is that in the midst of every “exception,” life happens precisely because it is not sacrificed, because it is continuously produced, nurtured, killed, buried, mourned, and conceived (of) again. Yes, the witness, too, is the thinker of that life. In an important way, an exclusively juridico-political engagement cannot do justice to just this kind of exception within “the state of exception.”

In Chapter Five I will show that the law and the “state of exception” are not only distinguishable, for example, inside a refugee camp, but that they are exceeded by a reality of relentless making-live what “absolutely cannot be appropriated or made judicial.”¹⁰² If we accept Agamben and Walter Benjamin’s discussion on the normalized “state of exception,” then the figure of the citizen becomes at least partly as problematic and de-politicized as that of *homo sacer*. The latter’s conception is supported also by the realization that as a limit figure, it is always in the process of arriving in our midst. The juridico-political category of the citizen, still very much conceived in relationship to the sovereign nation-state, does not exhaust the myriad

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Baucom, *Specters*, 183.

¹⁰¹ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 19.

¹⁰² Walter Benjamin quoted in Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 64.

ways in which the displaced human being, once definitive of, then defined by the sovereign, actually problematizes the concept of the limit as such.

How can a limit concept call into question “the fundamental categories of the nation-state,”¹⁰³ or any other category at all? Limit concepts, beyond and because of the function they serve in exposing the violence inherent in regimes of power, do not offer a decision on the monopoly that the concept of “the limit” depends on for being possible. If we return to Ziarek’s definition of an event as irreducible to a scientific cosmology of space and time, then there is a sense in which this irreducibility to any one system of representational or linguistic symbols also projects the political/poetic and highly contingent nature of the event as a non-limit concept, properly situated “in the interest of that which is unseen and prudently incalculable.”¹⁰⁴ *Homo sacer*, as the being whose natural life has been transformed as *bios*, can only be conceived of in the image of the citizen as example of calculability.

What Agamben discloses as the (normalised) exception enters the singularity of the event as hostage to theory. “The sovereign exception is, thus, the figure in which singularity is represented as such, which is to say, insofar as it is unrepresentable.”¹⁰⁵ Agamben seems to want, and what else can he do, to distinguish between the singular and the universal if only to inaugurate, at the same time, the survivor at the heart of a biopolitical project of “inclusive exclusion” – a theoretical turn not altogether immune to ideological imperialism. In this sense the claim that “we are all refugees” is both a necessary *inclusion* or ontologization of the refugee as the marginalized basis of the *polis* and – in one and exactly the same gesture – a new *exclusion* or appropriation, which is all the more violent for coming to us under the

¹⁰³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 134.

¹⁰⁴ John Dewey quoted in Hilary Putnam. *Ethics Without Ontology*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 11.

¹⁰⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 24.

guise of being an admission. In this sense both the Muselmann and the refugee are theorized as limit figures and used to move between the singular and the universal where politics is absorbed in the juridical figure of the law.

In order that he relate his discussion of *nomos*¹⁰⁶ to the potentiality of (sovereign) power as the pure indistinction between violence and law, Agamben maintains that “until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality has replaced the ontology of the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality, a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable.”¹⁰⁷ In a highly un-Schmittian turn of gaze, the impossible passage between potentiality (singularity) and actuality (universality) not only denotes a zone of indistinction which, in the state of exception, oversees law passing into (unmediated) violence but is, in the camp, suspended and exposed as the pure manifestation of life “communicating itself immediately.”¹⁰⁸ Having named bare life as the threshold of indistinguishability between sovereign power (violence) and law (justice), Agamben does not operationalize the figure of her/him who can be killed but not sacrificed beyond the death-life dichotomy espoused to by the apparatus making up the *ban* and the possibility not-to-be the norm. “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to this fact. Then we will have the production of the real state of exception before us as a task.”¹⁰⁹

The “concept of history” corresponding to Walter Benjamin’s exception-as-rule refers to the need for a conception of language able to speak the idioms of arrival and reception. What Benjamin’s illuminating recognition poses are the ways in

¹⁰⁶ “The sovereign *nomos* is the principle that, joining law and violence, threatens them with indistinction” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 31, emphasis in the original).

¹⁰⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 44. Whether this statement holds or not will be examined with greater emphasis in the chapter that is to follow.

¹⁰⁸ Walter Benjamin quoted in Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 62.

¹⁰⁹ Walter Benjamin quoted in Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 55.

which the human being, explained as the exception now become rule, comports her/himself in a time to-come, a time whose continuous arrival bears witness to a past no longer only a remnant. In fact, the answer to the exception is not to remain in that condition, recognizing that there is something within the “state of exception” that exceeds its own materiality. If “life is ultimately political in its facticity” and if “facticity,” after Heidegger, “does not mean simply being contingently in a certain way and a certain situation, but rather means decisively assuming this way and this situation by which what was given must be transformed into a task,”¹¹⁰ then one possible, though easy, outcome of bearing witness is understanding the human as constituted through a poetic engagement testifying to a responsibility to be present.

It is at the conclusion of a carefully constructed argument linking Auschwitz to the juridical “state of exception,” to *homo sacer* and then back to the question of sovereign power as the foundation of *bare life* that Agamben can declare that “Auschwitz is, by now, everywhere.”¹¹¹ Being outside, yet belonging, cannot unproblematically be superimposed on just any group of human beings: the refugee, the migrant, the illegal alien, the criminal, the homeless, the university professor. Beyond being juridico-political in nature, the condition of being in the world also implies a spatial-linguistic identification. If the *state of exception* engages the excess of law taking up residence in the spaces previously unauthorized or suspended within ‘normal’ law, the latter becomes, beyond a juridico-political concept, the “empty space” and “pure being” within language subject to no other condition or end but itself.

It is because of this that bearing witness as a process of addressing *aporias* and *lacunas* is a singular engagement both with language and with lived, everyday

¹¹⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 153, 150.

¹¹¹ Agamben, *Remnants*, 20.

experience(s). Primo Levi's take on Paul Celan's poetry offers a similar insight into the nature of poetic language: "If his is a message, it is lost in the 'background noise.' It is not communication; it is not a language, or at the most it is a dark and maimed language, precisely that of someone who is about to die and is alone, as we will all be at the moment of death."¹¹² The lacuna of language collapses in the poetic bringing forth in a way that allows for the incommunicable, "maimed" testimony to emerge.

conclusion: poetic witness and subjectivity

To put it more succinctly: the missing articulation between the living being and logos is the event of poetry. Bearing witness, a process both of bringing forth and forgetting of facts, is not oriented toward a graspable truth through which the subject moves in language; a truth that, if recovered, would reclaim and make the subject whole again. Bearing witness informs our engagement with human beings not so much by making amends and filling gaps, but by conceptualizing a relationship between language and the subject that is unpredicated on any appeal to knowledge and verification beyond the obligation to address. What Agamben does in defining the concentration camp survivor as a remnant, as *the* instant of witnessing, sets up a theoretical space from within which the survivor's testimony can be theorized as the experience of the impossible. As such, the latter become a non-sensical category.

For Agamben to be able to say that "there is no moment in which language is inscribed in the living voice, no place in which the living being is able to render itself linguistic, transforming itself into speech,"¹¹³ he must predicate the possibility of witness on the permanence of *homo sacer* as a limit figure and define bearing witness as a process of operationalization of the ultimate deferral of subjectivity and signification. To make the human being subject either to language or to law exclusive

¹¹² Primo Levi quoted in Agamben, *Remnants*, 37.

¹¹³ Agamben, *Remnants*, 129.

of each other means to subscribe to an ontology predicated on the twin poles of inside/outside, singular/universal superseded by a differentiating account of the human as locked within the lacuna of language, compromised in the pronouncement of the “I.” Establishing a connection between the desubjectified being and language through the lens of the *exception* allows Agamben to define testimony as “something like a *unitary* center to which one can refer lived experiences and acts, a firm point outside of the oceans of sensations and psychic states.”¹¹⁴ Thus, he can endorse a virtual rather than a historical singularity only to prove how the former might intersect with the historical (something Jacques Derrida is careful not to do).

Once Agamben overcomes the paralyzing realization of the non-articulation of language, once he agrees to un-“suspend the I,” once testimony has been made possible as “something that cannot be assigned to a subject but that nevertheless constitutes the subject’s only dwelling place, its only possible consistency,”¹¹⁵ somewhere in the dwelling place between the human and the “non-human” appears a word, a sound: the advent of the witness. If Hilary Putnam is right in saying that “there are neither only particular things nor only universal properties, ... [and] ethical life accords ill with the ambitions of ontologists,”¹¹⁶ then the poor, wretched, excluded, stateless, Agamben’s *homines sacri* are the very agents that alert to the dynamic, ethically-informed and ontologically-singular nature of all witnessing. Experience, in its incalculability, allows for the historicity of event to unfold under the rubric of *bare life* only if the latter posits itself not only in man’s “extreme potentiality to suffer that is inhuman”¹¹⁷ but also, in an inauguration of an ethics that, beyond death and silence, touches upon the ways and idioms through which everyday life can be assumed and addressed on its own terms.

¹¹⁴ Agamben, *Remnants*, 122.

¹¹⁵ Agamben, *Remnants*, 130.

¹¹⁶ Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 20, 33.

¹¹⁷ Agamben, *Remnants*, 78.

Chapter Two

'Your question - your answer.' Bearing witness, poetry, and the debt to life.

As discussed in the previous chapter, bearing witness is never simply a juridico-political process guided by an appeal to truth that results in the codification and institutionalization of language. Since no law represents a singular expression of justice, though it claims to operate in the name of the latter, a discussion of the juridico-political must exceed a discussion of laws. An engagement with the question of bearing witness likewise necessitates a discussion both of the juridico-political and of the ethico-political dimensions of language informing the nature of communicating the memory and meaning of event. What this suggests for the nature of truth is that the latter's accessibility through memory does not always serve the end of facts. The relationship between recollection and truth is not self-evident much in the same way that the relationship between language and testimony is often compromised by the experience of the unsayable. In this chapter, I will examine the question of bearing witness in language as it has been discussed by Jacques Derrida. I hope to be able to establish a connection between singularity, the poetic, performativity, and witnessing exemplified in the aporetic, mutually constitutive relationship between memory, truth and language. Though Derrida's work will be my reference point, I shan't limit my discussion of bearing witness to his oeuvre only.

Derrida's discussion of "the poetic" as an authentic linguistic idiom will open the way for a discussion of everyday ways of bearing witness that situate themselves outside the universe of the poem proper. In his discussion of Paul Celan, Jacques Derrida succumbs to temptation and presents poetic language as autonomous, out of our control, and almost beyond the scope of interpretation. Thus, my preliminary questions to Derrida: Is poetic witness exemplary of the singularity of 'event' in ways that are actually informed by lived experience? How resuscitative is the ability of

poetry if the latter is also undecidable? Is the authentic relationship between singularity and truth exempt from being accountable for its ‘mourning’ tendency?

What I suggest in the engagement to follow is that poetry, when it happens, does so through the calculable idioms of language that enable communication in general. In order to be able to address and/or answer my own questions, I will review more closely the thought of Jacques Derrida whose engagements with the nature of language and truth offer both a theoretical and a methodological entry point for any discussion of bearing witness. I hope to be able to show that the essential moment of bearing witness has to do not only with communication, but is also an act of faith contingent on, though not defined by, subject-object relations. In an effort to problematize the presentation of any one modality of bearing witness as better, more suited, truthful or reliable, I begin by engaging the following Derridean question: “In what way can any writing at all be exemplary (Celan for example) of a “singularity of an idiomatic event,” of a “regulated generality of a schema”?¹¹⁸

introducing the Derridean witness

Even though Giorgio Agamben argues that the example of the Musselman is enough to establish a discourse on the exception, his is nonetheless a rather passive and appropriated dynamic. As shown, Agamben’s appeal to the Musselman as the remnant becomes an ethically-compromised and politically-problematic category that takes its lead from an insistence not on life, but on a definitional dependence between the “exception” and “bare life,” the latter being both definitive of and defined by the exception. Agamben’s contribution to a discussion of bearing witness is, though highly revealing, also rather questionable. His desire for the exception to work leads him to overlook the ways in which the exception informs rather than

¹¹⁸ Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 98.

negates (everyday) being, being itself exceptional. As Geoffrey Hartman has shown, “To talk about the authenticity of moral life in the camps or similar conditions is problematic always excepting some remarkable episodes. Moreover, to found authentic testimony on the silence of the dead, or of the impassive Musselman, evades the entire question concerning the authenticity of the witness accounts that do exist.”¹¹⁹ Hartman criticizes Agamben for omitting to mention, discuss and/or address existing testimonies that engage the Holocaust and that, though arguably incomplete and factually-disparate in nature, contribute to a large body of material archives and testimonies relating the (memory of the) Holocaust to the world. In a similar move, this chapter will pose the poetic not as the best idiom for relating (traumatic) experience, but as one among many idioms implicated in, unformed by, and underwriting the process of bearing witness as one of responsibility. Derrida testifies to the event of the Holocaust thus:

I do not know whether from this nameless thing that one calls the ‘final solution’ one can draw something that still deserves the name of a lesson. But if there were a lesson to be drawn, a unique lesson among the always singular lessons of murder, from even a single murder, from all the collective exterminations of history (because each individual murder and each collective murder is singular, thus infinite and incommensurable), the lesson that we would draw today – and if we can do so then we must – is that we must think, know, represent for ourselves, formalize, judge the possible complicity among all these discourses and the worst (here the ‘final solution’).¹²⁰

What follows from the proposition that bearing witness is not simply a juridico-political engagement with a past event is an acknowledgement of the dynamic, highly contingent nature of witnessing as such. Hartman’s insistence on the need for a ‘caring ear’¹²¹ invites us to consider bearing witness as an intersubjective experience. What that means is that the latter becomes constitutive of the subject’s ability to speak of the past in an authentic and faithful, though often

¹¹⁹ Geoffrey Hartman. *Scars of the Spirit. The Struggle Against Inauthenticity*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 91-2.

¹²⁰ Jacques Derrida. *Acts of Religion*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 298, emphasis in original.

¹²¹ Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 86.

unscientific and/or factually sound, manner. If we consent that there is no neutral language as such and that all language carries within itself a meaning that gives it its origin, if the relationship between speaking, memory and witness is always contingent on an audience, then the process of bearing witness, experienced linguistically, necessarily defines and necessitates a subject. This is even more so the case when testifying to limit (traumatic) experiences. A breakdown of speech, when it does happen, in order that it may be re-articulated as event, must move language beyond a limit experience and adopt an idiom understandable by others. Bearing witness to limit experiences, posing a linguistic challenge, announces and opens up the possibility for alternative modalities of engaging and relating the past. An event, here understood as a singular, one-time occurrence in the past, demands a similarly singular mode of presentation that cannot always be limited to one or another preferred idiom. In addition to archiving the past through writing, bearing witness as a process of recovery and re-membering calls forth a number of other idioms, namely oral testimony, story-telling, poetry, dance, art. This chapter will examine the possibility of language as such and of poetry more specifically to exemplify the singularity of an(y) event. A close reading of Jacques Derrida through the lens of Geoffrey Hartman, Richard Beardsworth and myself will help guide this journey.

'event' and being in the world

An engagement with the concept of 'event' alerts us to its dual ontological and historical nature. The former, the "there is-ness" of event, is supplemented by the occurrence of event at a specific point in time. For Derrida, events "are singular, they occur just once."¹²² What is more, "there is the history and there is the event that transforms the situation. Now if this event is a literary one, it doesn't happen just

¹²² Jacques Derrida. *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002b), 47.

once at the moment when it is produced,”¹²³ making the recollection of ‘event’ partially contingent on fiction. From the point of view of bearing witness to this ontico-ontological nature of ‘event,’ the historical is always already affected by the excess of the ontological – by the excess of Being over being(s), of event over events. For Derrida, “the ontico-ontological difference,” what “Heidegger calls the difference between Being and beings, “remains unthought.”¹²⁴ Lacoue-Labarthe, summarizing Alain Badiou, maintains that event is “the taking-place of that-which-is-not-being-as-being, of the order of the supplement or of the supernumerary ... as withdrawn from knowledge, undecidable or indiscernible, rebelling against every presentation and yet capable of being thought as a truth, actually and after the fact, and thus requiring intervention and fidelity.”¹²⁵ We do not have a way of speaking about the duality of event other than by always speaking about it as one or the other, by always referring to its taking place in specificity and to its universal implications. Because of its specific manifestation, it cannot be represented other than through specific examples. For the purposes of this thesis, I read this as saying that bearing witness is language as practice. In this sense, “event overflows all works of actualization, justice overflows all works of law, the incalculability of surprise overflows all calculability of decision ... [what] Derrida calls ‘messianic without messianism.’”¹²⁶

The event, because of its constitutive duality, becomes a point of contention for writers, (continental) philosophers and researchers, all of whom, aware of the relationship between event and time, between theory and temporality, must choose a side in this ontico-ontological difference. The specificity of event is what I will refer to as singularity that from here onwards will be recruited in speaking about bearing witness. On the one hand, the ontological reveals itself as it happens, through

¹²³ Derrida, *Ethics, Institutions and the Right to Philosophy*, 48.

¹²⁴ Jacques Derrida. *Positions*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 9.

¹²⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 19.

¹²⁶ Satiyabrata Das. “The Melancholic Name.” (Paper presented at Lancaster University, November 2006), 2.

examples, tests, etc. On the other hand, replete with specific examples, a theory of event must move beyond specificity in order to save itself from becoming simply calculable. Ontology, thus, is always contaminated by what it wants to exemplify.

This has three important implications for bearing witness as the process of event-remembering. For Dori Laub, “A witness is a witness to the truth of what happens during the event.”¹²⁷ First, one cannot escape bearing witness; second, one has to do it continually and third and following from the previous two, one must decide how to comport oneself in the face of the demands that bearing witness places on questions of truth, politics and memory. In this sense and depending on one’s response to this last imperative, the choices made by the subject regarding bearing witness reveal a particular understanding informing the ways in which the world is organized, addressed, and studied. In other words, the ontological unfolding of Being is mediated through particular modes of testifying to that Being. In the case of Jacques Derrida, I argue, a privileging of the poetic reveals an underlying faith in the contingency, createdness and dynamism making and re-making the world. “*The emergence of the event ought to puncture every horizon of expectation. Whence the apprehension of an abyss in these places, for example a desert in the desert, there where one neither can nor should see coming what ought our could – perhaps – be yet to come. What is still left to come.*”¹²⁸ For Giorgio Agamben, a juridico-political choice was aligned with the privileging of ‘exception,’ revealing an underlying ontological understanding of the world as the relationship between limit and the normalized exception. I argue that, in fact, only the ordinary makes the extraordinary possible.

¹²⁷ Dori Laub. “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival.” In *Testimony: Crisis in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 75-92. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80.

¹²⁸ Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 47, emphasis in original.

I will begin my engagement with Jacques Derrida by posing the following questions: What is the relationship between an understanding of event as ‘singular’ and the modalities through which it finds its expression in the language of witness? Does ‘event’ have to be singular for bearing witness to be singular in relation to it and vice versa? Is singularity a posture in relation to the excess of event over the witness one can bear to it? In order to answer these queries, I will engage ‘singularity’ as discussed by Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy and will then explore the possibilities of defining the process of bearing witness as a singular activity.

Reading Derrida, Derek Attridge suggests that singularity “can never be reduced by criticism or theoretical contemplation” for the relationship between singularity and generality is “not merely a paradoxical coexistence but a structural interdependence.”¹²⁹ One account of ‘event,’ that of Jean-Luc Marion, defines ‘event’ as that which gives itself once at the moment of its happening thus making the latter unrepeatable and irreducible to anything else but itself.¹³⁰ For Derrida, both ‘event’ and ‘*récit*’ (witness) alert us to the impossibility of deciding once and for all on “the simple borderlines of this corpus, of this ellipsis, unremittingly cancelling itself within its own expansion. When we fall back on the poetic consequences enfolding within this dilemma, we find that it becomes difficult indeed to speak here with conviction about a *récit* as a determined mode included within a more general corpus or one simply related, in its determination, to other modes, or quite simply, to something other than itself.”¹³¹

What that implies is that an event cannot be reduced to being causally determined or predictable and that, when referred to after the fact, its relationship to

¹²⁹ Derek Attridge. “Introduction” In *Acts of Literature*. Jacques Derrida. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

¹³⁰ Marion, *InExcess*, 36.

¹³¹ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 239-40.

truth is independent of the external guidelines and general prescriptions otherwise used in search of truth. Or, in the words of Derrida, “each time an event –be it linguistic or not, or a written event or not – each time an event produces more universality, [the more it] ... opens the way, it is at the same time philosophical and poetic.”¹³² In that sense, event is a specific occurrence reproduced in language through the medium of idioms that are, paradoxically enough and in order that they may be understood and communicable, necessarily also of a generalized, universal kind. This paradox reveals the event’s rhizomatic nature as contingent on a multiplicity of interpretations extended through and offered as an address to another. By rhizomatic here I mean underwritten by “a play of difference,” “an alliance,” and “dimensionality” and thus, an encounter. “Being cannot be anything but being-with-one-another.”¹³³ The ethical implications of this view any and all pronouncements of difference not as dangerous, but as a constitutive part of a polymorphous identity.

As discussed by Edouard Glissant, “the poetics of relation remains forever conjectural and presupposes no ideological stability. It is against the comfortable assurances linked to the supposed excellence of a language.”¹³⁴ In that sense, a “poetics of relation” exists partially outside a purely theoretic or linguistic engagement with an event and is defined by a relationship between life and language that is not one of automatic logocentric representation, but that of a situational, imaginative construct that “permits us to escape the pointillistic probability approach without lapsing into abusive generalization.”¹³⁵ Thus, despite the fact that non-generalizing ‘universals’ are non-reassuring and can appear dangerous, they nonetheless tell of a way of addressing being as absence that is not pre-determined.

¹³² Derrida, *Ethics, Institutions and the Right to Philosophy*, 52.

¹³³ Jean-Luc Nancy. *Being Singular Plural*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.

¹³⁴ Edouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 32.

¹³⁵ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 100.

In this sense, they represent singular coordinates on a plain made up of other equally singular coordinates.

bearing witness to 'event'

Bearing witness presents one such coordinate positioned vis-à-vis truth and memory. What these singular coordinates have in common is that they are not contingent on a relationship to a center anymore than they are causally defined and represented by a law or a rule of position. These coordinates give rise to the possibility of responsibility borne at the outer limits “of the authority and power of the principle or reason,” a responsibility guarding against the appropriation of thought by techno-scientific reason, a responsibility irreducible to reason, truth or the law.¹³⁶ If we were to follow through with the consequences of such a line of thinking, then bearing witness as a singular happening (event) accommodates such responsibility, the parameters of which become redefined in light of the limits of reason, progress, and truth. Since responsibility implies a certain view of ethics and since any discussion of truth implies a certain understanding of justice, a question as to the nature of this justice/responsibility arises here.

Reading Derrida, Terry Hoy suggests that “the very emergence of justice and law, the founding and justifying moment that institutes law ... implies a ‘performative’ force which is always an interpretive force, neither legal nor illegal in the founding moment.”¹³⁷ This force exists in a relationship to the plane with each point an example, if of anything, only ever of itself. “There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasizes the distancing it opens up.”¹³⁸ This doubly constituted proximity is the very ethical foundation of the subject’s responsibility toward alterity. In Derrida’s words, “There is an *avenir* for justice and

¹³⁶ Terry Hoy. “derrida: postmodernism and political theory.” *Philosophy Social Criticism* 19 (1993): 248.

¹³⁷ Hoy, “derrida: postmodernism and political theory,” 250.

¹³⁸ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 5.

there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth. Justice, as the experience of absolute alterity, is unrepresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history.”¹³⁹ Event, in this sense, represents a positioning in time and space dependent for its recovery always on an originary interpretation. Whether without or outside language, this interpretation is guided first and foremost by the non-exemplarity. Singularity, bearing witness to this non-generalizability of ‘event,’ does not partake in a logic of ends nor is it derived from the subject-object dichotomy otherwise defining the modern understanding of scientific knowledge.

Bearing witness, in its relationship to the past, is a process of recollection and reconstruction, possible only after the event. Thus, bearing witness is representative in addition to being singular which relates both singularity and representation to the recovery of memory. What this means is that recollection and the work of memory in particular uncover a “singularity” that would not have been possible had not the call for revelation been answered in a timely fashion. The excess of ‘event’ over the witness one can give to it is accommodated at the outer limits of responsibility that is irreducible to the calculability of law, justice or rights. This means that testimony, in addition to being representative, is also intersubjective and informed by a relationship to alterity. Each reinterpretation coloured by a different intention – always singular. If we accept the premise that the “I” is always implied in the first person plural “we,” then the ways in which one, be it a refugee, a victim of trauma, a mother, or a PhD student, bears witness comments also on the ways in which bearing witness as such happens to everyone else. A thesis on language(s) of bearing witness is, first and foremost, a thesis on the possibility to bear witness in language at all, as well as about the unlimited linguistic potential of the witness herself. “There is no pure and simple “one,” no “one” in which “properly existing” existence is, from the

¹³⁹ Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 257.

start, purely and simply immersed.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, there is no independent, specially-ordained language of trauma and suffering that is not derived from language as such.

Singularity is contingent on ‘event.’ It is an activity, a process, an unfolding, and a going through. It is not a state of being but a state of becoming that is not just deconstructive, though both are informed by inquiries into the fragmentary, open-ended nature of knowledge. Human beings, too, are singular in the sense in which their everyday interaction with the world bears the trace of a repetition that is also an initiation, a bringing-forth. Contingent upon generalizable idioms and upon universally-derived and applicable modes of inquiry, singularity is nonetheless always as many singularities as it takes to bring a singularity into being. In that sense, the latter is not totalizing any more than it is exceptional in the Agambenian sense of the term. Thus, singularity cannot be founded on a generic identity or a similarly-defined category or it will always be dependent upon exclusion and an exception that is, as I argued in my previous chapter, violent. Such violence and the processes that challenge it, when engaged by everyday life, become what I call “performative.” From here onwards, bearing witness will be mirrored by the implications of “performative,” interpretive, dynamic, and aporetic (undecidable) positing of the world. A question here arises: “If we agree that being is irreducible and always also a process of becoming, does that mean that the everyday is singular and necessarily irreducible as well?”

on ‘being singular plural’

I would like to introduce, by way of offering a preliminary answer to the question just posited, Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of “being singular plural.”¹⁴¹ What this suggests is that “the understanding of Being is nothing other than an

¹⁴⁰ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 7.

¹⁴¹ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*.

understanding of other, which means, in every sense, understanding other through ‘me’ and understanding ‘me’ through others, the understanding of one another.”¹⁴² In other words, the essence of Being is co-existence¹⁴³ and as such, irreducible to any system of identification that is not also, in its nature, intersubjectively informed. Presence, lived by each and every human being as part of the sphere of the intersubjective, is first and foremost an ethico-political category and only then, a juridico-political one. As an ethico-political category, it is conditioned by a responsibility toward alterity informed by a structural interdependence between singularity and universality constitutive of dual categorization as such. Thus, singularity is once informed by and contained in the person of the other and then, communicated and engaged in language as an intersubjective tool of communication.

The singular is primarily each one and, therefore, also with and among all the others. The singular is a plural. It also undoubtedly offers the property of indivisibility ... indivisible in each instant within the event of its singularization. ... A singularization does not stand out against the background of Being; it is, when it is, Being itself ...”¹⁴⁴

The trace of singularity lies not in its being captured, frozen, or determined in language, but in its being revealed through an address that is an instance of deciding and a moment of responsibility.

It is in this sense that “performativity” as the idiom announcing the dynamic, interactive relationship between language (speech acts), power and the human being in everyday life is directly implied in any discussion of the process of bearing witness. As observed by Richard Beardsworth, “In its undecidable relation to the generality of law, the singularity of a literary text implies that the ‘literariness’ of literature has to do with performativity (in the sense of a performative speech act) and with rupture.”¹⁴⁵ If every inclusion raises questions concerning exclusions and borders,

¹⁴² Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 27.

¹⁴³ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 30.

¹⁴⁴ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 32.

¹⁴⁵ Richard Beardsworth. *Derrida & the Political*. (London: Routledge, 1996), 26

then every instance of beginning to speak, of bearing witness is also an example of a necessary exclusion without which, however, no decision would be possible. It is in this paradoxical sense that bearing witness is, in addition to being singular and performative, also an aporetic activity. The irresolvable contradiction that this aporia carries within itself demands an in-appropriable, irredicable engagement with 'event.' Bearing witness thus represents a mode of address, a way of being in the world and not a theory or a methodology. "What is at stake, first of all, is an adventure of vision, a conversion of the way of putting questions to any object posed before us, to historical objects ... in particular."¹⁴⁶ However, fact and truth are non-coincidental in the ways in which they address memory or in their end purpose.

Bearing witness reveals itself not as something to be explained or tested but as something to be interacted with: as a singular, linguistic and intersubjective activity it inaugurates meaning as inseparable from the social nexus which originates it without limiting it to a founding set. An interactive, dynamic and contingent understanding of bearing witness helps liberate the language of witness from all archaic meanings and supposed origins, making the former into a creative, imaginative experience of being. Engaged in the business of giving account of practices of everyday life, bearing witness should not be understood solely as a linguistic process. Taking lead from recent discussions regarding the future of historiography after the 'linguistic turn,' positing a shared bodily and linguistic responsibility for explaining and experiencing the world might inform of the dialectic relationship between, for example, the practice of politics on the one hand and the lives and roles of its subjects on the other. "As in the case of linguistic competence, bodily competence permits the agent to 'perform' the world, to speak the social, as it were. Understood in this way, social practices *are* routinized bodily performances, incorporating both a way of 'knowing

¹⁴⁶ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 3.

how' – to act, to be an agent, to do something – and a (practical, unreflexive) knowledge of the world."¹⁴⁷

If we agree that subjects are always written, that they owe their existence to an engagement with language, and that a text is always contaminated by what it exemplifies, then a certain way of thinking follows, namely, that there can be no one pure, meta-language as such, spoken or written. Should the imposition of any one system of language be left unexamined, then the result is an understanding of bearing witness as certain set of principles and norms natural and not produced, accepted and not imposed. The process of researching being in the world, then, must also recognize that the very complex, contingent, and highly fragmented nature of academic subjects requires that we write about them accordingly. "Writing is not arriving; most of the time it's *not arriving*. One must go on foot, with the body. One has to go away, leave the self. ... One must go as far as the night. One's own night. Walking through the self toward the dark."¹⁴⁸ The question of bearing witness, when engaged from the point of view of everyday language, challenges the purity and irreducibility of singularity by addressing the question of living in the world beyond pure presentation. I will address bearing witness not only as an aporetic and singular event communicated through a "purer" language, but recognize that one need problematize any and every testimony (witness) that claims for itself the title of singular or singular-ly other.

Bearing witness with Derrida

Derrida reserves a privileged space for the *poetic* as a preferred modality of engaging language in the process of bearing witness. His discussion of the address as

¹⁴⁷ Gabrielle Spiegel (ed). "Introduction." In *Practicing History. New Directions in Historical Writing After the Linguistic Turn*. (New York, Routledge, 2005), 19.

¹⁴⁸ Hélène Cixous. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 65.

an always singular activity suggests that in order for language to be able to communicate and accommodate this singularity, a similar idiom ought to be recovered in the process of bearing witness. The latter is defined, in turn, as a responsibility toward memory that takes its lead, in the context of law, from an always fresh appeal to justice.¹⁴⁹ This is not an invitation to improvisation or a turning away from precedent and rule, but a recognition that both the nature of memory and of the law can only ever be authentic if understood as an engagement outside pre-determined ends. Memory becomes undecidable, a responsibility towards upholding an ethical relationship to a decision that is never secure and always threatened by silence or oblivion “because there is an art of the non-response, or of the deferred response, which is a rhetoric of war, a polemical ruse.”¹⁵⁰ A decision, then, would not be the same as passing judgment for the former represents an evocation to an engagement with alterity predicated not on a recognition of difference (suppression), but on an immediate and speedy recovery of voice.

The dilemma of the undecidable that characterizes every decision in Derrida’s universe, when left to itself, without an address, has the potential of becoming not only violent but also, reducible to and defined by calculability. For Derrida, justice represents an excess over law in the same way in which the idiom of bearing witness represents an excess over the iterative, representative potential of language. For him, this idiom is the poetic. In this thesis, especially in my engagement with Paul Celan, I will attempt to show how the poetic helps restore memory through idioms of the incalculable that engage, recover, and help secure the singularity of ‘event’ both within and outside language. At the same time, I hope to make clear that poetry does not engage bearing witness in a better, more authentic or faithful way than other singular modalities of witness. What poetry does better, perhaps, is invent and offer

¹⁴⁹ Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 251.

¹⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida. *On the Name*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 21.

novel ways of speaking about, representing and addressing otherwise old, universal and violent concepts/truths. It is in this manner that poetry exemplifies a performative engagement with the world.

As discussed by Jacques Derrida, the “anxiety of language within language itself”¹⁵¹ is directly related to what it means to speak about, after, and beyond an event. The whole of Derrida’s work poses the question of issuing forth, at any time, a responsibility whose origin is neither theoretical nor empirical, neither singular nor universal. That these otherwise dichotomous categories are conflated in his thought points not to a rejection of difference, but to an obligation to one’s “singular response to singularity”¹⁵² which, here, will be discussed with relation to ‘bearing witness.’ As a singular occurrence, bearing witness does not rely for verification on an originary structure of truth-making predicated on processes of falsification and/or generalization. The essential moment does not have to do either with communication or with enunciation. If, as Derrida maintains, “there is no responsibility that is not the experience and experiment of the impossible,”¹⁵³ the process of bearing witness cannot be reduced to calculus, moved entirely toward “the simple undoing of telos,”¹⁵⁴ or charged with the responsibility of delivering truthful discourse. As Geoffrey Hartman has alerted, “different witnesses often see things differently / or even see different things. This may also happen with a single witness, whose memory is not static but evolves.”¹⁵⁵ That is, authenticity, seen as an attribute of truth, is not dependent solely on “presence, reliability, and precision.”¹⁵⁶

Derrida’s aporia as the “no marked out or assured passage” becomes “the condition of decision or event which consists in opening the way, in (sur)passing,

¹⁵¹ Jacques Derrida. *Politics of Friendship*. (London: Verso, 1997), 3.

¹⁵² Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 15.

¹⁵³ Jacques Derrida. *Points. Interviews 1974-1994*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995c), 44.

¹⁵⁴ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 26.

¹⁵⁵ Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 92-3.

¹⁵⁶ Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 93.

thus in going beyond.”¹⁵⁷ If the power of language to discipline issues forth a responsibility whose origin is necessarily informed by a condition of undecidability, then a poetic experience of language is both singular and aporetic in being the product not only of an a priori state, but of a decision revealing a structured commitment to recurrence. This decision becomes, at the moment of its passing into being, calculable. In order to resolve this contradiction without, on the one hand, espousing to a system of theoretic rationality or, on the other, pronouncing the end of the era of critical thinking, bearing witness and responsibility will be addressed as commentaries and embodiments of every day practices of life-bearing. What I hope to show in this way is that a committed engagement with language necessarily presupposes a committed engagement with life as lived practice. Singularity, defined as a dynamic, performative mode of engaging the world, becomes implicated in an understanding of truth as an open, undecided question. The link between truth and memory is not self-evident and spans beyond the universe of replicability through the lens of which much of modern techno-scientific research is done. “As soon as it is guaranteed, certain as a theoretical proof, a testimony can no longer be guaranteed as a testimony.”¹⁵⁸ What is more, bearing witness is not, as has been shown in a number of studies,¹⁵⁹ always a healing, positive, dignified, or a noble process. In Veena Das’ words, “being subjected to violence does not somehow purify us”¹⁶⁰ which is true for bearing witness to violence as well, if I may suggest a parallel between ‘recollection’ and ‘exposure.’

¹⁵⁷ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 54.

¹⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida. *Sovereignties in Question. The Poetics of Paul Celan*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 68.

¹⁵⁹ See also Fiona Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa*. (London: Pluto, 2003); Veena Das. *Life and Words*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California press, 2007); Kelly Oliver. *Witnessing. Beyond Recognition*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Inge Agger. *The Blue Room*. (London: Zed, 1994); Michael Lambek & Paul Antze (eds). *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*. (New York: Routledge, 1996); Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub (eds). *Testimony*. (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁶⁰ Das, *Life and Words*, 196.

trauma and the repetition of language

Derrida would agree that certain forms of existence cannot be easily decided upon or defined, that there are experiences that cross the mark of iterability either because of their traumatic nature or because of their lingering psychologically and/or physically negative effects on the subject. Bearing witness to such experiences, in its difficulty, uncovers an important aspect of the process of witnessing – its ethics. In academia, such experiences are often romanticized and made to stand for an idealized, ennobled and academically exploited reality of suffering. We are told that when something is unsayable, it is somehow beyond our knowledge, something so horrific that the mind cannot grasp and/or put it into language. Even though this might be the case in certain situations, such a theoretic construction endorses rhetorics of silence that help perpetuate, legitimize and disseminate fear. A focus on the unsayable, trauma and violence focuses attention away from the myriad ways in which human beings do find ways of relating their experiences as well as understanding these experiences and passing them down through time.¹⁶¹ Derrida's theoretic contribution to just this kind of courage, though elaborated differently, has been undermined on purpose by critics pretending not to see that his objective and eventual goal has not been the obfuscation and jargonization of knowledge, but the making of testimony possible. As much as has been written critically about the subject's inability to speak, not nearly enough has been said about the ways in which even sympathetic understandings of silence perpetuate resignation, fear and silence.

Derrida's concern with repeated, meticulous, and careful readings of texts for the purpose both of uncovering their dynamic nature and also, of making a decision, addresses the issue of singularity as it figures in the general idiom of language. The impossibility of deciding or speaking, for Derrida, leads to the obligation and the

¹⁶¹ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 49; Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*.

imperative not to remain with the undecidable¹⁶² but to jump toward an urgent decision. It is for that reason, as discussed by Terry Hoy, that “we must take justice as far as possible beyond the already indefinite zones of morality, politics and law beyond the distinction between national and international, public and private.”¹⁶³ Undecidability, in this sense, is actually a demand for a decision, a sort of an “‘irruptive violence’ that is no longer responsive to the demand of theoretical rationality,”¹⁶⁴ a responsibility before another and before the ethics of memory, an opportunity to take up the risk of language.

As Derek Attridge notes with insight in his introduction to Derrida’s *Acts of Literature*, it is the latter’s “singular response to singularity that Derrida’s philosophical commentators tend, inevitably, to undervalue.”¹⁶⁵ Not only does Derrida affirm and argue for the co-existence of the singular and the general, but he also invites us to think of every ‘event’ in terms of possibility and an openness into existence that is not restricted solely to its immediate linguistic meaning. That is, truth outside the “scientific assumption that the world is knowable only through words and that to have no voice is not to be without language, unable to communicate.”¹⁶⁶ In this sense, an appeal for bearing witness to engage alternative modalities of speaking falls with Derrida’s own critique of logo and egocentrism.¹⁶⁷ It is in this sense that literature, when called forth in service of rational, scientific assumptions, can and has become institutionalized. Bearing witness, too, can fall into the trap of thinking that the world is knowable through words and not at all through performative (doing) ways of engaging life whose origin, in addition to being irreducible, also always tells about itself from what it has lived through.

¹⁶² Jacques Derrida. *Demeure. Fiction and Testimony*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 16.

¹⁶³ Hoy, “derrida: postmodernism and political theory,” 250.

¹⁶⁴ Hoy, “derrida: postmodernism and political theory,” 250.

¹⁶⁵ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 15.

¹⁶⁶ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 50.

¹⁶⁷ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*.

For Derrida, the relationship between writing and reading is “not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*.”¹⁶⁸ In terms of this productive dynamic, the enunciation of experience as bearing witness participates in a logic that problematizes an understanding of testimony either as a revelatory experience or as demarcating healing. Getting in touch with painful memories is seen as one step of working through trauma. Survivors are interviewed, hypnotized, taken back to sites of violence, medicated - all in an effort to prove that remembering leads to healing, is part of a process of working through, getting over and moving on, that “telling one’s story was supposed to restore dignity to the victim.”¹⁶⁹ Fiona Ross has shown, in her examination of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that truth itself is “presumed to be amenable to discovery through scientific method and quantification, and to be accessible through individuals’ memories and the material remainders of apartheid. The link between truth and reconciliation was considered self-evident and consequential: that disclosing the truth would result in reconciliation.”¹⁷⁰ Ross points to the fact that bodily experience of pain, the kinds of scars that can be seen, shown and acknowledged, do not exhaust the whole story of deprivation, suffering and violence and that women’s testimonies in particular speak to “the destruction of kinship, of the alteration of time’s expected flow, of the power of economies in shaping experience, of the intrusion of the state, and of women’s determined attempts to create and maintain families.”¹⁷¹

This, in turn, alerts to the fact that how we use language affects the ways in which we communicate intention, belief, policy, violence, love and truth. This use is not unbiased, nor is the moment of testimony in the face of the unspeakable, for

¹⁶⁸ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 101.

¹⁶⁹ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 13.

¹⁷⁰ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 12.

¹⁷¹ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 48.

example, a showcase for the interrogation of fact(s) independent of dichotomous distinctions. Derrida himself alerts to the fact that justice

is announced wherever, reflecting without flinching, a purely rational analysis brings the following paradox to light: that the foundation of law – law of the law, institution of the institution, origin of the constitution – is a ‘performative’ event that cannot belong to the set that it founds, inaugurates or justifies. Such an event is unjustifiable within the logic of what it will have opened. It is the decision of the other in the undecidable.¹⁷²

Though testimony is often put to political use through such mechanisms as truth commissions, tribunals, trials and public rituals of punishment that serve the purpose of re-instating forgotten memories, the recovery of Truth is not the unproblematic, unquestionable, end goal of testimony making the latter into the originator and carrier of its own vendettas. One would be well advised to recall Derrida’s caution against illusions of being able to dominate the system of language within which one writes/speaks. “But are other paths not possible? And as long as the totality of paths is not effectively exhausted, how shall we justify this one?”¹⁷³ Derrida’s task here is not one of annulling or justification, but of understanding and revealing the multiple possibilities behind each decision that, in addition to being an opening, is also an insight into questions of boundaries, exclusion, and justice. The potential of every decision to become violent, the potential of every text to be subverted, necessitates a singularly critical response to every ‘event’ that claims the status of Example.

Derrida’s recognition of the violent potential within language alerts to the potentially negative effects of charging bearing witness with the commission of truth. “Testimony as a concept has a special, double connotation: it contains objective, judicial, public and political aspects as well as subjective, spiritual, cathartic and private aspects.”¹⁷⁴ Because of its responsibility to answer for and before various

¹⁷² Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 57, emphasis in original.

¹⁷³ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 105.

¹⁷⁴ Agger, *The Blue Room*, 9.

audiences, bearing witness carries the risk also of initiating distinctions, crises, oppositions and universalizing appeals to truth and authenticity.

The act of faith demanded in bearing witness exceeds, through its structure, all intuition and all proof, all knowledge (“I swear that I am telling the truth, not necessarily the ‘objective truth,’ but the truth of what I believe to be the truth, I am telling you this truth, believe me, believe what I believe ... What therefore does the promise of this axiomatic performative do that conditions and foreshadows ‘sincere’ declarations no less than lies and perjuries, and thus all address of the other? It amounts to saying: “Believe what I say as one believes in a miracle.”¹⁷⁵

Story-telling, for example, in addition to being showcased for its open-ended, fluid and ‘freeing’ nature, is often also made into a privileged, “untainted” and romanticized modality of bearing witness reserved for specific (indigenous) geographic locations heavily dependent on oral traditions. This immediately constructs oral testimony as an-‘other’ mode of speaking, exoticized and eroticized, a vehicle for catharsis that nonetheless still upholds the primacy of the written word. This leads to imposing claims of authenticity on oral cultures at the same time that a politico-cultural reality of unproblematic self-exoticization is upheld for affirming the worldwide domination of the written over the oral word. A more in depth engagement with these questions and concerns will be the aim of chapter five of this thesis.

truth-claims and ‘linguistic undecidability’

Indeed, narratives are neither inert, nor do they simply oppose themselves to fact. To maintain such a simplistic division would be to underwrite a totalizing assumption that runs through academic literature, namely that “testimony describes the self completely,”¹⁷⁶ rather than recognizing the latter as fragmentary, incomplete and often factually questionable. Derrida extends a similar caution in a commentary on Kafka’s fable of the law when he says that law, in order that it secure its own existence, informs and necessitates itself independently of any system of applications

¹⁷⁵ Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 98.

¹⁷⁶ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 102.

and/or exceptions. “The law guards itself without doing so, guarded by a doorkeeper who guards nothing”¹⁷⁷ but a silence that erases responsibility and defers the law to itself. Thus, the law initiates violence that is also the law’s singular challenge to the subject: to overcome this violence. Likewise, “the text guards itself, maintains itself – like the law, speaking only of itself, that is to say, of its non-identity with itself. It neither arrives nor lets anyone arrive. It is the law, makes the law and leaves the reader before the law.”¹⁷⁸ It is because of this idiomatic and self-referential function of texts that language cannot fully and impartially address or encompass the singular nature of event. If “powers are themselves written, articulated performances based upon the circulation and withholding of knowledge in an inscribed manner, the decoding of which is not available to all,”¹⁷⁹ then a claim to be able to explain the world using a system of talking, writing, coding, re-coding, talking and writing again makes writing simply the archive from policy to culture. Instead, explaining the world through writing will be positioned in light of an engagement with the historicity of the event.

Despite the fact that Derrida defends the possibilities for decision contained within every instance of engaging the unspeakable, when bearing witness is at stake, the question becomes one of accessing experience. There is truth beyond texts, beyond the deconstruction of logos, beyond *poiesis*, beyond the analysis of the written word and though the latter is an important tool in uncovering and exposing violence and bias, it is often entirely abandoned in the moment of engaging the world. In what will follow, I will show that Derrida is being insufficiently Derridean when he insists on the ability of language to recover, resuscitate, and re-vive life (as biological experience). Taking lead from Richard Beardsworth who argues that “Derrida’s philosophy only makes sense politically in terms of the relation ‘between’

¹⁷⁷ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 211.

¹⁷⁸ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 211.

¹⁷⁹ Julian Wolfreys. *The Derrida Reader*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 14.

aporia and decision and neither in terms of a unilateral philosophy of aporia nor in terms of a unilateral philosophy of decision: in other words, aporia is the very locus in which the political force of deconstruction is to be found,”¹⁸⁰ bearing witness will be examined as linguistic undecidability on the one hand and the obligation to testify on the other: the latter engaging memory through the bodily experience of the everyday. Beardsworth is, in effect, very critical of the ‘literary’ Derrida on the grounds that he produces an overly formalistic, a-historical version of deconstruction:

Derrida’s argument concerning the irreducibility of subjectal logic *looks like* eliding the mediations between the human and the nonhuman and underestimating the speed with which the human is losing its experience of time. The ‘promise’ ends up, therefore, *appearing* too formal, freezing Derrida’s deconstructions of the tradition into a finite, but open set of ‘quasi-transcendental’ logics which turn the relation between the human and the technical into a ‘logic’ of supplementarity without history (the technical determinations of temporalization).¹⁸¹

If we agree that language makes justice possible, then bearing witness as such always charges language with a debt to memory, which is not the same as a debt to truth. Methinks Derrida’s examination of the questions of aporia and language remains somehow too theoretically informed and fails to account for the human being in much the same way in which Giorgio Agamben fails to account for the Musselman beyond the exception. What I will do in the remainder of this chapter is read Derrida’s theoretical examination of *aporia*, the poetic and the everyday against the implications that bearing witness has for these against the register of the ordinary.

first fragment: Aporia

For Derrida, an *aporia* is an unmarked, uncrossable and/or untreadable path; an irresolvable contradiction that, in addition to presenting itself as an impasse, suspends judgment while also obliging one to make a decision that always also carries

¹⁸⁰ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, xvi.

¹⁸¹ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 154.

a “political force.”¹⁸² An *aporia* does not apply to two separate entities but to a single entity, which makes it other than a part in a dichotomous cosmology. It is thus that an *aporia* does not presuppose or necessitate an opposition but, rather, helps lead one to the condition of possibility and impossibility of judgment. An *aporia* is not debilitating or negative in nature, a paradox, or just another clever Derridean twist, but is the condition of being itself founding of the possibility of language, justice and responsibility. What the *aporetic* informs of is not so much a state that defies reason and logic, wishing to deny, ridicule and make inconsequential, but of a state of being where the absolutely radical obligation to a decision makes possible any and all discussion of justice, responsibility, language and witnessing.

An *aporia* is not impossibility and it does not subordinate the subject’s freedom in a movement wishing to erase all subjectivity. It is violent for being based on a logic of ends. It does, however, uncover the potential for violence contained in any one decision that, in its determining nature, is always an example of an inclusive exclusion. It is ethically informed in that it obliges the human being to accept, define and live up to a kind of responsibility. It does, however, also deconstruct any system of ethics based on institutionally informed practices of systematicity. An *aporia* is urgent, beckoning the subject to commit herself, take an uninsured risk. It is the kind of risk taking that carries within itself the danger of being called over-simplified, nihilistic and refuted for its non-applicability. It is William Blake’s road less taken, the unknown that must be faced. An *aporia*, if not addressed, can become violent, destructive and ethically-void. “An *aporia* demands decision, one cannot remain within it; at the same time its essential irreducibility to the cut of a decision makes the decision which one makes contingent, to be made again.”¹⁸³ An *aporia*, situated on the threshold between politics and ethics, inaugurates the possibility for justice in

¹⁸² Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 12.

¹⁸³ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 5.

surpassing itself. It is irreducible to the decision which it necessitates, calling forth from within itself a need to be engaged repeatedly. Since an *aporia* has its own way of being addressed, it is singular in addition to being irreducible.

The decision to which bearing witness is obligated is to engage language despite the unspeakable that is contained within it and because “the operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law, to *making law*, would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself it neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no earlier and previously founding law, no preexisting foundation, could, by definition, guarantee or contradict or invalidate.”¹⁸⁴ This *aporia*, rather than announce itself as an impasse, reveals that there is no natural status to language, that language as such is never neutral and that every single decision has the potentiality to reveal itself as a different kind of decision, irreducible both to any and to every other decision. It alerts to the fact that the world is not knowable solely through words and that an insistence on the scientific nature of the causal relationship between language and truth does not hold in the face of experience. In this sense, Derrida does not problematize singularity in light of the (im)possibilities it offers for political action. This means that there is, likewise, no neutral, natural mode of bearing witness and that each instance of witnessing is a contingency operating from within a linguistic system of signs that has the potential to violate and institutionalize as much as it can heal and enable. Bearing witness, in addition to being a declarative and affirmative activity, is also prescriptive and as such, spans the temporal universe of the past. Shoshana Felman’s reading of this, much like Derrida himself with regard to poetry, allocates a special place for bearing witness in a universe predicated on narration. In that sense and

¹⁸⁴ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 241.

viewed through language, “the event is not that which happens. The event is that which can be narrated.”¹⁸⁵

Memory, thus, acquires a new dimension of importance regarding ‘event,’ alerting us to a privileging of textuality over historicity, of the telling of ‘event’ over the living of ‘event,’ of linguistically-informed representations of reality over the lived fact of the everyday. Writing, in the words of Richard Beardsworth, “is the name given to what witnesses this excess.”¹⁸⁶ These decisions, dimensions, coordinates, oppositions and dyads, seemingly reserved for the “literary,” carry already important political consequences for the practice of bearing witness. Derrida’s aporia, borne out of a linguistic *impasse*, demands a decision rooted in the time and law of ‘event’ as “the very locus in which the political force of deconstruction is to be found.”¹⁸⁷ In its testimonial nature, bearing witness attests, making “way for assumed knowledge, to an institution or a practice, a social organization, a ‘conception.’”¹⁸⁸ While bearing witness relies on attestation and the interactive relationship between language and fact, my argument, against Feldman, is that ‘event’ is that which happens before and not after the moment of narration. In the sense in which ‘event’ is singular in nature, narration and story-telling accommodate this singularity rather than cancel or universalize it.

What that means more generally is that bearing witness has the potential both to underwrite and to challenge memory, making any truth pronouncement obliged to take both these possibilities seriously. The composition of this dynamic, in turn, brings out the inescapable political character of the event of witnessing. Peter Trifonas suggests that deconstruction itself “is predicated *on taking memory into*

¹⁸⁵ Felman, *Testimony*, 14.

¹⁸⁶ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, xiii.

¹⁸⁷ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, xiv.

¹⁸⁸ Jacques Derrida. “A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text.” In *Revenge of the Aesthetic*, 180-207. Edited by Michael P. Clark. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000b), 187.

account: accounting for the causality of its effects, its bias, its exclusions – rendering an account of what makes memory, disrupts it, constructs its limits and openings, how and who it favors.”¹⁸⁹ Memory, in addition to working as recollection and restoration, can erase “‘event’ by fixing it either within written or otherwise publically recognized sites of archiving by making the dangers of testimony ... thoroughly contained”¹⁹⁰ in the form of controlled narratives. Language, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, has the effect of “weaning memory.” Underwriting (public) memory, bearing witness inevitably takes part in an academically and sometimes also culturally-endorsed project of suppressing difference in favour of certain kinds of truth and knowledge. A closer engagement with the political implications of this will be presented in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Challenging the disseminated norm, the process of witnessing has the potential to reveal the fact that language is derived from the same process that constitutes it as a liaison of representational thinking. What the latter does for the process of bearing witness is underwrite its performative, dynamic nature through repeated engagements both within language and outside it. What this reveals is that every continuous engagement is contingent on the previous one and that identity itself depends on the revelation and understanding of difference. Since every decision has ethical implications when carried into practice, bearing witness as a decision to speak reveals the inherent political charge of any language that claims for itself a depoliticized, neutral position. Every *aporia* reveals and underwrites the possibility for a decision that is only ever possible on condition of honouring this *aporia*.

literary witness

Bearing witness as an intersubjective activity, dependent on and conditioned by the presence of a listener, reveals ways of thinking the political and violence that

¹⁸⁹ Derrida, *Ethics, Institutions and the Right to Philosophy*, 72.

¹⁹⁰ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 191.

are informed by everyday practices of affirming, recognizing and living with difference. In the sense in which an engagement with language/law is always conditioned on pre-established rules, no account of singularity can ever be pure, that is, completely free of the violence that constitutes it. The potential of bearing witness to encompass and (re)present the singularity of an event is thus not self-understood or self-evident. “The literature of testimony ... is not simply a statement (any statement can but lag behind events), but a performative *engagement* between consciousness and history, a struggling act of *readjustment* between the integrative scope of words and the unintegrated impact of event.”¹⁹¹ Derrida’s understanding, both of law and of literature, goes beyond the limits of interpretation and theoretical definitions and allows for a discussion of both the juridical and the literary and of their potential for action and change. It is because “literature and law cross each other’s paths regarding an undecidable relation between the general and the singular”¹⁹² that Beardsworth can conclude that for Derrida, “it is *literature* which points the way to this ‘impossible experience,’ literature points the way because it is itself the enactment of an *aporetic* relation between universality and singularity.”¹⁹³

I argue, against Beardsworth’s reading of Derrida and perhaps against Derrida himself, that it is not just literature that accommodates the experience of *aporia*, but an inherently political relationship between the linguistically-informed moment of enunciation (witnessing) and the facticity of ‘event.’ In that sense, Derrida’s endowment of the poetic with the power to “resuscitate” and “revive” an otherwise “lethargic” language alerts to a possible definitional violence with respect to the constitutive (written) nature of language itself. I will develop this critique

¹⁹¹ Felman, “Camus’ *The Plague*, or the Monument to Witnessing,” in *Testimony* 93-119. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 114.

¹⁹² Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 25.

¹⁹³ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 24.

further in my engagement with Derrida's reading of Paul Celan's poetry. For now, suffice it to posit it as a variation on a Derridean paradox.

Since bearing witness as attestation can be viewed both as a juridical and a literary process, since no law can be general enough not to be violent and since literature acts as the meeting point between the singularity of idioms and the universality/generalizability of the canon, both law and literature share a degree of undecidability. "In its undecidable relation to the generality of law, the singularity of a literary text implies that the 'literariness' of literature has to do with performativity (in the sense of a performative speech act) and with rupture."¹⁹⁴ This means that the category of the singular, constitutive of testimony, always passes through negotiation, through the lens of *aporia*. This *aporetic* relationship, in order that it lead to witnessing, must reconcile the calculable and the incalculable. In other words, "The tension between eyewitness testimony and bearing witness, between historical facts and psychoanalytic truth, between subject positions and subjectivity, between the performative and the constative, is the dynamic operator that moves us beyond the melancholic choice between either dead historical facts or traumatic repetition of violence."¹⁹⁵

Literature, Beardsworth argues, because it does not simply inherit its tradition in order that it may repeat and institute it, can "help us to reflect upon the structure of decisions as well as upon the structure of a 'less violent' decision."¹⁹⁶ Derrida maintains in "'Before the Law' ... that this very *irreducibility* of the law to its account constitutes the law."¹⁹⁷ The law, neither a rulebook derivative nor an offspring of fiction, suggest that justice itself, the singular pre-requisite of law, exists

¹⁹⁴ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 26.

¹⁹⁵ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 16.

¹⁹⁶ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 26.

¹⁹⁷ Quoted in Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 33.

in a realm that is as dependent on invention as it is on tradition. Since bearing witness acknowledges its origin within this very *aporia*, it accounts for law and for justice in ways inaccessible to law and justice themselves. In other words, the violence within language is the latter's desire to found the truth while aware of its inability to do so solely from within itself. Richard Beardsworth's insight into the relationship between law and literature is especially useful here: "Literature's exemplarity is threefold: first, the 'literary' resides everywhere, although literature is only one mode of language; second, when, as in much modern literature, it remarks its 'literariness', literature is 'exemplary' of a particular awareness of the failure of law; and third, and consequently, modern literature stands out in its respect towards the law."¹⁹⁸ The responsibility incumbent upon literature to uphold the law makes the literary especially appropriate for addressing and pronouncing itself on questions of truth. It is in this sense that literature and language bear witness to the political by uncovering its *aporetic* nature at the very moment they derive judgment from this *impasse*.

I have shown how bearing witness, a linguistic, singular engagement with a past event, brings to light the relationship between justice and memory, ethics and truth. It carries within itself the potential to address and host justice, revealing how justice is not neutral in nature. Or, as Judith Butler has alerted us: "No speech is permissible without some other speech becoming impermissible."¹⁹⁹ The implications this carries for a discussion of the different modalities of bearing witness are threefold: first, bearing witness is never simply a revelatory or a representational activity and the traces of memory that it brings forth are, in their inability to reconstruct an authentic origin, irresolvable (*aporetic*) in relation to truth. Second, bearing witness has the potential to restore subjectivity, as Kelly Oliver suggests:

¹⁹⁸ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 37.

¹⁹⁹ Quoted in Oliver, *Witnessing*, 63.

“Witnessing as address and response is the necessary ground for subjectivity.”²⁰⁰ The latter, however, is not always unproblematically and/or positively addressed in language, just as a speaking, witnessing subject is not always also a “healed” subject. And thirdly, bearing witness contains within itself the potential to give rise to a multiplicity of idioms and ways of being that recognize the fragmentary, fragile, unfinished and thus, politically relevant nature of recovery.

Importantly, this also challenges the idea that bearing witness should be reserved for accounts of trauma, violence and subordination. Even mainstream International Relations accounts will do well to learn from these implications and apply them in its scientific endeavours – if not in an attempt to shake up its groundwork, then in an effort to supplement, double-check and expand its scholarly horizons. In fact, I will argue that bearing witness is not a privileged, better or more authentic form of truth-telling, nor that the process itself lives only in theoretical and/or scientific evocations. The implication these propositions have for bearing witness is an invitation to consider the latter as a process of public, communal, constant and everyday revelation that sometimes refers to and at other times denies language. Testimony can also erase language – maybe because language, as science, is sometimes erasable. It is here that a distinction between history as told by historians and history as narrated or performed by people reveals that the “reliability of the eyewitness is only limited”²⁰¹ and that testimony informs this dynamic nature. This invites a sensitivity informed not only by an emotive or a personal desire, but also by an appeal to recognize the potential within language to host both truth as fiction and fiction as truth. Next, I will engage the nature of this relationship in a discussion of “the poetic,” situating the latter not simply as a literary form, but as a novel way of being in the world.

²⁰⁰ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 16.

²⁰¹ W. James Booth. *Communities of Memory. On Witness, Identity and Justice*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 92.

the poetics of bearing witness

I will refer to “the poem” as an example of a work of literature. “The poetic,” on the other hand, will address more generally the mode of linguistic engagement that shares the stylistic and structural requirements of a poem, but that exceeds these, manifesting itself rather as a way of being in the world than a way of speaking in the world. Poetry, Derrida argues in *Sovereignties in Question* (2005), accommodates the fragmentary nature of language because its open-ended style invites the possibility for invention and imagination. For Derrida, poetic language has a resuscitative power that brings out the true essence of language as free, non-lethargic, innovative, and dynamic. “The poetic act ... constitutes a sort of resurrection: the poet is someone permanently engaged with a dying language that he resuscitates, not by giving back to it a triumphant line, but by sometimes bringing it back, like a revenant or phantom.”²⁰² Derrida offers a reading of Paul Celan he insists belongs without belonging to the canon of literature. To say that something “belongs without belonging” is not simply to confuse the meaning of belonging, but to suggest that even the possibility of deciding on meaning is endlessly more complicated than is often presented by social scientific programs.

In a sense, what Derrida is saying is that language, if it wants to claim for itself the status of being free, truthful and imaginative, has to be poetic language. “Whoever surrenders to the *truth of language*, is a poet, whether he writes poetry or not.”²⁰³ In the sense in which the poem makes possible an address to the other “by keeping quiet, keeping something quiet from him,”²⁰⁴ the poem becomes “attached to the *singularity of the signifying body of language* – or of the body, period – but which, because of such singularity, *eludes all possession*, any claim of belonging

²⁰² Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 106.

²⁰³ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 105.

²⁰⁴ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 96.

to.”²⁰⁵ However, this body of language is quite removed from the actual bodies of people that poetry addresses and that bearing witness recovers. The poem’s death, in fact, can only ever be a figurative death in being “forgotten, or not interpreted, or left to lethargy” and not the physical death “in crematoria or in flames.”²⁰⁶

In order for his anthropomorphizing of poetry to work, Derrida has to infuse the poem with the kind of life that, like the life of the witness, is predicated on one’s ability to survive, supersede and later, recall ‘event.’ “Whoever bears witness does not bring a proof; he is someone whose experience, in principle singular and irreplaceable (even if it can be crosschecked with others to become proof, to become conclusive in a process of verification), comes to attest, precisely, that some ‘thing’ has been present to him.”²⁰⁷ This allows Derrida to link poetry with the human: “poetry ... bears witness to the present, to the now, to the ‘presence’ of the human. And because to bear witness is always to manifest presence, thereby speech, through speech that addresses the other and thereby attests to a presence, well, then, what counts here, and what signs, is a presence attesting to a presence, or rather to a present, a human present.”²⁰⁸ What is showcased here is the poem’s hospitality underwritten by an alterity. If “an act of hospitality can only be poetic” and the possibility of address is underwritten by “the unquestioning welcome”²⁰⁹ of a wholly other “before they are indentified, even before they are a subject, legal subject and subject nameable by their family name,”²¹⁰ then poetry itself must be considered as wholly other.

In order for the relationship between self and other to be one of hospitality/address and not of violence, the self must perceive alterity both through

²⁰⁵ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 102.

²⁰⁶ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 107.

²⁰⁷ Derrida, “A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text,” 190.

²⁰⁸ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 118.

²⁰⁹ Jacques Derrida. *Of Hospitality*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000a), 29.

²¹⁰ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 29.

idioms of difference and similarity. That means that the sovereign subject must be able to differentiate between entities, both physical and linguistic, based on their relationship to his own sense of security. However, as Derrida himself suggests, “since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence.”²¹¹ If we were to take Derrida’s suggestion seriously, then a law of unconditional hospitality embodies not so much a real-life unmediated, juridically unsanctioned state of human mobility, but rather a state of being where commonly accepted difference markers themselves are subjected to re-examination and re-casting in light of the actual insecurity they breed among people.

Derrida is asking us to take a hard look at the policies, implementations, programs, institutions and theories that bear witness to our understanding of relationality in the world. Even though Derrida’s formulation of address can produce violence by insisting on an unconditional law of hospitality as “a law without imperative, without order and without duty,”²¹² his call for hospitality offers the possibility of conceptualizing exiles, émigrés, displaced persons, the homeless, refugees, language itself as mobilities that mutate, develop and are defined by their interaction with one another, by their portable stability. Bearing witness, likewise, in its nature as an address, must be taken seriously for the “political and *more than* political” potential it has to “to deconstruct these inheritances or the prevailing interpretations of those inheritances.”²¹³

If the poetic is an opening “by its very virtue to illuminate,”²¹⁴ then what it illuminates is “the operation of creative imagination at the greatest possible

²¹¹ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 55.

²¹² Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 83.

²¹³ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 139.

²¹⁴ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 6.

proximity to it.”²¹⁵ For Derrida poetic language, holding within itself the promise of reawakening meaning from its slumber and acting as a power of creation, offers the possibility of uncovering a purity that has been given over to verification and replicable proofs. This kind of creative, dynamic address/truth, for Derrida, is best addressed through poetic language. Since the witness himself “does not bring a proof” by virtue of attesting to an “experience, in principle singular and irreplaceable,”²¹⁶ then bearing witness itself is best accommodated in the language of poetry. The language of poetry, in turn, is a performative, that is, “something which produces an event while using, organizing a given ... material ... at the same time shaping and producing.”²¹⁷ The value of this performativity is that it informs without falling into “universality ... on the verge of losing its innocence ... prone to become functional.”²¹⁸ This universality and functionality are, for Derrida, the very things that make language lethargic and bearing witness – the other name for proof.

As already noted, no one kind of language is innocent or neutral. As the repository of meaning, language is never pure and its idioms as well as its toolbox are always underwritten by the very meanings they try to convey.

In the extent to which what is called ‘meaning’ (to be ‘expressed’) is already, and thoroughly, constituted by a tissue of differences, in the extent to which there is already a *text*, a network of textual referrals to *other* texts, a textual transformation in which allegedly ‘simple term’ is marked by the trace of another term, the presumed interiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own exteriority.²¹⁹

The poem, for Alain Badiou, “addresses not so much a sunset in general as this sunset, not so much the colour of the tiles in general as the color of those tiles there.

The poem never succeeds here absolutely, but nevertheless this is its goal.”²²⁰ Like

Badiou, Derrida recommends poetry for its ability to interact and exist alongside

²¹⁵ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 8.

²¹⁶ Derrida, “A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text,” 190.

²¹⁷ Derrida, *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*, 41.

²¹⁸ Derrida, *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*, 50.

²¹⁹ Derrida, *Positions*, 33.

²²⁰ Quoted in Asja Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 14.

philosophy. “Each time there is a sentence which finally calls for translation, provokes translation, becomes legible and attractive and interesting for someone in another language, in another country, then there is something philosophical and poetic occurring at the same time.”²²¹ Like philosophy, poetic language is well suited to change, to correcting itself depending on the context of interpretation, on the essentialist or non-essentialist climate of inquiry. “The same statements, grammatically and in their lexicon, can function here as everyday language, here as philosophemes, and here as poems, as poetic sentences. It depends on the context of the interpretation – of the conventions, the agreement or disagreement – and it’s always a matter of discussion.”²²² Derrida gives French universities as an example of this reproducing tendency that, “without accepting anything new,” legislates the university into “a state of censorship.”²²³ The inherent ambiguity of poetic language is what makes it so amenable to dealing with questions of witnessing (fiction), indeterminacy (repetition) and performance (interpretation).

on the romanticism of poetry as philosophy

However, the poetic is not limited to the philosophic. Poetry, attentive in its style and form to the polymorphous nature of experience, bears witness to those modalities of being in the world structured around recognizing, respecting and representing the political valence of that which has yet to be decided upon. The language of poetry (ordinary language used in novel ways) is especially valuable in a discussion of bearing witness, accommodating the simultaneous fragmentariness and completeness of testimony. Thus, bearing witness is amenable to being addressed by idioms that appeal to traditional and ‘interpretive’ methods alike. As I will argue in greater depth in my next chapter, the language of poetry takes its representational lead from the world while remaining attentive to the interplay between singularity,

²²¹ Derrida, *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*, 52.

²²² Derrida, *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*, 48.

²²³ Derrida, *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*, 54.

universality, *aporia*, performativity, and ‘event.’ Poetry, a non-predicative (singular) performance, evokes the decision language makes at the moment of bearing witness: the institutionalized decision politics must make when faced with the call to justice.

The danger with Derrida is, of course, always one of making the poetic mean too much exemplified by an over-reliance on an appeal to romantic abstractions, to “language’s peculiar ability to emerge from itself in order to articulate its origin.”²²⁴ If Derrida is correct in maintaining that “*Ceremony* is doubtless the most precise and the richest word to bring together all the aspects of the event,”²²⁵ then a danger arises of making poetry into one such ceremonial practice, a ritualistic, improvised, ‘literary’ discourse on historicity. Poetry has often been recruited by academics for its romantic appeal, its anti-scientific nature and its greater affinity for postmodern theoretic orientations. Martin Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Walter Benjamin and others all have, in their theoretical engagements, each with a certain kind of poetic, made the latter the middle man in underwriting a number of ontological and methodological causalities between philosophy, literature, and politics. On numerous occasions, these thinkers have been dismissed for the elliptical nature of their pronouncements and the fictionality of their work. Hands are waved, sighs are heard and conference rooms continue to be filled by scholars wooed by reason and method. Derrida’s own complaint that “what I denounce is attributed to me, as if one were in less of a hurry to criticize or dismiss me, than first to put oneself in my place in order to do so”²²⁶ alerts to a painfully real lack of academic hospitality. His famous proclamation that there is nothing outside the text has failed to produce a serious engagement with the constructed, institutionalized nature of language beyond forcing critical theorists to defend themselves against

²²⁴ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 27.

²²⁵ Derrida, *On the Name*, 5.

²²⁶ Derrida, *Positions*, 53.

accusations of obscurity, practical mediocrity and theoretical difficulty. A better translation of “there is nothing outside the text” might perhaps be “there is no outside-text,” which avoids the implication that everything is just language and nothing else.²²⁷

A poetics of bearing witness, as a performative engagement, after the fact, challenges the professed possibility of language to write a single history. To say that poetry gives language to something beyond language means recognizing the constructed nature of language as a totalizing, all-encompassing realm committed to the modern dissemination and definition of scientific knowledge. Derrida’s ‘platform’ proposes a tempting challenge: “What we are attempting to put to the test is the possibility, in truth, the impossibility, for any testimony to guarantee itself by expressing itself in the following form and grammar: ‘Let us testify that ...’”²²⁸ A poetics of bearing witness points to “the idiomatic, the irreducibly singular, as a necessary aspect of any act of writing.”²²⁹ The poet’s “intention toward language,” as Peter Szondi, Paul Celan’s brilliant critic and friend discloses, does not lay out the subject of inquiry in a graspable, re-presentable way, but offers the possibility for the latter’s undoing. However, for poetry to live up to its name as “singular” language, it has to address ‘event’ continuously, daily and honestly. In order for the latter to be possible without also falling into the trap of abstract theorizing, recognizing here that theory is by nature totalizing, the language of poetry needs to address the historicity of ‘event’ beyond the implications of its factual nature. In fact, since no language is resistant to universalization, no language is innocent or neutral. Derrida’s view of poetry, likewise, fails to acknowledge that when it claims to stand for a “pure language,” poetry precedes ‘event,’ making it amenable to summary and dissociating knowledge from action. As Derrida has suggested, “the language of Western

²²⁷ My gratitude goes to Dr. Arthur Bradley for drawing my attention to this important difference.

²²⁸ Derrida, *On the Name*, 24.

²²⁹ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 14.

metaphysics... carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions that are inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system.”²³⁰

In this sense, poetry represents the decision to write and bear witness at the limits of language in so far as all limits can be transgressed. The issue here is to expose the nostalgia to totality guiding scientific inquiry, both positivist and critical, while engaging bearing witness beyond a romantic appeal to undecidability, *aporia*, and fragmentariness. In its nature as a performative unfolding, language is anachronistic: it does not impose a definite beginning or closure by introducing to living and thinking a structure of finitude(s) that holds. Bearing witness is, in this sense, a becoming and never simply a beginning, end, or middle, as every reference point, as ‘event,’ is also originary. Seen that way, closures are both unavoidable and necessary usurpations of possibilities where the production of knowledge and truth serves as a means of control.

As I will show in the last chapter of this thesis, bearing witness as a process of accessing, assessing and commenting on ‘event’ can affect similar closure when related to refugee experiences. Georgia Albert’s reading of Hans-Jost Frey suggests that “the interest in explaining a text implies that the text is ‘lacking’ in some sense, that in order to *mean* it needs the supplement of a commentary or exegesis. Every text is, in this sense, a fragment”²³¹ and declaring itself a fragment, every text, poetic texts especially, recover a totality that legitimates it as a negotiation between fragment and whole, between singular and plural. In addition, Fiona Ross shows that, with regard to women’s testimonies in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “stories, testimonies and telling are fragments, parts of

²³⁰ Derrida, *Positions*, 19.

²³¹ Georgia Albert. “Introduction.” In *Interruptions*, Hans-Jost Frey (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), xii.

people's narration of their lives.”²³² Language's resistance to translation, to being made a tool in the service of universals indebted to the demands of necessary ends, understands being as “evental” and bearing witness as constitutive of this fact.

“Left here to itself, to its essential solitude, in its performance or in its happening, the poetic act of the work perhaps no longer derives from the presentation of the self as such,”²³³ but unveils an intention toward language irreducible to a framework of representation. The singular as that which “could never be a mere example”²³⁴ realizes, paradoxically, that the saying of the unique has its own way of being said, over and over again, in a structured commitment to recurrence. If it is to serve life - final, fragmentary and experimental - bearing witness must be other than swearing or truth telling and language must enter its own performativity, its own re-creation. Such a suspension relocates responsibility from fixed systems of knowledge toward a different intention toward language. To say that language moves beyond the interplay between sign and signified does not mean, however, that “as soon as it is guaranteed, certain as a theoretical proof, a testimony can no longer be guaranteed as a testimony”²³⁵ in the sense which would make the latter fictional, not to be trusted or endowed with the quality of truth.

Bearing witness, understood as a performative engagement with ‘event,’ cannot only be a determinable, permanent system of truth. Fiona Ross has alerted us to the fact that against the common belief that testimony yields authenticity the former, used as reportage and data, is not neutral but is interpreted depending on the information one is trying to solicit from the past. “Voice implies authenticity: speaking is considered to be an act that fully, completely and absolutely describes the

²³² Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 102.

²³³ Derrida quotes in Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 303.

²³⁴ Derrida, *Points*, iii.

²³⁵ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 68.

self. This is clear in the Commission's assumptions about the relationship between "experience" and "story": the narration of experience was assumed to be a simple fact, a release of 'stories' of pain that already existed intact within those who has experienced violations."²³⁶ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) have argued along similar lines that even those who were in the Nazi concentration camps, for example, could not see what was happening there. As Kelly Oliver sums up: "From the inside, victims were not only empirically annihilated as witnesses – murdered – but also cognitively and perceptually destroyed as witnesses because they were turned into objects and dehumanized."²³⁷

the way of fable

To maintain that testimony cannot be guaranteed as testimony if guaranteed as theoretical proof invites one to re-define bearing witness both as performative and as constructed event. Bearing witness does not necessarily interrupt or resist any deployment of a program of knowledge intended to close off the possibility for the kind of recurrent decision-making that underwrites a responsible relationship between truth, power, memory and fiction. Indeed, Thomas Keenan engages the productive potential contained in a serious engagement with 'fable,' which he defines as "'a saying pure and simple' – thus renders secondary, irrelevant the division of language into true and false, *mythos* and *logos*."²³⁸ Keenan takes this a step further by introducing a relationship of responsibility between fable (*mythos*) and truth (*telos*) as "the interpretation and practice of responsibility – our exposure to calls, others, and the names with which we are constituted and which put us in question."²³⁹ Unlike Derrida, who privileges the poetic for its resuscitative potential, Keenan recruits the idiom of the 'fable' in an effort to formulate a theory of responsibility constituted not "as a matter of articulating what is known with what is

²³⁶ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 79.

²³⁷ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 89.

²³⁸ Thomas Keenan. *Fables of Responsibility*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 55.

²³⁹ Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, 45.

done” but rather, “as an asymmetry or an interruption between the orders of cognition and action.”²⁴⁰ No more are undecidability and contingency ruled out from the political imaginary. What Keenan does with great mastery and sensitivity to the political, ethical and linguistic imaginations of post-modern thought, is offer a theory of responsibility derived from an ontological *impasse* as the necessary condition for any and all political action and decision. Keenan posits literature

as the experience of risk, chance, the undecidable. Not the decisionist celebration of the pathos of pure resolution, of having to decide once and for all, without reason, but with firmness and conviction. ... thinking about what happens in language can only begin to take the measure of its enigmatic character if we suspend our cheerful confidence in the fact that it does or has to make sense and perform. Literature tells us that letters can always not reach their destination, as Derrida said to Lacan, and this originary dispersal is the condition or the chance of anything (new) happening at all.²⁴¹

Keenan’s literary does not save or revive a dying, lethargic language. It is not the opposition between scientific and literary language that gives clarity, but an understanding of the underlying insecurity of language as such that allows for decision to arrive, for responsibility to be had.

The recognition of language’s insecurity is not synonymous with primitiveness of thought, but is a weapon against complacency of thought and faith, against the obligation to bear witness against one’s will and because of an obsessive insistence on finding proof reducible to verification. If Derrida is correct in maintaining that “good conscience as subjective certainty is incompatible with the absolute risk that every promise, every engagement, and every responsible decision – if there are such – must run,”²⁴² then bearing witness cannot offer a monolithic theory of responsibility, but only the kind of responsibility borne out of encounters, between borders, as risk and undecidability. While the relationship between knowledge and language is dictated as much by the latter’s undecidability as by an appeal to transparent reductionism,

²⁴⁰ Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, 1.

²⁴¹ Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, 5.

²⁴² Jacques Derrida. *Aporias*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 19.

the saying of the unique and the ordinary both have, paradoxically, their own ways of being said. If “the limits of knowledge ... call into question ... the validity of testimony,”²⁴³ as Dori Laub suggests, then testimony cannot always be about knowing things. For Laub, the pure facticity of ‘event’ is made up of the process of going through and listening.²⁴⁴ Bearing witness, in addition to being an engagement with historical and linguistic singularity, is also an engagement with the internal witness contained within every witness: an internal witness that reveals the possibility for an address conditioned not on an erasure of singularity but on a play of difference. Kelly Oliver defines the “inner witness” as “the necessary condition for the structure of address-ability and response-ability inherent in subjectivity.”²⁴⁵ For Dori Laub, “testimony is ... the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal “thou” and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself.”²⁴⁶ Bearing witness realizes that every singularity is contained within a universality, that the performative potential of the testimony of a Holocaust survivor, a refugee, a rape victim, a single mother, a prisoner of war, an academic is the creative aspect of memory that makes irrelevant the line between fact and fiction, making any insistent appeal to truth not only violent, but also impossible.

second fragment: singular witness

If “the force of our weakness is that impotence separates, disengages, and emancipates,”²⁴⁷ then the conflation of the otherwise dichotomous categories of the singular and universal in Derrida’s thought points not to a rejection of difference or a failure to honour opposition, but to a kind of methodological obligation to one’s “singular response to singularity.”²⁴⁸ In reading literature, this obliges remaining

²⁴³ Laub, “Bearing Witness and the Vicissitudes of Listening,” 61.

²⁴⁴ Laub, “Bearing Witness and the Vicissitudes of Listening,” 62.

²⁴⁵ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 87.

²⁴⁶ Laub, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival,” 85.

²⁴⁷ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 5.

²⁴⁸ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 15.

truthful to the “structural interdependence”²⁴⁹ between singularity and universality. It is a structural interdependence that manifests itself on every level of reading a text. The singular, here, is not the solitary, though in an important sense it stands alone. To engage the singular in a system of knowledge does not, however, mean assigning to it a fixed place in a universe of prescriptive, assimilating thought. Despite the temptation to idealize, I would like to alert the reader to the fact that singularity is not a more worthy or purer lens through which to view the world. In its nature as a linguistic idiom, it is a representation and an aide. The relationship between language (saying) and knowledge (the said) is inherently a poetic relationship. It is important to note that all competing epistemological orientations commit their responses as the product(s) of a particular, singular kind of engagement with language, meaning, and truth economizing on “a system of metaphysical oppositions.”²⁵⁰ In the moment of bearing witness, the irreducible singularity of each example is derived from the exemplarity (universality) of the law that “articulates itself as an obligation to decision.”²⁵¹

Singularity, in order that it does not become self-referential, needs to link up to that which exceeds its onto-theoretical boundaries. The poem, accommodating the singularity of language, bears witness to the possibility of justice to come. The singular is thus not an a priori state but the product of a decision. What the singularity of bearing witness as a process illuminates is a debt to a singularity of expression that, in turn, underwrites (in)security. Writing, both academic and otherwise, is inherently singular in nature, making problematic the very notion of a unified, universal community of scholars. Thus, “each speaking [*parole*] is independent”²⁵² and reveals a limit to the essence of being beyond which being in the

²⁴⁹ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 15.

²⁵⁰ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 17.

²⁵¹ Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 302.

²⁵² Derrida, *On the Name*, 42.

world recognizes both possibility, promise and its insecure, indeterminate nature.

Derrida goes on to suggest, emphatically that

there is another death, the death that comes over language because of what language is: *repetition, lethargy, mechanization*, and so forth. The poetic act therefore constitutes a sort of resurrection: the poet is someone permanently engaged with a dying language that he resuscitates, not by giving back to it a triumphant line, but by sometimes bringing it back, like a revenant or phantom.²⁵³

What Derrida unveils as the resuscitating function of poetry becomes problematic with respect to the poet's ability to engage the historicity of events. Language, a vehicle for the recovery of memory and the communication of fact, is likewise unable to fully address or contain events outside of their own performative interpretations.

third fragment: daily accounts

“an event, if I understand right ... would have the form of a seal, as if, witness without witness, it were committed to keeping a secret, the event sealed with an indecipherable signature.”²⁵⁴

So far in my engagement with Derrida, I have discussed his view of poetry's relationship to bearing witness in light of the former's ability to accommodate language's innovative, performative potential and in light of Derrida's self-referential romanticization of poetry's actual 'role' as a catalyst for political action. Poetry becomes, for Derrida, the single most irreducible idiom that cannot be possessed, owned or disowned either by language, by country or a people. It is in this sense that bearing witness can open up the possibility for interpreting and engaging difference as multiplicity without, at the same time, appropriating or reducing it to a manageable, knowable, determinable or, for that matter, poetic system. If we agree that there is no natural status to language before it is engaged by a subject, then bearing witness becomes implicated in repetitive decision-making that, engaged within strict theoretic boundaries, threatens to grow into idealized abstraction.

²⁵³ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 106.

²⁵⁴ Derrida, *On the Name*, 60.

Poetic language, in order to avoid such a fall, must project the beginning of thought alongside a beginning of action – something that Derrida does not explicitly address.

This suggests an understanding of the process of memory recovery beyond a linguistic (poetic) activity predicated on the subject's ability to think identity in terms of iterability. If what can be thought can also be reduced, then neither language nor singularity as concepts can be posited as pure. The question arises: "What is the nature of this language since already it no longer belongs, no longer belongs simply, either to the question or to the response whose limits we have just verified and are continuing to verify? Will one call this a testimony ... as with every testimony, providing that can never be reducible, precisely, to verification, to proof or to demonstration, in a word, to knowledge?"²⁵⁵

An event in language represents a coming after death, a coming in lieu of absence. It is perhaps in this sense that bearing witness can be called resuscitative. The problem with Derrida's reading of the poetic potential to revive, however, is that he does oppose life and death when no strict deconstructive project could oppose the living to the non-living. That is, he is not being sufficiently deconstructive because he is still attempting to oppose life to death in the concept of resuscitation. It is in this sense that his poetic project perhaps fails to fully address the very real-life, actual deconstructive and expository logic contained within the body of the poem. What comes after resuscitation, as we will see with the work of Paul Celan, is the actual example of the poem, breathing, living but also indebted to memories of death, to death itself. It is not because they are opposed that they evoke meaning, but because life and death are simultaneously contained, containable rather, in the poem that the latter offers a space for an address, a space that is ontologically and historically singular and not predicated either on exclusion or on dichotomies.

²⁵⁵ Derrida, *Points*, 22-3.

What I am trying to show is that there is, in the process of bearing witness, something beyond the linguistic – authentic precisely because of its daily lived singularity. What I am suggesting here is that the latter experience is overlooked by Derrida in favor of the resuscitative potential of poetry. In that sense, language (poetry) bears witness to a truth that exceeds it, to a confession that does not aspire to make known, “for one will never reconcile the value of testimony with that of knowledge or of certainty.”²⁵⁶ For practical reasons, it is important to stress, once again, that a discourse on singularity and undecidability is also a discourse on justice since it relates to a moment of making a decision, thus making the founding of law a performative process. If that were not the case, then a discourse on singularity and conversely, a discourse on bearing witness, would remain locked in a purely speculative universe. Failing to account for the productive potential of his understanding of singularity, Derrida’s reading of poetry needs to be supplemented by a discussion of the actual implications for a responsible decision-making inherent in an engagement with the insecurity, contingency and irreducibility of ‘event.’ One way of doing that is by engaging actual testimonies in an effort to examine the ‘applied’ resuscitative power of language vis-à-vis both academic and policy work.

Allow me to address summarily once again two implications of the relationship between testimony and truth as found in academic writings on the subject. This will allow me to return to Derrida and derive a few suggestions for refining the scope of his resuscitative discourse. First, James Booth endorses a view of witnessing as an imperative decision to speak. On the other hand, Veena Das, Jenny Edkins, Kelly Oliver, and Fiona Ross all caution against the unproblematic, linear transcription of memory into speech, against the “scientific assumption that the world is knowable only through words and that to have no voice is to be without

²⁵⁶ Derrida, *On the Name*, 31.

language, unable to communicate.”²⁵⁷ In addition, Michael Lambek and Paul Antze defend the thesis that “memories are never simply records of the past, but are interpretive reconstructions that bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, cultural assumptions, discursive formations and practices, and social contexts of recall and commemoration.”²⁵⁸ A discussion of bearing witness as a linguistic idiom can only be made alongside an account of the political and ethical implications producing, securing but also problematizing the relationship between bearing witness, truth and the ways in which we comport ourselves in the world. My next chapter engages the poetic oeuvre of Paul Celan in an attempt to see whether Derrida’s characterization of poetry does indeed provide an opportunity for a discussion of political action.

Second, because there is an aporetic relationship between singularity and universality, bearing witness as a singular activity presupposes a generality of tools which allow the singular to be spoken, addressed and engaged. Justice addressed to singularity reveals the fact that there is no singular, private theory of justice that is not derived from justice in general. While this might suggest a possible disdain for the plethora of everyday, local decisions that underwrite the interactions of self with other, I would like to suggest that the “‘ordinary’ is always exceptional, however little we understand its character as origin.”²⁵⁹ Nancy understands ‘origin’ as that which “does not signify that from which the world comes, but rather the coming of each presence of the world, each time singular.”²⁶⁰ In that sense, a discussion of bearing witness, as a performative (coming of presence) enunciation of ‘event,’ must address a kind of unity made up of a multiplicity of events. Bearing witness, in addition to forging a theoretical exploration into the nature of Being, addresses the singularity of

²⁵⁷ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 50.

²⁵⁸ Lambek and Antze, *Tense Past*, vii.

²⁵⁹ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 10.

²⁶⁰ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 15.

events via an ethico-political question(s) of living in the world. Poetry does not, then, recover or resuscitate language from its dying bed, if such a bed were conceivable, nor does the poet have the role of a prophet, a messiah, or as someone who “has an intimate, bodily experience of this spectral errancy, whoever surrenders to this truth of language ... whether he writes poetry or not.”²⁶¹ What, then, is this ‘truth of language’ referring to?

Does a relationship between bearing witness and poetry make language visible as non-predicative, that is, as defined by and defining nothing else but itself? Not exactly. Both speaking and writing represent (universalize), despite the fact that they are wished and theorized away from such a formulation. In theory, ‘event’ is a singular occurrence in time and language in that ‘event’ is not recoverable with the kind of precision that can communicate or contain within itself the essence of this singularity. As already suggested, bearing witness as a singular engagement with ‘event’ is not an end; it (sur)passes language in the moment of its occurrence. This means that bearing witness uproots itself from the language of ‘event’ in order to address the nature of events. The latter is both the product of a decision informed by the desire for truth and an unveiling that “belongs, without fulfilling, to the space of the philosophical or onto-theological promise that it seems to break.”²⁶² This desire for truth is supplemented by a desire to transgress the literality of meaning. This is its *aporia*.

Thus, the aporetic character of every and any instance of bearing witness: always after the fact, always other than “the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” always a possible recruit for a discourse on the limit. The poetic (as an orientation within language), Derrida’s preferred testimonial idiom, is a product of the

²⁶¹ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 105.

²⁶² Derrida, *On the Name*, 69.

relationship between enunciation on the one hand and the excess of 'event' that defies enunciation on the other. If testimony bears witness to the historicity of 'event' and if poetry bears witness to the novelty of language, then the relationship between the two always remains a mutually constitutive one. Despite "the idiomatic, the irreducibly singular, as a necessary aspect of any act of writing,"²⁶³ one need problematize singularity's autonomy in an attempt to avoid falling into cultural, historical, socio-political or theoretical boundaries. Derrida's poetic, I argue, is one such boundary.

conclusion: on authenticity

In an effort to conclude without getting stuck in bounded spaces myself, I wish to engage shortly Geoffrey Hartman's metaphor of "authenticity." I would like to suggest that bearing witness, much like authenticity itself, is subject to certain criteria that place both in a relationship to truth that is directly implicated upon an evolving public consciousness. Authenticity, especially when related to bearing witness, appeals to a similar resuscitative, true-to-language role that Derrida reserves for poetry. The poetic, in order to remain faithful to the memory of 'event,' must be understood beyond a private language. Actual testimonies do not affect change or raise public awareness simply because of their dynamic, non-apathetic and/or performative nature. Trauma narratives, for their part, are allowed an emotive quality for their appeal to an understanding of subjectivity predicated on resistance, resilience and survival. These should only be the starting points for a serious engagement with memories of war, violence and suffering as intricately more complex and polymorphous than any single discourse/idiom might disclose them to be. What I am suggesting here is that trauma narratives are as fictional and highly-emotive as they are an appeal to particular kinds of truth and justice. The reason we do not weigh recent testimonials against the archive of knowledge we already possess

²⁶³ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 14.

is because we recognize that every instance of witnessing testifies to a singular experience that is absolutely irreducible to another system but the one set up by itself.

So far in this chapter I have examined the issue of bearing witness against the thought of Jacques Derrida. Bearing witness was first introduced as ethico-political in addition to being a juridico-political activity. The questions of *aporia*, singularity and the poetic were engaged in light of the question of bearing witness addressed as a singular and performative recollection of 'event.' I suggested that Derrida's argument in favor of poetry's resuscitative function vis-à-vis language was an idealized, romanticized and politically limiting deduction. I also suggested that Derrida seems to privilege the poetic as a preferred idiom of language, while somehow overlooking the equally important function of witnessing in recovering public consciousness and political potential. What is more, Derrida's opposition of life to death was challenged for its insufficiently deconstructive nature. I suggested that, in addition to recovering the singularity of 'event,' bearing witness must also inform and enable an engagement with bodies, "their states, their movements, their transformations."²⁶⁴

Next, I will offer an engagement with the work of Paul Celan in an effort to show that the value of individual testimonies is not only comparable to a CPR manoeuvre, but to a certain relationship to historical time informed by a novel engagement with language. It is this relationship to novelty that offers singular tools for coping with (traumatic) memory. I hope to show that poetry, unlike any other scientifically-endorsed idiom, goes a long way in offering an alternative way of articulation, sensitive at once to the fragile nature of memory and to the fragmentary nature of inscription. However, what the poetic does is not so much resuscitate as create for memory a niche in which the work of recovery begins and ends with language. While this is useful for a linguistic and/or theoretic discussion of

²⁶⁴ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 18.

testimony, it hardly measures up alongside Derrida's resuscitative prescription against instances of non-linguistic, life-informed modes of witnessing. Recognizing, with Geoffrey Hartman, that survivor narratives are both informative and performative, that they are often silenced for fear of retaliation, shame, or the advent of new and different traumatic memories poetry, an alternative way of bearing witness within political science, does offer new ways for the transmission of truth and for enabling healing to happen.²⁶⁵ Likewise, James Booth has argued that remembering recovers a lost connection to the past, grounding us in our relationship to family, friends, and community. What he does not problematize, however, is the potentially fractured, painful nature of linearly-evoked narratives that end up endorsing and perpetuating a sense of loss. What Booth idealizes with regard to language's potential to keep the past "among the unlost,"²⁶⁶ Derrida does with poetry. I will argue that the latter is not immune to falling into the trap of an idealized exemplary. I will also examine academia's accusation that poetry does not raise public awareness as other idioms of witness and politics do. My starting point is a hypothesis that poetry problematizes direct access to painful memories designed to define authenticity and truth by exposing scientific language for being just as private, violent and preferential as it claims to be universal, redeeming and neutral.

²⁶⁵ Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 95.

²⁶⁶ Booth, *Communities of Memory*, 82.

Chapter 3:

"All is less than / it is, / all is more."²⁶⁷ Paul Celan's singular witness.

The poem has always hoped ... to speak also ... *on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an altogether other. (Paul Celan)

Came, came.
Came a word, came,
came through the night,
wanted to shine, wanted to shine.²⁶⁸

This chapter will bear witness to a poet. The poet's name is Paul Celan.

My argument will unfold in a threefold procession. First, I will introduce Paul Celan and explain why I have chosen to read him alongside the work of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida. I hope this will answer potential questions pertaining to my intentions and/or partiality. Second, I will continue my discussion of the process of bearing witness by providing parallel accounts of Giorgio Agamben's juridico-political and Celan's poetic witness. This will allow me to re-introduce Veena Das' concept of a "descent into the ordinary" and weigh its everyday implications with the nature of poetic witness Celan gives. Bearing witness in cases of trauma and violence will be discussed in light of the traditional understanding and implications that "limit experiences" have had both for the process of bearing witness and, more specifically, for the discipline of political science itself. An insistence on truth and facticity, generally associated with scientific and academic pursuits, will be juxtaposed to the implications that the process of bearing witness, defined as a singular, performative and dynamic engagement with a past event, has for the nature of knowledge as the dissemination, testing and confirmation of information. Last but not least, I will return to Jacques Derrida in an attempt to clarify the implications his theoretic engagement with Celan's poetry has for an understanding of the process of

²⁶⁷ Paul Celan. "Cello-entry." In *Selections* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 201.

²⁶⁸ Paul Celan. *Poems of Paul Celan* (New York: Persea Books, 2002), 219.

bearing witness. Because Derrida has been especially vocal on the role of language for the creation of meaning, on the aporetic nature of all enunciation, and on singularity, I hope that by relating bearing witness as a process of remembrance, I will be able to examine the potential that poetic language has for engaging the singularity of an event. This is important in light of the fact that an academic category of “poetry of witness” has emerged challenging the enunciation of the Holocaust and similar events from the standpoint of an academically-informed, morally-invested and sympathetic bystander.

first fragment - why Celan?

“... at times when only the void stood between us we got / all the way to each other.” (Celan)

Asked why he wanted to climb Everest, George Mallory responded: “Because it’s there. This is the only irrefutable reason for climbing Everest that I know of... but it didn't work with Mom.” To the accusation that Paul Celan lends himself to appropriation by post-modern theory and thus does lip-service to Derrida&co-esque projects, my responses are two. First, any claim to fame earned someone by the favor of his critics is, on the one hand, commendable and on the other, often informed by less than noble intentions and not to be taken at face value. Further critique based on allegations of uselessness and madness should refer to the insight in George Mallory’s quote and remember that usefulness and practicality are not the main tools of artists. Beauty, joy and communion are. “It is very common today to complain of the ‘obscurity’ of poetry. ... This obscurity, if it is not congenital, has been bestowed on poetry by strangeness and distance (perhaps of its own making) and for the sake of an encounter.”²⁶⁹ Paul Celan is perhaps even more intriguing because he has been the focus of so much both positive and critical debate. The challenge for any future interpretation would be to ask why has that been and continues to be the case?

²⁶⁹ Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*. (London: Carcanet, 1999), 46.

Second, it is precisely because Celan is an over-analyzed and highly lauded poet that any further engagement with his oeuvre must commit itself either to the goal of critical novelty or to the rather more challenging end of a close reading of his work. Celan's relationship to the question of bearing witness has been taken for granted because of his status as a concentration camp survivor, because he wrote while many others did not, and because he was very familiar with the philosophical debates at the time. His work has inspired painters, literary critics, philosophers, composers other poets and writers and has been appropriated to speak on behalf of the survivor, the victim, the father, the husband, the friend, the Jew, the writer in German, the translator, the poet. Because of his eclectic and often difficult style, he has been implied, both during his lifetime and posthumously, in heated discussions spanning from the nature of being, to the evolution and usurpation of literary form, to the limits of language, to the difficult task of the translator, to the transformation of the German language after World War II, to his 1970 suicide and its bearing on his message, to his relationship to Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Hölderlin and Walter Benjamin, to accusations of plagiarism. Working with Celan's poems has been, in the words of Edmond Jabès, like moving "at the edge of two languages at the same time – that of renouncement and that of hope. A language of poverty, a language of riches. On one side, clarity; on the other, obscurity. But how to distinguish between them when they are blended to such a degree?"²⁷⁰

Because this is not strictly a literary study and because I am writing within a political science department, I will not limit my discussion to an engagement with a few select poems in an attempt to sing praise to the ways in which Celan's often fractured and formally non-traditional language does a better or worse job of addressing the specific question of bearing witness. I will anchor Celan by engaging him alongside the writings of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida on bearing

²⁷⁰ In Celan, *Selections*, 219.

witness. The latter has thus far been defined as a singular, dynamic, performative process of (re)calling 'event.' The purpose of this recollection is not strictly limited to the recovery of facts in service of Truth for no event is ever simply representable either through the medium of data or through narration. An exemplary or an ordinary witness, I would like to suggest that Celan bears witness in a way that is unique to and derived from his particular, singular modality of engaging the historic period he lived in. Bearing in mind that the Holocaust has not produced, for the most part, novel literary styles and forms, what Celan does is offer a way of conceiving and representing the relationship between loss and hope, suffering and redemption, silence and witness, in poetry. His work brings forth a resistance to vocalization and oral expression and a certain "materiality of writing, which cannot be translated into the spoken language of voice without an unaccountable remainder."²⁷¹

'poetry of witness' and the quest for truth

A few general introductory remarks might help situate my discussion of Celan vis-à-vis the particular question of witnessing. If we theorize that all experience is singular in that it cannot be reproduced, relayed or played back completely faithfully, and if language needs to be recovered and mobilized in order for communication to occur, then there must be a linguistic medium through which singular experiences can be transmitted. In an important sense language is necessarily also generalizable or it would never be possible. Bearing witness to a past event, then, turns into a process of materialization, reconstruction, and representation. As such, it is an approximation of an event that is transmitted through the generalizable tools of language. Thus, while bearing witness itself is singular (exemplary of itself, taking place over and over again), the linguistic devices used to address it partake of a universal framework of reference.

²⁷¹ Aris Fioretos, *Word Traces. Readings of Paul Celan*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 296.

At the same time, the interpretative outcomes of bearing witness are singular in that every time witnessing occurs, it yields a novel and original interpretation despite the fact that each repetition might be related to and derived from one and the same event. William Allen, reading Heidegger, Blanchot and Hölderlin, has commented on this paradox thus: “On one side a poem is pre-eminently the trace of a singular encounter; its existence rests in this singularity, the utterly unique and irreducible moment of which it is the record. However, a poem is inhibited from becoming this singular work only by way of its endless repetition.”²⁷² Thus we can have a whole library of Holocaust accounts without any one of them being entirely comparable to any other, without the knowledge imparted as a whole coming close to the actual experience of having been in a concentration camp. What all this suggests is that in order for bearing witness to occur, it must be operationalized by universal linguistic tools that nonetheless serve a singular end. Is this possible? Can a general and schematic toolbox address testimony’s irreducible singularity? Moreover, how is this paradox to be demonstrated without resolving it in favor of either singularity or universality?

These puzzles will be addressed in a discussion of the ways in which poetry bears witness to the performative dimension in all language, ordinary language included. The latter will lead to a consideration of the fact that no single linguistic (re)presentation occupies a privileged space with regard to the mediation between language, history and truth. In that sense, an experience of a concentration camp survivor, while it helps reconstruct a particular kind of concentration camp, cannot teach about concentration camps as such. Similarly, being a refugee in Afghanistan is not the same as being a refugee in Nepal, nor does it inform of the nature of “refugeeness” proper. Those states of being are not like Plato’s ideal Forms, theoretically

²⁷² William Allen. *Ellipsis. Of Poetry and the Experience of Language after Heidegger, Hölderlin, and Blanchot*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 51.

accessible only ever as an approximation of the (real) world. On the contrary, every event is its own ideal form. Bearing witness happens not with reference to an impossible idea, but with reference to the nature of 'event' as a singular, authentic happening. The fact that no event can be recreated in its fullness does not make bearing witness futile, but allows the process of witnessing alongside the event in question. Thus, event and interpretation are equally independent and contextually original. What an experience of being a concentration camp survivor teaches is something about the ability of the human being to overcome adversity and rise above inflicted loss of dignity and faith, something about the ability to remain human.

In that sense, Paul Celan also relates his experience as a concentration camp survivor. The poetic nature of his testimony is at the core of his unspoken promise that he is telling his story as faithfully and truthfully as possible. Derrida elaborates on the nature of this performativity thus: "The witness marks or declares that something is or has been present to him, which is not so for the addressees to whom the witness is joined by a contract, an oath, a promise, by a pledge of sworn faith whose performativity is constitutive of the witnessing and makes it a pledge [*gage*], an engagement."²⁷³ Celan's poetic oeuvre is in no way more true because lived through as the dehumanization bred in the camps. To compare different accounts to Celan's own on the basis of their truthfulness would be to reduce the process of bearing witness to an activity of fact-recording and evidence collection. His style - 'stuttering,' 'fragmentary,' 'self-evolving,' 'philosophical,' and 'abstract' - "may be understood as the wish to restore order by reducing to the most simple lines and shapes a world that seems to lack an inner principle and coherence."²⁷⁴ The experience of being branded is communicated with a reference to the fragmentariness of a whole: fingers stand for an arm, a letter represents the alphabet.

²⁷³ Jacques Derrida, "A Self-Unsealing' Poetic Text," 190.

²⁷⁴ Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song. Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 234.

ETERNITIES, died
over and above you,
a letter touches
your still un-
wounded fingers,
the shining forehead
vaults hither
and beds itself in
odors, noises.²⁷⁵

This parceling and picking apart signals both to an inability to speak of the whole and to a request for the reader to find the whole contained in each of its parts. Celan's repeated allusions to body parts, milk, ashes, boots, heart, and darkness evoke also pictures of bodies, innocence, death, violence, love and daylight. Celan's seemingly paradoxical and contradictory ways of seeing the world are expressed in his poetry with acute sensitivity to the cyclical, experimental potential of writing itself.

THE TRACE OF A BITE in the nowhere.

It too
you have to fight,
from here on out.²⁷⁶

Despite the "thousand darknesses of murderous speech,"²⁷⁷ there is hope, even among the most entangled and desolate of poetic landscapes. As Pierre Joris has pointed out, Celan's poetry is a commentary not only on his life but on humanity's "shared reality" bearing witness to "the starkness and the darkness of the place we live in."²⁷⁸ The hope that Celan describes is ours as well. It is real.

'the real' world and the event of writing

Celan himself insisted that his "poetry was directly linked to the real, and arose from, the real."²⁷⁹ Thus, his style cannot be dismissed as eccentric or sur-real, but needs to be understood as a commentary on the kind of world that would call for

²⁷⁵ Paul Celan. *Threadsuns*. (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2005a), 97, emphasis added.

²⁷⁶ Celan, *Threadsuns*, 45.

²⁷⁷ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 34.

²⁷⁸ Joris in Celan, *Threadsuns*, 17.

²⁷⁹ Joris in Celan, *Threadsuns*, 17.

a fragmentary, dis-jointed style. The two are not dissociated and for Celan, the post World War II world demanded an accurate linguistic presentation. It is for his bold strokes and his heightened sensitivity to the daily work of irreparable memories that Celan's oeuvre remains incomparable. "For even if incomparability may elude conceptualization – and what is a concept if it does not erase, in the name of generality, the singularity of that which cannot be compared? – it still remains possible to address it critically."²⁸⁰ While clarity, comprehensibility, and accessible language are necessary when attempting to communicate with an audience, Paul Celan's 'abstract' language in fact develops the concept of 'truth' further by exposing it to the limits of language. Ulrich Baer has suggested that Celan's poetry should be read as "a poetry of exposition" for all the ways in which it exposes us to an openness that demands a response as well as for the ways in which it exposes "itself also to the possibility that it may cease being poetry; become external, or other, to poetry; stop making sense; and no longer be either poetry or exposition at all."²⁸¹ Celan achieves this exposition by writing the 'unreadability of this world' using poetry's affinity for aporetic performance.

UNREADABILITY of this
world. All doubles.

The strong clocks
back the fissure-hour,
hoarsely.

You, wedged into your deepest,
climb out of yourself
for ever.²⁸²

The poet as witness evokes a world defined by "the devastating aporia constituted by World War II, its concentration camps and nuclear wasteland"²⁸³ leading to "the

²⁸⁰ Fioretos, *Word Traces*, x.

²⁸¹ Baer, *Remnants of Song*, 162.

²⁸² Celan, *Threadsunns*, 131.

²⁸³ Joris in Celan, *Threadsunns*, 16.

shape of our certainties”²⁸⁴ to be altered radically, to a state where “our, man-and-woman’s, finitude is our measure – and ... hangs by a thread.”²⁸⁵ Suns are threaded.

In addition to being singular, Celan’s poetry constitutes an ongoing discourse. Celan has been appropriated by a number of disciplines and because his work, if read with care, touches upon painful personal experiences, it could be interpreted as apocalyptic, gloomy, the product of a mentally-ill, heavily-medicated man’s ravings. The circumstances under which Celan wrote a number of his later poems were, it is true, informed to a great degree by his self-imposed psychiatric commitment. Note his sarcastic, biting and extremely lucid description of the universe of extermination: the ways in which it echoes a self-implication and refers to his present condition are everything but the work of a madman.

The completely glassed in
spider-altars in the all-
overtowering low building,

the immediate sounds
(even yet?)
the shadowplayers

the anxieties, iceture,
flightclear

...
the uninscribed wall
of a standing-cell:

here

live yourself
straightthrough, without clock.²⁸⁶

A poetics of witness, when defined according to its truth-content, threatens to morally identify with victims of mass destruction or with our own idealization of the poetic art itself. There is a tendency to grant favorable reviews to ‘true’ accounts of

²⁸⁴ Joris in Celan, *Threadsuns*, 18.

²⁸⁵ Joris in Celan, *Threadsuns*, 18.

²⁸⁶ Celan, *Threadsuns*, 118-9.

the Holocaust as opposed to their 'fictional' counterparts. What is more, the nature of academic writing on bearing witness, often informed by sensational, extreme suffering, seems also to want to justify efforts that are frequently as morally ambiguous and ethically compromised as they are redeeming. The case of Paul Celan intersects this emphasis on over-determined truths by actively engaging what are seen as the empty spaces of painful memories through a framework of singular, necessarily singular linguistic performativity. It is important to note here that Celan's work cautions against the unproblematic charging of remembrance with healing, as the former exemplifies a 'breach in language' where "every word risks glossing over the fact that language has been robbed of its power to lend coherence to an individual's experience."²⁸⁷

second fragment - from witness to poet to witness to ...

I would like to continue my discussion of bearing witness by suggesting that however indeterminate and abstract some poetry may be, what it does better than other linguistic forms is free itself from the functional demands of ends in actually approximating itself to greatest degree of singularity allowed language, a singularity "not defined merely in antagonistic opposition to others."²⁸⁸ Whether Celan has anything interesting to say or not is not an altogether irrelevant question for, in addition to being informative, bearing witness relates the past in ways that surpass the mere dissemination of information. Celan "moves through" silence by trying the limits of language against the latter's need and obligation to be comprehensible and objectively clear. "You be like you, always"²⁸⁹ is the advice he gives both his readers and language: be singular and faithful to yourself. If we heed Aris Fioretos'

²⁸⁷ Baer, *Remnants of Song*, 183.

²⁸⁸ Baer, *Remnants of Song*, 186.

²⁸⁹ Celan, *Threadsun*, 127.

proposition that “designation seems only another name for disposal,”²⁹⁰ then the goal of inquiry can be re-defined as a reaching out, moving to open spaces of exploration, being on the way even through loss.

What are we left with here – a poet, ‘event,’ the memory of both? Celan’s unique style breaks down the traditional conventions and prescriptions of romantic poetry by challenging both the position of poetry within the canon of literature and by offering the poem as a tightly-woven, almost incommunicable, self-transformative and summary-defiant unit. Yet, Celan testifies to the “loss within language by relying on this language to express it.”²⁹¹

“Out of shattered
madness
I raise myself
and watch my hand
as it draws the one
single
circle.”²⁹²

This circle, this joining together of coordinates, this something “earthly, terrestrial, in the shape of a circle which, via both poles, rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics” is Celan’s own metaphor for encounter: his “meridian.”²⁹³ However, Celan is not content with the traditional interpretations the metaphor of the circle yields for an understanding of being. In his poem ‘Threadsun,’ he revokes and discloses the now compromised recuperative wholeness of the circle in order to disclose the world’s broken relationship to its life-source – the sun’s light.

THREADSUNS
above the grayblack wastes.
A tree-
high thought
grasps the light-tone: there are
still songs to sing beyond
mankind.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁰ Fioretos, *Word Traces*, 333.

²⁹¹ Baer, *Remnants of Song*, 169.

²⁹² Celan, *Threadsun*, 143.

²⁹³ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 55.

²⁹⁴ Paul Celan, *Breathturn* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2006), 97.

Celan's thread-like suns are fragile, broken and overrun by the waste of humanity. This new situation echoes Celan's insistence on the need to re-examine, re-coin and re-invent all concepts and ideas informed by the binding, recuperative and life-giving qualities of the sun. The seed of that change, the potential to affect and think through this obligation rests, in Celan's analysis, with mankind. Here is the dually specific and universalizing quality to Celan's work: its power to resist appropriation as well as its potential to politicize and revolutionize. Celan's "holocaust" was as much the Nazi-inflicted genocide of his youth as was the fact of his troubled literary and personal life in post-war Europe. Celan never once uses the word "Holocaust" in his poetry, making hardly straightforward the relationship between his work and the Shoah. In an important sense, however, the latter lives in the urgent, dynamic, audience-driven ways in which Celan lived and re-imagined his own life in post-war Europe. "Stop reading: look! / Stop looking: go! ... / you are - / are at home."²⁹⁵ Reading must be more than reading in Celan's world, must be more than observation. The thread-like suns testify not to "something that exceeds the power of representation,"²⁹⁶ but to a strong "intimation of hope," to a heeding for action: cautionary as well as forward-looking.

In its testimonial undertones, Celan's poetry has been appropriated by many, making him widely recognized as *the* poetic example most academically-sensitive and theoretically-attuned to the question of bearing witness not because he communicated something people didn't already know, but because he pushed the limits of poetry beyond the mimetic and/or the (auto)biographical. Although Celan's work has done a lot to break down (linguistic) conventions and allowed the freedom of (poetic) expression, it has also been made to speak on behalf of ordinary language, as if poetry were somehow reducible to the latter. Celan's 'ordinary witness, however,

²⁹⁵ Celan, *Selections*, 67.

²⁹⁶ Thomas Vogler. "Poetic Witness: Writing the Real." In *Witness and Memory. The Discourse of Trauma*. Edited by Anna Douglas and Thomas Vogler, 173-206. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 97.

is measured in his ability to weave together his poems into a complete narrative thread aiming, always, at clarity and readability: at an address. “This obscurity, if it is not congenital, has been bestowed on poetry by strangeness and distance (perhaps of its own making) and for the sake of an encounter.”²⁹⁷

While Celan’s metaphoric and referential diversity lends itself to confusion, it is perhaps more importantly an example of a certain desire on his part to re-write the relations within language while still remaining within it. Celan does not specify a moral role for his poetry short of insisting that it be read and re-read in an effort to unearth its violent, stubborn and potentially liberating nature. Lacking an explicit title-denoted-meaning, Celan’s poems absorb and relate one image to another with the frenzy of a prophet.

Unexpiated,
narcoleptic,
stained by the gods:

your tongue is smutty,
your urine black,
watery-bilious your stool,

you hold forth
as I do,
lubriciously.²⁹⁸

Though the poet’s addressee is unclear, the message is there, in the form of a question: who is the bearer of this unappeased, unending guilt veiled in religious piety unable to remain awake and aware of itself long enough to repent and cleanse its body? Could Celan be talking about language itself – of how easy it leads away, of its slippery, treacherous, untrustworthy balance?

²⁹⁷ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 46.

²⁹⁸ From “Haut Mal” in Celan, *Threadsun*s, 249.

poetry at the limits of language

What is so moving and at the same time, so politically potent in Celan's work, is not only what he says in his poems, not even the weight of his oeuvre in the collective Shoah memory but rather, the force of the word that at once knows that it cannot stand for the history it has lived through and, at the same time, wants to make itself heard even at the limits of language. Celan's style addresses "the written hollows itself ... / in the liquefied names,"²⁹⁹ how "the language of man will never provide any sustenance other than a meaning that runs the risk of always being further dispersed, an erring without semantic stability."³⁰⁰ This dispersal, this erring is not antithetical to a reaching out and its instability suggests the insecure, unstable nature of truth itself. Celan's reaching out to meet the other translates into a readiness to confront and be confronted by the loss associated with the Holocaust: "Silence, old hag, ride me through the rapids. / Lids' fires, light up the way."³⁰¹

COME, make the world mean with yourself
come, let me fill you up with
all that's mine.

One with you I am,
to capture us,

even now.³⁰²

"Even now," after the Holocaust. "Even now," faced with a language that will always remain "inadequate to the full horror of the event."³⁰³ The single poem, despite language's "lubricious" nature, answers the call for originality and imagination, "and reproduces itself / through budding"³⁰⁴ because "the time of this movement is the time of hope and thought."³⁰⁵ For Celan, poetry's power to save did not lie in the composition of beautiful verse. Poetry's saving power is in becoming a site of

²⁹⁹ Celan, *Selections*, 105.

³⁰⁰ Fioretos, *Word Traces*, xvi.

³⁰¹ Celan, *Threadsun*s, 155.

³⁰² Celan, *Selections*, 140.

³⁰³ Vogler, "Poetic Witness: Writing the Real," 183.

³⁰⁴ Celan, *Threadsun*s, 135.

³⁰⁵ Christopher Fynsk, "The Realities at Stake in a Poem" In *Word Traces. Readings of Paul Celan*, edited by Aris Fioretos, 159-184. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 170.

resistance, despite Lawrence Langer's insistence that the poem "does not 'resist' genocide; it is born of it."³⁰⁶ Thomas Vogler calls Langer out on his "narrow and superficial reading of the poem" that, "instead of inspiring resistance or anger or revenge in the reader, its function is to 'immortalize anguish' and 'to mourn verbally' what must be accepted as 'an irretrievable loss.'³⁰⁷ Because of poetry's potential to bear witness, offer resistance and address, it testifies to all language's performative dimension. It is in this sense that Paul Celan supplements our reading of Giorgio Agamben by disclosing the relationship between language and exceptionality for being an inherently poetic one.

the poet and the law-giver or, 'How do you bear witness to 'mute'?

Giorgio Agamben's intimation into the juridical nature of witnessing opened this thesis. His engagement with the 'exception' and 'bare life' as the products of the relationship between law, sovereign power, and human life informs, in addition, the addressability of 'event,' something which underwrites the entirety of Celan's oeuvre. In my engagement with Agamben, I suggested that a juridico-political engagement with bearing witness was insufficient for a discussion of witnessing if only because of its self-referential theoretical framework. Rather than pose the political "exception" as a category of identification, as more than a state one endures, Agamben poses the former not only as a logical derivative of suspended law, but also as the catalyst for the production of *homo sacer*. I am interested in weighing that figure against Celan's own shattered shadows. As we have already seen, Agamben maintains that "In the system of the Nation-State, what are sacred and alienable rights are conceived of as such only when they relate to the figure of the citizen, *stated* individual. The rights of *naked life* are not endorsed by the state."³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ Vogler, "Poetic Witness: Writing the Real," 195

³⁰⁷ Quoted in Vogler, "Poetic Witness: Writing the Real," 195

³⁰⁸ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 20.

The “rights of *naked* life” are discussed only so far as they are guaranteed or denied by a sovereign. Not only does Agamben fail to address the potential of language to recover subjectivity, but he discriminates in assigning the status of true Holocaust witness to the dead, Primo Levi’s “drowned,” the *Muselmänner*. I will argue that the category of *homo sacer* finds its strongest expression not in a negatively informed relationship to “exceptionality,” but in poetic performativity accompanied by a silent promise guaranteeing the truthfulness of witnessing.

Recall that in Chapter One Agamben’s writing on the ‘exception,’ *homo sacer*, and law was juxtaposed to Veena Das’ concept of “a descent into the ordinary.” Her proposition that the unsayable, paired with memories of violence and trauma, reaches the point of engagement when approached through everyday, ordinary acts of witness will here serve as a link between Agamben and Celan. Veena Das cautions against the automatic translation of an event into methodological and theoretical frameworks informing and derived from other events. “I would submit that the model of trauma and witnessing that has been bequeathed to us from Holocaust studies cannot be simply transported to other contexts in which violence is embedded into different patterns of sociality.”³⁰⁹ What Das brings to light is the non-causal, a-temporal and non-generalizable nature of testimonies borne out of violence and trauma, derived from the single instant of which they speak and not for the purposes of scientifically-significant ends. These testimonies question any universal references drawn from them as well as any sweeping theorization based on the schematic, truth-establishing endorsement of an idealized silence.

Paul Celan’s poetry bears witness to a different register of exceptionality: the linguistic. Every one of Celan’s poems addresses the relationship between a norm (peace, linguistic coherence, life) and an exception (the camps, broken language,

³⁰⁹ Das, *Life and Words*, 103.

death). However, the exception(s) he addresses are not Agamben's passive, normalized states of being imposed upon the human being from a sovereign, a higher force, an order, or a Master. He addresses the relationship between language and witnessing – the need for new, not exceptional or extraordinary, idioms.

THE WRITTEN hollows itself, the
spoken, seagreen,
burns in the bays,

in the
liquefied names
the dolphins dart,

in the eternalized Nowhere, here,
in the memory of the over-
loud bells in—where only?³¹⁰

“Celan tells us where we have to stop and knock – or beg – for entry: in front of the word.”³¹¹ Celan's work is a constant bearing witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust, to his fate as a survivor in a 'serial' narrative whose anthologized fashion runs through his poetry as a cycle. Within these cycles, the weight of the poem's meaning “hollows itself” and is carried by singular words, derived, altered and re-invented from a German of the Nazis. The “liquefied names” of the dead are not Agamben's *Muselmänner*. The memory of these names, their loss, is evoked in the image of dolphins darting – now here, now gone – unpredictably. As George Steiner, among others, has observed, “Such words must be quarried from far and stony places. . . . Their authority is, in the true sense, radical, of the root (etymological). Or it springs from fusion, from the poet's right and need to weld neologisms.”³¹²

HALF-GNAWED, mask-
miened corbel stone,
deep
in the eyeslit-crypt:

Inward, upward
into skull's inside,

³¹⁰ Celan, *Breathturn*, 197.

³¹¹ Joris Introduction in Celan, *Breathturn*, 17.

³¹² Joris Introduction to Celan, *Breathturn*, 18.

where you break up heaven, again and again,
into furrow and convolution
he plants his image,
which outgrows and outgrows itself.³¹³

The addressee of the poem is introduced as a 'half-gnawed mask-miened corbel stone,' – hidden, buried in a crypt. The image is planted in a trench, into a narrowing of the road, underground where it 'outgrows and outgrows itself' into a series of complicated turns, a maze – suggesting difficulty in finding one's way or exiting. The meaning of the word 'furrow' also suggests a piece of plowed land, a field where crops grow, where food and life are nurtured. The mask is not even a mask, for it only appears as such – suggesting an unknown identity, a stranger, something hidden, a secret, a lie. Celan's reliance on single words, on their aporetic charge, on a series of verbs and adverbs pointing to active states of being results in a heightened accuracy of expression – succinct, measured, and sober.

Viewed in this way, Celan's language is not a language of closure, of definitional certainty, of accuracy of fact. Rather than defined as an exception or as something extraordinary, Celan's work offers a step forward, a *Breathturn* symbolic of the intention of all of his later work. On the other hand, we have Giorgio Agamben's juridico-political discussion of witness as predicated upon the kind of state of exception where human life is represented, encompassed and seduced by a force of law in suspension, by a no-step. While modernity is ripe with instances of violated human rights and forced statelessness as examples of juridical exceptions, the latter represent a passive 'exception' that, once imposed upon a people, is normalized. As we have already seen, Agamben's theoretic addressing of the restitution of human dignity and the exposing of injustice, though commendable, does not move beyond examining the particular examples of human life under exception or towards ways to overcome the exception. By way of responding to this

³¹³ Celan, *Breathturn*, 177.

impasse, I offer an excerpt from Celan's 'Meridian' speech where he addresses the nature of poetry as a setting free of an encounter.

The poem holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an 'already-no-more' into a 'still-there.' This 'still-there' can only mean speaking. Not language as such, but responding and – not just verbally – 'corresponding' to something. In other words: language actualized, set free under the sign of a radical individuation which, however, remains as aware of the limits drawn by language as of the possibilities it opens. ... This shows the poem yet more clearly as one person's language becomes shape and, essentially, a presence in the present. The poem is lonely. It is lonely and *en route*. Its author stays with it.³¹⁴

The passage reveals a dynamic, meditative side of Celan's thought – alongside the definitive, affirmative statements one can also extract a hesitation, a tentativeness, a groping forward if you wish, in an effort to make clear the poem's intention – heading "straight for the 'otherness' which it considers it can reach and be free, which is perhaps vacant and at the same time ... let us say, turned toward it, toward the poem."³¹⁵ Celan's insistence on poetry's intention marks his work's dynamics.

the work of poetry

Recall that with regard to the question of bearing witness, too, Agamben wants to make sure that the authenticity of the Muselmann as "the true" witness is upheld and recognized. However, he fails to give account of the fact that despite states of exception, despite exclusion and oppression lived by human beings, despite the suspension of law and order characteristic of modern politics, the human him/herself engages the historical performance of exceptionality. Language, in that sense, "reclaims the horizon of experience ... which language seemed no longer able to offer."³¹⁶ The insight of Agamben's analysis is undermined by a sensationalization of the exception when indeed, I argue that there is no exception as such – only the specific instances of people engaging and living versions of it. As already alluded to, Agamben falls into the trap of the exceptional as a general category of identification.

³¹⁴ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 49.

³¹⁵ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 48.

³¹⁶ Baer, *Remnants of Song*, 182.

By that I mean two things: first, Agamben derives his categories from the Holocaust, an event made into an exceptional site of witnessing, suffering and injustice; second, he falls into the trap of simulating “sacred life” at the expense of the efforts of living human beings who, marked by trauma and violence, face the task of rebuilding and making sense of their lives. In their everyday confrontation with life, the ordinary becomes extraordinary and then ordinary again in repeating cycles.

This questioning of the ‘extraordinary’ puts other things, such as man, language, and witnessing into question as well. That is why the problematization of the exception is not entirely separate from similar problematizations of the law, power and the sovereign. This (self)problematization is a process that underwrites all of Celan’s later writings concerned at their heart with the future of poetry, with the possibility of poetry as an art, and with the staying power of language as such.

I am talking about a poem that does not exist! The absolute poem – no, it certainly does not, cannot exist. But in every real poem, even the least ambitious, there is this ineluctable question, this exorbitant claim.³¹⁷

In that Paul Celan teaches about the limits of language to signify and speak definitively on behalf of the witness, he occupies the intersection between silence and writing, exemplary in turn of the tendency of the language of memory towards silence. “It is true, the poem, the poem today shows – and this has only indirectly to do with difficulties of vocabulary ... the poem clearly shows a strong tendency toward silence.”³¹⁸ If Celan’s language is spectrally enigmatic because it does not assign itself the role of a truth-sayer, then it is also from within this ghostliness that the singular encounter (through every poem) with ‘event’ is borne. Meaning, “the work of poetry

³¹⁷ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 51.

³¹⁸ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 48.

is to be done on the word itself,” a word that is “nothing solid diorite or opaque, but a formation with its own internal complexities and crevasses.”³¹⁹

LINE THE WORDCAVES
with panther skins,

widen them, hide-to and hide-fro,
sense-hither and sense-thither,

give them courtyards, chambers, drop doors
and wildnesses, parietal,

and listen for their second
and each time second and second
tone.³²⁰

The ‘wordcaves’ and the ‘pantherskins’ both can be associated with something prehistoric, as well as with a sense of being locked, imprisoned, made into a relic, covered with a foreign element. As suggested by Pierre Joris, the ‘wordcaves’ are empty words, words emptied of meaning. The second stanza of this poem turns the gaze to an active working through, unlike the prehistoric, static images of the first stanza. The poem is reworked, sensed hither and thither, in the heart (evoked in the third stanza). The heart’s ‘wildnesses’ is not programmatic of a lining up or of an orderly constructed world. It is ‘parietal’ in the sense in which it has the potential to be read and/or become institutionalized into a law. The last stanza of the poem, for me the most interesting one, speaks of music, a repetition, a second chance, a second reading ... of being attentive. “An ear, severed, listens. / An eye, cut in strips, / does justice to all this.”³²¹ What is the justice Celan refers to? Is he addressing himself, the need to pay attention, listen to language’s nuances, to the witness? Or is his justice one borne out of the ability of the eye to see many-ways, of the ability of the deafened ear to hear, still?

³¹⁹ Joris Introduction in Celan, *Breathturn*, 28.

³²⁰ Celan, *Threadsun*s, 207.

³²¹ Celan, *Breathturn*, 83.

William Allen has suggested a relationship between allegory and openness allowing for a relationship of language and world “as open and ungrounded,”³²² as *relation*. Celan’s ability to make his varied physical, biological, psychological, historical, religious, and linguistic analogies impart meaning is possible because he inverts their accepted meaning and transforms it into many meanings, each singular. Celan achieves this musicality, this image-concoction by being sensitive to and accommodating both the primary and the secondary and, if you wish, the tertiary meaning contained in the generation and use of language. “Single counter- / swimmer, you / count them, touch them / all.”³²³ That does not mean that poetry offers the best way of bearing witness: only that its witness, attentive to the nuances of language and to the aporetic character of all expression, remains faithful to the incalculable, inconclusive character of memory. What makes the poem appeal as unmediated testimony is not the triumph of imagination over pure intellect, but the simultaneous working of a number of different languages, “standing-for-no-one-and-for-nothing. / Unrecognized, / for you / alone. / With all that has room within it, / even without / language.”³²⁴ “Standing-for-no-one-and-nothing” – it is as if the words themselves do not mean anything on their own, cannot be isolated from their relationship to each other.

The poem, despite my own attempts, irreducible to a single interpretation, in its repeated reading, speaks with a multiplicity of voices. In this way, Celan’s work testifies to the potential of language to unfold continuously. “To exist is to be haunted by a voice (a lover, a father, God) whose source can never be recovered and from whose body we are irreparably divorced. All we are left with is the echo, the sound, which explains ‘why’ we are still and always negotiating.”³²⁵ If “poetry is a

³²² Allen, *Ellipsis*, 39.

³²³ Celan, *Breathturn*, 77.

³²⁴ Celan, *Breathturn*, 91.

³²⁵ Carl Lavery, “Audiology,” <http://www.pacitticompany.com/audiology-review.html>.

commitment of the soul,”³²⁶ then a poetic witness deals with the question of recovering this soul’s voice. Celan is a perfect example of language’s “compulsion toward truth” in holding on “to what is human.”³²⁷ Unlike Agamben, with Celan one should associate ‘remnants,’ fragments and/or traces with a process of going through, with the possibility bearing witness offers for understanding the world not by reducing it to data, but by engaging the emergent performativity of its singular nature in the body of individual poems. This performativity is not predicative, that is, directed toward something else, but refers to what lies within its own closure. “Celan’s poem is no example of hermetic poetry locked away into an ivory tower, but rather a way of writing marked by that unnameable linguistic ‘enrichment’ constituting its particular history.”³²⁸ This “unnameable linguistic ‘enrichment’” contained within the poem represents the transformative potential of language (as poiesis) and “defined equally by the limitations of language as by the possibilities of something yet to come – the promise of an ‘approachable reality.’”³²⁹

It is time that they knew!
It is time that the stone grew accustomed to blooming,
that unrest formed a heart.
It is time it was time.

It is time.³³⁰

on the no-more-extra-ordinary-witness

The performative nature of the language of poetry alerts to the fact that language does things. In the work of Agamben, ‘limit experiences’ are derived from a discussion on the exception and its relationship to *homo sacer*. He treats the latter as an incommunicable remnant, an extra-ordinary being borne out of the suspension of the law, yet the reason why the law cannot be restored. The exception is not,

³²⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), xvi.

³²⁷ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 57-8.

³²⁸ Hans Jost-Frey, “Intertextuality in Celan’s Poetry” In *Word Traces. Readings of Paul Celan* edited by Aris Fioretos, . (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 319.

³²⁹ Fioretos, *Word Traces*, xvi.

³³⁰ Celan, *Selections*, 44-5.

however, like the periodical lining up of planets or like the occasional wildfires that ravage the land – it is, as already suggested, contained in the ordinary.

Allow me to explain this a bit further. As I have already suggested, bearing witness reveals the singular example contained and derived from every extra-ordinary (event) that, brought forth through the example of each poem, reveals the transformative potential of language. In the case of Veena Das, women's 'extra-ordinary' experiences during the 1947 India/Pakistan partition are witnessed through speech. With Celan, these experiences are addressed in the example of every single poem, positing the irreducibility of the remnant, of life, to an 'extra-ordinary' event.

SINGABLE REMNANT – the outline
of him, who through
the sicklescript broke through unvoiced,
apart, at the snowplace.

...

-Disenfranchised lip, announce,
that something happens, still,
not far from you.³³¹

In other words, the poetic bears witness to the performative potential contained in all language. In the case of Agamben, the Muselmann cannot speak not because s/he is a *homo sacer*, but because s/he has been reduced to an 'extra-ordinary' witness and thus, an impossible witness. This performative potential itself will, later on in the thesis, open the doors for a discussion of the nature of social scientific language as active, polymorphous, heterogeneous, and alluding to the possibility of writing poetry and politics together without privileging one or the other.

hope and arriving

Allow me to explain why I see the nature of poetry as a transformative moving forward, a going through. What poetry as linguistic form does is use otherwise

³³¹ Celan, *Breathturn*, 113.

ordinary language in a novel way. What Celan's 'going through' represents for me is a movement back and forth between the 'ordinary' and the 'extra-ordinary,' starting with a 'limit experience' that is converted into singular poems. By using language in a novel way, Celan communicates the extra-ordinary in the single poem. Celan on love:

SOWN UNDER THE SKIN of my hands:
your name comforted
by hands:

When I knead the lump
of air, our nourishment,
it is leavened by the
letters' shimmer from
the lunatic-open
pore.³³²

Love, feeding on air, is starved, "sown under the skin" to remain invisible. It is a revelation of emptiness, of distance nourished by letters. The metaphor of bread-making here does not symbolize real food, though in the absence of real food Celan evokes the desolate landscape of his own life perhaps.

Used in novel and ordinary way, language makes the extra-ordinary intelligible without doing injustice to its singular nature, pointing to poetry's dynamic and performative tools of engaging the world.³³³ It is not surprising that Agamben associates the exception with the *Muselmänner*, for their silence allows him to reduce them to impossible witnesses. Recall my earlier discussion on the relationship between 'limit experiences' and language. I suggested that 'limit experiences' must pass through a plane of corporeality that "does not give way to anything else; it is irreducible to its signification,"³³⁴ meaning that an ethical imperative is born because at the limit of language there is 'something rather than nothing.'³³⁵ In making the extra-ordinary intelligible, Celan's work offers an insight into the relationship

³³² Celan, *Breathturn*, 143.

³³³ My gratitude goes to Darren Struble for helping me think this through all the way to its conception.

³³⁴ Gerald Bruns Introduction in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*. "Who Am I and Who Are You?" and other essays (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 6.

³³⁵ Allen, *Ellipsis*, 18.

between 'event' and the question of time. Why is that important? Because, as already discussed in Chapter Two, continental philosophy's desire for knowledge is informed by understanding, representing and writing about 'event.' In a sense, and as Celan shows, this is not a new discussion, since the nature of 'event' has already been and is continuously addressed through specific examples.

'Event' always takes place in specificity. Bearing witness must also address 'event' through specific examples. This means, moreover, that there is always more than one mode of engaging 'event,' leading to a certain excess of 'event' over events. This underlies the ontico-ontological difference between theory of 'event' on the one hand, and the history/study of events as process-driven practices on the other. As William Allen has suggested, "there is something peculiar about the language of poetry or literature that seems to exceed or undermine the attempts of philosophy to pursue an ontological inquiry, that is, to try and bring to language an understanding of the meaning or nature of being"³³⁶ as *poiesis* and *theoria* rather than as *praxis*. At the same time and in relation to the question of bearing witness, it seems that the latter necessarily has to be reduced to something (Agamben's 'exception,' Derrida's 'poetics,' Das' 'ordinary') in order for it to be possible. This reduction, in the work of Celan, takes the form of a particular relationship to language.

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening but went through it, went though it and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all.³³⁷

Celan's writing is a craft, meaning "handiwork, a matter of hands. And these hands must belong to *one* person, i.e. a unique, moral soul searching for its way with its voice and its dumbness."³³⁸ The corporeality that Celan evokes continuously in his

³³⁶ Allen, *Ellipsis*, 3

³³⁷ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 34.

³³⁸ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 25.

work is symptomatic to his understanding of the essence of language as a living, breathing, dynamic, evolving, moving thing that demands both the attentiveness and the commitment of its readers. What Celan does with the memory of 'event,' and where Agamben fails, is evoke the corporeality of language through the poem's essence as "remembrance of language."³³⁹

The singularity of Celan's oeuvre does more than bear witness to the Holocaust. In his poetry, prose and translations, he brings out the transformative power of language borne out of the experience of the limit. Moreover, he recruits and perfects the limit of intelligibility in the form of summons. "Through this shaft you have to come - / you come."³⁴⁰ Celan bears witness by moving forth toward a particular encounter, "an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath"³⁴¹ and thus, reveals the inevitable failure of poetry to bear truth-ful witness when the poetic is made to bear too much witness. In its essence as singular, this encounter poses, continuously, the question: "What/Who is to be addressed?" and answers guided by the realization that "Language is not simply the medium of something that happens, of speech or dialogue or understanding; it is the event itself."³⁴² As already suggested, language posits 'event' as a performative utterance containing the potential to deliver a promise, "I swear that I have seen, I have heard, I have touched, I have felt, I have been *present*"³⁴³ and initiate an encounter.

In an effort to examine the nature of this promise, I would like to introduce to my discussion, again, Veena Das' concept of a 'descent into the ordinary.' My reasoning for this is twofold. First, this will allow me to examine the proposed performativity of Celan's language and Veena Das' theory of ordinary witness against

³³⁹ Bruns Introduction in Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 6.

³⁴⁰ Celan, *Breathturn*, 157.

³⁴¹ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 47.

³⁴² Gerald Bruns Introduction in Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 15.

³⁴³ Derrida, "A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text," 188-9.

the concept of 'limit experiences.' Secondly, it will enable me to address the relationship between truth derived from bearing witness as experienced by Das and Celan on one hand and as experienced within the discipline of International Relations on the other. I am guided by the recognition that just as "the legal concept of witness is inextricably linked to the formally established legal process designed to determine rules of evidence and determinations of fact, so the literary discourse of witness has evolved its own procedures and rules of evidence, with critics functioning as judges who instruct the reader-jurors in the proper performance of their duties as witnesses of witnesses."³⁴⁴

the extra-ordinary: poetry in no wo(man)'s land

Writing about women's experiences during the India/Pakistan partition of 1947, Veena Das admits: "The absence of any standing language of pain is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that I cannot separate my pain from my expression for it – another way of saying this is that my expression of pain compels you in unique ways – you are not free to believe or disbelieve me – our future is at stake."³⁴⁵ Paul Celan alerts to a similar linguistic incompatibility between the experience of pain and the ability to express it in words. He speaks of just this kind of pain as standing "in the shadow / of the stigma in the air. / Standing-for-no-one-and-nothing. / Unrecognized / ... / with all that has room in it, / even without / language."³⁴⁶ The lack of recognition does not evoke anonymity as safety, but rather suggests displacement, being cast-out, struck mute. Despite this "stigma in the air" and absence of language, man still stands and by standing, bears witness to "you alone."

Testimony is posited amidst a tension that calls into question even the most benevolent reduction of language to fact. For both Das and Celan language is a living

³⁴⁴ Vogler, "Poetic Witness: Writing the Real," 184.

³⁴⁵ Das, *Life and Words*, 39.

³⁴⁶ Celan, *Selections*, 97-8.

thing “whose mode of existence is the event, a language of *Erfahrung* [going through] that lives through or undergoes the experiences of all those who speak it and hear it, and which is therefore never self-identical but always on the way.”³⁴⁷ Whereas Veena Das speaks on behalf of Indian women whose “breaking the silence” is seen as an empowerment, Celan’s whole oeuvre and especially his later poems thread the tenuous line between taking a breath and letting go. “We live under dark skies and there are few human beings. Hence, I assume, so few poems. The hopes I have left are small. I try to hold on to what remains.”³⁴⁸ The tension in Celan’s poems is borne out of the tension between the desire for an encounter and the realization that his adoptive (German) language remains wounded, carrying within itself both the weight of history and a momentum urging it on “clockwise,” toward “rivers north of the future.”³⁴⁹

Both Veena Das and Paul Celan recognize that violence and pain are not always narratable and that to render them into language, one has to contend with their tendency to construct the human in relation either to a “normal” or to a “limit” state. The “unsayable within the forms of everyday life”³⁵⁰ Das refers to is a kind of violence that defines the limits of life, such in-human violence that is not generally representable within the realm of acceptable social relations. To represent such suffering, for Das, without the proper amount of ethical sensitivity, is equal to desecrating the dignity of the human being by showing her in all her vulnerability, finality and helplessness. At least that is one way of looking at things. The other way is to approach the “unsayable” and the “uncanny” from a point of radical moral departure and speak, in spite of the “unspeakable,” not of representations but of “actual trace[s] of experienced world.”³⁵¹ For Veena Das as for Celan, the

³⁴⁷ Gerald Bruns Introduction in Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 16.

³⁴⁸ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 26.

³⁴⁹ Celan, *Breathturn*, 73.

³⁵⁰ Das, *Life and Words*, 90.

³⁵¹ Vogler, “Poetic Witness: Writing the Real,” 190.

transmission of 'extra-ordinary' accounts of violence allows, if only momentarily, for a way to move beyond the silence of (violated) words and into a realm that bears witness through the words at work, engaged by the everyday unfolding of life. For Das, the shocking and inhuman accounts of violence cannot figure into the life-mosaic without disturbing the fabric of everyday relations that is, however, never either totally protected nor totally destructible. The tension between a pain and its communicability presents an almost Derridean paradox in which, on one hand and in order for the life network to remain intact, one almost has to remove oneself from the violence lived through while, on the other hand, the silence borne out of trauma must bear witness and be respected.

This implies a paradoxical correlation between, in Das' words, "*a life and life*," that is, "*life as lived in the singular*" and the lives (and deaths) of others.³⁵² Though 'life' as a philosophical category of reference exceeds the 'being told' as ordinary lives, the latter are nonetheless important in making the telling of 'life' possible beyond abstraction and silence. This is important in making sure that the literary is not idealized as somehow providing a more 'natural' access to truth because of its affinity for metaphor, itself defined as an indirect relationship to truth, as if the opposition were between knowing on one hand (done through testing and proof), and the assessment of 'emotion' through literature on the other. Literature is not better equipped for dealing with trauma and pain nor does it embody a special affinity for empathy. What literary language, poetry more specifically, does when faced with the 'extra-ordinary' is, through each particular poem, engage the singularity of 'event.'

This does not make witnessing easier, though it does invite a relationship between experience and language. As Thomas Vogler suggests regarding Celan's style: "The 'breaking of form' is not evidence of a loss of control, but of an *exercise* of

³⁵² Das, *Life and Words*, 92.

control designed to produce particular effects.”³⁵³ Talking of the nature of his own linguistic commitments, Celan says: “As for my alleged encoding, I’d rather say: undissembled ambiguity ... I try to reproduce cuttings from the spectral analysis of things, to show them in several aspects and permeations at once ... I see my alleged abstractness and actual ambiguity as moments of realism.”³⁵⁴ What both Veena Das and Celan teach is that truth does not just come over a person like a lightning, accidentally, but is acquired through convention and learned behavior.

LAVISH MESSAGE

in a crypt, where
we flat with
our gasflags,

we stand here
in the odor
of sanctity, yep.³⁵⁵

your truth, my truth

What Celan saw as an assault on his name and oeuvre when accused of plagiarising Ivan Goll’s work is something similar to Das’ own experiences of academic and theoretic violence resulting from naming, defining, and establishing truths, categories, affinities, and facts. She argues that once you define a term as being made of certain characteristics, then it is easy, when necessary, to include or exclude as needed. This is not to suggest that once assigned to a category/theory, examples need remain there forever. It does, however, suggest that categorization contributes to the creation of networks of political, moral and military power that, even from within the law, deal meaning and construct powerful allegiances and exclusions between events, documentation, history and truth. “Being subjected to violence does not somehow purify us,”³⁵⁶ Das says, nor does it guarantee a better look

³⁵³ Vogler, “Poetic Witness: Writing the Real,” 196.

³⁵⁴ Quoted in John Felstiner, *Paul Celan. Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 232.

³⁵⁵ Celan, *Threadsun*, 195.

³⁵⁶ Das, *Life and Words*, 196.

at whatever the real nature of truth might be. Thomas Vogler recognizes that “both witness and confession are culturally agreed on systems for the production of truth”³⁵⁷ and therefore, exist within culturally defined, singular modalities of testimony. What this suggests is that Truth is a made-up compilation of many truths: singular and non-generalizable. A puzzle.

The implications this has for the academic discipline of international relations are two. The first one has to do with the relevance of poetry to the practice of politics. Though political science would like to claim that the soundness, predictability and replicability of its models are, because lodged within hard science, not the stuff of literary studies and emotion, there are important implications that follow for the practice of political science from taking the ‘linguistic turn’ seriously. If there is one thing that the latter makes apparent, it is the fact that writing is unsettling if only because it always privileges certain stories and subjects over others. However, modern International Relations (IR) theory has continued to perpetuate a positivist discourse within which it upholds the autonomy of sovereign truth-telling as Master meaning it has not really taken the ‘linguistic turn’ seriously at all. This thesis, challenging IR to engage poetry as an idiom of address, is another example, unheeded, of the continued thick-headedness of politics with regard to literature.

Second, despite the fact that academic politics rejects poetry as a legitimate tool for looking at the world, real life evidence shows that political science as we know it has not improved either the predictability of its models or the scientific weight of its theories. Therefore, the language of poetry, story-telling and literary witness might teach political science a thing or two about the performative, elusive nature of truth and knowledge. If there is always an official, an unofficial and a thousand other versions of any story, the ‘linguistic turn’ draws our attention to the moral charge of

³⁵⁷ Vogler, “Poetic Witness: Writing the Real,” 200.

each of these versions that, when engaged, can indeed move (political) science beyond blind appropriation. “Poetry,” as Celan reminds us, “should have a moral basis.”³⁵⁸ A closer look at political science’s ‘official’ dealings with refugees and other displaced people will be the subject of the last chapter of this thesis.

In addition, the process of bearing witness alerts to the nature of language vis-à-vis the human being as finite, flawed, inconstant, and informed by imagination and experimentation. Bearing witness, conceived as a performative linguistic engagement, helps negotiate the move between the singularity (historicity) and the universality (theory) of language that positivism’s toolbox does not accommodate. The question to ask of International Relations is the following: how are we to address our experience with language without reducing the singularity of ‘event,’ operationalized as example for the purpose of social science inquiry, in the process? Often, the generation of social science narratives is considered unacceptable unless the authenticity of the latter has been established against an inevitable sensationalism that accompanies the extreme. Likewise, poetry is not somehow superior to other forms of expression or better suited to address human experience. Indeed, poetry as a literary form is not given as something that can be addressed as a ‘what.’³⁵⁹ “Rather ... poetry alters our relation to language. Poetry is an event – Gadamer calls it a ‘speculative’ event – in which language interrupts our attempts to reduce it conceptually and instrumentally; it takes itself out of our hands.”³⁶⁰ Paul Valéry, too, comments on the ‘musical,’ intransitive nature of poetic usage that situates and finds its meaning vis-à-vis intelligence because and not despite of its performative appeal.³⁶¹ In an effort to situate poetic usage better, I will engage Jacques Derrida’s readings of Paul Celan and, more specifically, Derrida’s

³⁵⁸ Quoted in Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 154.

³⁵⁹ Allen, *Ellipsis*, 2.

³⁶⁰ Bruns Introduction in Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 7.

³⁶¹ Bruns Introduction in Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 3.

understanding of the role of poetry in reading the political, the literary and witnessing.

third fragment - the philosopher and the poet

“Hypothesis to be verified: all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language.” (Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 66).

For a thinker as heavily invested in the study of language as he is, Jacques Derrida offers a surprising number of insights pertaining rather to processes challenging enunciation, writing and speech. A question regarding the implications this has for bearing witness arises, and correctly so. It is Derrida’s insistence on the possibilities contained within language that allows him to offer his otherwise “irresolvable aporias” as opportunities for bearing witness. In addition to maintaining that writing gives flesh to meaning, Derrida knows that because language is inaugural, “it is dangerous and anguishing ... it does not know where it is going.”³⁶² His insistence on the creation of meaning through the medium of enunciation and inscription at once reaffirms the performative role of language in relation to the process of bearing witness while positing as paradoxical the relationship between speaking and truth-bearing.

In testimony, truth is promised beyond all proof, perception, all intuitive demonstration. Even if I lie or perjure myself ... I promise truth and ask the other to believe that I am, there where I am the only one able to bear witness and where the order of proof or of intuition will never be reducible to or homogeneous with the elementary trust, the ‘good faith’ that is promised or demanded. The latter, to be sure, is never pure of all iterability nor of all technics, and hence of all calculability. For it also promises its repetition for the very first instant. It is involved in every address of the other.³⁶³

Derrida correctly identifies that the meaning of testimony is not contained in its truth-bearing capacity for “as soon as it is guaranteed, certain as a theoretical proof, a testimony can no longer be guaranteed as testimony.”³⁶⁴ Derrida, unlike Agamben, knows that equating life with natural life as *bare life* means overlooking the potential

³⁶² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 11.

³⁶³ Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 98.

³⁶⁴ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 68.

contained within the human to bear witness. That is, Derridean life exceeds the definition of biological life only insofar as it mourns that excess, casting being itself as nostalgia. This life “is sacred, holy, infinitely respectable only in the name of what is worth more than it and what is not restricted to the naturalness of the bio-zoological (sacrificeable) – although true sacrifice ought to sacrifice not only ‘natural’ life, called ‘animal’ or ‘biological,’ but also that which is worth more than so-called natural life.”³⁶⁵ What Derrida is left with here is a preliminary definition of the process of bearing witness as a “kind of resurrection.”³⁶⁶

In addition to being an opening toward a decision, every interrogation of a text/event becomes, for Derrida, susceptible to a number of delimiting factors that structure and construct reality according to rules that preclude engagement from being openly, truly limitless. In order for him to be able to speak on behalf of singularity, defined as the non-exemplary, one-time, non-generalizable and authentic face both of ‘event’ and of the latter’s presentation in language, I show that Derrida adopts a limiting reference point leading him to idealize linguistic bearing witness as such. While it is true that “bearing witness is not proving,”³⁶⁷ it is questionable whether the following sheds much light at all on the nature of poetic witness: “The poem bears witness. We don’t know about what and for what, about whom and for whom, in bearing witness *for* bearing witness, it bears witness. But it bears witness. As a result, what it says of the witness it also says of itself as witness or as bearing witness. As poetic bearing witness.”³⁶⁸ Is this language of tautology “grounded in the singular experience of our own finitude” and if so, “how it is possible for a relation to occur between finitude and repetition, as the former is both the condition of possibility and impossibility for the latter?”³⁶⁹ What is this poetic bearing witness?

³⁶⁵ Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 87.

³⁶⁶ Quoted in Joris article in Celan, *Selections*, 204.

³⁶⁷ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 75.

³⁶⁸ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 87.

³⁶⁹ Allen, *Ellipsis*, 212.

Wherefrom is it derived and what is its role in our understanding of bearing witness more generally? Derrida would perhaps answer this with a confession that “what matters most is the strange limit between what can and cannot be determined or decided in this poem’s bearing witness to bearing witness.”³⁷⁰ I offer a preliminary answer to these questions with a Celan poem, exemplifying *a specific instance of witnessing a particular ‘event’ in a singular poem.*

ETCHED AWAY from
the ray-shot wind of your language
the garish talk of rubbed-
off experience – the hundred-
tongued pseudo-
poem, the noem.

Whirled
clear,
free
your way through the human-
shaped snow,
the penitents’ snow, to
the hospitable
glacier rooms and tables.

Deep
in Time’s crevasse
by
the alveolate ice
waits, a crystal of breath,
your irreversible
witness.³⁷¹

Recall my discussion of the constitutive relationship between ‘ordinary’ and ‘extra-ordinary’ witness where poetry, a medium of communicability, was emphasized not so much because of its resuscitative function, but because of its transformative (performative) potential, because of its quality as ‘actualized language,’ as *praxis*. While Derrida may be intuitively correct that the poem bears witness “in bearing witness *for* bearing witness,” it is important to remember that the

³⁷⁰ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 70.

³⁷¹ Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 215.

singularity implied, while it has its own ways of being said, exceeds “the politico-philosophical seizure of the real.”³⁷²

An appraisal of the poetic as a preferred, better mode of engagement with ‘event’ results in predicating bearing witness on the professed authenticity of a certain idiom of language over all others. For Derrida, *literature* points the way to the ‘impossible experience’ of bearing witness because it is the enactment of an *aporetic* relation between universality and singularity. “In its undecidable relation to the generality of law, the singularity of a literary text implies that the ‘literariness’ of literature has to do with performativity (in the sense of a performative speech act) and with rupture.”³⁷³ Richard Beardsworth is openly critical of the ‘literary’ Derrida on the grounds that he relies on an overly formalistic, a-historical version of deconstruction.³⁷⁴ In this sense, both *aporia* and bearing witness are irreducible to any one linguistic form or another. Derrida, much like Agamben’s circular dealing with ‘exception,’ privileges poetic language in order to bring it forth as the true idiom for engaging ‘event.’ The experience of being a refugee, for example, is singular in its everyday facticity that, beyond its theoretically-recovered nature, testifies to the physicality of being displaced that surpasses any and all literary discussions of the nature of the singular and the universal. It seems to me that with Derrida, the poetic is made to bear too much witness in its bearing witness. Allow me to supplement this proposition by referring the reader to Derrida’s reading of Celan:

And then there is another death, the death that comes over language because of what language is: repetition, lethargy, mechanization, and so forth. The poetic act therefore constitutes a sort of resurrection: the poet is someone permanently engaged with a decaying language that he resuscitates, but by giving back to it a triumphant line, but by sometimes bringing it back, like a revenant or phantom. ... Each poem is a resurrection, but one that engages us to a vulnerable body, one that may be forgotten again. I believe that all Celan’s poems remain in a certain way indecipherable, retain some

³⁷² Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, xiii.

³⁷³ Derrida in Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 20.

³⁷⁴ Thanks to Dr. Arthur Bradley for guiding my reading of both Beardsworth and Derrida and for this particular insight, as well as for the clarity of thought and generous insight that have repeatedly graced this thesis.

indecipherability, and the indecipherable can either call endlessly for a sort of reinterpretation, resurrection, or new interpretative breath, or, on the contrary, it can perish or waste away once more. Nothing ensures a poem against its own death ... Oblivion is always possible.³⁷⁵

Considering the fact that “resurrection” and “resuscitation” suggest a different relationship between language and life/death, it is important to point out the implications this difference has for our reading of Derrida’s reading of witnessing. ‘Resuscitation’ alludes to the bringing back to life that which is nearly dead while ‘resurrection’ alludes to the mechanic and cyclical nature that characterizes the organic, the singular. The latter is also the aporia of bearing witness. What this makes clear is the fact that Derrida succumbs to certain romanticism by opposing life to death when he evokes the resuscitative potential of language. This fact is important not only in offering a thematized, deconstructive critique of Derrida, but also for bringing my earlier discussion of the singular, contained in every single poem (of Celan), to bear against Derrida’s reading of the ‘poetic’ as a universal category.

Derrida situates the originality of language within a novel engagement with the ‘poetic.’ He does that by posing the resuscitating potential of poetry vis-à-vis a language of ‘repetition, lethargy, mechanization, and so forth.’ Here, the suggested meaning of ‘repetition, lethargy and mechanization’ falls into the trap of literality – they suggest a lack of creativeness, inauthenticity, and banality. Mechanization, however, as the condition of the organic and the singular is anything but banal. In addition, Celan himself was extremely fond of repetition which he understood as the practice of an encounter with the limit(s) of language. Thus, the poet does not bring a decaying language back to life, but reveals the performative potentiality of language: a potentiality to be found even among the death-camps. A poet bears witness through tautologies; through the use of mechanization and repetition in an effort to push reading and interpretation to the limits of language. With regard to the

³⁷⁵ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 106-7.

witnessing of trauma, the need for repetition becomes even more imperative. As William Allen has suggested, the ‘experience’ of trauma as that “which is *not* experienced in any mode of comprehension or representation” is a “recurrence, of that which was not experienced by way of something else ... is this evanescence that constitutes its singularity, for it renders it irreducible and unrecountable.”³⁷⁶ Celan’s experience of this ‘recurrence’ is imperative in order to bear witness to “the count- / less to-be / named un- / pronounceable / names.”³⁷⁷

Derrida, though an adamant defender of the irreducible nature of bearing witness, nevertheless reduces it by implicating it in a predicative relationship to the ‘poetic.’ Furthermore, he identifies poetry’s testimonial appeal as situated within a meta-language, thus failing to recognize that the incalculability of the *poetic* is contained in the example of every single poem. “The poet is someone who is permanently involved with a language that is dying and which he resurrects, not by giving it back some triumphant aspect but by making it return sometimes, like a specter or a ghost: the poet wakes up language.”³⁷⁸ The novelty implied in poetic engagements, the organic nature of poetic language, do not constitute a resuscitation but a repetition, explaining the ‘always-to-come’ as an underlying characteristic of poetry. Derrida’s claim that the poetic is able to encompass, resuscitate and speak for the singularity of language, reduces the poetic to a constative instance. Celan’s own belief that “a poem does not stand outside time”³⁷⁹ alerts to a different dynamic – namely, one of witnessing presencing, an arrival.

COME, make the world mean with yourself
come, let me fill you up with
all that’s mine.

One with you I am,
to capture us,

³⁷⁶ Allen, *Ellipsis*, 214.

³⁷⁷ Celan, *Breathturn*, 213.

³⁷⁸ Derrida quoted in Celan, *Selections*, 204.

³⁷⁹ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 34.

even now.³⁸⁰

Even now “the prayers / gone up in smoke / ... singing across / open-, open-, open”³⁸¹
are still to come.

In his discussion of Celan’s “Aschenglorie,” Derrida again makes the claim that “the poem speaks of bearing witness in general, ‘but above all about the poem that it is, *about itself in its singularity*, and about the bearing witness to which every poem bears witness.”³⁸² Does that mean that the poem resuscitates and resurrects at the same time and that sometimes it resurrects more than it resuscitates? Or does it go the other way around? Celan offers an answer to this puzzle by focusing our attention, once again, on *the historicity of the poem*. “The poem speaks. It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks. True, it speaks only on its own, its very own behalf.”³⁸³ Derrida’s ‘truth of language’ must make reference and inform itself in specificity. Running the risk of sounding simplistic, the poet cannot very well save a dying language if only because that would presuppose the fact of the death of language. What Derrida is referring to, perhaps, is Celan’s own relationship to German: his lifelong effort to reshape and re-new the language of the Nazis so that his witnessing did not end in “two mouthfuls of silence” – the mark of an impossible address. “It is this language I have sought, during those years and the years since then, to write poems: so as to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was and where I was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself.”³⁸⁴

THE SILICIFIED SAYING in the first,
you forget that you forget,

blinking, the punctuation marks
crystallize at the wrist,

³⁸⁰ Celan, *Selections*, 140.

³⁸¹ Celan, *Breathturn*, 211.

³⁸² Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 96.

³⁸³ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 48.

³⁸⁴ Celan quoted in Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 115.

through the earth
cleft to the crest
the pauses come riding,

there, by
the sacrifice-bush,
where memory catches fire,
the One Breath
seizes you.³⁸⁵

Language is lost and then found through the fabric of memory, turning the moment of recollection (as remembering) into an invention: trauma is not something we learn to recall, it is not something we learn at all, it is not what we usually refer to as ‘experience.’³⁸⁶ So in speaking of “that which happened,” we experience it as if for the first time through “tiny sheaves of hope.” What the resuscitation Derrida attributes to poetry discloses is the attention poetry pays to the relationship between the singular nature of an event and the ways in which this singularity and its excess are communicated through language. Celan’s way of seeing the world and of seeing language are implicated in one another as “the body of language becomes indistinguishable from that of the world,”³⁸⁷ calling into question the ability to fix the ‘fragmentarity’ of one on the model wholeness of the other. “Your chant – what does it know?”³⁸⁸

Celan poses this relationship as an unresolved one, as a reoccurring exchange between bearing witness and the need to reaffirm life through language, “even now,” in the face of inhuman, life-negating forces. The poem, “etched away from / the ray-shot of your language / ... Whirled / clear, / free / ... Deep / in Time’s crevasse / by / the alveolate ice / waits, a crystal breath, / your irreversible / witness.”³⁸⁹ His invitation to an encounter is anything but straightforward: “No one person is ‘like’ another ... only ‘distanced’ can my reader understand me ... always grasping only the

³⁸⁵ Celan, *Breathturn*, 207.

³⁸⁶ Allen, *Ellipsis*, 214.

³⁸⁷ Das, *Life and Words*, 206.

³⁸⁸ Celan, *Breathturn*, 119.

³⁸⁹ Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 215.

grilled bars between us.”³⁹⁰ Celan refers to the difficult, though not irresolvable, aporia of speaking about ‘that which happened,’ to the difficulty of straight talk at all.

Speak, you also,
speak as the last,
have your say.
Speak –
But keep yes and no unsplit.
And give your say this meaning:
give it the shade ...

He speaks truly who speaks the shade.³⁹¹

Here, language engages ‘event’ over and over again. Celan’s poetry, as already suggested, does that by inviting a repetitive, continuous witness, by bearing witness to ‘that which happened’ in bearing witness “to the now, to the ‘presence’ of the human ... a presence attesting to a presence, or rather to a present, a human present.”³⁹² For Derrida, on the other hand, “the poetics of a poem is that which occupies the impossible position of the witness, who has to answer for the impossibility of answering, to speak of the impossibility of speaking, thereby bearing the poem to us but in doing so finding its own position undermined, for while the pain of a poem needs a witness, ‘no-one / bears witness for the witness.’”³⁹³ Derrida’s reading of this famous last phrase leaves me questioning his interpretation for being too narrow, not nuanced enough, again, perhaps not Derridean enough.

WHAT OCCURRED? The boulder left the mountain.
Who awakened? You and I.
Language, language. Co-earth. Fellow-planet.
Poorer. Open. Homelandy.

The course? Towards the unsubsidized.
Your course and mine was the boulder’s flight.
Heart and heart. Adjudged too heavy.
Grow more heavy. Be more light.³⁹⁴

³⁹⁰ Quoted in Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 108.

³⁹¹ Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 69.

³⁹² Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 118.

³⁹³ Quotes in Allen, *Ellipsis*, 233.

³⁹⁴ Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 183.

Your course and mine - the course of language - language as boulder. The cold, death-carrying stone from Celan's earlier poetry here becomes a boulder in flight, digging its "paths upward." Whether or not the poetic as "a singular act, concerning a singular event and engaging a unique, and thus inventive, relationship to language"³⁹⁵ can access the singular historicity of 'event' is not what measures the value of poetry. It is rather something like the following Celan confession:

WHEN WHITENESS ASSAILED US, at night:
when from the libation-ewer more
than water came;
when the skinned knee
gave the sacrificebell the nod:
Fly! –

Then
I still
was whole.³⁹⁶

concluding remarks – on the way to memory

Thus far, I have argued that the "mortal body, fragile and at times indecipherable"³⁹⁷ of the poem does need saving or resuscitation. Its partaking into a mechanic repetition indeed enables the carrying out of witnessing. What that suggests is that every truth depends on the fact of being re-written, re-inscribed, spoken and performed again and that no truth, however theoretically sound, precedes the moment of its repeated conception in language. With regard to everyday instances of bearing witness, unconditioned either by theoretical aspirations or by policy-setting prescriptions, the performative nature of witnessing questions all ends. Whether we are talking of concentration camps, refugee camps, ethnic wars, famine or of the daily goings about of people, what is absolutely singular about witnessing is its potential to engage, address and disclose the human potential to out-live suffering, trauma and violence. "This makes clear that the claim of language is inherent to

³⁹⁵ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 88.

³⁹⁶ Celan, *Breathturn*, 123.

³⁹⁷ Derrida in Celan, *Selections*, 204.

trauma, a claim to speak or write where this cannot be done,” a demand “to interrogate the limits of language as a means to respond to its recurrent absence.”³⁹⁸ Derrida, though highly sensitive to the relationship between language and truth on one hand, and aporia and decision on the other, falls into the trap of idealizing the very thing that lets him announce the performative potential of language – poetry.

At the end of this chapter I would like to posit the following possibility: perhaps there is no way of engaging bearing witness without reducing it to something or to someone. If we agree that no matter what the linguistic format, no matter what the stylistic and phonetic arrangements, the nature of every representation is reductive, then no privileging either of the juridical, the linguistic, or the poetic could/should ever function as final. What I hope to have demonstrated in my engagement with Celan are the implications that language carries for the recollection and construction of memory by pointing out the possibilities for “turning of the breath” contained within the poetic idioms through which wo(man) recovers and reinvents ‘event.’ What will follow is an engagement with the role of memory in mediating witnessing. Later, an exegesis of the figure of the refugee and its relationship to sovereign power will supplement my inquiry into the nature, workings and implications that witnessing has for the practice of International Relations.

³⁹⁸ Allen, *Ellipsis*, 215.

Chapter Four

Memory, the 'linguistic turn,' and the 'singularity of political novelty.'

Before proceeding with my next chapter, I would like to make a detour and talk briefly about the implications the current project has had for my understanding of the nature of remembering. It was not from the outset that I was aware of the important connections between testimony/bearing witness and memory. In fact, it was only after a significant number of my academic books were lost in the trans-Atlantic mail and I was forced to recover their names from a long list of bibliographic material that I was made aware of the role of memory in research. Since I had never been one with a good memory, not only was I unable to remember the titles of all the books, but by this point I was only partially certain of the books' relationship to my thesis. As a consequence, I was faced with the task of piecing back into a whole the remnants of my compromised memory for names, facts and dates on one hand, and my altogether disrupted relationship to my project's future on the other. A process of careful reading selection turned into a *tabula rasa* and I was only doubtfully optimistic about my actual ability to fill in the blank spaces of my impoverished mental archive.

In the months to follow, I read new books, wrote various outlines, becoming the anti-product of what had been a professionally nurtured reliance on knowing through reference, archiving, summary, and past experience(s). The following chapter on the relationship between memory and bearing witness will be based both on research experience and on my ideas regarding the nature of truth-claims. I am driven to these topics because of a belief that if we agree to view testimony as the conscious effort to make past experiences iterable, then an equally conscious effort is needed to understand the nature of "iterability" vis-à-vis one's relationship to the

past. This chapter will argue that different contexts give rise to different modes of remembering and bearing witness.

Recall my discussion so far. Chapter One addressed the juridico-political 'exception' and the nature of bearing witness to being a *homo sacer* as envisioned by Giorgio Agamben. Chapter Two demarcated the philosophical potential of literature and testimony reflected through the prism of Jacques Derrida's singular engagement with the event of poetry. Chapter Three discussed the specific instance of Paul Celan's poetic oeuvre as a moving forward, going through, and an address. I suggested that the work of poets has important implications for understanding how the human being comports itself both privately and as part of a collective, as well as for our relationship to the language of witness. The last, Chapter Five, will problematize the engagement of academic political science with the refugee regarding questions of singularity, security, everyday performativity and the nature of situational testimony to being and getting along in the world.

Though not stated explicitly, so far I have been earning the right to interrogate the academic practices and beliefs of International Relations against what I will address as a "politics of singular novelty" defined as the interplay between an understanding of the world as dynamic, messy and unpredictable realm and the human making up this universe as a singular, finite, and insecure being. I believe that these premises do not lead the researcher to anarchy, apocalyptic thoughts, negative conceptions of the world, or abstract theoretical renditions of real life events, but to a potentially and infinitely contingent, multi-faceted, individually-informed conception of the political universe within which we work and that defines the boundaries of our inquiries. Following from my discussion so far, what I will pose as the puzzle in this chapter are the following two questions: first, why is it that neither Derrida nor Agamben address more closely the question of memory and

second, what are the specific implications a discussion of memory (and bearing witness) has for the study and practice of international relations?

Though seemingly unrelated, these questions are derived from the same premise, namely, that an understanding of the ways language and memory work to constitute the process of bearing witness is directly related to how one addresses the subjects that make up the inquiries of international relations. That is, if “the productive power of language makes meaning unlimited,”³⁹⁹ then the task of thinking politics differently alerts to the interactive, heterogeneous relationship between theory and practice. The task of thinking politics differently also means asking the following basic questions: “What is it that political scientists do as political scientists and toward what end?” and “Where do we as political scientists come from and where are we headed anyway?” Ivan Brady answers the last question thus: “The same places as the rest of us (including poets), through the same formative processes as human beings, anchored in the same heavily constructed, self-defining, cultural fields.”⁴⁰⁰ The task of thinking politics differently means thinking the experience of being human differently.

So far my engagement with Derrida and Agamben has been quite theoretical, though important practical implications were drawn from Agamben’s “remnants” and Derrida’s linguistic “resuscitation.” Paul Celan’s “going through language” alerted to the factual, theoretic, poetic and rhetorical elements that help turn all lists into stories. What is more, he alerted to the fact that “poetry can ground theories of the world that actually involve our interactions with it, not just abstractions from it.”⁴⁰¹ Next, I will examine the question of memory beyond the theoretical implications derived from the work of the two continental philosophers of interest here and enter

³⁹⁹ Ivan Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (2004), 623.

⁴⁰⁰ Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 624.

⁴⁰¹ Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 622.

in an engagement with the methodological, theoretical and practical implications that a capricious concept such as ‘memory’ can offer for the study of politics.

I will limit my discussion of political science to International Relations (IR), though my engagement with general concepts such as the nature of being, truth-claims, and sovereign power will be informed by political science as such. For example, sovereign power will be addressed not as a “technology of governance”⁴⁰² but rather, as “thought which poses a particular kind of challenge to thinking about politics” that “requires a form of political philosophizing in which the project of thought (politics) is in question because the very form of thinking (philosophy) is itself at issue.”⁴⁰³ The political itself, after Richard Beardsworth, will be understood as “a moment of transformation.”⁴⁰⁴

I will take to task IR’s underlying assumptions as a positivist, deterministic, and rational discipline whose commitment to the business of truth-telling follows its causally-informed methodologies, security-conscious thinking and an Enlightenment idea of progress. In an effort to build bridges between the various levels of my engagement so far, “memory,” a fluctuating though unavoidable link to the past, will serve as a mediator between the Derridean concept of singularity on the one hand, Agamben’s juridico-political *exception* on the other and finally, what I see as the generalizing facticity of academic political science. The inclination to extreme objectification characteristic of IR will be addressed critically for its claims on objectivity, on being able to predict, calculate and appeal to the affirmative power of truth-claims without accounting for the inherent distortions and reductions of its subject matter.⁴⁰⁵ I will begin my discussion by briefly referring to the thought of

⁴⁰² Jenny Edkins. *Poststructuralism and International Relations*. (Boulder, Co: Lynn Reinner, 1999), 5.

⁴⁰³ Dillon, *Politics of Security*, 3.

⁴⁰⁴ Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political*, 255.

⁴⁰⁵ Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 623.

Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben and by immediately asking the following question: “What form does memory take in their historical, politically-informed, philosophical oeuvres and to what purpose?”

singularity remembered – the iterability of fact

Language is ... the possibility of subjectivity because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity, and the discourse provokes the emergence of subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances. (Emile Benveniste)

I will recall Derrida in an effort to clarify his understanding of memory and, in turn, my own reading of his reading of memory. This is important because he provides a pillar on which I rest my theoretical argumentation, though it is sometimes a pillar less valuable for its constant support than for its unreliable foundation. What Derrida demands is that I find my own readings, my own voice and my own pillar(s), for I well know that it is not an authoritative voice that he lends, but the space for a discussion, the opportunity to think about my own work and the very shaky foundations on which it rests. Derrida is thus singularly important for making sure I remember to check my bearings. Every time I check them, every time I embark on a new direction, a new idiom, a novel reading, I have to look where I have been, to the places, battles, storms without whose direction and misdirection my present position would not be possible. Looking back to Derrida now, perhaps I will see more clearly.

Recall my discussion of Jacques Derrida’s writing on singularity. I tried to make clear that for him, singularity was at once a state of being that exceeded theoretical limits and one that, in order that it did not fall into abstraction, had to be met by language’s general tools. In addition, every singular instance (the poem for example) is the by-product of a decision to address an audience, an “other.” It is in this sense that a poetic engagement with experience informs of the political stakes of

witnessing: at once irreducible to any one example and, at the same time, brought forth through the prism of repeatability. Indeed, “the force that the singular mobilizes is both differential and formalizing”⁴⁰⁶ in that it contains a productive force that alerts to an origin defining but also challenging literary institution.

Timothy Clark discusses this double-bind in the following manner: “Too much of the standard defense of the literary as singular comes down to highlighting our not being able to finally identify or fix the meaning of something, and then vaunting this inability of resistance as a kind of vaguely democratic challenge to dogma.”⁴⁰⁷

Furthermore, in his response to Cathy Caruth’s book *Unclaimed Experience:*

Trauma, Narrative and History, Dominick La Capra says:

The apparent implication is that literature in its very excess can somehow get at trauma in a manner unavailable to theory – that it writes (speaks or even cries) trauma in excess of history. It is not altogether clear what the relation of theoretical discourse on the literary is to psychoanalytic theory and to literature. It would seem at the very least that this discourse somehow marks ... the excess of the literary vis-à-vis the theoretical, thereby seemingly escaping or outwitting the limits of theory with respect to excess.⁴⁰⁸

Even though literature has been paired with singularity time and again, I would like to suggest that it is not necessarily better suited for hosting the singular, even if much of memory literature (trauma, autobiographical, and experiential literature) insists on being able to provide the singular with a territorial and theoretical safe havens. This chapter will show that an engagement with the work of memory allows, also, for the creative, performative potential of international relations to unfold.

At the same time, bearing witness has become increasingly sublimated through processes of purging, revelation, spiritual, communal and/or personal healing. Transference (by which I mean one’s identification with another) between

⁴⁰⁶ Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida and the Event of Literature*, 17.

⁴⁰⁷ Timothy Clark. *The Poetics of Singularity*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 8.

⁴⁰⁸ Dominic LaCapra. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 185.

observer and observed, writer and subject, past and present, fiction and fact has itself become symptomatic of a reality of appropriating others' pain which, in turn, creates binary oppositions such as victim and perpetrator, guilty and innocent, deserving and condemned. The postmodern insistence on repetition, rereading and reiteration has also had a calcifying, rather than a liberating effect for understanding singularity in the sense that the latter has been viewed as a ritual construct informed by a desire to perpetuate and affirm a reality marked by irreproducibility and the unspeakable.

What should rather be taken away from these engagements is an acknowledgement of "a social setting structured deeply by socialization, enculturation, and individual experiences in which some messages are bound to be unclear, confusing, and contradictory, whereas others appear to define precisely for us what the world is about through widely known and shared codes."⁴⁰⁹ The process of truth-finding is revealed for its incompleteness and gaps in knowledge always more numerous than the words and theories plugged alongside it at any one time. Within positivist IR, the mark of truth has been defined by a drive toward external validity and generalizability rather than as interplay between grand narrative constructs and causally-informed laws. In an effort to counter the grip of the mainstream, this chapter addresses the process of meaning-making not as given, but as an agenda-setting construction offering a mobilizing potential relating to the ways and modalities through which individuals are studied, represented and understood. I will elaborate on this subject by way of an unorthodox mediator: Jacques Derrida.

derrida and the texture of experience

"You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one

⁴⁰⁹ Brady, "In Defense of the Sensual," 625.

can at least still know." Rene Daumal

I will have Derrida introduce himself to my discussion of memory thus:

“There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation.”⁴¹⁰ What he is saying is that a certain appeal to a politics of knowledge-control informs the drive toward progress characterizing Enlightenment and liberal humanistic rhetoric. Derrida calls this “*archival violence*.”⁴¹¹ In addition to being a depository of preserved or recovered facts, an archive is also a museum of memory, an ‘imprint.’⁴¹² As a museum, it contains information that is controlled, edited and represented with regard for the particular message intended for communication and with regard both for its particular keepers and for its audience.⁴¹³

Furthermore, as suggested by Michael Lynch regarding the relationship between archiving and truth-claims, Derrida’s remarks on the archive

also point the way to a critical examination of the belief that archives provide a home for primary sources and that such sources provide the raw data for writing history ... By situating archives in historically specific arrangements of ‘archontic power’ – offices, institutions and practices for gathering, filing, authorizing, certifying, classifying and redacting records – Derrida’s etymology enables us to recognize that archival data are never ‘raw.’⁴¹⁴

That is, the business of making truth is always informed by the ethnography and genealogy of data itself. This will be important in thinking through the disciplinal intentionality toward objectivity underwriting the drive toward scientific knowledge resonant within international relations.

⁴¹⁰ Jacques Derrida. *Archive Fever*. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995a), p4.

⁴¹¹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 7.

⁴¹² Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 30.

⁴¹³ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. 191.

⁴¹⁴ Michael Lynch. “Archives in Formation.” *History of the Human Sciences* 12, no.2 (1999): 67.

“To discipline” is understood not only as an outcome of an uneven relationship between an authority figure and a subordinate, but also as always underwritten by a desire to impose, solidify, and perpetuate the kind of ‘normal’ power relations that inform the drive toward progress, development, and security. Archives are disciplined. Memory is disciplined. Truth-claims are definitely disciplined. An exegesis on how this works will inform the remainder of this chapter.

The practices recruited to assemble, control and determine the access to information play an important role in the reconstruction of memory as testimony. The need to problematize this relationship goes hand in hand with a responsibility to examine the role of language in the production of justice. In this sense and taking lead from Linda Hutcheon, my subsequent use of terms such as “problematization,” “deconstruction,” “contextualization,” and “totalizing” will be understood as part of working within a postmodern rhetoric. The latter will be discussed as “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political.”⁴¹⁵ This carries potency not only for questioning the given nature of deterministic assumptions, but also for an engagement with how we write and use language to help exemplify and honour the relationship between singularity, politics, bearing witness and memory.

Being documented is built into writing and depends as much on idioms of generalization as it does on idioms of invention and performance. In the next chapter, means of documentation with respect to refugees will be shown to exceed the prescribed legal parameters of nation-states or international organizations. What is more, if we concede that “the world of signs and meaning is made,”⁴¹⁶ then how we bear witness to that world is a question of interpretation, re-production and engagement of these signs. Testimonies to trauma, made public through exhibitions

⁴¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. (London: Routledge, 1988), 4.

⁴¹⁶ Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 624.

and memorials, point to the fact that museums not only enable but also, delimit testimony by “making the dangers of testimony ... thoroughly contained”⁴¹⁷ in the form of controlled narratives. James Booth calls this the “willed silencing” we “encounter ... in our museums and libraries, and in our curious cannons, all of which are, in part, exercises in determining what will be left in silence and what will occupy a place in our collective memory.”⁴¹⁸ Mainstream IR showcases one grand narrative.

Memory, addressed as an idiom of bearing witness, problematizes otherwise taken for granted, common-sensical, and “natural” historical, literary or political research testifying to the fact that “all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning.”⁴¹⁹ In that sense, it offers a sensitivity to a world where post-modern and critical engagements are “especially significant politically in undoing pure binary oppositions that subtend and are generated by a scapegoat mechanism involving the construction as well as the victimization of the other as a totally, external, impure contaminant or pollutant.”⁴²⁰

Postmodern concerns offer a critique of opaque representational models not simply by substituting fact with fiction, but by challenging the “common-sense naturalness” of the assumptions of totalizing theoretical and practical approaches.⁴²¹ A critical engagement with questions of memory and bearing witness, in turn, poses as problematic the ways in which knowledge is preserved, interpreted, quantified and used in the service of ends. By offering one such engagement, this chapter shows that as a discipline directly implicated in the study of real-life events, it behooves International Relations to examine the ways and practices through which it comes to

⁴¹⁷ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 191.

⁴¹⁸ Booth, *Communities of Memory*, 76.

⁴¹⁹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, xii-xiii.

⁴²⁰ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. 68.

⁴²¹ Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. (London: Routledge, 1989), 32.

know what it knows. Next, I will comment on a weakness of Derrida's regarding memory which will, in turn, be discussed as "politics of singular novelty."

re-membering derrida

My end goal is not to place Derrida on the pages of political science syllabi, but rather to suggest that in relation to the problematic of bearing witness, Derrida's thought alerts to the tension between a desire to be enlightened (through methods of replicability, generalizability, and truthfulness) and the fact of the singular, performative 'event' that language accommodates. While scientific inquiry is informed primarily by a drive for predictability, the heterogeneous nature of being in the world alerts to the symbiotic relationship between theory and example, authenticity and repeatability, fact and fable, the individual and the community.

Ivan Brady, too, has alerted us to the fact that "The constructive process of analyzing, comparing, conjecturing, and inferring facts about the nature of the world makes life polysemous, polyvocal, ripe for alternative interpretations even as it guarantees a lack of closure in any absolute sense."⁴²² This leads to the realization that engaging singularity within international relations not only introduces a closer relationship to the subjects studied, but it also raises awareness of the solid, non-critical material underwriting much of academic politics. Extreme objectification, in this sense, accommodates reducibility as far as the differences underwriting the experience of language and life go. Derrida's neologism of *différance* reveals the non-self-evident nature of enunciation as such in that the difference between *différance* and *difference* is non-audible.⁴²³ What this reveals is the fact that "language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted 'historically' as a wave of

⁴²² Brady, "In Defense of the Sensual," 625.

⁴²³ Peggy Kamuff (ed). *A Derrida Reader. Between the Blinds*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 60.

differences.”⁴²⁴ Evoking language thus has the effect both of presupposing this difference and of reducing it. However, as Derrida makes clear in “Signature Event Context,” his is not an all-out attack on intentionality.

A brief summary of Derrida’s engagement with memory is due. Derrida addresses memory as an ‘imprint’ that “inscribes an impression in language and in discourse.”⁴²⁵ Memory is discussed both as a linguistic and as a physical impression: a scar on the body, in time, and in language. Memory evokes “pure repetition without proper identity or substance.”⁴²⁶ Talking about the case of the *pharmakon* (meaning remedy as medicine but also, as poison) in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida’s reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus* addresses the fact that the process of translation is a process of appropriating and choosing one meaning among a multitude of available meanings. However, this single meaning represents a multitude of other relations as well.⁴²⁷

Plato accuses writing for replacing living memory with a mnemonic device. For him, speech remains the purest ways of recovering any sign, that is, event. Plato talks of two kinds of memory: ‘anamnesis’ and ‘hypomnesis.’ The first kind literally translates as memory raised up, as in memory brought in focus, in sight, as something seen clearly and for the truth of what it is. An experience of anamnesis is part of the original story, a part of what we live and know as truth. This is, in some ways, similar to a religious experience and to the faith we have in the word of God serving as our own belief. Hypomnesis, on the other hand, signals something close to a technical aide-memoire, an instance of imitation or, in the case of Plato, writing.

⁴²⁴ Kamuff, *A Derrida Reader*, 65.

⁴²⁵ Derrida. *Archive Fever*, 30.

⁴²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” in *A Derrida Reader*, edited by Peggy Kamuff, 113-139. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 122.

⁴²⁷ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 127.

“The problem starts where the mneme, instead of being present to itself, is supplanted by archives, lists, notes, tales, accounts, chronicles: memorials instead of memory. But, as Derrida indicates, the 'evil' slips in within the relation of memory to itself, in the general organization of the mnemonic activity. Memory always needs signs in order to recall the non-present, with which it is necessarily in relation.”⁴²⁸ Thus both mneme and hypomnesis are dependent on repetition and contained within each other. Derrida admits that Plato’s project fails because writing always contaminates and supplements memory and in doing so, affects as well as infects memory. The existence of hypomnesis inside anamnesis inscribes an originary level of violence – a disruption of life by the non-living – right at the heart of life itself. Writing becomes “that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself at once be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing.”⁴²⁹ The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement. Bearing witness is that *pharmakon*. Memory for Derrida takes the shape of the very thing it resists, writing, by representing a constant passage between ‘anamnesis’ and ‘hypomnesis,’ a passage between opposites – the undecidable.

Memory is discussed in opposition to writing. In other words, “writing is essentially bad, external to memory, productive not of science but of belief, not of truth but of appearances.”⁴³⁰ In that sense, memory as anamnesis is living, developing and dynamic engagement with ‘event.’ Writing, on the other hand, is a representation of memory; a violence inflicted on an original level for there can be no knowing of remembering, no meaning to remembering without writing. What is more, “it is this life of the memory that the *pharmakon* of writing would come to hypnotize: fascinating it, taking it out of itself by putting it to sleep in a

⁴²⁸http://www.cobussen.com/proefschrift/200_deconstruction/250_supplement/251_plato_s_supplements/plato_s_supplements.htm accessed October 18th, 2008

⁴²⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1983), 110.

⁴³⁰ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 129-130.

monument.”⁴³¹ Writing as a tool of archiving compromises the originary intact texture of memory and condemns it to apathy and to not being able to disseminate

the truth of what is. Letting itself get stoned by its own signs, its own guardians, by the types committed to the keeping and surveillance of knowledge, it will sink down into *lethe*, overcome by nonknowledge and forgetfulness. Memory and truth cannot be separated.⁴³²

Yet, memory is writing. For Derrida, the work of memory is the overseeing of the active production and continuous disseminations of knowledge aware of “the truth of what is.” What does all this mean?

Memory, the sign of a sign, has to resort to the aid of signs (language) in order to recall the already past ‘event’ that it commemorates. This is also the paradox of bearing witness: singularity communicated through the general tools of language. Writing is considered suspicious, unreliable and fickle, evoking false knowledge, lethargy, something akin to Derrida’s discussion of language in *Sovereignties in Question* as lethargic, repetitive, apathetic and dying. The function of writing, however, is to supplement memory, to build upon it, to inscribe it in generational archives. Speaking is not writing, yet anamnesis is impossible without hypomnesis – the living impossible without the non-living. The definition of simulacrum attributed to writing is indeed symptomatic of all (re)presentation, even self-presentation. Writing becomes an aid to memory while, informed by *différance*, it challenges the ‘alert exercise of memory.’

In short, memory is defined as the reproduction, the revival of knowledge in the present: “a movement of truth.” The language of signs, because of its function as aide-memoire is denied its constitutive role in the production, interpretation and dissemination of truth. Yet, since memory needs the sign, it is always already defined

⁴³¹ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 130.

⁴³² Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 130.

by the supplement. Important implications for a discussion of bearing witness follow from this.

First, despite the fact that Plato assigns a ‘superior,’ ‘idealized’ role to ‘living memory,’ writing is surrogate to both memory and knowledge. Second and following from Derrida’s discussion of the *pharmakon*, it becomes clear that the act of recording is a simultaneous engagement both with presence and absence, inside and outside, ‘pure’ knowledge and ‘supplemented’ one. Writing itself makes possible the play of this *différance* and also, the subsequent dual relationship of constitution on the one hand and erasure on the other between memory and writing.

Thus, even though writing is external to (internal) memory, even though hypomnesia is not in itself memory, it affects memory and hypothesizes it in its very inside. That is the effect of this *pharmakon*. ... The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself *at once* be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing.⁴³³

This allows Derrida to conclude that because living memory is finite, writing is necessary because the existence of hypomnesia inside anamnesis inscribes an originary level of violence – a disruption of life by the non-living – right at the heart of life itself. This relationship is a violent, though an unavoidable one. With regard for the process of bearing witness and my discussion of singularity, truth is defined as the re-enactment of repetition, as the always singular evocation of the performative translation of memory into language/writing/the supplement.

falling out with derrida

A point of contention within Derrida’s oeuvre is a certain ultra-theoretical setting up of the singular (addressed as memory) as unique and authentic while, at the same time, making it amenable to being dealt with properly through examples,

⁴³³ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 135.

poetry (written language) showcased as the most appropriate among them. There is in addition an unambiguous drive toward constructing concepts such as “loss,” “mourning,” and “death” as particularly well-suited to be addressed by singular linguistic idioms and forms giving the latter the authority to speak for, represent and understand better the nature of “subaltern” narratives as nostalgic. What I mean by this is that Derrida’s work constructs a certain self-referential, circular framework that allows him to set up questions of “loss,” “mourning,” and “death,” for example, in such a way as to make them addressable only by singular idioms. These are set up rather than as “dilemmas of intelligibility,”⁴³⁴ as products of an affirmative contestation. “The life of language is also the life of specters; it is also the work of mourning; it is also impossible mourning.”⁴³⁵

However, the singularity of ‘event’ borne witness to in language is not an a priori state but the product of a decision informed not by the “ghost of melancholy” but, as Ian Baucom suggests, by the “practice of interest fundamentally at odds with disinterested practices central to the emergence of occidental modernity, its universal philosophy of history, its theory of justice, its practices of empire and its dreams of a universal and homogeneous state of history.”⁴³⁶ Memory, in that sense, becomes a supplement, a mimetic tool for the translation and transcription of ‘event.’

Problems of ‘forgiveness’ and ‘mourning’ cannot function from within an internally sublimated aporia that honors the singular while, at the same time, signifies the nature of language as universalization. That is, if mourning is also an impossible mourning, how can one affirm a democratic politics capable of foreseeing a future (agency) without arriving at “a dual allegiance and perpetual uneasiness” for

⁴³⁴ Excerpt from Roundtable Discussion on the legacy of Jacques Derrida in *Millennium* 34(1): 237-258.

⁴³⁵ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 103.

⁴³⁶ Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 300.

“the decision you arrive at will necessarily be insufficient to the course of that oscillatory process of gesturing in both directions?”⁴³⁷

Take, for example, the following conditional: “If forgiveness forgave only the forgivable, then ... the very idea of forgiveness would disappear.”⁴³⁸ While this potentially negative tautological formulation does offer insights into the conditional nature of justice as well as into the practical consequences of its paradoxical essence, at once yielding justice while producing its own exceptions, one wonders how forgiving the unforgivable and then, Derrida’s framework of “undeconstructable concern for justice”⁴³⁹ remain at all informative of the nature of justice, forgiveness, retribution, and so on. Yet, Derrida calls forth an urgent demand that “today one should be able to cultivate linguistic differences without yielding to ideology or to state-nationalist or nationalist politics,”⁴⁴⁰ forecasting justice as the ethical product of an *ethos* of questioning and negotiation, not melancholy. Derrida himself confesses in an interview with Richard Kearney: “I have never succeeded in directly relating deconstruction to existing political codes and programmes.”⁴⁴¹ Does that nullify his own programme? Does it discredit his lifelong project of philosophical deconstruction? I hope to be able to show that what he does is give us other kinds of bearings in addition to those we get from a “programmatically” political science approach. For one, Derrida posits justice as the result of a decision that must exclude and simplify in order to yield a ruling. That is, it is possible, necessary and real.

Language, serving law through its communicative, factual quality, becomes an important medium of that decision. Taking lead from this statement and in an attempt to discuss the process of bearing witness as something which exceeds the

⁴³⁷ Campbell, ‘Roundtable Discussion on Derrida’s legacy’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 1 (2005): 239.

⁴³⁸ Jacques Derrida. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. (London: Routledge, 2002a), vii.

⁴³⁹ Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, viii.

⁴⁴⁰ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 102.

⁴⁴¹ Quoted in Campbell, “Roundtable Discussion,” 239

political while it is underwritten by it, as something that is not defined through and through by the political and yet, recognizes itself as occurring within the frameworks of sovereign power, I wish to examine whether both memory and witnessing are perhaps irreducible to empiricist, relativist, postmodernist claims or to themselves.

The extent to which Derrida informs of the paradoxes inherent in every attempt to make language represent irrefutability alerts us to the tension defining language at once as communicative and then as unavoidably deconstructive.

To write is not only to know that through writing, through the extremities of style, the best will not necessarily transpire ... nor will the transition to what transpired always be *wilful*, nor will that which is noted down always infinitely *express* the universe, resembling and reassembling it. It is also to be incapable of making meaning absolutely precede writing: it is thus to lower meaning while simultaneously elevating inscription.⁴⁴²

As already discussed, Derrida does seem to fall into an unchecked romanticism regarding issues of witness, poetry, and singularity. Not only does he privilege written over spoken language, but he is not Derridean enough first, by not problematizing singularity in light of the (im)possibilities it offers for political action and second, by still attempting to oppose, against the deconstructive logic, physical life to death in the concept of resuscitation. “Because language can be desired but not appropriated,”

“the idiom is what resists translation, and hence is what seems attached to the singularity of the signifying body of language – or of the body, period – but which, because of such singularity, eludes all possession, any claim of belonging to.⁴⁴³

While Derrida’s project is concerned with the question of *how* to read texts against and despite already existing hegemonic, sovereign and mainstream interpretations, it is at the same time informed by an understanding of the modes, tropes and criteria of expression most suitable for engaging questions of power, transformation, and the political. In other words, Derrida’s making-sense is

⁴⁴² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 10.

⁴⁴³ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 101, 102.

underwritten by a poetic sensitivity that, though informed by an intuitive grasp of *différance*, nonetheless creates its own universe. The end goal of this kind of thinking, like the end goal of philosophy, is to be secured, though the kind of security I am referring to here is informed by the contingency of chance and luck: *au hasard*.

My engagement with Paul Celan alerted to the negative outcomes of linking poetry to philosophy. Writing at the limit of language, Celan comments on the representative potential contained within historic singularity. The latter was recognized as “acausal discontinuity” that “cannot be expected or objectified,”⁴⁴⁴ meaning that to anticipate a representational faculty in poetry’s relationship to the singular means to romanticize poetry and history by ignoring their tendency to discipline, control and naturalize. They are informed by an indebtedness to each other that, if and when unrecognized, is the kind of omission that precludes a relationship between, for example, poetry and the social sciences. Thinking about the relationship between history and memory, Dominick LaCapra has argued that

Absence and loss could not form a binary in that the opposite of absence is presence and that of loss is gain. ... The problem, which cannot be formulated in binary terms, is the mutual interaction and marking of presence/absence and gain/loss in what Derrida terms a larger economy, and the difficult issue is to elaborate the distinctions that do not function as binaries or sheer opposites.⁴⁴⁵

Because the singular as historical, temporally-specific occurrence is non-reproducible but only repeatable, it remains singular only in the moment of its taking place which is not to say that an experiential event, because it happens only ‘once,’ is random, unexpected, and marked by its fleeting presence. Derrida’s insistence on the role of language for the communication of meaning, his recognition of the aporetic nature of all enunciation, and his subsequent entrusting of poetry with the task of speaking for the singular make certain things follow.

⁴⁴⁴ Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity*, 3.

⁴⁴⁵ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 48 (fn. 6).

First, singularity in language is best addressed through the singular idioms of poetic language. Second, bearing witness can only ever approximate a singular event by engaging it in authentic ways that, in turn, yield unique and novel information. Third, memory (as access to a past event) works by establishing a connection between a theoretically-informed ontology and a factually-constructed singularity. As a result, this thesis posits that there are important implications that Derrida's thought on singularity, iterability, reading and witness has for the ways in which being is experienced by those who live the political (everyday). To this end I offer the following hypothesis: Rooted in the historical nature of politics, the singular is inescapable.

the linguistic turn, formalist beliefs and the "guarantee of meaning"

There can't be any doubt about it any longer: the struggle
against ideology has become a new ideology. (Bertold Brecht)

The positivist ontology of the realist project within academic international relations has been, for a long time now, underwritten by a number of foundational dichotomies and dualisms "which distinguish what is ... real from what is merely ephemeral and superficial (i.e. subject/object, theory/practice, fact/value, domestic-inside/international-outside, and egoism-ethics)."⁴⁴⁶ The appeal is to a sovereign center that gives a sense of order, truth, meaning and certainty, a sovereign center that becomes the self-referential⁴⁴⁷ product of its own illusory attachments. The ontological commitment of Political Realism to the centrality of "the sovereign state" posits the relationship between units as competitive, strategic and power-maximizing through orderly, self-interested methods of explaining reality. In an anarchic international environment, states exist in a system of self-help that obliges them to

⁴⁴⁶ Jim George. "Realist Ethics,' International Relations and Post-Modernism." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 24, no.2 (1995): 199.

⁴⁴⁷ Richard Ashley. "Living on Borderlines" In *International/Intertextual Relations*, edited by James der Derian and Michael Shapiro. (Massachusetts: Lexington, 1989): 230-31.

care for their own survival by making sure they have sufficient material capabilities to guarantee the security of their grand narratives.

Whether major war is caused by the desire of a declining state to overtake its further decline,⁴⁴⁸ by disruption of the balance of power in a dyadic balancing system,⁴⁴⁹ by one state's claim to hegemony,⁴⁵⁰ by industrialization of a rising state or by the perceptions of leaders regarding threatening behaviors on the part of their opponents,⁴⁵¹ the starting and ending assumptions point to "the state" as the subject of international politics.

In light of my criticism of the prevailing opposition of fact to fiction, science to narrative, truth to speculation, an insistence on problematizing the relationship between language and fact should not come as a surprise. If we accept that one is always implicated in questions of language use, that the subject of IR is written and owes its existence to an engagement with language, then certain things follow, drawing attention to the ways in which things, events and people are represented with attention not for their differences, but for the ways in which differences compliment and inform similarities. While the positivist insistence on "good social science" situates the subject(s) of its inquiry amidst an engagement with language that has already been decided upon in favor of replicability, "the paradoxes of postmodernism work to instruct us in the inadequacies of totalizing systems and of fixed institutional boundaries (epistemological and ontological).⁴⁵²

If we recognize that language is not neutral, then the implications for doing research become as important as any conclusions drawn, namely, that (poetic)

⁴⁴⁸ Dale C. Copeland. *The Origins of Major War*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2001).

⁴⁴⁹ Stephen Walt. *The Origins of Alliances*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1990).

⁴⁵⁰ Robert Gilpin. *War and Change in World Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003).

⁴⁵¹ Stephen Van Evera. *Causes of War*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2001).

⁴⁵² Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 224.

language “is experimental, consciously manipulating semiotica in speech and writing for meaningful effects in an effort to say new things, old things in new ways, special things about Being-in-the-World.”⁴⁵³ Contrary to a desire for an objective closing in upon signifieds and not signifiers, the “linguistic turn” alerts to the fact that language is open to accidents that do not and cannot participate in a logic that exceeds the very thing language thinks “within its closure.”⁴⁵⁴ In that sense, both writer and the written subject are inevitable bearers of statecraft which implies that power is inherent in any engagement with language. Being aware of different ways of reading, interpreting and using language is only one way of dethroning dominant power-constructions. Subsequently, even mainstream, positivist international relations has, despite its truth-hysteria, acknowledged the fact that the subject of politics is a written subject and as such, a signature of talk and text.

What this realization does is bear witness to the tension between the discipline’s desire to be enlightened and the singular nature of the experiences of those who live the political.⁴⁵⁵ In that sense, the kind of linguistic turn that has been underwritten by mainstream IR has remained a monolithic turn that, rather than acknowledge the specific idioms that inform an engagement with ordinary experiences has, for the most part, endorsed a meta-theoretical privileging whose short-sighted nature has failed to follow through with the implications of the idea that “how something is expressed enables certain meanings while construing others ... demonstrat[ing] alternative conceptions of the relation between space, time and identity by highlighting the relation between form and content.”⁴⁵⁶ In that sense, memory as a mediator of past experience becomes singularly important as the site of the possibility of bearing witness with attention to the ‘linguistic turn.’

⁴⁵³ Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 628.

⁴⁵⁴ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 81.

⁴⁵⁵ A more in depth engagement with the refugee will be the subject of the next chapter.

⁴⁵⁶ Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr. “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer.” *International Migration* 42, no.1 (2004): 203.

What is more, “A necessary condition for memory is ‘forgetfulness’ – if memory were complete, it would not be memory but something else.”⁴⁵⁷ With any discussion of memory comes also the concern for practices and discourses of memorialisation, an issue that will be taken up later in this chapter. Jenny Edkins has shown that questions of how, why and what we remember all have important implications for narratives whose content often reinforces state agendas. Memory is, thus, a political activity of the present and, as such, can both aid and depoliticize our engagement with the past. Memory as opposed to history, Pierre Nora argues, is “alive, evolving, negotiated and belongs to the present and to particular groups.”⁴⁵⁸

Memory’s incalculability and frequent historical inaccuracy contribute rather than to the unreliability of fact, to the dynamic, disorganized nature of history itself that informs the relationship between the political implications of archiving and questions of doing research. In that sense, historical analysis based on discontinuity and difference is not “a murdering of history”⁴⁵⁹ but rather, after Michel Foucault,

what is being bewailed with such vehemence is not the disappearance of history, but the eclipse of that form of history that was secretly, but entirely related to the synthetic activity of the subject; what is being bewailed is the ‘development’ (*devenir*) that was to provide the sovereignty of the consciousness with a safer, less exposed shelter than myths, kinship systems, languages, sexuality, or desire.⁴⁶⁰

The problematic, often double, sometimes even multiple nuances to memory point to the linguistic foundations of subjectivity and to the inherently heterogeneous nature of every singularity, of every story told as history.

When faced with the task of translating memory either as truth or as fiction, one recognizes the inherent ethical implications these choices hold. “For many

⁴⁵⁷ Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations*, 72.

⁴⁵⁸ Quoted in Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 31.

⁴⁵⁹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 159.

⁴⁶⁰ Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 14.

people the issue about memory is one about truth or falsehood. Something happened in the past: how accurately do we remember what happened? ... Both sides of the debate share the assumption that the past is determinate. It is over, and what happened happened, independent of our memory of it. The past exists prior to memory in this understanding.”⁴⁶¹ Rather, memories can be viewed as “slices of truth”⁴⁶² that always exist and take their lead from a multi-dimensional universe.

Within mainstream IR, the discourse goes something like an Aesop fable, where a concealed sense of the allegorical guides interpretation. Character roles are clearly drawn out and their interactions structured so as to move closer to an end in service of purposive truth. It is important to recognize that no academic is immune to the telling of fables and that gate-keeping is just as much a part of mainstream as it is of critical scholarship. The search for irrefutable conclusions through the tools of quantitative confirmation is, contrary to what positivist scholars claim, very much a theoretical endeavor. The totalizing gestures that characterize the search for knowledge and the theoretical schools of thought that claim scientific validity are, in fact, as far away from explaining (our known) Reality as is any writer of (science) fiction, especially since postmodern thought from Foucault, to Baudrillard, to Lacan, to Derrida has shown that relationships between subject and object, theory and practice, history and reality are first of all productive and only then representational.

As already argued in my engagement with Paul Celan, dismissing non-scientific approaches has not substantially improved IR’s understanding of the stories told and lived by its subjects. My engagement with Derrida made clear the dangers of romanticizing the potential of language to offer renewal, but what about a similar

⁴⁶¹ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 33.

⁴⁶² Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 629.

concern regarding a romantic appeal to scientific reliability?⁴⁶³ Allow me, in a preliminary response, to suggest that while fact-dependent research provides a preliminary understanding of the ‘big picture’ of peoples, cultures, and modes of being in the world, it does not possess all the tools (ethical or methodological) to encompass, construct or reduce the former to the stuff of generalizing conclusions. Social scientists, in short, are poor story-tellers for wanting to select for objectivity, “laundering ... experience to isolate the ‘facts’ of the matter at hand, and of course, taking a hard right turn away from the poets on writing and other forms of reporting ... results.”⁴⁶⁴ The relationship between this kind of ‘reporting’ and bearing witness will be viewed as a political question.

the post-modern center or, on the nature of productive difference

Assumptions about literature involve assumptions about language and about meaning, and these in turn involve assumptions about human society. The independent universe of literature and the autonomy of criticism are illusory. (Catherine Belsey)

As Ivan Brady confesses in relation to the programmatic nature of ethnography (and most social scientific enquiry), “the unfinalizability of ethnography is not so much a problem of unknowables. The overriding problem is plural “knowabilities” and the frustration of choosing among them. (Or having someone choose for you, someone or some institution with the power to enforce the choice, say, society, for example. Or the Taliban. Or your department head).”⁴⁶⁵ If there is one thing that the linguistic turn makes apparent, it is the fact that writing is always unsettling if only because one has to privilege certain stories and subjects over others. Though the latter might not be reduced so much anymore to “simplistic modeling

⁴⁶³ For a list of exemplary methodological and empirical texts on the subject, refer to any given syllabus from a class on Realism as taught in most North American universities. King, Keohane and Verba’s 1994 text(book) on quantitative social science research is a staunch representative in its family.

⁴⁶⁴ Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 630.

⁴⁶⁵ Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 632.

techniques and scientific representations of utilitarian, rational action,⁴⁶⁶ they are nevertheless reduced, by positivist and critical scholars alike, to a totalizing iteration.

If, in academia, “language alienates us from everyone except ourselves”⁴⁶⁷ and “if language is central to being human”⁴⁶⁸ “as the means by which meaning is exchanged, created and recreated,”⁴⁶⁹ then it is important to recognize that all linguistic engagement with the world has the potential to reduce by making exemplary the sum total of its possible engagements. In other words, any threat of dissidence has the potential to colonize difference. IR has moved, if not all the way around its axis of reference, at least so far as recognizing that there is no such thing as a homogenous community of subjects. On the other hand, “To be a structuralist is first to concentrate on the organization of meaning, on the anatomy and idiosyncratic balance, the completion of each moment, each form; and it is to refuse to relegate everything that is not comprehensible as an ideal type to the status of aberrational accident. The pathological itself ... cannot be understood as the deficiency, defect, or decomposition of a beautiful, ideal totality.”⁴⁷⁰

Derrida alerts to the fact that the violence inherent in hospitality is, every time, conditioned on that same hospitality, informed by distrust for alterity and a suspicion of difference as such. In other words, “It is only ever possible to extend hospitality to the other while at the same time, scandalously and paradoxically sacrificing all the others to whom it is also necessary to respond.”⁴⁷¹ In this sense, Derrida’s aporetic inclination recognizes the paradoxical nature of all political interactions and exchanges.

⁴⁶⁶ George, “Realist Ethics,” 215.

⁴⁶⁷ Roxanne Doty. “Maladies of Our Souls: Identity and the Voice of Writing in Academic International Relations” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no 3 (2004): 8.

⁴⁶⁸ Prem Kumar Rajaram. “The Spectacle of Detention.” *Working Paper Series* no. 7 (Asia Research Institute, 2003), 202.

⁴⁶⁹ Rajaram, “The Spectacle of Detention,” 204.

⁴⁷⁰ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 26.

⁴⁷¹ Nick Vaughan-Williams. “Beyond a Cosmopolitan Ideal,” 118-9.

International relations has the potential to recover the singular nature of experience through novel ways of engaging and reporting on the subject. I argue that truth claims, in addition to being “necessary but not sufficient conditions”⁴⁷² also alert us to the role language plays not only for bearing witness, but for situating witnessing within language’s sensual universe. In other words, human “fear, anxiety, loneliness, pain, reassurance, solidarity, ambition, confusion, failure, pleasures and puzzles of mind” not only inform of and account for the nature of our shared Otherness, but are “essential for accounting for life from the perspective of humans as sentient beings that are likely to be laundered out of scientific reports.”⁴⁷³

The language of facticity does not correspond to “the search for significance that marks the victim’s world.”⁴⁷⁴ By victims I do not mean only those individuals who have undergone traumatic or painful experiences, though their cases do represent a clearer distinction between normal and limit experiences. What I am suggesting more generally is that no substantive engagement with the wor(l)d is possible lest it be guided by a narrative informative by virtue of having its singular nature acknowledged.

A (poetic) engagement with the singular nature of experience facilitates a working through trauma and loss without defining the latter as hypotheticals. A “politics of singular novelty” recognizes that the experience of the impossible (i.e., limit experiences) is not dismissible through normatively informed reasoning but opens up a space for working through the ethical, juridical and sociopolitical tensions inherent in studying and representing the everyday. Moreover, while “the whole issue of how one narrates the dissolution of the very possibility of narration is a

⁴⁷² LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, xii.

⁴⁷³ Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 630.

⁴⁷⁴ Veena Das. *The Word and the World*. (New Delhi: Sage, 1986), 7.

fascinating one,”⁴⁷⁵ it also asks that we put on our critical hat whenever faced with a grand narrative voice.

singularity of political novelty

One of the fundamental postmodern acts is the opening up once again of the question of where the domain of the arts should be, how they abut on the social and natural sciences. (David Antin)

As has been tellingly pointed out by Asja Szafraniec in her recent book, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature*, “Since the singular is never given as a fact, object, or existing thing, there is nothing in a work that would be absolutely singular.”⁴⁷⁶ Nick Vaughan-Williams summarizes Derrida somewhat differently, suggesting that “For singularities to be genuinely singular they cannot be described as anything else that would compromise their singularity. Yet, as soon as any given singularity is identified as a singularity, it has to be, even in a very minimal way, like something – or indeed everything – else.”⁴⁷⁷ Singularity, then, becomes reified when viewed as manifestations of being in the world. While a commitment to responsible decision-making involves, for Derrida, recognition of the singular nature of all beings (human as well as non-human), it also demands that one conceive of a politics of singularity by going beyond a political defined by a system of nation-states.

This, paired with Jacques Derrida’s insistence on literature’s formalizing ability, leads me to suspect that for Derrida, the singular is achieved (realized) only when it appears (is given) as fact: be it a date, a name, a signature, a word of text, a mark. It is perhaps useful to remind the reader of Derrida’s famous statement that there is nothing outside the text. His “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” might perhaps be translated better as “there is no outside-text” which avoids the implication that

⁴⁷⁵ Das, *The Word and the World*, 206.

⁴⁷⁶ Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature*, 20.

⁴⁷⁷ Vaughan-Williams, “Beyond a Cosmopolitan Ideal,” 116.

everything is just language and nothing else. “Derrida’s denial of the transcendental signified is not a denial of reference or a denial of any access to extra-textual reality. However, it is meant to suggest that *meaning* can be derived only from within texts through deferral, through *différance*.”⁴⁷⁸ Language is not just a tool for the dissemination of information, but lives at the core of the ontico-ontological difference between the theory of ‘event’ and the history/study of events as process-driven practices that produces evidence, knowledge and specific implications for action; between writing as producing memory and neutralizing ‘living memory.’

The question, posited in my discussion of Paul Celan, remains the following one: how does one speak of this dual nature of the event (of writing)? My preliminary answer: by engaging the singular nature of event and problematizing “the political” by way of novel linguistic engagements, reporting both on scientific facticity and on singular historicity. While truth claims are important for an engagement with the world, they are “neither the only nor always the most important consideration in art and its analysis. Of obvious importance are poetic, rhetorical, and performative dimensions ... which not only mark but also make differences historically.”⁴⁷⁹

In a sense, then, it is the poetic elements contained in every narrative that help turn a list into a story. Language and writing more specifically are poetic not because they supplement content, but because they are creative in addition to being analytic and declarative and thus, avoid “the artificial distancing in thought and writing that characterizes scientific endeavors, and tied as they are to individual perceptions and meanings that help to calculate both our individual personas and our raveling to the others in an out of our own Made Worlds.”⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁸ Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, 149.

⁴⁷⁹ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 15.

⁴⁸⁰ Brady, “In Defense of the Sensual,” 632.

However, that does not mean that narrative automatically makes things ‘real’ or ‘whole.’ Documents are neither inert nor fixed traces of the past in that they problematize the ways in which we relate to, understand, analyze and live the present. The facts of history can thus be posited as overtly discursive rather than given, teaching that “while all knowledge of the past may be provisional, historicized, and discursive, this does not mean that we do not make meanings of that past.”⁴⁸¹ Derrida’s appeal to the resuscitative nature of poetic language can be read as a more general appeal to recognize that knowledge cannot but be recovered through the interplay of narrative and scientific objectivity.

What that means is that beyond archiving and the tireless work of academics ‘making something re-appear’ out of the ruins of memories, bearing witness is a double challenge to that singular “creative pursuit of which works of literature are an outcome.”⁴⁸² The problem of representing and researching historic events carries with itself “the problem of implication, your own implication, your own response, begin[s] on the level of naming.”⁴⁸³

theoretical impasse: postmodern and other pains

On the one hand, re-affirming repetition, originality, and *différance* threatens to sentence all inquiries into the past to a field of ‘postmodern fiction.’ On the other hand, one is made aware of the heightened and ever so urgent impulse to turn the process of representation into a totalizing narrative. Yet, the aporetic nature of *différance* is not exactly the same as playing (in) the middle. The former stipulates a philosophical undecidability that characterizes the nature of enunciation while the latter, though partially informed by the same undecidability, addresses any discussion of the real-life implications of memory to an active process of dual

⁴⁸¹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 149.

⁴⁸² Szafranec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature*. 20.

⁴⁸³ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. 161.

recovery: past and future. When recalling the problematic character of traumatic memory, for example, it is important to keep in mind that the “middle voice” is not necessarily the appropriate way to write trauma especially if the “middle voice” allows a going beyond as an over-deterministic scientific reliance on binary opposites.⁴⁸⁴

What happens when relying on any one modality of addressing painful memories is that the medium of address ends up institutionalizing the process of remembering through an insistence on being able to encompass and represent what is most demanding and truthful about the experience in question. In that sense, Derrida’s insistence on the resuscitative nature of poetic language suggests that the literary is endemic to an “authentic” access to truth. Dominick LaCapra has discussed Derrida’s thought as

an analysis that doesn’t seem to enable other forms of working through – an analysis that somehow / wants to affirm the necessity of being implicated in trauma and yet also wants politics.⁴⁸⁵

A certain insistence, perhaps an unavoidable one, on the literary work’s singularly generalizable nature allows Derrida to make a somewhat effortless transition between “bearing witness,” “poetic language,” and “singularity” without ever raising the question of memory. “Despite the anti-totalizing aim” of Derrida’s writing and because of his focus on a few select concepts (writing, singularity, *différance*), “there is still an essentializing center around which totalities can be constructed.”⁴⁸⁶ The political character of the process of bearing witness, discussed from the point of view of no one theory or dialectic figuring of the world, informs of a multi-faceted engagement with memory and (historical) event.

⁴⁸⁴ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 19-20.

⁴⁸⁵ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 152-3.

⁴⁸⁶ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 214.

Recall my discussion of the nature of 'event' as always taking place in a specificity informed by a dual historical and ontological relationship to facticity. Beyond enunciation and iterability, neither Derrida nor academic IR provide us with an answer to the questions: "Who is doing the witnessing? Who is the aporetic witness responsible for recovered singular truths?" Posing and attempting to answer these questions should be the foremost concern of political science, since witnessing is not an anonymous process and since historical facts cannot automatically be traced back to truthful testimony. The *Muselmann*, too, has a name, though her testimony might not always be recoverable under it. The (singular) witness, implied and represented in language, subverts language's own stylistic and institutional laws according to an economy of memory. This 'economy of memory' dictates the possibility that stories are recoverable as well as recovering. An 'economy of memory' poses as open-ended the relationship between fact, singularity, subject(ivity) and the drive for objectively reporting on institutionalized knowledge.

Derrida acknowledges the ethical implications inherent in one's "relationship" to alterity as "the memory of the phantom, of that which is neither dead or living, more than dead and more than living, only surviving, the law of the most commanding memory, even though it is the most effaced and the most effaceable, but for that very reason the most demanding"⁴⁸⁷ The figure of the phantom does not recover a commitment to justice but becomes symptomatic of an oscillating movement between mysticism and messianism, whose reliance on the transcendental quality of experience poses justice as an outcome of an (im)possibility. In this sense, memory problematizes the proclaimed objectivity of scientific facticity.

Allow me to pause and summarize my discussion so far. First, I introduced the question of memory and the implications it had for processes of archivization,

⁴⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law," 11.

recovery and reporting of facts. The former was shown as instrumental in pointing out the correlation between preserving information and the politically-significant implications inherent in all forms of institutionalized, fixed memory. The desire for factual accountability informing the drive toward accuracy, truth, and progress was contrasted with the inconstant, unreliable, non-scientifically verifiable nature of memory. This, in turn, opened my discussion to a reading of politics through the prism of singularity and the witness. The thought of Jacques Derrida and more specifically, a discussion of his particular engagement with the concept of memory, pointed out a totalizing tendency in a somewhat romantic Derrida. Singularity, rooted in the historical nature of politics and transmitted through the historicity of 'event,' was discussed as inescapable and fundamentally definitive of all political inquiries. The fact that traditional political science methodology does not address this issue or take its implications for research seriously should not discourage a singular reading of politics. To that end, I will supplement my discussion so far with a brief engagement with Agamben's *homo sacer* as the *juridico-political exception*.

ceremonial encounters: agamben and the presence of the remnant

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to this fact. Then we will have the production of the real state of exception before us as a task. (Walter Benjamin)

I open this section with a hypothesis: In order to be accessible, the remnant must exceed the limit(s) of an exception. As intimated earlier, Giorgio Agamben's thought on *bare life* singles out an inaccessible "other" and builds upon the latter's silence a theory of the juridico-political exception. The exception, defined by the sovereign suspension of law, in turn, gives birth to *homo sacer*. Unlike Derrida, who explores the relationship between the singular nature of 'event' and enunciation, Agamben's contributions to an understanding of the relationship between *bare life* and politics begin and end with a self-referential theory of the exception vested in

narrowly contextualized etymological derivations. His work has, however, been central in initiating an academic discussion on the relationship between sovereign power, juridically-suspended law (turned norm) and the fragile nature of the human.

Agamben's corporeal engagement with the juridico-political concept of the remnant fails on two fronts. While Agamben seems to engage only hurriedly the relationship between the remnant and memory yet, his *Musselmänner* are the silent witnesses. Derrida's romantic appeal to the saving power of (poetic) language is mirrored, in Agamben, by a 'bio-political' rendition of an ethical dilemma unsupplemented by a closer engagement with language. In an important sense, both Derrida and Agamben teach by their omissions about the engagement with the question of memory and its rendition as a political concept. In an attempt to materialize my critique, I will read Agamben in light of the implications he offers for understanding the political.

I will first remind the reader of the main points of contention in Agamben's thought and then, engage the question of memory alongside Agamben's remnant as *homo sacer*. In Agamben's oeuvre, the latter is posited as a politically universalizing concept not unlike the archive, itself rooted in the institutionalization and control of memory. The original problematic of bearing witness will, throughout my discussion, help un-sublimate the juridical relationship between trauma and memory by calling for a coming to terms with the legacy of limit experiences and the tendency they have to lead to philosophical reductionism. The latter will be discussed in light of the ceremonial and ritualistic practices of creation and dissemination of information underwriting an Enlightenment drive toward progress.

Recall that the central issue in Agamben's thought on the juridico-political – the sovereign exception – bears on the nature of the human. In addition to defining

life as a referent of political power, Agamben intimates that the juridical state of exception is indicative of the impossibility of testimony. Thus, not only is ‘normal’ law suspended, but so is the linguistic resource giving individual agency. Agamben offers a version of sovereign power where the latter self-suspends by suspending the law that is its own creation. Sovereignty thus becomes definitive not only of the political, but also of the moral and social life of an individual, making the happy life “one over which sovereignty and right no longer have hold.”⁴⁸⁸

In addition to labeling the life of the individual as “bare life,” Agamben makes sovereign rule into more than a juridico-political category by endorsing it with the power to determine, highlight and/or underwrite the individual drive toward achieving a good life. Human beings, read as juridico-political subjects, no longer possess the ability to employ, nurture and pass on ways of relating to the world that are not entirely informed by their relationship to sovereign power. I am not entirely sure that Agamben makes an additional satisfactory connection between *bare life* and politics. The singular nature of memory and bearing witness challenges the relationship between the exception (politically informed), the human (bio-politically (de)posited) and language (aporetic and directly implicated in the work of memory).

While Agamben may indeed be correct in claiming that “language also holds man in its ban insofar as man, as a speaking being, has always already entered into language without noticing it,”⁴⁸⁹ positing language as “something nonrelational” does overlook the fact that language, in addition to being defined by what is nonrelational, is also the main tool in service of establishing, maintaining and representing political as well as human relations. As R.B.J. Walker has suggested, “what is at stake in many claims about contemporary transformations ... is that we have become caught up in

⁴⁸⁸ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 115.

⁴⁸⁹ Giorgio Agamben. *The End of the Poem*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 50.

radically novel forms of norm, as normativity and normalization, and in radically novel, and dangerous, forms of exceptionalism.”⁴⁹⁰ The latter point is especially relevant when considering the implications Agamben’s thought potentially has for international relations.

the exception as the source of sovereign power

Read against traditional sovereign rhetoric, Agamben’s underlying logic does not problematize sovereign power as compromised, constructed, and normalizing to begin with. In effect, sovereign power becomes independently self-referential and without check, challenging itself in order to reaffirm itself where the “*state of exception*” becomes a stable spatial arrangement inhabited by naked life that cannot be inscribed into the order.”⁴⁹¹ The latter also manages to create a category of identification, i.e. *homo sacer*, that is posited as a problematic, extra-ordinary condition of being without itself casting a shadow on the legitimacy of sovereign power as democratic, non-authoritarian. The paradox uncovering the interdependent nature of the relationship between governing and governed no longer prescribes the same kind of agency for the governed, spoken of as “abandoned,” “non-human,” remnants, as *Muselmänner*, extra-ordinary and in excess of address.

Agamben seems to understand politics as “a sphere of pure means” where the human is a unit of management rather than a physically and ethically-informed being. That is why Agamben can say both that “naked life” is the original foundation of sovereignty and, at the same time, that “naked life has become the dominant form of life everywhere”⁴⁹² now, making a state of emergency the norm without sounding self-contradictory or too offensive to critical theorists. It is one thing to say that “naked life” is the product of the exploitative relationship between rich and poor

⁴⁹⁰ R. B. J. Walker. “Conclusion. Sovereignties, Exceptions, Worlds.” In *Sovereign Lives*. Edited by Jenny Edkins et al. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 246.

⁴⁹¹ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 43.

⁴⁹² Agamben, *Means Without End*, 6.

nations, but it is a whole other thing to use this in lieu of acknowledging the violent implications resulting from having theoretically posited a category of “limit(ed) existence.” The anonymous and quotidian nature of the powers that produce ‘naked life,’ while informative of the processes underwriting the transparency of much of modern political and social interactions, does in effect reduce victims of that violence to quotidian and anonymous beings. Did Agamben do this on purpose?

While the figure of the *Muselmann* posited as the only ‘true’ witness to the Holocaust does provide a reference point for a discussion of limit experiences, it also defers knowledge and the agency of the subject to an impossible, dead, and a negatively-constructed figure. Language, in this sense, or rather ‘being-in-language’ becomes “a gigantic loss of memory”⁴⁹³ which is beyond even Benjamin’s apocalyptic idea of “pure language” as the unachievable, perfect experience of language. What Agamben does not explore is the possibility that in a *state of exception*, language as “the only one thing ... reachable, close and secure amid all losses” that “had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech”⁴⁹⁴ has the potential to recover, if not renew the relationship between subject and past, suffering and witness, silence and testimony.

Survivors who translate their experiences through what I call “a performative reenactment of the past” transcend these differences. The latter refers to every instance of engaging a traumatic experience through the lens of linguistic, artistic, dramatic or other performative idioms that bear witness to the fact that any engagement with the past is a dynamic process making use of performative idioms and methodologies. By performative here I mean the active, interchangeable and mutually-informative interplay between speaking, writing, psychological and

⁴⁹³ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 60.

⁴⁹⁴ Celan, *Collected Prose*, 34.

emotional working through, acting out and remembering that go into every example of engaging the past.

I would like to suggest that what is particularly interesting about the process of bearing witness is that unlike scientific methodologies that aim at a level of generality, bearing witness is sustained and defined by ‘micropractices’ necessarily different in that they do not as readily privilege one idiom over another. By ‘micropractices’ I am referring to linguistic, material and/or philosophical idioms whose power to address the singular nature of bearing witness is exemplary of the latter’s singular nature. What Agamben poses at the state of exception dictated by the work of sovereign power relies on a totalizing idiom where the power to challenge the exception is denied. In this sense, Agamben’s “juridico-political” and Derrida’s “poetic” become two idioms underwriting the world as figured through the interplay between philosophy, theory and practice.

Recall again my positing of Agamben’s thought against Veena Das’ concept of a ‘descent into the ordinary’ which I found particularly informative when addressing the communicable, though problematic, essence of trauma for ordinary people. In Das’ discussion of women’s experiences of violence during the 1947 India-Pakistan partition, healing is achieved and subjectivity restored not through silence but by physically taking on the same world that was the very bystander to inflicted violence. Das allows for transference between memory and testimony to take precedence over the silence of dead or dead-like human beings. Rather than focus on what is terrifying and unspeakable, the women Das studies explore their world through “micropractices” such as sewing, cooking, tending the house, re-marrying, child-bearing, story-telling, singing, writing, crying.

These practices teach of an everyday “politics of singular novelty” informed by a desire to sustain, resist and creatively work through suffering, pain and violence. What Das does in addition is translate her observations into similarly creative, multi-faceted, novel idioms of academic research. Agamben’s quasi-sacrificial, unspeakable rendition of the Holocaust atrocities keeps him from engaging traumatic experiences as communicable, narratable instances of being alive. The result is a theoretically-derived unwillingness to allow for working through painful experiences. Agamben’s remnants turn into documentary knowledge and their silenced testimonies neither “attempt to understand experience and its aftermath / including the role of memory and its lapses” nor come “to terms with ... the past.”⁴⁹⁵

The privileging in Agamben’s thought of “limit experiences” and the fact that actual Holocaust testimonies do exist, pose as impossible the creation of a critically-informed, politically-responsible public sphere. Agamben’s discussion forecloses any attempt to represent and/or transcend an unrepresentable singularity. He suggests that testimony “concerns the subject’s capacity to have or not to have language,”⁴⁹⁶ in which way “the subject is thus the possibility that language does not exist, does not take place – or, better, that it takes place only through its possibility of not being there, its contingency.”⁴⁹⁷ In drawing up a self-referential theory of the exception informed by its very own product (*homo sacer*), Agamben suspends the greater political relevance of his discussion of the “exception” vis-à-vis bearing witness.

What makes *homo sacer* even more problematic is the fact that, as the materialization of the *state of exception*, the former allows Agamben to state the following: “Life and law, anomie and *nomos*, *auctoritas* and *potestas*, result from the fracture of something to which we have no other access than through the fiction of

⁴⁹⁵ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 86, 87.

⁴⁹⁶ Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 145.

⁴⁹⁷ Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 145.

their articulation and the patient work that, by unmasking their fiction, separates what it has claimed to unite.”⁴⁹⁸ The kind of political singularity exemplified in the responsibility to speak must be extended beyond a juridical prescription predicated upon the human as *bare life* in a *state of exception*.

excess and the remnant

Agamben seems fascinated with a philosophy of the excess. The figure of the remnant, however, must exceed the limit experiences that inform it. Otherwise it remains an abstraction that not only erases the possibility for testimony but also challenges the notion of remembering as such, reducing it to an endless ceremonial evocation and mock-recreation of an untouchable past. Put otherwise, one has to undergo the temptation of the excess in order to be able to “relate excess to legitimate limits (or desire to desirability) which is the ethical problem.”⁴⁹⁹ In Agamben, the impossible interaction between language and the ‘limit event’ turns into a ceremonial encounter destined to remain locked in and defined by a circle of human misery.

Despite its clear and present danger, the value of the notion of unrepresentable excess is to foreground the problem of the possible ties and limits of both representation and dialogic exchange in responding to, or coming to terms with, events of the Shoah (as well as other limit events in history). And it simultaneously raises the question of the relations between research, memory, and what limits them.⁵⁰⁰

Derrida’s rendition of the relationship between poetry’s resuscitative potential and the work of mourning revealed a failure to discuss actual physical death. Likewise, Agamben’s remnants become non-definable, sublimated products of a legitimized sovereign power they can neither move beyond nor ignore. A ‘politics of singular novelty’ recognizes that these very subjects, no matter how dejected, miserable, reducible, tortured, and speechless might be can speak for themselves regardless of the theoretical limits set before them.

⁴⁹⁸ Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 88.

⁴⁹⁹ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 155.

⁵⁰⁰ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 94-5.

rattling laws

But now shrinks the place where you stand:
Where now, stripped by shade, will you go?
Upward. Grope your way up.
Thinner you grow, less knowable, finer.
Finer: a thread by which
it wants to be lowered, the star:
to float farther down, down below
where it sees itself gleam: in the swell
of wandering words.⁵⁰¹

I would like to direct the reader's attention to the question of archiving again. An insistence on making known, on coming out and revealing one's experiences, thoughts, feelings, and past can, even when aiding reconciliation and healing, turn into a compulsive obsession with unearthing, excavating, and re-building bastions of knowledge. What this means is that witnessing is also and always necessarily underwritten, despite its performative nature, by a desire for revelation bordering on the sublime. Certain things follow from this realization: First, bearing witness, in its communicative, informative but also performative, and singular nature provides the researcher with multiple tools for the study of human experiences. These tools allow the use of metaphoric, idiomatic, allegorical, and fragmentary idioms without having to fall within the boundaries of disciplinary methodologies. Meaning is not better accommodated by a fragmentary engagement with language; ellipsis and half-hearted metaphors do not address better language's inability to contain all meaning, nor do they respect the responsibility incumbent upon writing to become a decision. The idioms within language that the linguistic turn draws our attention to, if they are to be engaged responsibly and fully, require that one follow through with the choices one makes in writing all the way to the unexplored territory of political singularity.

As I have tried to show so far, neither philosophy, nor literature, nor poetry, nor political science on their own address just how theoretically rich, metaphorically-enlightening, novel, and politically latent the issue of bearing witness is. The

⁵⁰¹ Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*. 69.

implication here is not that one should substitute bombs with poetry or abandon grammar and structural coherence altogether in trying to answer the question: "What is politics after the linguistic turn?" The issue is, rather, one of exposing the nostalgia to totality guiding political science inquiries, both positivist and critical, especially since (singular) writing has not been engaged beyond a romantic appeal to the undecidability and *aporia* of fragments.

Second, because the process of bearing witness is informed by uncontrollable, unpredictable, non-verifiable sources (memory, traumatic violence), so are its assumptions and conclusions likewise conditional, open to revision, and contingent on an understanding of truth and progress that is post-truth and post-progress. On the one hand, the power to regulate and discipline (the subject of political inquiry) poses the question of issuing forth, at any time, a responsibility whose origin is necessarily neither theoretical nor empirical, neither singular nor universal. On the other hand, a singular experience of language, because of its resistance to being translated, substituted or summarized, bears witness to the responsibility that law, language and politics alike have for engaging life as the singular expression of those who live the political everyday. An engagement with bearing witness teaches that if it is to serve life, itself final, fragmentary and experimental, language must be more than swearing or truth telling and law, in the moment of its suspension, must be exposed to its own performative limits. Such a suspension relocates responsibility from fixed systems of knowledge toward the unfolding of different intentions toward language.

What is the nature of this language since already it no longer belongs, no longer belongs simply, either to the question or to the response whose limits we have just verified and are continuing to verify? Will one call this a testimony ... providing that it can never be reducible, precisely, to verification, to proof or to demonstration, in a word, to knowledge?⁵⁰²

⁵⁰² Derrida, *Points*, 22-3.

If “powers are themselves written, articulated performances based upon the circulation and withholding of knowledges in an inscribed manner,”⁵⁰³ then any theory claiming to explain the world using a system of talking, writing, coding, re-coding, talking and writing again, turns writing into an archive from policy to culture.

This suggests that if the irreducible singularity of each example is derived from exemplarity itself, if there is always a universalizing dimension to any engagement with language, then the exemplarity (universality) of the law “articulates itself as an obligation to decision.”⁵⁰⁴ Justice becomes a question of unavoidable choices implying ethical as well as political obligations to bearing witness to these choices that, in making them, also make us. For Agamben to say that “In the case of *homo sacer*, a person is simply set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law,”⁵⁰⁵ he must also presuppose that divine law holds a kind of precedence over human law that not only defines but also revokes identity.

“If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*.”⁵⁰⁶ This should not leave us content. The death of the witness not only compromises but also sabotages the project of reconciliation. Rather than challenge the silence and complacency borne out of the Holocaust, Agamben underwrites the former not only theoretically and by honoring the “exception,” but also through a juridico-political universe. Allow me to suggest that when reading sovereign power against the experience of being human in the world, it is important to make the distinction between, for example, refugees and non-refugees, camp inmates and bystanders, victims and sympathetic listeners, for there is something unique in the experience of being a refugee that is not the same as

⁵⁰³ Wolfreys, *The Derrida Reader*, 14.

⁵⁰⁴ Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 302.

⁵⁰⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 82.

⁵⁰⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 115.

being defined by the power of the sovereign exception. Thus, the ontology of being a refugee becomes reified by treating the time and place of the specific event of displacement as something that can be appropriated in service of theory.

Discussing witnessing through the figure of an impossible witness, Agamben does not quite situate his discussion within the domain of publicly accessible memory, important in that “Accurate memory ... including memory that confronts the traumatic dimensions of history, is ethically desirable in coming to terms with the past both for the individual and for the collectivity.”⁵⁰⁷ In a way, Agamben’s witness remains thinkable only in the context of limit experiences that, in turn, not only romanticize trauma but also make witnessing conditioned on the moment of violence.

In order to create a clearer picture of Agamben’s relationship to ordinary life, in my next and last chapter, I will ask the following question: Does the refugee exist beyond the juridical as a *homo sacer*? For what Agamben does by creating the category of *homo sacer* is institute a theoretical species of human being that helps make thinkable the violence, cruelty, and sheer beastliness of normal people doing things from behind the mask of orders, exceptions, weakness, survival, or madness. This extra-ordinary human being ends up helping to theorize a politics of the event constituted by a totally new breed of sovereigns.

Allow me to conclude my engagement with Agamben by briefly engaging his concept of the “inclusive exclusion” in light of the question of a “politics of singular novelty.” If Agamben is correct in saying that (natural) life (*zoe*) is included in the polis by means of an exclusion blurring the difference between *zoe* and *bios*, then what we are left with is an intimation that politics is the place where life has to transform itself into good life and where what has to be politicized were always

⁵⁰⁷ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. 96.

already bare life. Agamben almost fetishizes the real-life implications of historic events by making *homo sacer* into a monist theoretical category of identity.

Dominick LaCapra addresses Agamben's treatment of "sacred man" and its implications for the practice of politics and historiography in the following manner.

The result is an overly reduced, analytic idea of the (impure) sacred divorced from ambivalence (which Agamben explicitly rejects and sees as 'mythologeme'). This one-sided conception of the sacred in its application to the Holocaust inserts the latter into one more variant of modernization theory in which the Holocaust becomes the culmination and paradigm of modernity. It also coincides with an often exaggerated emphasis on confined, positivistic, relatively antiseptic notions of biology, medicalization, and eugenics, which in Agamben are coordinated with a Foucauldian notion of biopower and biopolitics. ... It does not account for Nazi quasi-ritual horror at contamination, elation in victimization, regeneration or redemption through violence, fascination with extreme transgression, and equivocation or even at times ambivalence with respect to the Jew.⁵⁰⁸

Agamben's remnant rejects the singularity of event by attempting to reduce it to a definition of the "sovereign exception ... [as] the figure in which singularity is represented as such, which is to say, insofar as it is unrepresentable."⁵⁰⁹ The category of 'inclusive exclusion' allows Agamben to suggest that what cannot be spoken about is outside of language which, we saw with Paul Celan, was not the case. Though one cannot say that Celan is the prototypical survivor one can, however, assert that he is exemplary of what it means to be a survivor. Not so with the remnant. In addition to being silenced the remnant, set outside the law, is *abandoned*, "that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable."⁵¹⁰ What this suggests for a "politics of singular novelty" is that, in an important sense, the question of the survivor as an authoritative witness takes us back to a politics demonstrating a different intention toward language: one that bears witness to a singularity of enunciation that is not verifiable until engaged in itself.

⁵⁰⁸ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 127 (ftn #14).

⁵⁰⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 24.

⁵¹⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 28.

being in flight

*There is no identity with is 'self-identical' ...
all identity is fundamentally ambiguous.* (Étienne Balibar)

If, in search of one's bearings, one has to come up with a case eventually, a question comes to mind as to whether refugees are an exemplary case for thinking the moment of being in flight? If iterability is "the necessary repeatability of any item experienced as meaningful, which at the same time can never be repeated exactly since it has no essence that could remain unaffected by the potentially infinite contexts (within contexts) into which it could be grafted,"⁵¹¹ then the universality that being in flight entails is always contained in the millions of individual bodies that the historical figure of the refugee evokes, and vice versa. In its singularity, the refugee represents a paradoxical figure set against the background of political theorizing. If "the fragment can only be approached by a discourse without recourse to power,"⁵¹² then the refugee can only be approached by a theory without recourse to closure. The encounter of the refugee with political science makes for an interesting dilemma: either the singularity of the refugee has to be given up in service of a meta-theory, or the controlling instinct of academic scholarship itself must be rethought.

Thus far, I have argued that if we took the "language turn" seriously, then a continuous insistence on interrogating the relationship between the singular and the historical is in order. What this suggests for bearing witness, itself conditioned on relating remembering to linguistic enunciation to a singular event, is that no single idiom can claim extra-ordinary representational power.

In that sense, I argued that the poem engages politics by its insistence on the pure taking place of language beyond any prescriptive frameworks. The relationship between the subject and language (both in writing and reading) is not a constitutive

⁵¹¹ Derek Attridge, "Introduction." In Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 18.

⁵¹² Frey, *Interruptions*, 33.

one, that is, language does not represent a subject only to make it knowable (through language). Note that the attention here is not on the possibility of language to engage knowledge, but on knowledge itself as an end. This means that out of the possible referential emptiness (purity) of language, writing produces a subject and since there are many different ways of writing, there must also be many different modes of subjectivity, or at least ways of being human in some sense or another.⁵¹³

The issue here is not about teaching Princes how to rule, nor is it about mobilizing resistance so that Princes in waiting can take over from Princes in power. The issue here is recognizing a mode of writing politics and its subjects that exposes and interrogates research/writing differently, an event that addresses being in the world through the micro-idiom of bearing witness; a language that neither simply represents nor recalls, neither formalizes nor breaks down, neither generalizes nor reduces but uncovers the tension underwriting the nature of being human.

Next, I will offer an engagement with “the refugee” in an attempt to problematize security and refugee definitions. A teleological view of history will be exposed for overlooking the active role that individual human beings play in shaping both politics and history. As Nick Vaughan-Williams has suggested, specific situations give rise to specific actions that give rise to political decisions,⁵¹⁴ informed by an understanding of responsibility defined by asking what one should do under every single circumstance.⁵¹⁵ This situates marginal voices beyond the contested space between self and other, citizen and foreigner, and ideas of eternal Kantian peace.⁵¹⁶ The next chapter will engage the refugee not as a *homo sacer*, but as a singular human being underwriting a desire to *out-live* security.

⁵¹³ Mick, thanks for formulating this insight for me.

⁵¹⁴ Vaughan-Williams, “Beyond a Cosmopolitan Ideal,” 117.

⁵¹⁵ Vaughan-Williams, “Beyond a Cosmopolitan Ideal,” 119.

⁵¹⁶ As Nick Vaughan-Williams points out, within any logic of progress, non-Europeans trail behind (2007: 113).

Chapter Five

Refugee voices and voice-overs: On exile, an umbrella, and the question: "Who am I after the night of the estranged?"

Insects endlessly busy,
horses the color of sun,
donkeys the color of cloud,
clouds, huge rocks that weigh nothing,
mountains like tilted skies,
a flock of trees drinking at the stream,
they are all there, delighted in being there,
and here we are not who are not,
eaten by fury, by hatred,
by love eaten, by death.⁵¹⁷

I would like to open this chapter with a confession. I believe that one can, perhaps, only speak authoritatively about things one has lived through, things one has experienced oneself. It is not enough to read about them in a paper, in someone's journal, in a book, on the internet, or learn them in a political science seminar on International Relations theory. In light of what will follow and though I did visit a Bhutanese refugee camp in the summer of 2003 and though I did work with refugees in Phoenix, AZ, I am not a refugee myself nor have I ever had an experience approximating in any way the experience of being displaced. The extent to which I understand what being a refugee means is, to a great degree, informed by the official UNHCR and academic definitions implying homelessness, poverty, joblessness, insecurity and the lack of rights (legal or otherwise). The closest I get to knowing what it might feel like to be a refugee (a paperless subject defined by an international bureaucracy) is being a visa-holding Eastern European living abroad. The closest I got to knowing what it felt like to be a powerless foreigner was when accused of being an Eastern European prostitute by a Homeland Security Officer at Washington Dulles International Airport.

⁵¹⁷ Paz, Octavio. "Riprap. (7. Landscape)" In *Selected Poems* (Toronto: New Directions Books, 1984), 9.

But, unlike a refugee, I did speak good English, knew how to defend myself against unjust allegations and waited in line with all other non-US citizens rather than stand in the special “refugee” queue, often unmanned, very quiet, evoking the curious, spectacle-hungry looks of the rest of us. Unlike a refugee, writing and thinking about the experience of refugeeness is my only way of understanding, sympathizing with, and approaching refugees themselves. Unlike a refugee, I work and write with the fashionable demand for ‘durable solutions’⁵¹⁸ in mind, chanted equally loudly and authoritatively by both academics and practitioners. These solutions cannot be “durable” in the same way that they can never be “final” and so they will be, in the context of this paper, discussed as ordinary, contingent, and informed by the demand for physical survival. Unlike a refugee, even my home away from home remains one within a critical academic training pushing and urging me on to write, research and speak, for I well know that silence feeds on fear, ethical amnesia and the symptoms of materially-informed detachment. I am not a refugee, yet allow me to share with you how a non-refugee understands her displaced fellow-wo(men).

introducing the argument

The outline of my argument will unfold in three steps. First, I will address the nature of being a refugee not simply as a political question informed by the doings and concerns of sovereign states, but also as an ethical and a linguistic issue. I will do that by showing that while (becoming) a refugee is very much a political problem, regardless of the misguided anti-problematic rhetoric endorsed by some critical security and displacement scholars, being a refugee transgresses the thinking and writing of mainstream politics in important ways. To maintain that refugees are not a problem, that defining them as a problem undercuts their humanity, that their

⁵¹⁸ The three ‘durable solutions’ are voluntary repatriation, integration in the host-country and resettlement in a third, usually developed, country.

problematic nature endorses a statist discourse by underwriting regimes of power and oppression means to overlook the real-life implications that being displaced has both for the individuals and for the nation-states in question. I am sure that asked whether being a refugee is problematic for them, all refugees would answer in the affirmative. Fine-tuning semantics is not what interests me. Rather, the question that engages my research has to do with the ways in which refugees, on their own, cope with and understand their predicament in ways that are physically, politically, culturally and temporarily different from “official” narratives. The nature of displacement, the ways in which we understand and address it as political scientists, how it moves us to comport ourselves in the world, does behoove us to examine more closely just what the ‘refugee problematique’ uncovers regarding the human nature of its subjects. Refugees represent an instance of crisis in the international order if only because the latter thinks itself as stable, peace-driven, orderly and law-informed. As Nevzat Soguk has pointed out with regard to United Nations’ own conceptualization, refugees “are seen as a problem existing prior to international regime activities, while the regime activities are represented as solutions to that difficult, morally demanding but not intractable problem of the refugee within the otherwise presumably unproblematic, stable, and secure territorial bounds of the sovereign state.”⁵¹⁹ It is clear that refugees and other liminal beings (the homeless, the immigrant, the prisoner, the mentally or physically challenged, the aging) alert us to the fact that the international order is defined by a crisis, that it is only envisioned and not actually underwritten by security concerns aimed at reducing the degree of uncertainty, danger and threat that, in turn, inform the desire for order, law and power. To that end, displaced lives will be presented as individually and not institutionally-informed ways of, first, exposing and then, *out-living* the chimera of security.

⁵¹⁹ Nevzat Soguk. *States and Strangers*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 13.

Second, I engage what I see as a paradoxical positing of the refugee within critical academic discourses. In an attempt to offer an in depth critique and being aware of the limited space available for me to do that, I will purposefully omit from my discussion a close engagement with a number of mainstream security arguments relating and relating to displacement. Their assumptions, propositions and conclusions will undoubtedly be alluded to in the process of my engagement with the critical representations of the refugee within political science after the linguistic turn. In this chapter, I take my lead from the work of Dillon, Malkki, Nyers, Rajaram, Soguk⁵²⁰ and others whose contributions to the field of critical refugee and security studies have helped emancipate the discussion from otherwise totalitarian, oppressive, ethically-void, and universalizing tendencies. The latter have posited the refugees as an 'exclusive inclusion' challenging the self-proclaimed authority of the nation-state rhetoric on the one hand while, at the same time, the refugee is still spoken of as a silent "category of unfortunates"⁵²¹ in need of agency, a voice and, most importantly, a state. As Soguk has shown, "When the refugee seems to exhibit any sign of agency in the discourse, either as some kind of threat or as someone whose agency was manifest in her will to drag her body between distances, she hardly ever figured as a person but was part of an amorphous mass, faceless and speechless."⁵²²

I will show that refugees possess an (authentic) voice that they use in the everyday conducting of their lives, both through language and through their actions, and that this voice, unlike its academic counterpart, is not a pre-determined,

⁵²⁰ See Dillon, *Politics of Security*; Dillon, "The Sovereign and the Stranger," In Ekins et al (eds). *Sovereignty and Subjectivity* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1999), Dillon, "The Scandal of the Refugee," In Campbell and Shapiro (eds.) *Moral Spaces*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999a), Dillon, "Correlating Sovereign and Biopower" In Ekins et al (eds). *Sovereign Lives*. (New York: Routledge, 2004). See also Liisa Malkki. *Purity and Exile*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Peter Nyers. *Rethinking Refugees. Beyond States of Emergency*. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Prem Kumar Rajaram. "The Spectacle of Detention." *Working Paper Series* no.7 (Asia Research Institute, 2003); Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, "The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer." *International Migration* 42, no. 3 (2004): 33-63; and Soguk, *States and Strangers*.

⁵²¹ Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo (eds.) *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the refugee crisis in the developing world*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1989). 33.

⁵²² Soguk, *States and Strangers*. 242.

homogenizing one. In addition to all formal definitions, it is this (active) voice that gives content and meaning to what it means to live days on end as a refugee, underwritten by, yet challenging, other agendas' ends. Emma Haddad reaches a similar conclusion in her examination of the various definitions attached to refugees: "The way in which the refugee sees her own identity often contrasts sharply with the perceptions of those bestowing the label."⁵²³ That is, monolithic definitions are exposed not only for violating the integrity of individual experiences, but also for being informed by the understandings and agendas of people far removed from the reality of displacement. All this is true despite the fact that rhetoric of clientelism veiled in political neutrality tries to hide the fact that the label of 'refugee' is not benevolent and creates its own momentum. Bureaucratically-imposed, Haddad argues, "the concept can be seen as a form of control."⁵²⁴ What is more, defined both against and alongside statist agendas, the refugee remains conceptualized by the sovereign state as both a problem and a product of nationalist politics, as a tamed being "whose protection is only possible by another state."⁵²⁵ I suggest that refugees alert us to the "absence of state protection of citizen's basic needs"⁵²⁶ as well, casting the former as inactive, ineffective and directly responsible for the creation of liminality. It is for this reason that the issue of security becomes a common denominator when examining the relationship between the state and its citizens, the latter's legitimate rights based on their relative position of threat vis-à-vis the nation-state. In other words and as Shacknove has pointed out, nation-states and their policies are indeed, in many cases, the main causes for the generation of refugees.⁵²⁷ What this points to is, on the one hand, an understanding of the process of refugee creation as state-induced and, on the other, the re-affirmation, in trying to 'solve' the refugee problem, of state borders and sovereign agendas.

⁵²³ Emma Haddad. "Who is (not) a Refugee?" European University Institute Working Paper no. 6 (2004), 18.

⁵²⁴ Haddad, "Who is (not) a refugee?" 18.

⁵²⁵ Haddad, "Who is (not) a refugee?" 13.

⁵²⁶ Haddad, "Who is (not) a refugee?" 13.

⁵²⁷ Andrew E. Shacknove. "Who is a refugee?" *Ethics* 95, no. 2 (1985), 282.

By continuously insisting on the need to problematize and re-problematize the refugee, critical theorists construct the latter largely from a theoretical point of view. By continuously insisting on the need to define and cast the refugee vis-à-vis questions of national security, on the other hand, mainstream political science ends up configuring the refugee without critical regard for questions of power, oppression and language. “This reveals, of course, the extent to which the refugee is a creature of states and state interests first and foremost, and only secondly a consequence of concerns and cosmopolitanism.”⁵²⁸ Conceived of as an ‘inclusive exclusion,’ the refugee is defined as a limit condition and thus, as subjectivity set up negatively, in need of fixing, securing, and normalization. In an attempt to think the refugee with attention to the latter’s ethico-politico-linguistic nature, I offer a re-reading of Giorgio Agamben’s theory of *homo sacer*.

Third, I re-turn my discussion to the question of bearing witness in hopes of providing an insight into the relationship between language and (academic) theorizing about refugees on one hand and language and field/policy-informed work on the other. The bulk of my argument will address the discipline of political science as such and more specifically, the methodologico-practical commitments that inform, direct and shape its goals and tools. I engage the latter by suggesting that how we understand, theorize and teach about refugees has important implications for the ways in which we conduct ourselves in the world as academic practitioners, educators and witnesses. My discussion will be guided by the following hypothesis: The historicity of refugees is what makes them credible; that historicity is always singular. Factually speaking, refugee populations across time demand a number of the same basic services, i.e. clean water, food, shelter, income, security; they have similar grievances and end up going through similar national and international procedures

⁵²⁸ Haddad, “Who is (not) a refugee?” 19.

set up to restore, protect and guarantee the inalienability of their rights. The UNHCR definition of what a refugee is addresses precisely this set of characteristics.⁵²⁹

defining refugees: the logic and the law

It is commonly accepted that this definition has some very important limitations for being Eurocentric, deterministic, “genderized”⁵³⁰ in suggesting that women and children endure the greatest suffering, privileging the powerful, exclusive of refugee voices themselves, too narrow and over-reliant on the ability of the international regime to fix things. The latter is exemplary in the following UN statement: “International protection as provided by countries of asylum in cooperation with the UNHCR is an effort to compensate for the protection that refugees should have received in their own countries.”⁵³¹ The definition is, as suggested by Peter and Renata Singer,

a narrow one, demanding that claims to refugee status be investigated “case by case” which means that “the same international disorder that makes people refugees also prevents their recognition as refugees, for the statement that people face persecution in their own country implies criticism of that country, and most countries are slow to criticize allies, particularly when their own support of those allies has contributed to the suffering of the refugees.”⁵³²

It overlooks two important implications inherent in being a refugee. The first one is the fact that the category of displacement is informed by individual experiences that are neither calculable, nor generalizable beyond their individual scope. The second is that the international regime, charged with the task of delivering solutions to displacement, does little preventative work and is informed by similar if not the

⁵²⁹ The 1951 Refugee Convention defines the ‘refugee’ as any person who “owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his formal habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unable to return to it.” (Article (1)(2) United Nations Conventions Relating to the Status of Refugees, July 28, 1951).

⁵³⁰ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, 31.

⁵³¹ United Nations (UN). *Note on International protection*. (44th Session. Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme, 1993), 2.1-2.3.

⁵³² Peter and Renata Singer. “The Ethics of Refugee Policy” In *Open Borders? Closed Societies? The Ethical and Political Issues*. edited by Mark Gibney. 113-130. (New York: Greenwood Pres), 114.

same assumptions that underwrite the logic of sovereign nation-states: the desire for stability, legitimacy, and territorial autonomy.

As Soguk has shown, the international regime “should not be understood simply as a tertiary response to the refugee problem by state-agents presumed to be already historically fixed” but “as a practice of statecraft of the first order, oriented to produce, stabilize, and empower contingent images, identities, subjectivities, relations, and institutions of sovereign statehood in local and global politics.”⁵³³ Furthermore, Prem Kumar Rajaram has suggested that, because of the arbitrary nature of donor aid and its allocation within the humanitarian camp, the latter “may be seen as a disciplinary strategy guaranteed by donor governments.”⁵³⁴ There, refugees’ actions are followed and recorded by aid agencies and researchers in order that the latter may use them as data to justify their often arbitrary allocations of aid or the denial thereof. In other words, “Refugees are seen as a problem existing prior to international regime activities, while the regime activities are represented as solutions to that difficult, morally demanding but not intractable problem of the refugee within the otherwise presumably unproblematic, stable, and secure territorial bounds of the sovereign state.”⁵³⁵ The inability of nation states to protect their citizens alerts also to the international regime’s own hand in helping perpetuate humanitarian crisis and statist agendas.

Refugees, “except for their common experience of having felt forced to migrate ... are an extremely heterogeneous category of people.”⁵³⁶ As suggested by Nevzat Soguk, an attitude that recognizes the polymorphous nature of refugees “takes seriously the powers and resourcefulness of these people to remake their lives even in

⁵³³ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, 111.

⁵³⁴ Rajaram, “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer,” 40.

⁵³⁵ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, 13.

⁵³⁶ Ellen Laemmers. *Refugees, Gender and Human Security*. (Netherlands: International Books, 1999), 22.

displacement, for example, in a refugee camp, or in re-placement in new places with unfamiliar names, speeches, and mores that are fast familiarized in their determination to survive.”⁵³⁷ Because the figure of the refugee evokes the concept of the limit, the exception(al) and the sacred, and because it is often given as an example of the modern biopolitical human condition, a number of ordinary implications of being a refugee, i.e. bearing and raising children, putting food on the table, marrying, dying, fetching water, and cooking food are overlooked and/or recruited in service of theoretical goals.

These ordinary needs, met under harsh circumstances, are much like the everyday demands that life places on us all. To present refugees as exceptional, while sensitive to their particular situation, does overlook the kinds of physical tasks that, when engaged, re-write and re-draw the theoretical boundary between the ordinary and the extraordinary. The nature of the politico-ethico-biological fact of being displaced has important implications for the ways in which we as academics bear witness to and understand the refugee not only as an unstable and destabilizing but also, as a powerful politically-constructed figure. Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben will help situate my exegesis with attention to questions of hospitality, *aporia*, *bare life*, and the exception. Furthermore, I engage (refugee) poetry by way of inviting the reader to think about bearing witness independently from academically-translated commentary.

⁵³⁷ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, 5.

preliminary notes on “the refugee”: in lieu of a literature review

I am afraid of ambiguity's
old academic hush. Still ...
things happen,
and simply to record them
is often to deceive,
is even sometimes to mimic fog,
the way it's perfectly
yet inadequately clear about itself. ...⁵³⁸

Taking lead from Michael Dillon's writing on the relationship between security and the (inter)national,⁵³⁹ I would like to offer the following preliminary hypothesis: “The refugee underwrites (inter)national security by confronting us with the task of ‘*out-living*’ the desire to be secure.” By this, I do not mean to suggest that being displaced is more attractive than holding a passport issued by a national government, nor that refugees offer a romantic commentary on what it means to be (human) in the world: displaced, uprooted, a nomad, thus - free. What I am rather alerting to is the fact that the thoughts and concerns that guide the work of International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline, in addition to being informed by questions of security and scientific validity, are also underwritten by questions of fear, not knowing, absence, loss, violence, displacement, and trauma.

These terms are not simply the missing partner in a dichotomous pair; they inform by virtue of addressing the issue of insecurity through the prism of the everyday. Hence, we enjoy a security that is informed not by the peaceful co-habitation of individuals, ethnic (racial, religious, political, etc) groups, or nation-states, but a security that is predicated on the everyday struggles of ordinary people to out-live the yoke of the very things that define them once as secure and then, as insecure. “One of those constellations of struggles, however, indeed the one which informs all others, is the recurring struggle for the political itself. For whatever

⁵³⁸ From “Not the Occult” in Stephen Dunn, *New and Selected Poems 1974-1994*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 269.

⁵³⁹ Dillon, *Politics of Security*.

politics is allowed or taken to be – how it is captured, fixed and determined in its foundations; in short secured – is a decisive element in all power struggles.”⁵⁴⁰ Concern with formulating a theory of war, democracy, balance of power, peace, to give a few examples, can obscure the complex ways in which these concepts evolve within the everyday, a-theoretic struggles of ordinary people. Likewise, massive internal and external displacements of peoples suggest that the crossing of an international border is no longer a requirement for becoming a refugee.⁵⁴¹ These definitional sensitivities carry important implications for a discussion of (human) security outside traditional statist understandings.

Much of the discourse informing our engagement with refugees is aimed precisely at undermining, veiling or cross-dressing insecurity into a language devoid of much else than a concern for ensuring its own longevity. The question to ask is whether such engagements with refugees are helpful beyond their theoretical implications. My answer has two parts: on one level, the desire for territorial stability/security that informs much of International Relations thinking is the longing for security derived from a Kantian understanding of progress, stability and nationality. The global migration flow of people, legal or illegal, cosmopolitan or rural, Western or not, characterizes modernity’s problematic Kantian cartographic imperatives, informed by a coherent national culture that “functions, interpretatively, within the European state-oriented political imaginary.”⁵⁴² The ever increasing refugee numbers, supplemented by hundreds of thousands of internally displaced peoples, supplemented by the illegal immigrants both in Western Europe and the Southern border of North America, point to trends in border crossings whose raison

⁵⁴⁰ Dillon, *Politics of Security*, 18.

⁵⁴¹ Haddad, “Who is (not) a refugee?” 2.

⁵⁴² David Campbell and Michael Shapiro (eds). “Introduction” In Campbell and Shapiro, *Moral Spaces*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1999), xvi.

d'être is indeed a search for greater security, though a security informed by factors challenging directly the powers of nation-states.

As suggested by Singer and Singer, "to distinguish, in meeting the need for protection, refuge, food, and resettlement, between someone fleeing from political persecution and someone who flees from a land made uninhabitable by prolonged drought is difficult to justify."⁵⁴³ The very meaning of "security" has been altered by these mass movements of people and by the insufficiently adequate treatment they receive by both nation-states and international organizations. In an example of institutionalized hypocrisy, to identify these movements solely as national security threats means to fail to acknowledge and engage the shifting definition(s) of nation, security, border and citizen. David Campbell points to the complex nature of global relations and their bearing on the open question of ethical responsibility and alterity in relationship to the Gulf War.⁵⁴⁴ For him, "we need to develop an approach to responsibility that is cognizant of the way in which the reterritorialization of states necessitates a deterritorialization of theory"⁵⁴⁵ which would figure the discussion of Being as a responsibility toward an Other.

On the other hand, if we recognize that how we say things bears upon our understanding of the ways in which relations are built, actions executed and scholarship conducted, then it behooves us as scholars to recognize that an ethical engagement with the world carries with it a linguistic charge that helps both construct and radicalize identities, theoretic commitments and interpretive conventions. Because refugees are conceptualized as victims, as speechless emissaries of a violent past, as the ambassadors of ethnically-informed political

⁵⁴³ Singer and Singer, "The Ethics of Refugee Policy," 114.

⁵⁴⁴ David Campbell. *Politics Without Principle: Sovereignty, Ethics and the Narratives of the Gulf War*. (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 1993).

⁵⁴⁵ David Campbell. "The Deterritorialization of Responsibility" in *Moral Spaces*, 29.

practices, as objectified and oppressed human beings in need of ‘durable solutions,’ they are also constructed as the stuff that, brought back to stability, informs security itself. The latter is measured through statist appeals to repatriation, assimilation or resettlement. As Nevzat Souk has pointed out, refugee discourse “takes for granted, never questions, and starts by positing the paradigmatic hierarchy of the citizen/nation/state ensemble. There is an ‘already there’ quality in the representations of this hierarchy, which is presumed to be already historically located, already articulated through prevailing forms and relations, and already empowered to speak and to be heard.”⁵⁴⁶ Rather, the refugee is a figure that bears witness to the state’s failure to provide security to its citizens and thus, itself becomes a source of anxiety, a threat to statist logic calling for the hermetical re-production of truth, knowledge and power. Understood as historical figures, both the nation-state and refugees represent “multiple, intersecting, and overlapping fields of activity.”⁵⁴⁷

As suggested by Michael Shapiro, “the stories through which ‘peoples’ enact their identities and collective coherences ... and the spatial models allocating global proprietary control – participate in violence and inhibit ethical modes of mutual recognition at a global level.”⁵⁴⁸ The influence and agendas of nation-states, however, are so far reaching that the very discourses informing the former’s desire for security and for securing bodies end up skipping right over the singular experiences that inform their subjects and their ability to formulate, understand, problematize and/or puzzle over the implications that a (refugee) camp, for example, has for our understanding of other territorial encampments considered part of the nation-state. Diken and Laustsen have suggested that the camp, from a transitory and temporary ‘home,’ has been turned into a tool for the immobilization of people that, in turn,

⁵⁴⁶ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, 30.

⁵⁴⁷ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, 45.

⁵⁴⁸ Michael J. Shapiro. “The Ethics of Encounter: Unreading, Unmapping, and Imperium.” In Campbell and Shapiro (eds), *Moral Spaces*, 59.

“effectively problematize the notion of the city and politics.”⁵⁴⁹ The camp architecture, so often represented by family huts/tents lined in rows and squares, also caters to an ordered, geometrical visualization of refugee security underwritten by an appeal to the latter’s temporary nature and by an insistence on effectiveness rather than affectivity.⁵⁵⁰ Refugee camps, set up to mimic the social and political make-up of a city become “the sites of an enduring organization of space, social life and system of power that exist nowhere else.”⁵⁵¹

Michel Agier defines refugee camps as “the emblem of the social condition created by the coupling of war with / humanitarian action, the site where it is constructed in the most elaborate manner, as a life kept at a distance from the ordinary social and political world, and the experimentation of the large-scale segregations that are being established on a planetary scale.”⁵⁵² He posits that the formula of the camp itself bears witness to the “*formation of a global space for the ‘humanitarian’ management of the most unthinkable and undesirable populations of the planet*”⁵⁵³ where the camp itself becomes “a life kept at a distance from the ordinary social and political world” in the form of a “large-scale segregation.”⁵⁵⁴ In other words, a discourse on refugees and their humanitarianly-assigned dwelling places has important implications not only for our understanding of displacement, but also for the ways in which security inserts itself as a prerogative in our academic, humanitarian and personal agendas.

The need to define the refugee and the paranoia borne from not being able to do so readily alerts to a fear inherent in recognizing that, indeed, belonging to a single

⁵⁴⁹ Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen. “Camping’ as a Contemporary Strategy – From Refugee Camps to Gated Communities.” AMID Working Paper Series (Aalborg University, no. 32 (2003)), 2.

⁵⁵⁰ Jim Lewis, “The Exigent City.” *New York Times Magazine* (June 2008), 30-38.

⁵⁵¹ Michel Agier. “Between War and City: Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee camps.” *Ethnography* 3, no.3 (2002), 322.

⁵⁵² Agier, “Between War and City,” 317-8.

⁵⁵³ Agier, “Between War and City,” 320.

⁵⁵⁴ Agier, “Between War and City,” 320.

category of identification is an impossibility – for the refugee and the citizen alike. “Belonging to more than one category means ambivalence in as much as the search for distinctions based on either/or is present.”⁵⁵⁵ Jenny Edkins (2003) has pointed to a similar problem of fixing identities found in famine relief camps where the concern of international humanitarian organizations is often/always one with food, life and death and not with upholding an economic self-sufficiency or cultural integrity for the refugees. That means that upon arrival, refugees are grouped based not on family, clan or ethnic associations, but on the international organization’s assessment of their needs and the best ways to cater to them. The fact that this causes resentment on the part of the refugees who think that the international humanitarian organizations are not being sensitive enough to their (individual) plight should not discourage scholars and humanitarian workers from attempting to develop alternative ‘processing’ strategies while, at the same time, still do their job. However, this observation alerts us to the fact that in addition to needing to care for starving and dying bodies, the responsibilities of states and relief organizations, when reduced solely to food, water and shelter, end up producing *bare life*. The long term task of saving this life becomes, soon enough, a question that cannot be limited just to the nutritional intake and/or physical fitness of people.

The situation has not become any less complicated with the advent of the ‘terrorist,’ as immigrants and terrorists are often addressed, constructed and treated together as ‘dangerous subjects.’ The following statement from former US Attorney General John Ashcroft, delivered on October 21st, 2001, illustrates the extent of this bureaucratic metamorphosis:

Let the terrorists among us be warned. If you overstay your visas even by one day, we will arrest you. If you violate a local law, we will work to make sure that you are put in jail and kept in custody as long as possible.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵⁵ Diken and Laustsen. “‘Camping’ as a Contemporary Strategy.” 2.

⁵⁵⁶ Qtd in Rajaram and Grundi-Warr. “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer.” 41.

This refugee and immigration paranoia is manifested to an even larger degree in the example of the Australian migration law, which gives its own rationale for treating refugees and illegal immigrants as ‘criminals.’ Not only are the prescriptions of the law generally discriminatory, but so are the provisions extended to include the territory of the whole country as subject to ‘exception.’ The Australian justice system thus makes itself (legally) exempt from having to care for, insure and/or listen the grievances of the refugees, as they are, from the moment of their arrival, placed in detention centers exempt from the laws of the land or from international provisions of non-refoulement. What is more, Singer and Singer point out that the Australian fear that the steady influx of refugees might damage the environment is highly unjustified in a reality where Australian residents “having holiday houses, roaring around the bush in four-wheel-drive vehicles, going skiing, and throwing away their drink containers without bothering to return them to recycling.”⁵⁵⁷ The issue remains one of fear as rhetorics of security.

Refusing to respect the legal obligations ensuing from international agreements conflicting, threatening and/or challenging the sovereignty of Australia, the nation-state simply makes the latter null. The question of national security is hereby given as a reason why Australia only observes international treaties and obligations that suit its vision of who is safe to be allowed in the country and who is not. Beyond the obvious fact of diplomatic hypocrisy, here is an example of outright likening of refugees and other stateless people to criminals and terrorists. Allow me to quote in its entirety an excerpt from a law passed in 2001 by the Australian Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA):

The Australian Government is firmly committed to ensuring the integrity of Australia’s borders and to the effective control and management of the movement of people to and from Australia. This commitment stands before Australia’s absolute commitment to meeting its international obligations

⁵⁵⁷ Singer and Singer, “The Ethics of Refugee Policy,” 126.

under refugee-related conventions. Underlying these commitments is the fact that Australia is a sovereign country which decides who can and who cannot enter and stay on its territory. Only Australian citizens have the unrestricted right to travel freely in and out of the country – all other people must have a legal authority in the form of a visa.⁵⁵⁸

Thus, sovereignty underwrites not only the juridico-political relations between subject and state, but it also defines bio-political existence as something to be maintained, supervised, evaluated and de-limited. So much we know from Foucault. If a citizen is causing trouble, then s/he is either arrested, fined, jailed or otherwise reprimanded in an effort to restore a sense of normalcy and order. If a citizen, once expelled, finds herself a refugee, then the responsibilities of the state are transformed from those of a protector, to those of a participant donor as inconspicuously veiled under rhetoric of neutrality and humanitarianism as is necessary to restore, once again, normalcy and order.

The segregation of nationalities; the orderly organization of repatriation or third country resettlement; medical and hygienic programmes and quarantining ... the accumulating of documentation on the inhabitants of the camps; the control of movement and black-marketing; law enforcement and public discipline; and schooling and rehabilitation were some of the operations that the spatial concentration and ordering of people enabled or facilitated.⁵⁵⁹

These are the very political and humanitarian markers used to secure bodies. None of these markers engage the individual experiences of displaced people who, “in becoming objects of the philanthropic mode of power, the political, historical, and biographical specificity of their life worlds vanishes into a vast register labeled ‘unknowable, irrelevant, unconfirmed, unusable.’”⁵⁶⁰ Procedures of screening, monitoring, securing and defining the refugee help produce the refugee as “a

⁵⁵⁸ Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). 2002a. *Fact Sheet 71: New Measures to Strengthen Border Control*. Public Affairs Section, DIMIA, Canberra.

⁵⁵⁹ Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer,” 42.

⁵⁶⁰ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 296.

knowable entity”⁵⁶¹ and the camp as an “*hors-lieux*,’ outside of the places and outside of the time of a common, ordinary, predictable world.”⁵⁶²

The creation and dissemination of knowledge about the refugee becomes a humanitarian concern where processes of normalization and ‘calculation’ are connected in one way or another to questions of securing states against the bodies of the displaced, the “undesirables.”⁵⁶³ This, in turn, has led the academic discipline of political science to address the question “Who am I after the night of the estranged?” in the passive voice: re-positing it as a commentary on the realm of the international as a citizenship-less, order-less, though a statist realm. That the creation of the refugee is a problem is, at this point, evident. As to the origin of this problem and the ways in which it is ‘handled’ and ‘operationalized,’ the lack of sufficiently critical debate is itself indicative of the degree of political and humanitarian hypocrisy. If “IR is a tiny place” informed by invented mainstream epistemological commitments, as I heard Michael Shapiro say once, and if “modes of thinking create kinds of subjects,” then how do we think of a ‘we’ versus ‘them’ from within IR itself is an important question to ask? Who, precisely, is charged with answering and addressing this question?

When speaking of refugees, “an individual identity is replaced by a stereotyped identity with a categorical prescription of assumed needs.”⁵⁶⁴ It is important to note that securing is done both before and after accepting the label of refugee – which is never simply and unproblematically granted, especially as industrialized countries’ shared response to refugee petitions for resettlement are

⁵⁶¹ Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer,” 42.

⁵⁶² Agier, “Between War and City,” 323.

⁵⁶³ Agier, “Between War and City,” 323.

⁵⁶⁴ Zetter, Roger. “Labeling Refugees: Formatting and transforming bureaucratic identity.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 4, no. 1 (1991), 44.

often met with “deterrent policies” and doors closed “as tightly as they can.”⁵⁶⁵ The refugee label assimilates but also excludes, commenting on the violence inherent in the ways in which we construct and/or represent the stories we tell.

To pose our puzzlement about existence, and our desire for the truth of it, this way requires that it be shown how something is wrested from nothing and prevented somehow against falling back into nothingness. In other words, it requires us to discover how secure (certain) things are – what secures them and how they can be secured – so that we can confidently take them to be the very things that we take them to be; or resolve disputes between us in respect of what they really are. A ground is sought that will explain the emergence of some-thing, allow us to judge exactly what it is, and measure the inevitable variation in its appearance against how that ground tells us it ‘really’ is. And, of course, if this is done, if we can securely determine how something is something rather than nothing, then we have mastered it.⁵⁶⁶

Our understanding of the world, our experience of it, our doing politics within it are always contaminated by an insecurity informative of the nature of human life itself. The latter questions the conceptualization of liminality as a security threat and, in turn, bears witness to the fact that no representation of the refugee, be it academic, artistic, humanitarian or political, is enough. “The story” is really a riddle, a Derridean *aporia* calling for different readings in accordance with the institutional and temporal commitments of both narrator and audience.

going places: vanishing points

Tell me, draftsman of the desert,
Surveyor of the sinking sands;
Is the unrestraint of lines
Really stronger than the blowing winds? ⁵⁶⁷

While being uprooted as a refugee is associated with insecurity, homelessness and powerlessness, being uprooted as a tourist, a legalized immigrant, or an ex-pat is associated with freedom, courage, wisdom and adventure. Or, as Michael Shapiro suggests in relation to Mexican cosmology, “there is more than one time in the world

⁵⁶⁵ Singer and Singer, “The Ethics of Refugee Policy,” 115.

⁵⁶⁶ Dillon, *Politics of Security*, 19.

⁵⁶⁷ Osip Mandelstam, “Ottave,” qtd. in Roland Bleiker, “Forget IR Theory” In Stephen Chan, Peter Mandaville, Roland Bleiker (eds.) *The Zen of International Relations! IR theory from East to West*, 37. (New York: Pelgrave, 2001).

... there is another time existing altogether alongside, above, underneath, the linear time calendars of the West.”⁵⁶⁸ The refugee’s insecurity is seen as tragic, as a reflection of his subaltern identity or, as Liisa Malkki observes, “understanding displacement as a human tragedy and looking no further can mean that one gains no insight at all into the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have for specific people ...”⁵⁶⁹ Broken roots become symbolic and synonymous with going non-native, with being an outcast, a person without nationality.

At the same time, travelling and tourism, prerogatives of the citizen, are seen as educational, informative and adventurous. Notions of space and map-traversing are constructed according to a system of culturally and nationally pre-defined identities where the act of border crossing is understood once according to one’s relationship to a home state, then according to one’s intentions vis-à-vis the host state and then again, regarding one’s partaking in a number of identity-defining characteristics: race, gender, religion, continent, knowledge of English. Challenged by the incessant flow of people through them and, as Kirtik Raj has suggested, rather than as rigid, geographic identifiers, “Borders are better conceived today as a set of points, or broken, discontinuous lines ... that serve the same set of functions, but in a way that troubles the simple inclusion/exclusion logic far more seriously.”⁵⁷⁰ The Levinasian call to recognize the (absolute) Other, the stranger, as constitutive of the self’s reciprocal relationship to oneself before and above the sovereign state becomes here a violent, repulsive appropriation and absorption of the spaces and cosmologies this Other occupies in the world. The common-sense logic of native vs. foreigner is supplemented by an underlying logic of self-preservation - I would do anything to protect my life. Turned sour, this citizenship-informed instinct leads to the

⁵⁶⁸ Shapiro, “The Ethics of Encounter,” 62.

⁵⁶⁹ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 16.

⁵⁷⁰ Kirtik Raj. “Refugee, Border-Camp” (Working paper prepared for Minnesota International Relations Colloquium “On the Move”, 2005), 8.

construction of alterity as dangerous, different, unknown, and subject to exclusionary policies and a demand that the state take care of these fears by taking care of them. But fear, when misunderstood and unexplored, has a funny way of mutating, of acquiring monstrous dimensions, of reproducing itself and taking over one's life.

In this sense, Levinas' "pluralism that does not merge into a unity"⁵⁷¹ is not only domesticated but, if defiant, becomes representative of a threat to the self, a disruption to the homestead. Refugees are thus spoken of as inferior, dangerous, broken, and stuck; as "a symbol of instability" in need of mending. Tourists, on the other hand, are adventurous, voyeuristic, possessing a knack for overcoming danger - with their particular kind of freedom appealing to some ordinary idea of what being free means (an idea that immediately implies what not being free is as well). Indeed, "the immigration laws of developing countries effectively confer on their residents the benefits of membership in the better-off group, without giving the worst-off group any opportunity at all - never mind *equal* opportunity - to be among the better-off."⁵⁷² After the prevailing understanding of the relationship between the state and its citizens "in terms of participation, representation, and protection in the bounded space of presupposed particularity and difference ... the refugee is seen as one who lacks the citizen's unproblematic grounding within a territorial space and, so, lacks the effective representation and protection of a state."⁵⁷³

A politics of security functions as a commentary on the nature of *bare life* as uprooted, tragic and broken and of natural life as free, happy and whole. As observed by Liisa Malkki in her study of Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania, "One vital underpinning of the generalization and universalization of the refugee in contemporary therapeutic discourses on refugees is to be found, then, in the common

⁵⁷¹ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press 1987): 42.

⁵⁷² Singer and Singer, "The Ethics of Refugee Policy." 117.

⁵⁷³ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, 10.

assumption that ‘the refugee’ – apparently *stripped of the specificity of culture, place and history* – is human in the most basic, elementary sense. The refugee as bare humanity stands, we imagine, for all of us at our most naked and basic level.”⁵⁷⁴ This makes the homeland a sacred and desired realm that must be defined and signed off on by state, nation, and community. Being homeless, then, is a curse and an impediment to realizing one’s potential, the right to a homeland being the condition for realizing the human right to freedom. Memory, homelessness, violence and the human end up being formalized in a relationship of good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, peace vs. war, security vs. insecurity.

the refugee problem: securing bodies

“ Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping.” (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*)

The goal of securing bodies, posited by the nation-state as an outcome of perpetuating the exercise and use of legitimate power has, as pointed out by Michael Dillon, “come to dominate our understanding of rule, so sovereign power has come to limit our imagination in relation to the possibility and to the promise of politics.”⁵⁷⁵ Refugees, in that sense, have been brought to political and juridical submission by the rhetoric of sovereign logic commenting on the ways and modalities according to which power, both statist and international, is organized. This points out to the fact that sovereignty itself depends on human insecurity, the former being defined and underwritten by its relationship to liminal beings: refugees, the homeless, immigrants, illegal aliens, the mentally ill, the handicapped, the old. As the relationship between liminality and power shifts, so does security become redefined and refined over and over in relation to the limit, the exception, and to the kinds of

⁵⁷⁴ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 12.

⁵⁷⁵ Dillon, “Correlating Sovereign and Biopower,” 41.

(marginal) lives that inhabit the tenuous zones of indistinction that Giorgio Agamben calls “exceptions.”

As Étienne Balibar (2002) has pointed out, borders have come to be proliferated both within and outside the domain of the nation-state to the extent that “there is an increasing ‘interpenetration’ of interior and exterior, such that day-to-day living becomes increasingly securitized even when the survival or society or identity is not really under threat.”⁵⁷⁶ As the sovereign desire to secure lives grows, so does the deployment of insecurity originating within the sovereign state become more and more prominent and uncontrollable. Otherwise put, “In the symbiotic relations and relational transfers and exchanges of power relations, sovereignty takes on a different tenor, as it then becomes exposed to other accounts of the life whose deployment and death it ultimately seeks to command.”⁵⁷⁷

These visions of insecurity are inescapable and must be addressed through the lens both of sovereign power and the limit that, tempting and theoretically savvy, can ultimately transgress our desire to overcome it. As I argue later in this chapter, Agamben’s *state of exception* become norm limits the ability of sovereign power to secure itself not only historically (as with Agamben) but also, in the everyday. If we follow through with Michael Dillon’s insight that “the first exercise of sovereign power is to create the sovereign”⁵⁷⁸ and with Carl Schmitt’s “sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” then securing the *body* of the refugee is no longer only a question of securing the legitimacy and life of the sovereign state. The process of securing (human) bodies alerts to the performative, singular modalities that inform both the sovereign state and the liminal populations produced by and producing it.

⁵⁷⁶ Raj, “Refugee, Border-Camp,” 10.

⁵⁷⁷ Dillon, “Correlating Sovereign and Biopower,” 45.

⁵⁷⁸ Dillon, “Correlating Sovereign and Biopower,” 47.

This also alerts to the fact that addressing refugees as liminal beings only insufficiently recognizes their singular nature.

Hence, what ultimately concerns me are the ways and modalities of thinking the refugee as a “we,” not the history of the development of the ‘label,’ the current definitional quarrels, or an enumeration of statistics in humanitarian and academic reports. What drives me is the question of whether it is possible to speak about liminal beings in a way that is sensitive to the singularity of their temporally-specific being in the world. That is, what kind of language should we recruit to address the singularity of the refugee without, while remaining intelligible, adopting the very violence it resists? This issue is at the bottom of understanding and addressing the current political imaginary and of being able to think, write and comport oneself ethically and politically in the world. It informs my ability to contribute and partake in the work and thought of academic political science. It regards a desire to see past theoretical bickering, past the (un)critical gaze of elitist audience, and past a self-inflicted need to preface, excuse and justify my theoretical commitments – and toward a potential to create, imagine, embrace, and love my work and its informants.

While an engagement with the refugee might, in the end, tell me very little about the ways in which the experience of the (displaced) sovereign subject is constructed and constructs politics, it comments on the relationship between states of emergency and the subject’s continuous transgression of and *out-living* the desire for security as defined by the sovereign center. As Raj’s summary of Jane Caplan⁵⁷⁹ points out, “*states* require the individual to have an identity in order to be recognized at all, and in most cases, this identity – a legal name, a national identity number, a passport number – is both state-issued and unchangeable without state

⁵⁷⁹ Jane Caplan. “‘This or That Particular Person’: Protocols of Identification in Nineteenth Century Europe.” In *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, 49-66. Edited by Jane Caplan and J. Torpey. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

permission.”⁵⁸⁰ I am not suggesting that living in fear is more desirable than living in peace. Rather, I claim that a security defined by the sovereign bureaucratic, political and juridical apparatus, by creating the insecure bodies that it must then secure, undermines itself. It does so not only because refugees continue to exist in spite of the nation/state/citizen holy Trinity, but also because displaced people’s lives re-define, re-conceptualize, and re-claim security for themselves in ways that, not underwritten by the authority of the state, sabotage the ‘legal’ identifiers otherwise denied them by sovereign power.

Take the example of false documentation discussed by Liisa Malkki in her engagement with town Hutu refugees in Tanzania. What she suggests is that identity documents, in addition to making subjects visible and traceable, serve also as an avenue of invisibility, especially in cases when buying oneself nationality papers and having (any kind of) papers from international organizations helps identify someone, other than as illegal or a refugee, as part of the local, recipient community.

The range of different meanings attached to citizenship and to the documentary construction of identity shows how inadequate is the common assumption that when a person ‘assimilates,’ he or she simply ‘gains’ aspects of a new cultural identity while ‘losing’ something definite from the old identity in the bargain. Just as citizenship was always something more than a simple matter of have or have-not for the town refugees, so, too, was that messy, vital phenomenon that scholars so passionately gesture at by saying ‘identity.’ Rather than revolving around a transition from one fixed, rooted identity to another, the lives of the town refugees celebrated what Deleuze and Guattari have called ‘rhizomes.’⁵⁸¹

Michel Agier comments on similar assimilation techniques among other African refugees in Kenya. “A Kenyan identity card or driver’s license, or a regularly renewed temporary work permit, obtained by bribing the officials who issue or check these

⁵⁸⁰ Raj, “Refugee, Border-Camp,” 15.

⁵⁸¹ “Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign states. [...] It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. [...] The tree is filiation but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction. ‘and ... and ... and ...’ (Deleuze and Guattari quoted in Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 174).

documents outside the camps, enable them to carry out their business deals.”⁵⁸² This uncovers the everyday strategies used to re-invent ways of being/feeling free, normal, invisible and safe.⁵⁸³ I would go so far as to suggest that these alternative identifiers, in their illegitimate, illegal character, both exempt the refugees from the need to seek the approval and stamp of officialdom while, at the same time, underwriting the refugees’ desire to reaffirm and re-claim the rights and freedoms of recognized citizenry outside legal norms.

detention, definition and defiance

1. detention

Question: Why did you leave Algeria?

Answer: Because I am Berber.

Question: Why did you choose Australia?

Answer: Because I am an indigenous.⁵⁸⁴

In addition to sovereign and humanitarian practices of refugee protection, another kind of securing the refugee body goes on that is initiated and carried out by the refugees themselves. This particular kind of securing is not always aimed at reclaiming lost citizenship, nor does it directly help the refugees on their quest for international political recognition. Rather, this kind of securing is aimed at facilitating the carrying out of everyday rituals, customs, and demands of life that, in helping the refugees cope with their situation, also offer a sense of bodily and communal security otherwise unavailable to stateless subjects. This is important because it draws attention to the political charge of much overlooked, everyday acts of coping with and making livable that bear weight in the re-claiming of freedom and the restoration of agency. In their essence, these acts are physically-performative commentaries on ordinary life – they give voice, face, physical dimensions, color,

⁵⁸² “Agier, “Between War and City,” 330.

⁵⁸³ For an interesting discussion into the distinction between strategies and tactics, though engaged in a markedly different context, refer to Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2002).

⁵⁸⁴ Angel Boujbiha. “Interview” http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol1no1_2002/boujbiha_poems.html. [May 29, 2008]. Boujbiha wrote this poem as a detainee in Villawood detention center in Australia.

warmth and vision both to the refugees and to those working with them. To the extent to which these acts comment on an individual engagement with life/daily happenings, they are singular and non-generalizable beyond the individual example each of them offers. This, in turn, is important because it calls for idioms and modalities of addressing this “securing,” this ‘*out-living*’ security, this particular kind of practicing survival that are informed not by calculable methodologies but are derived from the experience of life-events. Refugee poetry, giving voice without always naming, is one such instance of alternative opposition and defiance.

My name is asylum
I was born in here
Here is the detention center

The center is circled by wire
Wire makes it scaring

The wire is 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
1 is the wire for closure
2 is the coiled barbed wire
3 is the protection for 1 and 2
4 is the razor wire on the top of 3
5 is the high fence.

The higher fence
Which stops birds coming inside
Stops thoughts and imagination
Which stops the world outside
The higher fence which becomes
The border between me and Australia....⁵⁸⁵

Being a refugee is here exemplified in an interesting way: by numbers, the same statistically-informed tool that often strips refugees of their humanity. Boujbiha portrays the detention center as a self-contained, circular reinforcement of a fort-like nature. The different layers of barbed wire, securing and securing one another over and over again represent a rather symbolic fact of ‘being in control’ on the part of the guarding officials. Ruddock’s caution against cutting one’s wrists is hereby

⁵⁸⁵ Boujbiha, Angel, “My Name is Asylum”
http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol1no1_2002/boujbiha_poems.html; [May 29th, 2008].

underwritten by a shared cultural fear of deviance, terrorism and violence. The refugees are not only locked away behind barbed wires, they are also displaced from their culture – the latter’s occasional surfacing seen as potentially dangerous, unclear, non-Australian and contagious. Thus, the refugees’ proposed deviancy underwrites the Australian citizen’s normalcy. In terms of securing this deviancy, the five layers of barbed wire not only represent a physical obstacle to any attempt to escape, they also exemplify a physically-informed suspension of the understood nature of being a refugee - a powerless, persecuted human being in need of protection, not detention - a claim that should, at the least as the UN understands it, offer a safe place of temporary residence for those under its protection.

Detaining refugees is seen as a move toward making Australia a safer place. What is so interesting about this statement is that it contradicts the status of the displaced as ‘legal,’ ‘authentic,’ and ‘genuine’ refugees since, the understanding is, the latter kinds could not possibly present a threat. Thus, definitionally speaking, the Australian government’s practices showcase the right to determine, on the one hand, the legitimacy of refugee claims based on modes of entry into the country (boats seen as ‘semi-barbaric’ and uncivilized), ethnic and cultural background and, on the other, once under Australian jurisdiction, to choose to deny protection “based primarily on the fact that legal obligations do not apply to detainees that are ‘unlawful.’”⁵⁸⁶

What is more, “the Australian Government has created an expansive zone of indistinction, encompassing by inference the entire Australian nation-state, where a stable exception has been created.”⁵⁸⁷ Consider detention described thus:

⁵⁸⁶ Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer,” 46.

⁵⁸⁷ Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer,” 46.

Being detained
Means arrested

Welcome to the process
There is a law
Plus legal adviser

...
The detention
The routine
The flying time
Called human rights

Why so many years detained?⁵⁸⁸

Securing the body of the detainee also means pushing the latter to such desperate measures such as sewing their lips, throwing their children off boats and cutting their wrists. It serves to portray the detainees as deranged and anomalous, as dangerous and uncivilized human beings whose reactions are not desperate pleas for help, but well-calculated, unreasonable, deviant, manipulative and violent ways of getting the better of the Australian state and its perks. What is even more scandalous is that all this institutionalization is veiled under the name of law that not only gives priority to “certain forms of existence while denigrating others,”⁵⁸⁹ but also justifies itself by an appeal to the public morale and understanding of a community whose unity is based around exclusionary parameters and false formalities.

2. definition: “who’s there?”

Recall my engagement with Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben and Paul Celan and my continuous insistence on the singular nature of the process of bearing witness. Recall that in Chapter Five, Derrida’s thought helped introduce my discussion on the tension between political science’s desire for progress, rationality and enlightenment and the singular, non-generalizable experience that life represents. Giorgio Agamben’s writings, engaged in Chapter Two, were challenged for their exclusively juridico-political understanding of being in the world. The limit

⁵⁸⁸ Angel Boujbiha. “Detained.” http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol1no1_2002/boujbiha_poems.html. [May 29, 2008].

⁵⁸⁹ Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer.” 48.

category of “bare life” paired with his “state of exception” become-norm were challenged on account of being self-contained where “bare life,” personified by the *Muselmänner* - dead, unable to speak or bear witness to having been in the concentration camps - does overlook and undermine the real-life testimonies that camp and violence survivors offer. Recall my critique of Derrida in Chapter Three: first, for his tendency to romanticize the literary, writing and poetry; second, for being anti-Derridean in not problematizing enough the singular in light of the (im)possibilities it offers for political action and third, for opposing actual physical life to physical death when speaking of the resuscitative function of the poetic. My engagement with Celan’s poetry in Chapter Three discussed his language as a novel positing of an otherwise old language/world. I suggested that the reason poetry was different than other linguistic modes was because of its ability and its suitability for using otherwise ordinary language in a novel way.

In light of these critiques, I will re-read the experience of being a refugee from the point of view of the ethico-political implications that life-experiences have for questions of security, the limit, states of exception, “bare life,” and language. Allow me to preface what will follow by a lengthy excerpt from Thomas Keenan’s *Fables of Responsibility*.

Any political responsibility is itself nothing other than an experience of a certain encounter at the border, of a crossing and its irreducible difficulty, of the aporia and the *no pasarán* which marks all frontiers as structurally undecidable. Something other than knowledge comes into play at the frontier, something that exceeds or cannot be reduced to cognition and the application of a rule – otherwise the decision at the border would make no difference.⁵⁹⁰

What Keenan suggests is that the responsibility of assigning and assuming responsibility is not as clear cut and/or rationally-deduced as it might seem at first glance and is, like Dillon’s (1996) securing of security, to be *out-lived*. If Keenan’s

⁵⁹⁰ Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, 12.

“*Who’s there?* is, first of all, a question of language,”⁵⁹¹ then who one is speaking to is important in light of the implications that power has in supplementing any rhetorical construction. Politics, in this sense, involves an exposure to the difficulties of language, resolving the dilemma of bearing witness to an event without erasing the latter’s singularity. In the sense in which refugees’ everyday actions inform the possibility of their safely being in the world, they also comment on the modalities that constitute their being in the world unsafely.

2.1 camp landscapes

“There is a man sitting across the room
in shadow, but I know who he is.
His brilliant eyes burn through shade.
He tells me that if I sit still and listen
then all the stories of the world will come to me. . . .”⁵⁹²

Next, allow me to introduce the Bhutanese refugees whom I visited in the summer of 2003. I am not interested in the reasons for their exile or in the ongoing tri-partite talks between the Nepalese government on the one hand, the Bhutanese government on the other and the refugees themselves, though I am aware that these negotiations have direct bearing on the refugees’ everyday lives. What I will engage, though briefly, are my impressions of the relationship between living as a liminal being and the politics underwriting the camp’s legitimate existence. Thinking back on that visit and having to write about it, I am reminded of the words of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, a former professor and the visionary behind the Zapatista National Liberation Army: “It’s very difficult when you have a theoretical scheme that explains the whole of society and then you arrive in that society and you realize that your scheme explains nothing.”⁵⁹³

⁵⁹¹ Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, 13.

⁵⁹² From “Lives” in Brian Daldorph, *Outcasts*. (Warrensburg, Missouri: Mid-America Press, 2000), 3.

⁵⁹³ Quoted in Higgins, Nicholas. “The Zapatista Uprising and the Poetics of Cultural Resistance” *Alternatives* 25, no. 3 (2000): 364.

I visited the refugee camps in July, at the height of the monsoon season, when bridges and rivers were impassable and we had to mount an army truck in order to make the treacherous crossing between town and the camps. The entry to the refugee camp itself was not heavily manned or under obvious security, though we did have to sign our names in a visitor log-book as well as answer a few questions as to the purpose of our visit. I had previously obtained a rather arbitrarily-granted permit to carry out two days of camp research from the Nepalese Minister of Foreign Affairs, who happened to be in town that day and whose “protection” I was lucky enough to secure after an “official” visit consisting of a discussion of my legitimate academic standing, his powerful political status and his making sure I knew that being allowed to visit the camps was a favor and an act of good will on his part.

During my short visit, I was escorted at all times by a local Red Cross official who insisted on showing me the progress that had been made toward making the refugees self-sufficient. They had developed their own vegetable gardens, though the size of the enterprise was hardly on a scale sufficient to feed even one-hundredth of the population. Gardening had thus become an activity for the ‘consumption’ of visitors, onlookers and report-writers. I was shown the ‘offices’ of the various support and humanitarian organizations, unmanned at the time, each housing a table, a few chairs and posters from central offices situated on other continents of the world. I asked if I could speak with the camp leader, after which I was escorted to an improvised “studio” where Hari (the camp leader) and myself sat and talked surrounded by children, heat and flocks of lazy flies. Hari spoke good English in a slow and composed manner: his tall, slender shape bent forward to meet me. His feet were bare; he had on a white shirt and off-white pants. He smoked a lot and used his hands and body to gesture in making a point, seldom looking around longer than a moment. There was little obvious urgency in his tone, not much drama either, and as

the conversation turned from a question-answer format to story-telling, I set aside both my list of prepared questions and my recorder.

Hari spoke of the refugees' attempts at setting up schools, of their political and social initiatives, of the frustrated youth they had to appease daily, of the difficulty of finding food or securing any income, of feelings of uselessness, of the idleness threatening of the spirit of the young, of depression and the difficulty of motivating people to be engaged in community activities, of the poor condition of their dwellings, of the lack of healthcare, and of their political demands towards both the Bhutanese and Nepali governments. As has been suggested by Michel Agier in relation to ethnically-mixed refugee camps in Africa, the re-construction of life in the refugee camps is an example of "inventions of the everyday" that "transform the everyday vision that the refugees have of space in their daily lives ... accompanied by the beginnings of a symbolics of space."⁵⁹⁴ Hari placed no demands on me, did not make me promise anything in return for his audience and only asked that I accompany him on a short tour of the camp, without the Red Cross official present. Hari introduced me to a former Bhutanese Cabinet Minister whose crooked hut was packed with so many books that, to me, it represented a vain attempt at maintaining a bastion of knowledge despite the poverty and widespread illiteracy of the camp population. We shared chai, spoke to a young, angry man who insisted he was doomed to be an exile forever. This young man had been a teacher in Bhutan and had, since coming to the camps, helped set up a school here as well. Hari introduced me to a group of weaving children between the ages of 8 and 15 whose work helped bring their families some income; to the leader of the Youth political organization, also named Hari, who in turn showed me his family hut – a room wallpapered with newspapers, two single beds shared by five people, a few cooking pots and a small

⁵⁹⁴ Agier, "Between War and City," 329.

pile of clothes. We spoke some more; I was given copies of ‘secret’ documents, shown the largely empty food distribution center, and urged on to take pictures.

2.2. pictures and seeing

I would like to address one of those pictures next, if only briefly. In a dissertation on bearing witness, it seems to me almost obligatory to engage at least one photograph, photographs themselves representing one definitive form of testimony. A photograph freezes time and sometimes even defies linguistic explanation. In other words and as Roland Barthes has suggested, a photograph supposedly (re)presents the “this was” of an event, the definitive modality allowing us a glimpse into the past. For the purposes of this dissertation, photography will be discussed as one among a number of modalities relating the past. I hope to show that it is not necessarily a better, for being truth-faithful, tool of addressing memory. The fluid, unreliable, singular nature of memory defies even the supposedly non-partisan, unbiased message a photograph communicates. However, photography does offer an eye in the past and for its pertinence to the subject of this thesis, I will address it next.

Taking lead from Liisa Malkki’s criticism of the enframing function of much of official refugee photography, itself informed by “the shared view that refugees constitute something different, unusual, and strange and hence, require a unique identity,”⁵⁹⁵ I would like to offer my thoughts on a picture I took in the Bhutanese refugee camp. As Malkki suggests, photographic portrayals of refugees nowadays are extremely abundant, offering “a strong visual sense of what ‘a refugee’ looks like.”⁵⁹⁶ Thus, photographs portray a certain aspect of being a refugee which is never the whole picture of being a refugee: women are portrayed working, tending to children,

⁵⁹⁵ Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, 13.

⁵⁹⁶ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 10.

animals, the fields while men are portrayed doing most everything else that might characterize their social and class status in their particular population, ethnic groups.

Review of contemporary photographs of refugees would seem to suggest that children have come to embody, more easily than adults, the universalism of bare humanity. The intent here is ... to signal the operation of a humanistic, universalizing representational practice that should be studied further.⁵⁹⁷

Thus, women are predominantly represented as caretakers surrounded by children, as the backbone of the camps, as the peace loving but also, as weak, overworked and in need of assistance. Commenting on Salgado's *Family of Man* photographic collection, Nyers observes: "One is struck with the impression that during their exile, refugees never worship, trace, build, sing, or dance. / It is as if only in the context of welcoming the return of statist identities that such activity can be seen."⁵⁹⁸ Women are often portrayed in colorful clothing, wearing traditional jewelry, keeping up appearances. Men, on the other hand, are often missing from pictures or if they are present, it is either their manliness and strength that come across, or their idleness. In the set-up of the African refugee camp, men are often the breeders of violence, the rapists, the uncontrollable ones. In an effort to avoid homogenizing images of refugees that work to obscure their individual humanity "erasing the specific, historical, local politics of particular refugees, and retreating instead to the depoliticizing, dehistoricizing register of a more abstract and universal suffering,"⁵⁹⁹ and in an attempt to supplement my previous discussion of the refugees' everyday ways of securing their bodies and speaking for themselves, allow me to turn your attention to a picture of a man holding an umbrella. This is my proof that I was there and that Hari was the way I describe him. The photograph bears witness.

⁵⁹⁷ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 11.

⁵⁹⁸ Nyers, *Rethinking Refuges*, 21-2.

⁵⁹⁹ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 13.

3. defiance: hari's umbrella

The picture is of Hari, the camp leader, holding a rainbow-colored umbrella to protect himself from the afternoon sun. Hari is standing in the middle of one of the 'main' roads in the camp, surrounded by a handful of curious, grinning children. At the time, his umbrella seemed to me the biggest umbrella I had ever seen in my life, maybe because he had a lot of sun to protect himself against, maybe because its colors stood in sharp contrast to what I had come to know as the grim camp reality. In the picture, Hari is posing for me as I prepare to leave the camp, he is saying good-bye. I am reminded of a line from Alphonso Lingis' *Foreign Bodies* going something like that: "The body is always lived in *first person*."⁶⁰⁰ The body is secured in first person as well. Allow me to address Hari's umbrella as one such tool for securing his body. First, the umbrella protected him from the scorching sun. After all, that is what an umbrella's purpose is - to protect the body from harsh atmospheric conditions. Hari's umbrella, in that sense, was an object that aided Hari in his daily dealings with the heat, why not with the grayness as well.

Elaine Scarry recognizes the fact that "the ongoing work of civilization is not simply in making x or y but 'making making' itself, 'remaking making,' rescuing, repairing, and restoring."⁶⁰¹ Her understanding of the piles of shoes, eyeglasses, hair and bags on display at 'Auschwitz I' memorial site showcases the sentient nature of all suffering. Had it been raining, Hari would have been using the umbrella to protect himself from getting wet. When it rains, as it does daily during the monsoon season, I am sure he uses it for this purpose too. Hari's umbrella, bearing witness to the needs and sensations of Hari's body, was defined by and definitive of the specific temporal implications of Hari's environment that day. It drew my attention to one aspect of being in the camp. As Jenny Edkins suggests with reference to exhibits

⁶⁰⁰ Alphonso Lingis. *Foreign Bodies*. (New York: Routledge, 1994). 48.

⁶⁰¹ Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 279.

(piles) of concentration victims' objects, "they are intimately connected with the living body yet survive it. Not sentient or alive they are nevertheless the last witnesses."⁶⁰² The umbrella infused Hari's environment with color. Hari was still in a refugee camp and though he was the camp leader, he had no privileges of the kind that would have made him feel 'freer,' or 'more protected.' That umbrella, however, protected Hari's body from the heat. Over the years of being in the camp, Hari and his body had developed the skill of endurance; he had become good at it. This kind of endurance is unknown to one who has never inhabited a refugee camp.

Hari's picture interrupted the sense of continuity and generalizability my visit to the camps had created in me. I had seen everything I expected to see, save that one huge, colorful umbrella. Suffering, I was reminded, is never simply debilitating or tragic. "There rises up in the body that suffers a power of endurance, which can generate powers to devise mockeries, evasions, rules, and even posthumous subversions."⁶⁰³ "The worst part," acknowledged by Nietzsche as our surface self-consciousness defined by dependence on others was, for a moment, supplemented by independence. Hari's language was that of the body, bearing witness to being a refugee at the outer limits of language. Hari's umbrella distinguished him from the hundreds of other refugees I saw that day though it did not make him special or more valuable, only more memorable in the way in which it implicated him in a kind of empirical presence that was marked by the sign of the unexpected performative. As far as "the conservative presumption of positivism and empiricism ... become the essentializing and politically suspect practices against which a self-proclaimed anti-essentialism approves itself,"⁶⁰⁴ the world of the refugees, independent of the signs, academic models and theoretical orientations available to encompass it, is already

⁶⁰² Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 152.

⁶⁰³ Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, 63.

⁶⁰⁴ Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 52.

and always present to itself, “both independent of, and anterior to, those signs that would designate it.”⁶⁰⁵

Allow me to draw a connection between this thought and Derrida’s “there is no outside-text.” Derrida is not implying that everything is just language and nothing else, nor that the subject is caught up in an endless system of referrals, going from one meaning to another, from one signifier to another, from one text to another, ad infinitum, never reaching an end, never yielding a conclusion. In other words, if we understand Derrida, we will expect no instruction from him. The absolute resistance to a type of ‘clinical exegeses’⁶⁰⁶ inherent in all processes of representation alerts to the nature of all things, bodies included, as unstable, shifting and contingent.

What is more, Derrida’s “there is no outside-text” calls into question “the common understanding of materiality as a rock-solid ‘something’ that is, as the absolute exteriority that qualifies and limits the efficacy of representational practices.”⁶⁰⁷ For, if we entertain the thought that whatever (sovereign) insecurity measures itself against is not security but always another form of insecurity, then we come to appreciate the fact that the breathing, moving, sleeping vibrations of everyday life address security not as secure bodies but as bodies of matter. That is, bodies that secure themselves otherwise than through the legitimate networks of sovereign power, bodies whose materiality bears witness to the parallel processes of assimilation and exclusion that underwrite and, at the same time, define the claims of legitimate sovereign power. Securing the body of the refugee reveals the myth of sovereign security.

⁶⁰⁵ Kirby, *Telling Flesh*, 55.

⁶⁰⁶ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 175.

⁶⁰⁷ Kirby, *Telling Flesh*, 61.

My stay in the refugee camp was very short and thus, limited in its ability to draw grand conclusions as to the “real” refugee life. In addition, my visit took place five years ago and since, a lot of things have changed without my knowledge. I am perhaps only in a position to quote here from someone I know from my significantly longer library sojourns: “We who are homeless- ... we, children of the future, how can we be at home in this today? We feel disfavor for all ideas that might lead one to feel at home even in this fragile, broken time of transition ... we ourselves who are homeless constitute a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin ‘realities.’”⁶⁰⁸

on being classified

Such is your present removal from what you take to be your native land. For by nature there is no such thing as a native land, any more than there is by nature a house or farm or forge or surgery, as Ariston said; but in each case the thing becomes so, or rather is named and called. (Plutarch)

If it does not drive you crazy, walking though a refugee camp could possibly shake you out of the dark unawares characteristic of well-wishers. If you are not in a hurry or followed by a Red Cross official whose vehicle is the only one that can take you back across the bridge-less river, you might find yourself lost among the rows of huts and buzzing mosquitoes, amidst the arid, though tended to, landscape of the camp. If you forget all that you’ve been taught in international relations seminars, you might engage the multiplicity around you: presence as incoherent, unpredictable, stubborn, and disfigured as it is beautiful, humbling, and real. I take that back, do not totally forget the academic seminars and your own homeland – their weight should help keep you honest. Remember the silence and your own lack of words when faced with the numbing appeal of the tragic. You might also remember your mother’s heeding to call all things and people by their proper names, to give your pen to a kid and write your name on the humid, colossal wall of scorching, monsoon air as

⁶⁰⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche quoted in Daniel Warner. “Searching for Responsibility/Community in International Relations” In Campbell and Shapiro (eds), *Moral Spaces*, 18.

if writing on sand at high tide – the words legible only in the short moment between rising and receding tide.

Normal life, as I knew it outside the camp, was recreated as camp life and despite the fact that here lived despair, anger and disappointment, there was a reality of very real self-sufficiency and resilience that, bearing witness to the refugees' hardiness, also commented on another important issue: the securing of bodies. Visiting the camp reminded me of going to a museum, where you are given an information booklet, a set of headphones with an itemized, narrated tour of the premises and the freedom to walk around as long you don't touch, approach too closely or in any way damage the exhibitions. You are not allowed to take pictures of the exhibits, reproductions of which can be purchased from the gift shop on your way out. Museums, in addition to being emissaries of high culture, represent spaces targeting the mass consumption of art; spaces where art unfolds itself via the medium of a commercialized spectacle.

the 'camp' as museum

I like going to museums; I don't like going to camps. For the ways in which museums serve as depositories of knowledge, as archival spaces organizing, storing, classifying, preserving and disseminating information – they are valuable examples of a particular kind of securing. As Edkins has suggested, “museums become places of pilgrimage since they contain relics”⁶⁰⁹ that prove the authenticity of the exhibits. Despite and perhaps because of the recent academic insistence on the importance of narrative, museums become designated as (the) legitimate endorsers of a specialized kind of knowledge responsible for the *identification* of certain art pieces as surrealist art, avant-garde art, cubism, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, futurism, fauvism, minimalism, contemporary art, modern art, postmodern art, pop art, Rococo, etc, etc. Museums -

⁶⁰⁹ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 153.

topic-specific, time-specific and often highly specialized – grant entry to some by denying entry to others. So do refugee camps.

Allow me to draw a brief analogy between the refugee camp and the memorial camp (museum). Jenny Edkins suggests in her *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* that memorial sites are, often and with time, appropriated for different purposes – either for the creation of a narrative of suffering, for the dissemination of a certain linear view of history or, as is often the case, for the political purpose of the states that often “use accounts of heroism and sacrifice to tell a story of the founding of the state, a narrative of glorious origin.”⁶¹⁰ In a suggestive though not directly analogous way, refugee camps remind of memorial camps in that, like the memorial at Auschwitz or that at Buchenwald and Dachau, visiting these sites is often a guided affair, with the sites themselves serving the memory of a particular group of people rather than the memory of the event in its entirety. As Edkins poignantly observes, “perpetrators, or descendants of perpetrators, current generations demand a particular, unique place in the memory of the horror”⁶¹¹ which makes the nature of memory itself the result of a productive, performative and very dynamic rendition of history, much unlike the linear renditions we are used to receiving.

Allow me to suggest, furthermore, that the fact of refugee camps, their practical implications for real-life people and their inherently political nature demand a reading away from monolithic, generalized accounts. Indeed, the fact that most refugee camps do not figure on demographic and/or physical maps of the countries that host them suggests that in the official imaginary of states and international organizations, the camps figure as *hors-lieux*. In fact, and as Edkins has shown in her account of various memorial and museum sites, representations

⁶¹⁰ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. 54.

⁶¹¹ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. 135.

themselves often become suggestive of a monolithic history that, in addition to being instrumentalised, is also constructed as an imperative, as something that “had to be told.”⁶¹² Malkki has suggested that, in the case of refugees, the monolithic nature of this story is often challenged by ‘victims’ themselves who produce their own ‘mythico-histories’ that approximate in very specific ways whatever it is they feel represents best what it means to be part of the nation they would like to return to, politicizing displacement beyond the narratives of the sovereign state.

time-lines as bubbles

Even though Jenny Edkins argues that non-linear narratives (no narratives at all for that matter) of trauma and suffering address the ‘real’ as opposed to the ‘symbolic,’ that is, linguistic and representational elements of an event through what she calls ‘encircling,’ I would like to suggest that ‘encircling’ the real itself can become problematic if and when it leads to ignoring or minimizing the importance of the temporality of an event, as in the reality of its having taken place in time. Though monolithic, totalizing and sometimes violent, linear narratives do alert to one characteristic of an event – its historicity - that, when engaged properly, does not neutralize an event but makes us aware of the social real inherent in every “traumatic real.” Setting up “linear time” against “trauma time,” in addition, can create a dichotomous relationship that differentiates between “standard political processes” and “real politics.”⁶¹³ Both ‘linear’ and ‘trauma’ time, it seems, have to be reproduced all the time, the former because of its indebtedness to a scientific notion of truth, the latter because of its singular, non-reproducible nature.

In this sense, it is not that the language of science with its insistence on replicability and generalizability is opposed to that which is ‘unspeakable’ and

⁶¹² Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. 17.

⁶¹³ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. xiii-xiv.

‘unrepresentable’ but rather that, like Celan’s poetry, the language of trauma, if you wish, is additionally informed by performative, innovative and non-scientific idioms. This is important because it points to the ways in which language comports itself in the face of trauma in ways that are respectful of the demands of trauma yet, not totally reducing itself to silence. Survivors have their ways of re-inventing language, of appealing to language in novel ways, be it through poetry, through actions, or even through the eyes and pens of observers and researchers. While they may operate within the dominant power structures, within the dominant linguistic community, they are not entirely beholden to it or locked within its boundaries in much the same way that their lives are not locked within and defined by “trauma time.”

Allow me to summarize my engagement with Jenny Edkins so far. First, I agree with her that some survivors are not in a position to bear witness to what has befallen them, either because they are dead or because they are unable to speak. The fact of their non-existence should not be taken, as has been the case with some prominent deniers of the Holocaust, namely Robert Faurrison, to mean that the Holocaust never happened. On the contrary, the absence of the witness is first and foremost indicative of the destructive, real nature of the event. Silence, too, bears witness. In that sense, I do not subscribe to Edkins’ use of Agamben to show that the true witness to the Holocaust is the dead witness. To say this means to construct the Holocaust as a certain kind of event, the witnesses to which are only and always dead. In fact, that contradicts Edkins’ own contention that the Holocaust has been institutionalized and brought to mean certain things and not other things.⁶¹⁴

Second, I do not agree that there is no available language with which to express what the survivors went through. There might not be an easy access to this language and it might be the case that testimony is, in the end, not linguistic at all,

⁶¹⁴ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 17.

but to say that no language accommodates the camp experience on the one hand and, the experience of being a survivor on the other, means to gloss over testimonies that engage the difficulty of finding words alongside the imperative to try and find words.

Edkins herself recognizes this aporetic condition in her engagement with memorials and museums, though she nevertheless considers “trauma time” and methods of encircling direct representation as singularly appropriate for dealing with traumatic memories. Third, to say that a survivor has not seen the extremities of what it means to have been in a concentration camp means to fix a definition of what it means to be a survivor with anything outside that definition considered as inauthentic survivor testimony.⁶¹⁵ As Edkins correctly identifies, alternative testimonies in the form of art installations, museum exhibits, videos, and literature do “find other languages of remembrance.”⁶¹⁶

Finally, I do agree with the shared opinion that giving survivors a forum at truth and reconciliation commissions or other such juridico-political constructions does restore their agency to an extent. However, as Fiona Ross (2003) has shown, these commissions, set up to offer closure and truth, end up reinforcing a state-supported view and a certain explanation (construction) of the event in question. Regarding the inherently problematic nature of representing violence and/or trauma and, as Veena Das has suggested, “because the use of violence is rooted in philosophical doubt it invites not only elaborate structures of representation but may also be surrounded by silence and the breakdown of signification.”⁶¹⁷ An engagement with and enabling of a singular narrative voice alerts us to “the whole issue of how one narrates the dissolution of the very possibility of narration.”⁶¹⁸ It is to this

⁶¹⁵ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 18.

⁶¹⁶ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 17.

⁶¹⁷ Das, *The Word and the World*, 177.

⁶¹⁸ Das, *The Word and the World*, 206.

dissolution and the ways in which it is represented in the world that this thesis bears witness.

on the politics of displacement: the discipline and its dissidents

Refugees are theorized and conceptualized by the discipline of political science in ways that grant them one kind of legitimacy by denying them other kinds. What is more, “the generalization and problematization of ‘the refugee’ may be linked to yet another process, that of the discursive *externalization* of the refugee from the national (and, one might say, cosmological) order of things.”⁶¹⁹ Securing the body of the refugee is presented as a most natural duty of the nation-state in reaction to the fact of displacement. Refugees are easily categorized by virtue of certain identifiers, their individual identities having been subsumed into a collectivity held together by the common denominator of political rightless-ness. The ways in which refugees are identified by adding the negative “less” to words is not just an indication of how they differ, but also of how they define their positive linguistic counterparts. What happens when we call them by their names? What happens to the name-less objectification that has, for years, defined their joint treatment in the eyes of states and benefactors? What would happen when the sovereign center is denied the power to name? Do we, then, introduce a different kind of politics? Does that change us?

Refugees become “at once no longer classified and not yet classified. They are not longer unproblematically citizens or native informants. They can no longer satisfy as “representatives” of a particular local culture. One might say they have lost a kind of imagined cultural authority to stand for ‘their kind’ or for the imagined ‘whole’ of which they are or were a part.”⁶²⁰ Their bodies are thus secured, rather than against the kind of violence that created them in the first place, because they are

⁶¹⁹ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 9.

⁶²⁰ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 17.

seen as potential threats to national-security. Refugee camps, in that sense, are constructed as politically-controlled safe havens, spaces of segregation responsible as much for the 'safety' of the refugees as for the securing and perpetuation of state-informed conceptions of order and security.

Allow me to suggest that the discourse on refugee camps and refugees is a monolithic discourse whose "tendency to universalize 'the refugee' as a special 'kind' of person occurs not only in the textual representation of refugees, but also in their photographic representation."⁶²¹ Refugees are thus made into the exemplary case for thinking the moment of being in flight. A teleological view of history, characterizing much of modern political science reasoning, ignores the active role that individual human beings play in shaping politics, history, and policy. The universalization of the category of "the refugee," overlooks and neutralizes the fundamental inequalities responsible for erasing the specific, singular circumstances of particular refugees in favor of discussions of universal suffering and universal solutions to this suffering. To put this another way, "understanding displacement as a human tragedy and looking no further can mean that one gains no insight at all into the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have for specific people."⁶²² In the same way that narratives focus on 'the refugee' as a general category, thus within specific instances relating to one refugee population or another, narratives can also generalize and posit one ethnic group against another, one gender against another, one person against another, one home against another. As Michael Shapiro has pointed out, "The identity stories that construct actors as one or another type of person – man versus woman, national citizen versus nomad, one versus another ethnicity, and so on – provide the foundations for historical and contemporary forms of antagonism, violence, and interpretive contention over the meaning of actions. ... Such stories ...

⁶²¹ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 9.

⁶²² Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 16.

are part of the reigning structure of intelligibility and tend to escape explicit contentiousness within ongoing political and ethical discourses.”⁶²³ A mainstream desire for generalization underwrites the desire to identify perpetrators vs. victims, killers vs. murdered, victors vs. losers, citizens vs. others.

Against such essentialization I would like to entertain a responsibility cognizant of chance, contingency and the fable. Thomas Keenan has observed that much himself: “What could responsibility mean without the risk of exposure to chance, without vulnerability to parasitism, without the opening of the conscious ego by way it cannot contain ... without the indiscernible wolf. Without them, there would be nothing of responsibility but the choice between yes and no, this or that, nothing but the application of a rule of decision and a program.”⁶²⁴ A generalized account of refugees’ rights and needs, of the kinds of dangers they face overlooks specific, culturally-informed instances of coping, violence and oppression that not only recreate “life back home,” but also serve to underwrite, legitimize, and construct the everyday lives of camp refugees. Yet, rights can only proceed as generalizations. As Liisa Malkki has suggested, refugees often live with and hide behind “fictitious identities” that protect them from being picked on, insulted, or discriminated against by their host country. A 2001 quote from the then Australian Immigration Minister, Phillip Ruddock, illustrates the reality of bureaucratic ignorance brilliantly, if sadly, thus:

There are some people who do not accept the umpire’s decision, and believe that inappropriate behavior will influence people like you and me, who have certain values, ... who have certain views about human rights, who do believe in the sanctity of life, and are concerned when people say, “If you don’t give me what I want, I’m going to cut my wrists” ... You say it’s desperation, I say that in many parts of the world, people believe that they get outcomes by behaving in that way. In part, it’s cultural.⁶²⁵

⁶²³ Shapiro, “The Ethics of Encounter,” 59.

⁶²⁴ Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*. 51.

⁶²⁵ Cited in Rajaram and Grundy-Warr. “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer,” 44.

On the contrary and as Liisa Malkki has shown, most people do “not imagine for themselves a categorical, collective existence as ‘refugees.’”⁶²⁶ Michael Dillon, too, has challenged our thinking on the refugee by positing the latter

as a figure of the “inter” – or the *in-between* – of the human way of being, as a figure of the ‘inter’ of international relations ... a scandal for politics ... in that the advent of refugee is always a reproach to the formation of the political order of subjectivity that necessarily gives rise to the refugee. The scandal is intensified for any politics of identity that presupposes the goal of politics is the realization of sovereign identity, and for any politics that presupposes that the goal of politics requires epistemology’s promise to secure political knowledge.⁶²⁷

This suggests that the ‘heterogeneous’ nature of politics is informed by a search for a dwelling place, by an indebtedness to the very insecurity underwriting both the refugee and the nation-state.

Allow me to offer a revised definition of what it might mean to be a refugee, coming from refugees themselves. For the ways in which this comments on the discrepancies between commonly-circulated official labels and rarely addressed self-definition, I will share the quote in its entirety:

The following points were commonly listed: (1) a refugee is always afraid that he will be transported somewhere against his will; (2) a refugee cannot vote or be elected to office; (3) a refugee cannot be a member of a political party; (4) a refugee always has to worry about Leave Passes; and finally, (5) a refugee does not feel free. It is significant that all these aspects of an imagined refugee’s status were hindrances and constraints. The leitmotiv ... was the curtailment of liberty and freedom. Freedom here referred to personal freedom in the contemporary context, in distinction to the more collective, revolutionary freedom envisioned by the camp refugees ...⁶²⁸

The day-to-day coping mechanisms for securing the bodies of individual human beings define and shape the lives of refugees without commenting directly on the nature of academic or political/policy solutions. Sewing one’s lips, writing poetry, and Hari’s rainbow-colored umbrella protecting him against the hot *tarai*⁶²⁹ sun, all represent everyday rebellions against being fixed within a taxonomy one cannot

⁶²⁶ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 159.

⁶²⁷ Dillon, “The Scandal of the Refugee,” 95.

⁶²⁸ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 160.

⁶²⁹ *Tarai* is the Nepali word for the flat plains in the Southeastern part of the country where the refugee camps are located.

escape from. They represent individual struggles that, as part of a collective refugee identity, become the fruits of modern technologies of power. Michel Foucault alerts us to this dynamic when he speaks of the ways in which, within the prison or the mental clinic, power produces reality, knowledge and truth.⁶³⁰ In a similar vein, Malkki problematizes the refugee camp thus:

The refugee camp as a 'technology of / power' produced its objects and domains of knowledge on two levels. On the one hand, it helped to constitute 'the refugees' as an object of knowledge and control. On the other, the camp served to produce 'the refugees' as a categorical historical subject empowered to create a mythico-history of a people. Its local, particular pragmatics conspired to produce – independently of intentions – historical narratives which reordered the lived-in world. Thus, as a technology of power, the camp ended up being much more than a device of containment and enclosure; it grew into a locus of continual creative subversion and transformation.⁶³¹

The refugees in Malkki's study are divided into camp refugees and the self-settled town refugees. Michel Agier suggests that for Malkki, "the attachments of the exiles to the places they came from were of varying strength and the effect of detachment also depended on their place of relocation."⁶³² The camp refugees (opposed to the more cosmopolitan town refugees) nurture and exhibit a desire to hold onto their refugeeness as a marker of purity, authenticity, and faithfulness to a Hutu Burundi identity – a faithfulness that would eventually make them privy to higher moral claims and earn them re-entry into the native cosmology from which they have been forcefully expelled.

Malkki insists on the importance and constitutive political, social and ethical power of camp-produced mythico-histories, the daily reenactment of which becomes, with time, an idealized version of 'home,' a type of symbolic securing of both history and the present. I would like to suggest that this self-coined and self-narrated security defines the refugees vis-à-vis their "imagined identities" and not according to

⁶³⁰ Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Vintage, 1995).

⁶³¹ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 236-7.

⁶³² Agier, "Between War and City," 332.

government trade-marked, statist, or humanitarian logic. This suggests that the business of defining security as this or (and not) that is a performative act: a case of both opening and limiting reality, containing within itself seeds of transformation and stasis, bearing on the ways in which we conceptualize and tell of both politics and history. As Malkki suggests, refugeeness and exile “can show how nationness – and historical-national consciousness – may come to be formed in the absence of a state apparatus or a territorial base – or, indeed, other characteristics usually taken to be necessary properties of nations.”⁶³³

This suggests that questions of security, nationhood, belonging and liminality are not static derivatives of a monolithic theoretical exercise, but are contingent on the everyday experience of *being* a refugee. “In contrast to the evolutionary view of historical consciousness as a capability typifying a particular stage of development, it is being argued here that actors produce historical consciousness where they need it ‘for the sake of life and action.’”⁶³⁴ This exposes the act of ‘securing bodies’ as an ongoing process whose “historicity is cumulative, dynamic, and capable of continual transformation, not a static structure fixed outside of time and place.”⁶³⁵ Notions of security, community and agency are, in the refugee camp, formed outside the cosmology and mythology of nation-states and in turn redefine the contours of the nation-state itself.

The statist and humanitarian desire to produce “secure bodies” is, in turn, an example of a totalizing, monolithic, and generalized order eager to encompass both the norm and the limit, both the citizen and the exile, without really encompassing them at all. “Possibility implies calculability and hence the erasure of the ethico-political. If ethics and politics name the urgency and necessity of a response, freedom

⁶³³ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 254.

⁶³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche quoted in Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 242.

⁶³⁵ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 242.

and responsibility name the impossibility of doing it with any guarantees.”⁶³⁶ The implications of this for the discipline of political science suggest that the accepted necessary and sufficient conditions for explaining war and peace, truth and falsity, reality and fiction, are indeed informed by a desire to translate epistemological into academic into humanitarian into policy into all-encompassing commitments.

on the (extra)ordinary nature of human experience

With a variable key
you unlock the house in which
drifts the snow of that left unspoken.
Always what key you choose
depends on the blood that spurts
from your eye or your mouth or your ear.

You vary the key, you vary the word
that is free to drift with the flakes.
What snowball will form round the word
depends on the wind that rebuffs you.⁶³⁷

Recall my engagement with the question of ‘liminality’ alongside Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “bare life.” What I will show next is that Agamben’s theory of the exception, in addition to problematizing the relationship between sovereign power, law and the human being, ends up essentializing, totalizing and normalizing the concept of ‘liminality’ itself. What is more, Agamben’s “state of exception” actually posits the limit of the ability of the sovereign state to secure itself, thus making it possible for the refugee to “out-live” the kind of security prescribed for ailing sovereign states. Peter Nyers’ interpretation of Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* uncovers that “refugees are included in the discourse of ‘normality’ and ‘order’ only by virtue of their exclusion from the normal identities and ordered spaces of the sovereign state. As an object of classification, the refugee is trapped within the sovereign relation of the exception, a relation that Agamben argues is an ‘extreme

⁶³⁶ Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, 72.

⁶³⁷ Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 59.

form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion.”⁶³⁸ However, I would like to point out that the “state of exception” is not a stable category, something that remains fixed, permanent, and into whose universe different other concepts, people, subjectivities are plugged in. Nyers defines the “state of exception” as “central to understanding how both sovereign power and refugee identity are constituted.

The basic idea behind the state of exception is that the law can be legally suspended for the purpose of preserving that state and its system of law for some grave internal or external danger.”⁶³⁹ As discussed in this chapter, refugees and other liminal beings exceed the “state of exception” insofar as they bring to it a sense of contingency, a sense of living an everyday made possible despite the insecurity associated with limit states, through temporality. The refugee’s relationship to the sovereign realm, however, should not be defined and viewed solely from the critical perspective of an ‘inclusive exclusion’ that can be just as normalizing as the sovereign’s view of the political significance of the refugee herself. In either case, even when defined against practices challenging sovereign discourse, the refugee still remains conceptualized from within statist logic as a marginalized, right-less, illegal, and dangerous subject because of the latter’s exclusion from the nation, and not because of the state’s primary role in that exclusion. To speak of an ‘inclusive exclusion’ means giving the refugee back into the hands and policies of states, defining the refugee first and foremost as a limit figure and then, as a subjectivity set up negatively, as something that needs to be fixed, normalized, and secured.

Moving between the exception, “bare life” and the violence inherent in any law, Agamben envisions a kind of ‘modern’ politics predicated on liminality. “If we

⁶³⁸ Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, xiii.

⁶³⁹ Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, xii.

want to be equal to the absolutely new tasks ahead, we will have to abandon decidedly, without reserve, the fundamental conceptions through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political (Man, the Citizen and its rights, but also the sovereign people, the worker, and so forth) and build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee.”⁶⁴⁰ While the figure of the refugee is informative of the relationship between human life and the violence of sovereign power, I disagree that we should build our political universe on the figure of the refugee, as if the latter were some sort of a fundamental example of “bare life,” somehow better informing what it means to be human and what the condition of being in flight encompasses. Agamben is, throughout his political writings, quite ambiguous on the relationship between “bare life” and politics. That is, in *Homo Sacer*, he draws a distinction between “bare life” and natural life – the latter defined as politicized natural life, albeit its politicization as excluded from the body politic.

The refugee is one of many examples available for understanding nation-state bred homelessness. Agamben’s “homo sacer” as the being that can be killed but not sacrificed, as the being whose life is neither sacred nor purely human, underwrites the refugee only as a limit concept, only as an ‘inclusive exclusion.’ Both referents have the effect of taming the refugee. Giorgio Agamben posits the refugee as a problem by framing the refugee as the epitome of liminality, as the physical representation of the limit. This, I argue, ends up essentializing the category of the refugee in service of a theory of the limit. For the ways in which this informs of the anomalous nature of modern politics, it is a useful exercise. For its failure to differentiate between the “excess” and “access to that excess” – it does disservice both to discussions of the refugee and to understanding bearing witness to that condition.

⁶⁴⁰ Giorgio Agamben. “Beyond Human Rights” In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 159.

Recall that Agamben's 'state of exception' underwrites the issue of human (in)security by insisting on the nature of "bare life" as depoliticized life as opposed to politicized life, "most clearly manifest in the citizen."⁶⁴¹ There is no depoliticized life. If 'homo sacer' is excluded from the normal limits of the state, if the former constitutes an excess over the protection sovereign power can offer, then the 'bare' of 'bare life' alerts to a type of security that, underwritten by the suspension of law, demands a collapsing of the distinction between inclusion and exclusion beyond the political. "Bare life" thus is neither on the outside nor on the inside. While Agamben is correct in correlating the political plight of refugees with their otherwise compromised personal freedom, what he does ends up pointing once again to the citizen as the starting point of the analysis on rights, identity and freedom. In that sense, Agamben reinforces the rhetoric on sovereignty (by making it constitutive of the definition of human life). He does not challenge the sovereign rhetoric as such nor the violence it gives birth to, while at the same time offering an extension of the Foucauldian logic of biopower. "Bare life" is discussed as politically unqualified life ultimately coinciding with the political.⁶⁴²

'Bare life' is thus made to stand for a form of the political predicated on violence and death. Or, perhaps it is the constitution of the political itself as insecure that Agamben hints at, without criticizing, in his analysis. While modern politics is, to a great degree, defined by blurring the distinctions between inside and outside, citizen and foreigner, national and (inter)national, it is nonetheless neither the sole arbiter nor the ultimate sovereign responsible for the creation of "sovereign law [that] *exempts itself* from operating."⁶⁴³

Here the paradox is that precisely the figure that should have embodied human rights more than any other – namely, the refugee – marked instead the radical crisis of the concept. ... In the system of the Nation-State, the so-

⁶⁴¹ Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, "The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer," 34.

⁶⁴² Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, 39.

⁶⁴³ Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, "The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer," 36.

called sacred and inalienable human rights are revealed to be without any protection precisely when it is no longer possible to conceive of them as rights of the citizens of a State.⁶⁴⁴

In light of the ways and modalities through which the refugee takes up the task of securing her/himself, in light of the daily actions that inform the lives of refugees and other liminal beings, in light of the fact that refugees problematize the sovereign desire for security and in lieu of a conclusion, I offer the following proposition: Though historically informed and constituted, the factual example that each refugee represents defies the generalizations of theoretico-historical accounts. That is, Agamben's generalizing, juridico-political conception of displacement is in fact underwritten by particular, singular examples of so-called "bare life." Borders, exceptions and violent laws are made possible, coherent and endorsed by specific processes of control, othering, and exclusion. Agamben's generalizing thought on refugees, concentration camp victims (*Muselmänner*) and other liminal beings fails to acknowledge the existing, real testimonies borne out of the "exception." Liminal beings are not defined by silence, nor does their testimony need be evoked only to posit the restorative powers of the nation-state. Liminal beings are human because they are not defined by their liminality – their historical experiences bear witness to the excess of living over the truth that theory can give. The complex process of bearing witness to being liminal recalls, once again, Paul Celan's witness:

That which you wove out of light thread
I wear in honor of stone.
When in the dark I awaken
the screams, it blows on them, lightly.

Often, when I should stammer,
it raises forgotten crinkles
and he that I am forgives
he that I was.

But the god of the slagheaps
beats his most muted drum,
and just as the crinkle ran
the grim one puckers his brow.⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 160-1.

detours and right-of-ways

I have suggested that the camp should be addressed not only as an example of the state of exception become norm, as suggested by Agamben, but also as a complex and multi-faceted cartography; as an active, productive force inscribed on the bodies of people; as an archive, if you will, of actions, journeys, and stories. The (refugee) camp is thus both a poetic and a juridical trope. It is, indeed, the bio-political space where power confronts bare life as its referent object, but there is also mediation under way – mediation through the tools of staying alive. Agamben maintains that in the camp, the state takes the maintenance of naked/biological life in its hands, thus turning the camp into a “stable spatial arrangement inhabited by naked life that cannot be inscribed into the order.”⁶⁴⁶ Beyond and before the juridico-territorial-sovereign order of the camp’s living space lives life that is not just a problem to be solved, but a journey to be taken – a journey ripe with detours, roundabouts, and right-of-ways; a journey predicated on the power of the human to bear witness to something beyond liminality.

The refugee camp, in its juridical origins, cannot only be a precedent of absence, since the human being’s presence cannot be thought of negatively. In the camp one finds the food distribution center, the Red Cross and UNHCR offices, patches of wilting vegetables, check-in points. There are also the rice fields tended by refugees, the spinning wheels on the front steps of huts, Hari’s umbrella, schools, the striking intensity of color; there is Nepali tea the refugees offer me in a gesture of hospitality, there are crinkled relatives’ pictures waving from a distant past, shelves with books learned by heart; there are freedom-fighters, ambassadors to Kathmandu, Delhi and Geneva: all ling-graphic tropes constituting the state of exception above all else as inhabited by human beings.

⁶⁴⁵ Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 39.

⁶⁴⁶ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 43.

Michael Dillon points out, with reference to the complexity of systemic, genetic relationality and connectivity, that “Being-in-formation necessarily entails deformation, reformation, mutation and transformation. ... characterized by gaps, misfires, breaks, slippage, unintended outcomes, transference and change.”⁶⁴⁷ In this sense, fragmentary thought is a measure of a system’s liminality, a measure of a theory’s breaking point, a measure of language’s point of “dissipation.” In the refugee camp, “power derives from aligning itself with the force of the law of becoming, rather than with some sovereign monopolizing of ‘being the law,’ that is, “the force of law without significance.”⁶⁴⁸ Violence under the flag of the nation-state has been theorized as a way to discipline non-conformity and smooth out ideational doubts, so that “the State can in this way say that violence is ‘primal,’ that it is simply a natural phenomenon the responsibility for which does not lie within the State, which used violence only against the violent, against ‘criminals’ – against primitives, against nomads – in order that peace may reign.”⁶⁴⁹ Borders are strengthened, the police wear the clothes of (un)ruly violence, and modern, civilized man exists within a reality of neo-racism, where “the refugee is human or s/he is nothing, or at least nothing but raw stuff”⁶⁵⁰ inhabiting “those ambivalent spaces between the inside and the outside, between order and disorder, between clarity and ambiguity.”⁶⁵¹

In the words of Slavenka Drakulic, a Bosnian refugee herself: “A refugee is someone who has been expelled from somewhere but does not go anywhere because they have nowhere to go.”⁶⁵² From within the state system, the voice of the refugee tells a story: its variations, palpitations, and insecurity reveal a desire for

⁶⁴⁷ Michael Dillon. “Poststructuralism, Complexity and Poetics” *Theory, Culture, Society* 17, no. 5 (2000), 13.

⁶⁴⁸ Dillon, “Poststructuralism, Complexity and Poetics,” 13-4.

⁶⁴⁹ Doty, *Anti-Immigrantism in Western Democracies*, 14.

⁶⁵⁰ Dillon, “The Sovereign and the Stranger,” 102.

⁶⁵¹ Doty, *Anti-Immigrantism in Western Democracies*. 27.

⁶⁵² Slavenka Drakulic. *The Balkan Express*. (Perennial, 1994)

engagement. When understood in its contingency, the hegemony of territorial sovereignty and conventional discursive choices is revealed as a myth and a story that offends and excludes without admitting to it.

I hope the preceding chapter has been able to show the following three things: first, that securing the body of ‘the refugee’ underwrites the legitimate claims to power by nation-states themselves. Second, that being a refugee is a historical experience that is neither generalizable nor calculable beyond the fact of the experience itself. Third, that refugees communicate and relate their experiences through a number of different non-statist tropes: songs, poems, dance, umbrellas. The material sentience of their bodies, in their daily negotiations with displacement, instantiates a witness. As Michel Agier has shown, “*camps create identity*”⁶⁵³ that is relational in addition to reproducing and reinforcing an already existing ethnic, socio-economic, cultural, gender and/or political associations. Camp life is dynamic, versatile, innovative and experiential in addition to being experimental. The plural nature of the refugee camp suggests the likewise plural identity of the refugees themselves – always only a nuanced commentary on the individual experiences that shape, constitute and predicate our own understanding of the limit. In Michel Agier’s words:

The policing of emergency makes the camps spaces of pure waiting without a subject, to which are opposed the sketches of subjectivation that appear in initiatives aimed at recreating work, in movements, meetings, even in the conflicts themselves. Being human, winning back this medium of identity, of being-in-the-world, which war and exodus endanger, therefore consists for each refugee in redefining his or her place by taking advantage of the ambivalence of the life of the camps, between emergency and duration, the here-and-now and the long term, the sentiment of physical or social death, and the recommencement of life.⁶⁵⁴

An examination of the processes by which a refugee discourse informed by liminality and exception reveals that securing the camp means constructing the latter as a

⁶⁵³ Agier, “Between War and City,” 333.

⁶⁵⁴ Agier, “Between War and City,” 337.

naked, deserted and segregated space where sociability, integration, and peace are not envisioned but delegated as the prerogatives of nation-states, recognized cities and legal citizens. Performative ways of bearing witness to the everyday, polymorphous life of refugees offers one way of 'out-living' this security.

CONCLUSION

The task of this thesis has been to question and expand on conventional international relations engagements with language and refugees. In the preceding pages, language was addressed as constitutive of discussions of power, sovereignty, and displacement. I have argued that bearing witness should be understood as a system of practices and inventions, and not as a fixed, truth-centered engagement with 'event' in language. I have also argued that the refugee, as a figure of displaced humanity, 'out-lives' nation-state underwritten security by giving rise, in refugee camps, in town settlements or in detention centers, to a system of practices, interactions and 'cultures' that re-introduce a security of a different kind. The latter, underwritten by individuals' efforts at maintaining life, should be addressed more carefully both by academics and by policy makers for its implications not only for our understanding of displacement but also, for the systems and discourses informing the current relationship between *difference* and *sameness*, between *outside* and *inside*, between *fiction* and *truth*.

Bearing witness, defined as an ongoing, performative and singular engagement with the world, was theorized as one such mode of address. Paul Celan's poetry in particular was shown to bear witness to the performative, relational potential not only of poetic, but of all language. It is this potential within poetry that exemplifies the performance of the exceptional without reducing the latter to a pre-committed, pre-determined discourse on dichotomies. The politics of bearing witness, informed to an equal degree by an engagement with the potential of language, memory and practice to prevent, rather than enable change, places emphasis on the constitutive relationship between these categories and their ability to supplement as well as problematize one another.

Chapters one and two of this thesis focused on already existing theoretical discourses. Giorgio Agamben's engagement with *homo sacer* as a given category of identification was exposed for its passive, rather narrow definition of exceptionality. In effect, bearing witness was differentiated from the static charge of an Agambenian luminal universe and positioned in light of its relationship to Veena Das' concept of a "descent into the ordinary." The result of this analogous positioning was intimation into the nature of bearing witness as a certain performative enactment of the ordinary without being reduced to it.

Chapter two examined the "resuscitative" character of poetic witnessing as hypothesized by Jacques Derrida. What I could not have foreseen, yet what became a guiding point of my discussion, was the contradictory character of Derrida's own reading of witnessing. On the one hand, his particular attention to the poetry of Paul Celan introduced a certain melancholic fix to Derrida's argument. A discourse predicated on a commitment to the constitutive power of loss, mourning and lacunas cannot, in turn, re-fashion itself unproblematically by revealing its life-giving potential. Thus, Derrida's treatment of poetic language was either insufficiently Derridean or there was, indeed, something more going on. In this analysis, poetic language remains a constitutive part of language as such and as such, must, to some extent at least, also be informed by language's potential to fall into lethargy, passivity, and repetition.

Having alerted to this contradiction without dismissing poetic language, I argued for the potential performativity of all language, including the language of political science. From there onwards, the thesis unfolded as an exploration and an exegesis on the different idioms of engaging the singularity of bearing witness. Poetry, memory, storytelling and academic accounts were analyzed in their

relationship to the process of witnessing. Derrida, more so than Agamben, was an important starting point for uncovering the political nature of the relationship between undecidability, language and power. I argued for the practical ramifications of his thought in asking to take the political nature of witnessing seriously.

fault lines and measured dangers

It behooves me at this point to share a few of the potential weaknesses borne out of this thesis. First, based exclusively on an engagement with other people's writing, the argument put forth might be considered speculative in nature. That is, my own truth-claims remain unsupplemented by the kind of material evidence known as 'case studies,' field work, and more generally, data. To this I would like to respond in a twofold way. On the one hand, I have tried to argue that engaging poetry (as data) and stories indeed has if not quantitative, at least methodological implications for practicing politics, both by academics and by policy makers.

On the other hand, recognizing that no academic endeavor is impervious to error, omissions or misjudgment means that the same is true for this thesis. As a finite work, constructed and organized around certain academic directives, this thesis is not only limited in its ability to mark a fissure, but it is also indebted for its existence to the history of academic research. As such it summarizes, quotes, follows from, executes and brings to life a certain institutionally-informed image. However, it also problematizes, performs, questions, marks and discloses the fissures and detours that characterize the nature of academically-informed truth production. Each of these methodological commitments obliges a certain amount of exclusion of alternative inclinations. The goal of my argument is not to disseminate difference, but rather, to promote a methodological openness that, in its polymorphous nature, can be defined as almost pragmatic. Standing at the crossroads of literature, history (historiography) and political studies, this thesis hopes to have disclosed and

commented on the ethical commitments resulting from the demand for a decision on one hand, and a commitment to critical engagement on the other.

A second potential weakness of this thesis has to do with its practical implications or, traditionally put, with its contributions to the advancement of the discipline. My response will offer a summary account of the purpose of this thesis. It was never intended to serve as an aid tool for practitioners in the field of displacement. In addition, it never aspired to prescribe, envision or enumerate strategies and directives for coping with, alleviating and preventing wars, displacement and/or suffering. Having said that, this thesis was borne out of a frustration with the methodological rigidity characterizing social scientific endeavors. Having been dismissed for being non-scientific, amateurish and immature at a number of conferences, I wanted to figure out a way of refining my thoughts on witnessing and language. It soon became apparent to me that these negative responses were indeed rooted in a certain kind of fear: a fear of being exposed and accused similarly for being non-scientific, dilettante and immature. The only way to outgrow this fear was to face and engage it. The only way to continue bearing witness to my academic interests was to stop apologizing for what they were not and embrace what they were. The purpose of this thesis has been to do just that. Yet, I hope it has not outgrown its own reservations and fears by moving beyond doubt, skepticism and failure.

As suggested in chapter six, a discussion of bearing witness as a performative, interpretive and singular engagement with language carries implications for the ways(s) in which we practice, understand and represent our involvements with the world and its inhabitants. These implications always remain as affirming as they are problematic. This thesis hopes to have laid the foundations for a further discussion of the inadequacies and normalizing agendas characterizing the current discourses on

testimony, security, and displacement. That is, beyond its appeal to well-known critiques of sovereign power and logic, this thesis testifies to a mode of addressing being in the world that recognizes the latter's multiple, chaotic, and messy nature. All this should, in the end, alert to the potential of language choices to construct and serve as data informing of intentions, agendas, and interests. It should also provoke a re-examination of the ways in which we, as academics, comport ourselves both in the community of our peers and among the subjects of our study.

what follows ... the future of the project of witnessing

There are a number of possible implications of this thesis beyond its current engagements with poetry and political science alongside each other. Here are a few of the puzzles it leaves unanswered in hopes that they will be engaged more closely in future research. First, what is the relationship between bearing witness and institutions? What are the implications of a critical engagement of witnessing for an understanding of the institutional make-up of international relief agencies, governments and humanitarian organizations? Nevzat Soguk alerts to the constitutive relationship between institutions and the understanding and theorizing of the refugee. His genealogical study of refugee production and definition since the 1920s uncovers a displacement of responsibility for the creation of refugees from the failure of sovereign states to a discourse heavily invested in humanitarian caretaking offered by international organizations. This leads to a situation where

Refugees are seen as a problem existing prior to international regime activities, while the regime activities are represented as solutions to that difficult, morally demanding but not intractable problem of the refugee within the otherwise presumably unproblematic, stable, and secure territorial bounds of the sovereign state.⁶⁵⁵

This means, in addition, that refugee situations are 'dealt with' from the point of view of institutionally-identified issue-specific problems - food, water, clothing, shelter,

⁶⁵⁵ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, 13.

repatriation, safety – and not from a point of view informed by refugee demands themselves. This has led to a situation where refugee crisis have been turned into managerial tasks where the gross yield is measured in directives, annual output, and problem containment, and not in an informed, accountable and performative (that is, informed by difference, change and unpredictability) action.

This brings me to a second alley for future research I see exemplified by this thesis, namely – the academic institutionalization of the refugee. Recall my engagement with Dominic LaCapra's re-casting of the relationship between truth claims and idioms of expression. I suggested that this had important implications for the practice of academic political science. By way of a reminder, the question of fact was posited as an outcome of the dynamic and highly complex simultaneous interplay of narrative structures and the desire for (scientific) truth. Furthermore, this each-other-constitutive relationship alerted to important work of problematization carried out equally rigorously both in the direction of truth claims and in the direction of art forms. That is, "the interaction or mutually interrogative relation between historiography and art (including fiction) is more complicated than is suggested by either an identity or a binary opposition between the two, a point that is becoming increasingly forceful in recent attempts to reconceptualize the study and of art and culture."⁶⁵⁶

More specifically and regarding the academic engagement of 'event' and 'witnessing,' LaCapra's discussion opens the ways for a revision of the ways in which events of witness such as conferences, forums, symposiums and workshops, to give a few examples, are constructed and carried out under the auspices of mutually and institutionally agreed-upon conventions, directives and expectations. Thus, it is not uncommon for an international conference on refugees' roster to be made up almost

⁶⁵⁶ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 15.

entirely of academics, policy makers and practitioners, with refugees themselves hardly in sight but for an occasional photography exhibition, brochures with summary introductions of “crisis” populations, and donation pleas on their behalf. Over the past four years of attending such conferences, a number of questions have come to mind regarding the relative absence of refugee input at refugee-themed academic functions. I cannot help but attribute this either to the fact that refugees are not considered legitimate and scientifically-sound contributors to the discussion or that there is an institutionally-endorsed agreement pertaining to the very idioms and modalities of engagement allowed to transpire within the walls of academia. For claiming to be venues for critical thinking, conferences actually discipline the very discourses that make them up.

Since conferences, workshops and seminars are directly involved in the business of ‘bearing witness,’ a close examination of their underlying rhetoric and mission statement vis-à-vis their actual unfolding has the potential to inform not only of the relationship between researcher and discipline, but also of the greater rhetoric defining the academic pursuit of truth as such. In fact, engaging in dissident moves in an effort to provoke a response uncover the particular assumptions and beliefs that make up the actual practice of creating an academic community. In addition, these practices are not isolated examples of yearly or semi-annual displays of ongoing research. They also serve as gate-keeping exercises aimed at defining the legitimacy of academic projects by helping to validate hierarchies and truth-claims symptomatic both of the University as a venue responsible for the creation and dissemination of power/knowledge and of the practicing of academic research in general.

In that sense, a serious engagement with witnessing as a performative, dynamic, and singular activity can help identify the various ways in which academics have become desensitized to the violent outcomes of their work. The kind of violence

I am referring to is not measured in heads cut-off, mutilated bodies or destroyed houses, though the analogy can be just as physically and emotionally crippling as it is subtle. In that sense, Roland Barthes' insight regarding the role of literature in establishing agency is especially potent for a discussion of the relationship between academic political science and the subjects of its research. "Modern literature is trying, through various experiments, to establish a new status in writing for the agent of writing. The meaning or the goal of this effort is to substitute the instance of discourse for the instance of reality (or of the referent), which has been, and still is, a mythical 'alibi' dominating the idea of literature."⁶⁵⁷ An insistence on truth can provide one such 'alibi' for the otherwise rashly generalizing voice of academically-legitimated research.

The third opening has to do with a number of questions, each of them important in a different way in relationship to witnessing. Allow me to enumerate them here: "What is the relationship between truth and oral testimony?" "How has a discourse on expert witnesses contributed to the construction of the process of witnessing as truth-producing?" "How does testimony obtained under torture in a world ripe with terrorism redefine the study of politics?"

Engaging the politics of bearing witness is especially problematic in instances of trauma. This is so not only because of the painful nature of traumatic memories, but also because of the burden shared by victims and liberators alike in reinstating justice. Engaging the politics of witnessing remains, however, crucially important for understanding the motivations, desires and beliefs that underwrite all instances of truth-construction and ideological dissemination. It is difficult to understand how living in refugee camps for years at a time can be considered, by international institutions and nation-states, a viable alternative to being at home. It is even more

⁶⁵⁷ Barthes, Roland. "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" In *The Structural Controversy: The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 144.

difficult to remain impartial when analyzing survivors' testimonies. Yet to fail to engage the myriad ways in which language constructs and determines knowledge means to abandon the dialogue before it has begun.

This thesis remains an attempt at thinking through the implications our understanding of responsibility and witnessing has for how we comport ourselves in the world as political beings. As I have tried to show, there is no one Truth on which we can base our actions, nor is there a universal law we can rely on for judging the good from the bad, the innocent from the guilty, the friend from the foe. All we can hope to do is engage continuously questions of security, displacement, and testimony without settling for the appeasing allure and reassuring representation of nation-states' daily construction, dissemination and justification of violence.

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