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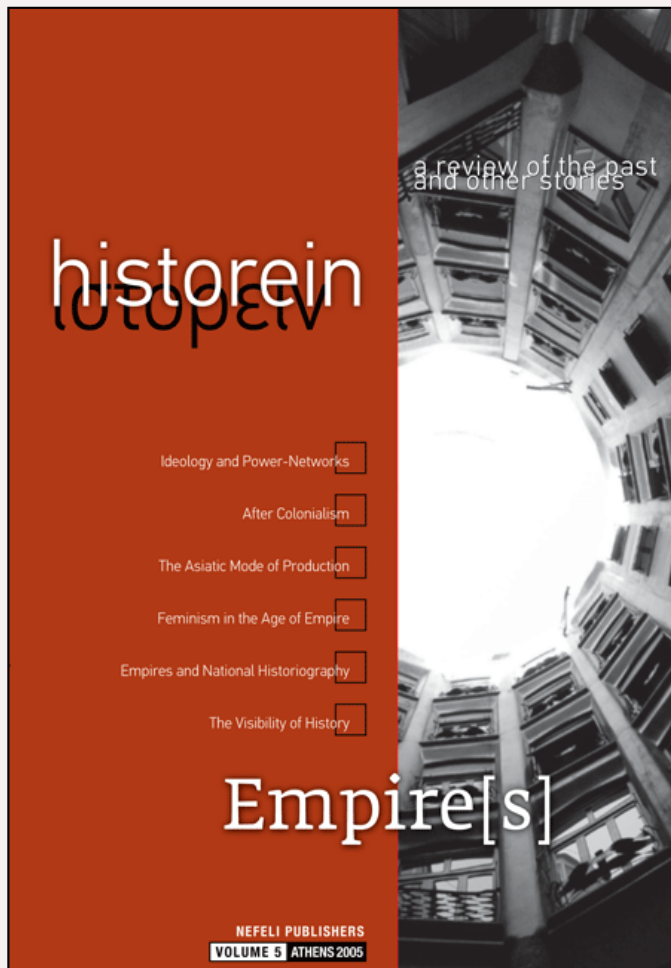Athanasiou Athena   Panteion University, Athens
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Reflections on the Politics of Mourning: Feminist Ethics and Politics in the Age of Empire

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If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war.

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* [1]

On 8 June 2001, in more than 150 locations worldwide, from Adelaide to Zurich, from Cairo to Washington, from Jerusalem to the Maldives, women (and some men) activists dressed in black repudiated the thirty-fourth year of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. In Israel and Palestine, but also in Manhattan in front of the New York Public Library, Women in Black hold weekly silent vigils calling for an end to the Occupation. The feminist anti-militarist organization Women in Black emerged in Jerusalem in January 1988, one month after the beginning of the first Palestinian *intifada*, when a small group of Israeli Jewish women, actively supported by Palestinian women who are Israeli citizens, started marching into the West Bank to protest against Israeli aggression and to demand the full involvement of women in peace negotiations by engaging in a bodily politics which involved displaying the feminine body in public, in black clothing, and holding silent vigils for killed Palestinian men and women. In a similar vein of performative politics of feminist dissent and patriotic disloyalty, the Serbian Women in Black started in 1991 to stand silently in public places in Belgrade protesting against

Serbian militarism and national aggression in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Croatia. Women in Black in New York have been standing in solidarity with the women of Belgrade since 1993. Allied groups sprang up in Azerbaijan, Canada, Denmark, England, France, India, Italy, Scotland, Spain, Switzer- land, Turkey, and in several US locations. Since its inception, Women in Black has become an international movement of women of all denominations and nationalities which holds vigils, usually in front of major buildings and monuments, to protest against war, interethnic conflict, rape as a tool of war, the arms industry, racism, neo-Nazism, violence against women, homophobia, and human rights abuses in their part of the world. Today, the Women in Black movement has spread well beyond Israel and Serbia, and continues to challenge wars of aggression and the politics of ethnic superiority worldwide.

These activists deliver no speeches; they chant no slogans. They just stand silently, usually at rush hour in central public squares or at busy intersections, holding banners that invite people's participation: "Dress in black, mourn the victims, stand for peace." Their displays are charged by the intense emotional component of a memorial gathering, which is conditioned and struc- tured by a certain disavowedness of anonymous loss. On some occasions, they stage funeral ceremonies. In a procession through Coffs Harbour, New South Wales in Australia, Women in Black carried a flower-draped coffin while the names of civilians killed in the Iraqi conflict were read through a megaphone. "People like those we mourn today", a participant said, "will go on dying until we get to the root causes, and end the exploitation."[2] What such public expression of ethically and politically positioned affect conveys is that the lack of response to the singular instances of social suffering inflicted by imperialistic and post-imperialistic oppression will perpetuate the violence of suffering and loss itself. It is this ethical and political response in the form of mournful reckoning of loss – no less than an ethics and politics of *responsiveness* and *responsibility* – that this essay seeks to unravel.

In many parts of the world, notably in the Mediterranean and the Balkans, black clothing – as a mourning attire – signals women's particular relation to bereavement and death and their right, but also civic duty, to mourn.[3] As the cultural idiom of mourning is typically imbued with the nationalistic and heterosexist fantasy of the 'mother of the nation', the weeping mother who has honorably sacrificed her sons to the nation's military pursuits, Women in Black profoundly undermine the normative role stereotypically assigned to women by nationalism and patriarchy. They do so by re-embodying the ambiguous sign of mourning outside the sanctioned boundaries of the home and the valences of femininity, by performing an alternative feminist politics which involves being radically disloyal, instead of unconditionally supportive, to 'their' men in time of war. Their struggle against militarism is entwined with a radical cosmopolitics of gender, a politics eloquently reflected not only in their practices of disrupting formulations of women's proper place (*in* the nation-state, *in* the family, etc.), but also in their non-exclusionary notion of who counts as a 'woman': people of all genders and sexualities are welcomed to participate as women in their actions of ritual mourning.[4] By performing the simultaneous disruptive acts of estrangement from the nation's normative life and of solidarity with the non-living abjected "adversary" (the dehumanized enemy), Women in Black create new transnational alliances of struggle for a new, radical 'sexual difference', for a new, radical humanness.

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Mourning the Other: Bare Life, Sovereign Power, and the Biopolitical Nomos of the Empire

> *The death of the Other: a double death, for the Other is death already, and weighs upon me like an obsession with death.*

> *In the work of mourning, it is not grief that works: grief keeps watch.*

Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*[5]

In the context of the politics of Women in Black, mourning ought to be construed as an ethical and political reflection on what it means to be responsible to the memory of the lost other, the one whose suffering and loss is expropriated (the enemy, the marginal, the foreign, the illegal immigrant, the other). Jacques Derrida has importantly suggested that mourning is impossible, as the other resists one's own horizon of intelligibility and technologies of appropriation, memory, and language. "Speaking is impossible", writes Derrida in the wake of Paul de Man's death, "but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness."[6] In discussing Derrida's radical reworking of a psychoanalytic post-Freudian account of mourning, Penelope Deutscher rightly points out that "Derrida converts the issue of mourning into one concerning the ethics of alterity." As Deutscher has so persuasively argued, philosophical renditions of mourning have historically been contexts for "the thematization of a problematics of appropriation of the other and resistance of the other to that appropriation."[7]

In this genealogy of theoretical renditions of mourning, a particular position is occupied by what could be called "activism of mourning", that is public and collective formations by which trauma is addressed in all its affective, social, and political or biopolitical implications, intimacies, and limits. The ways in which AIDS activism in the nineteen eighties conjured the sign of mourning – 'die-ins' in major places of public administration and the AIDS Memorial Quilt – has opened spaces for challenging divisions between public and private as well as between affective and political. ACT UP's history of affective and performative politics has brought into relief the multiple, subtle, and insistent forms of trauma generated by the social death of homophobia, thereby forging not only a collective knowledge and recognition but also affective networks of friendship, camaraderie, and community built on a queer archive of testimony, struggle, survival, and response to trauma. Within the framework of queer theory, both Judith Butler and Douglas Crimp have poignantly called into question the identification of mourning with political paralysis in the face of losing a public language to mourn in the age of AIDS. Butler has valuably addressed the political, social, and psychic foreclosures "that have made certain kinds of losses ungrievable".[8] Crimp has effectively shown that mourning and militancy are intertwined rather than opposed; he has exemplified the political urgency of understanding how and why gay men are excluded from practices of mourning, how and why gay people's grief becomes unrecognizable, how gay identities are obscured at familial funeral ceremonies, and how and why mourning might also encompass the loss of particular forms of sexual contact in the time of AIDS.[9] From the historical and political construction of public remembrance in the face of AIDS to the vigils at the Brandenburg Gate, where 10,000 people lit symbolic candles in opposition to violence against

foreigners on a cold 30 January 1991, the sign of public vigil emerges as a performative practice of political protest with intense, albeit ambivalent, sensuous suggestiveness.

In their public rites of mourning, Women in Black offer an alternative vision of 'sexual difference', a challenging and unheard-of vision, which lies on the threshold of politics to come. Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray has suggested in the *Speculum of the Other Woman* that sexual difference is the last utopia of our civilization.[10] Thus conceptualized, sexual difference would amount not to a literal/ontological referent but rather to a non-topos that has no place within the intelligible terms of the present, the one that does not "take place" yet, the not-yet, or the yet-to-come of humanity, the Not-One that the only place it can take is a place decidedly eccentric to the phallogocentric logic of human intelligibility.[11] Through their political-performative gestures of affect, Women in Black not only compel gender, kinship, and national intelligibility into a severe crisis, but also they unsettle the very boundaries of the political.[12]

As manifested in public ritual acts of feminist defiance such as the ones performed by Women in Black, the body of the 'other' – the other (as) woman in the broadest sense of the word – comes into view to threaten the stability of the empire of the 'One'. On the over-exposed bodies of these inappropriate/d subjects, globalized capitalist biopower fights the battle for its own survival and uncontaminated supremacy over humanity. Ruin – which is itself already not one – is arguably emblematic to the turbulent heterotopias of the new world order. From the disturbing continuities and discontinuities that bind the ruins of the World Trade Center in New York and the ruins of Palestinian homes in Gaza emerges the body, in all of its multiple ramifications, at once inscribed, cited, and annihilated by history.

What is at stake is the globalized biopolitical interest in colonizing this embattled terrain of history; the innermost interest of reigning regimes of sovereignty in controlling the body, in putting it in its proper place. It is precisely this idealized propriety of place – including the proper place for mourning – that Women in Black radically appropriate, transgress, and dislocate by reclaiming the polis and its order as they publicly display their improper femininity in holding their unfamiliar rituals of political mourning for the absolutized Other who has been lost. At the heart of the alternative vision of feminist body politics performed by Women in Black lies the public act of ritual mourning for the unmournable: the less-than-human, those reduced to what Giorgio Agamben, following Walter Benjamin, has called "bare life" or life captured in a zone of indiscernibility between *zoe* and *bios*, between natural and political life. Public grieving for loss unrecognized as such by sovereignty represents an inexcusable aberration from the customary propriety of mourning. Improper public mourning for the *external* enemy compels the limits of cultural intelligibility into a fatal crisis; it does so in ways akin only to a 'woman', the perennial *internal* enemy, Hegel's – but also Irigaray's – "eternal irony of the community".[13] In mourning otherwise, Women in Black displace the normative identification of rituals of mourning with the social role of women; they enact a disruptive mourning that dissembles the social role of woman as mourner eternally silenced by the law of sovereignty, eternally relegated to the aphasic outskirts of discourse. In the politics of Women in Black, responsiveness entails engagement with the question of political sovereignty.

Sovereignty operates by determining the limits of life and the categorical borders of humanness, by recomposing and policing the boundaries between the self and others, by demarcating a

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thinkable and livable human propriety that is inevitably white, Christian, masculine, heterosexual, healthy, fit, and, above all, property-owning and law-abiding. In view of the radical politics performed by Women in Black, it becomes necessary to ask: what forms of life are eligible to be accorded the status of 'human', what conditions determine the fragmented horizon of 'our common humanity', what bodies are valued, cared for, and mourned, and which ones remain foreclosed, unmourned, and dispossessed, outside and beyond the canon of high humanity; which dying bodies merit the glare of televisual representation and reverent obituaries of individualized sympathy, and which do not count, cannot be counted, deserving nothing but a casual statistical and anonymous reference; and finally, what is it that differentiates the ways we experience, conceptualize, remember, commemorate and mourn the unspeakable suffering of those who had to choose between burning alive in the World Trade Center or jumping to their deaths, and the injustice and ultimate pain to which the people of Rwanda and Burundi were subjected? To understand what it is that determines our structured sensibility to forms of violence and death, we need to heed the connection between sovereignty and biopolitics in a global context.

At the heart of the biopolitics of contemporary global sovereignty lies the decision on the value – or nonvalue – of "life". The life of bodies targeted as dangerous, violent, or criminal is politically unqualified, unworthy of being lived, their death is unworthy of being mourned. Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* expands Foucault's insight about the biopolitics of war in the modern era as not "waged in the name of the sovereign who must be defended", but in the name of "the existence of everyone", "in the name of life necessity".[14] Agamben has shown how this politicization of "the naked question of survival" takes place in exceptional topologies of sovereignty where violence and law are indistinguishable.[15] He illuminates the paradoxical status of the space of exception: although it signals a space placed outside the juridical order (according to the etymology of the word 'exception', which in Latin (*ex-capere*) and Greek (*ek-taktos*) means 'external to the order'), the process of making exceptions is nevertheless not exceptional. If it is locatable at all, the state of exception is not located outside or beyond the law, but it is embedded within the law's juridico-political structure. Rather than a deviation, the state of emergency is a temporal, 'temporary' abrogation or suspension of law, which emerges as a central structure of the law itself, indeed, as the rule of the law. The abuse of power becomes the law, the very conceptual fabric of monological sovereignty and hegemonic unilateralism. The violent rupture is intrinsic to juridical rule itself, a space that is itself not without violence. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, who in his thirty-six "Theses on the Philosophy of History" employed the term "state of emergency" as the rule, as the very legitimization of power,[16] Agamben suggests:

> The state of exception, which is what the sovereign each and every time decides, takes place precisely when naked life – which normally appears rejoined to the multifarious forms of social life – is explicitly put into question and revoked as the ultimate foundation of political power. The ultimate subject that needs to be at once turned into the exception and included in the city is always naked life.[17]

Agamben reminds us that "state of exception" is a term that Nazi jurists used in order to define the particularity of the Third Reich. In the extermination camp, a temporary suspension of order on the basis of a state of emergency and threat to public security was given a spatial arrange-

ment, a permanent biopolitical realization whereby everything becomes possible. The relation between bare life and sovereign power is a relation of exclusionary inclusion: in the figures of the Jew, the homosexual, the partisan, the Roma, or the mentally and physically handicapped, bare life is that part of humanity that is unqualified for political recognition; it is excluded at the moment of juridical institution, and included at the state of exception. Bare life remains included in the realm of politics only through its very exclusion from it. In the context of liberal imperialism, bare life becomes subject to the biopolitical pragmatism of "humanitarian intervention" – a realm where philanthropy and militarism cross paths to shore up a moralistic rhetoric (and spectacle) of pain mitigation rather than a political discourse of justice.

When Agamben argues that the Nazi death camp, far from being a historical anomaly, is the hidden model – the most absolute biopolitical *nomos* – of the modern political space in which we are still living, his expansion of the essence of the camp not only does not mean to trivialize its historical specificity, but rather intensifies its political connotations. "The camp is the very paradigm of political space",[18] he writes, whereby politics turns into biopolitics (or thanatopolitics) and human life turns into the life of *homo sacer*, that is, the irreducible bare life, which is exposed to a political death that no juridical order and no sanctioned rite can possibly redeem. As a permanent and legitimized state of exception, the camp decisively exemplifies the political space of the Modern, a zone of indetermination between law and violence. Making a similar point, Stathis Gourgouris has insightfully unraveled the complicity between violence and law at the heart of Enlightenment *nomos*, its "intrinsic outlaw nature, its *paranomia*",[19] which echoes what Women in Black call "the permanent 'pre-emptive' war",[20] a war that takes the form of a permanent state of exception. In the age of humanitarian militarism and disaster overexposure, the global indetermination between law and violence takes place in new tele-technological fronts of containment and surveillance, but also in 'non-places' of exception such as the *zones d'attente* established in European airports to hold illegal 'aliens', ethnic rape camps in the former Yugoslavia, centers of temporary detention for illegal immigrants and asylum-seekers, zones of internment for suspected terrorists, and indefinitely displaced and incarcerated 'aliens' whose legal status remains deliberately unclear.[21]

In working through the connections among political suffering, gender, language, and the body, the performative genre of women's public mourning exposes the political implications of loss, but also the political possibilities in the re-workings of loss, memory, and mourning. In examining the cultural and political processes of destruction and suffering unleashed by the Partition of India in 1947, and specifically, the events of violence, rape, and abduction of women, as well the appropriation of women's bodies as cultural media by the project of nationalism, the Indian anthropologist Veena Das explores the mimetic transactions between language and body by which "the antiphony of language and silence" performed in the genre of women's public mourning re-inhabits a world that has become utterly non-inhabitable in the face of desolating events of violence and loss.[22] Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's example of "feeling pain in the body of another",[23] Das traces routes of acknowledgement and recognition – new constructions of speech and silence – through which social suffering might enter the body of language. Das's rendering of the gendered division of labor in the work of mourning allows us to come to a more subtle understanding of the corollary and formidable complexity of the relation between pain, language, and the body, and think through the ways in which Women in Black body forth a performative language that thrusts the limits of representation and referentiality.

Speaking in Mourning, bearing Witness to Unspeakability

No political reflection can dispense with reflection on language, with work on language.

Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" [24]

The very idea of Women in Black holding silent vigils in public is meant to draw attention to the historical unspeakability and silenced memory of collective traumatic encounters with death that demand our witness when nothing is left to be said, and, at the same time, to echo what has gone unsaid and remains to be said in light of the historic voicelessness of women, the others of language. Within their struggled recovery of the possibility of language, they situate their ethico-political distrust of language; and they do so by virtue of their silenced gendered agency:

> *We refuse to add to the cacophony of empty statements that are spoken with the best intentions yet may be erased or go unheard under the sound of a passing ambulance or a bomb exploding nearby ... Our silence is visible. We invite women to stand with us, reflect about themselves and women who have been raped, tortured or killed in concentration camps, women who have disappeared, whose loved ones have disappeared or have been killed, whose homes have been demolished.*[25]

The act of reclaiming and reappropriating the language which has been the vehicle of their own expropriation overlaps with the act of witnessing other women's loss and dispossession. Their "visible silence" profoundly questions the possibility of representation in the face of massive and extreme human pain by exposing the condition by which disaster wrecks language. This is not about "giving voice to the voiceless", but rather about incorporating the bewildered muteness of the survivors.[26] Their stance is not that of the victim or the survivor, but the one of the witnessing listener and empathic bystander, the mediating agent who speaks *for* others, those turned into "bare life" – in Agamben's sense – by the empire's biopolitical sovereignty, and addresses her testimony *to* others. Their stance, the stand of the witness,[27] is one of a second-degree witness. They have not suffered affliction firsthand, but rather noticed – testified from the outside – political horror and strive to seek out ways to recognize, to address, and to relate to the unencompassable woundedness of its occurrence, inaccessible though it may be, by articulating an effective political-historical testimonial intervention. It is this stance of public witnessing, this ethics of discursive and bodily engagement with the devastation of the other through lending one's body to the other's loss, that can convert a "bad death" (un-mourned and un-witnessed) into a "good death".[28]

Sometimes the silence in Women in Black vigils is interrupted by women's wails of grief and even occasional screams. As a Women in Black flier puts it: "In Baghdad, it has been reported that one can hear the sound of women wailing in the night for another lost son or daughter, husband, friend or lover." In its entire inarticulate and voiceless cry, the language of silent mourning that Women in Black perform in public places of official commemoration becomes aligned with and entangled in the language of human suffering that the ceremonial lamenting wails of the women of Baghdad convey. This shuttle movement between silence and cry bespeaks a condition that breaks with the meaningfully finite and self-transparent presence of utterance. Women in Black inhabit language

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in the realms of its most intense and unpronounceable discontinuities (i.e. silence and scream), its political, historical, and biographical losses. The language in which they strive to convey the confrontation with death that others have suffered is a language that situates itself outside of its own self and on the very limits that signify the finitude of our frames of reference and the delimitations of any referential reifications. The implications of this nonverbal language are aptly captured by Blanchot: "A word that is almost deprived of meaning is noisy. Meaning is limited silence (language is relatively silent, depending on the degree to which it contains the element into which it departs, the already departed, the absent meaning, which verges upon the a-semic)."[29] The performative language of Women in Black puts into action the naked experience of language – language being at a loss; it enacts a language that might yield new avenues of bearing witness. Both in silence and in speech, Women in Black speak through the traumatic experience of an Other in a way that puts into an infinite undecidedness the boundaries between self and other.

The specific genre of political mourning that Women in Black perform is not without its hazards, however. It might be reproached for romantic pacifism and utopian unrealism. It may also call forth clichés of voiceless suffering, stereotypes of the female body as a signifier of silent mourning, or perceptions of empathy as naturally appropriate to peaceful femininity. Indeed, such politics of mourning entails not only possibilities for political subversion but also perils of renormalization: the peril of hopelessly perpetuating stereotyped images to which the sign of "mourning" has been historically attached intersects with the peril of being drawn into the complicity of the observing bystander – the "Westerner" – who homogenizes and essentializes "suffering", reducing it either to discourse of humanitarian aid or to a liberal-legalistic discourse of human rights violations. It is true that appropriating affliction at a safe distance in the transnational society of corporative mediation has become the prevalent currency of moral(istic) engagement, an engagement that is all too often disengaged from political responsibility and action, and is all too easily reduced to sentimental pathos, narcissism, aesthetization, simplification, commercialization, and the expiation of guilt.[30] The devastating conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East are transformed from "local" or "regional" political disasters into isolated, transient, and safely communicable spectacles of atrocity taken up into the global circuits of popular media, market bureaucracies, and transnational institutions of humanitarian intervention. In the wake of massive trauma in the globalized world, the politics of representation may turn on the affective-performative politics of Women in Black reproaches of voyeuristic sensibility and political appropriation of loss and suffering. Above all, a movement that focuses its politics on protesting against the social suffering inflicted by the current biopolitics of sovereignty faces the challenge of overcoming the most crucial predicament that Das has described in her work on the "critical event" of the 1984 Bhopal Disaster: "The more suffering was talked about, the more it was to extinguish the sufferer."[31]

In response to such reservations, it should be stressed that Women in Black do far more than graphically represent or "talk about" moments of atrocity and events of loss. By bringing into language the unintelligible lives and deaths of the current world order, by claiming their very being-in-language, while engaging a radical language and politics of gender, Women in Black participate in a new cosmopolitics of feminist dissent and resistance to a certain globalized sovereignty, while remaining acutely aware of the vicissitudes and aporias involved in enacting loss for one's own

political vision. By critically assuming and radically disrupting the stereotyped positions of "women" in the regimes of nationalism, militarism, and gender normativity, they help to summon the ethical responsibility and mobilize the political responses needed to envision and actively pursue social change. If Hélène Cixous is right in claiming that mourning is men's way of withstanding castration, of making haste to introject and phantasmatically incorporate the lost object in order to recover the investment made in it, then Women in Black take the risk of engaging in the ambiguous sign of mourning against its patriarchal and nationalist implications. If the process of "letting go" is what differentiates "normal" mourning from "pathological" melancholia,[32] Women in Black are neither interested in "getting over" or "letting go" political loss nor willing to succumb to the absorption of unavowable political trauma by an overarching paradigm of unknowability or ineffability. Rather, they insist on rearticulating public mourning as a historically situated practice of dissent and alternative responsiveness in our present world, such as it is *now*. Their performative politics of mourning is meant to engage in the temporality of the present in a way that 'says the ineffable' and thus constitutes the conditions of a powerful political agency that points to a transformative social vision. As Cixous has eloquently put it: "Culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead."[33]

The Enactment of Testimony

> *One should not develop a taste for mourning, and yet mourn we must.*

> Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* [34]

In a work profoundly rooted in Holocaust Studies, literary theorist Cathy Caruth engages the crucial link between theory and literature in order to theorize the unarticulated implications of the theory of trauma in Sigmund Freud's writings. She proposes that through the notion of trauma and its associated complex relation between knowing and not knowing, we come to a new understanding of history as no longer unambiguously referential; through the notion of trauma, Caruth argues, we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that arises precisely where immediate understanding is impossible.

What is at the heart of Freud's writing on trauma is the contention that the reality of trauma is not immediately available to the wounded. The traumatic experience, in Freud's theoretical explanation of trauma, remains inaccessible to some degree. It is an experience that is neither fully grasped nor fully assimilated as it occurs; it cannot be possessed by the victim's consciousness and yet possesses her actual life. Trauma emerges, then, as a narrative of a wound that resists recuperation, a story that repeats itself as it uncannily and inadvertently emerges through the unknowing acts of the survivor and thus ceaselessly permeates and shapes her life. Rather than an experience that can be immediately declared, represented, communicated, affirmed, disavowed, negated, renounced or attested to, trauma is the belated and recurring address of the narrative of trauma. As a narrative that is indirectly and retroactively reinscribed, translated, and reworked, trauma resides at the intersection of language and history. Caruth lays special

emphasis on the listening to the sorrowful voice, the address of another that demands not only a listening but also a response. The traumatic experience remains, in Caruth's reading, "unclaimed experience", but one that emerges as "the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from a wound",[35] a voice that witnesses a truth that the addressee cannot fully know but to which she nonetheless bears witness.

If the core of trauma is its narrativization, nonetheless disaster is not representable according to the established genres of narrative and history. And if the conventional and available means of narrating the human experience of trauma fail to exhaustively account for it, then it is necessary to speak about these events and experiences of traumatic rupture, especially in our bloody times when, as Shoshana Felman has shown, testimony has become the discursive modality par excellence of our relation to traumatic events. In the "age of testimony" – the era of Nazi extermination, of Hiroshima, of Vietnam, of the Gulf War, and of many more instances of politically induced pain – how might one testify to such trauma that has the power to elude linguistic and conceptual frames of reference, especially given that those historical events of trauma, precisely by eliminating any possibility of witness, radically modify the relation between event and knowledge, language and evidence, witnessing and ethics, thus prompting a "crisis of witnessing", as Felman and Laub indicate suggestively in their theory of testimony?[36]

For Felman, testimony should not be understood as merely an act of observing and recording, but rather as "an utterly unique and irreplaceable topographical *position* with respect to an occurrence".[37] The uniqueness of this position resides precisely in its paradoxical connection with the "inside" and the "outside".[38] Pointing to a space of struggle in the context of the Palestinian intifada, where the relation between the inside and the outside is differently mapped, Edward Said wrote in 1989: "… we become partners in the common struggle, and not onlookers or mere passive observers. Thus will the inside and outside become one."[39]

In the face of events of "unclaimed experience" in Caruth's sense, Women in Black open up new spaces for witnessing "an event eliminating its own witness",[40] and thereby for rethinking how the act and stance of *bearing* witness is tied up with the act and stance of *bearing* responsibility: "To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude."[41] It is to enact responsibility before the dead, which according to Derrida is a precondition for thinking and enacting justice.[42] In the political genres performed by Women in Black, such *bearing* involves, above all, the necessity to *bear* the aporias of mourning. It is through this endurance that they offer new articulations of responsiveness and responsibility, and produce new sites of resistance as 'response-ability'. Drawing on the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's conception of responsibility toward others in their death, Blanchot writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*:

> *Responsibility: a banal word, a notion moralistically assigned to us as a (political) duty. We ought to try to understand the word as it has been opened up and renewed by Levinas so that it has come to signify (beyond the realm of meaning) the responsibility of an other philosophy (which, however, remains in many respects eternal philosophy) … My responsibility for the Other presupposes an overturning such that it can only be marked by a change in the status of "me", a change in time and perhaps in language.*[43]

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Responsibility, Blanchot suggests, requires that one unsettle the mastery of the first-person speaking subject and disengage oneself from the "me" that signifies the self-presence of this mastery. For him, responsibility is such that it would summon us to turn toward an unknown language that would permit us to convey the disaster – and disaster as the improperness of its name, as Derrida puts it – "without either understanding it or bearing it".[44] Such turning would encompass an encounter with the very limits of responsibility: "That is why responsibility is itself disastrous – the responsibility that never lightens the Other's burden (never lightens the burden he is for me), and makes us mute as far as the word we owe him is concerned."[45] Such possibilities and impossibilities of responsibility require the invention of a new mode of mourning, which involves, or becomes, as in Blanchot's oeuvre, *poesis*.[46]

Within and beyond Sexual Difference: Language, Body, and Feminist Dissent

The pain of the other not only asks for a home in language but also seeks a home in the body.

Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain"[47]

The public mourning of Women in Black is a performative act situated *in* language; as a stance that struggles to exceed what always exceeds us. Language, understood as the totality of discourse but also as its ceaseless fragmentation, retains a special connection with the violence involved in the production of life as bare life in contemporary biopolitics. Veena Das has put it aptly: "[T]he way language is deployed to render some forms of dying as fanatical (e.g. by terrorists) and others as representing the supreme value of sacrificing oneself (e.g. as in values of patriotism) blocks any road to understanding when and under what circumstances individual life ceases to hold value."[48] And Judith Butler has addressed the narrative dimension of the US responses to war waged in Afghanistan this way:

In the US, we start the story by invoking a first-person narrative point of view, and tell what happened on 11 September. And it is that date, and the unexpected and fully terrible experience of violence that propels the narrative. ... Our own acts of violence do not receive graphic coverage in the press, and so they remain acts that are justified in the name of self-defense, but also justified by a noble cause, namely, the rooting out of terrorism. ... A narrative form emerges to compensate for the enormous narcissistic wound opened up by the public display of our physical vulnerability. ... Perhaps the question cannot be heard at all, but I would still like to ask: can we find another meaning, and another possibility, for the decentering of the first person narrative within the global framework?[49]

This "another possibility" that Butler calls for, the possibility "for the decentering of the first person narrative within the global framework", summons up a new language of reading and speaking, distinguished from language understood as a plenitude of self-contained presence and propriety. This would be a language performed by the very passage from the proper place – the *house* [50] – of ontopological belonging to the a-topos or ec-topos of subversive catachresis; a language

effected by a perpetual coming-out that contaminates the essence of mono-language by going beyond its conventional topologies. Today's radical feminist politics of mourning-otherwise, like the one performed by Women in Black, gives us a cue of the aporia between speaking and the unspeakable, between bearing witness and the impossibility of speech, between contestation and vulnerability, between the human and the inhuman produced in the language of sovereignty; the aporia at the heart of the very political praxis of mourning for those socially instituted as impossible, prohibited, and unimaginable to mourn. This is the very structure of the aporia that the political language of Women in Black makes us listen to. In this respect, their catachresis of mourning, or, their mourning-as-catachresis, is to be read as testimony, that is, as an event of language confronting the limits of speakability:

> *Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the human and the inhuman enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish ... the true witness.*[51]

Mary Layoun, an Arab-American literary theorist and justice activist who has written extensively on the intersection of nationalisms and sexualities, put it this way at the Women in Black vigil in Madison, Wisconsin: "One of the things that you learn about not being listened to is both to speak, but also to listen because you have had to learn listening. And there can't be a just peace unless we listen."[52]

The vigilant language of Women in Black is "structured" like a performative movement, an excessive one, a movement to the point of "exhaustion"; an inexhaustible errancy that at once delights in wandering and longs to connect; an errancy that never arrives and, despite the injunctions of phallogocentrism to referential anchoring ("penetration", we should recall, is the most common metaphor for incisive referentiality), never gives itself over to a semantic destination, to a proper place in gender normativity and in the nation-state; it always slips away, at times into otherness, as it were, drawn into newly discovered sensoria of speakability. Meaning is stripped from its sedentary connotations, as language wanders from the domestic oedipal chambers of mother tongue to the abyss of its unheard-of possibilities. In effect, this is a language that contests the ethnocentric and phallocentric violence that mother tongue carries in itself. In this light, then, Rosi Braidotti's question provides a powerful commentary on the political density of the mother tongue in light of genocidal rapes:

> *Is it because of their mother tongues that women in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia are being systematically raped and held in procreative concentration camps? Is coercive motherhood by gang rape the price to be paid for speaking the 'wrong' mother tongue? Is not every appeal to the 'right' mother tongue the matrix of terror, of fascism, of despair? Is it because the polyglot practices a sort of gentle promiscuity with different linguistic bedrocks, that s/he has long since relinquished any notion of linguistic or ethnic purity?*[53]

Braidotti's consideration of the sexual differentiation of the new world order's "universal citizen" takes us to the particular political language of Women in Black; a language that contests the recent and current politics of biopolitical sovereignty, displacement, and increasing nationalism

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in this Age of Empire by bearing witness to unwitnessable life and by mourning unmournable death. I have been suggesting that, by showing – enacting, performing – how the workings of empire are systematically gendered, and by resisting what has been categorized as "mourning" in its normative connections to the feminine and the patriotic, Women in Black leave open a space for a politics-to-come, for a renewed anti-racist, anti-colonialist, and anti-militarist feminist protest against biopolitical production of life as bare life. This is, indeed, about a "politically infamous" enterprise that Drucilla Cornell calls "the sacrilege of feminism".[54]

Now that the political is not circumscribed by the territorial border, yet new boundaries of political intelligibility are drawn,[55] a new cosmopolitics of "address" seems to be at stake, if "address" is taken, in the suggestive ambivalence of its sense, *both* as the claim of home *and* performativity of language, *both* as self-positioning *and* as turning to another. This sense of the political emerges not only as a promise but also as a performative possibility of displacement available to communities that are marginalized or foreclosed by virtue of sovereign regimes of intelligibility – be they class, gender, race, or sexuality. The eventness of the performative is always unanticipated, perhaps always untenable; but it is also always open. This is because the placeholders of the imperial episteme of the common referent always have the wrong address – let alone too narrow a notion of "address"; and as Avital Ronell asks, "what if the future is not about restoring the phallus – or, for that matter, woman – to a proper place?"[56]

FOOTNOTES

1   Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso, 2004, p. xii.

2   Source: http://www.womeninblack.net.

3   Anthropologist Neni Panourgia suggests that black clothing should not be understood solely as a cultural prescription *imposed* to mourners because such proposition would negate the possibility of the mourner's *desire* for mourning attire: "Mourning attire should also be considered within the framework of desire by the living to keep the deceased closer to them, not to expunge them from quotidian life. Thus black clothing can create an emotional and conceptual bridge between the two worlds which allows mourners a privileged negotiation of their loss, especially since this negotiation is unilateral, on the part of the living, now that their dead has no desires, rights, or existence." See: Neni Panourgia, *Fragments of Death, Fables of Identity: An Athenian Anthropography*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, p. 214f.

4   Drucilla Cornell, "The new political infamy and the sacrilege of feminism", paper delivered at the De-
    partment of Philosophy, New School University, New York, 2003, p. 14. Since published in *Metaphiloso-
    phy* 35:3 (2004), pp. 313–329.

5   Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, transl. Ann Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska
    Press, 1995, pp. 19 and 51.

6   Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, New York: Columbia UP, 1989, p. xvi.

7   Penelope Deutscher, "Mourning the Other, Cultural Cannibalism, and the Politics of Friendship
    (Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray)", *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 10:3 (1998),
    pp. 159–184 (176).

8   Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997, p. 185.

9   Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy", *October* 51 (1989), pp. 3–18.

10 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, transl. Gillian Gill, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985 [1974].

11 Here I follow the definition of "utopia" suggested by Eleni Varikas, who rejects an understanding of the
    concept as an "irrational" avoidance of the present. Varikas insists on utopia's a) interstitial location
    between what is no longer tolerable and what does not yet exist except as a lack or expectation; and
    b) its radically uncertain character, as it derives from an ethical choice that can never be empirically
    justified. See Eleni Varikas, "Féminisme, modernité, postmodernism: pour un dialogue des deux côtés
    de l'océan", *Féminismes au présent, Supplément au Futur Antérieur* (1993), pp. 59–84 (84).

12 In such spaces of reclaiming the political, losses that are disavowed and thus cannot be grieved are
    entwined with events of merriment that cannot be acceptably celebrated. As Judith Butler reminds us
    a propos of her reading of Walter Benjamin's account of the *Trauerspiel*, "the rituals of mourning are
    sites of merriment" (Judith Butler, "Afterword: After Loss, What Then?", David Eng and David Kazanjian
    (eds.), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, pp. 467–474 (472)).
    Women in Black disrupt culturally rewarded forms of "full" and "normal" subjectivity in aligning the
    social emergence of a "natural" gendered order and a system of compulsory heterosexuality with a nor-
    mative sense of national belonging. The practice of lesbian unions between women of warring nations
    has been a suggestive aspect of political and ethical performance in Women in Black: the public lesbian
    union between an Albanian woman and an English woman was celebrated in the international annual
    meeting of Women in Black in 1996 in Novi Sad (Cornell, *op. cit.*). Such practices are meant to counter
    the ideologies of war sacrifice and national belonging that are predicated upon prevailing narratives of
    kinship symbolics of blood and heterosexual family values as a justification for war and genocide.

13 In Hegel's interpretation of Sophocles' drama in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Antigone, as the woman
    who in insisting on the right and rite of mourning and in burying the body of her brother in defiance of
    Creon's decree, holds civic-customary law responsible before divine law, is the "eternal irony of the
    community", that is, the one who disrupts Hegel's watertight system of an otherwise cohesive "com-
    munity" composed by "blood relations". For a critique, see Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship
    between Life and Death*, New York: Columbia UP, 2000; Stathis Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think?
    Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003, and Gillian Rose, *Mourning
    Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. In meditating on

the figure of the mourning woman outside the boundary wall of the city, the latter asks: "What is the meaning of these acts? Do they represent the transgression of the law of the city – women as the irony of the political community, as its ruination?" And Rose answers thus: "No. In these delegitimate acts of tending the dead, these acts of justice, against the current will of the city, women reinvent the political life of the community." (Ibid., p. 35). Significantly, anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis has delineated the gendered poetics of the body involved in the mourning ritual among Inner Maniats; women's performative-affective labor of pain, lamenting, and witnessing, a practice of cultural power on the part of women in Inner Mani's male-dominated social order, organizes the relations between the living and the dead, but also between the collective and the individual as well as between self and others. See C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. Maurice Bloch has pointed to the paradoxical connection of women to death. While they signify, he claims, the polluting aspect of the body, they also bear the responsibility of expulsing the polluting elements of the corpse through mourning rituals. See Maurice Bloch, "Death, Women, and Power", in Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982, pp. 210–230 (226).

14 Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, transl. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage, 1998 [1978], p. 137.

15 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998 [1995].

16 Walter Benjamin [Hannah Arendt (ed.)], *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1989 [1968], p. 257.

17 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, transl. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000 [1996], p. 5–6.

18 Idem, *Homo Sacer*, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

19 Stathis Gourgouris, "Enlightenment and *Paranomia*", in Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (eds.), *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997, pp. 119–149 (122).

20 From the declaration of the International Meeting of Women in Black in Italy, 21–25 August 2003.

21 In Camp Delta in the Guantánamo Bay naval base, more than 600 people from 43 countries are indefinitely imprisoned and definitively excluded from the community, with no access to legal assistance, refused recognition as war prisoners and thus excluded from the protection of the Geneva Convention. The inhabitants of these non-places are completely deprived of their rights, juridical value, and political status, and thus they can be subjected to unpunishable acts of violence.

22 Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain", in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (eds.), *Social Suffering*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 67–91 (68).

23 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958.

24 Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?", transl. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7:1 (1981), pp. 41–55 (45). From the original "Le sexe ou la tête?", *Les Cahiers du GRIF* 13 (1976), pp. 5–15.

25 Statement of Women in Black, available at: http://www.womeninblack.net/stats/wibart.html (accessed 2 September 2005).

26 In her meditation on Claude Lanzmann's groundbreaking film *Shoah* (1985), a film about the witnessing of the Holocaust, literary theorist Shoshana Felman considers the unspeakable confession that reverberates throughout the interviews – the testimonies – presented in the film, in the reticence of the Holocaust survivors, who have continued to be "the bearers of the silence", as though they keep the secrecy – a secret utterly binding and compelling – of contemporary history. The whole effort of the film, Felman argues, is to inscribe – cinematically bear witness to – this movement between fall to silence and a retrieval of the living voice, and "to enact the *liberation of the testimony* from the bondage of the secret". See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. xix (original emphasis).

27 Nadia Seremetakis has written on the crucial relevance of witnessing to the mourning ritual in Inner Mani, southern Greece. In their performance of lament, female mourners claim to "come out as representatives" (*na vghó antiprósopos*) of the dead, and to "witness, suffer for, and reveal the truth about" (*na tine martyrísome*) the dead. See Nadia Seremetakis, *I Teleftaia Lexi stis Evropis ta Akra: Di-aisthisi, Thanatos, Gynaikes*, Athens: Nea Sinora, 1991, p. 136 (first published as: *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Death without weeping is a public disgrace, Seremetakis points out; silent death, that is unlamented death, is considered "naked death", whereby "nakedness" implies solitude, isolation, estrangement, and abandonment. (p. 104, Greek edition).

28 Seremetakis, 1991, p. 104–110, Greek edition.

29 Maurice Blanchot, *op. cit.,* p. 52.

30 See also Luc Boltanski, *La Souffrance a Distance*, Paris: Metailie, 1993.

31 Veena Das, "Moral Orientations to Suffering: Legitimation, Power and Healing", in Lincoln C. Chen, Arthur Kleinman, and Norma C. Ware (eds.), *Health and Social Change in International Perspective*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1994, pp. 139–170 (163).

32 This distinction between mourning and melancholia through the pathologization of the latter as a regressive movement belongs to Sigmund Freud. See his "Mourning and Melancholia", in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, London: Hogarth Press, 1957. For a deconstruction of the Freudian logic, see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, *op. cit.,* and Giorgio Agamben, "The Lost Object", in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, transl. Ronald L. Martinez, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

33 Hélène Cixous, *op. cit.,* p. 55.

34 Jacques Derrida [Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (eds.)], *The Work of Mourning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 110.

35 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996, p. 3.

36 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *op. cit.,* p. xvii.

37 Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah", in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *op. cit.*, pp. 204–283 (206) (original emphasis).

38 Ibid., p. 232.

39 Edward Said, "Intifada and Independence", *Social Text* 22 (1989), pp. 23–39. For an insightfully critical reading of Said's article, see Mary Layoun, "Telling Spaces: Palestinian Women and the Engendering of National Narratives", in Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger (eds.), *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 407–423. In showing how women's bodies become ciphers upon which the imaginings of male resistance fighters are predicated, Layoun unravels the ways in which Palestinian women's participation in the *intifada* may challenge the prevailing paradigms that underwrite the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in recasting the dominant narrative demarcation of "inside" and "outside" and the role of women in those spaces. Ibid., pp. 408–410.

40 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *op. cit.*, p. xvii.

41 Felman, "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching", in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–56 (3). Here Felman reads the poet Paul Celan's "No one bears witness for the witness".

42 No justice is either possible or thinkable, writes Derrida, without the principle of responsibility before those who are "victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism". See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, transl. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. xix.

43 M. Blanchot, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

44 Ibid., p. 27.

45 Ibid.

46 G. Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

47 Veena Das, p. 88.

48 Veena Das, "Violence and translation", *Anthropological Quarterly* 75:1 (2001), pp. 105–111 (110).

49 Judith Butler, "Explanation and exoneration, or what we can hear", *Theory and Event* 5:4 (2002), electronic publication at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.4butler.html.

50 Language is, for Martin Heidegger, the house of Being. In his meditation on language "On the Way to Language", where he comes to grips with the relation between language and the human, Heidegger thinks through the event of language's finitude. The reference to Heidegger in this context is not accidental, of course: Heidegger is the philosopher of human mortality and of Being-toward-death, who persistently refused to "speak" about the Nazi genocide and his Nazism. To face the question of how (Heidegger's) language opens to receive a stranger, that is, to appropriate human finitude – the very experience of being "thrown" into finitude – in the figure of the effaced Other, we will have to think through language's porosity and vulnerability to difference. For a detailed consideration of this enterprise, see Athena Athanasiou, "Technologies of Humanness, Aporias of Biopolitics, and the Cut Body of Humanity", *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14:1 (2003), pp. 125–162.

51 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York: Zone Books, 1999, p. 120.

52 Quoted on http://www.fire.or.cr/junio01/vigil8june.htm (accessed 2 September 2005).

53 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia UP, 1994, p. 13.

54 D. Cornell, *op. cit.*, 2003.

55 In Jacques Derrida's terms, the "topolitical" has been dislocated. See Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Échographies – de la television*, Paris: Galilée, 1996, pp. 67–68.

56 Avital Ronell, "Support Our Tropes: Reading Desert Storm", in Frederick M. Dolan and Thomas L. Dumm (eds.), *Rhetorical Republic: Governing Representations in American Politics*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, pp. 13–38 (28).