

(Ef)acing the Other:

The Subversion of Empathy in the Killing of Humans and Other Animals

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As a species, humans have long distinguished ourselves through our unique ability to conceive of increasingly efficient methods and technologies for separating death from our immediate experience. Through the pursuit of this goal, we have fractured space and sight in such a way as to bring us to our present state of utter dissociation from the actions of those to whom we now outsource this violence. We can only know what we see, or as John Berger writes: “We only see what we look at” (8). I will argue that sight – in its raw, unmediated form – is a prerequisite to rational deliberation and ethical discourse. Further, I will suggest that the physical barriers to sight are supplemented by discursive constructions that further obscure the Other from those who would do them harm. Only by acknowledging sight – conceived as encompassing interpersonal perception as such, including but not limited to the visual – as a political weapon, problematizing and charting the “frontiers of sequestered experience” (Giddens 169), can we begin to deconstruct these barriers and reassert the empathetic relationship to the Other as a prerequisite to moral deliberation. This study represents a sustained attempt to explore the physical and discursive techniques by which certain populations are framed as ungrievable, and therefore killable.

Emmanuel Levinas utilizes the concepts of “totality” and “infinity” as a way of

structuring the phenomenological experience of our relationship to the Other. When we face the Other with intentionality, we are seeing across an unbridgeable divide, an ontological abyss that is an experience of radical alterity and heterogeneity. This chasm represents the impossibility of truly understanding another as they are in and for themselves. This divide is infinite, and for Levinas is characterized by the attempt to cognize an experience that overflows thought itself. It is this true excess of the Other that rends the totality under which we subsume our fellow beings. Within the totality, we see through a mediating term or concept that functions as an attempt to bridge the infinite. In this way, we understand the Other not as it is in itself but as a manifestation or element of some combination of categories. Individuality becomes lost beneath a floating signifier – ‘terrorist,’ ‘radical,’ ‘civilian,’ or perhaps even ‘beef’ and ‘pork’ – and such a fragile linguistic link is easily weaponized. This initial schematization is a powerful form of violence, blurring lines, smoothing edges, and filling in voids to place beings neatly within concepts. Only through the lens of the totality can we place and quantify individuals. The pure vulnerability and exteriority of the Other is pacified and made manageable.

For Levinas, the primary ethical relationship between beings is consummated in the experience of the face. The face

should be here understood broadly, designating not (only) the literal face but an experience of the Other that reveals precarity and difference. As Levinas writes, “[t]he way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the Other in me, we here name face” (Levinas 50). Here again, it becomes clear that Levinas is not suggesting that a literal face-to-face encounter is the sole foundation for empathy, but that this serves as a paradigm for understanding all other forms of encounter. Conceived in this way, the face is the physical manifestation of the pure excess of infinity. He writes that “The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger” (75). That hunger demands response; to glimpse the face is to be placed into an asymmetrical relationship of infinite obligation (Critchley 49). It is therefore possible “to recognize the gaze of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan only in giving or refusing” (Levinas 77). The only choice remaining involves the question of fidelity: to give or refuse, which is nothing other than the temptation of totality.

It is important to note that Levinas places the face-to-face relationship primarily through the metaphor of discourse. This call and response, whether generosity or refusal, is for him a proto-conversation: “The eyes break through the mask – the language of the eyes, impossible to dissemble. The eye does not shine; it speaks” (Levinas 66). This is the voice of Other, which, again, is to be understood broadly as the plea for recognition and mercy. Through facing the Other in this way as an experience of the infinite, our existential egoism is shattered and called into question. As Judith Butler, philosopher and Maxine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of

California-Berkeley, explains, “the face of the Other speaks to me from outside, and interrupts that narcissistic circuit. The face of the Other calls me out of narcissism toward something finally more important” (*Precarious Life* 66). This egoism, which Levinas understands as the truest form of atheism, the denial of the infinite, is shattered in the experience of the face-to-face.

Butler deals with Levinas extensively in *Precarious Life*, and through her work we can see the relevance of Levinas for our present situation. Butler understands the face primarily as that which “communicates what is human, what is precarious, what is injurable” (xvii). The voice, that which is communicated through the face but which is not necessarily vocal is “agonizing, suffering” (133). Thus, the face to face relation becomes a process of awakening “to what is precarious in another life, or, rather, the precariousness of life itself” (134). This precarity is fundamentally the vulnerability of the body: “the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence” (26). Butler here emphasizes the importance of the dialectic of the Other and the Same for the moral experience: acknowledging a common bodily fragility provides a sympathetic bridge to the acknowledgment of a more basic and non-traversable alterity. This experience of ultimate vulnerability must take place in order to comport oneself ethically toward the Other.

In examining the political import of the concept of precarity, Butler introduces the notion of ‘grievable’ life. As she writes, “some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must

not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (xv). The determination of who, or what, is grievable is a political act, and takes place first in the public sphere through discursive violence. Dehumanization, for Butler, is not only achieved through metaphor, but is also accomplished through omission. Those whose lives are determined, in discourse, to be ungrievable, are in a sense erased from the field of moral concern: “Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization... They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost, or, rather, never ‘were’” (33). The obvious implication of this is not only the question of whose lives will count as such, but also whose deaths will count as deaths (xx-xxi).

This question of who, and what, is real is thus primarily a function of what we are able to see and the medium through which we see it. Can the face-to-face take place in the digital age? In *Frames of War*, Butler problematizes the visual medium as a site where derealization occurs *prior* to the encounter. She writes that “instruments also use persons (position them, endow them with perspective, and establish the trajectory of their action); they frame and form anyone who enters into the visual or audible field, and accordingly, those who do not” (*Frames of War* xii). Her understanding of the frame, both visual and discursive, as a tool to render persons as such (or not), will be fundamental to the examples in this paper. For Butler, the framing of an event is not a neutral, impartial view of a moment in time; it is rather an active force in “instrumentalizing certain versions of reality” (xiii). What is most crucial for our purposes is her argument that the frame of

an event is itself a weapon, “selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (xiii), and that the visual and discursive framing of lives as ungrievable is itself “not just preparation for a destruction to come, but the initiating sequence of the process of destruction” (xvi). In short, this psychic violence, more than simply a prerequisite, is in fact a *vital component* of the physical violence that follows and consummates it: “they are deprived of life before they are killed, transformed into inert matter or destructive instrumentalities, and so buried before they have had a chance to live, or to become worthy of destruction, paradoxically, in the name of life” (xxix).

Here, the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his decades-long *Homo Sacer* project reveals its urgency: the decision of whose deaths will count as such, will be grieved, is a function of sovereign power. Agamben understands the body as the site of a fundamental split through which the individual is revealed as both a biological organism and a political being – the “fundamental categorical pair of Western politics” (2). In this dichotomy, *zoē* represents “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” – bare, reproductive life, historically excluded from the political sphere – while *bios* is more properly understood as the public, political life of the individual or group (2). Agamben identifies the “politicization of bare life as such” to be “the decisive event of modernity” (4). The *homo sacer* (sacred man), the concept that forms the height of his project, represents that which “*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (4, emphasis original), understood here primarily as the space in which “it is permitted to kill without committing homicide” (83). This

determination, who or what may be killed without having been murdered, is a determination that resides in centralized political authority – as Agamben writes, “it constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power” (6). The *homo sacer*, then, constitutes the basic form by which we can understand Butler’s notion of ungrivable life: it is a life that can be taken without consequences, juridical or otherwise.

Before moving on, we must negotiate a point of tension between Butler’s notion of precarity and Agamben’s dichotomy of *zoē* and *bios*. Recall that for Agamben, *zoē* is characterized as “simple natural life” or “merely reproductive life” – life “confined... to the sphere of the *oikos*, ‘home’” (2). There is a clear difference in these descriptions. Surely there is a certain distance between the idea of a private sphere and that of pure biological necessity. What concerns Butler is precisely this process by which “a population is cast out of the polis and into bare life, conceived as an unprotected exposure to state violence” (*Who Sings the Nation-State?* 37). However, when Agamben describes the *homo sacer*, he is describing entire populations for which this distinction is ambiguous – those whose lives have lost any political import but who are nevertheless politicized in terms of mere life as such. Butler criticizes Agamben on this point in reference to the people of Gaza: “any effort to establish such an exclusionary logic depends upon the depoliticization of life and, once again, writes out the matters of gender, menial labor, and reproduction from the field of the political” (38).

The question then becomes whether Agamben’s analysis is not blind to a form of life among the marginalized and dispossessed that is, for all its precarity, not

reducible to the body. The disagreement here could perhaps be explained as a matter of perspective. Butler represents the stark facts of these precarious lives in their daily experiences, while Agamben’s analysis is focused on determining how these concepts function at the level of the state. There can be little doubt that Agamben recognizes the struggles and hopes of vulnerable communities as they navigate their day-to-day existence – in many ways his project is a sustained engagement with this very idea. However, the fact remains that from the perspective of the state, their lives *are* depoliticized. Their being *homo sacer* does not rely on their consent, not does it imply that they have abandoned the political. What this transition does require, however, is that from the perspective of sovereign power they have become ungrivable and thus disposable.

Having come this far, a crucial question arises concerning the juxtaposition alluded to in the title of this paper: what is the relationship between the ungrivable human life – the *homo sacer* – and the animal? Providing an answer to this question involves traversing the fantasy of an anthropocentric ontology and coming to terms with the animality common to all beings. As James Stanescu, philosopher and professor at American University, writes, “we invest a vast amount of intellectual work in trying to figure out what separates and individuates the human species, rather than in what makes us part of a commonality with other lives” (“Species Trouble” 569). A great deal of ink has been spilled in the project of outlining and refining various traits and activities that might distinguish the human from the animal, all of which are

plagued with deep inconsistencies.¹ Sufficed to say, “[t]he declaration, “We are all animals,” is one that revolts, and indeed, seems an attack upon dignity itself” (570). The resulting ontological distinctions are motivated by this revulsion, as a way of producing a worldview that maintains a comfortable human exceptionalism. Insofar as this activity can be understood as a way of preserving a special place for man at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of being, it can be equally seen as a method of delineating who and what is worthy of moral concern. The stakes of this debate, it would seem, involve no less than an undermining of the entire edifice of humanism and the Enlightenment project of equitable social organization founded on the rights of man. For if there is nothing to separate the human from the animal – if the animal also has *bios* – then one is confronted with the precarity of the nonhuman and the call to a flattened moral ontology.

While Judith Butler rarely deals explicitly with the question of the animal in her work, a passage in *Frames of War* provides the possibility of a way forward: “if it is the “life” of human life that concerns us, that is precisely where there is no firm way to distinguish in absolute terms the *bios* of the animal from the *bios* of the human animal . . . there is no human who is not a human animal” (19). In short, the human takes part in an animality common to all beings, and insofar as the human animal has a political existence then we cannot exclude the nonhuman from this category. Why is this the case? With Levinas, Butler understands the ethical relationship primarily in terms of the vulnerability

expressed in the face, which we know is equally the body insofar as it “implies mortality, vulnerability, [and] agency” (*Precarious Life* 26). If the body, and not some capacity for rational thought, is the site of precarity, then it cannot be bounded exclusively to the human. Recognizing vulnerability in another human being is accomplished by recognizing this shared animality of flesh and blood. As Stanesco writes apropos Butler, “[i]t is only by avowing our animality that we can also avow our precariousness” (“Species Trouble 576). What this suggests is that grievability and precarity are not categories that we in some way *extend* or *expand* to include the animal, but that these were never exclusive to the human in the first place.

As we have seen, the ethical relationship to the Other is predicated on the ability and will to rend totality and experience the face. This implies the *ability to see*, which in the context of this study has two meanings: (1) the ability to *literally see* the Other, without the mediation of distance and technology; and (2) the ability to *acknowledge the Other as such*, understood as the absence of the mediation of the totalizing category of thought under which the Other is subsumed. In these different, but perhaps equally powerful ways, advances in technology and propaganda function in a way that renders the face to face impossible. What is at stake in understanding the role of distance in the production of the ‘ungrievable’ is the recognition of the ability of sovereign power to frame lives as *homo sacer*: individuals that may be killed without having been murdered. It is the stripping away of the political content and import of life (*bios*) to

¹ For an extended discussion, see Mathew Calarco’s *Zoographies* (2008).

reveal only its disposable, biological core (*zoē*). What follows are two brief excursions on the role of distance – verbal and physical – in neutralizing otherwise-powerful ‘safety catches’ within the human psyche as they manifest in modern warfare and animal slaughter operations.

The Bravery of Being Out of Range

This section will serve to explicate the role of physical and technological distance in undermining the possibility of an effective face to face ethical relationship. While these two factors are related, and are in many cases two sides of the same coin, there are circumstances – such as in the case of imagery technology in drone warfare – when separate treatment is warranted. British sociologist Anthony Giddens defines such a “sequestration of experience” as the process whereby various spheres of activity are set apart from the everyday, including “madness; criminality; sickness and death; sexuality; and nature” (Giddens 156). On his view, death has become a matter of technique, not moral deliberation, and as such is “routinely hidden from view” (162). Whether an indirect result of pragmatic considerations or as a deliberate and systematic attempt to conceal, this construction of a common experiential field among participants and observers can be understood in terms of Butler’s concept of the ‘frame.’ As will be shown, advances in technology and technique “actively participate in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (*Frames of War* xiii). The following question should be kept in mind during this section: is the Levinasian face to face, the experience of vulnerability as a call to radical empathy, still possible in

the wake of the relentless mechanization, rationalization, and abstraction that characterizes modern methods of killing?

The potential tactical advantage of this concealment should not be underestimated, for as David Grossman, psychologist and retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, writes, “Looking another human being in the eye, making an independent decision to kill him, and watching as he dies due to your action combine to form the single most basic, important, primal, and potentially traumatic occurrence of war” (*On Killing* 31). Providing barriers, sequestering these experiences, represents the removal of a significant empathetic “safety catch” (Pinker 552) that could otherwise hinder effective combat operations. The philosopher Mark Coeckelbergh discusses the moral ambiguities that accompany the forward progress of military technology, which he describes as “distancing technologies” (90). Of course, there is a strategic defensive advantage to this distance, but the gain is also psychological: “One can now kill at longer distance: this is less psychologically ‘painful’ to the killer, the other is further away and may appear as a stranger, as ‘the’ enemy, as a puppet, as a target: as something-to-shoot-at, as something-to-be-killed” (90). Eric Markusen, former Professor of Sociology at Southwest Minnesota University and Research Director of the Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Copenhagen, describes the mutual evolution of physical and psychological distance in the context of aerial bombing: “The primary impetus for increased altitude was to outdistance the range of enemy flak, and new generations of bombers were designed to fly ever higher... [This] meant that many crews virtually never saw the people or even buildings at

which they were aiming” (228-229). Coeckelbergh takes this example further:

"When on August 6, 1945 at 8:15 AM B-29 bomber Enola Gay dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima, the crew soon witnessed blinding light and a mushroom- shaped cloud, covering the entire city in smoke and fire ... They didn't see how the skin of their victims was bleeding and burning. They didn't see people that looked "like walking ghosts," as a survivor described them. They didn't see the suffering and death of men, women, and children."
(87)

What this suggests is that the lack of proximity to the 'target' during aerial bombing operations, while tactically beneficial, results in a significant loss of normal empathetic cues that would otherwise serve as a psychological barrier to killing, and that this loss of affect occurs along a continuum that includes military technologies as diverse as spears, arrows, rifles, and drones.

While the industrial animal slaughterhouse does not create the sort of linear physical distance that characterizes modern military technology, it nevertheless utilizes a "meticulous partitioning of space" to render the act of killing nearly invisible to employees (Pachirat 84). The internal geography of the slaughterhouse that Timothy Pachirat, Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, describes is such that the kill floor and the front office are "as far apart physically as possible without being separated into two distinct buildings," with no interior route connecting them. The

bureaucratic division is just as stark, with all supervisory staff housed in their respective departments and having virtually no overlap or contact (39). Strict dichotomies come to be enforced, justified through a combination of food safety standards and bureaucratic efficiency: clean and dirty, live and dead, visible and invisible (Vialles 35). Pachirat emphasizes that "the division of labor on the kill floor works to fragment sight, to fracture experience, and to neutralize the work of violence" (159). Those who work pre-kill see only living, breathing, animals to be handled and pushed through the chutes. The much larger number who work post-kill see only an inert, bloodless substance to be processed in a cold, sterile environment (Vialles 35). This discipline of sight and labor is replicated down to the lowest possible level, even the "inner sanctum" that contains the physical act of slaughter itself (Johnson 211; Vialles 39). Among those who work on either end of this process, the fact that they cannot *see* the killing blow or that they do no *actually perform* it allows them to take comfort in their position of relative moral superiority and deny the process that they take part in. It is worth quoting Pachirat at some length here to illustrate this complex moral calculus:

"Only the knocker places the hot steel gun against the shaking, furry foreheads of creature after creature, sees his reflection in their rolling eyes, and pulls the trigger that will eventually rob them of life: only the knocker . . . And as long as the 1 exists, as long as there is some plausible narrative that concentrates the heaviest weight of the dirtiest work on this 1, then the other 120 kill floor workers can say, and believe it, 'I'm not going to take part

in this. I'm not going to stand and watch this.” (160)

Thus, the sequestration of experience enforced within the modern slaughterhouse is able to foster a ‘hierarchy of disgust,’ in which the erasure of the act of killing from the eyes and memories of employees allows them to rationalize their continued involvement in the system that requires it.

Having examined the effect of geography in neutralizing psychological barriers to killing, we must consider how technological advances can also obscure whatever “weak or imperfect moral connection” remains (Novek 127). The technological medium of drone warfare can be said to transport flesh and blood human beings into the consequence-free logic of a video game.² Grossman, writing in a time before the ubiquity of advanced imagery technology, described how night vision devices work to convert the enemy into an “inhuman green blob” (169). These, along with telescopic sights and other technology, “lower some of the psychological barriers to illegitimate killing” (Sparrow 179). Through a reliance on thermal-imagery in drone warfare, normal empathetic cues become neutralized through a “boring visual rhetoric” that takes the form of a “general aesthetic minimalism, bereft of even the most elementary forms of contrast, color, and content” (Ohi 617). This facilitates an abstraction in which “any possibility of ethical recognition” is lost without a true encounter with the Other (Sparrow 181). Coeckelbergh’s analysis pushes the argument further, arguing that “If the other (dis)appears as ‘data,’ as ‘information,’ as ‘a dot on a

screen,’ as an entity within a computer game, then it is easier to push the button” (93).

Through this technological dehumanization, the victim dies twice: “Epistemologically speaking, he is already killed before the missile hits him” (93).

This first, technological death, also occurs in the production of meat, such that any understanding of the animal *qua* living being is lost. The effect of mechanization in the slaughterhouse is such that the animal, held above and apart from the worker, becomes something else entirely – raw material awaiting production – and the worker, lost in the rational efficiency of the dis-assembly line, becomes numb to the reality of processing flesh. These killing spaces were conceived from the outset as a completely rationalized and machinated space (Otter 96). Through taking full advantage of labor-saving technology, the worker’s interaction with the animal is effectively minimized as it becomes increasingly handled and transported by hooks, pulleys, and rails (96). The introduction of this task-oriented, optimized approach to killing engendered a then-unknown level of dissociation and detachment, a neutralization of the act of killing that left the workers themselves as “mere accomplices” in the efficiency and logic of the organization (Patterson 72). Taken to the extreme, the speed and quantities involved in the work engender their own form of psychological distance: “By the end of the day, by liver number 2,394 or foot number 9,576, it hardly matters *what* is being cut, shorn, sliced, shredded, hung, or washed: all that matters

² This should not be taken to suggest that drone operators do not suffer severe psychological distress from their actions after the fact, but rather that the

immediate and visceral connection to the victim that would otherwise create a level of ambivalence in the moment of decision is severed.

is that the day is once again, finally, coming to a close” (Pachirat 139).

This dis-assembly approach to meat production finds its origin in “a growing desire for hygienic, non-violent (that is, humane), and undetectable slaughter - ultimately, for a way to “harvest” meat that would essentially vegetalize the animal (Johnson 200). Though the kill floor was on a path to full mechanization, the physical act of slaughter was “stubbornly resistant” and still necessitated the “firm but delicate, trained hand of a sober slaughterman” (Otter 96). Slowly, however, technological innovation has placed even this last holdout of immediacy increasingly within the logic of efficiency and detachment. Humane stunning technologies – bullets, pistols, bolts – provide not only a level of mechanical distance, but also serve to erase the combat of the kill and replace it with a clean, precise, and instant death. The most extreme example of this is in the use of the ‘trap,’ in which death is administered with the push of a button from a safe, separate location. In the trap, “the animal is held apart from the man, who is then able to slaughter it in complete safety” (Vialles 113), a process that severs once and for all any possible ethical relationship.

The effects of this process of physical and technological distancing are not limited to the individuals directly involved in the process. The loss of any public connection to ‘outsourced killing’ lowers the threshold of legitimacy for military engagement abroad. It is very likely that certain operations would not be taking place without advanced military robotics technologies, and low-level conflict will

likely become ubiquitous as countries expand their drone technology programs. Through unprecedented geographic and technological distancing that disconnects the soldier from the victim, and both from the weapon, drone warfare is able to create the conditions for a true “risk transfer war” in which less-developed nations take the majority of casualties (Monahan and Wall 248). Due to the nature of current asymmetric and neocolonial global conflicts, a disproportionate number of these deaths will be suffered by noncombatants (Huntington 50; Gusterson 201). Images of flag-draped coffins are a sure way to erode the popularity of a large-scale military operation (the so-called “CNN” or “Dover” Effect) and wars without ‘boots on the ground’ have the unique advantage of not facing this threat to public support (Huntington 7-11; Kaag and Kreps 6). An increase in the use of drones will allow administrations to wage any number of ‘small wars’ with very little public interest or oversight, a “win-win proposition for the president, who could appear strong on defense without responsibility for body bags coming home” (Kaag and Kreps 65).

In fact, many political analysts and military ethicists are now arguing that a reliance on unmanned strike capabilities will reduce inhibitions against going to war by lowering the threshold for violence.³ The United Kingdom acknowledges this explicitly in its *Joint Doctrine Note 2/11*, in which it is argued that the total reliance on drone technologies for conducting strikes in Pakistan and Yemen suggests that “the use of force is totally a function of the existence of an unmanned capability – *it is unlikely a*

³ See Schulzke and Walsh; Kaag and Kreps; or Ryan, for example

similar scale of force would be used if this capability were not available” (5-9, emphasis added). In short, the explicit ‘benefit’ of drone technologies – that they save lives by removing soldiers from the battlefield – is not the complete truth: there are, and will continue to be, operations that are entirely a function of the availability of drones, such that were this technology not available these operations would not be carried out by other means.

This logic applies to the slaughterhouse as well. The conditions of modern agribusiness are such that the consumer has become utterly disconnected from the meat that they consume. Unidentified, unsigned, the ideal slaughterhouse looks like any other anonymous warehouse (Otter 105). It “turns a chameleon face outward, blending seamlessly into the local urban landscape” (Pachirat 84). Having an existence separated from both the consumer and the producer, “the former could henceforth be unaware of the origin of the meat he was eating, the latter of the destination of the animal he reared” (Vialles 27). This separation increases the efficiency of commercial operations, while at the same time creating the necessary distance that “allows morally troubling acts, such as the disciplining of livestock, to proceed relatively free of public observation” (Novek 124). The sequestration of killing “insulates consumers from the consequences - moral, ecological, economic - of their choices . . . This results in more narrowly self-interested consumption decisions” (135). In this sense, the sequestration of the slaughterhouse has succeeded in severing the tie between the eating and eaten animals. “He consumes a substance that is anonymous, anodyne, and available in adequate quantities” (Vialles 28). The

conditions and ambiguities of its path from ‘farm to table’ remain pleasantly out of sight.

Human to Vermin / Steer to Steak

In addition to the conduct of physical violence there is also a necessary psychological violence that occurs through a deliberate, discursive framework. Through a process of euphemism and metaphor, peoples and actions take on new, distorted value and meaning. While in many ways distinct from the physical act of killing, it would be a mistake to understand them separately: for Butler, this “implicit framing of a population as a war target is the initial act of destruction. It is not just preparation for a destruction to come, but the initiating sequence of the process of destruction” (*Frames of War* xvi). We have already discussed this concept as it manifests itself in the work of Levinas, for whom the ‘totality’ represents a proto-violence, the initial destruction of the Other in its alterity. We subsume the Other beneath the totality to blunt the trauma of its vulnerability and radical ethical demand upon us. This demand represents a significant tactical obstacle. As Grossman writes, “[t]here is a constant danger on the battlefield that, in periods of extended close combat, the combatants will get to know and acknowledge one another as individuals and subsequently may refuse to kill each other” (158). The response to this comes in the form of a careful program of psychological conditioning, with the explicit intent of discursively constructing ‘enemy’ populations as such. The following question that should frame the discussion to come: is the infinite relation, conceived of as recognizing the obligation incurred in the

face to face, and representing a prerequisite for moral consideration, still possible while exposed to calculated, instrumentalized versions of reality?

Before answering this question, we must first attempt to understand the potential power of language, and of thought, to shape our actions. In *Less Than Human*, David Livingston Smith, Professor of Philosophy at the University of New England, examines the history and effects of dehumanizing rhetoric in war, and he emphasizes that these techniques are more a representation of how we *think* than of how we *talk*. As he writes, “[c]alling people names is an effort to hurt or humiliate them. It’s the use of language as a weapon. But dehumanizing a person involves judging them to be less than human. It’s intended as a description rather than as an attack, and as such is a departure from reality - a form of self-deception” (25). Violent *thoughts*, or in this case a false representation of the Other – which under the name of ‘totality’ we understand as an act of violence in itself – is a necessary step in the buildup to violent *actions*. Smith continues this argument, writing that “[dehumanization] acts as a psychological lubricant, dissolving our inhibitions and inflaming our destructive passions. As such, it empowers us to perform acts that would, under other circumstances, be unthinkable” (13). Taking a broader view, we can see the distance created through language as taking place not only in the object of violence, but also the techniques of killing. In the context of this inquiry, we will examine how verbal distancing techniques have been employed in recent history to break down normal psychological barriers to committing large-scale acts of violence.

Central to this discussion will be the figure of the subhuman, which is a tricky

ontological designation that suggests multiple interpretations. For Smith, the human and the animal are best understood as two distinct sets, and dehumanization is a process by which a person is transferred from the status of human to that of animal. As he writes, “subhumans, it was believed, are beings that lack that special something that makes us human. Because of this deficit, they don’t command the respect that *we*, the truly human beings, are obliged to grant one another” (Smith 2). In this sense, either one is a human or one is not, and in the latter case one is exempt from the field of moral concern. Author and historian Charles Patterson, by contrast, suggests a graded continuum with a separate subhuman status located on the barrier of the human and the animal (Patterson 22). This ambiguous location serves multiple functions, including the maintenance of a certain human exceptionalism that even the process of dehumanization cannot erase, and the ability to import and export personality traits liberally across the divide. In this way, “[n]egative perceptions of animals allowed people to project onto [the subhuman] qualities they did not like about themselves and helped them define themselves by contrasting animal behavior with what was alleged to be distinctive and admirable about human behavior” (24). This is why the phrase dehumanization, rather than animalization, is most appropriate in describing the framing of an individual as ‘less than human.’ However, their not-quite-animal, not-quite-human status still provides enough ontological distance from the world of men [sic] to deconstruct any psychological barriers to their “subjugation and domination” (26).

The history of modern combat has left us with no shortage of material on which to

draw for examples of dehumanizing rhetoric, employed at the level of the state all the way down to the individual soldier. Smith's account provides a brief overview of its deployment in World War II: to the Germans, the Jews were "rats"; to the Japanese, the Americans were depicted with "horns sprouting from their temples, and sporting tails, claws, or fangs" and described as "devils" or "dogs"; to the Allies, the Japanese were "often portrayed as monkeys, apes, or rodents, and sometimes as insects" (17-19). An issue of the United States Marine Corps' *Leatherneck* magazine featured "an illustration of a repulsive animal with a caterpillar-like body and a grotesque, stereotypically Japanese face, labeled *Louses japonicas*" (20). Two decades later, "American troops referred to Vietnam as "Indian country" and called the Vietnamese "gooks," "slopes," and "dinks" (Patterson 43). Grossman finds that the dehumanization of the Japanese was significantly aided by the cultural and physical differences that separated them from the West: as he writes, "44 percent of American soldiers in World War II said they would "really like to kill a Japanese soldier," but only 6 percent expressed that degree of enthusiasm for killing Germans" (162). Denying the humanity of the opposing force is therefore a key task of the state's propaganda machine (161). As we can see, metaphor utilized in this sense is much more than a trick of language – it strategically both reflects and creates ways of thinking about another group in order to facilitate, in the minds of the public and of each soldier, their extermination *en masse*.

There is, as has perhaps been noted by this point, an extremely problematic premise underlying this account: insofar as it relies on a division between the human and the

animal, dehumanization – and in fact its general critique – is predicated on a human exceptionalism that can be somehow assigned or revoked. It presupposes, and therefore leaves unchallenged, the assumption that if an individual is somehow 'less than human' then this in and of itself legitimates their extermination. Its critics, then, mobilize on behalf of the marginalized populations, arguing – correctly – that the use of animal metaphor is not only inaccurate (of course) but is an "ominous sign because it sets them up for humiliation, exploitation, and murder" (Patterson 28). Where, one might ask, are those who would speak on behalf of the animals that, even if one were to be successfully 'animalized,' this does and should not somehow authorize violence toward *either* group? Kathryn Gillespie and Patricia Lopez, critical geographies and researchers in animal studies, in their *Economies of Death*, argue to this effect:

"Using the language of 'dehumanization' or 'animalization' to describe fundamentally exploitative processes reproduces the notion of human exceptionalism whereby humans, based on their species membership, are entitled to better treatment than nonhuman animals. Thus, 'animalization' as a discursive construct maintains the subordination of the actual animal as it leaves intact a system whereby it is acceptable to treat animals 'like animals'" (2).

A productive discourse surrounding the technique of verbal distancing must go beyond the critique of dehumanization to encompass an understanding of the ways in which nonhuman animals are also, in their own way, made other and rendered as ungrievable.

This ‘otherization’ of the animal in the context of their being processed for human consumption is grounded not in vilification (as in the human context) but rather in the logic of economic rationalization. This rhetoric descends, most famously if perhaps not originally, from the Cartesian notion according to which animals are mere natural automata, machines with neither soul nor capacity for experiencing pain and suffering. This doctrine served the dual function of justifying the “ascendancy of man” and absolving them of their guilt by providing “by far the best rationalization yet for the human exploitation of animals” (Patterson 24). Thus, a fissure develops between the immediate experience of the animal in pain and a comfortable, reflective assurance that this pain is an illusion. This obfuscation creates the conditions for a cold economic calculus to hold sway over the relationship – the animal is no longer a being as such but rather a number, a product, and the face can no longer communicate its vulnerability or destitution. Stanescu documents two particularly telling examples:

"From the journal of *Hog Farm Management*: 'Forget the pig is an animal. Treat him just like a machine in a factory. Schedule treatments like you would lubrication. Breeding season like the first step in an assembly line. And marketing like the delivery of finished goods.' This next quotation is from *Farmer and Stockbreeder*: 'The modern layer [that's a chicken used just for her ability to produce eggs. Broilers are the chickens we kill to eat] is, after all, only a very efficient converting machine changing the raw material—feedstuffs—into the finished product—the egg—less, of course, maintenance

requirements' (*The Abattoir of Humanity* 79).

There are other, seemingly innocuous examples: as Pachirat writes in his study, “live cattle in the chutes are referred to as ‘beef,’ as in ‘Hey, guys, that beef has fallen down in the pens’” (230). The trick of language employed here is to ‘frame’ the animal in terms of its resulting product. The cow is no longer considered as such, but is rather a large, messy, and loud vessel of “raw materials,” such that “the animals are already beef even before they have been shot or bled” (230).

Once the rhetorical death of the individual has taken place, by whatever means, there remains the question of technique. One cannot rely on the reframing of the victim alone to effect a complete dissociation between the killer and the killed, and in order to maximize efficiency the method of killing itself must be pacified, rendered neutral. This process is subtle, and in fact may be nearly invisible in many cases: “[i]nnocents murdered in war become ‘collateral damage’; the condemned are ‘executed’; countries are ‘pacified’ and their native populations ‘dispersed’ in ‘mopping-up operations’; ‘kinetic operations’ ‘neutralize’ and ‘liquidate’ their ‘targets’” (Pachirat 32). The ascendancy of drone technology, enabled in part by its unprecedented level of physical detachment, has seen this rhetoric continue unabated: “The USAF issues terse daily airpower summaries in which Predators and Reapers are said to provide ‘armed overwatch for friendly forces’ and ‘release precision-guided munitions’ that destroy ‘enemy positions’, ‘targets’ and ‘vehicles’” (Gregory 204). Grossman notes that, in addition to the verbal pacification of technique, “[e]ven the weapons themselves

receive benign names - Puff the Magic Dragon, Walleye, TOW, Fat Boy and Thin Man - the killing weapon of the individual soldiers becomes a piece of a hog, and a bullet becomes a round" (93). Similarly, one "does," "makes," or "harvests" the animal rather than kills it (Vialles 56-57). Swimming in this sea of euphemism inevitably serves to construct an alternative reality, one in which the core truth of the activity is rendered unspeakable and vulgar.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this study, one might begin to wonder whether the premise – that the inability to see the Other subverts normal empathetic feedback mechanisms that otherwise serve as a powerful deterrent to killing – is not, on the face of it, demonstrably false. In the digital age, one need only turn on the nightly news to see grotesque depictions of the results of violence around the globe. Andrew Hoskins, Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Nottingham, and Ben O’Laughlin, Reader in International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London, describe that our present “media ecology” as one in which “people, events and news media have become increasingly connected and interpenetrated through the technological compressions of space-time” (18). They relate this constant barrage of information to the hypothesis of ‘compassion fatigue,’ which occurs “when we tire of media coverage of suffering, pain and death in wars, conflicts and catastrophes close to or, more typically, far from home” (37). It logically follows that whatever is to blame for the lack of emotional response and popular opposition to mass killing in our modern age, it is likely not the lack of

information or media portrayal. The philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, not uncharacteristically, takes this point further: in the context of Aquinas’ argument that “the blessed in the Kingdom of Heaven will be allowed to see the damned being punished so that their own bliss will that much more delightful” (218), he suggests that the sight of the suffering Other is hardly a weight on our moral conscience. In fact, “the sight of the other’s suffering is the *objet a*, the obscure cause of desire which sustains our own happiness – take it away, and our bliss appears in all its sterile stupidity” (220). The question that clearly needs to be asked is whether the traumatic reality is not the violence itself, but that should it be on display it would not actually mobilize an effective opposition. Why does the sight of violence on our televisions and social media feeds not outrage us enough to demand that it be stopped?

We can, at this point, again apply Žižek’s insight to suggest a possible answer to the seeming discord between the argument articulated in this study and the ubiquity of violence in media:

"To those sitting inside a car, outside reality appears slightly distant, the other side of a barrier or screen materialized by the glass. We perceive external reality, the world outside the car, as "another reality," another mode of reality, not immediately continuous with the reality inside the car. The proof of this discontinuity is the uneasy feeling that overwhelms us when we suddenly roll down the windowpane and allow external reality to strike us with the proximity of its material presence" (*Looking Awry* 15).

The windowpane acts as a barrier to reality; we are, minimally, both disconnected from and numb to what takes place on the other side of the glass. Taking this brief phenomenological analysis further, it would seem that a screen – whether a window, a computer, or a television – renders impossible a truly unmediated, visceral experience of what it shows. In the digital age, despite our unlimited access to information, the face-to-face experience remains blunted by the medium. Butler argues to this effect: “Indeed, the photographed face seemed to conceal or displace the face in the Levinasian sense, since we saw and heard through that face no vocalization of grief or agony, no sense of the precariousness of life” (*Precarious Life* 142). The ethical relationship, the experience of infinity, must “strike us with the proximity of its material presence” if it is to have its true effect. To become obligated, to be called into question by a radical exposure to vulnerability and precarity, one’s experience of the Other must be unmediated. “We cannot, under contemporary conditions of representation, hear the agonized cry or be compelled or commanded by the face” (151). The face-to-face must take place in the flesh.

Real, interpersonal experience, unmediated by distance or euphemism, is therefore a prerequisite to any rational deliberation and ethical discourse. Levinas’ phenomenological account of the experience

of the Other makes clear that in order to become obligated, to act in fidelity to the call that comes through the face, one must first break down the physical and cognitive barriers that would otherwise conceal it. Transparency, reclaiming those areas of our experience that have become distorted or denied to us, emerges here as a powerful political weapon. An understanding of the processes at work in these spheres can help to illuminate other battlegrounds of fractured experience. It is my intention that this study point forward to other areas where a “politics of sight” may be called for to reveal what has been concealed through language and geography (Pachirat 240). David Harvey, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Geography at the City University of New York, has argued that the command of space – and, by extension, experience - “is a fundamental and all-pervasive source of social power in and over everyday life” (226). Through a cocktail of apathy, military necessity, and economic logic, we have developed a cold, mechanical approach to death. But for all our efforts, it remains, and we continue to suppress the bodies in order to make it palatable (Lee 242). It is these spaces, the “frontiers of sequestered experience” (Giddens 169), that demand our attention. One can only hope that “[u]nder the light of everyone’s gaze, under our gaze, they will wither and shrivel up, scorched by the heat of our disgust, our horror, our pity, and the political action these reactions engender” (Pachirat 247).

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