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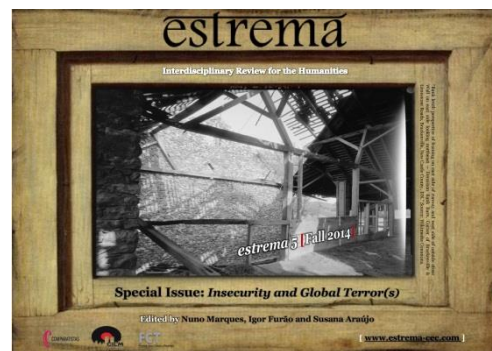
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*Are so-called suicide bombers our “ritual others”?*¹

Marko Stamenkovic²

Abstract

Within the First World scholarship, the concept of “suicide missions” has occupied an uneasy place in relation to the issues of risk and security for Western neoliberal democracies. As part of colonial humanism, these and related concepts have been contested by mediated (ideological, gendered and racist) perspectives growing within a single, imperial epistemic paradigm. This paper challenges such a paradigm by centering on the most recent neuralgic points surrounding the ‘universalist’ and ‘rationalist’ imaginaries of “suicide terror.” It approaches “suicide bombers” as theoretical figures from an interdisciplinary perspective, focused mainly on contemporary decolonial philosophy and post-Eurocentric social and cultural theories. This paper aims to break away from normative exercises of discursive power through which an ethical interruption of the epistemological becomes my primary task, in particular with regard to the notions of ritual otherness, death-politics, colonial matrix of power, sovereignty, resistance, and self-sacrifice.

Keywords: epistemic violence, ‘suicide bombing,’ ritual others, necropolitics, decolonial thinking.

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Introduction³

Within the First World scholarship,⁴ the so-called suicide missions (SMs, “suicide terror,” “suicide attacks,” “suicide bombing,” etc.) have occupied an uneasy place in relation to the issues of risk and security for Western neoliberal democracies (Pape 2005, Gambetta 2005, Lankford 2009). Throughout the twentieth century this polemical phenomenon has gradually become not only significant in local terms (Russian Empire, Near East, South-Central Asia, etc.) but also, in the aftermath of the so-called 9/11, globally and continually pressing. Since “the beginning of the first massive wave of suicide missions in the twentieth century” in 1981 in Lebanon (Ricolfi 2005, 84), the enigmatic figure of a “suicide bomber” has been inscribed, both formally and informally, into political, philosophical, sociological, psychological and media discussions across the world. What used to be recognized in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a predominant form of regional “pathology” (most notably in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) turned out to be relevant on a broader scale in the course of the last thirty years. Due to the transnational distribution of “suicide terror,” this commonly condemned phenomenon has also challenged many voices, both within the Western and non-Western humanist traditions, thus allowing a sort of decentralization of academic positions from canonical and oversimplified views on the global insecurity under the threat of “human bombs” (Abufarha 2009).

This paper contributes to such decentered positioning by examining the concept of “suicide bombing” in relation to *thanatopolitics*. I use this term following Stuart J. Murray to denote “the use of death for mobilizing political life” (Murray 2006) under

3 A draft of this paper was presented at the International Conference *Images of Terror, Narratives of (In)security: Literary, Artistic and Cultural Responses*, University of Lisbon, Faculty of Letters, 23-24 April 2013. It reflects my research at the Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences, University of Ghent (Belgium), supervised by Prof. Dr. Tom Claes, Director of CEVI - *Center for Ethics and Value Inquiry*, following my PhD project *Suicide Cultures. Theories and Practices or Radical Withdrawal - A Transnational Cultural and Media Paradigm (2001-2011)*, supported by Basileus Scholarship - an Erasmus Mundus Action 2 project for academic exchange between EU and Western Balkans funded by the European Commission.

4 When using the term ‘First World scholarship’ I broadly refer to the concept of the world delineated by the core capitalist regions of self-proclaimed democracies (Western Europe and North America) in what makes them both imperialist and responsible for the modern/colonial/capitalist organization of the world-system, its ongoing matrix of power and the geopolitics of knowledge aligned with it (Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodríguez 2002). In this sense, the concept of “‘First World’World” serves as an operative tool that can include similar designations (such as “Western world” and/or “global imperialist North”) under conditions that they relate to the global processes of hegemonic thinking and acting, the opposite of which involves the counter-hegemonic and anti-imperialist world-systems situated in the so-called Third World or, better, in the global anti-imperialist South.

conditions framed by the necrocapitalist regime (Banerjee 2008) and its necro-colonial matrix of power. The politics of death, here inseparable from the notions of capitalism and coloniality, also relates to the concept of *necropolitics* that signifies “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death [that] profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror” (Mbembe 2003, 39). Hence, I consider the rationality of self-sacrifice (“suicide bombing”) within the matrix of power through which the colonial and capitalist sovereignty exercises control over mortality and exposes populations to death under the permanent suspension of the state of law. I do this in order to propose an opening, both conceptual and ethical, towards differently positioned lines of thought around which “the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality, can be seen as laboring under the sign of the future” (Mbembe 2003, 37).

In the political-judicial contexts characterized by the permanent – and not temporal – suspension of the state of law (Mbembe 2003, 12), life and death are continually hijacked by “a power formation [that combines] the characteristics of the racist state, the murderous state, and the suicidal state” (Mbembe 2003, 17). The hardcore example of Palestine, in that sense, remains a chronic one. If ‘giving life’ to this text is bound by its ‘mortal points,’ my analysis of the core issues will revolve around the idea(s) of death and the logic of dying under colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial regimes of power. This is but one possible theoretical, political, and ethical point of departure in discussions involving so-called suicide bombing – the point from which to ‘give birth’ to a ‘new life’ becomes possible through self-sacrifice. Beside the instrumentality of death for the sake of sovereign necro-colonial order, ‘death giving life’ is here also understood *within* and *through* the logic of creating the optimal conditions for a new, collective life to emerge after individual deaths.

The theoretical analysis focused on necropolitics thus operates as a counter-gesture against the biopolitical epistemic hegemony. This complex task demands overcoming numerous problems, yet one of them shall be the main thread in any future research, namely, “not how to end ‘suicide-terrorism’ but to understand why it occurs in the way it does. This involves recognition that ‘suicide-terrorism’ is as much a part of meaningful and constructive human living as it is also an imagination of the absence and destruction of all cultural and social order” (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008, 396). Hence, the main point of contestation in the paper at hand deals with the epistemic exercise of discursive power over the concept of “suicide bombing”: the intention *to*

make sense of something that resists the (biopolitical) logic of sovereignty. In response to that, the hegemonic rationality keeps exercising discursive power so it may regulate and rationalize notions associated with the “irrationality” of “suicide bombers” disassociate these from ideas of “senselessness” and divest them from the “irrational” layers, under which supposedly all the risks imposed by “suicide bombers” have been weighed.

The Concept of “suicide bombing” - Exercise of Discursive Powers

The concept of “suicide bombing” has had a powerful presence in the contemporary world. Although it is commonly understood as “the phenomenon, which has become the defining act of political violence of our age” (Gambetta 2005, v) its meaning nonetheless lacks clarity in the contemporary global discourse, either scholarly or popular. Diego Gambetta, the Oxford University Professor of Sociology and editor of *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, has offered one possible definition of so-called suicide missions (SMs). In what is considered to be “the first major book-length treatment” of the subject based on “a wealth of original information and groundbreaking analysis from leading experts” (as stated in the Oxford University Press web site) Gambetta considers “the standard case of an SM that ... consists of a violent attack designed in such a way as to make the death of the perpetrators strictly essential for its success” (Gambetta 2005, vi).

Making Sense of Suicide Missions is a distinctly valuable source of information concerning one of the most sensitive and pressing subjects nowadays. As a sophisticated and methodologically profound examination, it is grounded in the analysis of several historical cases of selected subgroups, from the Japanese Kamikaze in the earlier twentieth-century, through the later appearance of the Tamil Tigers and the Middle Eastern groups, towards the most recent examples of the al-Qaeda and the so-called 9/11 attacks. The authors’ attempts to reframe the subject from a non populist and obscure ideological perspective and to offer a novel, comprehensive analysis from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints (sociology, social and political sciences, international relations and law) provided, indeed, a worthwhile study. Despite all its qualities, *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* still lacks something very important. I will argue that, within the academic examinations of the subject, it remains an exemplary case of the epistemic exercise of discursive power.

Given the urgency of the topic, in particular in the so-called 9/11 decade, the book's exclusively "First World" viewpoint discloses something that usually remains either unnoticed or intentionally silenced. Nine scholarly positions brought together in eight chapters of the book do not only rest upon the white male hegemony, ideologically situated in some of the dominant knowledge centers (among which New York, London, Oxford, Turin, and Madrid). Moreover, they reveal the conditions under which the *certainty* of their approach cannot be separated from the dominant modes of thinking in today's neoliberal democracies. Hereby the "certainty" refers to the following criteria: theoretical, methodological, and ideological departure points; explicit or implicit epistemic rootedness in the rationalist discursive climate of the so-called First World; and their overall treatment of different subtopics under the umbrella term of "suicide missions." The question is: why are the concept(s) of "suicide missions" problematic when informed by the scientific objectivity, epistemic rationality, and traditionally universalist pretensions of the "First World"? Also, why are they insufficient in proposing a more *globally* nuanced theoretical understanding of a phenomenon as contested as "suicide attack"?

These and similar questions can already provide some preliminary general answers. Hereby I want to focus on only one – centered on the *epistemic matrix of power* – that assumes a critical position towards normative perspectives on the topic. The singular answer hereby corresponds with one of the main aims of this paper, namely, to challenge the normative discourses rooted in the epistemologies of pragmatic (biopolitical) rationality. They are perpetuated by the First World's claims towards objectivity, rationality and universality and rooted in a single, sovereign epistemic matrix formally privileging life over death. In the line of thought of contemporary decolonial thinkers (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009, among others) I see it as the epistemic matrix of power: it is inseparable from the colonial capitalist modernity and its normative logic of ongoing geopolitical and cognitive hegemony over the "Third World" to which the troublesome birthplace of "suicide missions" also belongs – if the Near East is meant to be such a place, which remains highly polemical (Dale 1988). This is not to say that such a matrix and such a logic necessarily have to be taken for granted: what needs to be put into force is the process of their critical dismantling.

In the particular case of *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* what pretends to be implicit (and thus hidden from a reader's immediate view) is the origin of its most problematic side. It is at the very surface – in the title of Gambetta's book that aims to

“make sense” of suicide missions – where one has to be attentive. This is where the rationalist and pragmatic principles of the ‘objective’ sovereign epistemic matrix have *already* been inscribed, only to be developed and reasserted further on throughout the arguments in the book. If the notion of hegemony here pertains to the “First World,” my own argument does not imply a simplistic view that is to be applied too generally to almost “all” scholarship developed in Western/First World countries. It rather applies to the ongoing matrix of epistemic power established and perpetuated by such scholarship. The upcoming examples of “First World” scholars in this paper confirm that, nonetheless, it is possible to take a distance from the given epistemic norm. The question here is not whether these scholars are able to deal with other “cultural” matrixes but how they deal with the *ideological* matrix of their own political, epistemic and cultural environments, so that their positions of critical balance could eventually be achieved.

To make sense of suicide, a phenomenon “encumbered with so many conceptual taboos that we do not know how to think it” (Hacking 2008, 1) has in itself been a difficult and continuous task for too many scientists in too many disciplines involved in an endeavor to make sense of it, at least since the nineteenth century. Moreover, to make sense of suicide applied in riots, wars, resistance movements and anti-colonial battles (or what is recognized nowadays under the term “suicide terror”) seems to be an even more challenging and unsolvable task: “We are, however, so confused both about suicide and about its use in battle that we should try out innumerable unexpected angles of approach. The meanings of suicide itself are so protean across time and space that it is not so clear that there is one thing, suicide” (Hacking 2008, 1). How *many* suicides are there in the world then? And how to *make sense* of all of them?

It is true that the so-called suicide bombing “occupies an uneasy place in relation to suicide *per se*” (Jaworski 2010, 119). However, I am motivated to find one or more *critical* positions in the First World from which to situate our discussions on “suicide bombing” in a less normative manner. In the case of *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, this position becomes very polemical when perceived from the anti-imperial Third World perspective. I understand it as a decolonial perspective, grown in the context where “suicide bombings” do not exclusively make part of a death-culture but also, and even more importantly, of the culture of life, collective memory and community building. I see it as the kind of “culture” that has been constitutive of the anti-colonial politics of liberation, not only in the twentieth-century Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, and

Afghanistan, but globally. It goes back in time to the European initial expansion overseas, the colonial invasion of the “New World,” and the beginnings of its capitalist exploitation as early as the fifteenth-century (Dale 1988).

It is in this line of thought that I find the First World’s attempts to make sense of “suicide missions” polemical. On the one hand, they are polemical when they persist in remaining *inside* their self-victimizing dogma of self-defense (in general, when the centers of Western power see themselves as targets of non-Western “suicide attacks” or, in particular, when the local neoliberal democracies see themselves as targets of local guerrilla fighters and “terrorists”). On the other hand, they are also polemical because they persist in keeping their ‘innocent’ position *outside* of any responsibility for generating the strategies of “suicide attacks.” According to the U.S. historian Stephen Frederic Dale, such assaults and attacks are a pre-modern form of (what he still calls) terrorism, “a more politicized variant of a type of anticolonial resistance that long antedates the twentieth century” (Dale 1988, 39). As noted, though very briefly, by the Italian sociologist Luca Ricolfi in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, Dale’s study is “the most important historical contribution to understanding SMs” because it gives solid arguments about suicide attacks that are “not a recent invention but have deep roots in the historical relations between Islam and the West, even more than in Islamic culture itself [since] for centuries suicide terrorist attacks have been an Islamic way of resisting foreign occupation, especially European colonial powers” (Ricolfi 2005, 83).

Beside Ricolfi there are still some First World scholars who, from the very outset, admit their safely distanced position towards the sensitivity of contexts that make part of their research without being their own. Given their examples, my point is: the earlier the limits of one’s own epistemic field of analysis are outlined, the ethically more balanced, theoretically more convincing, and qualitatively more nuanced argumentation one manages to propose. This does not imply a ‘better reading of things’ just because “I am able to situate myself as a scholar, and to publicly acknowledge my cultural contexts and limits.” Instead, it implies the obligatory self-awareness about the complexity of issues to which I do not immediately adhere, in terms of contextual differences; it also implies the necessary awareness about having a better starting point, in the way of situating myself within the limits of a position (scholarly or otherwise) from which my ‘reading of the world’ should be negotiated with the Other – both ethically and epistemologically – before any ‘universally’ applicable knowledge is produced. The ways how knowledge about something become Knowledge depends upon this (self-)

awareness, either tacit or declared. One such positive example is given by the Polish-Australian sociologist and suicide scholar Katrina Jaworski, devoted to the gendering of suicide in general and its implications in the domain of “suicide bombing” in particular. Says Jaworski:

Particular issues and theoretical tools need explanation. I am aware of the political and painful nature of suicide bombing and its complex and diverse history. Furthermore, I am also aware of the fact that *how I interpret and analyze suicide bombing is framed by a western context*. Still further, I recognize that my analysis of suicide bombing is *outside the contexts in which it occurs, framed by the social and cultural aspects that shape my thinking and writing*, my uses of theory and how I deploy them in the task of understanding how knowledge about suicide becomes knowledge. (Jaworski 2010, 120; my italics)

Without pretensions towards any “objectivity” *per se*, Jaworski justly admits her entanglement within a particular (First World) context and her particular (Western) viewpoint. She openly gives a self-critical argument that does not diminish her possibility to analyze a “distant” phenomenon. This does not signify that we can only analyze phenomena that belong to our cultural matrix and succumb to our conventions of thought; neither do I claim that the phenomenon of “suicide bombing” can be approached only by those who have a supposedly more legitimate position to analyze it, given the “proximity” of their own context to the issue (for example, the Muslim scholars). What I claim for is the necessity to *negotiate* the radically opposed positions around the subject as polemical as “suicide bombing” and to do so through one’s own scholarly work, so that the self-critical stance could always be maintained with regard to the differing contexts between which the phenomenon itself occurs. Jaworski *situates* her own theoretical and ethical position in a way that shall be exemplary in the current scholarship on “suicide bombing” and related issues, for three reasons that I would like to highlight at this point.

First, her approach treats the Other as a subject of knowledge having its own voice within the epistemic universe dominated by hegemonic voices. Hence she recognizes the necessity to leave the space of her own analysis open for contested yet differently situated identities, given their specific contexts, frameworks, and viewpoints. Additionally, unlike some earlier examples, Jaworski does not immediately approach the issue as “an act of political violence” (Gambetta 2005, v) but rather “as a result of different forms of political struggles” (Jaworski 2010, 119). This, in my view, introduces a better nuanced and more open relation to the topic.

Second, unlike the absence of such openness in the *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (where none of the contributing authors is a non-Western scholar, and where the ‘objectivity’ of research presupposes the examination model by which the Other remains the object of inquiry in the sense that its ‘subjectivity’ lacks a proper voice), Jaworski goes the other way. She constructs her own analysis constantly with the Other in mind (not only the non-Western Other, but also the non-masculine Other). This becomes a precondition for her deliberately gender-informed view on suicide and “suicide bombing” to emerge. In that regard, she says: “Aspects of suicide bombing offer insights into examining the operation of gender norms in relation to how knowledge about suicide is constructed. ... The purpose is to show how what is represented is not a matter of intrinsic truth” (Jaworski 2010, 119 - 120). What is represented is not a matter of intrinsic truth because it breaks away from an exclusionary, universalist and patriarchal hermeneutic canon. Through this canon, the subjects of everyday life have been perpetually constituted as the *objects* of scientific thought, for the sake of inviolable truths that must be “rational” and “objective” in order to “make sense.” A “suicide bomber” is one of them. It is in this sense that I oppose the “objective” approaches to the issue at hand: not against the notion of “objectivity” per se, but against its *instrumentality* in the hegemonic research models for the sake of justifying the normative “scientific” arguments behind them. Hence, the critique of objectivity here has less to do with its validity as a methodological notion (which is scientifically legitimate); it has to do more with its implications in the justification of *ideologically* biased statements behind such methodologies that tend to constitute “universal” regimes of truth.

Therefore, if “making sense of suicide missions” is to be the unconditional departure point of analysis, then it has to belong to “exclusively gendered subject position in western philosophy, articulated as male, rational, abstract, objective, neutral, white, heterosexual, and universal, transcending time and the material body” (Jaworski 2010, 120). Luckily enough, ‘making sense’ of so-called suicide missions is not my concern, at least not in this paper. What *is* my concern could be described as ‘feeling’ sense: the sense of the other’s way of living and dying, the feeling of what – for some – makes no sense while for the others makes all (affordable) sense. To feel sense instead of making it is to resonate with the other, in Gayatri Spivak’s terms, soon to be discussed. For now, it will be enough to say: feeling sense of “suicide missions” is where my personal

position in this paper is situated, as it resonates more with Jaworski's *ethical* counter-perspective than with Gambetta's normative *epistemic* view.

Third, and the last point I want to make around Jaworski's approach, relates to her deliberate usage of the term *martyrdom* (throughout her article as well as in its title) which has not usually been the case in the "First World." For a Westerner, for whom a "right" to be well off as an individual is more important than a "right" to give his or her life for a collective cause, the notion of martyrdom has been an elusive alternative to the notion of "suicide missions." Although my own preferences go towards the non-hegemonic terminology, one thing needs to be pointed out: if "suicide bombing" is to be simply exchanged for "martyrdom" the issue of interpretation remains not only unclear but even further complicated and unresolved. Here I have in mind the arguments by some Western scholars, in particular those in theological studies. When analyzing the forms of ritual martyrdom, they argue from the outset that "martyrdom means witness" (Cook 2007, 1). Once again, the itinerary of the term has so far been as following: from the defining act of political *violence* (Gambetta) through the act of political *struggle* (Jaworski) to the act of religious *witnessing* (Cook). I dare to see them as variants of the same concept – basically, the concept of *self-sacrifice* inclusive of *external victims* and violence against the enemy. My conclusion is that this "transfer of meaning" develops through the chain of signifiers around a single signified, constantly balancing from one extreme point to another. When interpreted from a deliberately hegemonic point of view, without much or any self-criticism (as it has usually been the case regarding "suicide bombing" in the Western sphere of influence), what might happen is the following: the signified becomes re-directed into a connotative sphere that inevitably corresponds with one's own context, epistemic universe, ideological position, etc. Cook, for example, says:

Witness is the most powerful form of advertisement, because it communicates personal credibility and experience to an audience. Therefore, it is not surprising that the world's missionary religions have developed the art of the promotional martyrdom into a process that is identifiable and fairly constant through different faiths. ... In other words, the martyrdom must have communicative force within the context of the society in which the martyrdom is taking place. (Cook 2007, 1)

Consequently, here the fixed signification (of martyrdom) in one context "delegates" an associative meaning to the signified ("promotional" witnessing) in another context. Instead of opening up the doors to the Other, an attempt to understand the martyrs' "witnessing" from an exclusively religious stance remains locked within the neoliberal logic. Since it inevitably recalls individualist, materialist and self-promotional acts

based on profit-making (or “communicative force,” as Cook says), the notion of martyrdom becomes even more problematic. This is primarily due to the rhetorical potentiality of language adapted to a targeted audience (in this case the “First World” readership) in need for “translation.” The irony is that this is, perhaps, the most appropriate manner indeed to explain, to any hyper-consumerist audience in the “First World,” what it means to be a “suicide bomber” and why: once adjusted to fit the logic of self-promotion, it associates spiritual communion with contemporary “forms of advertisement” as a “promotional” tool for nothing else but the “religious marketing.” As a counter-position to such exercise of discursive powers, the next chapter exposes arguments in favor of discourses that plead for ethical nuancing of the concept of “suicide bombing,” within the educational framework of knowledge production in general and the humanities in particular.

Exercise of Educational Power, or Why universities need cultural instruction on ‘suicidal’ resistance?

If “suicide bombing” is “martyrdom” that is “witness” and then again something else, such a chain of meanings shall suffice to deny the core logic (or counter-logic) of this paper instead of supporting it. If the question is “What does that mean, exactly?” – as the Iranian-born cultural sociologist Hamid Dabashi introduced it in his recent work (Dabashi 2012, 3) – then I would preferably propose a different approach: instead of searching for an immediate answer, i.e. the most feasible definition of “suicide bombing,” our attention should be focused, first and foremost, on the question of ‘meaning’ itself.

To understand a phenomenon as complex as “suicidal violence” (Dabashi 2012, 3) is to examine the very premises of its public conception. To do so is to examine the *rationality* within which such a conception has grown. I refer to the kind of rationality that has been, throughout the last five hundred years, not only the product but also the engine of a universalist knowledge – the epistemic model that turned out to be a “civilizing,” “emancipating” and “regulating” project of Western modernity *par excellence*, or the cornerstone of its singular and hegemonic epistemic “universe.” To engage in the task of disrupting, withdrawing from or dismantling this singular epistemic universe demands at least a twofold gesture: to take a step back and “decolonize” ourselves from what we have maintained to be the only guarantee of truth

in relation to the “suicide terror”; and to take a step forward through the conceptual fog surrounding the “suicide terror.” Both steps demand revising our own epistemic point of departure, including its theoretical, political, ethical and historical roots. This is to say: before any *meaning* of “suicide bombing” and *discourse* about it become the principal matter of our concern, there must be a self-imposed requirement to produce a critical distance from our preconceived assumptions. Hereby I refer to our cemented accounts of life and death, the politics of violence and the violence of politics, terror and insecurity, the us-versus-them logic and the “clash of civilizations” hypothesis, our “knowledge” and their “ignorance,” our “scientific progress” and their “religious fundamentalism,” our “modernity” and their “barbarity,” etc.. This is an ethical demand preceding the epistemic norm, whereas the ethical is understood as an interruption of the epistemological (Spivak 2004, 83). There must be a personal and collective demand for such an *interruption*, in scholarly and popular discourse on “suicide bombing” whatsoever. There is a need for it, as a necessary methodological precondition, in the sense that it operates towards establishing a sense of “order” around “a process of familiarizing ourselves with foreign ritual prerogatives” as a way of learning our “lesson in differences” (Blier 2003, 296-297). Selected scholarship in the field of anthropology may be one way of responding to this need, in particular by posing a proper starting question. Mine would be: what is *foreign* to a hegemonic subject of knowledge, in regard to the ritual prerogatives of a phenomenon recognized as “suicide bombing”? How such prerogatives produce a *difference* between the subject’s hegemonic knowledge of “suicide bombing” and any alternative concepts (“martyrdom,” for example) proposed by the epistemic Other? If the “clash of meanings” is inherent to this difference, where does the clash originate, where does it end, and is there anything beyond it?

In her definition of ritual phenomena and practice the anthropologist Suzanne Preston Blier accounts for an essential variety of human behaviors through their differing aspects of ritual rationalization. While recalling her early professional experience during a research conducted among the Batammariba people in Northern Togo (West Africa), she describes a situation of *ritual correctness* as a fundamental “lesson in differences” or “ritual imperative,” namely: “Batammariba ritual practice and courtesy require one to greet the house while positioning oneself in front of its door – its symbolic mouth (Blier 2003, 297). This simple yet crucial example helped her learn that such (ritualized) behaviors differ from normative epistemic rationales in the sense that

“what is ‘reasonable’ and ‘normal’ in one society is not necessarily so in another” (Blier 2003, 297). Moreover, in her efforts to define the very nature of rituals through ritualized behaviors, Blier points out that “rituals help to make the irrational seem not only viable and operable, but also understandable; [they] require at once a certain faith and an acknowledgment that things that are important are *not always rational and understandable*” (Blier 2003, 304; my italics). Similarly, “any prescribed system of proceedings in religious or other spheres, ... as significant to believers as to nonbelievers, creates a ‘reality’ that gives their lives a sense of order; rituals, as markers of life, offer through their formality and relative fixity a means of measuring, mastering, and making sense of the world at large” (Blier 2003, 298).

Hence, my argument is: what the so-called suicidal violence actually “means” is precisely what escapes the issue of rationality, *our* rationality – the rationality of a modern Western(ized) subject of knowledge raised in a predominantly European and North American epistemic universe. This “civilized” rationality, instrumental for what has purported the colonial and capitalist modernization of the “First World” hand-in-hand with its principles of hegemonic universalism, remains insufficient in coping with many other possible rationalities or “irrationalities” (non-Western, anti-Western, or simply *different* from Western modes of reading and interpreting the world). There are, and luckily so, the systems of proceedings that break away from the normative views on the world as such, from the meanings they are meant to produce, and from the knowledge they aim to establish. There have always been non-normative forms of human behavior that do not fit the epistemic or any other formalities imposed by the dominant “civilizing” master-narratives (be it Western, neoliberal, colonial, capitalist, etc.). These narratives and norms are inseparable from the same matrix of power that, since the end of the fifteenth-century and the so-called “Vasco da Gama epoch in Asia” (Dale 1988, 43), has been functioning toward “measuring, mastering, and making sense of the world at large” (Blier 2003, 298).

This is to say that our general assumption of the world, inherited by a *certain kind of logic*, must be questioned anew. In order to ‘make sense’ of (our own) abstractions around the “suicide bomber” it would make much more sense to have our supposedly stable directions of inquiry de-stabilized from their self-imposed certainty. And this certainty, the only one we believe to have, rests upon the grounds of the ideology of Enlightenment. Hence, it is its rationalist heritage – the kind of epistemic burden we have been taking for granted too long (in Europe and North America in particular) –

what must be scrutinized instead of being endlessly reproduced. This is also to say something more about the “suicidal violence” itself: that our understanding of the issue “requires a whole new language of inquiry, mode of thinking, and manner of reflection that altogether defy our received wisdom, disciplinary divisions, academic dispositions, theoretical proclivity, and customary cultures. Thinking about suicidal violence, we have to imagine the unimaginable” (Dabashi 2012, 3).

Let us, then, imagine the unimaginable already today. Instead of “making sense” of the “irrational violence” that escapes the lines of self-centered, narcissistic and instrumentalist thought (so characteristic of Western political, intellectual and scientific rationality), I would insist on critically re-assessing the gap between “our” rationality and “their” irrationality. To do so, with Blier’s arguments in mind, one must pose questions of a different kind: are so-called suicide bombers our “ritual Others”? Two sub-questions emerge here. First, why is it necessary to keep any critical distance from the normative notion of suicide bombers (by referring to them as “so-called” suicide bombers)? Second, why do I want to address them as “(our) ritual Others”? Wouldn’t it be easier to call them simply “(suicide) terrorists” – which is what they are according to the protagonists of power discourses in possession of ‘ultimate truth’ (i.e. the Western political, media, and entrepreneurial demagogues, and their respective circles of influence)? Why not choosing one among numerous, usually pejorative, terms, commonly and overwhelmingly offered by such ‘experts’ in the field? The case of Stephen Holmes, the Professor of Law and Political Sciences at the New York University, is telling in that regard. In his text *Al-Qaeda, September 11, 2001* he offers a whole range of attributes to be considered when applied, from a dominant and mainstream perspective, to the phenomenon of our interest here: (suicide-) “squads,” “terrorists,” and “pilots,” “disciplined zealots,” “operatives,” “perpetrators,” “hijackers,” “the 9/11 terrorists,” “militants and fanatics” (Holmes 2005, 131-172). Unlike the earlier example (Cook 2007), we can here encounter the sense of “skepticism towards causal theories that overemphasize the religious elements” (Holmes 2005, 135). One of his major hypothesis thus aims towards highlighting the decisive *political* rationale in this context, namely that “non-religious elements may well have been predominant in the 9/11 mission as well” (Holmes 2005, 135). If he had been aware of the aforementioned Dale’s historical study on anticolonial ‘suicidal’ resistance in Islamic Asia, he would have probably argued differently about its political-religious rationales instead of asking the following question: “If suicide missions (SMs) are a

consequence of Islamic fundamentalism, why did previous waves of Islamic fundamentalism not give rise to SMs?” (Holmes 2005, 135).

Who is a “fundamentalist” subject when the significance of *fundamental* propositions (such as Dale’s) remains unnoticed by distinguished experts? If the binary between exclusively political and religious reasons is the only option left to our critical analysis, my point is clear: I do not want to succumb to such binary views in the way they have been applied so far in the mainstream scholarly and media discourses. Instead, I would preferably support some other views, such as Gayatri Spivak’s. In this context I find her words significant enough to quote them instantly:

I understand the ethical, and this is a derivative position, to be an interruption of the epistemological, which is the attempt to construct the other as object of knowledge. Epistemological constructions belong to the domain of law, which seeks to know the other, in his or her case, as completely as possible, in order to punish or acquit rationally, reason being defined by the limits set by the law itself. The ethical interrupts this perfectly, *to listen to the other as if it were a self, neither to punish nor to acquit.* (Spivak 2004, 83; my italics)

In her text *Terror: A Speech Act After 9-11*, Spivak reflects – specifically in relation to the U.S. “war on terror” – upon the simultaneous nature of the impossibility and the necessity to communicate something as contested as the war. Improper in itself as having been “repeatedly declared on media by representatives of the United States government [while] not having been declared by act of Congress” (Spivak 2004, 82), she situates such a war (and such a *terror-ism*) within the legal field of a criminal case, a lawsuit, and an empty field of abstraction. This is, she argues, the binary where the U.S. enemy – and a very abstract enemy in that – is being fought: in the media-fog of aggressive rhetoric without a standard institutional legitimacy (declared against another nation-state, for example), in a war zone “zoomed down to a lawsuit and zoomed up to face an abstraction” (Spivak 2004, 82). For her, “to respond [to *that* kind of war] means *to resonate with the other, contemplate the possibility of complicity* – wrenching consciousness-raising, which is based on ‘knowing things,’ however superficially, from its complacency” (Spivak 2004, 87; my italics).

Contrary to any “condemnation imperative” (Hage 2003, 67), her own arguments evolve “out of the imperative or compulsion to speak” or what she calls “the agency of response” (Spivak 2004, 81). This agency is, however, not neutral – it is thoroughly and consciously implicated with her institutional affiliation and position of a University Professor in humanities. Her mission is not only to “produce a criticism that can possibly engage a public sphere” (Spivak 2004, 81), but also to situate the public

responsibility of the humanities within the ethical field (Spivak 2004, 84). What does it mean to situate ethically the public responsibility of the humanities? First, she insists on the possibility of complicity with the other as a *subject* of knowledge, i.e. the other who is to be listened to “as if it were a self,” instead of having it continuously constructed as an *object* of knowledge, without bringing any lasting change. Second, she condemns punishment – legal upon individuals, or military and economic upon states and collectives – as forms of public criticism, so she could speak out in a plea for greater attendance “upon a preparation for the ethical upon which we must attend, and where *the public responsibility for the humanities* may be situated” (Spivak 2004, 83; my italics). To situate the public responsibility of the humanities within the ethical field is to allow for the ethical interruption of *epistemic fundamentalism*, the one enforced by the universalist ‘objective’ thinking deeply rooted in the Western scientific ‘rationality.’ Thus to move away from such rationality and to listen to the other as if it were a self, neither to punish nor to acquit, is to resonate with the other, in Spivak’s terms: to take an ethical position within the epistemic universe of inviolable truths, in academia at large and in humanities in particular, via “suicide bombing” and numerous other neuralgic concepts.

To resonate with the other is to see the other as seeing oneself, and to see the other *as a subject, capable of construction*, in the world of subjects. Contrary to the self-eroticism of a Western subject, to resonate with the other does not imply anymore a narcissistic (masturbating) technique by which the image of ourselves must be replicated and projected somewhere else, so that our “clones” abroad – in the “Third World,” for example – to whom we obsessively and self-lovingly talk, could satisfy our own goals at home (either cultural, military, or economic). Additionally, beside their capability of construction, Spivak does not omit the subject’s inevitable capacity of *destruction* (or violence inherent to the act). She says:

Suicide bombing – and in this case the planes were living bombs – is a purposive self-annihilation, a confrontation between oneself and oneself, the extreme end of autoeroticism, killing oneself as other, in the process killing others. It is when one sees oneself as an object, capable of destruction, in a world of objects, so that the destruction of others is indistinguishable from the destruction of the self. (Spivak 2004, 95)

Spivak’s main message, as I understand it here, is a call upon the intellectuals’ public *responsibility* – via the agency of *response* – to reconsider their own (epistemic) violence against the other: the responsibility in demand for their exercise of educative power concerning the Other’s ritual correctness. This is one of the reasons why

universities in general and the humanities in particular need cultural instruction on suicidal resistance.

Elesin's Syndrome

With this in mind, I would like to resume two things. The first concerns the master-narratives: the “sub-conscious” origins of master-narratives and their overarching rationale throughout the history of modernity are here understood as encompassing at least three dominant aspects – capitalism, colonization, and Euro-U.S. centrism (Dussel and Ibarra-Colado 2006, 493). The second concerns the ‘ritual Otherness.’ As a counter-narrative to the master-narratives’ rationale, the “ritual Otherness” is here understood as the space of Otherness, alternative to the hegemonic epistemic universe and resistant to the epistemic violence inherent to it. This is a space, obscure and hidden, within which a “suicide bomber” theoretically resides and behaves according to different epistemic rules (or differently legitimized rationality) while waiting from us to finally start imagining the unimaginable, as Dabashi earlier proposed. Therefore, it is high time to address the issue of self-sacrificial behavior, and the ritual behavior of a “suicide bomber” in particular, from another perspective.

The Eurocentric rational logic rests upon the sovereign (epistemic) power of measuring, mastering, and making sense of the world. If it has been administering the world of living (Foucault 2003) and, also, of death and dying (Mbembe 2003) in order to exercise control over it, then such an exercise must be of particular kind. It conceives of a singular disciplinary paradigm or, in Clifford Geertz's terms, of “*ritual's master fictions* ... the lies that are held broadly by society to support its institutions even if acknowledged to be false” (Cf. Blier 2003, 303). Within such a prescribed and precise system of disciplinary behavioral patterns, the category of “suicide bombers” simply does not fit – it falls short of the rationality of the “First World” and its ritual master fictions. It escapes our ability to understand “how can a person just blow himself or herself up or crash himself or herself and a multitude of others into a building, blowing up everything around and about him or her?” (Dabashi 2012, 3), just as a North American anthropologist had not immediately been able to understand why an African needed to greet a house (as Blier self-critically observed earlier).

In that regard, I would like to evoke a situation described in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, a literary work offering a good example of the colonial

matrix of power exercising sovereign control over the ritual Other. In this theatre play, set in colonial Nigeria by the African Nobel Prize Winner, suicide does not play itself out under the mask of self-hatred, depression, desire to escape the world, religious witnessing, political struggle or political violence. Rather it is situated as a *rational cultural form* of a socially sanctioned personal loyalty toward the local tribal tradition (among the Yoruba people in Nigeria), namely, “the tradition of the king’s horseman [named Elesin] to ritualistically kill himself upon the burial of the king to rejoin him in death” (Scott 2007, online). Thus, as a form of social obligation, it becomes “a very important mechanism of communal regeneration” (George 1999, cf. Scott 2007). Furthermore:

The Elesin’s self-sacrifice is therefore an acceptable cultural practice because it honors the perpetuation of the community rather than the perpetuation of individual desires. Elesin’s definition as an individual, in this sense, ... is not in conflict with his community. His duty as an individual is in service to the king and his community. ... Elesin’s duties, while considered foreign and barbaric to the colonialists, is a part of the ritual of life that forms the Yoruba beliefs in reconnecting life, the afterlife, and the unborn. Therefore, Elesin’s own death is considered *an affirmative act*, one that is firmly based within communal beliefs. (Scott 2007, n.d.)

The British colonial powers in Woyinka’s play remain hostile towards any idea of (what they understand to be) suicide as an affirmative, constructive, and desirable act. Instead, they prevent Elesin from performing the ritual of self-sacrifice as part of his tribe’s “barbaric” tradition, in their own view. This is unacceptable according to the “civilized” European colonial administration in Nigeria in charge of population’s life and, apparently, death: the preventive decision is therefore nothing less than another exercise of sovereign power. Its regulatory logic of life/death rationality, of “the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death” (Mbembe 2003, 12), is supported by the effect of ritual *othering*, whereas this Other is always a “redundant” and thus “threatening” element for the sovereignty’s overall security. This counts for Nigeria under the British colonial rule as much as for the United States under the rule of their National Security Agency today. But it also counts for the contemporary world at large, implicated with global colonial and surveillance powers beyond the issue of territoriality in the classical sense of the term. Woyinka’s play is but a bold example of the “biopolitical” power exercised, both discursively and practically, by the colonial sovereignty over its own subjects.

Before conclusion, I would like to make one thing clear: I am not pointing out the issue of cultural differences in order to address the so-called cultural relativism. I am

rather referring to the practices of control, calculation, administration, and overall governance over populations' lives in a way that brings us closer to the biopolitical modes of life-management by the sovereign power typical of our times, according to Foucauldian theoretical views (Foucault 2003). More precisely, it is through the notions of (ritual) *behavior*, *correctness* and *imperative* that I wanted to approach the dimensions of resistance within which the concept of "suicide bombing" resides – along with our fundamental impossibility to understand it. A 'ritual Other,' in that sense, is precisely the one who escapes the logic of dominant rationality as established by the sovereign epistemic universalism. The most recent example (of U.S. top-secret mass surveillance programs, disclosed to the global public in the Edward Snowden Case)⁵ has confirmed, from a different angle, the extension to which one citizen's self-sacrifice for the public good (what I call *Elesin's syndrome*) is incessantly entangled within the sovereignty's mechanism of global security control. In today's Western liberal democracies, we keep experiencing the various forms of superior power on many different levels, both private and public, since our 'civilized' world of 'justice and freedom' has never gotten rid of its colonial logic of the past. On the contrary, it has been operating perpetually across the globe, always in tune with the rhythm dictated by the colonial matrix of power. It goes without saying that there is no other place in today's world that exemplifies this rhythm in a more devastating way than Palestine – this, however, deserves a separate chapter and will be part of my upcoming paper.

A "ritual Other" is a threat not only because it is *different* from us, because it does not sustain the rationality of our supposedly 'normal' life. It is a threat because its *sameness* with us transcends the contextual grounding (of difference, of certain locality, of particular ethnic origin, etc.) within which our 'enlightening' rationality wants to keep him imprisoned – in the darkness of either barbaric or fundamentalist "irrationality." This introduces the issue of *epistemic violence* in relation to the subject at hand – the silenced knowledge aligned with the acceptance of the "condemnation imperative." Such a negative epistemic condition urges us to further future analyses around the pre-modern forms of "suicide missions" (as studied by Dale), and around their contemporary forms (as studied by Spivak, Jaworski, and Hage, among many others), yet always in a non-normative way.

⁵ See, for example, "NSA Leaks," Autonomous non-profit organization (ANO) TV-Novosti, Channel RT TV, accessed July 14, 2013, <http://rt.com/trends/nsa-leaks-snowden-surveillance/>.

Conclusion

If life and death oscillate at the point of collapse between what is to come and what is right now, it is at “the end” (in the space of death) where for a martyr “the future is collapsed into the present” (Mbembe 2003, 37). Hence, the future of an article concerned with so-called suicide bombings, such as this one, has no other way to collapse into the present but by disclosing – in the act of writing – what has remained, for too long, obscured by a singular and superior (colonial, universalist, imperialist, self-centered) perspective. This perspective has been typical of the sovereign “war on terror” logic and its dominant necropolitical rationale. What has been hidden are thus precisely the effects of epistemic (and not only physical) violence against the Other, be it, in this case, the Palestinians, the Arabs, the Muslims in South East Asia or elsewhere, the disempowered, the humiliated, the abandoned, the excluded, etc.. It is the Other, as I understand it, whose promise of new life on *this* Earth (not in Heaven) after *this* life (of colonial exclusion, exploitation and extermination) remains to be a “threat.” And it will continue to be so – unless we start understanding it not only differently but also self-critically, with the “public responsibility of [our own] humanities” in mind.

The promise of a “suicide bomber” does not operate from the life-versus-death rationale – which has been the privileged domain of (neo-) colonial necropolitical control under the biopolitical mask – but exactly from one final yet turning point: the individual point of (self-) destruction from which the founding chapter for the collective future is to be set up, defended, constructed anew, or made from scratch. It has to be made for a new (epistemic) community, yet to come. To respond to the question “are so-called suicide bombers our ‘ritual others’?” means to work towards this goal and this promise.

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