

To my parents Slobodan and Vesna Stamenković

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Preface

The present thesis revolves around the issues of life and death. It emerges from the need to put into question the many and varied manifestations of human mortality in order to understand the following: how the inherent human condition to be mortal can become instrumentalized on behalf of the sovereign power but also –and even more importantly for this project– on behalf of the powerless/ the governed.

The red thread around which the thesis evolves probes our ways of thinking about the tension between these two major processes: I analyze this tension in order to understand how it constructs our knowledge about what has been all too commonly (and, often, misleadingly) categorized and criminalized as an ‘unwarranted’ form of dying, especially while being placed in a particular and polemical epistemic category of death which we nowadays recognize as ‘suicide’.

Suffice it to say from the outset that, while working on this thesis, I have never been interested in answering the question whether ‘suicide’ is a problem or a solution, whether it is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ to ‘kill oneself’; rather, I have been motivated to approach the subject as a matter of varied death-politics. What challenged me the most was the antagonism between two types of death-power: the power of the governed (i.e., the subjugated and subalternized subjects or, more precisely, those among them whom I shall call the ‘living dead’) to make use of their own death in contrast with those in government – the sovereign necro-power benefiting from deaths of the others for its own purposes (be they ‘democratic’, ‘colonial’, ‘imperial’, or otherwise). This thesis situates the issue of ‘suicidal’ death in the epistemological and political gap between these two sides and serves as my point of departure to contest the ongoing global matrix of power out of which the epistemic colonization of human mortality is but a constitutive part. The inevitably pathologizing medico-scientific power discourse around it and its criminalizing juridical variants, despite providing some of the most evident counter-arguments to my thesis, have altogether contributed to sharpening my critical position towards the broader Western framework of ‘universal’ knowledge: that kind of ‘untouchable’ knowledge from which – according to some philosophers – the

subject of death had to be expelled for the sake of happiness (of 'a contemporary Western man', not humankind as such).

Accordingly, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the subject of human death in general and 'suicide' in particular by putting forward a radical proposition, namely, that there is no self-violence without epistemic violence: it demands a new and radically reconfigured discursive space for considering the faculty of self-inflicted death beyond the dominant, pan-European/ Western canon of knowledge (that is, beyond the body of knowledge-theory which pertains to the 'West' as much as it pertains to the 'global imperial North') in exchange for the pluritopic epistemic positions that cherish radically different, perhaps so far 'unthinkable' approaches towards the subject at hand. They are not only rival to the hegemonic *thanatological* perspectives of 'Western' scholars (and the matrix of epistemic power to which we 'naturally' adhere as a given) but rather they form constitutive elements of the transnational/ transmodern hermeneutics of death (or the *thanatopolitical* philosophy par excellence) rooted in the experience of suffering from a viewpoint of the global anti-imperial South. This re-articulation, as an exemplary decolonial option within the research field, comes in response to some profoundly political dimensions of the major subject, and develops throughout the thesis in an attempt to re-configure the relationship among 'death', 'power', 'sovereignty', 'globalization' and 'democracy' in a more refined way than it might have been the case so far, at least in modern and contemporary Europe.

To perform such a task, I speak from the epistemic position of the South and draw on present decolonial philosophy through which to launch a critical analysis of three main issues: one is predominantly theoretical and revolves around the transnational epistemologies of human death; another is more empirical and considers the manifold practices of 'suicide cultures' through ongoing conflicts between necropolitical and thanatopolitical dimensions of human mortality; the last issue encompasses the previous two by means of what I shall call the radical withdrawal which will, hopefully, contribute to some new philosophical and cultural horizons around 'pathological' ('suicidal') phenomena and the 'africanization' of subjectivities in crisis. Challenging the limits of the rigid conventions concerning the terminology, methodology and epistemology of death, the present thesis addresses the 'Western' man who is invited to welcome new epistemic communities into his privileged, secured, untouchable, singular and rational universe of knowledge. This is the mission to which I have devoted the last three years of my life.

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Introduction

It is, perhaps, a time to contemplate our own death, the death of our sovereign subjectivity, the willful expropriation of who we think we are, the death of our own moral and intellectual narcissism, and the willful suspension of our will to contain the world as a piece of rational knowledge.

Stuart J. Murray, "Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life" (2006: 211)

The Loss of 'Death'?

The present thesis addresses mankind 'deprived of death': a contemporary Western man who, "in order to safeguard his happiness, [...] has contrived to stop thinking at all about death and, more particularly, about his own death, to deny it in a way by maintaining a stony silence with regard to it" (Schumacher 2011: ix). What I am referring to hereby is linked with a recently formulated hypothesis by Bernard N. Schumacher from the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) about the alleged erasure of 'death' from contemporary Western philosophy and contemporary Western society. In his book *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy* he contends that the philosophical thought is nowadays going through the experience of loss with respect to 'death'. Significantly enough, he also points out that the discursive terrain of 'death' has been contested and neutralized to the extent that it creates the preeminent sense of absence.

In turn, I associate this situation with the decontextualization of Western knowledge about 'death' and feel the urge to pose the following set of questions: How come that a human being could be deprived of (his or her own) death? How is this possible? Moreover, if such form of deprivation exclusively applies to a 'contemporary Western man' does it necessarily imply that the 'curse' of death must be relegated elsewhere (for

instance, among the ‘non-Western’ populations)? If death, indeed, comes at the expense of happiness (to which a ‘contemporary Western man’ so jealously adheres) could it be that death pertains, in a less inhospitable manner, to some other –perhaps ‘non-Western’– men? Is death the ‘privilege’ of non-Western humankind and their immanent ‘fate’, the kind of burden which should never be regarded as a ‘strange’ element among the populations whose existence is more prone to the experiences of living hardships (including their ‘ultimate negativity’ – death itself)? Or should the initial proposition about the denial and silence of death be articulated in a completely different way?

Drawing on Schumacher’s initial claim, I pursue the ‘mystery’ around death throughout this thesis, hoping to find some possible answers to these and other related questions. What interests me even more in this context is the relationship between ‘death’ and a number of other phenomena, such as (Western) ‘democracy’, politics, and global coloniality: Is there any relationship between ‘democracy’ and ‘death’? If a ‘contemporary Western man’ has been deprived of (his own) death, which theoretical and political position should I embrace in order to speak about death openly, against the presumed silence? Moreover, if it is still possible to speak ‘in the name of death’, I am challenged to do so in a way that purports one of my future arguments: that the subject of death has been ‘lost’ in the so-called West insofar as the epistemic violence against the ‘other’ has been purposefully and strategically omitted (eliminated from our view), or has never been fully accounted for with a very specific reason – for the sake of ‘democracy’ itself and the ‘universal’ values attached to it. So, how do the current epistemologies of death and dying reside within the world(s) of knowledge determined by what I shall call the democratic epistemic regime? How does the democratic epistemic regime in contemporary Western world operate vis-à-vis the notion of death and the manifold *politics of death* inherent to this regime, be they visible (present) or invisible (absent/lost)?

Finally, how could my own work contribute to a greater understanding of the relationship between ‘death’ and ‘democracy’ or, more precisely, about the many and varied transnational epistemologies of death vis-à-vis the singular (‘democratic’) epistemology that has supposedly eliminated ‘death’ from our reflection, philosophical or otherwise, in the so-called Western world? How to bring ‘death’ back to light out of obscurity, invisibility and silence – and what could such operation bring forward to the world – and to the worlds of knowledge currently ‘deprived of death’?

The Ubiquity of Death

Evidently, my efforts to grasp some dimensions of thought around the alleged absence of death in the Western geopolitical and philosophical sphere have evolved out of numerous questions. Among them, one of the fundamental starting points is as follows: how is it possible to talk about the alleged absence of death, especially nowadays when – despite all the endeavors to have their life on Earth improved– the humans are still witnessing on a daily basis the prominence of death across the world, in both private and public sense of the term. The ubiquity of death has become all the more ‘close’ to humankind due to the fact that the global proliferation of media coverage, saturated by information about death (be it of textual or visual nature), has increased in an unprecedented manner throughout the last decade with the advent of communication and surveillance technologies at large (Internet having the primary role in this context). Why would, then, the global increase of visibility –of all aspects of human life (and death)– be contradicted by the alleged decrease of the subject of death among the ‘Western’ population? What could this apparent ‘contradiction’ tell us about ‘life’, ‘death’, ‘visibility’, ‘invisibility’, a ‘contemporary Western man’, and the conditions of globality as such, among other issues? How ‘silent’ is the silence of death nowadays?

Think, for instance, about the current civil war in Syria, that has been ongoing since 2011; think about the increasing clashes in Ukraine (since early 2014) or the recent riots across the North of Africa and the Middle East: all these events, respectively, serve as the most recent testimonies about the humankind exposed to death – in battles among various political and civil fractions, in conflicts over the issues of power and freedom, in struggles for ‘democracy’, if you will; think about an unprecedented destruction of Palestinians, in their own land, under the most inhumane colonial conditions that modern history has brought to the surface; think of drone-killers, the laser weapon system by which armed unmanned aerial vehicles have been deployed not only against the alleged ‘terrorist’ threats to the US empire, but also against the civilian population at large, mostly in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa; think about all the Tibetans burning themselves in protest against the Chinese repression, but also about all the Chinese workers pressured by domestic working conditions for whom jumping down from their companies’ roofs to certain deaths seems to be the only viable solution; or about the North American finance managers who have been doing the same, almost in a chain reaction, since the late 2013; think about the people killing themselves in despair due to financial hardships (and any other, related or unrelated reason) since the beginning of the most recent economic recession, especially in the South of Europe; think of more than 200,000 Indonesians swept away by the Tsunami ten years ago, or of almost two thousand citizens of New Orleans killed by the Hurricane Katrina in 2005; think of the Balkan peninsula populations threatened by the most disastrous floods

ever, in May 2014, only twenty years after the bloodthirsty civil war affected the region – “resulting in the deaths of over 140,000 people and four million displaced”;¹ think of 800, 000 genocide victims in the 1994 Rwanda, or the thousands of people in Central African Republic killed or exposed to death during the recent escalation of violence between the Muslim and Christian militia; think of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, leaving more than 200, 000 dead bodies behind; think of the polemics around Terri Schiavo whose case (the vegetative state of existence) overexposed the issue of end-of-life decision making while bringing the global audience’s attention to the legal struggle towards and, also, against her prolonged life-support (in which not only her family members, but the church and the state themselves have been involved); think of Marcus Jannes, a Swedish student who died in October 2013 while broadcasting his own suicide –live over Internet– thus contributing to all the more popular trend of what has come to be known as ‘cybersuicide’. Think of any other case throughout the last decade in which the exposure of human bodies to death, with or without controversies, has only contributed to the increased presence of the subject in our everyday lives, in the ‘West’ and in the ‘East’, in the ‘North’ and in the ‘South’, at the ‘center’ and at the ‘margins’ of the Earth.

Given the media impact of lethal events onto the worldwide audiences, one could even dare to say that the first decade of the twenty-first century (also dubbed the ‘nine-eleven decade’, or the ‘neoliberalism decade in crisis’) ‘exploded’ together with the explosions of the World Trade Center towers in New York on September 11, 2001 (which was the event I witnessed in person, though from a safe distance, at the very beginning of my two-month internship in Autumn 2001 in a SoHo art space). Despite the few thousands of dead bodies left behind this event, it was almost immediately followed by another accumulation of death elsewhere, with the re-production of new victims in Afghanistan (among other places on Earth contested by the US government and its necro-power regime back then). These are only some possible examples that can testify about a simple fact: the beginning of the third millennium has been saturated by many and varied manifestations of death ever since the year 2001. Yet, as I announced it from the beginning, “a contemporary Western man has contrived to stop thinking at all about death and, more particularly, about his own death”. How is this possible?

¹ ICTJ, “Transitional Justice in the Former Yugoslavia”, *International Center for Transitional Justice*, 1 January 2009 (last access 29 May 2014), <http://ictj.org/publication/transitional-justice-former-yugoslavia>.

Death, Democracy, and Epistemic Violence

To have this and related questions answered within the limits of a single PhD thesis may appear to be an ambitious, almost unrealizable task. However, I keep such an ambition at a distance and focus on some specific aspects of the problematic situation as described it above. I start from the following assumption: that to write about death in general and, more precisely, about our own death is, first of all, to write about its denial in the Western, pan-European world; consequently, to write about the denial of death is to investigate the hidden, implicit layers of meaning behind such an obfuscating process, but also to propose other possible ways of thinking and talking about its ‘unintelligible’, ‘unthinkable’ and ‘irrational’ dimensions – to engage with the spheres of knowledge beyond the ‘most correct’, ‘universal’ and ‘rational’ horizons (of thinking, of speech, of acting) where death has not been eradicated at all but, on the contrary, where it has served a fundamental, eye-opening purpose: probing the formation of ruling epistemology around power discourses and modes of governance over populations’ mortality, at the expense of life itself.

In this line of thought, I pursue the idea that the alleged silence around death –as a matter of forced absence, of an imposed forbearance from speech, of visions purposefully overshadowed or obscured– should come about as a challenge to discuss death itself, loud and clear, in order to have the silence itself (absence/ forbearance/ invisibility, etc.) exposed and put on public display. I encounter it from a philosophical and, inevitably, political perspective: from the position that has remained foreign to the Imperial Being of a ‘Western’/ ‘democratic’ man (i.e., the man of the global imperial North), or the position which grounds my speech of the ‘other’, in both theoretical and empirical terms, within the context of what I shall call the global anti-imperial South, following some contemporary decolonial philosophers and epistemologists of the ‘South’ (Mbembe 2003; Grosfoguel 2007, 2012; Maldonado-Torres 2007, 2011; Mignolo 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013a, 2013b; Santos and Meneses 2010; Santos 2014; Castro-Gómez 2002, etc.). The main point of contestation here relates to what I shall call a *democratic epistemic regime*. This is the terminology I propose from the outset in order to outline the relation of ‘democracy’ and ‘death’ to “a dominant epistemology [that] has eliminated our epistemological reflection from the cultural and political context of the production and reproduction of knowledge” (Santos and Meneses 2010: 7). I approach such dominant epistemology as a power formation, most notably with regard to our knowledge(s) about ‘life’ and ‘death’, the many and varied politics aligned with them, and the epistemic violence therein. Instead of being intimidated by this violence, or abiding to the unwritten law of silence about the subject of death, I took upon myself the risk to speak –in the ‘West’– about what must be eliminated as the subject of speech should the ‘happiness of a Western man’ remain forever safe and protected.

Given this framework, the main argument I expose in the initial part of my study is that there is no loss of 'death' where there is no epistemic violence, or where there is no democratic epistemic regime of power. 'Death' has been lost insofar as we take the epistemic violence on behalf of the ruling democratic regime for granted. This, in turn, allows us to contest the preeminence of such a regime and the very notion of 'actual democracy' (commonly and misleadingly understood as 'ultimately the most human system possible'); additionally, it allows us to look for death beyond the 'democratic' epistemic horizons so we could eventually find it, both inside and outside the Western world, where it might have slipped from our view, where it might have been forcefully obscured - or where it has been *violated*, in a properly epistemic sense: expelled from the dominant world of knowledge(s) and, accordingly, destroyed. Due to the imposition of knowledge on behalf of the democratic epistemic regime (to which I associate the 'Western philosophy' and a 'Western man', in Schumacher's terms), my thesis decenters from such a manifestation of power and aims at a radically different perspective onto 'death' and 'democracy' alike.

Thanatopolitics vis-à-vis Thanatology: Epistemic Decolonization of 'Death' from the South

This decentered re-orientation obliges me to take another viewpoint onto the subjects at hand in terms of philosophical, political and critical *position* where one truly stands as a human being (and also as a scholar) in order to 'look at the world' through and across the dominant epistemic horizons that claim to be ultimately democratic. I argue that the shift of our viewpoint, within and beyond the ruling authority of the so-called democratic epistemic regime, could bring to light not only the *plurality* of perspectives regarding 'death' in comparison to the Western '*universe*' of knowledge, but also the *pluriverse* (i.e., the many and varied universes) of knowledge about 'death' outside the canonic thanato-epistemology within which the 'Western' philosophy has developed its own version of related studies (now crowned by the 'denial of death').

With Santos and Meneses in mind, I have embraced the decentered position (from the 'South') which allows me to see the cultural and political context of the production and reproduction of knowledge about 'death' where it might have been eliminated from our epistemological reflection by a dominant (sovereign) epistemology. It also paves the way for a properly global and political *philosophy of death* to emerge from the dark side of Western 'democracy', not only in terms of its *thanatological* variant (which Schumacher proposes as a solution that could bring 'death' back to Western philosophy, so a Western

man could start reflecting upon it again) but, in contrast to that, a properly *thanatopolitical* philosophy (as I shall call it from now on). The latter takes a distance from the dominant rationality, intrinsic to the ‘depoliticized’ Western understanding of death, within the ‘democratic’ matrix of sovereign epistemic power, and re-contextualizes the very premises from which our speech about ‘death’ could break the silence so to uncover the broader frame of references and imperial interests upon which it has been imposed onto a ‘contemporary Western man’.

To speak about death is to speak about the epistemic violence on behalf of the dominant (hegemonic) epistemology of the global North and its ‘democratic’ (imperial) framework. This is a properly decolonial act which re-introduces the kind of discourse from a distinctively counter-hegemonic and anti-imperial perspective – or from that theoretical/ political/ ethical/ viewing position that Santos and Meneses (2010), among other contemporary thinkers, situate in the global anti-imperial South. Hence, to look at death from the South means to discover many and varied forms of human *life and death* (together with discourses, practices, and knowledges aligned with them) existing under conditions of the democratic regime of the Western world (the global imperial North) – or, properly speaking, in the underworlds of knowledge controlled by the ruling authority of democratic epistemic regime. It is my contention that, for a ‘Western man’, to be brought back to thinking about (his own) ‘death’ what is needed is the proper re-contextualization, re-articulation and re-politicization of knowledge(s) regarding life and death – which could take place, as I suggest, by means of *epistemic decolonization*.

More precisely, I use ‘epistemic decolonization’ to refer to some current trends in decolonial –not postcolonial– thinking associated with the liberation of knowledge(s) from the ruling canon (to which I devote due attention at a later stage of my thesis). Epistemic decolonization does not only serve as a golden thread in developing this thesis methodologically; rather, it brings to light theories or knowledge-worlds of death that have, so far, been less visible, invisible, unrecognized, too ‘local’, ‘indigenous’ and ‘irrational’, or all too easily associated with so-called ethno-philosophies. They constitute the grounds from which my idea about the transnational thanatopolitical philosophy becomes not only possible but also necessary. As a critique of democratic epistemic sovereignty and its own options regarding the (Western/ *thanatological*) philosophy of death, the *thanatopolitical* philosophy offers but a key to reflect upon the very question of humanness: what it means to be *human* and exposed to death (in terms of a human being (self-) recognized as a ‘Western man’ but also every other possible human being, more or less different from a ‘Western type specimen’ of humanity) and what the global humanities owe to humankind at the dawn of the third millennium beyond the singular knowledge-paradigm within which the ‘Western’/ ‘democratic’ epistemology sovereignly resides. In the world where ‘death’ has never been lost but rather purposefully eliminated from our reflection in order to be instrumentalized, the instrumentalization itself occurs along the lines of two conflicted politics of death

(necropolitics and thanatopolitics, respectively) in pursuit of both imperialist and anti-imperialist goals. One of the aims of epistemic decolonization, at least in my thesis, is to encounter, examine and explain such processes to the extent that some future researchers might continue the same task in a qualitatively better pronounced way or contest it, altogether, for the sake of much more convincing proposals and results.

To decolonize ‘death’ from the epistemic canon proper to the global imperial North (the ‘West’) and to liberate a ‘contemporary Western man’ from his polemically restraining relationship towards the subject of death is what I understand to be the long-term task of my project. I have undertaken it herein only modestly, at a discursive level, in order to ground and conceptualize the main aspects of the present thesis that could, eventually, serve as a critical platform for other, future projects. So far, I have approached the many and varied manifestations of (self-inflicted) death through one possible methodological and interpretative framework (decolonial philosophy, or decoloniality for short, aligned with the epistemologies of the South) where so-called suicide cultures –or what I shall preferably call the theories and practices of radical withdrawal– take center stage. I pursue such direction in order to engage with one of the fundamental philosophical issues from a perspective that discloses my position of a ‘contemporary Western man’ (given my current position of a PhD researcher in Western Europe) who nonetheless remains resistant towards the code of silence surrounding ‘death’; additionally, it discloses my theoretical and political position of a contemporary non-Western subject of thinking whose preferences towards the issues of life and death have been profoundly influenced and shaped by decolonial theoretical and empirical viewpoints, epistemologically decentralized from the ‘Western’ (‘Northern’) canon of knowledge towards that place in the world of knowledges called the ‘South’.

Visibility / Invisibility of ‘Death’

If death has, indeed, become not only omnipresent but also very ‘close’ to contemporary humankind (or, at least, to those members of global society who are exposed to daily news, although they do not necessarily follow scholarly literature on the subject), the alleged disappearance of death in the ‘West’ contradicts the real picture on the global media and epistemological terrain. The earlier exposed materials around the presence of death in the world throughout the last decade(s) provide but an insight into the atmosphere from which my personal interest in the topic –and, more precisely, in the self-inflicted death– has emerged around the years 2009-2010.

As early as 2009 my attention was profoundly provoked by the assumption that there may exist many and varied ways by which the dynamic of global politics could have

been constructed (also, but not only) upon those aspects of human condition that we usually tend to see as life-threatening due to self-violent types of behavior. This rooted my preliminary though important remark: that the many ways we think and talk about suicide –or how we are *supposed* to do that– involve a predominantly preemptive (medico-scientific/ juridical/ pathological) framework through which the act itself must be either contested or condemned, unquestionably and from the outset. Such framing, being formally sanctioned and institutionalized, also implies that there is no knowledge of suicide outside discourses that are formative for the meanings and values ascribed to the act already in advance, through which certain ‘regimes of truth’ are not only enforced but also communicated to the global population as a given. Meanwhile, I have learned that, since 2003, the World Suicide Prevention Day, an initiative of the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP), has been marked on September 10 each year “with the purpose to promote worldwide commitment and action to prevent suicides”.

Tracing back the personal genealogy around my initial attempts to understand ‘what it means to understand’ the issue as enigmatic as suicide, I have come to the point of questioning myself the following: if there is a way to *know* anything about it, how does the very process of ‘knowing suicide’ become constructed, developed and publicly presented as *the* knowledge of suicide? If there is any viable version of ‘truth’ about it does this imply the existence of a certain ‘epistemic regime’ (preventive towards the act of suicide) that could guarantee the status of such ‘ultimate’ and ‘universal’ knowledge while presenting it as unquestionable?

Furthermore, I have been asking myself what could be my modest yet personal contribution to the ways this ‘sovereign knowledge’ is interpreted (perhaps differently than what is already to be found there, on the horizons of epistemic ‘empire’)? Are there any other possible directions that we could take with regard to already established norms, which have ‘correctly’ secured our approaches to (our own) life and death, and how could such directions potentially interfere with some more or less normative *perceptions* of ‘life and death’? What is it that can be *seen* about those norms –and, eventually, their deviations – in merely perceptual terms? Also, what is it, if anything, that has remained excluded (for any reason) from the field of vision through which our ‘knowledge of suicide’ pertains to the world(s) of knowledge at large, not only with regard to their verbal aspects but also to their visual counterparts? Finally, what is ‘visual’ about suicide, about death in general, and about human suffering on the road to (self-inflicted) death: what is it that makes our knowledge about it possible from an *essentially visible/visual* point of examination? Under assumption that the scientific studies of suicide have, so far, largely ignored how suicidal behavior and suicidal death come to be materialized into images, I have been motivated from the outset to understand, among other aspects of death relevant for this thesis, how the images and

image-making operations influence or could influence our perception and, consequently, our knowledge about the (self-inflicted) death at large.

Thanatopolitics vis-à-vis Necropolitics: Structure of the Thesis

I started familiarizing myself with these issues while examining related questions even before my formal doctoral research had started in September 2011. This was the period when I drafted the preliminary version of my future PhD proposal in Belgrade (Serbia), now titled “Suicide Cultures: Theories and Practices of Radical Withdrawal”. Today it is composed of more than 300 pages which resulted from a three-year long research period in the Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences at the University of Ghent (Belgium). In its present form the thesis is organized in three main parts, each of them covering main subject areas according to the precise scheme.

The first part provides a broad theoretical framework through which to examine the status of death in contemporary philosophy at large – from the epistemic position of the ‘South’. My main concern here is with the relationship between death, knowledge and power, and how to think beyond the dominant (‘Western’) canon of thinking that is hereby also considered not only as ‘democratic’ and thanatological, but properly necropolitical (by which, in a word, I imply the instrumentalization of death [of the others] on behalf of the sovereign necro-power, in line with Achille Mbembe’s groundbreaking work on the subject). As a counter-proposal to that, I am putting forward Stuart J. Murray’s notion of thanatopolitics while considering the possibilities of instrumentalizing [one’s own] death on behalf of the powerless (as a critical, counter-hegemonic option to necropolitical violence). To take a critical distance from a normative universe of thought here means, first, to disclose the linkage among many and varied ways we think (or do not sufficiently think) about the humankind’s life and death and, second, to open up the space for another, pluriversal re-configuration of the subject.

Such re-configuration allows for a disclosure of two conflicted politics of death (necropolitics and thanatopolitics) to emerge behind the existent horizon of knowledge(s) which are linked to an inadequate and, for many reasons, Eurocentric epistemic model (by which I refer to its roots in theoretical paradigms that remain exclusively biopolitical, i.e., centered on life itself, while excluding death to the margins of epistemological reflections). Accordingly, the first part grounds the possibility of envisioning other possible models, despite the ongoing difficulty to accommodate the

incommensurable pretensions of a ‘Western man’ towards superior and ‘universal’ perspectives in comparison to the rest of the world. What I introduce here are some ideas around the manifold transnational epistemologies of death and mortality (and also those of life and living) that have, so far, been overshadowed by a singular, ruling and normative theory of knowledge about the subject at hand. I consider such ‘singularity’ of dominant vision to be monolithical, forced (epistemically violent) and, also, limited by profoundly ideological ambitions that have been shaped by the centuries of capitalist, colonial and Eurocentric ways of thinking: the mutually intertwined processes (Dussel 2006) due to which our ideas about life and death remain, still nowadays, dependent upon the canon of knowledge pertinent to the global imperial North. This constellation of powers is an epistemic form of sovereignty inseparable from a ‘democratic’ project of the pan-European world, yet in demand for critical and urgent re-articulation from the position of the global anti-imperial South. This is how I approach it throughout my thesis, while providing, in its first part, the main theoretical framework for further examination.

The relevance of such approach becomes more evident in the second part of the thesis. There, I offer some possible directions of thinking thanatopolitically (instead of thinking thanatologically), with a number of related or seemingly unrelated ‘case studies’ exposed, through which to have the common and normative perspectives on (‘suicidal’) death critically revised. I pursue this goal most notably by applying the methodological tools of contemporary decolonial philosophy or global decoloniality against a number of counter-arguments in the areas of healthcare sciences, psychiatry and psychology, suicidology, legal theory, criminology, international security, gender studies, political studies, etc. By ‘global decoloniality’ I imply the ways “to decolonize Western control of philosophy as the ‘correct’ way of thinking”, whereas the liberation of thinking depends upon the decolonization of philosophy itself. This is most notably expressed by Walter D. Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova (2009: 22) in their article “On Pluritopic Hermeneutics, Trans-modern Thinking, and Decolonial Philosophy”. There they plead for a radical shift of vision within the current geo-politics of knowledge towards what they consider to be the liberation of thinking or “the *global decoloniality* [...] in front of the *imperial universality of the same* [where] emerges the *convivial pluriversality of the other*” For them, “to decolonize philosophy means to liberate thinking and to de-link from the philosophical imperialism in the hands of the same, reproducing, constantly, the other, [...] moving away from deadly Western imperial distinctions between same and other” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009: 23). In this sense, they propose “the *inter-subjective commonality of the colonial wound*” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009: 23) against what can be understood as a sort of injury caused by the imperial (colonial/capitalist/Eurocentric) cut: the many and varied manifestations of epistemic violence at large, among which the violence over our knowledge(s) about life and death

makes but an integral part – and serves the major purpose for my project at large. Accordingly, if the subject of self-inflicted death is to be the main point of discussion in the present thesis, the central argument exposed therein puts forward a radical proposition: that there is no self-violence without epistemic violence. If every discourse about self-inflicted forms of death (or the so-called suicide) depends upon the ways of thinking and talking about life and death at large, our discussions about these issues should be conceived radically differently – they must account for the “decolonial turn” which could properly re-introduce the subject of epistemic violence into the established problematic around life-and-death, alongside the human capacity to deal with the geopolitics of knowledge, to critically “engage with the (geo)political economy of knowledge construction”² and its (epistemically violent) consequences for any *other* possible way of thinking and any *other* legitimate way of being in the world of knowledge(s).

Drawing on theories and practices that take into account the limits of epistemic power and its violent order of governance over the rival worlds of knowledge (previously unaccounted for or systematically dismissed), the second part proposes other possible and legitimate ways of thinking and talking about practices of living *and* dying, and examines self-violence upon the meanings of life *through* death and, ‘strangely’ enough, vice versa: upon the meanings of death *through* life (the latter being the main conceptual ‘residue’ of thanatopolitical option and its reformatory potential for understanding the political, protest-based character of self-violent deaths). In the present thesis I embrace these corrective modes of thinking vis-à-vis the universalist conundrum of knowledge from the position of “colonial difference” (to use the terminology proposed by Mignolo [2002] in his article “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference”). By this I refer, more precisely, to that theoretical, political, and empirical position which makes it possible for an anti-imperial subject of the global South to voice his/her dissent regarding the alleged epistemological truths on behalf of the imperial power. Voicing one’s dissent comes about as a counter-hegemonic (and, often, literally self-violent) manifestation of protest, through personal or collective suffering (including its image-character – the visual representation of suffering). I see it as an expression not only against the stolen human dignity and imposed injustice, but in defense of other legitimate ways of being/ thinking/ talking/ behaving, including other possible and legitimate ways of living and *dying*.

² As proposed by Vanessa Andreotti in her [working] paper “Engaging the (geo)political economy of knowledge construction: Towards decoloniality and diversity in global citizenship education”, available at: https://www.academia.edu/276980/Engaging_the_Geo_Political_Economy_of_Knowledge_Construction_Towards_Decoloniality_and_Diversity_In_Global_Citizenship_Education (last access 1 June 2014).

The second part of the thesis focuses on such forms as manifestations of self-sacrificial (not 'suicidal') revolt and counter-hegemonic/ anti-imperial/ anti-capitalist/ anti-colonial/ decolonial resistance at large. I bring together the manifold concepts of self-sacrifice, such as 'suicide protest' (Biggs 2013), 'self-immolation [by fire]' (Biggs 2005, 2008), 'suicide missions' (Gambetta 2005), 'istishad' (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008), 'suicides by economic crisis' (Povoledo and Carvajal 2012) or 'austerity suicides' (Stuckler and Basu 2013) and, last but not least, 'assisted suicide' (Cholbi 2011). Despite their seemingly unrelated character, these practices now coexist within the same part of the thesis. I bring them purposefully together not only with the intention to put some more practical and empirical expressions of previously outlined theories into a broadly conceived, 'general' focus, but due to the very thanatopolitical (and not thanatological) dimensions of power on behalf of the powerless 'living dead', communicated in protest. By doing so, I aim at sharpening our perspective into some common aspects of 'communicative suffering' that play a fundamental part in what I preferably call the thanatopolitical philosophy of death aligned with the practices of radical withdrawal. In this sense, the radical withdrawal pertains to the powerless (hereby named the 'living dead', the 'abandonados', the terminally ill people 'waiting with death', the people burning only themselves in protest or, as it happens, burning the others in the process). They are the 'powerful powerless', since their dying bodies (the suffering bodies that are neither entirely dead nor alive, but exist in the state between life and death) are able to communicate to the others their sense of injustice, for instance, exactly through suffering - not through death itself. This is relevant to the extent that grounds such practices of communication in the theories of death which I explore in the first part. Among them, Murray's thanatopolitical perspective, i.e., the "use of death for mobilizing political life", takes center stage, and proves to be a valid model when confronted with the necropolitical use of death (for the sake of exercising the sovereign power over populations' mortality). The second part is, therefore, centered on forms of self-inflicted death, practiced by the powerless themselves, which are not only self-violent ('suicidal') but, first and foremost, counter-hegemonic - insofar as they manifest resistance against the given matrix of sovereign necro-power. This aspect of 'suicidal' death has been central for my thesis. By placing an accent on such interpretation, I have consistently aimed at breaking the canons of imperial knowledge by which one's withdrawal from life accounts for either illegal or ultimately threatening form of dying (or terror), to the point of general criminalization, contestation and condemnation. Since the epistemic power always prevails in pursuit of its own, imperial interests (that is, in the name of the powerful, of 'democracy', and of the 'universal good'), I expose the selected forms of radical withdrawal to talk about them from a thanatopolitical perspective altogether.

The third part continues the previous line of thought: while bringing the thanatopolitics closer to contemporary Europe and, in particular, to its South hit by the so-called sovereign debt crisis (or ‘Eurozone economic crisis’, ongoing since 2008), I put my efforts to decolonize the concept of ‘austerity suicides’ both from its own terminology and the hermeneutic inconsistency pertinent to the geo-political constructions of knowledge, still dependent upon normative medico-scientific (pathologizing) perspectives and merely socio-economic frameworks of reference. While my focus is clearly put on the European South and the suffering of its populations from the unjust austerity regime (imposed and enforced by the ongoing necro-coloniality of power), the last part of the thesis “considers ‘economic suicide’ as an indicator of the necropolitics that is the consequence of neo-liberal capitalism. Theorising crises of subjectivity attending the ongoing European recession, [I argue] that there are opportunities for forging the Self against hegemonic structures of power and governance”.³ The last part of the thesis sharpens the earlier exposed arguments around self-violent resistance towards the epistemic worlds of ‘suicide cultures’ at large or, more precisely, towards what I propose to be recognized as ‘radical withdrawal’ from now on. The exemplary cases I discuss in this part are personified, on one side, by an anonymous ‘weeping man in Athens’ and, on the other side, by the shadow of the late Mr. Dimitris Christoulas – the former dreaming of survival under neoliberal ‘democracy’, the latter leaving everything behind, after shooting himself dead at the central Athens square, in order “to ‘send a political message’ about the inequities of Greece’s crushing debt crisis” (Smith, 2012). Symbolically enough, they bring us back (from Athens –the now ‘empty’ cradle of European democracy and, perhaps, its tomb) to the very beginning of my thesis where the discussions about the so-called ‘actual’ democracy, its basically authoritarian nature, and its sovereign (Eurocentric/ capitalist/ colonial/ racist/ sexist) regime of epistemic power urge the curious readership to re-consider their personal/ political positions about the experience(s) of life at the dawn of the third millennium *and* the multiple politics of death to which humankind is constantly submitted. If only one of the readers, who might *sacrifice* their time and energy to reach the last chapters of this thesis, would feel the urge to decolonize their own ways of thinking, being, and feeling the ‘other’ of their own selves (i.e., the other of the same, that might have been obscured or overshadowed by centuries of epistemic violence reproduced from one knowledge-generation to the next), I would be more than convinced that this project

³ As pointed out by Achille Mbembe and Megan Jones, the editors of The Johannesburg Salon, a Journal of The Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism (JWTC) of the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa), where one of my texts (namely, “Radical Withdrawal: Necropolitics, Capitalismo Gore, and Other Kinds of Life” – now included in the last part of my doctoral thesis), was published in 2013.

has fulfilled its purpose. The doors for new members of the epistemic community of the South are now open.

Part One

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework

A 'Democratic' Regime

During his conversation with Glaucon in the Fourth Book of Plato's *Republic* (c. 380 BC), Socrates discusses the notion of 'regime' in relation to politics. He starts by saying that there are "five types of political regime with their own specific form" (Plato 2003: 143) and presents the first, which "might be called monarchy, if an exceptional individual emerges among the rulers, or aristocracy if several emerge" (Plato 2003: 143). While describing each of them he argues about their connection to the types of soul to which they pertain, since "for individuals also there must necessarily be as many kinds of character as there are kinds of regime" (Plato 2003: 253-254). In the Eighth Book, Socrates adds to the earlier discussion:

There's the one which is pretty generally approved, the Cretan or Spartan. Next – and next is the scale of general approval – is the one called oligarchy, a form of government filled with all sorts of evils. In contrast to oligarchy, and the form of government which arises next, is democracy. And then there is the wonderful institution of tyranny, standing head and shoulders above all the others, the fourth and last diseased state of the city. *Can you think of any other kind of regime which forms a distinct category of its own?* I take it that hereditary rules by families, kingships which go to the highest bidder, and other similar regimes, which you will find are no less common among the barbarians than among the Greeks, are all intermediate between the forms I have mentioned. (Plato 2003: 253; my emphasis)

From a wider perspective, the word 'regime' denotes a state of orderly or systematic affairs: this may include a particular lifestyle, the ways of being and behaving, or the way we do things according to certain patterns (either in a self-prescribed manner or otherwise). If you ask people today to think about the notion of regime the majority of them may immediately refer to another term – such as 'governance' – and associate it

with some of its specific forms (*authoritarian*, for instance). Due to commonly misleading and predominantly negative tones applied to the popular understanding of the word ‘regime’, this association does not come as a huge surprise. Among those people there also might be a few who consider themselves knowledgeable enough about the European history: for them a ‘regime’ may denote the political system of *Ancien Régime* (i.e., the monarchic rule preceding the 1789 revolution in the French Kingdom). Many will simply think of numerous *totalitarian* regimes throughout history across the world: some of them were typical of the twentieth century, some of them are still in power. One of them is called ‘democracy’.

‘Democracy is basically authoritarian’

When requested to give his views about “our current democracy [as] ultimately the most human system possible”, Dutch sociologist Willem Schinkel responded that “democracy is basically authoritarian” and continued:

If democracy is the most humane way of human society, this means that it will never be completely done. Of course there are all sorts of problems concerning our democracy at this moment – we could talk about that too. But the first problem is that democracy is considered to be ‘realized already’. Whereas democracy should in fact maintain an attitude of ‘being connected with the future’, of a ‘not-yet-character’. If democracy does not have that attitude, it quickly becomes a form of anti-democracy. (Schinkel 2013)

What is Schinkel here suggesting? I assume that every question about ‘our current democracy’ relates to the system of so-called Western neoliberal democracies that stands for ‘ultimately the most human system possible’. If this is the way we understand today’s democracy this implies its superior position in comparison to other possible systems, presumably less human. The notion of democracy and the notion of (ultimate) humanness here correlate as even categories. Nonetheless, I argue –in line with Schinkel– that the relation between them remains essentially uneven, unequal or paradoxical in the following sense: for a democratic project to be ‘ultimately humane’ it has to be complete. However, once it is considered complete (or ‘realized already’, in Schinkel’s terms) it does not stand anymore for democracy. If democracy is *a priori* taken to be ‘realized’ it remains essentially incomplete (unrealized), because its actual realization denies its democratic character. Hence, a system that aims to be democratic and ultimately humane must have a *democratic attitude* instead of ‘being democratic per se’ at the present moment – or, as Schinkel claims, it must be connected with the future

instead of 'being realized already'. Otherwise, the system only claims to be something (i.e., 'democratic') without *actually* being so.

This allows me to think of the 'actual' state of Western democracy as a system that is not 'the most humane way of human society', or that democracy is basically inhumane. For a potential democracy to be realized in the future the system must admit its actually non-democratic nature (i.e., that it is not-yet-democratic) so it could continue to *aspire towards becoming* the most human system possible. Once this aspiration seems to be fulfilled, the possibility of being 'actually democratic' –and ultimately humane– is lost. For Schinkel, it is the *actuality itself* that goes against the very ontology of democracy because it cannot be 'realized already'; rather it can only aspire towards such realization without claiming to be what it is not. If the system is claiming to be what it is not (democratic and the most humane, *here and now*) it means that it is neither democratic nor ultimately humane. Accordingly, one can assume that every system that claims to be 'actually democratic' is not democratic at all or –if the system keeps claiming to be what it is not– it becomes exactly the opposite: anti-democratic or non-democratic. Therefore, the reality of a 'democratic regime' which we are currently experiencing in the form of governance 'best of all' conceives of the following: first, it relates to the system of so-called Western neoliberal democracies; then, it presupposes the superior position in comparison to other possible systems (presumably 'less humane' and 'less democratic'); finally, it is essentially non-democratic and/or anti-democratic insofar as its relation to humanness is incomplete: we can consider it to be *humane* inasmuch as we can also consider it to be *inhumane*. Given this logic, Schinkel expands his argument – and rightfully so– to the extent that he allows himself to claim that 'democracy is basically authoritarian'.

Socrates' argument was crystallized in Athens at the dawn of the European democracy while Schinkel's came about in the year 2013. My concern here is with the concept of democracy and its varied regimes of life- and death-politics at the present moment in history: the dawn of the third millennium that coincides, to a certain extent, with the dusk of democracy. To get closer to the issues of life and death –and how their respective regimes intertwine with the notion of democracy– I have, first and foremost, placed an accent onto some possible conceptions that treat them as "false constructs and fantasies made up deliberately by scholars and writers since Greek times" (Mudimbe 1994: xv). Schinkel's suggestions embrace such constructs while urging us to question them anew – right now when (as Walter D. Mignolo announced it) "democracy has turned into a noble discourse to advance by force the imperial interests".¹

¹ Walter D. Mignolo, "Ukraine 2014: A Decolonial Take", *Walter Mignolo: Thoughts on modernity/coloniality, geopolitics of knowledge, border thinking, pluriversality, and the decolonial option*, posted on March 18, 2014, <http://waltermignolo.com/ukraine-2014-a-decolonial-take>.

Democratic Epistemic Sovereignty

This allows me to claim that there is an intricate connection among the following elements: the concept of democracy, the notions of power and imperial interests therein, and the creation of discourses that pertain to a certain production of knowledge (including the assumed body of knowledge about death, in particular about our own death). Hereby I especially refer to the knowledge about (Western) democracy itself as well as about the power-balance in the global world-system which revolves around the imperial ('democratic') interests. With such assumptions in mind, I understand the existent 'democratic' regime as properly imperialist, whereas the Latin term *imperium* denotes the sovereign power and its pretensions towards the status of a ruling authority over (global) populations. In this context, democracy is imperialist insofar as its own discourses pertain to the ruling body of a global knowledge (presumably 'universal' and thus 'recognizable worldwide'). I shall call it the sovereign epistemic regime or (*democratic*) *epistemic sovereignty*, while the vision it confers upon the global populations –and the manifold world(s) of knowledge therein– I consider to be properly *imperialist*. Hence, when I speak of *imperialist epistemological visions* I refer to the 'democratic' forms of subjectivity, self-perceived from a 'democratic' and superior perspective, that have been able to construct the 'universe' of knowledge through which we have come to 'know' (as 'correctly' as democratic subjects could aspire towards the 'ultimate and universal' truths) the matters of life and death in general and those pertaining to *our own* lives and deaths in particular. What I find the most problematic here is, namely: how has our knowledge about our own selves come to be created, produced, and reproduced by the democratic epistemic sovereignty and its matrix of power as *the* 'ultimate and universal' knowledge if it has always been upheld from the *imperialist* ('democratic') *perspective* in pursuit of imperial ('democratic') interests?

My concern here is not with the question whether Schinkel is right or wrong; instead, I am interested in what his proposition could tell us about the ways we perceive ourselves under conditions of democracy that is 'basically authoritarian' (i.e., imperial, sovereign, superior, dominant and universal) and how such perceptions shape our knowledge about the notions of life and death from a 'democratic' perspective. Given the earlier assumption, according to which "a contemporary Western man has contrived to stop thinking at all about death and, more particularly, about his own death" (Schumacher 2011: ix), I cannot but ask the following: is there any relationship between the current state of Western 'democracies' (or democracy as such) on one side and the knowledge(s) about life/death on the other side?

To approach this question, I assume that every pretension of a system which tends to be overtly 'democratic' (on the grounds that it literally epitomizes the idea of

democracy as ‘realized already’, in the sense of the ‘most human system possible’) exposes itself to the *negation of democracy*. Thus, it takes a huge risk to be converted into the opposite of what it pretends to be, namely, an authoritarian regime. The *superior* position of Western neoliberal ‘democracies’ among other possible regimes is inherent to such risks: this is due to the fact that its ‘democratic’ nature has not only been self-proclaimed but, also, *self-legitimized* in the process. Self-legitimation is inseparable from discursive power mechanisms that have allowed for this act of self-recognition to be grounded in “false constructs and fantasies” (to quote the Congolese philosopher Valentin Mudimbe once again). This, in turn, allows me to say: democracy is a singular disciplinary paradigm rooted in “ritual’s master fictions [or] the lies that are held broadly by society to support its institutions even if acknowledged to be false”, in Clifford Geertz’s terms (as cited in Blier 2003: 303).²

The Darker Side of ‘Democracy’

Starting from this, the actual ‘democracy’ relies upon a broadly and misleadingly upheld view (about itself as the political system ‘best of all’) which, in turn, becomes a tool for the imperialist epistemological power to instrumentalize global vision for its own sovereign purposes. The power cherishes the need to exercise control over the populations who live their lives ‘best of all’ in so-called neoliberal democracies, but also over their counter-parts elsewhere: the latter include the people who are yet supposed to learn their lesson of democracy as propagated by Western technocratic ‘evangelists’ (most notably in the name of ‘human rights’ and ‘global justice’, if not otherwise declared). However, a regime that tends to be at the same time superior, self-legitimized and ‘democratic’ is nothing but equivocal. On the one hand, as Schinkel argues, it is non-democratic and/or anti-democratic: it maintains an attitude of ‘being connected with

² For the sake of comparison, see the more standard definitions of democracy (“government by the people”, “a government in which the people share in directing the activities of the state”), as reconsidered by Lummis (1996: 23). Lipset and Lakin (2004: 19-37) approach the issue through the difference between a minimalist and a maximalist definition of democracy by which the right to vote comes at the expense of the essential civil and political liberties, for instances. On the contrary, my approach ignores both the elitist and the libertarian dimensions pertaining to the more conventional definitions of democracy; instead, I plead for a profoundly decolonial view onto it: this is where the questions of life and death become not only constitutive for the way that a contemporary Western man embraces the idea of ‘democratic freedoms’ in pursuit of his own (imperial) interests, but where the level of their visibility and/or invisibility plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining the conflicted politics of life and death (such as necropolitics, thanatopolitics, biopolitics, etc.) in order to exercise sovereignty over worldwide populations that are not or do not consider themselves to be sufficiently ‘democratic’ in the Western sense, as I shall discuss later on.

the present' while it should maintain an attitude of 'being connected with the future'; on the other hand, as I suggest, it remains properly 'democratic' insofar as it discloses the *darker side* of democracy. The 'darker side' of democracy –its officially invisible or less visible side– consists in its basically authoritarian nature whenever the politics of universalism and its rhetoric of power prevail on its visible or *brighter side*.³

Immanuel Wallerstein (2006: xiv) assumes the existence of what he calls “the politics of universalism” and “the rhetoric of power” in the sense that they “pursue the interests of the dominant strata of the modern world-system”. He explains this further:

The rhetoric of the leaders of the pan-European world –*in particular, but not only, the United States and Great Britain*– and the mainstream media and Establishment intellectuals is filled with appeals to universalism as the basic justification of their policies. This is especially so when they talk about their policies relating to the 'others' – the countries of the non-European world, the populations of the poorer and 'less developed' nations. The tone is often righteous, hectoring, and arrogant, but the policies are always presented as reflecting universal values and truths. (Wallerstein 2006: xiii; my emphasis)

The rhetorical language that claims to be universal and imposes its 'singular' viewpoint (a pan-European/ 'democratic' perspective) as superior establishes its own power over any other viewpoint in the world-system that consists of *multiple perspectives* – not of a singular one that is supposedly 'democratic' and thus sacrosanct. Such universal pretensions, enforced by the power rhetoric towards the singularity of vision, disclose a certain condition within which many and varied discourses (including those on 'democracy', 'life' and 'death') reside nowadays. I understand such a condition to be not only 'singular' and 'universal' in terms of its superior power position but also hegemonic, in the sense that “recent debates about hegemonic knowledge in the modern world [...] allow us to characterize the dominant conception of knowledge as *Eurocentric*” (Lander 2000, as cited in Lander 2002: 245). Accordingly, the earlier announced Schumacher's thesis about the loss of 'death' in Western society is but a feature of the dominant conception of knowledge about 'death' as pan-European and/or Eurocentric. This, I would like to highlight, makes it inseparable from the democratic

³ The notion of rhetoric is here crucial as it reiterates “very old themes, which have constituted the basic rhetoric of the powerful throughout the history of the modern world-system, since at least the sixteenth century” (Wallerstein 2006: xiv). Accordingly, if “there is a history to this rhetoric” there is “a history of opposition to this rhetoric” (Wallerstein 2006: xiv). Thus, a resistance to the politics of universalism must come to the fore. Wallerstein names it “universal universalism” and adds: “In the end, the debate has always revolved around what we mean by universalism. I shall seek to show that the universalism of the powerful has been a *partial and distorted universalism, one that I am calling 'European universalism'* because it has been put forward by pan-European leaders and intellectuals in their quest to *pursue the interests of the dominant strata of the modern world-system*. Moreover, [...] we might instead move forward to a genuine universalism, what I am calling 'universal universalism'” (Wallerstein 2006: xiv).

epistemic sovereignty and discloses the imperial epistemic vision of the subject of death (that is allegedly lost) as a properly ‘democratic’ vision.

This thesis speaks, therefore, to that part of global population whose reluctance to recognize themselves in the image of death discloses death of the others (anonymous, innumerable, and still unrecognized deaths). Whereas to think and talk about someone else’s death (while negating one’s own) refers to the ‘threatening other’, or the terror of negativity against one’s own happiness, to ‘make use’ of death for one’s own purposes must always be justified (as it has been the case, even implicitly) for the sake of personal ‘happiness and prosperity’, which hereby means: in pursuit of imperial interests to which the current state of ‘Western democracy’ owes, to a large degree, its own existence.

Eurocentric Knowledge, Imperial Globality, and Global Coloniality

For the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2004: 207) the preeminence of a ‘democratic’ worldview has become all the more evident in “the rise of a new US-based form of *imperial globality*, an economic-military-ideological order that subordinates regions, peoples and economies world-wide”. He argues that “imperial globality has its underside in what could be called, following a group of Latin American researchers, *global coloniality*, meaning by this the heightened marginalization and suppression of the knowledge and culture of subaltern groups” (Escobar 2004: 207; my emphasis). What he properly accentuates is the form of violence committed on behalf of the stronger against the epistemological horizons of the weaker. This also relates to what the Venezuelan sociologist Edgardo Lander calls the ‘Natural’ order of global capital, “the pervasiveness of the Eurocentric perspective in the principles or fundamentals that guide current practices by which the global order of capital is planned, justified, and naturalized (i.e., made less artificial)” (Lander 2002: 245). Lander explains the “perspective of Eurocentric knowledge” (i.e., the imperialist epistemic vision aligned with the democratic sovereignty) as “the central axis of a discourse that not only naturalizes but renders inevitable *the increasingly intense polarization between a privileged minority and the world’s excluded, oppressed majorities*” (Lander 2002: 245; my emphasis). The social segregation here announced indicates the modes of unequal distribution of justice among the world populations when perceived from that epistemic viewpoint that Lander rightfully calls Eurocentric, and continues:

Eurocentric knowledge also lies at the center of a *predatory model of civilization that threatens to destroy the conditions that make life possible on Earth*. For this reason, the critique of Eurocentrism and the development/ recovery of alternate knowledge perspectives cannot be interpreted as merely an esoteric intellectual or academic preoccupation, or for that matter as a topic for interesting debates within a narrow community of scholars working on epistemological problems. In reality, these issues are *closely related to vital political demands, both local and global*, which are linked in turn to communities, organizations, and movements that (in a variety of ways) confront and resist the growing hegemony of transnational capital throughout the world. (Lander 2002: 245-246)

Lander's critical insights are not only extremely relevant – as they decenter our viewing position from the sovereign epistemic perspective – but they are also fundamental if we are to understand the “multiple consequences for the constitution of modern social knowledge” (Lander 2002: 246) in their relation to pretensions claimed in the name of Eurocentric epistemic hegemony. In that sense, he pays particular attention to

one particular kind of knowledge –Western scientific Knowledge– [that] is understood to be *true, universal, and objective* – the form by which all other ways of knowing are simultaneously defined as ignorance or superstition. In Western knowledge, the separation of reason and body lies at the base of a ‘disembodied,’ desubjectified knowledge; these divisions sustain its *pretensions to objectivity and detachment from time and space as a universal knowledge*. (Lander 2002: 246)

I am placing an accent on this particular statement since the nature of this thesis is not to propose a discourse on ‘death’ from an epistemic position rooted in ‘objective’, ‘disembodied’ or desubjectified knowledge, but exactly the opposite. Furthermore, Lander's perspective allows me to approach the supposed loss of ‘death’ through the relation between the democratic epistemic sovereignty and the historical project of modernity/coloniality/globality that is rooted in the imperial interests aligned with the Eurocentric vision of the world. ‘Globality’ here denotes another term to be contested, since it applies not only to the end-point of globalization but to a fundamental shift in consciousness: from local (national) consciousness toward a unified and, thus, universal ‘imaginary’.⁴ Similarly, the term coloniality hereby denotes “the imperial/

⁴ In terms of Erin K. Wilson, “the term ‘globality’ primarily refers to a social condition, potentially the end-point of globalization, whereby individual and collective consciousness is focused increasingly at the global level and away from the national level. As in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when collective consciousness shifted away from religious affiliations towards national affiliations, in the era of globalization there is speculation that we are witnessing a shift away from national allegiances towards a global consciousness or “imaginary” (Steger 2008), whereby individuals will feel a greater connection with the global community than with presently existing national communities”. See Erin K. Wilson, “Globality”, *The Wiley-*

colonial organization of societies [that] describes a global phenomenon” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009: 132); also, “conceptually, coloniality is the hidden side of modernity. By writing modernity/coloniality we mean that coloniality is constitutive of modernity, and that there is no modernity without coloniality” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009: 132).

It is through this theoretical framework that I read the many and varied critical positions against the ‘democratic’ Eurocentric epistemological vision of the world, the aim of which is the properly *epistemic decolonization* in the following sense: “Decolonizing from this global coloniality becomes the main epistemological horizon of the decolonial option. Decoloniality means here decolonization of knowledge and being by epistemically and affectively de-linking from the imperial/colonial organization of society” (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2009: 132). About the perverted relationship among modernity, coloniality and globality –and our need to take a distance nowadays from the sovereign idea of knowledge enforced by this triangle of pan-European power– Lander adds the following:

By ignoring the colonial/imperial relationships between peoples and cultures – ones that made the modern world-system possible– Eurocentric knowledge understands modernity to be an *internal* product of European genius, owing nothing to the rest of the world. Similarly, the current condition of the other peoples of the planet is seen as having no connection to the colonial/imperial experience. Their present status of ‘backwardness’ and ‘poverty’ is the result, rather, of insufficient capitalist development. Instead of being seen as *the products of modern experience*, such conditions are interpreted as being symptoms of the absence of modernity. We are therefore dealing with *a history that dehistoricizes and conceals the constitutive relationships of the modern colonial world-system*. (Lander 2002: 247)

Hegemonic (Imperialist) Rationality, Modernity and Globalization

Following this line of thought, I dare to ask: has ‘death’ been lost in the West due to a history that dehistoricizes (decontextualizes, eliminates, erases) and makes absent (conceals) the constitutive relationships of the modern colonial world-system with the

Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization, 2012, online, accessed on 20 November 2013, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/>.

very subject of human mortality? This introduces some important ideas about the form of 'democratic' (pan-European) sovereignty, inseparable from the modern colonial world-system, not only over the human beings but over their knowledge-worlds at large. By this I imply that the epistemic consequences of such sovereignty have been inherent to modernity itself and also internal to its colonial/capitalist matrix of global power. Hence, the 'democratic' legitimacy of imperialist epistemic regime has been built upon the kind of violence that is not only rooted in dehistoricized/ decontextualized/ concealed conceptions of modern and contemporary Western democracies, but it makes the *constitutive part of hegemonic (imperialist) rationality*. It epitomizes the same kind of rationality and its unquestionable 'truthfulness,' 'objectivity' and 'universality' that we nowadays recognize as either democratic or applicable to the pan-European or US-Eurocentric credence in basic human right to pursue 'life, liberty and happiness' (as Thomas Jefferson announced it in the 1776 *Declaration of Independence* to denote the core values aligned with the newly formed United States of America, for instance): the core values of an 'actual' Western democracy which remains, by all evidences tracking its imperial interests ever since the eighteenth century, basically authoritarian.

The form of violence inherent to such 'democracy' and to its hegemonic, imperialist rationality also discloses the kind of epistemic violence – which brings us back to Schumacher's thesis about the loss of 'death'. As proposed by the Portuguese social and legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos, nowadays we can talk about this violence as a sort of epistemicide. The term itself already includes the idea of a sovereign epistemic power 'killing the knowledge(s)' of the 'others' for the sake of its own superior epistemic position in the 'global world of knowledge'. I understand it in the following sense: that there is no 'life, liberty and happiness' for the superior (epistemic) power without 'death, slavery and unhappiness' for the subjugated Other. Santos, however, defines epistemicide much better than that, in relation to the regulatory social mechanisms of epistemic control linked to modernity (the most 'civilized' product of 'enlightened' European rationality), as follows:

The paradigm of modernity is an ambitious and revolutionary sociocultural paradigm which evolves from the sixteenth century on in Europe, to be imposed, almost always by violence, upon other regions of the world in the succeeding centuries. *It is based on a dynamic equilibrium between social regulation and social emancipation brought about by a new conception of rationality*. Alternative modes of conceiving regulation and emancipation in Europe and elsewhere were thereby discredited, both by the destruction of the knowledges upon which they were grounded (by *epistemicide*, that is) and by the oppression and, in extreme cases, genocide of the social groups whose practices sustained such knowledges (Santos 1995: 570; my emphasis)

This means that every discourse around the 'actual' democracy, which is aware of the epistemic violence brought about by its imperial project of modernity/ coloniality/

globality, must also include an awareness about the globalization as a modern, hegemonic and imperial *epistemic* world-system: a system which is both ‘democratic’ and authoritarian since it has been upheld by the genocidal capitalist logic and neoliberal ideology in their triumphant expansion and domination across the globe. In this line of thought, globalization entails a singular phenomenon embedded in Eurocentric worldviews by which “the idea of a *relatively single globalization* process emanating out of a few dominating centers remains prevalent” (Escobar 2010: 35). Curiously enough, Arturo Escobar poses the following question:

Could it be, however, that the power of Eurocentered modernity –as a *particular local history*– lies in the fact that has produced *particular global designs* in such a way that it has ‘subalternized’ other local histories and their corresponding designs? If this is the case, could one posit the hypothesis that *radical alternatives to modernity are not a historically foreclosed possibility*? If so, how can we articulate a project around this possibility? Could it be that it is possible to think about, and to think differently from, an ‘exteriority’ to the modern world system? That one may envision alternatives to the totality imputed to modernity, and adumbrate not a different totality leading to different global designs, but a *network of local/ global histories constructed from the perspective of a politically enriched alterity*? (Escobar 2010: 37; my emphasis)

Ego-conquirus: Worlds of Knowledge, Sovereign Epistemic Regime, and Imperialist Vision

This brings me to the next argument: there is no democracy as we experience it today without its violent (authoritarian, invisible and darker) side. In other words, no regime that tends to be democratic can escape a dichotomy between the visibility and the invisibility of its inhumanness, even if such a dichotomy pertains to forms of violence that are ‘merely’ epistemic. If for a ‘democratic’ regime, in order to be considered as the ‘best of all’, it means to be superior (or ‘ultimately the most human system possible’) in relation to other regimes, this also indicates its global aspirations towards something very significant: the conditions by which its ruling epistemic authority must remain undisturbed. Consequently, the self-legitimized democracies of Western neoliberal regimes are properly authoritarian insofar as their politics of universalism and rhetoric of power account for the contemporary *imperialist epistemic regime* with its own

imperialist epistemic vision of the world: or, as Ramón Grosfoguel suggests, such politics and such rhetoric include the forms of “epistemic racism/sexism” that allow us to think nowadays of fundamentalism that is properly Eurocentric.⁵ Accordingly, within the epistemic climate of Eurocentric ‘democratic’ fundamentalism, we are also supposed to accept the thesis about the loss of ‘death’ as the category of knowledge that has been erased from Western philosophy and Western society so a Western man could ‘preserve his happiness’.

Given the background provided by Schinkel, Wallerstein, Santos, Escobar, Lander and Grosfoguel, among numerous other thinkers, I use the words ‘Eurocentrism’, ‘Western modernity’, ‘global hegemony’ and ‘democracy’ together and in relation to ‘imperial epistemic sovereignty’ for the following reason: to denote the *asymmetrical* power-balance in contemporary world, in the sense that encompasses two major aspects. First, I refer to the general concept of worldviews (the construction of knowledge) imposed by the dominant part in the global world-system: this imposition comes in order to enforce the imperial principles of ‘universal’ rationality upon the global populations, that is undertaken by the power of Imperial Being in the name of ‘life, liberty and happiness’. The imposition also comes through a variety of social, political, economic, military and intellectual constructs over the groups or classes of populations that are not only internal or external (peripheral) to the Imperial Being, but they also pertain to the many and varied types of ‘others’. Such rationality negatively interferes with other possible types of rationality (otherwise treated as ‘irrational’) that –given their threatening potential for the persistence of the sacrosanct ‘democratic’ order and stability– must be forcefully dismissed from the imperialist epistemic universe. In that sense, the question of epistemic sovereign power (epitomized by what Grosfoguel treats as the Imperial Being) is worth being recalled over and over again, in particular through the figure of ‘ego-conquirus’:

Occidentalism created the epistemic privilege and hegemonic identity politics of the West from which to judge and produce knowledge about the ‘Others.’ The egopolitics of knowledge of Rene Descartes in the 17th century, where Western men replace God as the foundation of knowledge, is the foundational basis of modern Western philosophy. However as Enrique Dussel (1994), Latin American philosopher of liberation, reminds us, Descartes’ ego-cogito (‘I think, therefore I am’) was preceded by 150 years of the ego-conquirus (‘I conquer, therefore I am’). The God-eye view defended by Descartes transferred the attributes of the Christian God to Western men (the gender here is not accidental). But this was only possible from an Imperial Being, that is, *from the panoptic gaze of someone who is*

⁵ See Ramón Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing the University”, *2nd Decolonial Days, Berlin 2011* (YouTube), posted on February 20, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKgL92yqygk> .

at the center of the world because he has conquered it. (Grosfoguel and Mielants 2006: 8; my emphasis)

The panoptic gaze of an Imperial Being, being in charge of the imperialist epistemological vision, has cemented the dominant ideology of knowledge in a way that Enrique Dussel describes as both asymmetrical and deformed. For him, this has been heavily dependent upon the explanation of European ‘superiority’ from a Eurocentric point of view that “assumes Modernity as exclusively European [...] and only as a result of inter-European phenomena” (Dussel 2006: 494). He detects these phenomena in the Enlightenment, the ideology of the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. This indirectly suggests the reluctance of Europeans to deal profoundly with their own colonial responsibilities behind the mask of ‘progress’ aligned with “capitalism, colonization and Eurocentrism [...] in order to understand Modernity”, as Dussel (2006: 493) argues, i.e., “as processes that lend it their specific content [in demand for] a critical posture concerning the dominant explanation of Modernity and its associated processes”.

Epistemic Gaps: Global Anti-Imperial South vis-à-vis Global Imperial North

Accordingly, I associate the hegemonic ‘democratic’ epistemic regime with the *global imperial North* while its ‘others’ are relegated to the counter-hegemonic epistemic regimes of the *global anti-imperial South* (Santos and Meneses 2010). This allows me to claim that the hegemonic discourse implies the superior position of speech on behalf of the imperialist subject of the global North, while the counter-hegemonic position belongs to the subjugated anti-imperialist subject of the global South. The forms of global imperial domination here function against the multitude of subjectivities and rationalities among the subjugated and peripheral groups, otherwise considered too ‘local’ and thus less relevant for the ruling authority of the world. Furthermore, I understand the concepts of Eurocentrism, Western modernity, democracy and global hegemony in their linkage to the contemporary forms of ongoing colonial/ capitalist organization/ design of the world through which an imperial epistemic sovereignty continues to determine the grounds of a singular, universal and normative knowledge over many other possible knowledge-worlds. The subjugated and ‘subalternized’ histories of such knowledge-worlds are thus considered not only ‘too local’ or irrelevant but also *rival*. By being rival, their rationality (otherwise understood as ‘irrational’, from the hegemonic viewpoint) represents a threat to the sacrosanct ‘universal’ reason

defended by the imperial canon of knowledge that pertains to “northern epistemologies” (Santos 2007).

Unfortunately, the persistence of imperial epistemic sovereignty in defending its own superior scenario of rationality has been possible due to a certain lack of organized resistance on behalf of the global anti-imperialist forces – or due to the lack of sustainable revolutionary results of such resistance so far. Hereby I refer to any results that could consistently gain more visible and legitimate prominence by producing the more *symmetrical* balance of epistemic powers, which is a radically different (and probably utopian) situation in comparison to the one already in force. Nonetheless, by being radically different and utopian, such perspectives allow me to pursue the aim of this thesis from an anti-imperialist perspective of the South in order to expose the undesirable negativity of death and its supposedly unthinkable positive side exactly where it might have slipped from the ‘democratic’/ modernist/ colonial/ capitalist/ racist and sexist epistemic view.

In this context, I assume that the visible or brighter side of the hegemonic ‘democratic’ regime reveals the characteristics of ‘the most human system possible’. Besides, I comply with Schinkel’s suspicious objection to such an assumption and also assume that the invisible or darker side of the same regime might be the place where to look for ‘death’ that was allegedly lost in the West. In this situation, the arising question is: what is it that constitutes the invisible or darker side of the hegemonic regime so our suspicions around democracy –as ‘ultimately the most humane system, best of all’– could be sustained? Given our awareness about the darker side of democracy, which options can we open to other, alternative prospects within the potential multitude of regimes that are properly *counter-hegemonic*? Insofar as they do not pursue “the interests of the dominant strata of the modern world-system” (Wallerstein 2006: xiv) and insofar as they express their resistance to the hegemonic and ‘democratic’ politics of universalism (here broadly associated with the pan-European or US-Eurocentric epistemic vision), I refer to them as ‘counter-hegemonic regimes’. By this I denote the subjugated systems of power –or the lack of power thereof– that do not or cannot pretend to be democratic while the hegemonic ‘democratic’ regime claims its own privileged and dominant position in the ‘singular universe’ of global perspectives as ‘ultimately the most human system possible’ (the ‘best of all’). The arising question to be posed within such a situation is simple yet fundamental, namely: “Are other epistemologies possible today?” (Santos and Meneses 2010: 7).

Are Other Epistemologies of ‘Life’ and ‘Death’ Possible Today?

Similarly, if (for a Western man) the subject of ‘death’ has been lost from its ‘democratic’ dominion of epistemic power, can we put forward a radical proposition against such a ‘loss’ and, by doing so, where could such a proposition lead us? By this I mean that ‘death’ might be located elsewhere, both within and outside the Western canon of knowledge, i.e., outside of so-called northern epistemologies. My point is that ‘death’ needs to be perceived from a radically different perspective in order to be properly reflected upon under condition that *other epistemologies*, unlike the dominant one, are possible today – which is the option I defend hereby, most notably by referring to the “epistemologies of the South” (Santos 2014) and the perspective of colonial difference or the perspective of subalternity (Mignolo 2002). If the democratic sovereignty could have erased ‘death’ from Western epistemic horizons centered on life, what is the reason behind such erasure? Could other contemporary epistemologies on ‘death’, more or less relevant in comparison to the dominant one, help us approach their properly democratic, anti-democratic and/or non-democratic nature around ‘death’? If, following Schinkel, the hegemonic ‘democratic’ regime is indeed authoritarian, does this characteristic indicate that counter-hegemonic regimes of ‘death’ are more or less authoritarian (i.e., anti-democratic, non-democratic) or not authoritarian at all?

To answer these questions, I need to approach ‘death’ as a problem that has not only been ‘depoliticized’ by the sovereign reason but also exported from the West to the rest of the world since it does not allegedly pertain to the western civilization and its conception of the universe devoted to ‘life, liberty and happiness’. This recalls Schinkel’s idea about the authoritarian regime of democracy once again which is enforced by the “historical practice of imperialist epistemological vision” (al-Masseri 2010).⁶ The argument proposed by the late Egyptian scholar Abdul Wahab al-Masseri is very useful in this regard:

⁶ Despite an evident similarity in the ways they formulate the same issue, the two positions outlined here by al-Masseri (or Mudimbe) and the earlier exposed one by Wallerstein, respectively, are not accidentally confronted with each other. Among other reasons, I put them together to highlight the diversification “of the colonial and the imperial differences” around which the geopolitics of knowledge has been organized through history (Mignolo 2002: 59). In this sense, al-Masseri’s and Mudimbe’s positions reflect “colonial experience or, rather, a local history of the colonial difference” while “Wallerstein, instead, is immersed in the imperial difference that distinguishes the philosophical critique of Western civilization in Europe and the sociological critique of modernity in the United States” (Mignolo 2002: 58-59). This point of diversification, from which these two positions –as exemplary for the subject at hand– diverge in their approaches toward the implications of power from either colonial or imperial experience, Mignolo takes as one of his crucial point of departure to articulate a number of issues. He highlights the perspective of colonial difference (or the perspective of subalternity) that resists the politics of Eurocentric universalism by contributing to “an-other logic (or border thinking from the perspective of subalternity) [together] with a geopolitics of knowledge that

There is a view that *imperialism*, as a historical practice, constitutes a deviation from *western civilization and its conception of the universe*, and that the adoption of the imperialist solution, which involves *exporting problems to the rest of the world and hegemony over other nations*, is inconsistent with being a *liberal, humane, and enlightened civilization that has accepted democracy as philosophy of government, laissez-faire as its economic order, and rationalism and humanism as universal philosophy*. It is our contention, however, that these varied philosophies *do not stand in contradiction to the imperialist epistemological vision*. Rather, there is a close link between these philosophies and the imperialist vision, which will be fully understood once we turn to the epistemological level. (al-Masseri 2010: 149; my emphasis)

In the context of my study, such epistemological level conceives of two poles. On the one hand, I consider the hegemonic democratic regime and its epistemic sovereignty to be centered on ‘life’ in the shadow of ‘death’. The alleged absence of ‘death’ in Western society serves merely as a pretext in pursuit of the travestied and ongoing historical practice of the ‘politics of life’, behind which occurs the really existing sovereign ‘politics of death’ (in terms of the Eurocentric/ imperial/ colonial/ capitalist/ racist/ sexist exclusion of the ‘other’). On the other hand, the many and varied anti-imperialist options resist against such a sovereignty –or strive to be uncovered from the ‘epistemic graveyards’ (i.e., the death-worlds of knowledge) imposed by sovereignty itself– so the complex, multifaceted and ambiguous conceptions of ‘life’ and ‘death’ could be brought back to light in a radically different way, as they deserve. Their ambiguity, as proposed hereby, refers to a reversed concept by which ‘death’ does not necessarily imply some sort of negativity but it could also bring ‘life’ – or, to be exact, other possible kinds of life, which is different from the improper and undigified forms of living imposed to a human being *under particular existential circumstances (terminal illness, colonial occupation, economic crisis, political prosecution, and so on)*. Such circumstances are linked to *particular ‘subalternized’ social groups*, which I identify as the ‘living dead’ and/ or ‘abandonados’ (together with Achille Mbembe (2003) and Joao Biehl (2001) in mind, respectively). These groups play the central role in this thesis since they are, in turn, *associated with particular sovereign regimes of power* (be they ‘biopolitical’, necropolitical, necro-colonial, Eurocentric, ‘democratic’, or totalitarian, among other options): it is such connections that allow me to pursue the ideas around some positive and constructive (rather than exclusively negative or demonizing) faculties of death and dying, towards what I shall further call the thanatopolitical philosophy.

regionalizes the fundamental European legacy, locating thinking in the colonial difference and creating the conditions for diversity as a universal project” (Mignolo 2002: 91).

To Speak in the Name of Death: ‘Suicide as a Political Act’?

Is it possible to speak positively about death and, if yes, under which conditions such speech becomes thinkable (if not absolutely possible)? The main theoretical backup to proposals that go in this direction has been provided by the Canadian philosopher Stuart J. Murray (2006) through the concept of thanatopolitics. This especially allows me to situate a properly *thanatopolitical philosophy* within the broader framework (provided by the epistemologies of the South) in order to further plead for the recognition of some constructive and/ or positive dimensions of death among the thinkers who might remain skeptical towards such constellations of thought. I perceive these dimensions as contrary to the hegemonic politics of death which instrumentalizes human capacity to be mortal for its own (imperial/ capitalist/ colonial/ ‘democratic’) purposes. In other words, I see them as being proper to the *counter-hegemonic and anti-imperialist politics of death aligned with epistemologies of the South against the necropolitics of ‘democratic’ epistemic sovereignty*. “What would it mean, then, to speak in the name of death? Is such speech possible?” (Murray 2006: 192 – 193).

More than twenty years ago, the psychologist David Lester claimed that “several ways in which one may conceptualize suicide may be called political, i.e., the suicidal person seeks to change the balance of power in his group or in society” (Lester 1990: 1185). For the ‘suicidal person’, in his own terms, to make this change possible means to act in a certain way. For the change to be efficient, the act has to produce a certain transformation. The transformation occurs in the social field of power where one (the ‘suicidal person’) stands in relation to many (the ‘group’ or ‘society’ to which he or she belongs). The result of transformation depends on how the balance of power shifts from one position to another: from the given situation that the ‘suicidal person’ wants to change to the desirable situation he or she wants to achieve. During this process, the status of the ‘suicidal person’ can change, too, which depends on the way that his or her act triggers the efficiency of transformation and the power-balance therein. This means that the balance of social power changes in direct relation with the status of the ‘suicidal person’ who is going “from a position of powerlessness to the one of power” (Counts 1988, as cited in Lester and Rogers 2013: 213).

Lester adds to the discussion by arguing that “suicide can be conceptualized more broadly as a political act” (Lester 1990: 1185) depending on how ‘politics’ is understood. He refers to a Scottish psychiatrist Ronald David Laing who uses the word ‘politics’ in his book *The Politics of Experience* “to describe any behavior in which one or more people exert power over others” (Laing 1967, as cited in Lester 1990: 1185). Moreover, Lester

refers to the physician Henri Laborit and the psychotherapist Jay Haley to stress the causal relation between human behavior and different forms of power, in which suicidal intentions can play a significant role.⁷ Hence, “the desire for power and for dominating others may be one of the more powerful desires motivating human behavior, and its effects can be documented quite clearly in suicidal behavior where the suicidal act can easily change the power balance in relationships” (Lester 1990: 1185).

Lester also points out that the political conceptualization of suicide may relate to people’s intentions “to publicize some cause and to attempt to bring about some change” (Lester 1990: 1185). He gives an example in the context of Vietnam War and the South Vietnamese political and religious crisis in the early 1960s, when the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc acted in protest against the local regime and its anti-Buddhist policies. Curiously enough, Lester identifies it as an act of self-immolation (Lester 1990: 1185), which means that he does not necessarily refer to it as an ‘act of suicide’. What he applies here belongs to the terminology that has become common, and rightfully so, in the fields of scholarship dealing with the acts of protest involving self-destructive forms of behavior in politically contentious contexts (Biggs 2005, 2012). This is but an example of conceptual ambiguity through which the act of ‘suicide’ needs to pass –when approached as a political act– in order to reach the status of self-immolation, that is, the thanatopolitical act of self-sacrifice and/or radical withdrawal (as I refer to it throughout this thesis): the terminology close to our habitual usage of the word ‘suicide’ yet far enough to shape our views on ‘suicides as political acts’ radically differently.

Therefore, a more adequate terminology needs to be applied to the same phenomenon so the difference could be highlighted between what social sciences treat as self-sacrifice while natural sciences treat it as just another version of ‘self-killing’, ‘suicide’ or ‘suicide as a political act’. Lester’s argument sustains the following thesis: if suicide can be conceptualized as a political act on the basis of power, it is the misbalance of power between an individual and the group that defines the ways in which human behavior can produce a certain transformation of power. What remains problematic in his account is the very definition of the phenomenon that he calls ‘suicide’ while another term (‘self-immolation’/‘self-sacrifice’, in thanatopolitical sense) seems to be a more viable option for other fields of expertise, such as social sciences. This is a significant point of contestation to which one constantly needs to go back should the prevalence of medico-scientific terminology and ideology be decolonized. The

⁷ Haley’s approach, though controversial in what concerns his “interpretation of the Bible analyzing Jesus’ actions as a man trying to build a mass movement to topple a power structure” is telling insofar as he brings the category of “power tactics” into the discourse at hand. More about Jay Haley’s book *The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ and Other Essays* (Carmarthen: Crown House, 2006) is available on Crown House Publishing Web Page (Online), accessed on February 3, 2014.

<http://www.crownhouse.co.uk/publications/product.php?product=334>

decolonization of 'suicide' is a necessary precondition for the thanatopolitical philosophy of death to emerge – and for 'suicide' to be decolonized the pathologizing medico-scientific matrix of discursive power needs to be dismantled once and for all.

In this line of thought, I want to consider another set of arguments, by the Canadian author Richard Ziegler, concerning “three categories of suicide that are political” (Ziegler 2013). His views on the relation between 'suicide' and 'politics' reside in his more general understanding of the 'suicidal behavior' that contradicts the prevailing psychiatric perspectives in contemporary medicine and public health sciences. From the outset, he assumes the connection between this kind of behavior and the forms of social governance ('suicide prevention') that are capable to control what he conceives as a human right with regard to suicide. His position is dissenting insofar as it “is expressed less frequently, namely, that suicide is not a societal or health problem but is a human right and a solution to a problem, that suicide is usually a political act and that suicide prevention, when it involves the use of force, is social control” (Ziegler 2013). Additionally, he claims that our existent ideas about what 'political suicides' stand for may be too narrow to include the examples of “those relatively few cases in which those who kill themselves *have expressed the political motive* for their voluntary death” (Ziegler 2013; my emphasis). Among them he counts the IRA hunger strikers in Northern Ireland and the Buddhist monks in Tibet. Given such limits, he suggests that the concept of 'political suicides' has to be approached from a much wider perspective in order to be properly understood. He also makes it clear that this includes the concept of suicide under condition that it occurs “without any concomitant killing of others”. This is an important addendum to some other views that do not overlook this particular aspect but consider the act to be multilayered and to include the political dimension, even if it results in deaths other than the perpetrator's – this is most notably applicable to the context of so-called suicide attacks (as I will expose it in the second part).

Ziegler's classification of 'political suicides' includes the suicides in protest against one's own social environment, those in protest against society at large, and the suicides associated with “philosophical pessimism”. More precisely, this classification encompasses selected cases. Firstly, it concerns *suicides in protest against specific individuals but unrelated to political authorities*: this group concerns “those who take their lives not to convey outrage over the actions of their political rulers but to have an impact on other people with whom they are in close relationships” (Ziegler 2013). Secondly, it concerns *suicides in protest against society, related to political authorities*: this group concerns those “who hold the state or society to be at least partially responsible for the unbearable situation that induces the suicides” and denote the sense of rejection, “a declaration that the individual's disavowal of society was preceded by society's abandonment of the individual” (Ziegler 2013); this group also implies what has largely and misleadingly been understood as 'economic suicides' or, in Ziegler's terms (2013) *suicides in protest against the feeling of social rejection, related to “the actions of*

the state or society” in what most notably concerns “*the economic misery*” corresponding to “chronic involuntary poverty or unemployment”. Thirdly, it concerns suicides “out of philosophical disdain for existence” by which he implies philosophical pessimism that represents “a rebellion against the human condition” (Ziegler 2013).

Ziegler’s views on economically motivated suicides (to which I pay due attention most notably in the third part) are challenging because their political dimensions are usually overlooked for numerous reasons. On the one hand, they concern the lack of awareness about the political causality of economic reasons on behalf of the suicidal persons, since “those who leave life due to intolerable economic hardship may have been unable to specify who or what was responsible for their suffering and they may have been unaware that poverty and unemployment have political causes” (Ziegler 2013). On the other hand, they relate to the discomfiting sense of responsibility on behalf of the society and, in particular, the ruling authorities (the state itself). Accordingly, “society often refuses to regard the suicide of those who were experiencing financial deprivation or any other ordeal as political acts because this acknowledgement would imply some degree of societal culpability” (Ziegler 2013).

Lester’s and Ziegler’s arguments, although they frame the act of self-inflicted death as properly political (and thus seemingly contribute, to a certain extent, to my arguments exposed throughout this thesis), remain insufficient to support my thesis –or even contrary to it– because of the following: they still relate to such forms of death as manifestations of self-killing or ‘suicide’ and give priority to individual’s autonomy in performing a destructive act over themselves in terms of annihilation centered on *life* (where life itself is supposedly taken away) without fully considering the forced, subjugated and undignified status of individual’s life (that is, life closer to death, the ‘living dead’) in its perverted linkage to the sovereign power itself. This contradicts my thesis since, using the same vocabulary, my attention is focused elsewhere: on the forms of self-destruction centered on *death*, where death –and not life– is voluntarily taken away by the victims. Why?

Because ‘life itself’ (and the way I treat it throughout this thesis) applies to those categories of humankind whose living forms of existence have already been occupied and degraded by the sovereign power to the extent of the ‘living dead’. This is due to the assumption by which I treat the notion of life among the selected categories of population as essentially wasted, which complies with theoretical propositions offered by Achille Mbembe (2003), Joao Biehl (2001), and Eric Cazdyn (2012), as I will expose later. By this I refer to those members of living humankind who had been transformed into the ‘living dead’, the *abandonados*, the people ‘waiting with death’, or the humans who turned into the ‘already dead’ before their actual death had even come to play. Since their lives are submitted to such a degree of undignified living, the life itself seems to be a weak source of power to confront the sovereignty that succeeded in degrading them so profoundly. Yet, their actual death remains the only dominion –or this seems to

be the case with some of them at least– through which it is still possible to expose their revolt and defend their dignity (or what is left of it) as properly ‘human beings’.

Two Politics of Death in Conflict

I treat the ‘living dead’ who ‘take their own life’ (in public protest) as epitomized by the logic of martyrdom or self-sacrifice. When sacrificing oneself, the victim *appears* to have committed suicide while in reality –and with Mbembe in mind all the time– the victim has *taken his own death (not life)* out of the sovereign’s self-proclaimed right to decide who must die or be left to live: for a ‘living dead’, as I earlier argued, whose life has already been occupied by the sovereign necropower to the point of destruction, it is his *death* that is left as the only territory to be defended against the sovereign’s remaining pretensions (i.e., the ‘right’ to decide about the death of the governed). Hence, the victim takes his or her own death (and not his or her own life) from the domain of power that sovereignty keeps as its own disposal. Firstly, because death is the only dominion over which the ‘living dead’ could still claim his rights (his life being ‘already lost’), and secondly, because his death brings public attention to the matters of collective injustice, easily overlooked or unpronounced. This comes about in a manner that allows him to express his protest against necropolitics and to confirm his own power over the sovereign (who had already reduced him to a ‘living dead’). The mortality itself is the privileged domain where death (and not life itself) stands for the main objective of sovereign politics, according to Mbembe, and this is precisely what the ‘living dead’ does not want to give away to the other but, instead, keeps claiming his own rights to it: his own ‘right to death’. In addition, the ‘living dead’ does it publicly, in protest, with a clear political objective in mind: to contest the sovereign necropower and to confront it almost face-to-face (in front of a parliament, for instance) by mode of displaying his own right to keep death ‘in his own hands’. This means, as I propose, to regain one’s own *right to death* (by committing a self-destructive act) and to do so in response to the aggression of the necropolitical ‘other’, not in response to (or against) one’s own self. Given the status of a living citizen as a ‘living dead’ or ‘already dead’, the act of self-destruction is but a counter-measure on behalf of the victim to preserve the minimum of his/her humanness (and the maximum of power that is left) in face of the sovereign exploitative right to put populations to death – or to let them continue living their lives, under its sovereign rule, as nothing more but the ‘living dead’.

While the violence against the others –when executed by necropower– remains negative, the violence against necropower takes a more positively pronounced tone and I see it, together with Murray (2006), as a properly *thanatopolitical* form of self-sacrificial

protest. This thanatopolitical aspect, usually unpronounced as such, might be the reason why the so-called *suicides as political acts* often gain a sort of respect in the community whose members dare to take this step. Here the notion of ‘heroism’ does not necessarily fulfill its purpose: what is important is the positive position of the victim towards his or her own *right to death* (unconstrained by sovereign’s ultimate decision about it) and the victim’s counter-position (through the self-destructive act) towards the negativity of necropower’s destructive violence against the populations at large. The general ‘reason’ or political objective behind such acts is thus to shift the balance of power between, on the one hand, the necropolitical sovereign violence (those in government) and, on the other, the thanatopolitical violence of the powerless (the governed).

The major definition I propose is as follows: self-sacrifice (‘suicide’) occurs when certain members of the latter group (the governed, ‘the living dead’) dare to oppose the sovereign reason and its negative politics of death, and when they do so by means of a positive politics of death (thanatopolitics) in terms of one’s right to one’s own death. Therefore, to commit such an act has less to do with ‘suicides’ than with the right of the ‘living dead’ to claim and expose *their own power (the power of the powerless) associated with death*. This coincides with the ‘violence of positivity’, pretty much in a way that Murray defines thanatopolitics as “the living from the dead” or “the use of death for mobilizing political life”. This, I argue throughout this thesis, could be a radical inversion of the ‘suicidal logic’ from which some new horizons towards the act of ‘self-destruction’ –as ‘self-reconstruction’ (i.e., restoring the sense of one’s human dignity)– might emerge in the future. They indicate that such destruction does not result from the person’s ‘democratic’ autonomy to choose between life and death; rather, it develops from his or her antagonisms with the necropower by which the sovereign intends to maintain full control over populations’ lives and death while excluding the ‘other’. In response to the sovereign occupation of ‘my own’ life (a process that has transformed me into a ‘living dead’), I might no more defend any right to live as a decent, human being; yet I can still defend the last unoccupied ‘territory’ (‘my own’ death) by claiming my own right to keep my personal death out of sovereign’s hands and, alongside, to keep the traces of human dignity instead of giving them away to the sovereign necropower (even though the sovereign necropower keeps pretending to possess the luxury of deciding about my own death for its own political goals, or to impose death upon me at its own whim).

Hence, neither Lester nor Ziegler’s arguments entirely comply with what I call ‘taking one’s own death’ from the sovereign’s right to ‘let live and make die’. Rather, I find support to my overall arguments in Murray’s notion of thanatopolitics, to which I will devote due attention very soon. Additionally, to justify my arguments around the thanatopolitical potentiality of self-sacrificial death, otherwise understood as ‘suicide as political act’, I will necessarily rely upon Mbembe’s thesis on necropolitics (and Banerjee’s concept of necrocapitalism, which I discuss in the third part). The distinction

thanatopolitics vis-à-vis necropolitics is here more than relevant and significant so that the thanatopolitical power behind ‘suicides’ of the ‘living dead’ could be adequately situated within the zone of conflict between the *various politics of death* (not merely between the politics of life on one side, and the politics of death on the other). To grasp the potentiality of thanatopolitical conceptions of death, in what follows I will, first of all, reflect upon its necropolitical counterpart.

Necropolitics and Thanatopolitics

In the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century it was nobody else but the Cameroonian philosopher and political scientist Achille Mbembe who pronounced a historical ‘no’ to the Eurocentric philosophy of life. Few before him have dared venture into a major critique of sovereignty and what has been largely considered as the ‘universal’ reading of power. Such an endeavor would be unimaginable without the historical legacy of Michel Foucault, or what he used to call ‘biopolitics’ – “a politics that is organized by and for the control and regulation of life [...] informed by a discourse on life that is *about* life as much as it appears, strategically, to *belong to* life itself, a natural extension of life’s sacred –and thus unquestionable– value” (Murray 2006: 192-193). What Mbembe performed was related to the normative, ‘universal,’ and reproductive understanding of the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics. Speaking in the name of death instead of life (Murray 2006: 139) Mbembe did not only dare to oppose the hegemonic biopolitical reason, but he also succeeded in executing a radical turn from it. Consequently, the seed of his efforts started to grow worldwide, into a new global ‘episteme’ centered on the work of death-politics. Throughout the last decade, this has become prominent most notably among the scholars outside of the so-called First World. It also evolved to such an extent that it generated a whole new theoretical production, which paralleled the growth of a transnationally active network of scholars, thinkers, and practitioners working under the epistemological umbrella of necropolitics, or what Mbembe has understood by it, namely, “the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective” (Mbembe, 2003: 12). On the basis of this proclivity and his ability to theoretically decenter from a travestied life-politics, Mbembe’s groundbreaking work on the limits of sovereign death-power under the guise of biopolitics has provided the major background to my study. Given its coexistence within the global inquiries on necropolitics and its variants (Montag 2005; Papava 2005; Biehl 2005; Zebadúa-Yañez 2005; Murray 2006; Palombo 2007; Patel 2008; Banerjee 2008; Osuri 2009; Tlostanova 2010; Osterweis Scott 2010; Pugliese 2010;

Amparo-Alves 2011, 2012; Grzinic and Tatlic 2012; Cazdyn 2012; Valencia Triana 2012; Silva Barros 2012, etc.) my thesis serves as only one among innumerable related platforms across the universe of contemporary critical thinking - or, rather, its “pluriverse” (Dussel 2006: 505) and the “plurality of experiences in the diversity of local knowledges” (Moosa 2010: 302)- through which to discuss the subject of death from the position of the global anti-imperial South.

From a biopolitical perspective, the sovereign power centers on the notion of life as that dimension of humankind through which, in order to establish control over individuals and the society at large, life as the objective of the political comes to the fore. Mbembe takes such a view critically into consideration and opposes it while arguing that the limits of sovereignty reside elsewhere. His theory situates the politics of life within the *negative instrumentality of death* or what he calls “necropolitics” and “necropower”, the terms by which he accounts for

the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*. (Mbembe 2003: 40)

Contrary to the established historical considerations of the issue –most notably in terms of the recognized (Western) intellectual heritage– the theory of necropolitics transgresses the limits around the normative concepts of human being as a closed totality and of life as a ‘universal’ category (while ‘death’ is determined as the end-point of a supposedly always meaningful existence). The novelty of philosophical thinking that Mbembe proposes subverts the ‘meaninglessness’ or ‘nothingness’ of death: he points out its instrumentality – its ‘usefulness’ – for the survivors (the sovereignty) in terms of their control and regulation of power over the ‘living dead’. To live under such conditions means to experience *life exposed to death* under the matrix of necropolitical power – or necropower for short. In my own way of recapping his ideas (with contemporary Palestine and the South of Europe in mind) this also means to experience life exposed to death under the various forms of necro-colonial regime of power, which is another name for the *practices of social fascism* to which a human being (or the so-called human being, a ‘living dead’) is exposed under the dehumanizing logic of death at the dawn of the third millennium. Hence, the sovereign, hegemonic concept of death, intrinsic to the *necro-coloniality of power* (where ‘death’ really is, where it has not been ‘lost’ but it has been used for the sovereign purposes, in pursuit of imperial [‘democratic’] interests) is also inseparable from the counter-hegemonic concept of death as a form of resistance – such as ‘suicide bombing’ and ‘economic suicides’: this is where I situate the *thanatopolitical* faculty of death against the sovereign necropolitics, drawing upon Murray’s proposal (to which I will return soon).

Death – many deaths, in terms of the destruction of populations' lives (and not 'life itself') – has been the cornerstone upon which life, *in its capacity to be eliminated*, serves as the major goal of every power that claims to be sovereign. In other words, one's capacity to be excluded from the world of living, due to the sovereign decision, gives priority to the 'work of death'. Thus, human mortality, as Mbembe says, becomes the main objective in the politics of governance over the populations subjected to the ruling *necro-authority*. To introduce 'death' on the stage of politics, as explicitly as Mbembe did, means to go against the grain of the common reason, to reverse the normative rationality upside down in order to have its 'universal' norms questioned anew. This, again, means to scrutinize the ruling authority of the sovereign power and – by exposing the other, darker side of its pragmatic rationality centered on 'life' – to undermine the very premises upon which its power has remained so far undisturbed. For Mbembe, the objective of the political is death, and its omnipresence is not only replacing the position of life but it now co-exists alongside with it (behind the mask of biopolitical power-discourses). Accordingly, the theoretical counter-position of necropolitics, centered on death, positions itself as a rival (epistemic) power in comparison to the 'singular' epistemic sovereignty over the 'democratic' world of knowledges where 'death' has been supposedly lost: in the very rivalry between 'life' and 'death' – in their relation to power, sovereignty and politics – another type of rivalry (necropolitical theory vis-à-vis biopolitical theory) has found a comfortable place to grow. This is where the questions of good ('actually democratic') governance and bad ('actually non-democratic') governance have to be examined: over the questions of the living and the dead, without excluding the violent waging of 'ultimate justice' between the two epistemic positions to which the so-called democracy and 'all the rest' pertain, respectively.

Since Mbembe's publication of *Necropolitics* in 2003, contemporary philosophy has produced a fundamental turn from existent, both traditional and critical accounts of sovereignty, power, and knowledge. This turn, paradigmatic for our times, has been neither the matter of a mere conceptual exercise nor of another counter-theoretical construction. Rather it was the matter of necessity: the necessity to think over the premises of 'universal' rationality and to rethink its historical specificity, the one upon which our current debates about life, death, and human condition at large are taking place across the globalized world. Mbembe demarcated the crucial 'line of defense' in a rather militant way, from which it became possible to catapult another important historical claim for the right of excluded and stigmatized 'local' knowledges to exist within and coexist together with the imperial paradigm. He drew the line of silenced potentialities that, in their constant migration from one state of crisis to another (over minefield-like ruptures and interceptions set up by a singular, self-proclaimed universalist variant) allowed him to mobilize theory in a full-frontal combat with the bastion of hegemonic knowledge. In such a way, confronting the roots of Foucauldian

concept of 'biopolitics' turned into a decolonial ethical strategy of counter-epistemological interruption at large. I recognize such operation as formative of philosophical activism based upon the following tactics: critical *philosophical disruption*, inevitable *intellectual intervention*, and constructive *proposition for theoretical alternatives*. These three elements are essential, in my view, for understanding Mbembe's 'necropolitical' approach. Moreover, they seem to be valid steps in overcoming the general limits of normative epistemologies of the global imperialist North from a viewpoint of the global anti-imperialist South.

The proposed demarcation line between the North and the South (or, for that matter, between the imperialist and anti-imperialist epistemologies, respectively) becomes, with Mbembe now, a methodological fissure that separates two intertwined and interdependent yet differently positioned theoretical constructions. Two social, political, and ethical conceptions of the current regimes of sovereignty concentrate their tensions in the world of power around this line. They are, namely, the Foucauldian ('Western') concept of biopolitics and the Mbembean ('non-Western') concept of necropolitics. In their two distinctive diagnoses of contemporary politics Foucault and Mbembe are apparently contradicting each other. The main reason for such contradiction lies in what makes them differently informed by experiences of life and death, and their respective discourses. Given their personal and professional backgrounds, one could even say the following: what differentiates the two has also been formatted, on the one hand, by the overall management of life in the 'biopolitical' setting of the 1970s Europe (and France, Foucault's natural habitat, in particular); and, on the other hand, by the administration of death in the 'necropolitical' setting of the 1990s Africa (where Mbembe continues to live and work). It is also worth noting that these two settings converge due to the fact that Mbembe had his own experience of the 1980s Paris, where he received his doctoral degree in History, while Foucault lectured in Africa (he lived and taught in Tunisia, where he temporarily moved in the 1960s) and also had a chance to experience the 1970s Iranian revolution first hand, "working as a special correspondent for *Corriere della Sera* and *le Nouvel Observateur*" (Afary and Anderson 2005).⁸ Moreover, what was understood by Foucault in the 1970s as the control of populations "in the name of life" (Murray 2006: 193) has equally become a viewpoint representative of the biopolitical (imperial) theory of life. However, it has gradually turned to be limiting and insufficient as it's viewpoint was "located primarily on the side of power and the state" (Frey and Ruch 2006: 8). Consequently, it *evolved* by the early 2000s into a viewpoint representative of the 'subalternized' others, broadly excluded or unaccounted for by the imperial epistemic sovereignty despite its

⁸ See: Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended.*" *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

pretensions towards ‘universality’ (or, perhaps, exactly due to such pretensions). Mbembe’s argument around the power of present sovereignty as necropower has, therefore, not emerged as an entirely novel concept; rather, it had ‘matured’ from an earlier concept of biopower into what he calls necropower (i.e., sovereign/ neoliberal/ capitalist/ modern and late-modern/ colonial and neocolonial power of death-politics). This is to say that the ‘older’ form of power –or the biopower (as Foucault wanted to see it)– has never really been replaced by the ‘new’ form of power. Instead, it has remained perpetually active (like a dormant volcano) as a necropower: so, it continued to exercise sovereignty as a way of exercising control *over mortality* which presupposes the sovereign right to put populations to death or, simply, to kill (Mbembe 2003: 12).

Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics is a cornerstone of transnational necropolitical theories based on his explicitly introduced notion of necropower which accounts for “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 2003: 39). However, this *necropolitical turn* is not indifferent towards the previous concept of biopower but, on the contrary, operates through it. While drawing on “its relation to notions of sovereignty (*imperium*) and the state of exception” (Mbembe 2003: 12), necropolitical theory functions “as a demand that the attention to a politics of life not elide the difficult fact that the administration of death remains a significant function of contemporary political power” (Frey and Ruch 2006: 8). The shift provoked by the theoretical appearance of necropolitics wants to distinguish the human condition of the ‘living dead’ governed upon the principles of the *politics of death* from the governance upon the principles of the *politics of (good) life*. Differently said, it wants to highlight the conceptual fissures between the necropolitics in the global South (i.e., the manifestation of neocolonial neoliberal politics of the global North *par excellence*) from the ‘biopolitics’ in the global North itself (as the political travesty of the neoliberal neocolonial management and control over populations’ lives and deaths across the world, linked to the beginnings of European overseas expansion in the fifteenth century). One important element, however, is not to be overlooked in such easily demarcated spheres of governance, as properly pointed out by Marina Grzinić:

Necropolitics is not reserved only for the Third World, but is operative also in First World capitalist societies. Today in the EU and USA the logic of organization of life and the division of labor provides the minimum for living and sometimes not even this. It is such (necropolitical) logic that organizes the contemporary neoliberal global capitalist social body. This minimum can be clearly seen in all the battles that are now going on in Europe for the preservation of the social state, the once guaranteed social security and healthcare (won by means of labor struggles). The necropolitical is also clearly seen in the control measures (seclusion, deportation and ferocious anti-immigrant EU legal policy) within and at the borders of the Schengen area (Grzinić 2009: 94)

Necropolitical re-formulation of the biopolitical (or the 'necropolitical theoretical turn') was, in that regard, a necessary step for two reasons. First, it had to be proposed and executed on behalf of the previously silenced anti-imperialist epistemologies of the global South and its subjugated epistemic subjectivities. Its continual status of the 'living dead' in the shadow of sovereign's 'unending life' has historically been administered by the militarily and economically stronger imperial power that instrumentalizes one aspect of human nature (*to be mortal*) by devouring subjugated territories, resources, and populations under conditions of a constant war. As Murray (2006: 192) says: "The king, the sovereign, is not one, and despite his death, his unending life is a sort of rhetorical and collective achievement purchased at the price of the many. The life of sovereign power is a life that is lived in the shadow of death – many deaths, nameless and innumerable, disavowed and forgotten". The sovereign's right to put the governed subjects to death –at its own whim, at any time and in any place within the sovereign domains of rule (which has nowadays become increasingly *global*)– has built itself up to the point of establishing the idea of ultimate sovereignty in a very particular manner. It has certainly not been rooted in mere theoretical speculations but, quite to the contrary, in the empirical spheres of everyday life: in the personal and collective, non-essentialist and non-hegemonic experience of non-Western human subjects in the global anti-imperialist South, whose life and death epitomize the contemporary experience of human destruction. As Mbembe says:

My concern is those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but *the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*. Such figures of sovereignty are far from a piece of prodigious insanity or an expression of a rupture between the impulses and interests of the body and those of the mind. Indeed, they, like the death camps, are what constitute the *nomos* of the political space in which we still live. (Mbembe 2003: 14)

What Mbembe did through his writing on necropolitics was therefore conceived, first and foremost, as the theoretical re-formulation of a precise *existential position* rooted in actual global geopolitical conditions – those of *permanent insecurity*. By this I refer to: wars, genocide, riots, cyber-control and high-tech surveillance, territorial occupation, concentration camps, gated communities, favelas, ghettos and suburbs, detention centers, political and financial crisis, and numerous other forms of military, technological and socio-economic power-control. In that sense, Mbembe reminds us of Agamben's main theses in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, such as the 'state of exception' (Mbembe, 2003: 12-13). Interestingly enough, when describing these conditions as characteristic of a politico-juridical structure that incessantly reinforces its own power by remaining "continually outside the normal state of law" (Mbembe, 2003: 13), Mbembe does not necessarily

suppose upholding the phenomenon of *concentration camps* (as the twentieth-century modernity and postmodernity would have done it). This, for many paradigmatic phenomenon, is here intentionally detoured and with a good reason. It is noteworthy recalling the fact that Agamben's insistence on a concentration camp has been criticized on numerous occasions and deserves a due revision. Aihwa Ong, for example, argued that "it is politically and ethnographically incorrect and even dangerous to present the concentration camp as the norm of modern sovereignty. The shifting legal and moral terrain of humanity has become infinitely more complex" (Ong 2006: 23). Accordingly, for Mbembe, to think of the concept of the state of exception is no more the matter of our dependency upon a discursive absolutism "in relation to Nazism, totalitarianism, and the concentration/ extermination camps" (Mbembe 2003: 12). He elaborates critically on such relation while pointing out some earlier interpretations, summarized by Hannah Arendt. What she saw as our impossibility of embracing the horror of life in the Nazi factories of death is due to the very place of such horror, namely, "outside of life and death" (Arendt 1966: 144, quoted in Mbembe 2003: 12). Mbembe thinks differently:

Contemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that it is possible to develop a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity. Instead of considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death (Mbembe 2003: 14)

The second reason for Mbembe's reformulation of biopolitics I understand to be as following: his theoretical execution of necropolitical theory from another (counter-hegemonic, anti-imperialist, 'Southern' or 'Third World') perspective was a necessary strategy of expansion – the expansion of a legitimate anti-imperial value-system beyond the exclusive concerns of the global South itself. Being urgent as much as *global*, the core of such concern was to properly re-formulate a public demand for critical inquiries into the working dynamics of the transnational "politics of death" (as Mbembe named it): the kind of politics chronically present in the global 'South' yet, simultaneously, *internal* to the rest of the world. This has already been pointed out by, among others, Rodger Frey and Alexander Ruch. In their own account of the necropolitical intricacy with biopolitics these two literary theorists say:

We consider the thesis of a necropolitics to be internal to the discourse surrounding biopolitics, not only because it was occasioned by Foucault's discussions of biopower and biopolitics but also because, if our wish is to develop more descriptive and efficacious terms to describe contemporary politics, we would do well to consider the 'multiple powers' described by Mbembe in their complexity rather than simply avoiding questions of death in favor of a myopic

view toward life [...] the terms of life and death are mutually co-implicated, as are the terms of any traditional dualism, and any attempt to isolate one from the other is fated to collapse in its own aporias. (Frey and Ruch 2006: 7)

If, as Mbembe states further on, “late-modern colonial occupation differs in many ways from early-modern occupation” (Mbembe 2003: 27) precisely by its complexity of three types of control (the disciplinary, the biopolitical, and the necropolitical), it becomes clear that he does not side unilaterally against biopolitics as a concept. Instead, he is more interested in “avoiding a too-rapid assumption that biopolitics as the management of life has simply replaced an older form of sovereignty based on the right to put to death. Thus, he writes (regarding Palestine) that ‘late-modern colonial occupation is a concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical’” (Frey and Ruch 2006: 7). This is where the ‘concept of Palestine’ holds a key role for our understanding of the points of intersection between global necropolitics and global decoloniality. In this line of thought, the figure of a so-called suicide bomber, its counter-hegemonic rationality, and its distinctively ‘Southern’ epistemological habitat remain crucial for my future analysis of the subject at hand.

Before coming to that point of discussion, I would like to point out the following: while necropolitics opposed and destabilized the dominant understanding of sovereign power not only *in relation to* or *against* but also *across* and *through* Foucault’s concepts of biopolitics and biopower, it is worth noting that Mbembe himself has not been ‘saved’ from the effects of colonial humanism. Quite to the contrary, I imagine his alternative (necropolitical) proposal and its worldwide recognition to have a particular pre-history. Like many other postcolonial pre-histories, this one includes, perhaps unavoidably, the possibility of evolving along the lines of sovereign (colonial) epistemic power, here epitomized by Foucault’s concept of biopolitics. I am referring to someone’s chance to obtain a higher education degree at the very heart of the Eurocentric/ imperial academic universe and its “colonial humanism” (Mbembe 2006: 119). This, for example, implies that one African scholar (or Mbembe himself, for that matter) could have obtained his Ph.D. in History in France, at the University of Sorbonne in Paris: the very center of a colonial state that once kept its mandate over the territory in West Africa and Mbembe’s native homeland, French Cameroons. This small yet important biographical note would have been insignificant for my study were it not crucial, in fact, for the very outreach of the knowledge exchange in the process of the “second decolonization,” in Ramón Grosfoguel’s terms: the kind of knowledge that a colonial European state (France, in this case) has fortified and maintained “at the forefront of Eurocentric philosophy” through an iconic example of French thinker Michel Foucault. It was exactly this philosophical figure in relation to whom, among many others, Mbembe developed his own views on necropolitics. In this symbolic waging of biographical, historical and cognitive powers, there was evidently a possibility for Mbembe to personally produce and develop a necessary counter-stance towards

‘primitive’ and ‘ethnological’ philosophical tradition from which he (like many of us, including my own deviated pseudo-philosophical self) has emerged on the stage of contemporary critical thinking. I refer to the ‘invisible’ tradition of thought (or the so-called ethno-philosophy, which is the term I find despicable in this context) strong enough not only to oppose longstanding universalisms but to confirm its own status on the global map of critical wisdom, so as to produce a valid critique of the imperial theory *through* its own protagonists. Who are those protagonists? Those famously outspoken and ‘universally recognizable’ figures who “are indeed not only eminent philosophers, but the philosophy they practice has the globality of certain degrees of self-conscious confidence without which no thinking can presume universality” (Dabashi 2013). Perhaps the most pragmatically summarized invitation for such an interruption of the epistemological monolith (embodied by Mbembe’s necropolitical turn in relation to biopolitics, for example) was offered by a network of European scholars, as here described: “Any reinvention of the concept of Europe that takes into account the complexities inherent in Europe’s place in a globalized world must contain a *critique of Eurocentrism*. Learning *from the South*, i.e. absorbing the full critical impact of alternative approaches may be a key element in the rethinking –and unthinking– of ‘Europe’”.⁹

The appearance of necropolitical turn at the theoretical arena of the early twenty-first century is, therefore, a possible suggestion to humankind aiming towards the historical goal of decolonization, self-liberation and self-emancipation. It does not only reflect a desire to have so-called historical truths corrected (when perceived from a perspective suppressed till now), because the necropolitical governance has characterized the world before the term itself was coined by Mbembe in the early 2000s. The situation is, in fact, much more complex and open to the plurality of interpretations. Accordingly, I want to propose the reading of the necropolitical turn as one among many possible *decolonial options* for philosophical strategies of epistemological liberation of ‘death’ from its alleged loss in the Western ‘universe’. They could be hereby understood on pair with the militant strategies of territorial liberation that were typical of historical anti-colonial resistance. Necropolitics as a decolonial option comes as the result of a self-imposed imperative towards philosophical oppositions, discursive disruptions, and theoretical propositions of another legitimate and constructive system of values. I understand this system as emerging from (and applicable to) a ‘new’ epistemic community of the world: the kind of obscured community that has suffered for too long from externally imposed epistemicide and the universalist, modernist, rationalist and systematic exclusion of non-European cognitive

⁹ See the collection of online essays titled “Decentering Europe” and edited by Boaventura de Sousa Santos for *Eurozine* (26 September 2007), <http://www.eurozine.com/comp/focalpoints/decenteringeurope.html>.

pluriverse and alternatives. In that sense, the question “Can non-Europeans think?” (Dabashi 2013) must be taken very seriously. It is a way of pointing out, over and over again, what it means to think in a historically prepared Eurocentric environment: to think philosophically, to write philosophically, to call oneself a *philosopher*, and to be recognized as such by the others, in turn. The answer to this question is, actually, a precondition for the Southern anti-imperialist episteme to be globally recognized and put into force – if to ‘think,’ nowadays as before, presupposes to function (philosophically and intellectually) in the contexts different from or, even, opposed to the privileged Western European and North American ways of thinking and ways of knowing. As Hamid Dabashi had already remarked with an ironic tone, if the question is “What happens with thinkers who operate outside the European philosophical ‘pedigree’?” (Dabashi 2013), then the emergence and global significance of necropolitical turn discloses precisely what *could* happen with such thinkers (and their followers, too): Mbembe’s successful example gives but one possible answer to that question while the consequent emergence of transnational necropolitical theories speaks for itself.

Additionally, if the question “Why is European philosophy ‘philosophy’, but African philosophy ‘ethnophilosophy’?” (Dabashi 2013) persists in haunting our troublesome epistemic universe(s), then I need to advance my arguments around the so-called imperialist epistemological vision (al-Masser, 2010: 149). One way to do so is by re-focusing from the exemplary linkage between Mbembe and Foucault towards the new linkage: that between Mbembe and Murray. The previous kind of linkage stand for the crucial point of intersection, where both lines of a coordinate system of thought have formed an exemplary system of knowledge (as ‘knowledge’ and ‘ethno-knowledge’, respectively). The new linkage serves the purpose of being the critical turning point where I want to situate our discussions on life, death and human condition at large. It makes part of a system in which contemporary philosophy has disclosed the violence of epistemological universalism and entered a new phase of analysis, the one in need for ethical interruption. This interruption is embodied by Mbembe’s threefold operation, namely: his detection of the weakest points pertaining to the biopolitical normative crisis; his suspension of their fundamental theoretical veils; and, most importantly, his proposition towards the necropolitical turn or “how death informs our political life today” (Murray 2006: 192). The experience of exclusion thus produced makes part of sovereignty’s negation (and condemnation) of the Other whereas “the negation of one part of humanity is *sacrificial*, in that it is the condition of the affirmation of that other part of humanity which considers itself as universal” (Santos 2007: 10; my emphasis). In other words, death and discourses on death have been ‘sacrificed’ for the sake of life and discourses on life, as an indispensable condition of contemporary biopolitical rationality. This is where Murray’s thanatopolitics comes to coexist with Mbembe’s necropolitics.

Towards Thanatopolitical Philosophy

In the earlier part I have exposed some lines of thought around the fundamental connection between the limits of (epistemic) sovereignty and the exercise of control over mortality as it comes to play through what Achille Mbembe recognizes in his seminal work on the politics of death as necropolitics proper. What he refers to, once again, are “the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*” (Mbembe 2003: 40). Contrary to that, the instrumentality of ‘death’ can be understood as something positive and productive in terms of ‘thanatopolitics’, as Stuart J. Murray (*The Living From the Dead*, online) proposes when asking: “How, for example, could the ‘enemy combatant’ or suicide bomber’s death be represented as valuable, or even as a politically and ethically meaningful death, as it is in many cultures that are struggling to resist the biopolitical hegemony of the West?”. Says Murray:

If the death of the suicide bomber is illegible to us in the West – outside our cultural idiom, I wanted to know how his or her death might not merely negate but forcibly challenge the dominant political ideologies that inform Western – and increasingly, global – values [...] what I call a ‘thanatopolitics’ – a ‘politics of death.’ I argued that we might understand some deaths in a productive sense, as a profound resistance to or a refusal of a Western ‘political theology’ (Schmitt) conceived as an ‘ethics of life.’ I suggested that death might be seen not merely as the negation or destruction of an always-prior ‘life,’ but that *death could be seen as socially, politically, and ethically ‘productive’ in itself, in the ways that it binds together communities, galvanizes political commitments, and so on.* And indeed, I claimed, if we fail to understand this conception of death, we will fail to grasp the transformative potential – the very meaning – of current geopolitics. (*The Living From the Dead*, online, my emphasis)

Murray’s theoretical insight is all the more interesting not only because it criticizes the ‘universal’ rationality of the Western system of values with respect to ‘death’ (and thus fundamentally contributes to what I elaborate further in other chapters of this study) but because it does so, unlike Mbembe, from within the Western epistemic ‘universe’ itself. As Walter Mignolo (2002) would say when discussing the geopolitics of knowledge at large, Mbembe’s and Murray’s views around the instrumentality of death match each other from two distinctive positions – the position of “colonial difference” (in the case of the former) and the position of “imperial difference” (in the case of the latter). With these two options in mind, the present study questions the strict division between ‘death’ and ‘life’ but also the plurality within the concept of ‘politics of death’ itself: this could, possibly, invert “our own moral and intellectual narcissism, and the willful suspension of our will to contain the world as a piece of rational knowledge” (Murray

2006: 211) – which is the task I see as fundamental for the sake of other kinds of life, so far unthinkable or unimaginable within the imperial epistemic universe where Schumacher’s ‘Western man’ remains deprived of ‘death’.

For Murray it is clear that the power of the sovereign and singular universe of knowledge nowadays depends upon the imposition of ‘life’ over ‘death’. Centering on life and life-related issues presupposes an *exclusion* of implicitly or explicitly ‘sacrilegious’ discourses (including those on dying and death) from the normative or ‘sacred’ discourses on living. Biopolitics, in his view, presupposes a hegemonic condition where the superiority of life does not only appear against death but, more importantly, against the ambiguous *values* that are inherent to the concept(s) of death, its theorizing and reflections across the many worlds of knowledge. When Murray questions the fundamental lack of death from our discourses on (‘happy’) life, he highlights their exclusionary and self-proclaimed right to exist against the backdrop of obscurity imposed on the question of death:

‘Death informing life’ will seem counter-intuitive or even insane to us because, as Foucault has claimed, in the last two centuries we no longer properly *speak* of death. Discourses on death are as forgotten and disavowed as the nameless and innumerable deaths themselves. In the last two centuries, Foucault argues, political and sovereign discourses have focused instead on *life*. Life has eclipsed death. In the name of life, the ‘mass grave’ has become popularized, making death(s) nameless and innumerable, obscure and obscured (Murray 2006: 192–193)

If ‘death’ has been lost from the Western ‘democratic’ imperialist epistemologies, as Schumacher earlier suggested, does it mean that it could still be (implicitly) present there, or somewhere else, even though it has been forced to occupy the margins of philosophical thought – instead of being at its center? Has ‘death’, in this sense, become less visible or invisible (instead of being ‘lost’) due to its imposed relegation to the dark, authoritarian side of the Western system of knowledge? Is this due to the fact that it has simply been overshadowed by something else, or forcefully expelled into the ‘obscurity’, which allowed for the global world of knowledge(s) to become dominated by another epistemological category (such as ‘life’, for instance)?

Instead of having our speech about death and dying prohibited, silenced or denied, a different kind of discursive turn has to be introduced. My claim is that this could be done by our shift of perspective which also includes the movement from the existent position of looking at ‘death’ as a philosophical subject – from the epistemic center to its margins. This re-positioning should redirect our attention from existent imperialist epistemologies elsewhere: towards other possible universes that could clarify the mystery of ‘death’ and its ‘disappearance’ in Western society. This could also help us understand what makes the darker side of imperialist epistemic visions so obscure, indeed, and why we are not allowed to talk about the subject of death (and our own

death, in particular) outside of the prescribed norms centered on its ‘pornographic’ obscurity. Starting from such prohibitions, I argue that this shift of perspective –or *redirection of our attention*– is necessary as much as it is urgent because ‘death’ has never been lost: it has been purposefully eradicated from our view. Where is it then and, if it had to ‘disappear’, why was this necessary for a contemporary Western man (and the state of Western ‘democracy’ as such)?

A ‘Biopolitical’ Masquerade

In this line of thought, I assume that the context in which ‘death’ occupies a subservient (‘lost’) position in contemporary Western philosophy is the context framed by the dominant politics of life or biopolitics proper (Foucault 2003; Lemke 2005, 2011). As Thomas Lemke reminds us, “according to Foucault, biopolitics marks the threshold of modernity since it places life at the center of political order. In this theoretical perspective, there is an intimate link between the constitution of a capitalist society and the birth of biopolitics” (Lemke, 2005: 3).¹⁰ This ‘intimacy’ among biopolitics, modernity and capitalism also denotes the following: that the privilege by which ‘life’ and life-oriented discourses have gained their exclusive position over ‘death’ stems from the strategic separation between ‘life’ and ‘death’ in the imperialist cosmology of power. Such a cosmology grounds the biopolitical context as properly *hegemonic* and urges us to act by offering constructive counter-proposals or counter-hegemonic proposals, i.e., to speak in the name of death with regard to the ‘universal politics’ of life and its rhetoric of power. This task presupposes situating our understanding of the term ‘life’ as precisely as possible, so any possible confusions and misunderstandings would be avoided. Once we decide to undertake such a task, what becomes even more urgent consists in defining the notion of life from the perspective centered on the notion of politics (and vice versa), through what has become all too often evoked by the word *biopolitics* as we have ‘inherited’ it from the 1970s Foucault. Lemke, for instance, reminds

¹⁰ In this context, it is worth noting that the concept of biopolitics has never been Foucault’s brainchild: while the stubborn and repetitive application of the term to his name has determined our prevailing understanding of biopolitics in relation to him, its origins lie elsewhere. As Lemke argues: “Although the concept of biopolitics has now become familiar, it may not be widely known that it has nearly a hundred-year history. Its initial appearance was as part of a general historical and theoretical constellation. By the second half of the 19th century, *Lebensphilosophie* (the philosophy of life) had already emerged as an independent philosophical tendency; its founders were Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche in Germany and Henri Bergson in France. [...] The concept of biopolitics emerged in this intellectual setting at the beginning of the 20th century. The Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén may have been among the first to employ it.” See Lemke 2011: 9.

us that, for the antique Greeks, it was “clear what the word [biopolitics] literally signifies” in the sense that

plural and divergent meanings are undoubtedly evoked when people refer to biopolitics. [...] It denotes a politics that deals with life (Greek: *bíos*). But this is where the problems start. What some people take to be a trivial fact (“Doesn’t all politics deal with life?”) marks a clear-cut criterion of exclusion for others. For the latter, politics is situated beyond biological life. From this point of view, ‘biopolitics’ has to be considered an oxymoron, a combination of two contradictory terms. The advocates of this position claim that *politics in the classical sense is about common action and decision making and is exactly what transcends the necessities of bodily experience and biological facts and opens up the realm of freedom and human interaction.* (Lemke 2011: 2)

Lemke develops two lines of inquiry while addressing the notion of biopolitics. He traces back the history of the term through the history of theoretical approaches to the concept of biopolitics and distinguishes two main features upon which it has come to our knowledge: life as the *basis* of politics and life as the *object* of politics. In that regard, the latter –which relates to the “question of institutional and political forms and the social answer to the ‘question of nature’” (Lemke 2011: 21)– is precisely what we are supposed to follow here when analyzing the relationship between life and politics. This is important not only because the notion of life is imbricated by the biological given, but also because that biological given of life, “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” – or the *zōē*, as recalled from the antique Greek by Giorgio Agamben (1998)– has become complicit with a very particular social, economic, military and politico-juridical order, that is, the ‘democratic’ sovereignty (of a contemporary Western man) from which epistemic horizons ‘death’ has allegedly disappeared.

When highlighting the need to discuss and understand the concept of life in its relation to contemporary politics (or the political economy of global neoliberal capitalism, as this is precisely the dominant regime of power within which our lives are imbricated today), we have been almost obliged to refer, theoretically and practically, to “a biopolitical mode of governing that centers on the capacity and potentials of individuals and the population as *living resources* that can be harnessed and managed by governing regimes” (Ong 2006: 6; my emphasis). This kind of obligation is the product of a claim, all too easily taken for granted, about the origins of the term that has become an overused device in conveying arguments around the governmentality over life-forms since at least 1976 (which is the year when Michel Foucault used the term ‘biopolitics’ in his lectures at the Collège de France and in his *History of Sexuality*). This distinctively Eurocentric view, rooted in Foucault’s ‘invention’ of the life/death axis as the biopolitical matrix of power, alongside its consequent, either positively or negatively nuanced derivations (as in, Agamben’s work throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, for

instance), has been holding up for quite a long time to the following common assumption: that contemporary configuration of biopolitics (as proposed and defined in the ‘initial definitions’ by the aforementioned French ‘progenitor’ of the idea) is the key to understanding the contemporary political life. It basically consists in the assumption that the primary object of today’s politics is nothing else but life itself, a claim that developed as one of the crucial conceits of the biopolitical field throughout the tradition paved by European thinkers since the 1970s. The Eurocentric biopolitical thinking thus regards human beings as living resources over which the power of sovereignty is exercised by modes of populations’ regulation, or “control of life and the biological processes of man as species facilitated by the technology of power [as *biopower*] and security mechanisms the aim of which is optimization of the state of life” (Foucault 2003: 246-247).

Nonetheless, to engage in theorizing about life today presupposes our need to reconsider contemporary forms of living (and related human phenomena of social existence under the rule of ‘democratic’ sovereignty, such as the ‘living dead’) from a perspective that is twofold: on one side, it does not remain obliterate towards death (i.e. the ‘other’ of life) and, on the other side, it does not exclude/ eliminate the opposite or differently contextualized/ re-politicized alternatives to the rationalist demagogy of European modernity focused on life and biopolitics. What remains missing, obscured and thus easily disregarded is the concept at the other end of the theoretical spectrum in which we could equally and potentially engage ourselves. I refer, namely, to the concept of death and the so-called *necropolitical* mode of governing as pronounced by thinkers critically positioned toward Western (pan-European, US-Eurocentric, ‘democratic’) biopolitical epistemologies proper to the global imperial North. A theoretically re-politicized *counter-perspective* centered on death (as a locus of necropower, necropolitics, necroeconomics and necrocapitalism) is but one alternative matrix within which our possibility of describing living conditions today gets a politically and theoretically more balanced pronouncement – in particular in the body of work coming from the knowledge-worlds of the global anti-imperial South.

The life of citizens and subjects under the global necropolitical regime differs substantially between the global imperial North and the global anti-imperial South. In other words, the people on *two different sides of the abyssal line* (Santos 2007) live and die differently under control of the ‘democratic’/ colonial/capitalist matrix of power and its self-proclaimed right to govern the living populations but also to put them to death. It is these differing ways that produce an urgent need to approach the notion of sovereignty from a revised perspective. When I stress out the fact about the existence and persistence of ‘two different lines,’ one being conditioned by another, I refer to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos had much more convincingly described when discussing the credibility of *alternative knowledges*, or the knowledges in need of mobility and

transgression across the line of the so-called abyssal thinking (Santos 2007). By the subjugated subjectivities of the global South I refer, once again, to the ‘living dead’ (Mbembe 2003) or ‘abandonados’, the forms of life in the zones of social abandonment (Biehl 2001). These subjectivities, together with the forms of subjugated knowledges associated with them, are forced to exist in an intricate relation to the ideas of death, darkness, and ‘pathological negativity’: all contrary to the current ideas of biopolitical rationality about ‘life, liberty and happiness’ and the compulsory positivity of living in ‘democratic’, ‘civilized’ and ‘developed’ global North. It is the death-world of sovereign knowledge that determines the principles under which the ‘democratic’ regime (or bio-regime) operates against all the ‘rival knowledges’ and their epistemic pluriverse, which are, in turn, expelled into the abyss (the mass grave) of global epistemologies. Accordingly, the so-called abyssal thinking is manifest of the normative imperialist epistemic vision and its sovereign regime of power proper to the global North. Santos defines the ‘abyssal line’ of thinking as typical for the “modern Western thinking”. According to him, the abyssal thinking implies “a system of *visible* and *invisible* distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones” and continues:

The invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of ‘this side of the line’ and the realm of ‘the other side of the line.’ The division is such that ‘the other side of the line’ *vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent* [the subject of death being but exemplary in this regard, my remark]. Nonexistent means not existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being. Whatever is produced as nonexistent is radically excluded because it lies beyond the realm of what the accepted conception of inclusion considers to be its other. What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of the co-presence of the two sides of the line (Santos 2007: 45)

Thanatopolitics vs. Necropolitics / Thanatopolitics vs. Thanatology (‘Death’ as the Other of the Same)

Hence, I consider two (conflicting) positions on death that are of fundamental importance for the present thesis: Mbembe’s concept of *necropolitics* (i.e., the so-called biopolitics, yet travestied) and Murray’s concept of *thanatopolitics*. They are significant as they converge towards what I shall call the *necro-coloniality of power*, most notably in relation to some forms of self-inflicted death (or, rather, the *thanatopolitical self-sacrificial*

regime of resistance against the necro-coloniality of power) and which role they perform within the constellation of power created by tensions between the necro- and the thanatopolitics. The aim is to open further discussions about ('suicidal') death not only as a philosophical subject *par excellence* but also as the preserve of epistemic power-regimes. My long-term goal is to re-position our ideas of death into the center of *thanatological* philosophy, as Schumacher (2011) justly proposes, but also to expand his vision about the dialogues around death 'among Western authors' towards non-Western authors and non-Western experiences of life – or the experience of living and dying from the other side of the abyssal line (the global anti-imperial South). This expansion is crucial for my study as it provides a new framework for a possible transnational philosophy of death which is no more only thanatological, as Schumacher sees it, but, as I have repeatedly highlighted until now, precisely *thanatopolitical*: 'death' as the other of the same.

Here the 'other' also implies a death-inducing subject, the one representing the ultimate life-security threat in the collective consciousness of today's neoliberal democracies, a mere 'terrorist' or a 'suicide bomber,' the troublesome abstraction of fear contrary to any notion of a 'freedom fighting hero,' for example. This is why such a threatening 'Other' radically usurps not only the idea of stability, imposed by the life-controlling biopolitical governance, but the very premises of the imperial logic of overall security and control. This implies –on either side of a hermeneutic cord, hegemonic and counterhegemonic– a knot of thoughts instigating the strategic abstraction of massive fear, both inside and outside the mere production of human victims and physical violence on behalf of 'suicide bombers'. In that kind of feat of tightrope walking, between the two knots of interpretation, I would preferably argue the following: that an aforementioned interruption of the overall security logic of imperial sovereignty results principally from the very attack against the 'economy of reasoning' in which two different sides operate. In their going 'against the West,' so-called suicide bombers dare to touch the supposedly untouchable and unquestionable rationality of the imperial world – its outspoken privileging of life's sacredness or "the Western conception of rational sovereignty with which biopolitics is allied" (Murray 2006: 195). And even though the warmongering necropolitical face has always been disguised under the biopolitical mask, the 'suicide bomber' manages to fulfill one unimaginable task: "While the resistance of the suicide bomber is sparked within the circuits of power, this resistance also *approaches the absolute*: he or she destroys the very condition of possibility for biopolitical regulation and control" (Murray 2006: 195). Says Murray:

While suicide bombing is destructive, while it is clearly a force of negation, I argue that we must also understand this act as *productive* – it produces something, it has independent rhetorical effects which are not easily comprehended within a biopolitical logic. These effects impinge on everyday life and extend beyond war

zones; their symbolic valence is unable to be contained or explained by our current moral norms or codes. How do we understand such death, the homicide-suicide, when it is explicitly carried out as a political act, an ultimate – and productive – act of refusal? What is ‘produced’? And how might this prompt us to reconsider our own faith in those liberal-humanist notions of the subject that have founded ethics and politics for so long? (Murray 2006: 195)

While being openly critical towards the rationality of the Eurocentric logic that “impose[s] some *colonizing vision* of causality or reason [motivating the suicide bomber]” (Murray 2006: 194; my emphasis), Murray enthusiastically goes on in discussing the issue by foreseeing yet unexplored horizons of our political life. This becomes possible exactly through our rethinking of death beyond the sovereign control over death- and life-politics or, precisely, beyond the sovereign rhetoric of power (‘immune’ to death) and its colonizing vision of the ‘universal’ world of ‘life, liberty and happiness’:

I address the effects of suicide bombing, and I read them as rhetorical, as effects which produce a particular response, a response that cannot be grasped through biopolitical reason alone. The hope is both to avoid the impasse imposed by the sovereign subject of liberal humanism, bequeathed to us from modern Enlightenment philosophy, and (at the other end of the spectrum) a postmodern nihilism that seemingly destroys the ethic of responsibility that is traditionally aligned with sovereign agency. Rather than terminating in a well-worn discourse that would blindly condemn these acts by reaffirming the sacred value of (biopolitical) life, I argue that *a discourse on death will both challenge the hegemony of biopolitical reason while opening onto a renewed way of conceiving what is sacred in political life today* (Murray 2006: 195; my emphasis)

In this line of thought, I analyze the prominence of sacrificial and self-sacrificial deaths at the dawn of the third millennium through so-called *suicide cultures*: they encompass the forms of dying with respect to the *positive* politics of death (thanatopolitics) in terms of broadly understood socio-cultural modes of resistance against any self-proclaimed sovereign rationality and its *negative* politics of death (necropolitics). This puts forward the perspective of transnational pluriverse of knowledges around ‘death’ instead of looking at it from a ‘singular’ Western/ ‘democratic’ universe. Given the epistemic status of ‘death’ in the West (where it has not only been ‘lost’ but hijacked –or colonized– by implicit necropolitics, working behind the explicit biopolitical pretensions to ‘life’, life-oriented sciences and life-centered thought, philosophical or otherwise), I look at the state of ‘death’ from many and varied epistemic viewing positions that can be treated as properly anti-imperialist: not only that they are explicitly ‘external’ to colonial biopolitical rationality but they re-contextualize and re-politicize the decontextualized and de-politicized (or ‘lost’) idea of death. Finally, they bring our attention where the idea and experience of ‘death’ are not only overwhelming but also very ‘loud’. By focusing on self-committed acts of dying as a form of protest

(political or otherwise), my aim is to bring this phenomenon to a greater understanding, beyond the limits of suicidology and suicide-related studies (which are themselves part of the colonizing 'biopolitical' universe of knowledge). My thesis openly goes against such knowledge, in a direction that questions and re-articulates *the 'right to death' and dying in protest (on behalf of the 'living dead')* under conditions where the sovereign 'democratic' imperial power has the definite *right to kill* in the name of 'life, liberty and happiness'.

Accordingly, I focus on tensions between two related and opposed contemporary theories of death (necropolitical and thanatopolitical) that most prominently figure out in my future discussions on self-inflicted aspects of death and dying, encompassing the concepts of 'suicide', 'sacrifice' and 'self-sacrifice' as forms of *thanatopolitical regime of protest*. Hence, I address these concepts through the epistemic expansion from thanatology to thanatopolitics as the necessary condition for the shift of our perspective – and for the epistemic pluriverse of 'death' to be addressed as it really deserves. My viewpoint is directed from the sovereign 'universal' plurality of Western philosophy (and its Eurocentric imperialist epistemic vision) towards the transnational pluriverse of both imperialist/ colonial and anti-imperialist/ anti-colonial epistemic visions focused on 'death'. Therefore, transnational philosophy of death comes about as a properly decolonial option vis-à-vis the necro-power of epistemic sovereignty and its necro-colonial rationality. I advocate for such an option in order to get closer to the 'political philosophy of death' (or thanatopolitical philosophy) in the future studies of the issue, here insufficiently explored.

Chapter 2

The 'Loss' of Death in the Global Imperial North

What is the status of 'death' in contemporary Western philosophy? What is the status of 'death' in contemporary Western democracies at the dawn of the third millennium? Throughout history, humanities have treated the subject of death on numerous, either related or divergent, conflicted and often polemical fronts. Within the branch of interdisciplinary scholarship known as 'thanatological', death in general and *human* mortality in particular have been the central issues of critical theoretical inquiries. For Douglas J. Davies, a social anthropologist and Professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University (UK), death is "a subject that touches practically every aspect of life." In his book *A Brief History of Death* he stresses out a very particular nature of the human interest in the subject of death in comparison to any other subject and says: "The inevitable interest we all have in death –whether voiced or silent– is, often, unlike the interest we possess in other subjects. This one is infused with emotion, whether that of the experience of bereavement or of its anticipation, or of the thought of our own mortality" (Davies 2005: x).

Nonetheless, the contemporary philosophical scholarship in the West seems to have a problematic position towards death: on the one hand, as the subject of specifically philosophical inquiry, 'death' has a privileged status among other subjects while, on the other hand, its loss from (Western) philosophy contradicts such a status. For Bernard N. Schumacher, the author of *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy* (2011) and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), 'death' is the subject of particular philosophical concern inseparable from knowledge about humankind as such.¹ He says:

¹ While Schumacher discusses 'death' as a specifically philosophical issue, the so-called death-studies (or thanatological studies) as interdisciplinary field of scholarship examine the experience of dying in different contexts of analysis: they deal with contemporary understandings of the subject of 'death' across the numerous interrelated theories encompassing, for example, religion, psychology, biology and the media. See,

Death is not a topic that the philosopher should treat in passing or on which we should not waste our time. On the contrary, it is one of the most important philosophical questions. Raising a whole series of inquiries, it stimulates philosophical speculation; for some it is at the very origin of the philosophical act. This consists, in part, of *discovering what prevents a human being from knowing himself as he is in reality*, that is, as Heidegger has rightly emphasized, a Being-towards-death, and (subsequently) of bringing him to live in authenticity. The confrontation with death leads to a meditation on life and human nature. (Schumacher 2011: 213; my emphasis)

Despite the fundamental importance of the subject of death for the philosophical discipline, during the last few decades a disturbing quietness has prevailed around the intellectual reflections on death and dying which created an atmosphere of a “stony silence” (Schumacher 2011: ix). What are the potential reasons for the emergence of such a calamitous situation? In order to get closer to some possible answers to this question, I start from Schumacher’s thesis on the ‘loss’ of death and the following argument: we are experiencing the strategic reduction of discursive space to have the question about the status of ‘death’ in contemporary Western society posed at all. Schumacher earlier assumed that if there is a scholarly and intellectual discipline that is in charge of the knowledge-worlds of death it must be *philosophy*. However, he also assumed that ‘death’ has been *lost* from philosophy and makes it even more precise by claiming that such a loss pertains to the epistemic terrain of *Western* philosophy. Hence, my remark is that the subject of death has a *contradictory position* in the context of contemporary Western philosophy: ‘death’ constitutes the ontology of philosophy as a discipline and overlaps with the very act of philosophizing since the beginnings of its history, while recent philosophy seems to have lost death as a subject. While the topic of death has occupied a traditionally privileged status within the philosophical discipline, inseparable from its roots, I assume that its current position is disturbed due to the dominating discourses on life (or its ‘happiness’, as Schumacher points out). These discourses are an integral part of the ruling biopolitical rationality pertaining to the so-called advanced capitalist world at the beginning of the third millennium. Under conditions of such dominance, philosophy is separated from the question concerning the essence of human existence: in terms of the erosion of ‘death’ (or even its loss) philosophy risks losing its fundamental relationship to what makes its nature particularly philosophical. Pulling itself out of the context of thinking about the essence of existence, the Western philosophy also withdraws from the essence of its own discipline: in the ontological sense it submits itself to a kind of *self-exclusion* while

for instance: Margaret Souza and Christina Staudt, eds. *The Many Ways We Talk about Death in Contemporary Society: Interdisciplinary Studies in Portrayal and Classification*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009.

renouncing the reasons of its own existence. Does philosophy in some way 'commit suicide'?

In the previous line of thought, I would rather argue that it is systematically violated –if not even 'killed'– on behalf of the patriarchal sovereign rationality that makes the contemporary philosophy of death doomed to fail, to become 'invisible' or to completely 'disappear', most notably due to the biopolitical coercion. My argument is that 'death' has never been lost in Western philosophy; rather, it has been intentionally and forcefully overshadowed by 'life' in the sense of its purposeful erasure from the imperialist cartography of knowledge. Such an erasure was indispensable insofar as the ruling authority of the 'biopolitical' rationality could remain undisturbed in its worldwide governance over populations. Therefore, the question of central importance for this study is not ultimately related to the continuous attempts at defining 'death' ('what is death?') nor to its moral implications ('whether it is a good or bad thing to die'), as they have been perpetually examined –and rightfully so– in the Western philosophical tradition. These questions have been significant throughout history and will certainly remain to be so, as they contribute to the plurality of epistemic positions concerning 'death' within the (Western) philosophy itself. However, beside them, the examination of death must involve the question of spatiality and the geo-political configuration of 'death' in contemporary epistemic cartography. Thus, the new question that my argument welcomes is: *where* is 'death'?

Following Schumacher, the explicit portrayal of death –as the subject matter of critical reflection in the Western world– is largely avoided, even subjugated to the level of implicit censorship. Is it because death is 'obscene'? If yes, what makes it so profoundly virulent, hideous and disgraceful so we cannot but relate to it in terms of shame and contagion? On the grounds of its presumable obscenity, the status of 'death' seems to disclose the kind of perversity that is comparable to pornographic sordidness, as Schumacher points out (in relation to Geoffrey Gorer's text "The Pornography of Death" (Gorer 1955, in Schumacher 2011:1). Both seem to provoke a similar repulsion, the kind of prudery that obliges us to keep silent about 'death' and accept its alleged loss as an advantage for our conforming to standards of good conduct. As Schumacher explains:

Although it is widely discussed within the framework of bio- and medical ethics, sociology, history, and literature, at the dawn of the third millennium death is the subject of a taboo that has been epitomized by the expression 'the pornography of death'. Public practices and discourse pertaining to death are no longer connected to the 'private' experiences and feelings of those who die or are in mourning. After holding a prominent place for thousands of years at the very heart of human culture, death has vanished from everyday communications, and contemporary Western society even tends to suppress anything that calls it to mind. It has become rare to see someone die. People no longer die at home, but rather at the

hospital; *the dead are, in a way, excluded from the community of the living.* [...] Meditation on death is avoided like the plague, because we prefer to occupy ourselves with things that are less lugubrious and, one might add, less obscene. Death causes those who speak about it to shiver and to experience an uneasiness mingled with fear of their own death or of the death of a loved one; it is mentioned only in cloaked terms. (Schumacher 2011:1; my emphasis)

Since we no more think about death, Schumacher discusses the reasons behind this situation with several possible answers in mind: this might be the result of our fear of death; also, it might be that the subject has lost its legitimacy (since some philosophers consider it not to be philosophical enough or not to be philosophical at all); additionally, its legitimate status has been revoked by considering death taboo; finally, we are averting our gaze from death as we are no more able or willing to devote any due attention to it – we are focused instead on some less important or less fundamental issues. “Whatever the reason”, says Schumacher, “it seems that philosophy would have everything to gain if it once again centered its theoretical and practical reflections on such fundamental themes, *for they are at the heart of human existence*” (Schumacher 2011: ix; my emphasis). In response to such a situation Schumacher argues that it is the very task of “*contemporary philosophy on the subject of death, or ‘thanatology’*, [...] to awaken the human being from the drowsiness resulting from this negation or this rejection of death” (Schumacher 2011:2; my emphasis).

It is evident that Schumacher discusses death as an essentially philosophical issue. From the very outset he reminds us –and rightfully so– of the long philosophical tradition that has treated “the act of philosophizing [...] as a preparation for death, as a rumination on life and death” (Schumacher 2011: ix). He puts philosophy and its innate task –the task of being a discipline of knowledge– into the center of his arguments regarding the idea of loss: not about ‘death’ equaling the ‘loss of life’ but about the loss of death itself as a philosophical subject. He pleads against the ‘poverty’ of philosophy with regard to its current aversion towards speculations on death. For him, philosophy itself is threatened by the experience of this fundamental loss: the connection of philosophy –through death– to the essence of human existence deprives the discipline of its ontological grounds that constitute its nature as properly *philosophical*. Hence, the notion of ‘death’ (as a philosophical subject *par excellence*) has been ‘buried’ in the death-worlds of Western knowledge. This means that philosophy subverts its own nature when it refuses to have itself exposed to “its theoretical and practical reflections on such fundamental themes” such as death (Schumacher 2011: ix). Why would (Western) philosophy ever allow this to happen?

Since the antiquity thinkers and philosophers have been examining their most convincing arguments with respect to ‘death’. In their “conspicuous disagreements” (Nagel 1979: 1) around the nature of death they have been dealing with this difficult subject in order to come to terms with the most proper definition of what death really

is, what makes its essential value as a philosophical category, whether it is good or bad to die, and how it relates to the category of life. Cicero's dictum, for example, positions death in relation to the processes of acquiring the philosophical knowledge. By the end of the sixteenth century Michel de Montaigne recalls it in one of his *Essays* so he could pronounce the old wisdom once again. In Montaigne's words, to study philosophy signifies only one thing: to prepare oneself for death – to learn to die (Montaigne 1865: 86).² From a more recent perspective, a contemporary philosopher may accept “the possibility of learning how to die, as recommended by Montaigne [but] rather recognizes the impossibility of training for death and, more particularly, for my death by anticipating it, by mystical trances, religious experiences, or therapies. Because ‘my death’ is beyond all experience, I cannot practice being dead” (Schumacher 2011: 127).

What is indicated hereby is the (inverse) relationship of ‘death’ towards ‘knowledge’. The inseparability of *ignorance* from the idea of ‘my own death’, as Schumacher suggests, confirms that ‘death’ is always irrevocably ‘lost’: it indicates the lack of personal experience of one's own death prior to dying. Accordingly, it reveals the confrontation with an ultimate condition that prohibits one's access to knowledge about one's own death –and, consequently, about one's own self– because “death [...] consists, in part, of discovering what prevents a human being from knowing himself as he is in reality” (Schumacher 2011: 213). For that matter, the category of death has been characterized by one constantly troubling feature: it escapes every possibility of empirical knowledge. This discloses the very impossibility of knowing (i.e., having the knowledge about) one's own experience of death during one's lifetime, or the very impossibility of having the experience of personal death as a category of one's own knowledge. In other words, if we take ‘death’ to be a script of ‘coded data’ about the experience of what cannot be experienced and about the knowledge of what cannot be known, we can say that our own ‘death’ does not allow for any translation of such data into what could be deciphered in order to be personally experienced or known during one's own lifetime. Otherwise, how can I –while living– claim to ever understand the very nature of death, partially or in its entirety, unless I access the unknown through the *irrevocable* experience of my own death (i.e. what is, supposedly, following my life's ‘closure to an end’)? How can I get to know the precise ratio of dying, the processes related to it or its results unless I have passed through my personal experience of dying? I assume hereby that the *future* experience of my own death relates to the present category of my knowledge about it (or its lack thereof) in a way that clearly reveals only one thing: my essential ignorance with respect to ‘death’. One single and inevitable aspect of knowledge related to my own death that I can have at this moment, while writing about

² “Cicéron dit que philosopher ce n'est autre chose que s'apprêter à la mort”. See Michel de Montaigne, J. V. le Clerck, *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, Volume 1. Paris: Garnier frères, 1865.

something that I essentially *do not know*, is the ‘imperative of death’ that I can be sure of. It consists in the future fact: I am certainly going to die –as we are all going to die– at some point in time, without exception.

If I am ultimately ignorant about (my own) ‘death’ and if I cannot ‘practice my own death’ during my lifetime, what else *could* I do concerning the subject of death? What does the subject of ‘death’ open to me as a living human being that goes beyond my limits of ultimate ignorance: what kind of access to knowledge –apart from empirical knowledge– ‘death’ allows me to have while living? This question is particularly valid if I want to understand death as a philosophical subject *par excellence*. In this sense, I should look for an answer about what it means to discuss death philosophically at the beginning of the twenty-first century if such a discussion is destined to revolve around “one of the most troubling mysteries for philosophical reflection” (Schumacher 2011: x). I will attempt at tracing my own views on this issue from an angle that will be as personal (‘subjective’, in terms corresponding with Lander’s earlier critique of the imperialist pretensions to ‘desubjectivized’, ‘disembodied’ and ‘universal’ objectivity of Western scientific knowledge [Lander 2002: 246]) and precise *as possible*, whereas the notion of possibility has its ‘absolute’ hermeneutic consistency denied due to two reasons: because my own death is ‘beyond all experience’ (so I cannot be either ultimately objective or subjective towards it *right now*), and because of the fact that the author of this writing [i.e. myself] is *still alive*. If I am alive (not dead) and if the experience of my life is below the experience of death (I cannot practice being dead), my possibilities of taking a position towards ‘death’ are defined and limited by the conditions of essential *invisibility* or the lack of experience, training and knowledge regarding death. Therefore, though my position could be perfectly defined as impossible and/or paradoxical, I would preferably see it as a position imbued with *essential ignorance* –the ultimate lack of knowledge– that eludes every thorough comprehension of ‘death’, which is the central subject of this thesis. However, I associate the notion of ignorance about my own death with the *prohibition to knowledge* about my own death and I treat it as problematic inasmuch as challenging, in the sense that indicates the very task of philosophy to confront a human being with what must remain ultimately unknown in order to discover ‘himself as he is in reality’.

Does my ‘essential ignorance’ also imply that “the human being is *deprived* of his death”, as Schumacher suggests at the very beginning of his book (Schumacher 2011:2; my emphasis)? By the notion of ‘deprivation’ he refers to Heidegger’s concept of inauthenticity [*Uneigentlichkeit*] – one of the possibilities of Being related to the dissociation of a man from ‘what I am not’, from “what does not belong to me” (Schumacher 2011:2). This is reflected in the tendency by which “we constantly lie to ourselves, saying that it is always someone else who dies, but never myself” (Schumacher 2011:2). Thus, ‘death’ is taken to be an ‘accident’ relegated to the other. When I speak of my essential ignorance towards my own death I do not refer to such

kind of deprivation; neither Schumacher does, as he does not see any accident in death, especially when it comes to the death of a loved one – rather he understands it from “the positive perspective as an existential shock that enables the survivor to transcend his everyday attitude of activity for activity’s sake and to *open himself to reflecting upon the meaning of his existence, personally and communally*” (Schumacher 2011: 2, my emphasis). If I correctly understand his argument, he indicates a *positive perspective* on the subject of ‘death’ which is inseparable from its epistemic openness insofar as it invites a human being to *open* him- or herself to reflections upon the very meaning of existence. In other words, ‘thinking about death today’ encompasses at least three aspects for Schumacher, with which I comply: first, to resist the negation, neutralization, and the denial of death – despite the current trend of death’s ‘elimination’ from Western philosophy; second, to overcome the distance (‘inauthenticity’) of the human relationship to death as something ‘that does not belong to me’ in order to get closer to ‘what belongs to me’ as much as to other human beings; third, to change the ‘compulsory’ (negative) viewpoint on death in order to relativize the preconceived negativity of death to the extent from which our view of another person’s ‘death’ does not close itself off but, instead, opens up the possibility of thinking about our own existence. By this, Schumacher refers to the scope of thinking about the significance of our personal and social life as a way of re-considering the differences between our own state of life-as-survival and the state of (someone else’s) death.

Resisting our denial of death, overcoming our distance to death, and changing our point of view about it are three fundamental premises upon which Schumacher, to my understanding, pleads for the return of ‘death’ to contemporary Western philosophy and to the contemporary Western man. To understand these propositions properly, let us go back to his original argument concerning the Western aversion towards death. Once again, “*in order to safeguard his happiness, contemporary Western man has contrived to stop thinking at all about death* and, more particularly, about his own death, to deny it in a way *by maintaining a stony silence* with regard to it” (Schumacher 2011: ix; my emphasis). The relation between ‘death’, ‘silence’ and ‘happiness’ is here crucial. It is based on the choice of ‘positivity’ of life at the expense of the ‘negativity’ of death, or the need to have this ‘positivity’ preserved (as a given) by the idea of happiness. Accordingly, to opt for life’s ‘positivity’ means to defend oneself against the ‘negative’ idea carried out by our potential thoughts on death. Schumacher points out the following fact: the Western man fears ‘death’ insofar as it stands for a threat to his personal happiness by which, in turn, the ideas of death and mortality supposedly deny his ‘right’ to be happy in life. ‘Happiness’ is here understood as a personal privilege aligned with ‘life’ and guaranteed by one’s life: hence, it should not be jeopardized by having one’s thoughts subordinated to ‘negative’ ideas (including the idea of death). To subordinate oneself to ‘death’ while thinking and talking about it automatically means to have oneself exposed to the ‘terror of negativity’. Due to this kind of terror the

Western man supposedly loses his chance and privilege to be happy. Additionally, he or she loses the guarantees of happiness that are normally ascribed to him or her as they belong to the *sovereign power of life* (or the epistemology associated with that power, anchored in the so-called biopolitics), not to 'death'. In light of this, I would add the following: it is not 'death' that nowadays represents the alleged threat to a Western man; rather, it is the idea of death –understood from an imperialist perspective of 'democratic epistemic sovereignty' centered on life at the expense of 'death'– that could possibly deny his or her right to experience 'life' through a *guaranteed happiness*.

If the guaranteed 'right to happiness' is, for any reasons, denied, this introduces a liminal situation and becomes a kind of threat to be avoided: not only because it submits a Western man to 'unhappiness' and its 'terror of negativity' but it automatically does harm to the undisturbed and superior legitimacy of happiness that the presumed sovereign power of life claims for itself. With the enforced and proliferating denial of death, in Schumacher's terms, the 'stony silence' about it comes as a result of the following: our choice in favor of the idea of positivity (life as 'always happy') comes at the expense of the 'negativity' inherent to our ideas about the 'always unfortunate' death. This choice Schumacher interprets as a false choice. He treats it as part of a 'philosophical masquerade' and explains it as follows:

Some philosophers end up taking part in this masquerade by considering the subject taboo or by declaring that it is not philosophical. Whereas the act of philosophizing was understood in the philosophical tradition as a preparation for death, as a rumination on life and death, many contemporary philosophers set aside the very question of man's relation to 'his own death'. Does this habit of averting their eyes originate in a fear of death? Is it due to a *shift of attention* away from radical questions concerning the meaning and ultimate foundation of human life, in both its personal and its social dimension, so as to focus on particular and local problems? Whatever the reason, it seems that philosophy would have everything to gain if it once again centered its theoretical and practical reflections on such fundamental themes, for they are at the heart of human existence (Schumacher 2011: ix; my emphasis).

What he points out is that the atmosphere of a 'stony silence' about death results from the fact that our attention has been shifted from the radical questions of life. On one side, this does not mean that 'life' can give an ultimate answer about 'death' – rather, it indicates a certain kind of exclusion: the question of 'death' (being the 'radical question of life') makes a constitutive part of 'life' itself from which, apparently, it has been excluded – it has been 'lost'. On the other side, this also means that the question of death (given its absence or its invisibility in 'life') directly involves the question of *visibility* in terms of the *shift of perspective* from one possible direction (the absence of 'death') to another (the implicit or explicit presence of 'death'). The supposed invisibility of 'death' imposes another question: what constitutes our ways of looking at

'death' so we could think about it as 'lost' or, opposite to that, as potentially still present among the other 'questions of life'? The point of view (or the many and varied viewpoints) is of central importance here. It indicates that our perspective on 'death' (or the *plurality* of possible perspectives within the Western world) gives us a *singular* – and 'universal' – view on 'death' that indicates nothing but its absence, which should supposedly be venerated for the sake of 'life' at the center of our attention. This means that our perspective on 'death' has been shifted towards the direction that creates the conditions for such an absence. Thus, it shapes our experience with regard to the 'loss' of death (as Schumacher describes it) in an essentially wrong way which favors 'life' and the 'happiness' of life instead. In other words, the status of 'death' in the Western world is allegedly lost due to the fact that 'democratic epistemic sovereignty' maintains a singular vision on 'death' as a way to exercise control over 'life' and populations' lives *as if human mortality does not make part of its imperial interests at all*.

This allows me to understand Schumacher's 'irrational' position towards 'death' as follows: what he indirectly reveals is the darker side of the current ruling epistemology centered exclusively on 'life' and its inseparability from the biopolitical dogma within which the 'Western man', in his terms, resides without 'death'. The experience of exclusion thus produced makes an indispensable part of the negation by which the sovereign reason condemns the 'other' of 'life', in the sense that 'death' and discourses on death have been *sacrificed* for the sake of 'life' and discourses on life – an indispensable condition for contemporary biopolitical rationality to keep the survival of its 'universal' reason undisturbed. Such rationality negatively interferes with other possible types of rationality, forcefully dismissed from the life-centered imperialist epistemic universe, on the grounds of their 'irrational' dimensions. I dare to see this kind of intervention as a certain type of *epistemic racism* that excludes the subject of death as the undesirable 'other' of 'life'.

Schumacher takes seriously such 'epistemic racism' into consideration in order to contest it. To encounter the 'absence' of death and 'bring it back' to Western philosophy, he proposes a more specific sub-discipline that, in all its complexity, belongs to what he calls *thanatological philosophy*. Its objective, "besides a systematic and analytical reflection on death, is to start a dialogue among authors representing *various currents in contemporary Western philosophy* who discuss death from a theoretical perspective" (Schumacher 2011: 215; my emphasis). This creates a possibility to delineate the space (within the Western philosophy itself, as he indicates) where the preserve of 'death' has not entirely evaporated: it is the space of philosophical dialogues and reflections that, together with Schumacher, we may call the *contemporary thanatological philosophy*. Nonetheless, I argue that this induces another problematic situation: if 'contemporary thanatological philosophy' denotes exclusively an exchange 'among authors representing various currents in contemporary Western philosophy', one may wonder about the limits of such an approach – which are also the limits of

‘democratic’ sovereignty and its *imperialist epistemological vision* therein. Is Western philosophy and its dominant epistemology a sufficient option to have the ‘thanatological philosophy’ established at all while excluding the rest of the world? What if our reflection about ‘death’ demands other possible epistemologies, which might be centered on “the cultural and political context of the production and reproduction of knowledge” (Santos and Meneses 2010: 7) from another perspective, that I shall call *anti-imperialist epistemological vision*? Additionally, is philosophy that claims to be ‘thanatological’ sufficient to overcome the contradictory position of ‘death’ so its current philosophical status (its alleged state of ‘loss’), as outlined above, could be promptly transgressed for the sake of bringing ‘death’ back to philosophy? I am eager to think that the status and position of ‘death’ may reside both within and outside of particularly Western philosophical tradition, which urges us to shift our attention, to take a radically different perspective and to approach the issue itself from another (viewing) position: the one that does not necessarily comply with the imperialist epistemological vision on behalf of the life-centered sovereignty which claims to be both ‘Western’ and ‘democratic’.

This is the fundamental critical point where I situate Schumacher’s thesis about the loss of ‘death’ with regard to the imperialist epistemological vision. If to be silent about death means to keep one’s happiness intact, it also means not to see ‘death’ where it might be waiting for a whole new series of questions to be posed and doubts to be resolved. This nurtures my argument about an exclusively ‘Western viewpoint’ in philosophy as non-sufficient to overcome the contradictory position of ‘death’ in relation to its current philosophical status. If the ‘Western’ viewpoint about ‘death’ (and its ‘loss’ in particular) is insufficient to bring ‘death’ back to contemporary (Western) society, how efficient would it be to conceive of the ‘contemporary thanatological philosophy’ (as Schumacher envisions it) upon such an insufficient basis? My argument is that some other, less visible perspectives (non-Western/ anti-Western/ less related to the Western tradition) –or anti-imperialist epistemological visions at large– must come in response to this gap as complementary to the dominant epistemological perspective. These ‘peripheral’ (marginalized, abandoned, excluded or ‘subalternized’) perspectives, I argue, could perform a critical and corrective function towards the ‘central’ (dominant, ‘democratic’, ‘biopolitical’) perspective on death: they are valuable enough to redirect our attention from the ‘loss’ of death as an absent or blind spot in contemporary Western philosophy towards alternative epistemologies that have so far been unaccounted for or forcefully marginalized. Eventually, they could replace the Western preeminence in death-matters (in terms of concerns with one-sided *politics of views* that excludes ‘death’ and discourses on ‘death’ at any cost) so the gap produced by their own ‘absence’, apparently forced, could be filled out. This is necessary for the sake of our greater understanding of death itself and the ways it becomes instrumentalized

in pursuit of both imperial (necropolitical) and anti-imperial (thanatopolitical) interests.

This is also where it becomes possible to claim again, as Schumacher does, that what prevents a human being from knowing himself (as he is in reality) is death itself. If death is discovered in the act of philosophizing (that belongs to the philosophy as the knowledge-discipline), and if this act is essentially about something that permanently escapes every certainty of knowledge, then it is the very task of philosophy to engage in the process of thinking about knowing what cannot be known – or, more importantly for this study, *what supposedly must remain unknown* in order to protect the power-interests behind (both in epistemological and political terms). Hence, 'philosophy' and 'death', through 'knowledge' and its lack thereof (what I call the 'essential ignorance' of one's own death), embrace each other in the common sphere of experience where the *lack of knowledge* (including the lack of reflections about 'death' leading to its 'loss' in the West) –and not the presence of such knowledge– plays the main role here.³ The task of 'knowing death' becomes even more challenging not only due to the 'loss' of death (and the 'absence' of knowledge about it therein) but also due to our assumption that there is a 'universal' approach towards 'death' as an ultimately 'negative' category of empirical knowledge that should, accordingly, be omitted from our discussions so the 'happiness' of a Western man could remain undisturbed. My question is: how to claim any 'universally' valid knowledge of death –presumably negative– under conditions determined by the essential ignorance of humankind about their own experience of death?⁴ Additionally, *who* is the subject of knowledge that could claim the right about an ultimate and 'universally' applicable truth concerning 'death'? *Who* has the 'universal' privilege of knowing 'death as it is' if the sovereign epistemic subject of the global imperial North, despite its pretensions to rule over the world of 'universal' knowledge, cannot be held exclusively accountable for such a position? If we assume that the 'democratic' epistemic sovereignty controls our discussions on 'death' *by means of avoiding them* (while creating the sense of a 'stony silence' around death, i.e., by making 'death' lost), what might be the properly political reasons behind such exercise of power? And what are its consequences for the geo-politics of knowledge where 'death' seems to be not only 'absent' but also prohibited/ censored (tacitly or otherwise)?

³ When I refer to this experience I exclude my capacity to observe – and, thus, 'to know' – death as someone else's death, in terms of a corpse of the other and the many rituals of the living around the dead - from the point in time preceding my own 'death'.

⁴ Schumacher also states that "one cannot deduce from a purely ontological analysis the necessity of the *Dasein's* Being-towards-death. In order to do that, it is necessary to pass by way of the experience of someone else's death. [...] I maintain that it is not possible, starting from an ontological analysis of Being-ahead-of-itself, to deduce Being-towards-the-end. The latter is unthinkable without the experience of the human being's finitude, in other words, unless one experiences the decease and the corpse of the other" (Schumacher 2011: 214).

Should the Western philosophy play a keynote role in the debates around 'death' (within what Schumacher, in such a process, considers as properly 'thanatological'), I would preferably take a different perspective and plead against thus conceived philosophy of death. As an alternative, I would propose the 'thanatopolitical philosophy' or the political philosophy of death, broadly speaking, where the notion of death-politics adheres to Murray's propositions in his article "Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life" (2006) vis-à-vis Achille Mbembe's propositions in his article "Necropolitics" (2003), as earlier described. My perspective (from the side of anti-imperialist difference) here discloses a position that avoids any claim that tends to be universal in itself against the already existent 'universalism' of imperialist epistemological vision. Rather, I agree with Schumacher that there is an essential difference in approaching the ideas of death and mortality from distinctively *philosophical* positions in comparison to manifold perspectives belonging to other disciplines of knowledge, i.e., the interdisciplinary thanatological scholarship at large. But I disagree with him in what concerns the thanatological philosophy within the Western epistemic universe; instead, I advocate for the expansion of such a concept into other, geopolitically nuanced philosophical understandings of 'death' which could lead towards the *thanatopolitical* philosophy – the transnational philosophy as a platform for reflection upon which we should discuss 'death' as a political and philosophical subject, where the many and varied 'politics of death' constitute the complexity of global value-systems beyond the imperial (Western/'democratic') epistemology.

I am arguing that what is usually brought into discussions around death (including its 'loss' and its 'ultimate negativity') makes part of a dominant utilitarian rationality or, for that matter, of the neoliberal 'biopolitical' pragmatism *par excellence*. In that regard, I would claim the following: if our discussions about death need to be necessarily and predominantly framed by imperial thanatological philosophy, this kind of knowledge imposes certain conditions and difficulties to deal with through the complexity of death as a philosophical subject at a global level. Such difficulties become manifest in another type of loss: the lack of theoretical reflections focused properly on death –and the varied *politics of death* (such as necropolitics and thanatopolitics)– instead of any of its theoretical 'surrogates' (such as the Western ideology of 'biopolitics', for instance). In the constellation of these differing yet complementary types of politics, I am interested in what makes 'death' so 'political' (necropolitical, thanatopolitical, biopolitical, and so on). The question is, also, what makes 'death' an essentially political subject under conditions where the living have an opportunity to *negotiate* their variously unconvincing arguments about what can be neither experienced nor known (i.e. death itself)? Does the political faculty of 'death' lie in its infinite epistemic openness, in its 'not-yet-character projected towards the future', where the 'never actual' experience and knowledge of 'death' complies with Schinkel's argument about the essentially impossible experience of *democracy itself*? Or, as Schinkel would say in relation to

democracy, if we cannot approach death as 'realized already' because it has a 'not-yet-character' (or because it maintains an attitude of 'being connected with the future'), does it also mean the following: since 'I cannot practice being dead' (in Schumacher's terms), I cannot practice democracy either? This rather indicates that, despite the fact that I cannot practice being dead, it is *through the very concept of death that I could practice democracy* in conditions that are not only extremely undemocratic (even if they pretend to be democratic in terms of 'ultimately the most human system possible') but that do not allow for any other form of 'democratic rehearsal' beside the one preserved by individual anti-imperialist visions – *the revolt of my own dying for a democratic cause*? I open these questions now only to have them as a vague guideline towards the future considerations of what I shall call the 'thanatopolitical regime of self-sacrifice'. In the next part, I will discuss some exemplary and existent discourses on death in Western philosophy in order to highlight the issue of thanatological plurality while, at the same time, arguing about the epistemic openness of death. One of my intentions, in that regard, is to expose the collisions and conceptual ambiguities around the definitions of death that exist within the (Western) philosophy itself, before embarking the transnational 'boat to death'. I will address the need for an essentially pluralistic approach that probes the limits of epistemic singularity and perceives death as an *open* concept. Despite the views dependent upon the irrevocable termination of existence, I assume the opposite: first, that there are manifold ways to respond philosophically to the issue, without giving priority to any sovereign or prescribed position; second, that the plurality of unequally convincing positions opens up the *properly democratic space of negotiations about life and death – as a political space privileged by (thanatopolitical) philosophy itself*.

Chapter 3

Thanatological Pluralism and The Epistemic Openness of 'Death'

What does 'death' stand for (in the Western epistemic universe) beyond assumptions about its 'loss'? Or what is 'death' in the global imperial North? In what follows, I assume that there are manifold ways to respond to this seemingly simple and unavoidable question, in both philosophical and political terms. One possible and common answer would be that "death is an unequivocal and permanent end of our existence" (Nagel 1979: 1). The relationship between 'death' and 'existence' is here crucial and framed by the idea of irrevocable termination. It denotes that, with the state of life's completion, the existence reaches its end-point whereas death comes to play. Accordingly, the concept of human life –in terms of its final closure– depends upon the end of existence which, in turn, makes the concept of death not only definable but also conceived as a totality that remains essentially *closed*.

I start from this common and 'hermetic' conception as a normative way of approaching death. Such a conception is conditioned by what I shall call the *radical break formula* (the end of existence = death). This implies the notion of death as the category belonging to a certain epistemic rationality subjected to the sovereign universe of knowledge. This view is hegemonic inasmuch as it dominates over discourses on death through the prescribed radical break formula as *sine qua non* and outlines 'death' in its clear-cut segregation from 'life'. In what follows, I have undertaken the task of challenging this formula in response to the need for alternative proposals. To propose alternative viewpoints is to face the ideas of death from other perspectives that are not only possible but also legitimate in comparison to the epistemic singularity of radical break, within and beyond the 'democratic' epistemic sovereignty of the Western world.

The aim is to probe the limits of epistemic singularity and its sovereignty on numerous levels, most notably via the understanding of 'death' as an *open* concept. My main argument at this point revolves around the need to break away from the 'radical break' between our ideas of existence and death. I have adopted the "concept of the

human being as essentially open to the future” where “the essential openness of the Being-ahead-of-itself does not ontologically imply an end” (Schumacher 2011:214). Therefore, I argue that the epistemic horizons of contemporary thanatological thinking should not be limited by the idea of life’s irrevocable termination at the end-point of existence as a given; instead, they should be encountered from a broader viewpoint –or the multitude of viewpoints– allowing for the open concept of death to co-exist in the thanatological ‘economy’ of arguments undergoing the experiences of pluralistic exchange.

The plurality of our knowledge-worlds of death encompasses the *multitude of unequally convincing positions* and transgresses the singularity of any epistemic sovereignty that claims to be universal or the most convincing. This ‘transgressive’ epistemic experience could also help us approach the matters of life and death in a very different way than it has been the case so far. Thanks to the current theoretical, scientific and technological legitimacy of such plurality, the thanatological inquiries nowadays have expanded our views: they open up the space for manifold arguments in discussions and negotiations about the status and values of death in contemporary Western philosophy as well as in common reflections of a Western man. This implies that the subject itself has gained not only its more ‘democratic’ but a profoundly political status. I understand it in terms of the many (unequal and unequally convincing) positions about ‘death’ and death-related arguments that are challenged in the philosophical space of negotiation as a political space *par excellence*. This offers arguments in favor of a conceptual ambiguity that leaves the borders between life and death open and embraces ‘death’ as a concept “projected toward the future” (Schumacher 2011: 214).

Radical break formula and counter-positions

The radical break formula, as I have named it hereby, relates to the aforementioned definition that conceives of death as an unequivocal and permanent end of our existence. According to it, the idea of death relates to the idea of existence through an irrevocable condition (‘the end’). What basically determines this condition is the *radical break* of existence: its ‘end’ –in the absolute, unambiguous and abiding sense– equals ‘death’ or what we commonly understand by the term signifying death (‘the end of life’). If this formula (the end of existence = death) was true it would indicate the following: death, in order to be properly defined, needs to be primarily conceived vis-à-vis existence, yet always under conditions where the suggested radical break must occur; otherwise, the end of existence would not necessarily equate with death.

However, if 'death' is the end-point of existence –or the point of its ultimate deduction– this may also be considered as a starting-point from which our idea of death, actually, begins. In other words, death begins where the concept of human being *opens* toward the future, as Schumacher argues, instead of closing itself off. If the end (of existence) also marks the beginning (of death) we may assume that the earlier definition of death –as an unequivocal and permanent end of our existence– is both insufficient and unsatisfactory. The end of one phenomenon ('existence') does not necessarily define another phenomenon ('death'). The radical break formula is thus wrong as the relationship between the two phenomena is far more complex. Existence and death participate together in a paradoxical situation where they exclude each other at the same point where they also merge with each other. This is to say that the line of their segregation is, simultaneously, the line of their mutual juncture. It is also the borderline across which our ideas of *the end* (of 'existence') and *the beginning* (of 'death') come together. This argument, though it may sound polemical, comes about as relevant because of the duality of the issue: we assume that our idea of 'the end' of existence (in terms of its finitude) necessarily includes another idea, opposite to the earlier one, which is the 'beginning' of death in terms of its 'openness' or infinitude. Therefore, death –although inherent to existence– cannot be defined exclusively in relation to existence on the premises of being its end-point.¹ The next question is: if 'death' can be defined at all from a 'Western' (thanatological) perspective, how *could* it be defined otherwise than through the formula of radical break?

Given the insufficient argumentation of the initial definition, death could be approached as an end of our existence *only under condition* that its permanence is characterized by the unequivocal closure of everything pertaining to the idea of existence (the notion of 'everything' hereby also includes death, as we are supposed to accept that death is the end-point of existence, i.e., something *internal* to existence and not *external* to it). Nonetheless, my argument goes against such a view: death *should not* be defined only as an end of our existence since the end-point of existence (supposedly 'death' itself) also marks the beginning of our ideas of death in their opening beyond that 'end-point'. Following this logic, the beginning/openness of death occurs *under conditions of 'non-existence'* – not under conditions of 'existence'. This means: when

¹ Schumacher, for example, goes against life's deduction to an end-point. He defends the thesis on death's freedom to remain open rather than "connected with a finite temporality" when he argues that "human life is not perceived as a closed totality". In that sense, his "critique of Heidegger's and Scheler's theses on death is based on a concept of the human being as essentially open to the future, as a free projection toward the future. This projection is not limited ontologically, nor in an *a priori* manner, nor from the subjective viewpoint – as both Nagel and Sartre have emphasized – by an end, which is to say that the subject does not have an *a priori* consciousness of the fact that the field of his possibilities is narrowing" (Schumacher 2011: 214).

existence reaches its 'end-point' –which is not 'death'– this is the starting-point of 'non-existence' or the point from which our idea of death opens to the future, infinitely.

Let us consider another perspective by which the mandatory formula of radical break is, for any reason, negated. What is the result of this negation? The situation established earlier (concerning the mutual exclusion of 'death' and 'existence' by the category of 'the end') will also be changed. The relationship of radical break between the category of death and the category of existence now turns out to be different and gives results of another kind. First, it disturbs the given set of proposed parameters to have life defined as a closed totality and brings the initial definition of death to the status of its own subversion. Second, it endangers any common or normative interpretation of death centering so stubbornly on the either-or situation via the radical break formula (implying, once again, that there is *either* 'existence' *or* its 'end'). If the radical break formula is temporarily overthrown or dismissed it means that our general idea of death does *not* absolutely and unambiguously stand at the very end of our existence. If death does not stand at the end of existence, the question is – where does it stand instead? Yet, from the viewpoint centered on 'radical break', if the existence has no 'end' there is no 'death'; where there is 'the end' there is 'death', but there is *no more* existence; this means that 'death' is *only* there where there is the state of 'non-existence'.

According to the radical break formula, the appearance of death (equated with 'the end' and, moreover, with 'the end of existence') necessarily coincides with the disappearance of existence. Hence, to be dead is to stop existing. Following the previous logic, the cease of existence announces the *beginning of non-existence*. Yet, we earlier assumed that death is also the 'beginning': the beginning of 'death' coincides with the beginning of 'non-existence'. In other words, when 'to be dead' means 'to stop existing' it is the appearance of non-existence that starts emerging behind the disappearance of existence. If death overlaps with the beginning of non-existence, does this argument automatically imply that death *does not exist*? Even if death does not exist at all, our presumption is that this argument says *something* about death: death as 'non-existence'. What else does it say in addition? Or, what is it that this argument *does not say enough* so our suspicion about death as 'non-existence' goes on? This kind of suspicion allows us to proceed with the discussion that must be *differently positioned* towards the ideas of death, existence, non-existence, and so on. The configuration of such positioning, however, needs to be made clear. To approach it, I would like to ask the following: if non-existence is the 'other' of existence does it also mean that death is playing the role of the 'other' with regard to existence? If the answer is positive, what constitutes the Otherness of death? Is death the 'other' of life in terms of its different nature that is, supposedly, better or worse than the nature of life? Or is 'death' the other of our sovereign ('democratic' and biopolitical) epistemic preconceptions from which it cannot but remain excluded and absent ('lost') due to the alleged negativity it brings to a 'happy' Western man?

Thomas Nagel, among many others, adds to our discussion by asking “whether it is a bad thing to die” (Nagel 1979: 1). This allows us to treat death as the potentially ‘evil’ side of existence due to the fact that it takes away life (i.e., the ‘good’ side of existence) into non-existence. If death is understood as the beginning of non-existence (that is supposedly ‘bad’) another question arises: is it better or worse not to exist *at all* (or not to exist *anymore*) than to exist ‘partially’? If we assume the possibility of partial existence, we also need to come to terms with what it exactly means. What makes the status of one’s existence ‘partial’ is what brings a novel element to our discussion in comparison to any definite idea of existence and non-existence, respectively. Therefore, this in-between option connects to (or collides with) the normative views about the idea of death as a clear-cut borderline between ‘death’ and ‘existence’ – between our ‘sense’ of existence and our ‘sense’ of non-existence (or the ‘non-sense’ of existence, to which I will return at a later point).

The ambiguity of ‘partial existence’

The arguments about the partial status of existence go directly against the clear-cut segregation or the so-called radical break formula between ‘existence’ and ‘death’. Hence, the ambiguity of existence (its ‘partial’ status, so to say) disturbs the preconceived ‘regimes of truth’ with respect to the radical end-point of existence as an indispensable condition for a human being to die. This complies with what contemporary bioethical theorists have in mind when approaching “life-ending principles by considering death [through] some conceptual distinctions crucial to a proper discussion” (Holland 2003: 68). The subject of life-ending has remained one of the key points in contemporary bio-ethical debates where the hardly definable nature of death is not only treated as a problem but also as a challenge to our existent knowledge-worlds. To respond to the initial question (about what death is) from a bioethical position thus becomes an impossible task “unless we separate different questions about death, and the various terms related to them” (Holland 2003: 69).

When Stephen Holland (Lecturer in Philosophy and Health Sciences at the University of York) discusses ‘death’ he insists upon the fact that it is not the ambiguity of death itself but *the ambiguity of our concept of death* which leads to conflicts between the various ways we approach the issue. Several interrelated instances play significant roles here, the most prominent ones being the two prevailing and confronting medical accounts of death: cardio-respiratory and brain-related. From a comparative perspective, the latter took the priority from the former with the occurrence of “a major shift in recent decades in our policy on death [...] largely due to improvements in health technologies”

(Holland 2003: 70). With the appearance of life-support machines, the earlier criteria for death (heart and lungs-related diagnosis centered on cardio-respiratory systems) gave way to the new criteria centered on the state of the brain. More concretely, this relates to the “permanent functional death of the brain stem or irreversible absence of cellular activity in the brain stem [as] the immediate precursor to brain death”.² To highlight the precision by which medicine defines death, Holland adds that “it’s the demise of certain crucial parts of the brain that matters” and points out that “a patient is diagnosed as dead when their brain stem is dead”.³ He maintains that, “at root, the problem is that we think about death in two ways: the end of consciousness and the demise of the human organism” (Holland 2003: 68). What he basically refers to (Holland 2003: 74) is twofold: first, we need to consider the biological and the ontological accounts of *living* human beings as organisms and persons, respectively; also, we need to distinguish between the biological and the ontological accounts of *dying* human beings as either *organisms* (if the “functional integrity of the organism” is irreversibly ceased) or as *persons* (if the “capacity for consciousness” is permanently ruined). This is important, he continues, because “getting the right account of death might inform life-ending judgments” (Holland 2003: 74), but especially because it concerns the so-called *ambiguous cases* or *ambiguous bodies* “such as anencephalic infants or PVS patients” (Holland 2003: 74). When these cases occur the diagnostic precision about functional or non-functional brain-parts needs to be even more specific (Holland 2003: 72). This means that the definition of a dead patient must distinguish the upper part of the brain (physiological commands) from the lower part of the brain (consciousness). To accept this *conceptual ambiguity* –perhaps the most fundamental one for our understanding of death through the bioethical lenses– means that our initial discussion around the so-called radical break (between ‘death’ and ‘existence’) must be taken much more critically into account and, also, much more seriously because it becomes all the more unsustainable.

My intention is not to go too deep into the discussion about the conceptual ambiguity of death. What is important is that Holland’s bioethical views outline some possible scopes of thinking about death beyond the preconceived radical break formula and the constitution of death as ‘the end’ of existence. In that regard, Holland offers three methods of primary significance that contribute to the contemporary ways we *could* think about death differently than by taking its status of ‘the end-point of existence’ for granted. Says Holland:

It’s crucial to a proper discussion of this question that three separate, though related, sets of issues are clearly distinguished. The first is *epistemological*. It’s

² See Lamb 1994: 1036-7, as quoted in Holland 2003: 71.

³ See Mohandas and Chou 1971, as quoted in Holland 2003: 71.

about what we know. The central question here is: how do we know whether this patient is dead or alive? Related to this is a question as to how we find out about the state of the patient. How are we to diagnose the patient's condition? So terms central to the epistemological question are diagnosis of, and criteria and tests for, death. The second issue is *metaphysical*. It's about what exists. The central question here is: does the world contain a live patient or a dead body? So it's not about our knowledge but about the metaphysical facts. The third issue is *conceptual*. It's about defining the concept of death. We use the word 'death' to capture the concept. So crucial questions here are: what do we understand by the concept of death, or what does the word 'death' mean? (Holland 2003: 69)

Questioning death through the radical break formula –or against it– is here framed by the conceptual inquiry of the issue. The persistent problem, however, consists in the fact that the bio-ethical discussions have taken so many different angles (about what constitutes the end of one's life and what doesn't) that our current idea of death, with all the ambiguity that it contains, easily slips into very contested and polemical hermeneutic terrains. Although Holland's distinctions, outlined above, are indeed important for the inquiry at hand, they seem to contribute to our discussion (in either epistemological, metaphysical or conceptual sense) to the extent from which we are brought back, once again, to the beginning of our inquiry: so, what is death?

The 'nonsense' of death

So far we have seen that the meditations on death can undergo more than one singular method (un)related to the so-called radical break formula: for example, while Nagel treats death as a closed totality, Schumacher sees it as an open concept, and Holland insists on its conceptual ambiguity. While it is still possible to approach death as something that *is* (death as 'the end', as 'openness', as 'the privation of existence') there are also debates that approach death as something that, essentially, *isn't* (death as 'nothing', as 'non-existence', as 'non-sense'). Through the 'nothingness' of death they center on its fundamental state of *not being* or being nothing else but 'no sense'. One of such approaches complies with the famous ancient dictum that death is "nothing to us".⁴ Epicurus says the following:

⁴ See, for instance: James Warren, "Removing Fear," in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, James Warren (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 242–243. See also: James Warren, *Facing Death. Epicurus and his Critics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 2004.

Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the *privation* of sense-experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality. For there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life. Thus, he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful when it is still to come. For that which while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when merely anticipated. So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. (Epicurus 1994: 29)

His argument is here a valid reference point especially in what concerns the ‘feeling’ of life as opposed to the ‘non-feeling’ of death, as he says, “for all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience” (Epicurus 1994: 29). So, to speak of death is to speak of the situation of privation; furthermore, it is to speak of the experience deprived of senses or the *experience of non-sense*. Following these lines of thought, let us consider once again the initial formula of radical break by focusing on it from a slightly different perspective. Instead of paying too much attention to the mutual exclusion between its two constitutive elements (‘existence’ and ‘death’), I will connect to my earlier expressed comment. Earlier I mentioned that the standard views on death revolve around the clear-cut borderline between, on the one hand, our ‘sense’ of existence and, on the other hand, our ‘sense’ of non-existence (or the ‘non-sense’ of existence). Starting from this, it is the presumable ‘nonsense’ of existence that –at this point of discussion– I want to focus on. One could also add, cynically enough, that discourses on death as a ‘non-sense’ must assume the experience of *nonsense*. Hence, to experience nonsense is to bring the category of ‘stupidity’ to the discussion or to make the whole discussion ‘foolish’ (*senseless*) in terms of ignorance – in particular in terms of the essential ignorance about our own death. Is the non-sense of existence an argument valid enough to replace our imaginary of death as the kind of nonsense (i.e., the state of affairs deficient in both meanings and senses and, thus, essentially ‘foolish’)? If this is really the case, does our discourse on death deserve any further attention, given that the ‘meaningfulness’ of all previous propositions has already been eradicated and replaced by ‘meaninglessness’ (the nonsense in terms of death ‘without sense’ or of its total ‘senselessness’, ‘uselessness’, and so on)?

Epicurus understands death as the empty place of meaning occupied by something that (in its ‘nothingness’) is “irrelevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist [so] the wise man neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad” (Epicurus 1994: 29). Instead of complying with him, I would preferably focus my attention onto the very relationship between our ‘knowledge’ of death (or

rather our ignorance, in terms of 'nonsense': the state of mind deprived of any fundamental knowledge of our own death) and the presumed nothingness of death (in terms of its state of being deprived of any sense, or its senselessness linked to nonsense). One of my points of analysis are the conditions upon which the modality of the verb *to be* ('is') operates while squeezed between 'death' and 'nothing' in the sentence 'death is nothing to us'. I find it significant hereby for the following reason: it delineates a discursive void, the kind of *epistemic emptiness* within which a world-system centered on life has privileged its basic property (the 'meaningful' and 'rational' *something* that pertains to 'life', by which life is 'everything to us') against the basic property of death (the 'meaningless' and 'irrational' *nothing*, relegated to 'death' on the grounds that it means 'nothing to us').⁵ What matters now is the last remaining segment of the phrase 'death is nothing to us'. It might be of crucial importance since it introduces the subject of knowledge applied to death: for *who* is this subject (the sovereign 'connoisseur' of death) so he or she could claim that death is everything, something, or nothing to us? Who is in possession of the epistemic power to claim the ultimate validity of either of those statements in order to argue about death (or life) from any superior position of knowledge? Is it the 'democratic' epistemic sovereignty or a Western man to whom death represents 'nothing' and, therefore, should be denied and ignored for the sake of 'everything' that life has to give us? Are 'we' –to whom death is nothing– the supposedly *universal* members of humankind, governed by the same 'universal' and 'democratic' epistemic reason from which 'death' has to be excluded so we could keep our 'happiness of life' intact?

The last question demands an answer from beyond the Western epistemic canon, to which I will return later. Here we must come to terms with our own position (within the Western epistemic canon) towards the presumed nothingness of death. 'To us', who are still living, death might still mean nothing. Nonetheless, when I refer *to us*, this stands for those who are not only living but also –and consciously– dying human beings, including those who are now absent (as they are already dead). The latter concerns, in particular, *the one among us* (namely, Epicurus himself) to whom the sentences in the earlier quote have been applied, according to the *Letter to Menoeceus*.⁶ Though

⁵ This relates to my earlier claim that biopolitics (understood as the politics of life) has been in charge of producing the discourses on living and life-management while obscuring those on death and dying, as Murray argues, or making them 'disappear' from Western philosophy, as proposed by Schumacher. Whether this has been a programmatic and strategic choice imposed by the epistemic sovereignty centered on life, remains an open question. I deal with it through both Mbembe's and Murray's versions of 'politics of death'.

⁶ For the Epicurean dictum on death and its most recent critical revision see B. Schumacher, *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, pp. 151–167; 168–181. Also: James Warren, *Facing Death. Epicurus and His Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For English translations of Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus* see, for example, *Epicurus, The Epicurus Reader. Selected Writings and Testimonia*, Brad Inwood (ed.), Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (trans.), Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1994; and Norman Wentworth De Witt, *St. Paul and Epicurus*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1954, pp. 187–193.

pronounced and written during his own lifetime, Epicurus's words have remained to buzz till the present as if he was still alive – though we know he is not. Hence, if 'death is nothing to us' then the death of the one who said so (more than two thousand years ago) should also be treated as part of the logic of presumed nothingness (senselessness, non-sense, nonsense, etc.). This means that the argument about death (as nothingness or nonsense) –on behalf of the one who is no more alive (i.e. who is no more 'among us')– could be taken into account only critically: with respect to his own idea of death (as 'nothingness') as well as with respect to his own, ongoing absence from the world of life (i.e. his own, ongoing 'nothingness').

This kind of inquiry leads us to the following conclusion: to talk about death cannot be exhausted by our discussions centered on the criteria of knowledge around any either-or situation (such as the terminal end of existence or the radical break between existence and non-existence through death). Instead, to talk about death –within the thanatological 'universe' of Western philosophy, as Schumacher suggests– means to negotiate the plurality of unequally convincing positions by which 'death' (the non-sense of existence) becomes exposed alongside our essential *ignorance* about death (the 'nonsense' of existence). It is not the 'nothingness' of death but the essential nothingness of our knowledge about death that makes the thanatological discussions challenging and worth continuing in the field of (Western) philosophy. It is through this ignorance around the 'nonsense of death', ironically speaking, that our unequally convincing positions about death converge around 'the termination of one's life' or 'the end of one's existence' or its 'partiality' or its 'nothingness', and so on. Hence, if there is any subject of knowledge that, in our fundamental ignorance, continuously imposes the barriers to our possibility of knowing anything about it with certainty, then 'death' itself must be that subject. In terms of this kind of (positive) ignorance I have claimed that to experience nonsense is to bring the category of 'stupidity' to the discussion or to make the whole discussion 'foolish' (*senseless*), so the pluralistic concepts of death could be discussed and negotiated in an open epistemic sphere as a precisely *political* category of knowledge (or its lack therefor). Interestingly enough, such a conception resonates with Schinkel's argument about the never 'already realized' –and thus never ultimately experienced or known– category of democracy itself, which objects to my argument that the epistemic sovereignty in the global imperial North is authoritarian insofar as it pretends to be truly democratic. I accept this objection in order to show, later on, both its strong and weak sides: especially when it comes to the direct confrontation between the *thanatological plurality* of 'death' (from the imperialist epistemological vision of the global North) and the *thanatopolitical pluriverse* of 'death' (from the anti-imperialist epistemological vision of the global South).

The Imperative of Death

In the previous part I claimed that the ultimate position we can take with regard to the 'knowledge' of death is the one of essential ignorance, which is not a negative but rather *positive* and *political* position as it opens the space of negotiation around unequally convincing arguments on life and death through the (ultimately unknown) subject of death. Yet, there is one thing regarding death that we can be certain about or we can know it already now, while living, despite our ignorance: "We are all going to die".⁷ If there is one single thing I can be sure of and if that 'thing' is death ('my own death') I can also properly assume the following: the only certainty that life gives me and the only certainty I could have in life is the inevitability of death. Those who openly admit their fundamental ignorance with respect to death, including myself, can equally confirm that the only certainty they could have in all their ignorance (about the subject that, incessantly, keeps them being so ignorant) is that *death is inexorable*.

Let us now assume that the imperative of death is the prime condition in the world of life and living. It means that the only certainty we could have, about our own selves and about the others who are sharing the experience of living with us, is the certainty of dying. In accordance with such an assumption, many would most probably defend the following view: what binds us all together (as all living beings on Earth, including animals and plants) is exactly the category of equality with respect to dying. Due to this fact, we are all sharing the same *position of equality* with respect to our own death and the many deaths of the others. Hence, all living creatures are equal exactly because they are dying creatures. Let us also assume that this position of our 'universal equality' is unquestionable.

Yet, we know that we are not all equal in life even if our 'universal equality' appears to be unquestionable with respect to the presumable 'end-point' of our existence (death itself). The assumption expressed hereby is that we are *all* going to die which makes us all equal. Yet, as Shelly Kagan (Professor of Philosophy at Yale University) points out, "once we accept that fact, the questions begin". Which questions? There are many. Kagan particularly pays attention to those that he himself finds the most relevant in the entire spectrum of inquiries. They are, namely: "How should the fact that I am going to die affect the way that I *live*? What should my attitude be toward my mortality?" (Kagan 2012: 2). This is the point from which the presumed universal equality of living beings starts to erode towards their 'inequality'. We could argue that the so-called *death anxiety* or the fear of death hides behind this erosion. If we take those fears into account, are we

⁷ See Shelly Kagan, *Death. The Open Yale Courses Series*, <http://oyc.yale.edu/philosophy/phil-176>. Accessed October 26, 2013. Also: Shelly Kagan, *Death*, Yale University Press, Durham 2012.

afraid of death because it is something *negative* to us? If we put those fears aside, will this leave the space open for anything *positive* with regard to our own death?

Let us now assume that there is a basic difference between these two categories. On the one hand, there are those who fear their own death – those who do not want ‘to give their lives away,’ so to say, or those who understand death in negative terms. On the other hand, there are those who fear their own death less, or do not fear it at all: those who do not mind giving up their lives, so to say, or those who prefer ‘taking their own lives’ (those who are prone to commit suicide or to sacrifice their lives for a certain cause), or those who might consider death in somewhat less negative or even positive terms. This elementary distinction brings us closer to an important counter-argument regarding the earlier proposed view about the essential equality of living beings in death (hereby I refer only to the *humans*), namely: that the position of humankind is *not equal* when it comes to our attitudes toward death. This is where we encounter at least two types of human beings: those who ‘fear’ and those who ‘do not fear’ death. Additionally, we are no more equal when it comes to our arguments about death: those who fear death stand at a distance from those who fear it less and at the opposite side from those who may not fear it at all. Those who have predominantly negative attitudes towards death (including their own death) will defend their position upon the premises that distinguish them from those who have less negative or even positive attitudes toward death. Therefore, to argue about death is to accept, first and foremost, the essential condition of ‘*inequality*’ among the humankind, balancing between the populations’ ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ attitudes toward death. This condition of inequality results, again, from our state of fundamental ignorance regarding death: this kind of ignorance is framed by ‘inequality’ in terms of disagreements and unequally convincing positions operating in-between the many knowledge-worlds of death and not within a singular, sovereign (‘democratic’/ ‘Western’) and supposedly unquestionable epistemic paradigm.

In conclusion to this part, I will stress out that for any discussion, expectedly or unexpectedly irresolvable, ‘death’ represents one of the most pertinent subjects: it imposes the ultimate frontier to knowledge. However, the essential ignorance regarding our own deaths allows us to argue *differently* over the subject of death: thanks to this difference, we are also allowed to have *one thing in common* that is shared by all the arguing positions, no matter how different they are. This is the preliminary condition one has to face when approaching death as the subject of thinking, of speech, of imagining (in terms of visions or ‘images’ of one’s own death). Starting from my own ignorance of death I could say: for an ignorant state of mind human death is but a challenge to test one’s own limits – of thinking, of speech, of imagining. Accordingly, my own ignorance –in relation to the subject of death and in relation to death as the philosophical subject– is precisely the *topos* where the focal point of my own piece of scholarly writing, about the subject that I am fundamentally ignorant about, is destined

to grow: from the very roots of my own and absolute ignorance, which belongs to me as much as it belongs to any other living human being. This also allows me to contest any ultimate 'knowledge' of death that tends to claim its epistemic sovereignty over the issue. There is no singular epistemic power that could be ultimately in charge of decisions about death insofar as it is 'my own death'. The essentially ignorant and unconvincing positions about death itself allow me –from my own ignorant viewpoint confronted to all other ignorant viewpoints– to claim, hypothetically speaking, my own right to (my own) death, despite the persistence of any potentially sovereign 'other' to deprive me of such a right and/or to impose it upon me. If to hold the power of the knowledge-worlds of death is to keep humankind under control, then this means: to exercise sovereignty over the world of living by means of 'death' as the tool of governance. Therefore, to claim one's own 'right to death' is to resist such sovereignty while accepting the fact about *unequally convincing positions* on behalf of everyone involved in discussing death and dying.

Yet, to discuss death does not mean to accept or reject such a right as something given. Instead, it obliges us to *negotiate* these unequally convincing positions: by entering the space of negotiation –which is a political space *par excellence*– the challenge is how to execute a radical turn against the 'democratic' epistemic sovereignty of death. If to negotiate unequally convincing positions on death means to challenge our general positions –in the world of subjects that are essentially *unequal*– then it also means to question the humankind's inequality at large and the essentially *asymmetric power-balance* among the populations regarding their attitudes towards death. Additionally, it means to challenge our ideas on equality and inequality through the very question of *justice* exercised over the idea of death, including its enactment (the very act of dying) and the 'sovereign' right to do so (for example, by killing someone, by having someone killed, or by letting someone die). This is the main reason why the future question in this study is not about what death *is* or what it *is not*. Instead, the arguments exposed hereby are leading us toward other questions that might be more relevant for some future inquiries. Schumacher's thesis gives me but a stimulus to re-formulate the question of death with respect to the notion of spatiality. So, *where* is 'death' if a Western man has lost it? Where is 'death' if it is not in the global imperial North? Or, where does the global imperial North stand –in the global world of knowledge(s) about 'death'– so the alleged loss of death in contemporary Western philosophy and society could be critically approached as a yet another result of epistemic violence proper to the ongoing sovereign 'democratic' intervention? Finally, why would it be necessary to probe the limits of Western philosophy about death and look for some other spaces of reflection that I so stubbornly plead for, while insisting on the so-called anti-imperialist epistemological visions and the question of epistemic justice? Depending on one's viewpoint, the answer is more simple or more complex than it seems to be at first

instance: because, as I will argue in the next part, 'every ruling power makes laws for its own good'.

Chapter 4

Every Ruling Power Makes Laws for Its Own Good

What are the limits of ‘democracy’ with respect to the imperialist epistemological horizons? How their ongoing expansion influences the ways we think today about the many philosophies and knowledges of life and death? Is thinking about death and dying destined to rest upon some ‘universal’ principles of knowledge and interpretation pertinent to the global imperial North, even if they claim to be not only philosophical but properly ‘thanatological’? Are our perspectives on these issues supposed to remain inseparable from the canonic inception of the ‘modern’, ‘civilizing’, and ‘democratic’ project so its ‘universal rationality’ should always be taken for granted? I find this situation problematic and ripe for critical counter-proposals that are, essentially, counter-hegemonic inasmuch as they are anti-imperialist.

The power of democracy and its authoritarian, darker side –as I exposed it earlier in line with Schinkel’s and Wallerstein’s arguments, among others– relate to the notion of (‘democratic’) justice-as-intervention. This relation resonates with a polemical idea that brings me back to another chapter in Plato’s *Republic* which I want to recall at this point. The idea consists in the possibility of approaching justice as that “what is good for the ruling authority” or “what is good for the stronger” (Plato 2003: 16), as pronounced by Thrasymachus in his conversation with Socrates in the First Book of *The Republic*. Says Thrasymachus:

You must be aware that some cities are tyrannies, some are democracies, and others aristocracies? [...] And what is in control in each city is the ruling power. [...] *Every ruling power makes laws for its own good.* A democracy makes democratic laws, a tyranny tyrannical laws, and so on. In making these laws, they make it clear that *what is good for them, the rulers, is what is just for their subjects.* If anyone disobeys, they punish him for breaking the law and acting unjustly. That’s what I mean, ‘my friend’, when I say that *in all cities the same thing is just, namely what is good for the ruling authority.* This, I take, is where the power lies, and the result is, for anyone who looks at it in the right way, that the same thing is just everywhere – *what is good for the stronger.* (Plato 2003: 16; my emphasis)

A pretty unfavorable figure among the characters of *The Republic*, Thrasymachus (the second half of the 5th century BC) is known as a rhetorician whose name best explains not only his temperament but, consequently, his role and position among the ancient Athenians described by Plato. In *The Commentary of Marsilio Ficino to Plato's Republic* (recently published for the first time in English) we can find that his name translates into the “fierce fighter [who] acts harshly” (Farndell 2009: 5). When Ficino, the humanist of the Florentine Renaissance, analyses the conversation between Thrasymachus and Socrates from a historical distance of many centuries after Plato, he notices the following: among “many reasons why Socrates is always in the habit of asking questions rather than giving instruction” figures also one through which to make clear that “human knowledge consists in negating what is false rather than in affirming what is true” (Farndell 2009: 6). Thrasymachus’ position is, therefore, not only ‘negative’ towards Socrates’ negations but also *reversely critical* towards the ‘just’ rhetoric around the idea of sovereignty itself. Being aware of Socrates’ habit, Thrasymachus affirms what is, indeed and unfortunately, true by bringing forward a rather polemical statement (“that what is just is what is advantageous to the more powerful”) and continues: “For those who are more powerful always *exercise sovereignty*, bring in laws that are advantageous to themselves, and rule over those that are subject to them; indeed, their subjects act justly when they obey those laws which have been established for the advantage of the rulers” (Farndell 2009: 6; my emphasis). Hence, ‘just’ is the one who has the power to impose the idea of justice onto the powerless. For the governed, to be ‘just’ means to pursue the laws imposed by the governing and, accordingly, to pursue “the interests of the dominant strata of the modern world-system” (Wallerstein 2006: xiv).

As earlier suggested, Wallerstein examines the issues of ‘political universalism’ and ‘rhetoric of power’ when he refers to “the universalism of the powerful [as] a partial and distorted universalism” that he calls ‘European universalism’ “because it has been put forward by pan-European leaders and intellectuals *in their quest to pursue the interests of the dominant strata of the modern world-system*” (Wallerstein 2006: xiv).¹ If this ‘universalist’ attitude must remain undisturbed, it is for the sake of a ‘civilizing’ mission that the imperial sovereignty has taken upon itself under the guise of ‘democracy’. In order to be spread among the ‘barbarians’, the idea of democracy is intertwined with the neoliberal logic of commercial interest (the trigger of a worldwide expansion) through which ‘democratic politics of universalism’ *intervenes* – most notably in the name of ‘global justice’ and ‘human rights’:

¹ See also my note number 2.

The concepts of human rights and democracy, the superiority of Western civilization because it is based on universal values and truths, and the inescapability of submission to the 'market' are all offered to us as self-evident ideas. But they are not at all self-evident. They are complex ideas that need to be analyzed carefully, and stripped of their noxious and nonessential parameters, in order to be evaluated soberly and put at the service of everyone rather than a few. (Wallerstein 2006: xv)

Wallerstein's thoughts are rooted in the discussion that came to be known as 'Las Casas-Sepúlveda debate', where Sepúlveda's doctrine on "the duty of the civilized to suppress barbarism" (Wallerstein 2006: 16) was confronted by Bartolomé de Las Casas' counter-arguments. The debate is based upon the religious arguments weighed between these two sixteenth-century theologians *pro et contra* the right of intervention on behalf of the Spanish conquistadores towards the indigenous populations of the Americas. The debate revolves around the differing interpretations of 'civilization' and "the presumed barbarity of the other against whom one is intervening" (Wallerstein 2006: 20), the duty to punish the indigenous by the Europeans (especially for their idolatry and rituals of human sacrifice, among other reasons), the justification of Christian evangelization and acceptance of God by means of coercion, and so on. Though these issues might seem no more relevant as they belong to a very old historical epoch, Wallerstein clarifies why he insists upon them – "because nothing that has been said since has added anything essential to the debate" (Wallerstein 2006: 11). Its ramifications continue to haunt the present state of 'democracy' in the sense that "in the nineteenth century, the European powers proclaimed that they have a civilizing mission in the colonial world" (Wallerstein 2006: 11), while in the twentieth century this expanded onto another terrain: defense of 'human rights' and 'undoing the dictatorial regimes' across the world, most notably in the global South (i.e., the supposedly non-democratic 'other' of the democratic global North) – or wherever the interventions could have encountered *the justification from the interveners' point of view*. He continues: "The point is that the interveners argued and believed that they were *acting in ways that maximized justice*, and therefore were *morally justified* in natural laws, if not legally justified in international law [...] on the grounds that only the *violent means* used could have eradicated the patent evil that they asserted was occurring" (Wallerstein 2006: 15; my emphasis).

The side I have taken in this thesis is the one symbolically connected to Amerindians, in the sense that the Spanish 'humanist' philosopher and theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1489-1573) describes them, in his book *Democrates Segundo* or *A Second Democritus: About the Just Causes of the War Against the Indians*: as "barbarians, simple, unlettered, and uneducated, brutes totally incapable of learning anything but mechanical skills, full of vices, cruel and of a kind such that it is advisable they be *governed by others*" (Wallerstein 2006: 4-5; my emphasis). The reason why I have opted for this position –as my personal (*subjective*), critical and theoretical counter-hegemonic

position– connects to the politics of universalism and the resistance against it, as outlined before. Hence, in this thesis I took upon myself the position of a ‘barbarian’ – which corresponds, to a certain extent, to the position of “colonial difference” (Mignolo 2002: 58)– following the need to take side in response to “the central question with which the world is still concerned today”, as Wallerstein contends, namely: “Who has the right to intervene, and when and how?” (Wallerstein 2006: 4). The question of intervention is crucial not only in its linkage to the question of death (being the major subject here) but also in its linkage to the question of justice – including the *epistemic justice* or the ‘right’ of the stronger side of power-balance to intervene against the weaker side. The manifold historical implications of the issue and its *ongoing* presence in the contemporary world give but a reason to highlight what he writes in this regard:

The question –Whose right to intervene?– goes to the heart of the political and moral structure of the modern world-system. *Intervention is in practice a right appropriated by the strong.* But it is a right difficult to legitimate, and is therefore always subject to political and moral challenge. The interveners, when challenged, always resort to a moral justification – natural law and Christianity in the sixteenth century, the civilizing mission in the nineteenth century, and human rights and democracy in the late twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. (Wallerstein 2006: 27)

The point where Thrasymachus’ *views on justice* intersect with Schinkel’s *views on democracy* and Wallerstein’s *views on interventionism* is the same point where the darker (violent) side of ‘the most human system possible’ resides: the epicenter of ‘democratic’ politics of death or necropolitics proper (in relation to Mbembe’s theory of death), under the guise of life-politics or biopolitics. With regard to “the challenge now facing a critical theory of society” –as Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez (2002: 269-270) would say– their common aim is “precisely to *reveal* what the crisis of the modern project consist of and to indicate the new configurations of global power”. As my study assumes that a critical theory of death makes part of the critical theory of society, it brings forward the way that Thrasymachus speaks to us nowadays through the words of Schinkel, Wallerstein and Castro-Gómez (among other critical thinkers of the times). The Greek ‘fierce fighter’ does so to the extent that he invites us to reconsider the crisis of the *modern* project on the grounds of its hegemonic (global, interventionist, ‘democratic’, ‘humane’, life-oriented, Eurocentric, capitalist, colonial, racist and sexist) epistemic powers: the same type of epistemic sovereignty that has to be recognized along the lines of thought associated with the *epistemologies of the global imperialist North* (Santos 2007): the ‘singular’ and ‘superior’ universe of knowledge where death is supposedly ‘lost’ (Schumacher 2011), where for ‘death’ there is no space left to grow discursively, as a philosophical category, or to be reflected by a common citizen on any other grounds but in terms of its obligatory inferiority and negativity, contrary to the

life's superiority and positivity. Is this because, from the interveners' point of view, the justification of 'death' is unthinkable and impermissible, especially when death itself occurs not only as opposed to 'life' but as resistant towards the very 'democratic' and 'just' ideology of 'biopolitical' (i.e., necropolitical) epistemic sovereignty? If death has not been lost but still exists within the many worlds of epistemic pluriverse (the spaces of thinking where it is possible to claim the rights towards philosophy of death which is neither 'Western' nor 'thanatological' but properly thanatopolitical, in a transnational and geo-political sense), would it be possible to justify 'death' from perspectives that do not necessarily comply with the idea of thanatology from the interveners' (imperialist) point of view (by which, again, I imply 'the most human' and the 'most just' viewpoint possible, inasmuch as it pertains to the West and its *actual* model of democracy which is 'basically authoritarian')?

What we need, I argue, is a constructive *revision of our perspectives* onto the global philosophies and knowledges of life and death. For the revision to be feasible one needs to take a clear (viewing/ critical/ theoretical/ political) position onto the current knowledge-worlds, those that are determined by the biopolitical authority lurking from the shadow of death. My suggestion goes in favor of *anti-imperialist epistemic visions of the global South*. Close to Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) and his understanding of 'countervisuality', together with Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) and his understanding of the 'epistemologies of the South', this is what I propose as a counter-force strategy against the hegemonic epistemic regimes pertaining to the global imperialist North. It is motivated by the need to have our epistemic horizons expanded beyond the canonic readings of the world, its history and its properties exclusively through the imperialist ('Eurocentric', 'democratic', 'just', 'universal') preserve of knowledge that is essentially interventionist. As Wallerstein reminds us:

The history of the modern world-system has been in large part a history of the expansion of European states and peoples into the rest of the world. This has been an essential part of the construction of a capitalist world economy. The expansion has involved, in most regions of the world, military conquest, economic exploitation, and massive injustices. Those who have led and profited most from this expansion have presented it to themselves and the world *as justified on the grounds of the greater good* that such expansion has had for the world's populations. The usual argument is that the expansion has spread something variously called civilization, economic growth and development, and/or progress. All of these words have been interpreted as expressions of universal values, encrusted in what is often called natural law. Therefore, it has been asserted that this expansion was not merely beneficial to humankind but also *historically inevitable*. (Wallerstein 2006: 1; my emphasis)

If the expansionist/interventionist policies for 'the greater good' of the humankind have brought forward the kind of knowledge that has imposed itself not only as

‘universal’ but also superior, I position the idea of plural knowledges of ‘death’ in relation to the singular, dominant biopolitical episteme of ‘life’ and its epistemologically colonized ‘others’. At the same time, I am making an appeal towards the *decolonization of transnational epistemologies of death*. It is here that I see the germ of a potentially *thanatopolitical philosophy* beyond the existent concept of thanatological philosophy that Schumacher suggests. This, I argue, could gradually and eventually pave the way towards the epistemic decolonization of our viewpoints onto the death-worlds (if not the decolonization of the world as such), most notably in terms of liberating our ‘politics of looking’ and decontaminating our epistemologically contested visions. The issue here resonates with what Marie Battiste calls “cognitive imperialism or cognitive assimilation” (Battiste 2000: 192). When she writes about it, most notably in relation to the Aboriginal context in Canada, she indicates that it is a phenomenon “also known as cultural racism [in terms of] the imposition of one worldview on a people who have an alternative worldview, with the implication that the imposed worldview is superior to the alternative worldview” (Battiste 2000: 192-193). The imposition of a singular worldview onto the world experienced in the plurality of views brings the discussion closer to the notion of ‘political violence’. By this I refer to the context of globalization and, more precisely, to the phenomenon and conditions of *globality* in its irrevocable association with some complementary phenomena such as: modernity, coloniality, and colonial matrix of power. If “global social justice is not possible without global cognitive justice” (Santos 2014), then global perspectives on death are impossible without anti-imperialist epistemic visions of the global South, that is: from the viewpoint that contests the preeminence of Northern epistemologies where death has been allegedly ‘lost’ or where every reflection about death, if any, merely serves the imperial interests (even if they have to be publicly concealed). The issue of ‘universal (biopolitical) rationality’, being constitutive for ‘universal (biopolitical) epistemology’, is but the starting point in dealing with such a contestation for the sake of our hospitality (theoretically, at least) towards the *epistemic ‘other’* – by which I imply the emergent subjectivity of the global anti-imperialist South.

This is proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos who explains how our misunderstanding of the supposedly ‘universal reason’ relates to the cognitive power formations precisely because “they are not necessarily universally valid, even when they purport to be general theories” (Santos 2012: 43). So, he adds, “if the epistemological diversity of the world is to be accounted for, other theories must be developed and anchored in other epistemologies – *the epistemologies of the South* that adequately account for the realities of the global South” (Santos 2012: 43; my emphasis). One of the possible options in response to that is the theory which articulates what Santos calls, in one of his earlier works, ‘the emergent subjectivity (of the South)’:

Emergent subjectivity is a subjectivity of the South and flourishes in the South. Given the asymmetries of the world system, however, the constitution of a subjectivity of the South varies according to the regions of the world system in which it occurs. Thus, in core countries, it involves the defamiliarization vis-à-vis the imperial North. This process of defamiliarization is a very difficult one because the North has no memory of itself as other than imperial. Let me illustrate this difficulty with the example of Jurgen Habermas. When he was asked if his theory could be of any use to the socialist forces in the Third World and if, on the other hand, such forces could in turn be of any use to democratic socialist struggles in advanced countries, Habermas replied: 'I am tempted to say 'no' in both cases. I am aware of the fact that this is a Eurocentric limited view. I would rather pass the question'. What this reply means is that Habermas' communicative rationality, in spite of its pretense of universality, starts out by excluding about 4/5 of the world population from participation in discourse. (Santos 1995: 579-580)

Accordingly, the conditions pertaining to the core capitalist regions –in terms of their expansionist/interventionist logic (as earlier described by Wallerstein, 2006) and the superiority of their epistemological visions (as proposed by al-Masseri, 2010 and Battiste, 2000)– define my critique around the global imperialist North and its proper epistemic regime of power. I treat it as the *imperialist epistemological vision of the global North* where the idea about the 'loss' of death', among many other contested issues, finds its roots. Opposite to that, I associate the anti-imperialist epistemic regime with the notion of countervisuality or the *anti-imperialist epistemological vision of the global South*, where 'death' has not been lost but has been instrumentalized, both in terms of necropolitics and thanatopolitics. The counter-hegemonic visuality of the global anti-imperialist South is positioned on the other side of the division line between the 'democratic' world of the global North and 'non-democratic' worlds of the global South. The body of knowledge epitomized by such a vision and accumulated therein includes manifold perspectives (both theoretical and empirical) associated with the counter-perspectives that do not necessarily overlap with those imposed by the global imperialist North. Being the 'other' of the North conceives of the positions that are essentially *counter-positions* – they are running counter to the center of the power-dynamics, which is why I insist on the concepts such as anti-imperialism, counter-hegemony, countervisuality, epistemic 'other', the global South, and so on. Therefore, the South –as I use it in this study– does not necessarily denote the conditions of the globe's Southern hemisphere; instead, it denotes the global conditions of essential asymmetry and inequality concerning the 'democratic' intervention of epistemic sovereignty over the worldwide populations at large. I identify the South through the power-balance on the side of the epistemic world-systems that claim to be counter-hegemonic and anti-imperialist in relation to the ruling authority of the global imperialist North and its hegemonic system of values (supposedly 'just', 'universal',

‘democratic’ and exclusively life-oriented). In turn, the global imperialist North is hereby understood as a power dominion of ultimate epistemic sovereignty, enforced by the ongoing matrix of pan-European (US-Eurocentric) knowledge-world and its modernist (colonial, capitalist, racist, sexist, and so on) enforcement of the ‘universal reason’ (Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodriguez 2002).

In this context, to look for ‘death’ where it might have been ‘lost’ means to look at the world from the counter-hegemonic, anti-imperialist perspective epitomized by the emergent subjectivity of the South. This also means to understand the epistemic matrix of the world’s knowledges not only from the ‘democratic’ plurality of visions pertinent to the global North, but from the *pluriverse* of supposedly non-democratic perspectives. This uncovers not only ‘what the crisis of the modern project consist of’ (in terms of Castro-Gómez) but also the manifold alternative histories that emerge from the *experience of the South* – which is basically the experience of the victims (including the victims of epistemic sovereignty) or the experience of human suffering under conditions of epistemic sovereignty of the global North. In the present thesis, I understand this experience in relation to “life in the zones of social abandonment” (Biehl 2001) and to the “living dead” (Mbembe 2003): the members of global humankind so far suppressed, silenced, eliminated, unrecognized, excluded, forgotten and/or abandoned on the dark side of ‘democracy’ as part of the imperialist authoritarian project *par excellence*. By this I imply the zones of social abandonment where the living conditions of a human being are closer to death than to a decent form of life, due to numerous circumstances (some of them might include the so-called economic crisis, the other may relate to drastic conditions under colonial occupation, and so on): they are the many and varied communities of global population whose members could also be described as ‘already dead’ (Cazdyn 2012) or the categories of humankind upon which the sovereign power confers the status of a ‘living dead’: this happens as a way of violent exclusion from the fabric of social and political life to which the ‘living dead’ belong but ‘do not fit anymore’ because (according to the sovereign power) they are useless and ‘worthless’.

Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment

Who are the ‘worthless’ human subjects of the world? In other words, for the ones who live their life in ‘democracy’ as we know it today – as ‘ultimately the most human system possible’ (Schinkel 2013), what does it mean to be *human in comparison to being inhuman*? I will hereby expose but one exemplary answer. When the South American anthropologist João Guilherme Biehl (2001) poses these questions it is with a very

special idea in mind: he refers to “a place in the South of Brazil called Vita” (Biehl 2001: 131). Founded in 1987 by “a former street kid and drug dealer”, Vita was “a squatted private property near downtown Porto Alegre” turned into “a precarious rehabilitation center for drug addicts and alcoholics” (Biehl 2001: 131). Gradually, its “mission enlarged” due to the fact that

an increasing number of homeless, mentally ill, and dying persons began to be dumped there by the police, by the psychiatric and general hospitals, by families and neighbors. Vita’s team then opened an infirmary, where these human beings –most of them without documents or without names– were waiting *with death*. (Biehl 2001: 131)

What does it feel for a living human being to ‘wait with death’?² Biehl looked for the answers to this question throughout the 1990s while approaching Vita as a paradigmatic case, “the real place to understand which forms governance and humanness were taking in Brazil” (Biehl 2001: 131). For an anthropologist concerned with the forms of governance *over* humanness, as I would add, Vita reflects the ways “how new technical, political, and medical strategies were impacting processes of social and biological change among the poorest in urban centers” (Biehl 2001: 131). As he later explains, this inquiry was part of his bigger project – “an ethnographic journey to document the experience of marginal and poor people afflicted by AIDS in several regions of Brazil” (Biehl 2001: 131). He continues:

Since 1992, I had been charting the new institutions and cultural processes that were emerging through the World Bank–funded management of AIDS. By 1992, the World Bank had approved an unusual loan of 250 million dollars for the creation of a new national program that was supposed to control what many international health experts were calling ‘the africanization of AIDS in Brazil’. [...] Gerson Winkler, then coordinator of the AIDS program of the city of Porto Alegre, was very critical of the new AIDS management (which he was also a part of): ‘It’s a big lie. What is really at stake is the making of a *clear division between the ones who have access to the financial and medical provisions of the AIDS world and the ones who don’t*. Poor people are lost in the fight for access. The machine does not absorb the demand. It is a fictional government’. (Biehl 2001: 131; my emphasis)

This experience of social exclusion –the result of strategic partitioning of society by transnationally funded public health programs– is elaborated further through what

² With regard to their ‘waiting with death’ and from a very broad perspective, I apply the category of ‘living dead’ – beside other possible cases (‘economic suicides’, ‘suicide bombers’, ‘self-immolators’, etc.) – to terminally ill patients whose calls for help against unbearable suffering, by certain forms of assisted suicide, are either largely ignored or legally responded to in very limited world-zones (Switzerland, for instance).

Biehl calls the “pharmaceutical governance” (Biehl 2006: 206-239). Within that framework, the case of Vita was sufficient to understand “what being human in this land is becoming” (Biehl 2001: 132). Given the dividing line between those who count as ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ and those who –due to their ‘anomalies’– must be kept on the other side, Biehl realized very soon that the human beings deposited in Vita were treated as “life’s leftovers” (Biehl 2001: 132). So he asks: “What kind of *social order* could allow such a disposal of the Other in Vita without indicting itself”? (Biehl 2001: 133; my emphasis). Upon visiting the place in 1995, and then again two years later, he examined the precarious existence and function of human life deteriorated to the level of mere garbage or, in his more discreet terms, “the wasted bodies” or “what is left of the human”. He describes them as *abandonados*, which also became one of the keynote terms for my own study, to denote “human beings – most of them without documents or without names [...] diseased, criminal, and abandoned bodies” (Biehl 2001: 131-132). To face these “unclaimed lives in terminal desolation” (Biehl 2001: 132) means to face “the ‘animalization’ of human beings in Vita [but also] to examine some of the bureaucratic procedures and moral actions that help to make these people *socially invisible* as they are abandoned to this most extreme misfortune” (Biehl 2001: 133-134; my emphasis). Therefore, to ‘live’ on the darker side of democracy signifies to be ‘already dead’: to be ‘socially included through dying in exclusion’. The people he describes are the sick and the deceased among the poorest in the Porto Alegre region, destined to the ‘most extreme misfortune’ in the sense of humankind treated as no longer ‘useful’. Their treatment is such due to the fact that they are not only lacking good health but also documents, even names: hence, they are perceived by their society as worth nothing – as Biehl argues further:

Today, in the democratically and economically readjusting environment of Brazil, sick and impoverished groups are *not directly killed by the state* (even though police violence is still frequent) or *made politically dead* (that is, excluded from political life). As I see it in Vita and throughout the experience of AIDS in Brazil: *the ones incapable of living up to the new requirements of market competitiveness and profitability are socially included through their dying in abandonment.* (Biehl 2001: 139)

From a perspective closer to our own times, twenty years after Biehl’s initial research, the case of Brazilian *abandonados* calls to mind numerous other examples of human suffering across the world due to the same or related reasons. The segregation they involve is based upon the exercise of institutional and supranational power over worldwide populations or the humanity relegated to the status of socially invisible bodies that are treated as ultimately wasted and worthless: the forms of life that are “already dead” in the sense of “that state when one has been killed but has yet to die, or when one has died but has yet to be killed [...] a subjectivity that is specific to the contemporary moment of late capitalism” (Cazdyn 2012: 163). This is the major category

of people –the so-called human beings (or what is ‘left’ of them) whom Biehl calls the *abandonados* – that I put forward in my later examination of ‘economic suicides’ (as they occur in the South of Europe under the most recent wave of economic recession and the severe austerity regime imposed therein) or in contemporary Palestine (under the strategic death-politics of the colonial state that I call the necro-coloniality of power).

Given Biehl’s accounts of *abandonados*, one of my aims in the present thesis is to raise the questions about the ‘living dead’ in general and their thanatopolitical forms of self-sacrifice (or so-called suicides) in particular. What interests me is the visibility and invisibility of their relation to the questions of knowledge at large, especially to the contemporary geo-politics of knowledge around the matters of life and death, and how the many allegedly unrelated concepts of death (most notably understood as ‘self-violent’) pertain to some vital political demands at the dawn of the third millennium. In that sense, I will later argue that there is no self-violence without epistemic violence, by which the major epistemological rupture discloses itself between two poles: on one side, the cognitive imperialism of hegemonic death-politics or necropolitics against the ‘other’; on the other side, the pluriverse of anti-imperialist epistemic visions centered on counter-hegemonic death-politics or thanatopolitics. Accordingly, I focus on the *fundamental division within the concept of death itself*, rather than only on the relation between the concept of death and the concept of life. The reason is simple: my aim is to reveal the positive aspects of thanatopolitics in comparison to the negativity of necropolitics, or the constructive dimensions of anti-imperialist ‘self-violence’ on behalf of the ‘living dead’ when confronted with the destructive dimensions of imperialist ‘epistemic violence’ on behalf of the sovereign power. It is in-between these two types of death-power –the power of the sovereign (enlarged to the status of necro-colonial power) and the ‘power of the people’ (reduced to the status of ‘living dead’)– where I situate the epistemic sovereignty of actual democratic regime as ‘ultimately the most human system possible’.³

Epistemic Decolonization

If the ‘living dead’ are the product of humankind’s ‘animalization’ (or even ‘africanization’) on behalf of the hegemonic, imperialist (‘democratic’) power regimes,

³ When using the phrase ‘power of the people’ I refer to the literal translation of the ancient Greek term denoting ‘direct democracy’ (δημοκρατία or *dēmokratia*) from *dēmos* ‘the people’ and *-kratia* ‘power, rule’, not the ‘parliamentary democracy’ as it has come to be known ever since.

whose “bureaucratic procedures and moral actions [...] help to make these people socially invisible as they are abandoned to this most extreme misfortune” (Biehl 2001: 133-134), how can we justify their emergence to visibility from such aberrant and humiliating conditions if it manifests their ultimate quest for a democratic cause through their own ‘self-violent’ death? My argument is that this is possible via another, anti-imperialist type of subjectivity that stands for the radical example of *epistemic decolonization* for which, as it seems so far, a Western man is not ready yet. If the processes of defamiliarization vis-à-vis the imperialist North remain difficult both inside and outside the limits of northern epistemologies, as Santos suggests, the emergent subjectivity invites us to familiarize ourselves vis-à-vis the anti-imperialist South. This is to say: to engage in the processes of epistemic decolonization by re-directing our ‘singular’ perspective from the ruling northern epistemologies towards other possible directions. This demands a continuous work towards always more profound attempts to make visible what has slipped from our view over the course of history as a given (including the ‘officially’ lost status of ‘death’ in Western philosophy). By the notion of *history* I mean the timeline of human evolution, demarcated by strategic colonial goals (in terms of material and physical expansion, but also the immaterial, *epistemic occupation* or *epistemic colonization* of the world) on behalf of the imperialist regimes of the global North – in the name of ‘democracy’, ‘modernity’, ‘globalization’, ‘civilization’, ‘progress’, ‘justice’ and so on. These goals have not only been pertinent to traditional European aspirations towards the global hegemony (nowadays coupled with all the more pervasive aspirations of the United States); rather, they have been determined and perpetuated by an ongoing colonial matrix of power, centralized primarily (though not exclusively) around the Anglo-Saxon linguistic axis of world-domination.⁴ Therefore, by ‘epistemic decolonization’ or ‘de-coloniality’ I refer to “the horizons to imagine and act toward global futures in which the notion of a political enemy is replaced by intercultural communication and towards an-other rationality that puts life first [*even if it demands, under certain conditions, the forms of self-sacrificial ‘death’, in epistemic terms or otherwise; my remark*] and that places institution at its service, rather than the other way around” (Mignolo and Escobar 2010: i).

If our views on “imperialism as a historical practice” (al-Masserri 2010) are inseparable from those on the dominance of Western vision of the world, I approach the imperialist epistemologies of the global North and its sovereign rationality from a counter-perspective: it is close to aforementioned anti-imperialist positions in philosophy and social theory as they attempt at producing the “critique of ideology

⁴ According to numerous contemporary decolonial thinkers (many of them being of Latin American, African, Near Eastern and Asian origin) this matrix of power has been ongoing at least since the colonial ‘discovery’ of the Americas.

from the South” (Sørensen 2009, in relation to Dussel).⁵ Hence, to talk about the epistemological visions of the world is to talk about imperialism/ globality/ coloniality/ modernity or the matrix of global/ colonial power that Walter Dignolo calls “the darker side of modernity” as the “other face” of coloniality (Dignolo 2011) – or the darker side of ‘actual’ democracy, as I would add. Although my references to Dignolo are prevalent in discussing the issues of coloniality, it is worth noting that it was not him who coined the concept itself. Dignolo makes explicit his own reference to the origins of the term *coloniality* while recalling the groundbreaking work of the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano whose text “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America” stands for a seminal piece of contemporary scholarship around the subject (Quijano 2000).

Quijano’s major argument revolves around the concepts of global hegemony, power and coloniality. He analyzes them from a perspective that centers on the idea of a “new global power” (at the top level of what we experience today as the process of ‘democratic globalization’), the idea conceived and enforced by two parallel, historical and still ongoing processes: “the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism” (Quijano 2000: 533). What he particularly points out in this context is situated around the idea of racism or, more precisely, the *racial axis of power* – which I apply to the ‘democratic’ processes of ‘animalization’ or ‘africanization’ that confer the status of ‘living dead’ to certain members of the world population. Quijano understands such an axis to have been born by the *colonial matrix of power*, the segregation processes inherent to it and the particular, dominant or ruling form of its ratio (i.e. *Eurocentric ratio-nality*). Thus, the colonial matrix of power has been conceived upon the Eurocentric, modern, capitalist and racial rationality of ruling authority (in Americas, in this case) or the global colonial matrix of power around which the US-Eurocentric model of power continuously operates in the globalized world as we know it today. Quijano explains this in the following sense: “The social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race [equals] a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism” (Quijano 2000: 533). Hence, his main argument – and for the discussion in this study the most important – concerns what he explains as “the model of power that is globally hegemonic today [and] presupposes an element of coloniality”.

Dignolo further explains the same concept in his own words while introducing another important element - the counter-hegemonic notion of ‘de-coloniality’:

⁵ Enrique Dussel speaks of the imperialist narrative and ideology as deformed for several main reasons. One of them has been heavily dependent on an explanation of European ‘superiority’ from a “Eurocentric point of view [that] assumes Modernity as exclusively European [...] and only as a result of inter-European phenomena.” Among these phenomena Dussel explicitly names Enlightenment, the ideology of the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. See Dussel 2006: 494.

The basic thesis is the following: ‘modernity’ is a European narrative that hides its darker side, ‘coloniality’. Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity – there is no modernity without coloniality. Hence, today the common expression ‘global modernities’ imply ‘global colonialities’ in the precise sense that the *colonial matrix of power* (coloniality, for short) is being disputed by many contenders: if there cannot be modernity without coloniality, there cannot be either global modernities without global colonialities. That is the logic of the polycentric capitalist world of today. Consequently, de-colonial thinking and doing emerged, from the sixteenth century on, as responses to the oppressive and imperial bent of modern European ideals projected to, and enacted in, the non-European world. (Mignolo 2009: 39)

For Mignolo, the notion of coloniality is doubtlessly intertwined with modernity: it makes part of a triple structure that delineates the actual critique of modernity and he describes it as follows:

One type is internal to the history of Europe itself and in that sense these premises are a *Eurocentered* critique of modernity (for example, psychoanalysis, Marxism, poststructuralism, postmodernity), and the other two types emerged from non-European histories entangled with Western modernity. One of them focuses on the idea of *Western civilization* (for example, dewesternization, Occidentosis), and the other on *coloniality* (such as postcoloniality, decoloniality). The three types of critiques are analyzed in relation to their point of origination and their routes of dispersion. Postmodernity originated in Europe but dispersed around the world. *Decoloniality originated among Third World countries after the Bandung Conference in 1955, and also dispersed all over the world.* Dewesternization originated in East Asia, but the dewesternizing argument can be found in other parts of the world. (Mignolo 2011, xi-xii; my emphasis)

Following Mignolo, decolonial thinking is constituted as a critical position that is, first and foremost, *critical vis-à-vis modernity as coloniality and modernity as globality*. Its origin is in the so-called Third World: hence, it is *external to the center(s) of power* – understood as both historical colonial power (Europe) and its continuation through the global power (US/European axis, i.e. the global imperialist North in geopolitical terms).⁶ As the critique of modernity, it does not exist by itself (i.e., isolated from other critical positions) but *within the network* of other critical positions toward modernity (having the shortest distance from the position of dewesternization, in Mignolo’s terms). As a way of

⁶ In that sense, it is also worth noticing the importance that Mignolo, among many others before and after him, gives to the historical event held in 1955 in Indonesia. See, for instance, See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya, eds., *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-african Conference for International Order* (Singapore: The National University of Singapore Press, 2008) and Mark T. Berger, *The Battle for Asia: From Decolonization to Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2004).

looking at the world and through the world, decoloniality embodies a critical position of the 'South' not only as a historically *intro*-spective and *retro*-spective position (looking back towards modernity since the beginning of globalization and the European colonial expansion); rather, it appropriates both intro- and retro-spective views so it could propose another perspective towards modernity: 'trans-perspective' or the *trans-modern* perspective. The trans-modern perspective is directed towards *re-visioning of the international society*.⁷ Hence, the trans-modern perspective –drafted on the occasion of the 1955 Bandung Conference, the germ of the forthcoming Non-Aligned Movement of developing countries (that is, of the so-called Third World)– makes the formal embryo of the idea of de-coloniality according to Mignolo, and situates it within a long, anti-imperial *scenario of the transformation*: from the *postcolonial* South (in its historical and administrative sense) towards the global *decolonial* South (in its geopolitical and epistemological sense).

Mignolo's 'darker side' of modernity brings us back to Thrasymachus, Wallerstein, Castro-Gómez, and Schinkel (and to the subjects of 'justice', 'interventionism', and 'democracy'): because talking about the 'coloniality of power' means to talk about the overall 'project of governmentability' as instituted by the global imperialist North, including its life/death axis of power and the epistemologies of life and death therein. This encompasses the issues inherent to discourses around the global epistemologies under the colonial matrix of power (such as sovereignty and power, governance and governmentability, coloniality and modernity, rationality and universality, imperialism and anti-imperialism, hegemony and counter-hegemony, globalization and anti-globalization social movements, biopolitics (necropolitics) and thanatopolitics, life and death. To read the effects of death's invisibility (or its 'loss') as constructed or imposed by and within the epistemic universe of the global imperialist North is to understand them as results of *epistemic violence*: its main goal consists in excluding the 'unfavorable' regimes of power from the global epistemic pluriverse with the aim of preserving the ruling authority of the 'one and only' sovereign biopolitical regime centered on 'life'. By advocating these *exclusionist principles* in the construction of a sovereign knowledge, the governance of imperialist life-policies does not only eradicate some 'abstract' and 'unimportant' categories such as 'death'; instead, it establishes measures of control and

⁷ The ambition toward such a re-visioning has its roots in the South, namely, in the Asian South and Southeast, with bridges towards Africa. This primarily relates to five countries (Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia and Pakistan) then newly liberated from the colonial powers that "in December 1954 [...] announced a plan for a conference of Asian, African and Middle Eastern states [...] for a sustained campaign to end colonial rule in the non-European world and its corollary of white supremacy. It was the first major conference of non-European states and led to the creation of the nonaligned movement". See Cary Fraser, "An American Dilemma. Race and Realpolitik in the American Response to the Bandung Conference, 1955", in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 115–116.

regulation regarding 'death' over the global populations' worldviews, both in negative terms (when it comes to *explicit* legal prohibition of homicide and suicide) and in 'positive' terms (when it comes to *implicit* stimulation of homicide and suicide for the purposes that fit the political, economic, and military goals of the global imperialist North). Thus, it contributes to the overall project of global epistemic sovereignty and its 'democratic'/totalizing/authoritarian vision of the world centered exclusively on 'death' under the guise of 'life itself'.

This kind of violent epistemic conditioning imposes the measures of *visual austerity* by which 'death' is reduced to invisibility, prohibited or 'lost'. In the context of contemporary neoliberal 'democracies' and the ruling authority of their imperialist epistemic regime, the actual situation surrounding 'death' is the result of a misbalanced dynamics of power: the *imperialist epistemic regime* centered on (happy) life remains bright, safe and secure while continuing to exercise the *violent* control over the subjugated forms of knowledge (and the viewpoints therein) behind the shadow of ongoing death-politics. The violence targets anti-imperialist rationalities, histories and epistemologies that urge us to look into the very darkness of the imperialist knowledge-world (as Thrasymachus does, for instance) or to look at the darker side of 'the most human system possible' – the so-called 'Western neoliberal democracy' – as Schinkel suggests. To look into its darkness means to develop a relationship with the very idea of death: to understand the logic according to which the sovereignty of an imperialist matrix of power resides precisely in its potency of exposing and overexposing to 'death' not only the humans (in terms of their subjugated experience of *living* under aberrant conditions closer to 'death' than to a decent life, and also in terms of their subjection to sovereign power's decision to literally kill people at its own whim) but also the 'rival knowledges' of the global anti-imperialist South.

This is related to the following fact: the ruling biopolitical regime of life-centered visibility eclipses everything else; thus, what remains invisible on behalf of other regimes of visibility, subjected to the ruling one, is either buried in the 'death-worlds' of knowledge or awaits to be unearthed so that the *epistemic justice* could be, eventually, satisfied. In comparison to the visibility of the singular knowledge, enforced and maintained by the ruling authority of the dominant epistemology and its regime of visibility, the fact is that the very invisibility of many knowledges has been victim of epistemic violence or the so-called epistemicide (as earlier explained by Santos 1995: 570). If the main political objective of the ruling 'biopolitical' (necropolitical) regime is to keep its imperialist prominence above every other possible world of knowledge, then this is enforced by its own (imperialist, 'universal', 'democratic, interventionist) logic of 'justice' which is "what is good for the ruling authority" or "what is good for the stronger", as Thrasymachus properly says. If this logic plays such a crucial part in our worlds of knowledge, then there must be a way to respond to *the question of injustice* (that is intrinsic to 'actual' democracy) from the anti-imperialist perspective, that is, from the

viewpoint of the global anti-imperialist South. *This* question, and no other, must be dealt with behind the mask of the authority ruling over the world of knowledge as biopolitics (i.e., necropolitics - the imperialist regime of the global North) as the singular and the only possible regime in charge of 'universal' knowledge. In this context, to act in a properly counter-hegemonic/decolonial way means to take the legitimate anti-imperialist perspective and confront ourselves with the questions of imperialist 'justice' and injustice, and the questions of *epistemic crimes* against the many worlds of knowledge and the many 'living dead', too. Hence, starting from the 'crime situation' against knowledge(s), including those on 'death', it becomes possible to argue about the epistemological visions of the world as inseparable from *the ruling (imperialist) regime of life*. Yet, for such arguments to be questioned anew, philosophy is not enough: they must rely upon the discursive and theoretical axis involving disciplines pertinent to the matters of justice, authority and violence, but also to the matters of visibility/invisibility (where disciplines such as art history and image-analysis could play a significant role, as I will show in the next part). In that sense, *political* and *visual* philosophies are but a suggestion, that I put forward hereby, to be taken in the direction that could demarcate the horizons of future thanatopolitical philosophy - and put the 'democratic' (imperialist) politics of epistemological visions under scrutiny through what Thrasymachus, among others, still has to teach us.

Chapter 5

Anti-Imperialist Epistemologies of the Global South and the Epistemic Decolonization of ‘Death’

How do the anti-imperialist epistemologies of the global South apply to the epistemic decolonization of ‘death’ – in practical terms? In this chapter, I will examine some possible answers to this question over the issue of self-afflicted death and its (mis)representation by the hegemonic/ ‘Western’/ patriarchal/ male subject of sovereignty. To do so, I will pay particular attention to the so-called ‘terror of negativity’ in the global imperialist North, on the one hand, and the urge for critical distance from northern epistemologies, on the other hand. The search for ‘death’, which is allegedly lost, remains one of the main concerns in this thesis, in the footsteps of Schumacher’s claims about a contemporary Western man who, “in order to safeguard his happiness [...] has contrived to stop thinking at all about death and, more particularly, about his own death, to deny it in a way by maintaining a stony silence with regard to it” (Schumacher 2011: ix).

Schumacher’s argument with regard to the prevalence of ‘happiness’ at the expense of ‘death’ (i.e., an ultimate ‘unhappiness’) is further supported by another argument which is applicable to the ‘Western’ epistemic universe. It concerns the governance of an ‘ethic of happiness’ in the neoliberal ‘positivity society.’ The argument appears in the book *Beyond Depression: A New Approach to Understanding and Management*, written by the British medical scientist and general practitioner Christopher Dowrick. One of his aims is to break the hermeneutic code around the scientific and popular models of understanding depression, a phenomenon that “in the sense of being low in spirits or having a mental disorder, is an increasingly common concept in the western world” (Dowrick 2009: 4). As repeatedly highlighted in his more recent writings and their summaries elsewhere, “from a cultural perspective, in western Anglophone societies we have developed an ethic of happiness, within which aberrations from the norm are assumed to indicate illness” (Dowrick 2009: 229). Accordingly, in linguist Anna Wirzbicka’s words (quoted in Dowrick 2009: 111), “when one looks at English from a

cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective the thought suggests itself that modern English has isolated the pain associated with a loved person's death as a kind of anomaly in human life." My question at this point concerns the following: is this 'anomaly' what makes death and related 'negative' phenomena (such as pain, sadness and suffering) so profoundly virulent and obscene that it borders today with the 'pornography of death' (Schumacher 2011) so we cannot but relate to it in terms of shame and contagion? Is 'death' the kind of *negativity* that *terrorizes* the 'happy life' of a Western man? Dowrick takes a critical –and historically accentuated– distance from such a 'negativity' and makes further comments on these claims:

There seems to me to be a trend in English-speaking societies, dating back at least to Jeremy Bentham and the utilitarians, to assume that we have an expectation, a right, even an obligation to happiness, and to restrict the range of negative emotions which are considered acceptable and normal. Commercial, professional, and organizational interest groups may therefore be doing no more than exploiting our cultural perceptions, not creating them, and deriving their positions from the basis of a set of commonly held value judgments. I think that modern English is doing its best to exorcise woes, sorrows, and grief from the fabric of normal life. [...] Meanwhile, happiness has come to be seen as the stuff of everyday life (Dowrick 2009: 111-112).

The continuous legacy of utilitarian philosophy is crucial for Dowrick's critical accounts of the new forms of power (which are not only '*positive*' but also *sovereign*). My argument is that this power is able to exploit our value judgments on the basis of its self-proclaimed ethics of happiness which is inseparable from the capitalist logic itself. To examine this argument, I rely upon Bentham's argumentation in favor of the maximization of happiness (or the minimization of loss, in terms of losing one's wealth as little as possible). In this regard, his 'calculative' approach is but a necessary step in understanding the connection among the 'Western' ethics of happiness, the utilitarian capitalist logic and the Eurocentric 'democratic' project: this step leads towards the origins of the current utilitarian power across Bentham's notion of happiness in relation to the (material) wealth of a man 'deprived of death'. What he basically maintains is that the unhappiness comes as "the effect produced by a portion of wealth which is leaving the hands of its former possessor" (Bentham 1871: 105). Accordingly, "the loss of a portion of wealth will produce in the total happiness of the loser a defalcation greater or less, according to the proportion of the part lost, to the part which remains" (Bentham 1871: 106). Hence, his main message goes as follows: "Take away from a man the fourth part of his fortune, and you take away the fourth part of his happiness" (Bentham 1871: 106). Should this proposal be viewed as the cornerstone of the utilitarian philosophy (that, in large part, constitutes the ethics of a Western man according to Dowrick), it grounds Bentham's formulations of the principle of utility "which approves of an action

in so far as an action has an overall tendency to promote the greatest amount of happiness" (Mau 2006: 563).

Given the influence of Bentham's position in the Anglosphere, one could say that his utilitarianism sustains the entire Anglo-American ('Western') philosophy of law at the center of the neoliberal matrix of politico-juridical global power – which, in turn, has profoundly shaped the very understanding of life- and death-values in the global imperialist North. I dare to say that such an understanding extends to the point of conceiving 'life' and the politics of life (biopolitics) as dominant over 'death' and the politics of death, but also as unquestionably 'just' in comparison to the 'unjust' issue of death. Bentham's view is sustained by his personal example that traces back this logic to the very moment of his own death. Given Bentham's awareness about the 'maximum of loss' brought about by the end of life, it is without any surprise that he had 'prepared' himself for his own death properly and in advance. I assume that he saw 'death' as a radical and irrevocable condition where all that is worth living (life itself, that is, the material wealth therein) will be lost by the mere fact of life's ending. If this is so, the loss of 'my own life' (being the highest stake of all I could put in a bid) relates to the loss of happiness/ positivity/ wealth accumulated during my lifetime – in exchange for 'my own death'. Bentham takes this formula as a challenge to the utilitarian doctrine from an ultimately personal viewpoint: if the stake is so huge and the loss is so irrevocable, what was he supposed to do so the loss of his own life, through death, could be optimally reduced: how to deal with an expectation of *keeping* the maximum possible positivity from the mere fact of dying, instead of gaining the maximum expectable negativity (death itself)? Hence, for a utilitarian such as Bentham (whose life, i.e., wealth, positivity, happiness, and so on, must be irrevocably terminated at some point of time), one of the main questions is how to 'keep' the values of his life still visibly present when he is no more alive? To put it differently: from a utilitarian viewpoint, how could I keep the 'wealth' of my own life once I am definitively dead, in terms of *not giving away* the alleged happiness and positivity epitomized by the mere fact of being alive? What could I do, without losing everything from the mere fact of living, at the point of time when my life reaches (in Bentham's sense) the 'minimum of its value? Reaching the minimum of life's value here equates with the moment of dying.¹

Given Bentham's pragmatic attitude towards the future state of his own body as a corpse, the corporeality here plays a significant role: it literally stands for the

¹ In another chapter, when speaking of many forms of social life *waiting with death* – such as Brazilian 'abandonados', the people in the zones of social abandonment, the victims of so-called Eurozone economic suicides (or even the terminally ill patients prone to assisted suicide) I contest this view in the sense that the minimum of life's value, in a vocabulary close to Bentham, can be aligned not with the moment of dying itself but with the borderline between 'life' and 'death' as interchangeable terms, where one's life is closer to death than to a decent form of living.

'*embodiment*' of his utilitarian rationality. His decision to control and restrict the amount of life's loss to a minimum (once he dies) set up his motivations to have his own body (the 'container' of happiness, so to say) preserved forever, as a sort of 'mummy' that even has its proper name: the 'Auto-Icon'.² I refer now to Bentham's utilitarian thought as objectified into a sculptural matter that testimonies about the application of his doctrine to his self-aware 'self-exposure' in death. In this line of thought, the 'Auto-Icon' is not only meant to serve the scientific purposes (following the 'altruistic' gesture of its donor, as Bentham himself described in his 1832 will), but to disclose – *to put on public display* – the ultimately narcissistic and materialist rationality of the deceased. Moreover, his utilitarian logic here allies with two supposedly contradictory categories, by which Bentham's pragmatics of living the life of ultimate 'happiness' merges with the 'unhappy' corpse of a dead person whose mere *fact of death* has not only been instrumentalized in the sense of being materialized, incarnated and visualized through the 'Auto-Icon'; moreover, it has been made 'useful' for the science due to the 'open' concept of death: the *infinitely extended* factuality of one's death in full view. To achieve the maximum of this contradiction through the artificial extension of one's own death (not life) – as Bentham's 'Auto-Icon' gives but an example – one, obviously, had to think practically: how to turn the materiality of one's own dead body into a useful image. What I imply here is the artificial and deceiving representation of 'life' on the basis of death, or the extent to which one's (actual) 'death' can be instrumentalized in material terms – as an image of oneself – while being hidden behind the mask of one's (previous) 'life'. In that sense, Bentham's utilitarianism of his 'exemplary body' is preserved at all costs and forever – 'without loss', so to say; yet, it also perversely reveals the work of death ('necropolitics' *de minimis*) behind the misleading appearance of life-politics. Bentham's 'Auto-Icon' does not only oppose the inevitability of material disfiguration (by his desire for 'immortality' against any material/ corporeal loss that death necessarily brings about): it *embodies* the logic of neoliberal material accumulation of wealth – the very 'figural materiality' of one's own corpse here stands at an extremely opposite side from the very 'abstract immateriality' of another one's corpse. As it will become more clear at a later stage of this thesis, I refer here to the kind of abstraction (Lat. *abstrahere*: to detach, to withdraw oneself) that is to be understood as the form of *radical withdrawal*. The perfect example of a total 'abstraction'/ disfiguration of one's own body in dying can be found, for instance, among the so-called 'suicide bombers': since their practice of radical withdrawal consists in having their own bodies totally destroyed by explosion, the efficiency of their act depends precisely upon the bodily disfiguration regardless of the material goods (life's 'wealth and happiness') lost in the

² See "Jeremy Bentham's auto-icon", University College London, <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/who/autoicon> (accessed on 3 February 2014).

process of dying. This, however, does not make their practice less 'utilitarian' as the aim of their death might consist exactly in "the use of death for mobilizing political life" (Murray 2006) – which is the main tenet of the thanatopolitical potentiality of self-sacrifice. Hence, in the confrontation between the northern (rational/ materialist/ imperialist/ necropolitical) and southern ('irrational'/ immaterialist/ anti-imperialist/ thanatopolitical) epistemologies of death, Bentham's utilitarian auto-icon and the disfigured body of a 'suicide bomber' stand at two radically opposed yet interlaced sides of the spectrum through which we still may examine the notions of life and death, their 'positive' and 'negative' values, and the potentials of epistemic decolonization of 'death' therein from a comparative perspective.

The utilitarian principles manifest today some of the driving forces behind the power dynamics in the 'West' while their consequences can be increasingly felt in the rest of the western-ized world. They expand to the point where Bentham's message could nowadays be popularly understood as follows: there is no positivity society where there is the idea of death – death must be 'lost' unless, cynically speaking, the bodies of the deceased could be preserved to posterity by having their corpses transformed into many and varied auto-icons, such as Bentham's. Drawing upon this rule I argue the following: if the sovereign power takes away the 'unhappy' part of human life (with the idea of death on the top of it), while claiming that there is no space for 'death' in the life of the living (i.e., that 'death' is lost), this manifests the exercise of control on behalf of the sovereign over his domain of governance and the population subjected to it *on the basis of the instrumentalization of certain ethical parameters* (the so-called ethics of happiness). Therefore, to be happy is not only to be silent about death but to be 'ethically correct' demands this silence: to avoid death in the Western world here means to support the power structure of a world-system that tends to be not only 'actually' democratic but also superior among other world-systems, including those of knowledge.

However, I assume that such a sovereignty also keeps silent about the massive production of death on its own behalf among other populations that have been exploited (and literally killed) for the sake of our 'actual' democracy since the historical beginnings of European colonial expansions, most notably since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Why is such a relation worth noting at this point? It is important, perhaps even fundamental for the subject at hand, because it demands from us to look at 'death' beyond the depoliticized, sanitizing viewpoint of the thanatological (Western) philosophy in order to take another perspective which is not only anti-colonial but properly re-politicized towards 'death'. With Bentham and Dowrick still in mind, I insist upon such a perspective since the instrumentalization of death for colonial purposes (among which the accumulation of material wealth has been but an aspect of European necropolitics) rests upon the fact that the cost of 'our' (imperial) happiness had to be paid by *their* (non-imperial) deaths. This especially relates to the massive production of death during the era of so-called colonial discoveries, or the colonization of the world at

large, which is an *ongoing* process and recalls the words of the Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel who says the following:

To understand the history of the world from a different perspective [uncovers] an alternative history that emerges *from the experience of the victims*: the ideas of those who have been invaded and dominated and who have not had the chance to express themselves. [...] The Eurocentric point of view ‘forgets’ very quickly that it was precisely the plundered resources of the colonies that have allowed the European splendor of the last 200 years (Dussel 2006: 492–494; my emphasis).

Dussel’s views probe the “emancipatory/regulatory” dichotomy of the project of modernity by emphasizing the obscurity of sovereign colonial reason and the instrumentality of death therein. Hence, it is the mortality of humankind –and not only their lives– that stands for the crucial element upon which the ‘Western man’ has exercised sovereignty over the rest of the world in order to preserve the ideas of his own versions of modernity and progress. If looking at the world from the imperialist epistemic position has allowed a ‘Western man’ to maintain his own ‘happiness’ undisturbed, it has also been inseparable from three adjoining historical phenomena: capitalism, coloniality, and globality (Mignolo 2011, Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009).³ The objective here is to show that *death itself* has been mobilized by European sovereignty for the sake of its universalist and imperialist *utilitarian* goals imposed upon the colonial territories, both old and new, through the “appropriation/violence” dichotomy (Santos 2007: 46). My point is that, behind the biopolitical mask of utilitarian pretensions, the sovereignty has continuously instrumentalized death in pursuit of its imperial interests exactly by means of necropolitics: death in the occupied territories and fabricated in the name of ‘sovereign rationality’ only perpetuated the massive and continuous reproduction of victims, always for the sake of a higher colonial cause: justified by ‘natural laws’ on the side of the stronger (who intervenes in the name of a ‘greater civilizational good’) if not by international laws, as Wallerstein would add.

These basic hypotheses around ‘death’ (in terms of its ‘loss’ from the imperialist epistemology, its instrumentality under the ongoing matrix of colonial/capitalist power, and its subservient position towards the dominance of life in biopolitical discourses), when perceived from a re-politicized, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist perspective, provide the main grounds for what I call the *necro-coloniality of power*. It

³ Similarly, when describing the myths of European ‘emancipatory’ and ‘developmentalist’ colonial project, Aimé Césaire also spoke in relation to what he defines as colonial hypocrisy: “The fact is that the so-called European civilization – ‘Western’ civilization – as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem; that Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of ‘reason’ or before the bar of ‘conscience’; and that it takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because it is less and less likely to deceive” (Césaire 1972: 2).

situates the idea of power in-between 'death-politics' (Mbembe 2003) and 'coloniality' (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009).⁴ The necro-coloniality is present wherever the imperial/colonial organization of societies and its geopolitical power prevail in terms of mobilizing death of the 'other' in pursuit of its own interests, while keeping the 'universal' reason as a privileged preserve of its 'happy' and 'ethically correct' life-politics. The imperialist epistemology is no exception to that. This is why, instead of limiting myself by the mere notions of necropolitics and/or coloniality, I put forward 'neco-coloniality of power': the notion which is another neologism proposed in order to delineate the point of intersection between theories of necropolitics and decolonial theories at large, respectively. This is the connection where, in my view, Mbembe's theoretical invention (and its consequent expansion throughout the growing network of transnational philosophy of death-politics) finds one of its most relevant points of reference for the future thanatopolitical philosophy, which I see as a proper decolonial epistemic option against the imperialist necro-coloniality of power and the darker side of 'democracy'. Schumacher and Dowrick only indirectly reveal the darker side of the current epistemology centered exclusively on 'life' and point out its relations to the biopolitical dogma within which the 'Western man', in Schumacher's terms, and the 'modern English', in Dowrick's terms, reside without 'death' or without 'pain associated with death'. The necro-coloniality of power, thus, allows me to ask: is one of the reasons why a Western man keeps forgetting about 'death' related to his own implications within the genocidal colonial politics (i.e., the politics of massive death production overseas, ever since the sixteenth century onwards)? If this is indeed the reason, should the reflections around death remain 'under the carpet' and in the atmosphere of a 'stony silence', so not to disturb a Western man by some 'unimportant' and 'irrelevant' side-effects of the democratic project that he had to undertake, together with his colonial ancestors, on the path towards 'life, liberty and happiness' into the 'best of all' worlds – the global neoliberal world?

Contrary to the presumed 'terror of negativity' centered on 'death', the current trend of producing and interpreting normal human experiences as exclusively affirmative has turned the world into a terrain governed by "the terror of positivity", as the South Korean philosopher and media theorist Byung-Chul Han claims (Tollmann 2011; Han 2013). This has not only been characteristic of an English society, as Dowrick and Wirzbicka propose, but of all westernized ('global') societies at the turn of the twenty-first century. The most apparent manifestation of such a trend has been established

⁴ When using the term 'coloniality' I am aware of its difference from the terminology applied to the European historical colonialism overseas and the notion of the white 'colonial' powers over the waters of the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the Pacific and so on. Here it implies the logic of the "colonial matrix of power". This is pointed out in scholarly writing on coloniality as "the imperial/colonial organization of societies", inclusive of historical period of colonialism yet extending up till today (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2009: 132).

through the virtual processes of populations' interconnections. On the basis of the incessant circulation and ritualization of human emotions over the Internet-based social networks (such as Facebook, for example) the affective economy operates in tune with the logic of demand, supply, and exchange of desires towards 'mutual likeness'. There, the gesture of clicking the 'like' button perpetuates the consensual demands for the construction of supposedly friendly human relationships. Additionally, it instigates the incessant multiplication of convergent affective connections, either virtual or real:

This label ['Like'], which is spreading like wildfire nowadays, has come to epitomize a new culture of friendship and friendliness. Liking or enjoying something is increasingly not a matter of subjective aesthetic taste, but has instead become a central interface of commonality transmitted through media channels. In this context friendship is not so much an extension of the individual ego into the social realm but instead, conversely, a kind of relay by means of which the cultural (and everything pertaining to the culture industry) connects its subjects to each other. In this respect the figure of over 800 million active users of the social network Facebook sends a clear message – even if there is still much racking of brains as to the kind of friendship that is now being implemented all over the world.⁵

While this proliferating logic of 'positive' attitudes leads toward the accumulation of artificially reproduced positivity (and creates what one could name 'positive cultures') the strategic reduction of negative attitudes (the lack of, so to say, 'dislike' buttons) leads to some undesirable yet inevitable counter-effects: the total omission of the Other, or his/her symbolic killing via their exclusion and elimination from one's own virtual social network. A culture that is no more culture in traditional sense but *hyperculture*, as Han understands it, has been redefined by "a complete lack of spatial or temporal intervals, times without distance and without discretion" (Tollmann 2011). Annihilating, deleting or de-friending the Other has become the only way to expose mutual disagreements online. According to Han, this reductionism in favor of positivity demonstrates not only "a surplus of positivity" but its "terror," a new kind of violence that has turned to be dominant in today's globalized society:

No other catchword dominates public discourse today more than 'transparency.' It is invoked emphatically, primarily in conjunction with freedom of information. The ubiquitous demand for transparency, which is becoming a fetish as it escalates, can be traced to a paradigm shift that is not restricted to the fields of politics and the economy alone. A society of negativity is currently giving way to a

⁵ See the Editorial for the journal *Springerin. Hefte fuer Gegenwartskunst* 2011, No. 4 (accessed on March 11, 2013), <http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft.php?id=74&pos=0&textid=0&lang=en>.

society in which negativity is increasingly being reduced in favor of positivity. Thus, transparency society initially manifests in the form of *positivity society*. (Han 2013: 1)

To sum up: Dowrick discuss a utilitarian trend in relation to happiness where our 'obligation' towards happiness is seen as acceptable and normal, while all negative emotions must be restricted; otherwise, they are interpreted as unacceptable and abnormal, whereas pain associated with death and the so-called depression are seen as anomaly to be excluded from the fabric of everyday life. Han discusses a society of negativity giving way to a 'society of likeness and happiness' which turns into a sort of world-governance whose power lies in its 'terror of positivity'. This means that, by imposing the 'ethics of happiness' onto populations, the Western society obliges people to isolate from their lives any form of negativity (such as pain associated with the death of a loved one, or the idea of death in general); at the same time, it stigmatizes any deviation from these obligations as some kind of anomaly or disease that, if present in human life, must be eradicated or cured on the premises of its 'pathological' nature. Given the previous arguments, the situation seems to be paradoxical as it brings together – under the same shield of 'Western society' – Schumacher's *happy or anti-negative* man, who stubbornly defends his luck from all forms of negativity, and Dowrick's *unhappy or negative* man, who suffers from the lack of happiness to the extent of reaching 'pathological' proportions. How do these two opposite types of man co-exist within the same (Western) society when they are brought together under the same conditions of a '*positivity*' society that is essentially *unhappy* (i.e., the society which is governed by epistemic sovereignty of a 'happy life' while constantly exposed to the 'negative death')?

Let us consider Schumacher's position in the outlined context as unconventional if not even 'heretic'. Given his insistence on the need to bring the subject of death back to the Western man, we might find his proclivity to be resonant with a sort of intellectual rebellion characteristic of a philosopher who is more eager to think and write about death than about the preservation of happiness. Does this mean that such a philosopher belongs to a certain intellectual minority in the Western society? Does it also mean that his social and ethical status is 'exceptional' in comparison to the set of ethical rules (i.e., the 'ethics of happiness') imposed by the majority and, therefore, it should be disavowed? Should the behavior of this particular (Western) man – Schumacher himself – be considered 'deviant' in relation to the norms prescribed by his own (Western) society to the extent that he could even be treated as a 'pathological case' – not only in the context of Western philosophy deprived of 'death', but also in the context of Western society imbued with 'happy life'? These questions, though apparently 'insane' or 'external' to the given discussion, are very much *internal* to it and justified on the basis that they are being posed from within the limits of sovereign rationality outlined by the imperialist epistemology itself – within the actual Western (hemi-) sphere of

thinking, where Schumacher's and Dowrick's own arguments correlate and coexist through the notion of death-as-negativity. If Schumacher insists that the idea of death (as a philosophical idea) needs to be brought back to Western philosophy and society, does it automatically qualify him as a potentially 'pathological' case in the society that cherishes so-called positive cultures (or 'cultures of life') as opposed to so-called negative cultures (or 'cultures of death')? Some could claim that Schumacher is only another 'philosophical pessimist' who disturbs the normative convictions about 'life' as opposed to 'death', most notably in terms of distinctive (positive/negative) values commonly and misleadingly ascribed to these two categories, respectively.

A statement by the Canadian author Richard Ziegler is indicative in this context. By 'philosophical pessimists' he refers to those philosophers and non-philosophers who express "a less sanguine attitude towards life" as essentially 'not worth living', a "rebellious response to the human condition [...] out of philosophical disdain for existence" (Ziegler 2013). Also, he draws a line between the 'philosophical optimism' and the 'philosophical pessimism' as two distinctive doctrines of emotional and political power around which certain power-groups concentrate and make use of. This most notably concerns the divisions between the sovereign biopolitical entities vis-à-vis the 'pessimists'. By the biopolitical entities I refer to the medico-scientific power of psychiatry aligned with the politico-juridical power of the state. Their interests coincide through the joint condemnation, regulation and control of a 'pessimistic' option given its threatening (emotional and political) potential for the system of values already established by the ruling power(s).

With regard to the state, Ziegler notes that pessimism represents an 'explosive' threat to every ruling political and administrative authority, since it accumulates negative emotions (in terms of one's discontent with any present political system) that could turn into an open expression of anger or violence against it. In that sense, as he further explains, "the opposition of governments to suicide is easily explainable, since suicide is a brutal denunciation of society; consequently, government politicians are reluctant to acknowledge the political motives behind suicides and are eager to promote suicide prevention" (Ziegler 2013). This is why Ziegler classifies 'philosophical pessimism' among the categories of suicide that claim to be *political* (which is the aspect of death to which I continuously return in this thesis). Says Ziegler:

Philosophical pessimists consider that people should have the right to be unhappy, sad, miserable, wretched or suicidal without any attempt by the mental health movement to utilize force in order to ensure emotional correctness. The belief that the purported negative emotions should be minimized or banished often implies that they are destructive and that people are involuntarily subjected to those feelings, and this view differs from philosophical pessimism which considers those feelings as deliberately chosen. The state's desire to have its citizens, including those whose economic and social conditions are hideous, be

happy is a transparent attempt to defuse any anger that could be directed against the state. (Ziegler 2013; my emphasis)

The message is clear: a Western man is expected to be rather happy than unhappy since his lack of positivity might result in an amount of negativity ('anger') which is potentially threatening for the *status quo*, determined by the governing power structures or the state. Similarly, with regard to psychiatry, pessimism stands for "an assault on a major premise of psychiatry" because it questions the essence of (biopolitical) dominion of power – life itself. Accordingly, "psychiatrists are fearful that the acceptance of suicide based on philosophical reasons would encourage people to question the value of life", as Ziegler (2013) points out and continues:

Psychiatry's invalidation of suicidal feelings is only one example of the psychiatric regulation of emotion. Western psychiatry attaches great importance to the desirability of what it often refers to as the positive emotions, notably happiness. Psychiatry supports and enforces *philosophical optimism*, a doctrine that maintains that existence should be affirmed and that people should accept their situation in life because there is always hope, but *philosophical pessimism* is a repudiation of individual and collective hope.

Ziegler's critique of psychiatric power is particularly valid as it connects with the ideas that Ian Marsh recently exposed in what regards, in his own terms, the "compulsory ontology" and "clinical episteme of suicide" (Marsh 2010a: 65-76). Marsh emphasizes the fact that the production and distribution of knowledge on suicide have been the privilege of power discourses pertaining to healthcare expertise in medical sciences and clinical practice. Accordingly, the subject has been treated as part of a broader field of knowledge where abnormality, mental disease, psychological disorder, and pathological behavior play the most distinctive roles. In turn, such dominant viewpoints have produced a boomerang effect: by pointing out the relative validity of normative and hegemonic discourses, or "the ways in which contemporary approaches to suicide could be said to relate to the prevention of suicide, and suffering in relation to suicide" (Marsh 2010a: 66-67), many professionals have challenged the power positions in the study field. Their need to question the ruling system of knowledge has not emerged from the competitive atmosphere of revolt for the sake of mere criticality. On the contrary, it has evolved from equally strong arguments in discursive analyses producing a kind of situated, 'revolutionary' dissidence. In that sense, Schumacher's position on 'death' in Western philosophy, for instance, is a telling example of articulated epistemic dissidence in the same context (that is, the Western context which is hostile towards 'death') – not a 'pathological' exception from the 'positivity society'. Are other death-related theories and practices, including those centered on 'suicide', destined to be remain forever pathological in the West?

From the imperialist epistemological viewpoint, the discourses around suicide in the West have historically varied in terms of its public acceptance, recognition, or demonization (as described by Georges Minois, 1999). The plurality and diversity of opinions in ancient times were substituted by Christianity's unilateral, negatively biased views followed by repression in the Middle Ages. The 'rediscovery' of suicide during the early Renaissance posed new challenges to intellectual and moral certitudes. In the seventeenth century, when the term 'suicide' got to be used for the first time, a new form of suppression occurred. It was followed by an epoch when the status of suicide got significantly updated from moralism toward (medical) science. This was notably due to the rise of public debate about self-inflicted death during the Enlightenment. A new downfall, from free debate to silence, came about in the period following the French Revolution and continued up to the twentieth century.⁶

Nowadays, due to our broadened access to knowledge and information, the suicidal phenomena have reached an unprecedented *global* dimension in their expansion across the world. Hence, the link between globalism of suicide and its disruptive social framework can to be taken more seriously into account. The link between suicides and medical sciences, and their pertinence to pathological evaluations of 'suicidal behaviors,' is another point to be seriously reconsidered. This is all the more important since the studies of suicide(s) have remained colonized: in the sense of being dominated by the sovereign power of psycho-discourses, themselves imprisoned within the bastion of 'biopolitical' scientific knowledge and its medical epistemological imperium, as Marsh (2010) argues. Such arguments put forward one urgent task in front of contemporary researchers: it consists in approaching, analyzing, and evaluating the existent system of knowledge(s) about suicide (and, also, about other related forms of self-inflicted death, misleadingly termed 'suicide', such as self-sacrificial death in protest, for instance). To undertake this task means to confront the given epistemic universe and to expand the knowledge(s) about 'death' beyond the sacrosanct value-system of medical sciences which is aligned with varied forms of global political and economic power. The confrontation is necessary because, as I argue in line with other dissident voices in the field, instead of a single empire there exist the pluriverse of critical worlds where *many* knowledges could allow for an expansion of the existent limits around suicide: given the present epistemic borders that have been cemented by medico-scientific absolutism and pragmatism around the issue, a proper decolonial turn needs to take place for the sake of epistemic liberation of 'death' at large and of 'suicide' in particular. What is required in order to have such borders crossed, so that the limits of existent and hard-shell

⁶ This brief overview is based on Georges Minois, *History of Suicide. Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, Lydia G. Cochrane (trans.), Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999. Originally published as *Histoire du suicide: La société occidentale face à la mort volontaire*, Paris: Fayard 1995.

power-discourses could be overcome for the sake of epistemic liberation, is a different mode of epistemological and hermeneutic transgression against the presumed 'terror of negativity' (which also involves a new 'epistemic community', as Talal Asad [2007: 29] would say). In a word, suicide is a phenomenon in demand of having its normative hermeneutic code broken. This applies, first and foremost, to public health institutions and to strictly national policies for suicide prevention. But it also applies to our need to make a step forward, outside of the privileged 'biopolitical' domains of knowledge and power and their various forms of alliances with other structures serving the modern/ colonial/ capitalist sovereignty on the basis of medical scientific conclusions. Being firmly attached to the epidemiological and pathological perspectives, suicidology is in demand for a proper epistemic decolonization. Moving towards the ecologies of our knowledge (Santos 2007) about the world of life and death, where many (less normative or still unrecognized, yet legitimate) views must be allowed to co-exist with the dominant power discourses – this is where Ian Marsh's arguments – among other 'dissident' authors – serve their purpose. They also uphold the present study in its aim to look for 'death' from a radically different angle where it might have slipped from our view so the thesis about the loss of 'death' in the West could be turned upside down and disclose the political instrumentality of human mortality: in the negative (necropolitical), but also positive (thanatopolitical) sense.

Through what can be termed the violent invasion of scientific epistemology into the many and varied knowledge worlds of 'death' (or epistemic occupation, as I here call, most notably with self-afflicted death in mind), I comply with the earlier mentioned dissidents by arguing the following: that the omnipresent normative perspectives have reached the point of their discursive, theoretical, institutional, and political *colonization* of suicide and suicide studies. Contrary to that, more than one knowledge discipline (where suicide has found fertile grounds to be analyzed and discussed critically) make up part of the cognitive and empirical territory from which it must be possible to launch critical arguments against the imperial 'regime of truth' and to open up the possibilities for epistemic liberation. More precisely, I argue for the *epistemic decolonization of death in the global imperialist North, including the so-called suicide, on the grounds of the experience of life and death from an anti-imperialist epistemic position of the global South*. Therefore, when it comes to 'a question of suicide' one needs to account for the *epistemic plurality* of related and unrelated arguments within the hierarchy of power structures around suicidality – not to rely upon the given matrix of power and its value-system pertinent to the 'North' (and to a 'Western man' as Schumacher names it). Given the leading positions in such a hierarchy (reserved for pathologizing, preventive, patriarchal, and patronizing perspectives ever since the nineteenth century), they have also established the principles for an obligatory ontology of suicide. I treat it as the kind of sovereignty where medical discourses and clinical practices have definitely prevailed. However, my stance is that one should never dismiss the coexistence of the plurality of other

arguments (be they ethical, theoretical, scientific or merely practical) proposed throughout the more recent history *from an anti-imperialist perspective* across the world.

Ian Marsh (2010a: 66), for example, uses the term ‘compulsory ontology’ when he describes this “necessity of expert knowledge at the expense of other ways of understanding [as] a compulsory ontology difficult to critique”. In problematizing contemporary discursive formations of suicide and, more precisely, a contemporary ‘regime of truth’ in relation to it, he says the following:

Within the field that has come to be known as ‘suicidology,’ suicide itself is constituted as an object of scientific study, as are suicidal patients. Epidemiological studies seek to establish the truth of suicide in terms of quantifiable factors such as age, sex, and means while psychological autopsy studies have sought to correlate acts of self-destruction with categories of mental illness. More recently, studies into the biology and genetics of suicide risk have looked to find evidence of neuro-chemical, neuro-anatomical or genetic abnormalities that could explain why people kill themselves. It is the meeting of science and medicine that dominates the field of suicide studies. (Marsh 2010a: 65)

Starting from this controversial meeting-point between science and medicine, Marsh continues his ‘guided-tour’ around the ‘exhibition of power structures’ in suicidology. In his words, as regards the matter of practice, attention should equally be paid to the following:

In practice too, for the most part those considered expert on suicide and the management of suicidal people are doctors, particularly psychiatrists. Other professions –psychology, social work, nursing, occupational therapy– tend to work within a medically delineated, and to a large extent controlled, space. Through this meeting of scientific study and medical/psychiatric practice the truths of suicide have come to be (and continue to be) formed. Such ways of thinking and acting come together to produce and reproduce a form of suicide that could be characterized as individual, pathological and medical. Suicide is taken as arising as a consequence of mental illness, a form of pathology or abnormality situated within the individual, and it is thus a matter of medical/psychiatric concern. It is now difficult to talk of suicide without recourse to some notion of mental illness, usually depression, or reference to the ‘mental state’ of the person involved. (Marsh 2010a: 65)

Evidently, Marsh argues that “suicide is constructed within dominant discourses as a unitary act with a singular meaning – pathology” (Marsh 2010a: 66). Thus, its abnormality remains situated within the individual (the ‘unitary,’ and not the social). This discloses the general conditions within which any alternative, counter-hegemonic epistemology, including sociology and social philosophy, encounters obstacles and

difficulties in coping with the “condemnation imperative” (Hage 2003: 67) of power discourses – or their ‘compulsory ontology,’ as Marsh calls it, and continues:

What such a stance makes difficult is the development of other ways of constituting suicide and the formation of alternative objects, concepts and subjectivities in relation to self-accomplished death. Instead there is a continual reproduction of suicide as the tragic act of a mentally unwell individual. As this is taken to be necessary, real and true – described here in terms of a compulsory ontology– it becomes difficult to critique, and shortcomings and negative (even if unintended) consequences that follow from so constituting suicide are for the most part unexplored. (Marsh 2010a: 66)

While remaining fully supportive of Marsh’s worthwhile stance on the issue at hand, I comply with his ‘decolonial’ attempts towards the liberation of suicide from its singular and compulsory ontology. Yet beside the plurality to be fought for, widely recognized and applied, there is one – inevitably singular– aspect of suicide that should not be overlooked: its enigmatic, undefinable, and, for the time being, unanswerable nature. Independently from any political, social, cultural, and ethical contexts within which suicides are discussed, ideated, or committed, the singularity of our knowledge (or, rather, ignorance) about suicide and its ‘doubles’ remains *hermeneutically incomplete*. This incompleteness should not be a reason to stop thinking and looking further than the limited distances imposed by a ‘compulsory ontology.’ On the contrary, these should be transgressed and perceived from a radically different perspective.

Let us assume that this transgression of the norm could also be applicable to someone outside of the context of philosophy – for instance, to any Western man who, in his everyday life, dares to reflect upon ‘death’ or related ‘negative’ ideas (such as pain, suffering, grief, melancholy, depression, and so on). In the society of ‘positivity’, the ‘negativity’ of such ideas is considered anomalous and forbidden (as Dowrick argues), which means that the *ruling perspective* onto ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ phenomena favors ‘life’ and life-centered rationality and excludes ‘death’ and death-oriented rationality. A perspective that favors life belongs to that sphere of life’s organization that has come to be known as biopolitics (as I have repeatedly highlighted before). Within the biopolitical scope of influence, the only correct conclusion concerning the behavior of a person reflecting upon ‘death’ and related ‘negative’ ideas would be that it is deviant (abnormal, anomalous, pathological and so on) so the person’s mental health should be taken into consideration in order to have such behavior cured. Why? Because all the efforts on behalf of the ‘positive’ society are put into the defense of human happiness from ‘negativity’ that the given person is, apparently, overwhelmed with and suffering from. The biopolitical perspective here discloses the ruling medico-scientific position of power, as Marsh says, that is not only preventive but, at the same time, hegemonic: it is so in its pretension to administer the life and health of the populations according to the

given norm of 'positivity' and the quest to maintain the scientific-technological control over people in the name of 'good life'. In the name of (good) life any aberration from the norm should be either cured (i.e., regulated, 'normalized', 'civilized') or eliminated/excluded from the fabric of everyday life: in other words, it should be considered as inappropriate, unwelcome and 'sick'. In a society prone to such regulatory treatments of suicidal death, these modes of exclusion disclose the forms of aberration close to the role played by 'abandonados', as João Biehl (2001) earlier described them – or with that category of social existence that Mbembe (2003) calls the 'living dead'.

The actual realization of self-proclaimed medical rights to stratify society by deciding who is a 'pathological' subject and who is not only empowers the ruling norms of the (Western) 'positivity' society and its ethics of happiness which, allegedly, must remain unquestionable and sacrosanct. Hence, the tendency of a living being towards 'death', even in a purely discursive sense, necessarily indicates the symptoms of 'some kind of mental illness', as Dowrick earlier commented. Again, does this mean that Schumacher is 'insane' if he plainly advocates for the return of 'death' to Western philosophy and the return of philosophers to death-related (i.e. 'negative') issues at large? Of course he is not. So, what could be the true nature of this 'problem'?

Schumacher's argument about the loss of 'death' (in terms of its absence in contemporary Western world) recalls another exemplary case – in terms of strategic *underrepresentation* of male deaths in comparison to the *overrepresentation* of female suicidality in nineteenth-century England and France. I argue that this stems from the patriarchal and pathologizing *sovereign logic* of self-defense on behalf of a ruling (male) subject: a trend that has not been entirely evicted throughout the centuries ever since suicide became the object of scientific studies. The dominant discourses of suicidology have been supported and enforced by such a trend where, among other issues, the gendered position of death still silently dwells. When Ian Marsh exposes a larger picture of "a critical inquiry into the formation of suicide as pathological and medical" (Marsh 2010a: 66), the gendering (and queering) of suicide has its own place in it. To give but one example, I will highlight this problematic as articulated in his recent study (Marsh 2010b). When he analyses "the ways the 'suicidal homosexual' was constituted in psychiatric discourse" he remarks that "although at times rather ill-defined –appearing only in the margins or at the periphery of psychiatric thought– such a figure was most often portrayed as 'weak yet destructive,' with the psychiatric profession wavering between pity and condemnation" (Marsh 2010b: 141) and adds:

Declared a pathological 'type' in the late nineteenth century, the 'homosexual' came to be constituted in relation to a variety of psychiatric theories and practices over the next century. Initially formed as 'degenerates,' 'perverts,' and 'inverts,' later as emotionally immature, disordered personalities, most usually understood as in some way biologically abnormal, psychiatric descriptions of the 'homosexual'

also came to include consideration of their perceived propensity to self-destruction. (Marsh 2010b: 141)

Here, again, a few conclusions become more than evident, namely: that the psychiatric matrix of power discourses is discriminatory; that it has pretensions towards universalist and patriarchal 'truths'; and that it exposes itself as troublesome in relation to a queer paradigm when claiming the figure of 'suicidal homosexual' (or –as I will discuss soon– 'suicidal prostitute,' 'suicidal [poor unmarried] woman,' and so on) to be problematic, i.e. pathological. Therefore, in the current process of epistemic decolonization it is the contemporary 'regime of truth' in relation to suicide that turns out to be itself the point of controversy, as Marsh contends. I treat the abovementioned 'deviations' from a gendered norm as a family of issues awaiting to be liberated from psychiatric 'compulsory ontology' and epistemic violence in order to show the similar pattern of sovereignty guiding our thoughts on 'death' today as exclusively 'obscure'. At this point, what interests me most is the question of (in)visibility of suicidal deaths, i.e., their visual properties: the ways they have co-existed, as visual representations, in relation to gender in modern and contemporary imaginaries. If (patriarchal) epistemic sovereignty treats death as 'obscure' and 'negative', as a threat to happiness of a Western man, I assume that the relationship between the notion of a (Western) *man* and the notion of *death* are mutually excluding. By this I imply that death is not only 'negative' or that it is not present (in terms of being lost or absent) but I place an accent onto the hypothesis that Death is not a man. So, is Death a woman?

For Karl S. Guthke this question was a starting-point in his iconographic inquiry of Western representations of death and its gendering, in particular through the *figure* of death (Guthke 1999). His main dilemma revolves around the rationality behind a range of choices, namely, "why is it that in some cultures and times, literature, folklore, and art commonly represent death as a man, in others as a woman?" (Guthke 1999: i). Guthke's dealing with this issue transcends any arbitrariness. He scrutinizes it as a matter of situated, contextualized, and strategic choice. In a historical overview spanning the period since the Middle Ages until the late twentieth century, he discloses a variety of attitudes and understandings of death. He perceives them as a number of possible ways to give meaning to the world and to humanity at large. This is most notably valid for what concerns "the cultural history of the West" (Guthke 1999: 5). He acknowledges "the wealth of images that the creative impulse has produced over hundreds of years of imagining the unimaginable in the Western world," while being aware that "such images may or may not reveal something about the 'nature' of death" (Guthke 1999: 5). Instead, he continues, "they open our eyes for aspects of 'the world as interpretation,' that is, for humans, individuals and groups, orienting themselves in their world by making such images and thereby, ultimately, defining themselves"

(Guthke 1999: 5). A certain type of power dynamics must have resided in those choices turning the figure of death recognizable either as a man or a woman:

At any given time, *related and contrary* images of death naturally cluster around the *dominant* ones. Different cultural contexts, differing group-specific views as well as different individual attitudes create different images of death. They are male and female images that each comprises a wide variety of further differentiations: old and young, beautiful and ugly, fatherly and motherly, terrifying and seductive, contemptible and venerable, and so on. (Guthke 1999: 5; my emphasis)

Given their 'related and contrary' characteristics, I want to expose a set of remarks that critically embrace the binaries proposed by Guthke, such as man/woman, male/female, life/death, image/word, figure/abstraction, and seeing/interpreting. This preliminary step is significant inasmuch as it paves the way towards a more nuanced comprehension of gender-related aspects of suicidal death. I understand such death as a specific way of dying turned into a theoretical concept, philosophical issue, and cultural phenomenon. Its materialization in textual and visual terms (i.e., cultural products) imposes one more argument to be addressed as relevant concerning those aspects of analysis that keep being omitted from dominant perspectives. As Marsh argues:

Thought of in this way –that is *suicide and the suicidal as cultural products*– self-accomplished deaths can come to be read less as statements concerning the internal, mental state of isolated individuals, but rather as outcomes of a play of culturally situated, relationally unequal forces. Issues of social justice, of fairness, the means by which certain groups come to be marginalized and vilified within a culture can come to the fore in discussions of the reasons why a person may have ended their life. Rather than suicide being interpreted either as an unreasonable, irrational act, determined by illness, or a rational course of action freely chosen, *it could perhaps be understood as a product of cultural forces situated outside the individual*. Such forces could be understood as constituting the suicidal individual, and even of forming, over time, the act itself. (Marsh 2010a: 74; my emphasis)

Guthke's question (Is Death a woman?) implies a complex chain of relations from the outset. First, it implies that there is a *link* between the notion of death and the notion of a woman, even if this does not necessarily result in their equation. Second, it implies that the notion of death demands a certain kind of figuration (instead of abstraction), a personification or *embodiment* of an idea. Third, it implies that such an idea, turned into a *body* through personification, depends on gendered choices between a man and a woman. These choices allow for possible reversals (Death is a man *or* a woman) yet without alternatives (Death is *either* a man *or* a woman). Fourth, it implies that the question (Is Death a woman?) rests upon a doubt, while it also invokes thinking in the opposite direction: if Death is a woman, is Life a man? This switch is acceptable only under conditions whereby there are clear division lines between a 'woman' and a 'man'

inasmuch as between 'Death' and 'Life.' Fifth: if Death is indeed a woman and, conversely, Life is a man, what does this process of iconographic segregation tell us about the gendered matrix of power through the language of life/death relationships? How is such a matrix constructed in the cultural history of the West and what are its limits in 'the world as interpretation', as Guthke earlier contended? What does 'Life-as-Man' exclude from interpretation and which role does 'Death-as-Woman' play in the gendered matrix of power? If they are supposed to remain separated, is this in order to perpetuate some already established understandings of our world and definitions of ourselves, in Guthke's line of thought? Moreover, are human beings condemned to exist within some strict knowledge framework that has already been set up (by images of death, among other constructions) so as to orient themselves in the world? Why did the cultural history of the West need to represent Death at all and, further on, to have the idea of Death *personified* and *anthropomorphized*? Finally, how to exercise control over life and death if they have no body?

Critical strands in sociology and social philosophy may suggest some helpful insights in tracing the answers to these questions. Numerous contemporary studies have been treating the social patterns of suicidality in relation to (or, rather, in contrast to) dominating macro-sociological perspectives. This criticism is further enhanced by the fact that general attention to suicide, and consequently knowledge on suicidal death, appeared only throughout the nineteenth century. Due to "the newly initiated mortality statistics [...] it was generally suspected that the drastic social changes associated with the processes of industrialization and urbanization were somehow related to the rising suicide rate" (Mäkinen and Jukkala 2010: 10). What interests me at this point are not the statistical and historical evidences around the socially implicated increase of self-inflicted death. Rather, it is an idea that countability has been inseparable from modes of *governance over death* through statistical measures and modernization processes. Some recent studies, in which suicide emerges primarily as a technology of governance, are of valuable support towards this idea. The sociologist Thomas F. Tierney, for example, focuses his analysis on the issue of governance and the governmentality of suicide (Tierney 2010). Following Michel Foucault's preliminary remarks on bio-power in his *History of Sexuality* (1976), Tierney traces "the relationship between the sociological appropriation of suicide and this uniquely modern form of power" (Tierney 2010: 357). He does so by interpreting Jacques Peuchet in relation to the views of Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim on the subject, while taking their "two nineteenth-century sociological treatises on suicide as historical examples of the development of 'governmentality'" (Foucault 2006 in Sharma and Gupta 2006; Inda 2006; Nadesan 2008).

It is worth remembering that the nineteenth century was a historical epoch that 'gave birth' to institutionalized scientific studies of suicide, most notably thanks to the efforts of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). For better or worse, Durkheim still stands out among many of his predecessors who have remained either

excluded from our knowledge of suicide studies or have turned out to be less recognizable in the public domains concerned with those studies (Goldney et al. 2008; Brancaccio et al. 2013). Durkheim's professional attitude toward women, negatively biased when it comes to his over-discussed book *Suicide. A Study in Sociology* (Durkheim 2010) deserves special attention. This is even more necessary when compared with another, easily forgotten study worthy of notice. I am referring, of course, to Jacques Peuchet and his *Memoirs* (Marx 1999 [1846]). Peuchet (1758–1830) was “a leading French police administrator, economist, and statistician” (Plaut and Anderson 1999: 3) whose *Memoirs from the Police Archives*, published posthumously in 1838, also contained his commentary on suicides in early nineteenth-century Paris. This commentary served as a starting point for Karl Marx (1818–1883) to tackle the issue of suicide briefly in his own work. The issue surprisingly remained scarce in his own writings: “It is Marx's only published discussion of suicide. After he published this brief article in 1846 in *Gesellschaftsspiegel* (Mirror of Society), a small German socialist journal in which Engels was involved, he never returned to the topic” (Plaut and Anderson 1999: 3). As sociologist Kevin Anderson highlighted on the occasion of the first English edition of *Memoirs*, “it is not, properly speaking, an article by Marx [as] it consists of Marx's brief four-paragraph introduction, followed by his edited translation of [Peuchet's] lengthy excerpts” (Plaut and Anderson 1999: 3). In the context of my thesis, this work is significant because it “contains one of the most sustained discussions of gender in Marx's early writings, [namely] *the suicide of women, linking these events to women's oppression inside the French bourgeois family*” (Plaut and Anderson 1999: 3; my emphasis). In Marx's edition, Peuchet's opening words straightforwardly target the causality of high annual suicide rates. He is attacking the *social* (also understood as predominantly *male*) rather than the individual rationality behind it, viewing it “as a symptom of the deficient organization of our society” (Marx 1999: 47). Additionally, he refers to “...no society, but, as Rousseau said, a desert populated by wild animals” (Marx 1999: 50).

The notion of *family* is of fundamental importance at this point. Here it is seen as a social category of micro-power relations. It differs from the category of single, unmarried, lower-class, unemployed women: the most common category of female suicides at the time. This is precisely the point of contestation where Peuchet (as remarked by Plaut and Anderson 1999: 13) diagnoses the persistence of that kind of organizational deficiency within which suicidal ideations continue to grow: “The revolution did not topple all tyrannies. The evil which one blames on arbitrary forces exists in families, where it causes crises, analogous to those of revolutions” (Marx 1999: 50-51). This analogy (between families and revolutions, between tyrannies and families, and between their respective causalities of crises) is a turning point from which to place the notion of gender in relation to Marx's view on suicide. Says Anderson:

Marx suggests that the oppressiveness of the bourgeois family is responsible for many cases of female suicide, especially of young women [and] also helps us to grasp more clearly his emerging views on gender and the family in modern society, during the same period in which he was developing his concepts of alienated labor and historical materialism and the beginnings of his critique of political economy and the state (Plaut and Anderson 1999: 22).

But what do the elements of this new constellation have to do with each other when perceived all together (the state, political economy, historical materialism, alienated labor, family, gender, and – suicide)? Does it seem to be but an arbitrary proliferation of terms, notions, and concepts? Have they remained *fixed* exclusively to time and space (the Western world of the post-Enlightenment era) in which both Marx and Durkheim developed their respective theories of society, politics, and culture? “Certain similarities between the treatment of suicide by Marx and that by Durkheim [...], more in social than in psychological terms” give evidence that “both view suicide as symptomatic of broader social ills, and both are interested in empirical data on suicide rather than moral or philosophical speculation” (Plaut and Anderson 1999: 19-20). Nonetheless, as Anderson points out, “it is on [the] issue of limiting divorce that Marx’s differences with Durkheim would seem to become the sharpest, given Marx’s stress on oppressive family relationships as a major factor in female suicide, and his critique of bourgeois marriage as an oppressive institution *that should not be regarded as a fixed universal*” (Plaut and Anderson 1999: 22; my emphasis).

Comparatively, what remains interesting concerning Durkheim’s professional relation to women (and thus his category of ‘female suicides’) is critically accentuated by Anderson: “At several points in *Suicide*, Durkheim makes extremely disparaging comments about women, writing at one point that women’s ‘mental life is less developed’ than men’s because ‘women’s needs are more closely related to the organism’[...] No comparable statements can be found in Marx’s work” (Plaut and Anderson 1999: 20). Durkheim also understands marriage (and, accordingly, divorce) very differently from Marx, arguing for the strengthening of marriage instead of liberalizing divorce. Says Anderson:

Because divorce or ‘conjugal anomie’ is a major form of anomie, which is itself a major cause of male suicide, he recommends making ‘marriage more indissoluble.’ Durkheim acknowledges [*and this is the most upsetting comment in my view, M. S.*] ‘that the suicides of husbands cannot be diminished in this way without increasing those of wives,’ but he seems, however reluctantly, to accept this as a necessary evil. He even asks: ‘Must one of the sexes necessarily be *sacrificed*?’ (Plaut and Anderson 1999: 22; my emphasis).

A perverted link in this interdependency between the wife’s slavery and the husband’s slaveholding rights, as Peuchet had earlier pronounced it, was “supported by the civil

code and the right of property [according to which] she is but a part of his inventory” (Marx 1999: 57-58). Hence the *objecthood* of married women used to stand for (and still often does) the most fertile ground on which the authority of their husbands could be indispensably exercised. Within the domain of sovereignty empowered by tacit familial laws of oppression, such exercise was indirectly ‘sanctioned’ while occurring inside homes and following private ‘laws’ (i.e. outside of public view and legal control). It is in that domain of privacy where the neuralgic point of the discussion at hand needs to be diagnosed. The family home, being the site of masculine despotism against women (wives, daughters, housemaids), functions in line with gender-biased micro-governance. It also stands for the nodal point around which, in Peuchet’s words, the malign symptoms of the “deficient organization of our society” converge. If this is the governance typical of family, as Marx understood it, then its own properties of micro-power (patriarchal, parochial, chauvinist, male, etc.) are nowadays becoming increasingly visible on a macro-scale – precisely through the sovereign instrumentalization of death over subjugated populations at large, as Mbembe argues with regard to what he calls ‘necropolitics’ (Mbembe 2003).

If Death is a woman, and Life is a man, the old model of oppression still happens in our global world due to (what contemporary critical theory perceives as) neo-liberal sovereignty, namely: the colonial, capitalist, and racial patterns of imperial domination. This is but one possible answer to my earlier question concerning the many points of intersection in the constellation of power: if there is a name for such constellation today then it must be that of neoliberal ‘biopolitical’ imperial sovereignty. Juxtaposing masculine governmentality with female subservience, through the lenses of her supposedly natural predilections for ‘mental weaknesses,’ has not come hereby as an arbitrary choice. I treat it as a constructive way of dealing with the ongoing matrix of gender-specific power that can *reposition* our general knowledge on suicidality, its (in)visibility, and how it works in the knowledge-world of (visual) representations. In that regard, art history gives many illustrative arguments.

In her recent publication, Michelle Facos deals with “the changing relationship between artists and society since the Enlightenment and issues of identity” (Facos 2011: i). Relying upon “a common format for representing female suicide [...] in both contemporary literature and illustration,” Facos stresses the fact that in nineteenth-century England “suicidal women frequently were shown casting themselves from windows and bridges into rivers [...] This penchant for representing drowning women reflected contemporary reality – drowning was the most common means of suicide for women in the nineteenth century; men preferred hanging” (Facos 2011: 228). In a section of her book centered on female suicide, she gives a brief and curious background to the issue while discussing the topic of “Realism and the Urban Poor” (Facos 2011: 218-246). What she points out is a paradox: the countable facts (disclosing a higher number of male than female suicides in the nineteenth-century) stand in opposition to the

cultural proliferation of female suicides in the related visual representations of the epoch. Says Facos:

The setting for these images was always the city; such despair was specifically associated with urban alienation and desperation [...] In England, *although many more men actually committed suicide*, depictions and descriptions of them are rare, while female suicides appeared frequently in popular one-shilling books, novels, newspapers, prints, and paintings. Bridge-jumping was the most commonly represented method of female suicide, *despite the fact* that most women *quietly* filled their pockets with stones and plunged into a nearby pond or canal. (Facos 2011: 228; my emphasis)

In England at the times, like elsewhere in the nineteenth-century European West, it was apparently not rare to find many *poor single women* among whom some were doomed to prostitute themselves for the sake of mere survival. In the framework as suggested by Facos, the general category of the poor was not only considered emotionally or mentally unstable but, very often, it was demonized by the ruling (male) part of the society in order to be governed. In that sense, there is a question still to be answered: why were male suicides, as she writes, “conspicuously absent from nineteenth-century pictorial imagery, although they occurred with three times greater frequency”? (Facos 2011: 229). Facos' own response is simple:

This reflected a gap between popular perceptions and social realities. Suicide was considered deviant behavior, and men –*who did most of the describing and representing*– ascribed all human weaknesses to women. This perpetrated a false impression that women, especially prostitutes, had a high suicide rate. Conclusions of ‘scientific’ psychological studies –discussed [by the author herself in the same book, remark by M.S.] in connection with Géricault's portraits of the insane– justified such attitudes (Facos 2011: 229).⁷

Therefore, males –who were empowered by tacit laws (of oppression) and tools (of image production)– were the ones to materialize suicides into images. While keeping a strategic distance from the negativity and undesirability of suicidal deaths (to which they, actually, pertained more than women themselves) they exercised the same kind of sovereignty that allows us to speak today in terms of ‘loss’ of death insofar as it recalls

⁷ My response – to which I will come back in details when discussing the imperialist epistemic visions aligned with the ‘politics of death’ – places the obscurity of this misbalance between male and female suicidality within the realm of sovereign (masculine, patriarchal, sexist) power which I identify, together with Mbembe, as properly necropolitical, given its capacity to instrumentalize death (on behalf of the governing authority at the expense of the governed subjects), not only for the sake of human destruction but the exercise of sovereignty therein that re-affirms (through killing) one's ruling authority as unquestionable. In the context of necropolitics, this is what Mbembe considers to be an *objective of the political* par excellence.

the male suicidality in the nineteenth-century West. By doing most of the describing and representing, as Facos says, the men also produced a *masculinist version* of suicidal death through images as cultural products (in Marsh's terms, quoted earlier). This re-introduces Schumacher argument about the 'atmosphere of a stony silence' with regard to the 'lost' male suicidal deaths, while the 'negativity' of the phenomenon ('death', 'suicidality', 'mental weakness') and its 'visibility' therein are relegated prevalently to the figure of a Woman. The overt representability of female 'mental weaknesses' is hereby substituted by the 'unrepresentability' of suicidal death on the side of men, by which I imply the forced *absence/lack/loss* of males in the images of suicide produced by *men themselves* for the sake of *their own* gender-safe representability (and governmentality therein).

One may think of many reasons for such an unfair substitution to occur: art historians could probably agree that the most evident among them remains dependent exactly upon the politics of representation that has historically privileged heroism (and not weakness, mental or otherwise) as the matter of men-centered imagery. Such preference was materialized in the prominence of female modes of self-destruction which, according to Facos, were also modified, constructed, or simply fake. This is evident not only in terms of the frequency or popularization ('one-shilling books, novels, newspapers, prints, and paintings'), but rather in terms of fabricated and spectacular 'truths' about *how* they did it. One may even call this way of self-accomplished death a *withdrawal* from the world: Facos describes it as *quietly*, silently *disappearing* into the water. To quietly disappear into the water does not necessarily mean to jump from a bridge! The latter makes up part of the popular voyeuristic fantasy, on behalf of male image-makers, due to their abundance of self-esteem and lack of ethical stance toward women. They obviously wanted to preserve the memory of those women (poor, single, unemployed, etc.), yet this occurred in a way that created a gendered pattern for representing them as 'drowning women.' The scopic 'regime of truth' thus produced was very different from the facts: it was in charge of a certain *politics of violence*, or the violence that is epistemic and visual inasmuch as it aims at concealing the fact of (male) deaths –through the forced segregation between men and women– for the sake of keeping the power-balance between the two undisturbed, which perfectly fits the imperialist (masculine, patriarchal, sexist) epistemological vision. Hence, if we would accept that Death was a *woman* in nineteenth-century England and France (for the sake of keeping the patriarchal epistemic sovereignty protected and the established male social status intact), we could equally accept that death is nowadays *lost* in contemporary Western epistemology: not only because such epistemology is centered exclusively on life (for the good reasons that the mere fact of living brings about to a human being) but also for the bad reasons: keeping the 'positivity society' and its 'ethics of happiness' under control so the established *status quo* of political and medico-scientific power structures (i.e., the colonial matrix of epistemic power in

charge of knowledges around 'life' and 'death') could remain unquestionable and undisturbed.

"The question of unrepresentability leads directly to the way in which political violence may or may not be put into an image" (Galloway 2007). If representability and unrepresentability necessarily imply the issue of violence, this part of my study has been but an attempt to re-consider Schumacher's argument about the 'loss' of (suicidal) death in the West from another perspective, centered on gender, female suicidality and male necropower: those domains of knowledge where Death, Life, Man, and –last but not least– Woman expose themselves together not only to political violence but to the violent politics of representation and its epistemic effects. While being rendered visible, embodied and anthropomorphized (through images), female subjects and their male counterparts are thus becoming *open* and *exposed* to our systems of interpretation, or hidden for the same reasons. Hence we, the viewing subjects, have a possibility of engaging in the production of discourses and discursive orders of power, or its lack therein. If by 'images' I connote the materialization of what must irrevocably remain hidden or invisible from our view, then by 'political violence' (as a way of conclusion to this segment of the study) I also want to connote something precise: death itself has remained *forcefully hidden or invisible* (i.e., allegedly absent or lost in the Western world) due to the ongoing, segregating conditions that neoliberal/ patriarchal sovereignty and its 'biopolitical' (necropolitical) matrix of power conferred upon women in the nineteenth-century England and France- this has been occurring continually and *under the same logic of epistemic coloniality* that, nowadays as before, is used by the sovereignty to confer the status of 'living dead' or 'abandonados' upon the governed populations (among which, most notably, I distinguish some cases in contemporary Palestinian and South European history). The next chapters in this thesis I devote to them, while placing an accent onto their self-sacrificial deaths (instead of 'suicides') as a way of arguing about the thanatopolitical regimes of power on the side of the weaker against the necro-coloniality of power on the side of the stronger.

Part Two

Chapter 6

A Man, Burning: Self-Immolation, Thanatopolitics, and Unconditional Revolt

*For death is precisely that from and over which I have
power.
But it is also that space where freedom and negation
operate.
--Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics" (2003: 39)*

The main argument in this chapter revolves around the forms of death broadly associated with 'self-immolation' (or, in purely etymological sense, self-sacrifice). By this I imply the varied forms of personal death on behalf of the 'living dead', whereas dying occurs in the name of resistance or protest against the sovereign power and the undignified status of life for which the (necropolitical) sovereignty itself is hold responsible. Such a death is properly *thanatopolitical* for one particular reason: it relies upon the *constructive* ('positive') aspects of death instead of its merely destructive ('negative') characteristics. This view pertains to some current theoretical strands that analyze "the use of death for mobilizing political life" (Murray 2006) in direct confrontation with necropower (Mbembe 2003) – or the power of death instrumentalized by sovereignty and epitomized by its necropolitical/ necrocolonial/ necrocapitalist forms of governance over populations. This kind of confrontation is relevant for the thanatopolitical conception of self-immolation insofar as it opposes the main objective of necropolitical regimes of sovereign power (or necropower for short), which is not 'life' but human capacity to be mortal. Hence, if thanatopolitics pertains to the 'living dead' and necropolitics pertains to the sovereign power, my argument goes as following: there is no thanatopolitics without necropolitics and there is no thanatopolitical counter-regime of 'suicidal' death without the necropolitical regime of homicidal/genocidal death. As long as a necropolitical regime claims its own right to

have populations' lives at its own disposal by exposing them to death on its own free will, there will be forms of thanatopolitical protest that count on "the living from the dead" (as Murray suggests) as well as self-immolators who, against the undignified living imposed by force, defend their own right to death beyond the sovereign's whim.

Besides, I argue that –for the self-immolation to be properly *thanatopolitical* and thus an efficient form of resistance– the strategic public exposure of suffering through dying (not death itself) must be coordinated in both timely and spatial terms: it must transform the act of protest into a visual record (an image) so it could leave a visible and documented, image-recorded trace of the dying event. This implies the exchange of emotional and political potentiality of corporeal rhetoric of protest in the self-immolator's last message. The exchange implies the potentiality of "communicative suffering" (Biggs 2003) –"suspended in time" via public memory or images (Yang 2011)– to address the "responsive gaze" of onlookers (Bradatan 2011), but also to be effectively received by them in return. Such effects depend upon the level of one's implication with the cause for which a person commits self-immolation and imply the sense of guilt, induced by this death, among the direct members of his/her community, among his/her adversaries, and/or among the external (distanced) viewers at large. With regard to the latter, the meaning of self-immolation expands beyond the specificity of motivations behind the act and the particular conditions in which it occurred. On the one hand, it reaches the unimaginable potentials of transnational diffusion across time and space; on the other hand, its relevance stretches into the very question of humankind: it probes the sense of humanness, of what it actually means *to be human*, under conditions where One takes his/her right to death by self-immolating in public in order to 'speak' to the Many. If it is true that "there is perhaps no better preliminary definition of politics than this – the nature of the relation between the one and the many" (Murray 2006: 191), I consider the given forms of self-immolation as radical acts that are not only 'political' but properly thanatopolitical. The aim of this study is to show some prospects of thanatopolitical strategies and their theoretical and philosophical relevance against the necropolitical imposition of death and the necro-coloniality of power at large. It is my hope that thanatopolitics does not only presuppose the potentiality of subalternized counter-terror against the sovereign terror of death, but that it truly opens towards the counter-hegemonic epistemic communities of the world – the communities to whom it could bring some less considered accounts of life and death, against the imperial epistemic sovereignty and its own 'regime of truth' which is supposedly unquestionable and universal.

Accordingly, I make a crucial difference between the following sets of concepts: that of 'immolation' (sacrifice) and that of 'self-immolation' (self-sacrifice), as well as between the concept of 'self-immolation' and the concept of 'suicide'. I place an accent on such distinctions from the outset because the usage of these terms, due to their conceptual ambiguity, has often been mutually exchangeable in a somewhat confusing,

even misleading manner in academic studies so far. Given this basic set of differences, which are explored in more depth in the first part of this chapter, I introduce the major division between two types of regimes through which my analysis of death centers on the *thanatopolitical regime of self-sacrifice* vis-à-vis the *necropolitical regime of sacrifice*. The former discloses a self-sacrificial death (under the ‘logic of martyrdom’) at the center of political order on behalf of the powerless, which makes it a properly thanatopolitical order. By the ‘logic of martyrdom’ I refer to Mbembe who associates it with the figures of so-called suicide bombers and their account of “my death [going] hand in hand with the death of the Others” (Mbembe 2003: 36), when the body of a self-immolator is turned into a weapon against oneself as much as against the others. In that regard, and with ‘suicide bombers’ in mind, Mbembe says the following:

The candidate for martyrdom transforms his or her body into a mask that hides the soon-to-be detonated weapon. Unlike the tank or the missile that is clearly visible, the weapon carried in the shape of the body is invisible. Thus concealed, it forms part of the body. It is so intimately part of the body that at the time of detonation it annihilates the body of its bearer, who carries with it the bodies of others when it does not reduce them to pieces. The body does not simply conceal a weapon. The body is transformed into a weapon, not in a metaphorical sense but in the truly ballistic sense. (Mbembe 2003: 36)

Additionally, and on the opposite side of the same spectrum, this logic implies what Michael Biggs associates with individuals “intentionally killing themselves on behalf of a collective cause” without harming anyone else (Biggs 2005): when the body of a self-immolator is not a weapon against the others but ‘against oneself’. Here, the image of victim’s suffering transmits the message of protest to his/her allies and adversaries through “communicative suffering” (Biggs 2003). While Biggs does not equate his notion of self-immolation to martyrdom or ‘suicide bombing’ (though he outlines certain similarities with both), what matters in this case is that this form of death avoids homicide, while in Mbembe’s terminology it encompasses “homicide and suicide [...] accomplished in the same act. And to a large extent, resistance and self-destruction are synonymous” (Mbembe 2003: 36). In either case, this type of death is instrumentalized by a self-immolator to the extent that it exposes the ‘mortal power’ of the powerless individual so he/she could personally and ultimately confront, protest and contest the sovereign regime of massive death production.

This other type of death stands at the center of political order pertinent to a necropolitical regime that instrumentalizes (colonizes, accumulates, organizes and deploys) human mortality: unlike the ‘logic of martyrdom’, here the sovereign power/necropower uses the death of the others under its own logic –the ‘logic of survival’– for its own, necropolitical purposes. By the ‘logic of survival’ I refer to the idea of extermination “which consists in wishing to impose death on others while

preserving one's own life" (Mbembe 2003:37). By 'necropolitical purposes' I refer to the massive production of death but also to the creation of conditions for the forms of *life close to death* and their regulation by sovereign power through the communities of 'living dead' ('abandonados') – the 'death-worlds' of social existence before death itself occurs.

For Mbembe this denotes "the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003: 40). The 'living dead' (or 'abandonados') provide a keynote name to these cases, not only in relation to Mbembe's formulation in his "Necropolitics" but also in reference to the dramatic conditions of social exclusion in the 1990s in the South of Brazil, as described by the anthropologist João Biehl (2001). I pay due attention to these categories throughout my thesis, in the sense that they give another, perhaps less expected and unconventional perspective onto the concept of life itself (i.e., life closer to death than to the dignified idea of living in its most human sense). Without the idea of 'living dead' and/or 'abandonados' my understanding of death(s) in general –how I see them in this study– and the thanatopolitical conception of resistance, in particular, would not have been imaginable. With the idea of 'living dead' in mind, I approach together the groups of people who set themselves alight in protest (such as the case of Thich Quang Duc, described in more depth in this chapter), the protagonists of Palestinian thanatopolitical regime of self-sacrifice against the necro-colonial regime of power (to whom I devote due attention at a later stage of my writing in this chapter), and the victims of so-called 'economic suicides' in the South of Europe under financial austerity regime, whose specificity is presented in the last chapter of this study. Despite all the earlier attempts to come to terms with specific names for specific acts, motivations and results around 'self-immolation', the present study also assumes that the conceptual ambiguities –with respect to our ways of thinking and speaking about death sparked by this phenomenon– are still far from being clarified. In what follows, I will expose my own research results done in that direction so far. This is in hope that they might be useful enough for any future inquiries in the field that could lead towards some less ambiguous and more sustainable approaches to the complexities of the so-called self-immolation.

In that sense, I pay particular attention to two prevalent groups that fall under the broadly conceived thanatopolitical category of self-immolation or self-sacrifice: 'suicide bombers', who kill the others in the act of killing themselves, and those who set *only*

themselves on fire without killing anyone else.¹ Although they share certain characteristics within the expanded terminology at hand (such as the personal manifestation of self-violent revolt through death), Biggs, as earlier described, considers self-immolation as precisely as “an act of public protest, where an individual intentionally kills him or herself –*without harming anyone else*– on behalf of a collective cause” (Biggs 2003: 2; my emphasis). For the sake of clarity, it is worth noting what he has to say in addition to this definition: “Like a suicidal attack, an act of self-immolation involves an individual intentionally killing himself or herself (or at least gambling with death) on behalf of a collective cause; unlike a suicidal attack, an act of self-immolation is *not* intended to cause physical harm to anyone else or to inflict material damage” (Biggs 2005: 173). The outlined difference –between the two forms of self-sacrifice for collective good– tells us about individuals involved in the acts of killing (themselves together with the others or only themselves, without killing anyone else). The latter example was sufficient to suggest that the self-immolators who do not intend to take anyone else’s life but their own are “dying without killing” (Biggs 2005: 173). Another important characteristic makes the proposed difference even better pronounced: “The suicidal attack is an extraordinary weapon of war whereas self-immolation is an extreme form of protest” (Biggs 2005: 173). Hence, ‘to die with killing’ means to put oneself to death together with one’s adversaries as part of the militant logic of violent resistance, whereas ‘to die without killing’ means to put oneself to death without producing death of the others as part of the logic of ‘non-violent’ resistance (however, although the ‘lack of violence’ here refers to the absence of killing the other, evidently it does not exclude the violence over one’s own self). Furthermore, although he has been extensively using terms such as ‘protest by suicide’ throughout his work so far, Biggs distinguishes between so-called personal suicides and self-immolation because the former relates “to individual grievances (including conflict with other family members) rather than a collective cause” (Biggs 2005: 174). Keeping in mind these distinctions, I anyhow approach them under the same (thanatopolitical) umbrella: in the first part of this chapter I devote due attention to the thanatopolitical form of self-immolation that involves individuals ‘dying for a cause’ without killing anyone else; in the second part I turn to another thanatopolitical form of self-immolation for a cause: so-called suicide

¹ Biggs, who makes a very clear distinction between these two categories (Biggs 2012b), includes into his classification the phenomenon of hunger strikes, which does not make part of my study at this stage of research. Biggs treats hunger strikes as a way of “running the risk of death, of which he [a self-immolator] has no desire, not even as a means” (Sweeney 1993: 428, in Biggs 2005: 174). For Biggs there is a major distinction between self-immolation and hunger strikes that he explains as follows: “Hunger strikes involve self-inflicted suffering, but few are undertaken as a fast until death. Even when a hunger striker seriously ‘threatens’ to starve to death, death can be averted by concessions [...] With self-immolation, by contrast, death is not conditional on the opponent’s (in)action” (Biggs 2005: 174).

bombers or freedom-fighters, most notably those pertaining to the contemporary Palestinian context.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the suggested discrepancies and ambiguities among the given terms might occur for the following reason: in comparison to other areas of thanatological scholarship, academic studies on contemporary forms of protest through self-immolation have so far contributed to the world of knowledge very modestly and to the degree that has remained incomparably low with regard to the ‘traditional’ expertise on death – by which I also imply the forms of dying most similar to though not identical with the given accounts of immolation and self-immolation, such as (ritual) sacrifices and (pathological) suicides, respectively. However, despite its modest beginnings and the fact that it has entered the world of academia relatively recently –since the end of the 1960s (Biggs 2005: 174)– self-immolation (notably by fire) has been increasingly present across the world since the dawn of the third millennium. I consider it as one of the defining features of the most recent historical phase of globalization. Given the global proliferation of differently motivated cases, this phenomenon has become inscribed into our imaginaries thanks to the attention paid to it especially by the media. Thanks to this source of information (beside the ‘proper’ scholarly literature), when I refer to self-immolation as a thanatopolitical form of protest I take into account a number of so-called suicide missions across the world: in the zones of permanent or temporary foreign occupation (Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.); in the ‘internal’ conflict-zones (Pakistan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Russian Republic, etc.); and in the core capitalist regions (USA, UK, Sweden, Spain), the most outspoken among them being the 9/11 event in 2001 in New York City. On the other hand, I take into account another type of violence – performed exclusively against one’s own self. For example, this was the case of Mohammed Bouazizi resulting in the anti-governmental uprising of Tunisian society and the beginning of the so-called Arab Awakening in the aftermath of his death by the end of 2010. The ‘copycat’ effect followed the Tunisian example in a wave of similarly induced ‘deaths by burning’ across the regions of North Africa and the Middle East (2011-2012). They conspicuously coincided with a number of differently motivated cases across Europe since the beginning of the so-called Eurozone economic crisis in 2008. Finally, among many other examples that have characterized the beginning of the new century, it is worth noting one of them – the most pertinent yet, in political terms, the most puzzlingly unsuccessful so far: the massive ‘fiery deaths’ among the Tibetans who have been burning themselves, for years, in protest against the Chinese occupation and the oppressive conditions provoked therein, without actually moving from the existent *status quo*.

The outlined forms of self-immolation refer to the manifold aspects of self-sacrificial death that Biggs (2008: 23) associates with “politically motivated suicides”, among which he most notably distinguishes those including the use of fire and performed

exclusively against one's own self. They are commonly referred to by phrases such as 'suicide protest', 'protest by suicide', 'fiery death', 'self-immolation by fire', 'protest by self-immolation', 'protest as communicative suffering', 'dying for a cause', and 'dying with(out) killing' (Biggs 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Accordingly, he makes a clear distinction between self-immolation in the narrow sense and other types of self-immolation, most importantly those that have come to be recognized as 'suicide missions', 'suicide attacks', or 'suicide bombing', among other related terms (Biggs 2005, 2012b). He does so rightfully, given his methodology and arguments that I will explain at a later point of the present study.² However, unlike Biggs, my own understanding of self-immolation blurs this distinction again: given the focus on thanatopolitical dimension of self-sacrificial deaths at large, my thesis encompasses –under the same shield– self-immolation by fire (what Biggs calls 'dying without killing') and the so-called suicide bombing. The juncture between them is particularly relevant when they are examined with regard to the necropolitical character of sovereign power against which self-immolators themselves use death, in order to mobilize (political) life of the survivors. Hence, I examine both 'self-immolation by fire' and 'suicide bombing' as thanatopolitical forms of death that pertain to one common denominator – self-immolation (self-sacrifice) at large – without losing an account of some essential distinctions between them (which, I admit, is especially relevant when it comes to the subject of victimization and the production of victims on the side other than one's own (immolated) self.

Self-immolation vis-à-vis suicide

In the scientific field of suicide studies the subject of self-immolation (self-sacrifice) plays an almost irrelevant part. The most comprehensive publication up-to-date dealing

² Throughout the last decade it has not been rare to encounter the many and varied opinions on the intricate relationship between the so-called suicide terrorism and the clinical suicidality. This was, most notably, applied to the forms of self-immolation in the context of Palestinian anti-colonial resistance. It shall be mentioned, perhaps without any surprise, that the prevailing conclusions of this kind stem from the research studies undertaken by primarily U.S. and Israeli scientists and scholars. To give but one example: in view of Adam Lankford, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Alabama (USA) and the author of *Human Killing Machines: Systematic Indoctrination in Iran, Nazi Germany, Al Qaeda, and Abu Ghraib* (2009), "much like other suicidal individuals, many suicide terrorists appear to be driven by clinically suicidal risk factors, including: (1) the desire to escape the world they live in, (2) the desire to escape moral responsibility for their actions, (3) the inability to cope with a perceived crisis, and (4) a sense of low self-worth" (Lankford 2010). Interestingly enough, when Michael Biggs proposes criteria to define the phenomenon of self-immolation, he excludes the so-called suicide terrorism from the list (Biggs 2012).

with suicide and suicide prevention in a transnational perspective (Wasserman and Wasserman 2009) devotes very little space to the practice of self-immolation: it is mentioned only occasionally, outside of the main research scope, and most notably in relation to Hinduism and female suicides in India (Vijayakumar 2009: 22-23; Canetto 2009: 241).³ The reasons for such reductionism may be many, but the strongest among them consists in the following assumption: self-immolation has little to do with suicide itself. Despite psychiatric tendencies to place everything in relation to pathology, “psychopathology is not necessary to explain most cases of self-immolation” (Biggs 2005: 201). Some contemporary sociologists argue that one immolates him- or herself for a “collective cause”, not for “personal grievances” (Biggs 2005: 174). Hence, the most remarkable feature allowing two phenomena to be properly distinguished relates to the motivations behind the acts of suicide and self-immolation, respectively. Michael Biggs adds to the discussion by suggesting that “there must be cases of personal suicide masquerading as self-immolation. [Since] it requires no organization, anyone who wants to put an end to his or her life anyway can easily choose self-immolation” (Biggs 2005: 201). Nonetheless, the scarcity of the act has been incomparable to the alarming frequency of personal suicides worldwide. Says Biggs:

What is remarkable, then, is that self-immolation is so rare. If we estimate at the most an average of seventy-five cases per year, then that equates to about one per 10,000 suicides. At the very least, we must conclude that suicidal tendencies almost never lead to self-immolation. I would go further and suggest that self-immolation is rarely explained by suicidal tendencies. (Biggs 2005: 201)

Examples of psychiatric and medical neutralization of self-immolation in favor of pathology have been numerous and ongoing. One case, that I would like to highlight, relates to the research results presented on the occasion of the 18th European Congress of Psychiatry in 2010 in Munich (Germany). It concerns the memory of former Eastern Europe where self-immolation has been neither rare nor invisible under Soviet rule after the Second World War, especially in the period following the Soviet occupation of

³ When the psychiatrist Lakshmi Vijayakumar writes with regard to Hindu religion and suicide in India, she uses the term ‘suicide by self-immolation’ in order to stress out the following: “As early as 3000 BC, suicides were generally condemned, but religious suicides were condoned. The practice of *sati* (self-immolation) and *jauhar* (mass suicide) was also prevalent among the Hindus. Suicide by self-immolation often occurs in Hindus, particularly among young women: the dowry system and arranged marriages are prevalent amongst Hindus and sometimes lead to suicides. Suicidal behavior was higher among Hindus than that of the native population in the countries to which Hindus had migrated” (Vijayakumar 2009: 19). These and related views indicate that certain tendencies, existent among (young) women in some parts of the world, can be very close to self-immolation for cultural or other reasons. However, arguments coming from a medical perspective largely remain focused on the behavioral characteristics of the phenomenon as properly ‘suicidal’, unrelated to interpretations (such as Biggs’) that are rather focused on non-pathological aspects of self-immolation, where ‘clinical suicidality’ does not take priority at the expense of other possible perspectives.

Czech Republic in the late 1960s: this event was the main trigger for figures such as Jan Palach in Prague and Ryszard Siwiec in Warsaw to communicate their protest by burning themselves in public.⁴ While this trend continued until the dissipation of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s (in Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania, to name but a few countries), the ideas and practices of self-sacrificial death have been spread around the region and in many different national contexts that shared at least one common characteristic: suffering from the (Soviet) colonial domination. Still, when a poster-version of the scientific study by a team of French researchers from the University of Angers (Département de Psychiatrie et Psychologie médicale, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire d'Angers) was presented under the title “Self-immolation of the Soviet Opponents in Central Europe: Suicidal behaviour or Political protest?”, their concluding remarks about the examined cases were formulated within a clearly pathological setting of inquiry – as behaviors that are properly ‘suicidal’ rather than politically or otherwise motivated:

More than an act of political protest facing an existential absurdity, or than a rational act coming to end a desperate life situation, the immolation could also testify about the suicidal behavior and the failure of certain adaptation mechanisms on behalf of the subject who commits the act to cope with his/her psychopathological depression or narcissistic fragility (Cechova-Vayleux et al. 2010; my translation from French).⁵

When approached from another (sociological) perspective, as outlined by Biggs, self-immolation is not inclusive of so-called suicidal risk factors, which have commonly been favored by epidemiological approaches in psychiatry and public-health sciences (including suicide prevention). By ‘suicidal risk factors’ I denote the states of “mental disorder (such as depression, personality disorder, alcohol dependence, or schizophrenia), and some physical illnesses, such as neurological disorders, cancer, and HIV infection” (World Health Organization 2013). By ‘suicide’ I here refer to the normative definition as proposed by medico-scientific power discourses –“the act of deliberately killing oneself” (World Health Organization 2013)– without necessarily

⁴ While the Palach’s case has been quite renowned, an interested reader might also want to consult the TV film “Usłyszcie mój krzyk” (Hear My Cry) by a documentary film director Maciej Drygas about the less known case of Ryszard Siwiec, now available on a DVD format (production: Studio Filmowe Logos, Zespół Filmowy Zodiak, 1991, black & white, 46 min; <http://culture.pl/en/work/hear-my-cry-maciej-drygas> (accessed March 10, 2014).

⁵ According to the original poster version of the presentation, whose electronic version I received thanks to one of the authors of this study (Mrs. Eva Cechova Vayleux) in our email correspondence on February 21, 2011, the original French version of the conclusion is as follows: “Plus qu’un acte de protestation politique, posé face à l’absurdité existentielle, ou qu’un acte rationnel, venant mettre un terme à une situation vitale désespérée, l’immolation pourrait aussi venir témoigner d’un comportement suicidaire et de la faillite de certains mécanismes d’adaptation du sujet concomitants d’une psychopathologie dépressive ou de fragilités narcissiques”.

agreeing with it, given that my preferences go towards the definition of the act as a thanatopolitical self-sacrificial act (or 'radical withdrawal', which I explain in the last part of this study). The WHO definition, if taken to be irrevocable, blurs the boundary between self-immolation and suicide and reduces the value of the former for the sake of the latter: whoever 'kills' him- or herself –with or without a clear cause (be it personal or collective)– commits suicide and falls under the normative definition of the act. Such views identify almost every act of self-immolation as a self-inflicted death corresponding to suicide.

My point is that this definition is not to be taken for granted. Despite some common elements, two acts do not stand for the same phenomenon. The meaning ascribed to 'suicide' does not necessarily overlap with 'self-immolation': the two terms should not be used interchangeably although this has been the case on many occasions so far (even Biggs uses the phrase 'suicide by protest'), just like the terms 'immolation' and 'self-immolation' should be differentiated. A problem, nonetheless, remains: how to distinguish among the many and varied forms of self-inflicted death without confusing one for another? If the concept of self-immolation does not equate with the concept of suicide, what is crucial to a proper discussion is the conceptual side of the issue. It depends upon what we understand by the concept of self-immolation and what the word 'self-immolation' means. Starting from the etymological origins of the terms 'immolation' and 'self-immolation', I will address the manifold, sometimes conflicted ways of dealing with the concepts of knowledge pertaining to both of them. This is in order to argue the following: self-immolation, as a personal/political act of public protest, needs to be decontaminated, detached and, finally, decolonized from the epistemic sovereignty of prevailing, epidemiological and normative clinical views on suicide. To make this happen, we need to shift our attention in the direction that bridges the normativity of suicide in self-destructive phenomena towards a more nuanced interpretation of self-sacrifice. Furthermore, self-immolation also needs to be critically approached with regard to the notion of immolation (sacrifice) insofar as the former denotes a constructive (thanatopolitical) regime of power in response to the latter's destructive (necropolitical) framework of oppression. This is but one of the reasons why I insist, later on, on Murray's concept of thanatopolitics which challenges the interchangeable relationship between 'suicide' and 'self-immolation' and strips the latter off its commonly assumed 'pathological' dimensions.

The 'necropolitical' framework of immolation rituals

To immolate is to sacrifice. According to Oxford Dictionaries, the Latin origin of the word *immolat* comes from the verb *immolo*, *immolare* and means “sprinkled with sacrificial meal”; in the English-speaking world the verb signifies “to kill or offer as a sacrifice, especially by burning” (Oxford Dictionaries 2012). Given this schematic etymological explanation, the meaning of immolation is inclusive of three basic elements. They revolve around the ideas of sacrifice (in terms of offering/gift-giving), killing and burning. Such etymological framework introduces some further important remarks. They concern three new issues relevant for the analysis at hand: the subject in control of immolation, the object of immolation submitted to such control, and the (ritual) relation between them. Both the subject and the object are situated around the act that reconfigures their mutual relation into a certain *state of order*, necessary for the act to occur as ‘immolation’. Given the adherence of sacrificial phenomena to religion and religious rites in particular (Hubert and Mauss 1964), I assume the occurrence of a sacrificial act as part of the process predominantly conceived upon its *ritual* dimension. The ritual dimension is not only indispensable for the concept of immolation as such: rather, it discloses the imperative of the ‘sacred order’ at the center of this concept. It is in rituals that “an object is offered to a divinity in order to establish, maintain, or restore a right relationship of a human being to the sacred order, [the practice that] has been found in the earliest known forms of worship and in all parts of the world” (Encyclopedia Britannica 2012).

Stuart J. Murray offers another key through which to elaborate on the limits imposed by the ‘sacred order’, “the sacred value of (biopolitical) life” (Murray 2006: 195), or what he also terms a ‘secular sacred’:

Biopolitics is, then, the rational, sovereign regulation and control of the population. This remains the dominant political paradigm in Western democracies today, while it is increasingly inflected by neoliberal ideology. Life itself is regulated, maximized, and harnessed through governmental policy, free-market global capitalism, ever-increasing juridicization, medicalization, etc. – the moral mission of a ‘secular sacred’. *Such a view of life is promoted, discursively, as a universal good*. It operates as a virtual cosmology for us, its subjects. And such a discourse makes it very comfortable, if not necessary, to disavow death as something almost immoral and alien, to forget that the price of life is often death itself (Murray 2006: 193; my emphasis).

If the sacrificial relation implies that its subjects and objects function according to a set of prescribed rules, it is the ‘sacred order’ that allows for a ‘ritual of immolation’ to be performed as a ‘universal good’. I see it as a form of *governance* that regulates the

internal system of relations between the subjects and objects involved in the immolation process as a way of living, insofar as it relates to the external party: a deity, or the idea of an ultimate (epistemic) sovereignty which includes the biopolitical sovereignty of 'life' over 'death'. Yet, since this form of governance occurs *through death itself* (or the exposure of human mortality to the sovereign power and its regulating order) I keep referring to so-called biopolitics as precisely the necropolitical order of power where 'immolation' plays its distinctive role. Hence, the system of meaning around immolation depends upon the prescribed and regulated ('sacred') logic of exchange between the internal and external parties in the immolation rituals. This also means that a certain form of governance accounts for our discussions about the many and varied instances involved in this kind of exchange, in particular if the topic revolves around the *human sacrifice*. The arising question is: who has the right to exercise control within the 'sacred order' of immolation? In other words, the subject's will to submit someone to the prime rule of the order (the act of killing, through sacrifice or 'gift-giving') is dependent upon the object's *exposure to death*. Thus, to sacrifice someone does not only imply the abstract form of governance called the 'sacred order' – it depends upon a precise set of regulations, sanctioned by the sacrificial community, that constitute the instrumentalization of death for the sake of a 'sacred order' or, as I shall call it, the *necropolitical regime of immolation rituals* at large.

To talk about immolation as a necropolitical phenomenon means to expand its indispensable religious framework into the broader area of interpretation and to confront the given logic of the 'sacred order' from another theoretical perspective. I look at it from a viewpoint that centers on a different type of order: the system of authority governing the interplay between life and death. This system claims to have the *ultimate power to decide* about life and death of those members of populations who (must) take part in sacrifice. In the context of human sacrifice, my assumption is as follows: on the one hand, the subject of immolation is a living human being performing the ritual toward someone else's death; on the other, the object of immolation implies another living human being who must be exposed to death through this ritual (that is, a *death ritual*) in order to play a particular role in it – that of a *victim*. This means that the same living beings who must be 'sacrificed' in 'immolation rituals' are also the living beings purposefully and intentionally exposed to death and, eventually, killed. Their elimination by killing comes as a result of what governs the rituals, i.e., the 'sacred order'. In other words, one could assume the *criminal* nature of sacrificial rituals: the objects of immolation are the victims of very sophisticatedly contextualized crimes (homicides/genocides) where human lives must be taken for the sake of the 'sacred order' yet under the pretext of a 'universal good'.

Whether the immolation rituals completely equate with crimes or not, I leave it to some future discussion. What matters here revolves around the basic distinction between the objects of immolation as the living and non-living 'gifts' in ritual

exchanges. What is important in both cases pertains to the common sense logic. For the act of immolation to occur, there must exist two sides at least: someone who performs the act (i.e., who commits the killing) and someone or something to be killed, i.e., 'sacrificed'. If the subjects of immolation are unconditionally the living (human) beings, are living creatures unconditionally the objects of immolation? The answer is: no. The object of immolation does not necessarily imply a *living* source (human beings and animals) but also *non-living* objects (food or artifacts). This distinction is important because it produces certain nuances in our understanding of the 'killing matrix of power' – or, for that matter, of the ways we treat the living beings exposed to sacrificial death-rituals as 'gifts', i.e., the victims. If the objects of immolation can be either the living beings or the non-living objects, two other types of immolation must be distinguished in order to understand the living/non-living dichotomy therein. This dichotomy depends upon the way by which the 'killing matrix of power' works in immolation rituals. In this sense, we either speak of bloodless sacrifice or of ritual killing. The former conceives of offering non-living things (food or artifacts) whereas the latter involves living beings (animals or human lives). With this distinction in mind, I hereby predominantly treat the object of immolation as a human living body in its status of death-evidence. The 'gift of death' – a dying body, a body in pain or a corpse "in a truly ballistic sense" (Mbembe 2003: 36)– is thus an essential element of sacrificial exchange, informed by both material and symbolic functioning of a living object exposed to killing, upon which the killing act itself is performed. Apparently, while we can still remain less concerned about the sacrifice of non-living objects, we cannot but remain concerned with the forced death of a human being submitted to ritual killings. The relationship among the one who sacrifices (the subject of immolation), the one who is sacrificed (the living object of immolation) and the one for whom the act is performed (the 'sacred order') is here crucial for our understanding of death itself: or such forms of killing that are, under the guise of 'immolation', sanctioned and even demanded by the type of governance through which the sovereign power exercises its 'rationality of the sacred order' in order to expose people to death, to decide about populations' deaths, and/or to make them die. This is also the reason why, instead of talking about 'immolation rituals', I preferably relate these forms of killing to the varied manifestations of necropower and the necropolitical regime of immolation therein. The idea of 'death' here relates to the manifestations of necropower through necropolitics in the processes of immolation: the gift of death (i.e. death of a living being) relates to a dying body (exposed to life-ending processes under the conditions of expected and certain death, regulated by the killing matrix of power in sacrificial rituals). It functions as a resonance to Mbembe's accounts "for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in

which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003: 40).

Beside the (interchangeable) aspects of killing and sacrifice, there is another important and contentious element to be clarified. It concerns the aspect of burning. As proposed from the outset, in the Anglosphere the verb 'to immolate' signifies the following: "to kill or offer as a sacrifice, especially [*but not necessarily*; my remark] by burning" (Oxford Dictionaries 2012). This is further supported by scholars who have been involved with the subject on a more profound basis of inquiry: "Self-immolation refers to the sacrifice of one's own life, especially, but not only, by fire; self-immolation may also involve drowning, starvation and feeding one's body to animals" (Kelly 2011: 299). Therefore, if immolation produces a certain kind of death, it does not exclusively imply dying by fire: 'immolation' does not exhaust its own meaning in reference to killing someone primarily by mode of burning (insofar as the word 'fire' is understood in its literal sense, as the chemical process of combustion releasing heat and light). Such a possibility is accounted for, but the connection to burning or to the fiery death is not to be taken for granted in discussions around immolation. The common and misleading application of the phrase 'death by fire' to the processes denoting immolation (and especially self-immolation, as I will reflect upon soon) has been framed by the popular usage of the term. What makes our common understanding of these phenomena still so strongly connected to dying by burning? In other words, what makes them so significantly inseparable from the popular ideas of immolation as a specifically 'fiery death'?

Michael Biggs seems to know the answer to this question. He brings the concrete historical period into discussion: "Although the word 'immolation' strictly means 'sacrifice', since the 1960s it has become synonymous with fiery death" (Biggs 2005: 174). This is a new challenge: it shows that the idea of immolation has been more prominently equated with fire since the 1960s, not before or after. Biggs has a good reason for such an argument, as it closely relates to the aspects of vision that make an exchange between the self-immolator and his/her audiences possible. He points out the exemplary case in the history of twentieth-century self-immolations: the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc who burned himself to death in 1963 in Saigon (former South Vietnam). His method of setting himself on fire to protest the religious oppression by the local regime served as a groundbreaking and worldwide example for future cases of self-immolation in the name of protest. This was, most notably, due to the fact that the Saigon event was recorded by a foreign photo-journalist, so the act gained international visibility almost immediately after the monk's death. Additionally, Biggs claims that since the period 1963-1970 "suicide protest was now indelibly associated with burning. Suicide protests before 1963 had not used fire, but other means of death. Since 1963, 85% of individuals have chosen burning. The imprint of Quang Duc's action endures" (Biggs 2012: 146). The novel method has paralleled the increase of the annual rate of what

Biggs also calls ‘suicide protests’: “Compared to the period 1919-1962, [it] was seventeen times higher in the period 1963-1970. Even excluding South Vietnam, the annual rate was eight times higher” (Biggs 2012: 146).

Therefore, the real and most valuable novelty of the 1960s (the ‘cultural innovation’ of Quang Duc, as Biggs calls it), due to which we nowadays associate (self-) immolation to ‘fiery death’, is related to the ways that the practice of burning oneself to death came to be used as a matter of *visual* evidence. First, this is conceived by offering oneself *publicly* as a gift-giving weapon of resistance, implying individual’s donation –of one’s own life– to a common cause in support of a collective struggle. Second, it is conceived as a visual trace of resistance, implying self-sacrifice perceived by the others. The mode of perception is here literally understood as a viewing or eye-witnessing experience on behalf of the audience that is confronted with (and also exposed to) one’s own act of self-immolation, either directly or indirectly (via people’s presence at the public spot where the act occurs, or via recorded images or written documents targeting those whom a self-immolator intends to address). Quang Duc’s modern example was therefore a radical breaking point, a point of departure from which “this ancient tradition was transformed into a contemporary media spectacle: American journalists were invited to watch the immolation, and indeed the assembled monks chanted slogans in English for their benefit” (Biggs 2012: 145-146). With that in mind, Biggs argues about the novelty of the famous Vietnamese case of 1963 that, “like any cultural innovation, it was a creative mutation of preexisting elements [...] a *creative redeployment of religious tradition in political struggle*” (Biggs 2003: 6; my emphasis).⁶

This might give a false impression that, parallel to its popularity, self-immolation has been a subject of increasing interest among the many and varied academic disciplines. However, the situation is quite the opposite: in particular with regard to sociology, Biggs makes it very clear that “despite the vast literature on collective protest and the classical importance of suicide for sociologists [...] self-immolation has not attracted the attention of social scientists” (Biggs 2003: 3). As early as 2003 he notices some relevant exceptions and mentions two sources of his main concern, namely: “Squatting, Self-immolation, and the Repatriation of Crimean Tatars” (an article by Gretta Uehling, the anthropology professor from the University of Michigan), and “Shame, Anger, and Love in Collective Action: Emotional Consequences of Suicide Protest in South Korea, 1991” (by the sociologist Hyojoung Kim from the University of Washington, Seattle). Needless

⁶ To a certain extent, this also complies with Ian Marsh’s suggestion, when he states the following: “If suicide can be conceived as voluntary, at least to some degree, then the door is also opened to consideration of the act in political terms – if politics is taken to arise where choices are possible in contested cultural field (Butler 1997). Such a position then opens up the possibility of interpreting suicide in terms of resistance, refutation or protest. Power relations and questions of social justice and inequalities could come more to the fore in discussions of suicide” (Marsh 2010a: 73-74).

to say, these two points of reference –in which Biggs finds “recent exceptions” in the sociological literature devoted to self-immolation– are but very selective sources of (sociological) knowledge on the issue. Academic interest in self-immolation has existed in a variety of writings in other scientific disciplines. They have been circulating in the scholarly curricula and publications at least since the 1960s (which is the period of Biggs’ general point of departure regarding the history of self-immolation and, in particular, in his texts of our concern here).

Despite the scarcity of specifically sociological materials, Biggs courageously undertook his task by shifting his attention to a different methodological approach: towards the mass media. Given the comprehensiveness of data related to a phenomenon as “rare and spectacular” as self-immolation, this turned to be an advantage: it allowed him “to trace a reasonable proportion of the total instances – not in a few countries, but throughout the world” (Biggs 2003: 3). This is not only due to the fact that information about the subject was available in the mass media, but (as Biggs makes it explicit) the link between self-immolation and global visibility is rather intrinsic and mutually dependent: without the media transmission, the very diffusion of self-immolation in cross-national sense would not have been imaginable at all. Also, the “exceptionally newsworthy” character of the event overcomes the media interest in “conventional protests like strikes and demonstrations” (Biggs 2003: 4). According to Biggs, “not coincidentally, [self-immolation] has spread in an era of global news transmission, and so newspapers and newswires are the primary source of data” (Biggs 2003: 3).

The relevance of mass media in re-activating self-immolation to the point of global efficiency is doubtless: “The introduction of self-immolation into the global repertoire [spread] far beyond the Buddhist tradition [and] deployed in protest for causes unrelated to the Vietnamese conflict” (Biggs 2003: 1). This is also linked to what Biggs acknowledges as the “cultural innovation” facilitated by optical and technological means of production and re-production. When defining self-immolation as an act of *public* protest, Biggs counts on visibility and communicability of the act towards those involved in it, directly or indirectly, either as viewers (spectators, witnesses, or ‘audiences’ in the broadest sense of the term) or as those who hold publicly responsible positions (political figures, most notably). This is why for self-immolation, as an act of protest, in order to be political it has to be public; and in order to be public it has to be “performed in a public space, usually in view of other people [and/or] accompanied by a written declaration, addressed to political figures or the general public” (Biggs 2003: 3). In his text “The Transnational Diffusion of Protest by Self-Immolation” he sharpens this

⁷ See Michael Biggs, “The Transnational Diffusion of Protest by Self-Immolation”, last access 25 April 2014, http://www.ibrarian.net/navon/paper/The_Transnational_Diffusion_of_Protest_by_Self_Im.pdf?paperid=8082340..

preliminary account on the efficiency of public view while stressing the precondition upon which self-immolation can exert emotional impact, especially “on a ‘public’ *unused to death presented as a spectacle* [...] To take an example, if the Diem regime had been publicly executing Buddhists in 1963, then it would be hard to envisage an act like Quang Duc’s” (my emphasis).⁸

This introduces the figure of a spectator into the historical narrative. The relationship between the one who immolates him or herself and the one observing the act testifies about the significance of viewers whose presence in the narrative provides the witnessing role reserved for those who are able to watch, to testify about the act of self-immolation so it could make a properly mobilizing effect. This largely depends upon the ‘thanatopolitical rhetoric’ of self-immolation (what Biggs otherwise calls ‘communicative suffering’). Given this framework, in what follows I intend to turn toward some more specific considerations of two different politics of death (self-immolation vis-à-vis immolation) in order to place an accent on how thanatopolitical (visual) rhetoric operates. The question is: what is it that makes self-immolation ‘rhetorical’ at all? Which conditions must be satisfied for the rhetoric of self-immolation to be effective, persuasive, and motivating enough so the expression of protest on behalf of the self-immolator could be understood by survivors as properly *thanatopolitical*?

Self-immolation: A Short Historical Overview

From an etymological perspective, if immolation stands for ‘sacrifice’ then self-immolation stands for ‘self-sacrifice’. But the question is: what does ‘self-sacrifice’ exactly mean? James A. Benn, a religious studies scholar, denies any strict meaning of self-immolation. He claims that “the range of practices, variety of practitioners, and the vastly different times and places in which they acted” have shown not only that there can never be a single answer to the question “Why did they do that?”, but also that “both the ‘they’ and ‘that’ of the question are meaningless” (Benn 2007: 198). To understand self-immolation as a phenomenon (un)related to suicide it is worth considering the multifaceted terminology as proposed by scholars from various fields of inquiry. To give the adequate answer, one needs to account for an important preliminary remark: there is no single definition of self-immolation. The only certainty

⁸ Biggs, *Ibid.*, p. 22.

to be considered is that our ideas of self-immolation can denote many and varied meanings on two main fronts of interpretation: one is narrow and remains linked to religious and/or spiritual contexts out of which the phenomenon originally emerged (Chinese Buddhism in the fourth century, according to Benn 2007, 2012); another one is broader and expands throughout time and space up till today: in a variety of geopolitical, cultural and social contexts it has brought novel meanings to the phenomenon in comparison to its historical origins.

Self-immolation is neither a novel nor unknown phenomenon in the context of contemporary (Western) scholarship. However, “its origins lie completely outside the Western tradition” (Biggs 2003: 3). In order to trace its historical line of development, contemporary studies usually draw upon the ancient sources of information that situate the origins and the tradition of self-immolation most notably in Asia. Benn identifies its roots through the medieval written documents, namely, “a medieval hagiographical collection called *Biographies of Eminent Monks*” (Benn 2012: 203). Through the story of a monk Fayu, dating back to the year 396, Benn detected “an account of what is probably the earliest recorded case of self-immolation by a Buddhist monk in China” (Benn 2012: 203). According to the story, Fayu burned his body “in homage [to the Buddha]; he consumed incense and oil; he wrapped his body in cloth, and recited the ‘Chapter on Abandoning the Body’ (*sheshen pin*). At its conclusion he set fire to himself. The religious and laity who witnessed this were all full of grief and admiration” (Benn 2012: 204).

Despite this historical evidence, a group of researchers from the State University of New York give a different account about the roots of what they preferably call ‘self-incineration’ instead of ‘self-immolation’ (Crosby et al. 1977). They refer to the ancient Greek resources from the first century BC –those left by the Greek Diodorus Siculus and Strabo, respectively– who gave “the earliest available accounts of ritualistic self-incineration” (Crosby et. al. 1977: 60). Both phenomena described by the two Greeks are situated in India. One of them refers to “the ancient rite of *suttee*, in which the widow was burned to death on the funeral pyre of her husband” (Crosby et. al. 1977: 60). This is not to be necessarily linked to the specific philosophical tradition of the Hindu religion, as *suttee* was “corollary of the primitive multi-cultural custom of widow-sacrifice” found not only in India but also elsewhere – including the Teutonic, Slavic and North European/Scandinavian tribes, among others (Crosby et. al. 1977: 60). Another phenomenon refers to a particular event from the fourth century BC, as Diodorus of Sicily describes it:

Here the Indian Caranus, who had advanced far in philosophy and was highly regarded by Alexander, put a remarkable end to his life. He had been taken ill and each day becoming more exhausted he asked the king to erect for him a huge

pyre, and after he had ascended it, to order attendants to ignite it (Crosby et al. 1977: 61).⁹

Similarly to Benn (2012), these scholars also refer to the Chinese Buddhist tradition and point out “the rite of ceremonial self-incineration [...] established in Buddhist sects in China and Southeast Asia in the early centuries of Christianity” (Crosby et al. 1977: 61). With this in mind, they indicate the significance of

a Buddhist text written in the first century AD about Bhahayiaraja, who ate incense, drank oils, and bathed in essences for 12 years before setting fire to himself as an offering to Buddha. This self-sacrifice established a precedent for the use of self-incineration as a means of religious sacrifice among Buddhist monks in the following centuries (Crosby et. al. 1977: 61).

Given this very brief historical background –with particular attention paid to China and its Buddhist tradition– it comes as no surprise that the same practice was repeated much later and in the same region (at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the southeast Asia), yet in a very different, colonial context (Biggs 2012; Benn 2007). When writing about this period, Biggs does not refer to it as ‘self-incineration’ but uses the term ‘suicides by fire’:

Chinese Buddhist texts from the fourth century onwards describe monks choosing death –often but not always by fire– to manifest their transcendence of physical existence, to demonstrate the power of Buddhist practice, or to elicit benefits for their monastic community. Similar suicides by fire occurred in French Indochina in the 1920s and 1930s. (Biggs 2012: 145)¹⁰

In comparison to Biggs, the earlier accounts (Benn 2012; Crosby et al. 1977) have something in common that is relevant for our knowledge about the historical traces of self-immolation. They belong to specific *religious traditions* (Chinese Buddhism, Hinduism) and their motivations have very particular (ritual, spiritual and communal) nature. If we look back at those evidences from our own, contemporary perspective, we can argue that religious motivations have lost their priority since they do not figure out anymore as exclusive triggers for self-sacrificial acts. As Costica Bradatan (2011) points out:

⁹ Crosby et al. here refer to: Diodorus of Sicily (trans.: C. Bradford Welles): Book XVII. 107.2 Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 432-433. For the description of *suttee*, they refer to: Diodorus of Sicily (trans.: Russel M. Greer): Book XIX. 33.2 Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1947, p. 321.

¹⁰ It remains unclear to me, from Biggs’s text, whether the colonial aspect of the context he refers to also gave to the self-immolators an immediate political or anti-colonial resonance or not (as a way for them to exercise their requests for freedom from the colonial power, or as a way to differently profile their religious feelings under the Christian rule).

Self-immolation in the Buddhist tradition is not the same thing as political self-immolation: the mindsets and motivations involved are different, and so is the societal impact. Yet even though the importance of religious-cultural background is undeniable in the case of the Vietnamese monks, political self-immolations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have become a major symbolic gesture in their own right.

This proves that there is a clear dividing line between the more traditional (mystical or religious) acts of self-immolation and, opposite to that, the acts inspired by other – notably political or politically sensitive– types of motives. Therefore, it is important to stress out that what is nowadays popularly known as ‘suicide protest (by fire)’ or ‘self-immolation’ differs from an earlier, spiritual and religious tradition that lacked the *political* aspects of protest instigated by self-sacrificial acts. What also characterizes self-immolation as a political phenomenon are the following aspects: the logic of *resistance* (which is why the phrase ‘suicide protest’ entered discourses on self-immolation); its more pronounced *profane* rather than sacral perspective; and its *relatively recent* emergence, usually in *public* (which makes them explicit and accessible inasmuch as openly visible acts, aiming at someone else’s view). According to this simplified classification, self-immolation as a political act is unrelated to the earlier tradition. However, there is one thing that has remained a constant: “Regardless of their different specific aims (mystical enlightenment or political protest), all self-immolators share *the same desire to transcend the human body as a strictly biological entity and to turn it, through fire, into a tool for other, higher purposes*” (Bradatan 2011). This suggests the thanatopolitical potentiality of the act insofar as the self-immolator’s *dying* body (in the process of radical withdrawal from life) can perform the persuasive role post-mortem and mobilize political life of the survivors. This is why, in comparison to exclusively religious variants of the act, it might be that the puzzle of self-immolation resides in the manifold aspects of its ‘higher purposes’ beyond mystical/ religious ones. In this sense, it is not one’s own body that determines the act as properly thanatopolitical but the distance one takes from his/her own body in order to detach, to ‘withdraw’ from its biological and material given: *not to ‘die’, but to ‘govern one’s own death’* for the sake of using it as an instrument that could bring another sense of life closer to the survivors or announce “the beginning of a new life”:

It is no wonder that in some cultures ‘death by fire’ has been seen not as death proper, but just as *the beginning of a new life*, a gateway to a higher form of existence. It is reported, for example, that the ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles decided to use this type of exit in order to prove his immortality (he threw himself into an active volcano). Self-immolation is also allowed in some forms of Mahayana Buddhism. For instance, in the *Lotus Sutra* there is the story of the Bodhisattva Medicine King who sets himself ablaze as a form of ultimate renunciation of the body. It was this account in particular that inspired—directly

or indirectly—not only Thich Quang Duc and other Vietnamese monks and nuns who self-immolated during the Vietnam War, but also a number of self-immolations in India, for example (Bradatan 2011; my emphasis).

Significantly enough, Bradatan here points out something that is worth accounting for with regard to Murray's notion of thanatopolitics, namely: that self-immolators aspired towards 'the beginning of a new life, a gateway to a higher form of existence' instead of conceiving of their act as an entrance to death. This instance, by which burning oneself connects to the idea of 'life' (not to 'death itself'), paves the way for the so-far 'unthinkable' complexities of the act of dying throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries that should be approached as properly thanatopolitical. By this I understand the personal instrumentalization of one's own death (i.e., personal form of governance over one's own death) as a counter-act in the face of the necropolitical regime of power (here also associated with *sacrificial* rituals) that instrumentalizes deaths of the others so it could exercise control over populations and re-affirm its sovereign power. The thanatopolitical dimension of self-immolation vis-à-vis the necropolitical dimension of immolation disturbs the power balance between the powerless and the powerful insofar as the 'burning man' takes the right to instrumentalize his own death back from the sovereign's hands. To be capable of doing so is to provide 'a gateway to a higher form of existence': not in terms of reaching the 'spiritual' emanation of Godhood, but in terms of putting the 'sacred order' of necropolitical sovereignty at the center of individual resistance. To have the idea of a *life-worth-living* literally embodied through one's own death here means to refuse living one's *life close-to-death* (as a 'living dead') or under conditions of social existence from which the 'burning man' withdraws himself forever, in fire.

Self-immolation, Public Protest, and Collective Cause

One possible definition of self-immolation –and the most viable so far, to my knowledge– was proposed by Biggs (2003) in his relatively old article "Protest by Suicide: Self-Immolation in the Global Repertoires, 1963-2002". According to him (as I have earlier presented), self-immolation is "an act of public protest, where an individual intentionally kills him or herself –without harming anyone else – on behalf of a collective cause" (Biggs 2003: 2). This definition, among its related and updated versions proposed by Biggs ever since (Biggs 2012), is centered on several fronts of analysis. First is the performing aspect of the act. Its enactment bears a distinctively political tone for at least two reasons: it is the matter of acting in protest, against someone in power or

against some decisions made on behalf of a ruling authority; also, it is the matter of public exposure, in terms of showing the act of individual protest openly to the others, as a visible and perceivable matter of fact, as *res publica*. Third aspect is centered on the results of the act and Biggs sees them as altruistic: they do not only aim at achieving benefits for the sake of the individual involved in the act (regaining one's own lost dignity, for example), but primarily for the group (community or society) to which the individual belongs or identifies with. This definition of self-immolation represents but an earlier version of Biggs' ongoing efforts to capture its essence within his long-term inquiries around this and related phenomena.¹¹ This version also discloses the relationship between globalization and self-immolation: while investigating the cross-national diffusion of this technique of protest, he sees it as part of transnational social movements inseparable from a global repertoire of contention (Biggs 2003: 1-2).

Ten years later, Biggs offers an updated and more precise definition of self-immolation. It was published by the end of 2012 in *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* in the context of the ongoing wave of Tibetan protests against the Chinese occupation and the oppressive conditions therein. Biggs here introduces a clear selection of four major criteria that stand for the defining principles of self-immolation:

I define 'suicide protest' (or equivalently, 'self-immolation') by criteria. First, an individual intentionally kills herself or himself, or at least inflicts physical injury likely to cause death. Second, the act is not intended to harm anyone else or to cause material damage. Third, the act is 'public' in either of two senses: performed in a public place, or accompanied by a written declaration addressed to political figures or to the general public. Fourth, the act is committed for a collective cause rather than personal or familial grievances. These criteria serve to differentiate suicide protest from suicide terrorism, personal suicide, martyrdom, and cultic suicide. Note that suicide protest implies no particular method of self-killing. It does, however, exclude the hunger strike. Most hunger strikers do not make a commitment to die. Those who do, use the threat of death to bargain with the adversary. Suicide protest, by contrast, is *unconditional*; no bargaining is involved (Biggs 2012: 143-144; my emphasis).

Although these criteria serve to differentiate suicide protest from some other phenomena involving self-destruction (including, what Biggs calls, 'personal suicide') what is apparent is that he here uses interchangeably the terms 'suicide' (in relation to 'protest') and 'self-immolation'. This introduces an important dilemma. First, suicide at large has been the category of knowledge privileged by the public health dominions,

¹¹ Hereby I refer to at least three of his early studies, namely, *Hunger Strikes by Suffragettes and Irish Republicans, 1909-1923* (2009), *Dying Without Killing: Self-Immolations, 1963-2002* (2005), and *When Costs are Beneficial: Protest as Communicative Suffering* (2003).

most notably in psychiatric research fields (Marsh 2010; Ziegler 2013). From a predominant –that is, epidemiological– perspective suicide is commonly understood as a pathological form of behavior. Contrary to that, self-immolation –as an act of protest– is not supposed to belong to pathological forms of behavior (at least when it is approached from perspectives that are not necessarily related to the institutional power-discourses in the public health domain). The role ascribed to self-immolation in its contemporary forms (as opposite to its more traditional forms, either religious or mystical) is the role of carrying a significant *political message* to the observers through the protest. By this I refer to self-immolation as the mode of communication that is ‘political’ because it is public: it is inscribed into the *res publica* and it concerns the matters of public responsibility – even the sense of public guilt which it aims to provoke among the viewers (Bradatan 2011). Also, the political dimension comes through the fact that self-immolators have a clear public target: the value-systems within the public sphere, that is, the communal or collective cause for which they die. If suicide is ‘pathological’ while self-immolation –as an act of protest– is ‘political’ rather than ‘pathological’, how do these two interpretations come together in the definition where Biggs interchangeably uses either of them?

Even though my own comprehension of ‘suicide’ is far from normative epidemiological interpretations, due attention should be paid to some older arguments within the psychiatric scholarship that revolve around self-immolation as a form of suicide without excluding its protest dimension. This, I hope, could prove to be efficient in our further understanding of the issue. What I have in mind is the article (mentioned earlier) –“Suicide By Fire: a Contemporary Method of Political Protest”– and published in 1977 by a group of scholars from the Department of Psychiatry at the State University of New York (Kevin Crosby, Joong-Oh Rhee and Jimmie Holland). Biggs also mentions it as one of his sources. Although these professionals are coming from a different field (medical, not sociological) their study remains relevant for the issue at hand. This especially concerns a range of differences articulated among various scholarly fields around the process of naming a phenomenon as polemical as self-immolation. This, in turn, produces different types of meaning and sometimes provokes quite contradictory conclusions about the same object of study. My point is that the variety of meanings, applicable to terminology here exposed, could help us properly grasp not only the complexity of the issue but also the politics of interpretation associated with it. While the terms ‘self-immolation’ and ‘suicide protest’ are privileged by Biggs’s in his own studies (and in sociological studies in general), the medical professionals are keen on defining their object of study through the clinical prisms as “suicides by fire” (Biggs 2003: 3).

Hence, Crosby et al. treat the object of their research as clearly as ‘suicide by fire’ and frame it primarily by its *destructive* outcomes. According to them, by the end of the 1970s it was still possible to claim that this was “an uncommon method of self-

destruction in the western world” (Crosby et al. 1977: 60). Despite the prevailing epidemiological stance in contemporary psychiatry, they also acknowledge the *protest* character of the method: they describe it as “method of political protest virtually unknown before 1963” (Crosby et al. 1977: 60). Their reference to the year 1963 is similar to the one Biggs proposed; thus it confirms again and unsurprisingly enough the significance of a decisive and exemplary moment in the recent history of self-immolation: the event known as the action of a Buddhist monk who “burned himself to death in a public square of Saigon to protest the policies of the Diem regime in South Vietnam” (Crosby et al. 1977: 60; Biggs 2003: 5). I would like to focus on the fact, positively exemplified by Crosby et al., that even among the psychiatrists discussing self-immolation (as ‘suicide by fire’, yet without excluding its political dimensions) it is still possible to voice professional arguments against the normative ‘pathologization’ in favor of the political and protest-based nature of the act. In comparison to many other examples coming from the psychiatric field (Cechova-Vayleux et al. 2010), the particularity of this article lies in the fact that it acknowledges the non-pathological nature of self-immolation: rather, it “reviews the historical and cultural antecedents which might have led to the recent appearance of suicide by fire *as a means of political protest*” (Crosby et al. 1977: 60; my emphasis). Additionally, they say: “This act was followed by the appearance of self-burning *as a means of political protest* in several countries throughout the world. While some of these suicides occurred as isolated events, others appeared in clusters suggestive of ‘epidemics’” (Crosby et al. 1977: 60; my emphasis). In their usage of the word ‘epidemics,’ Crosby et al. still rely upon the ‘professionally correct’ terminology (more common to medical than to social sciences) yet they use this word under inverted commas. This is an additional signal, though very modest and discrete, through which they possibly disclose the ‘fate’ of epidemiology as a method in need of critical re-articulation with respect to normative clinical approaches. Similarly, they make clear their distinction between “the suicides by fire examined for differences in political and non-political motivation” (Crosby et al. 1977: 60). This introduces a justifiable analytic rationale through which it becomes possible, again, to acknowledge and denote a *non-pathological* (or not necessarily pathological) interpretation of self-immolation, despite the persistent usage of the term ‘suicide’. Another important hermeneutic distinction is here introduced:

In recent years, the term ‘self-immolation’ has become a popular term for the act of suicide by burning. Immolation, however, by definition means sacrificial suicide by any method, with long historical usage in this context. Thus, ‘self-immolation,’ correctly used, does not imply burning, nor does suicide by fire necessarily infer ‘self-immolation,’ or sacrifice. To clarify the terminology, we suggest that the term ‘self-incineration’ rather than ‘self-immolation’ be used as a more accurate and useful label for the act of suicide by burning (Crosby et al. 1977: 60).

!There is another contribution to this attitude. For a psychiatrist Brendan D. Kelly, who has investigated self-immolation in the Buddhist traditions, it is important to highlight that this subject has to be interpreted from various viewpoints. Being aware of the ‘epistemic sovereignty’ of clinical suicidology, his arguments (Kelly 2011: 299) plead for a greater dialogue between the Western psychiatry and the Eastern philosophy of self-harm and suicide, in particular with regard to the Buddhist concepts of *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness or suffering) and *sati* (mindfulness). Unlike some usual approaches in his own field, Kelly does not condemn self-destructive forms of behavior as the evidence of pathology. In his view, the convergence points between the two traditions allow for certain forms of self-harm and suicidal motives to be re-considered in a qualitatively different way: this can happen outside of normative interpretative frameworks and for the benefit of therapeutic success. Curiously enough for a psychiatric professional, Kelly admits that self-immolation can be a form of protest while disclosing the more politically nuanced meaning behind the act, which turned to be its defining feature in sociological inquiries of the issue. Thus, he refers to Biggs (2005) and confirms that “self-immolation is sometimes linked with specific political contexts, but, in contrast with suicide attacks, it aims to articulate disagreement and exert pressure, rather than inflict damage directly on others” (Kelly 2011: 299).

Instead of being exclusively and necessarily viewed as the variants of pathological disorder (suicidal or formulated otherwise), the aspects of political protest pertaining to self-immolation are here acknowledged by psychiatric experts themselves. This proves the fact that the complexity of meanings around self-immolation (even if misleadingly termed as ‘suicides by fire’) could be approached –and rightfully so– in a non-normative way within the psychiatric discipline itself. However, the most important feature in this regard, in my view, must remain outside of psychiatric debates. For Stuart J. Murray, as repeatedly highlighted, this would be but one exemplary approach to what he defines as properly ‘thanatopolitical’ aspect of death and dying. This implies that a human being can use his or her own death in order to have the political life of their community mobilized for the sake of changing the power-balance influencing the actual living conditions, aberrant for different reasons. If thanatology, as a counter-concept for the study of necropolitical phenomena from the other side of the governing spectrum (the side of the weaker), can indeed improve the political lives of the living by having them mobilized and activated on behalf of one’s personal (self-sacrificial) death, such argument draws the borderline between the two phenomena exposed in this article: the sovereign instrumentalization of ‘unvoluntary’ death of the others in necropolitical practices of immolation, on the one hand, and the regeneration of future communal life through the individual instrumentalization of his/her own ‘voluntary’ death in thanatopolitical practices of self-immolation, on the other hand.

Therefore, in order to approach self-immolation above its conceptual ambiguities related to ‘suicide’ and ‘sacrifice’ at large, this chapter proposes a positive and focused

definition of the phenomenon – in line with Murray’s proposal around thanatopolitics, and my updated definition which goes as follows: self-immolation is an act of public protest where an individual intentionally instrumentalizes his or her death –with or without harming anyone else– in order to shift the balance of power between the powerless (the governed) and the powerful (the governing), so that the thanatopolitical regime and its life-giving matrix of power could prevail against the necropolitical regime and its killing matrix of power. The motivation for the act is not only exhausted by a collective cause, but is further stimulated in order for the self-immolator to claim his or her *right to death* (otherwise hijacked by the sovereign power). For a self-immolator to show his power to the sovereign –in the thanatopolitical sense– he/she must identify him- or herself with a ‘living dead’: a human being living in the ‘death worlds’ of social existence (as Mbembe earlier suggested) that are closer to ‘death’ than to a decent life worth living. The kind of power thus exerted on behalf of the self-immolator resides precisely in the (visual) rhetoric of burning oneself in public protest. Its emotional and communicative strength of an ‘awakening call’ can eventually convey a political message (a ‘costly signal’ as Biggs says) to the survivors: by disclosing their own implications in the cause for which one of their members decides to die, by invoking their own sense of guilt, and by motivating them to take active steps towards changing their conditions of living, the injustice of which has forced one of them to ‘die with a cause’.

Following Biggs from a critical distance, my understanding of self-immolation denies, to a certain extent,¹² the aspect of killing –which essentially belongs to the necropower of the one against whom self-immolators protest (i.e., the necropolitical regimes and their *killing* matrix of power). Nonetheless, self-immolator relies upon the power of death in his/her hands as a *constructive force*: it incorporates the political aspects of protest and publicity in terms of *exerting one’s own power in the face of sovereignty by taking one’s own right to death from the sovereign’s hands*. Following Murray and his proposals around “the living from the dead”, I treat self-immolation a complex form of self-sacrifice endowed with the power to mobilize society insofar as the forms of collective political life can go on in a different direction (which is potentially more just or less asymmetrical, in terms of power-balance), *beyond the limits* of one’s own individual mortality, otherwise exploited by the the sovereign, and *against the limits* of sovereign necropower. Following Bradatan, I comply with his insistence on the *emotional impact (the sense of guilt)* that one needs to awake by his or her act of self-immolation among the

¹² This implies the ‘non-violent’ forms of self-immolation that exclude ‘suicide bombing’. Nonetheless, if self-immolators who are not ‘suicide bombers’ apply *non-violent forms* of protest, as Biggs proposes, does the violence against one’s own self fall under the category of violence at all or it urges us to reconsider the very definition of ‘violence’ so we can distinguish differently between the violent and non-violent forms of protest as divergent within the concept of self-immolation.

survivors/the viewers, which is a necessary precondition for the balance of powers to be shifted and for the collective struggle against necropower (and injustice epitomized by it) to be successful.

In conclusion, I see self-immolation as an indelible part of the work of death-politics: unlike the necropolitical regime of immolation, my argument was that self-immolation subverts the imposed logic of the 'sacred order' and its 'killing matrix of power'. The one who immolates him- or herself in protest brings oneself to death while announcing 'new life' in contrast to the present life of the 'living dead'. By doing so, he/she withdraws from the 'living dead' status in life as it presently is (a 'death world') while leaving a trace of his/her presence in a political message to the survivors. This, in turn, could shift the balance of power in the local or international sphere of (media) influence as it puts into question the rationality of a world-system (based on the authority of a 'sacred order', i.e., the sovereign politics of death disguised under the biopolitical rule of life) in order to subvert it. This is not always the case, though: it depends on how much the power shift thus induced can invoke the sense of guilt among the survivors (Bradatan 2011) while pushing forward the sense of a possibly 'new rationality' to it for the sake of a new (communal) life. Whatever the results, the very gesture of opposing the necropolitical authority of 'immolation' and exposing it publicly, in the face of 'killing regimes', endows the person who sets him or herself on fire for a cause with the potentiality of power – the thanatopolitical power (not 'suicidal' or 'killing' power) that we call self-immolation. As Mbembe's words remind us, in his reference to Paul Gilroy from the beginning of this study: "For death is precisely that from and over which I have power. But it is also that space where freedom and negation operate". In what follows, I will consider the ways that 'freedom and negation operate' through images of a burning man, so to place an accent on properly *visual* aspects of thanatopolitical regime of self-immolation.

Chapter 7

A Man, Burning (For Real)

Have you ever seen a human being burning in front of your eyes? My own answer to this question would be negative. Let me reformulate the question: have you ever seen any *image* of someone burning? In this case, my own answer could be positive insofar as we take into account the relative accessibility of such images across the many and varied media worlds nowadays. Speaking more precisely, the initial question has to undergo yet another reformulation: have you ever seen any image of a man or a woman *suffering while setting themselves on fire*?

From a sociological viewpoint, suffering can be a source of power in at least two significant ways: by conveying information and by evoking emotions. Accordingly, social theories of protest as ‘communicative suffering’ (Biggs 2003) distinguish dying with a cause from the one without a cause – unless the latter is related to some kind of ‘pathology’ (by which Biggs refers to suffering due to ‘personal grievances’). In light of this perspective, ‘suicide protest’ (Biggs 2012: 143; Biggs 2013) confronts normative (medico-juridical) viewpoints on self-destruction as the pathological form of suffering. Vision and visibility have an important role to play in this context. Although images of self-immolation as communicative suffering are known for exerting strong visual and emotional impact on viewers, normative discourses on self-inflicted death have rarely devoted due attention to exploring its image-based properties. This paper focuses on the gap thus provoked and aims at contributing to a greater comprehension of the issue.

In trying to understand the emotional and political power of visual records of self-sacrificial death in contemporary society, I have selected one iconic example: Malcolm Browne’s photograph of a monk who burned himself to death in 1963 in Saigon (former South Vietnam) – he did so in protest against the local authoritarian regime supported by the United States of America. While having in mind some more recent cases, as my points of reference for critical comparison (such as Mohammed Bouazizi’s example in late 2010 in Tunisia), I focus on the visibility of mortality in strategically staged public dramas where human suffering –through self-sacrifice by fire– becomes an important conveyor of social, political and ethical messages via emotional impulses. The main point of such an approach lies in the thanatopolitical potentiality of self-sacrifice (or

'suicidal protest') to challenge the political *status quo* in a given local context. This occurs via the mobilization of people who, once the thanatopolitical message is transmitted and received, are supposed to engage in a common struggle against oppression, humiliation and injustice. The study contributes to existent body of writing dealing with the subject at hand – nonetheless, further research in social philosophy, ethics, and visual culture at large needs to be fostered in order to highlight this relatively novel, though not always instrumentally effective, politico-emotional paradigm of our times.

In this line of thought, the present study assumes that images of human suffering, regarding the people who set themselves on fire in protest, can perform a political function in the contexts defined by what has come to be known as self-immolation, at least since the early 1960s (Biggs 2005). The study is based on a personal database that contains two basic formats: the theoretical sources of contemporary scholarly expertise (Andriolo 2006; Benn 2007, 2012; Biggs 2003, 2005, 2012a, 2013; Bradatan 2011; Canetto 2009; Crosby et al. 1977; Kelly 2011; Yang 2011; Benslama 2011; Rivera 2012) and a number of photographic and moving images collected over the period of time between 2010 and 2013 from a variety of printed and digital media sources. Both types of database revolve around the subject of self-immolation. The most notable among them are linked to the following: the case of Mohammed Bouazizi and the anti-governmental uprising of Tunisian society in the aftermath of his death by the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011; the wave of similarly induced deaths by burning across the regions of North Africa and the Middle East (2011-2012); a number of cases across Europe since the beginning of the so-called Eurozone economic crisis in 2008; and the ongoing proliferation of death among the Tibetans burning themselves in protest against the Chinese occupation and the oppressive conditions therein.

This brief selection is, however, insufficient to encompass all the varied forms of self-immolation that have characterized the last five decades of the world's history. My study is based exclusively on a "type specimen of 'self-immolation'" (Biggs 2005: 173) concerning "an act of public protest, where an individual intentionally kills him or herself –without harming anyone else– on behalf of a collective cause" (Biggs 2003: 2). This definition is centered on several fronts of analysis. The first one is about the performing aspect of the act. It bears a distinctively political tone for at least two reasons: it is the matter of acting in protest, against someone or something, most commonly a ruling local authority; also, it is the matter of public exposure: it brings the act to the others, as openly and visibly as possible. The visibility is usually conceived in terms of an open-air space, whereas the act must occur nearby a strategically targeted location of political significance. It also includes the awareness about recorded visual materials or a written public message on behalf of the one who immolates him- or herself. The second one is about an individual prone to kill him or herself without harming anyone else, which distinguishes the act from other forms of self-immolation

(such as ‘suicide attack’, for instance). The third one is centered on the results of the act: Biggs sees them as altruistic in a way that they do not aim towards achieving benefits for the sake of the individual involved in self-immolation but for the group, community or society to which one belongs or identifies with. Accordingly, he introduces the notion of ‘communicative suffering’ that triggers the following question: can suffering become a source of power indeed?

Communicative Suffering

If suffering can be a source of power, as argued by Biggs, it can be so in at least two significant ways: by conveying information and by evoking emotions. Both ways have become part of the global imaginary only fifty years ago (the early 1960s), not before. This is due to the fact that, for the first time in history, the act of self-immolation was inscribed into the consciousness of the world by means of visual evidence. A photographic record played a crucial role in this cornerstone event that grounds my argument around the (visual) rhetoric of protest in thanatopolitical practice of self-sacrifice. This is most notably with respect to the relationship among the following three elements as central for this part of the study: the public exposure of a *dying* body (whereas ‘dying’ does not imply the status of the victim as already and definitively dead, but rather as ‘living dead’ – the in-between state closer to ‘death’ than to ‘life’); its materialization in images of dying through the visual evidence of suffering (*before* death itself occurs); and the exchange with the viewers where one’s suffering is mirrored in the emphatic, “receptive gaze” of the others (Bradatan 2011). By ‘the others’ I hereby refer to spectators, an observant community of onlookers, who must encounter their own guilty conscience in front of these images in order for self-immolation to fulfil its role as properly thanatopolitical. What they all have in common is what constitutes the emotional and political power, but also the *ethical* power exhorted in relation to the self-sacrificial logic of thanatopolitics – or, as Stuart J. Murray says in another context, of “the use of death for mobilizing political life” (Murray 2006).

Biggs introduced the notion of ‘communicative suffering’ into scholarly literature on self-inflicted suffering as protest by the mid-2000s (Biggs 2003, 2005). He uses it alongside some more familiar forms of political protest events, such as strikes and demonstrations and applies it to the so-called “global repertoire of protest”. The focus is here put onto dimensions of protest in events where people “march long distances, go willingly to jail, welcome or provoke the blows of police, refuse to eat, and even kill themselves” (Biggs 2003: 2). In that sense, he insists on the efficacy of the ‘dramaturgy of suffering’ in comparison to the effects produced by merely symbolic actions in civic

protest events and adds, importantly, that “self-immolation –where someone kills him or herself for a cause, without harming others– reveals the various ways in which *suffering can become a source of power*” (my emphasis).¹ This comes about due to the fact that suffering belongs to the realm of the real (and not of the symbolic) so it imposes real-life costs, beyond the dramatic symbolization. In other words, there is “a terminological distinction between *the drama of burning a flag* and *that of burning oneself*” [...] self-immolation by fire is so awful (in the archaic as well as modern sense of the word) because the suffering is real and not (merely) symbolic. Burning oneself in effigy would not have the same effect” (Biggs 2003: 6). What is the ‘effect’ Biggs talks about and how does it connect to the idea of power? To answer these questions, I will bring forward a visual example without ever showing it. Let us ‘observe’ it by mode of narrative description from the viewpoint that I shall call an ‘ignorant’ gaze.

An ‘Ignorant’ Gaze

There is a photographic image from which my analysis departs. In its right bottom corner the morning hour (9:30AM) is indicated, most probably the moment when the image was recorded. In the foreground we can see the following: a single human being in the center, around him or her there is something resembling fire, and a small object to the left. These elements are situated on what appears to be a street-like terrain. In the background of the image we can see: a car (to the left), some people’s faces behind the car, wreaths of smoke around and a few more human figures to the right. The latter are recognizable only by their lower parts: their faces remain invisible due to the smoke-cover in front. This is the basic description of the image.

Let us now focus on the human presence in the picture. All the human beings share some common aspects: their features are associative of the populations of Asian origin; their dresses also look alike and seem to be homogenous, as if they are wearing some sort of uniform. The clothing of the central figure is more difficult to properly identify. The same goes for the ‘faceless’ figures behind him or her: only their lower parts are revealed in what seems to belong to their long robes and sandals. To detect what the rest of the people are wearing, those behind the car, is an impossible task. Beside the human beings, the non-human elements also make part of the image. The foreground object to the left gives an idea of a plastic canister. The canister is cut by the frame and only one part of it is exposed. We may presume that the reproduction of the image at

¹ See Michael Biggs, “Hunger Strikes by Suffragettes and Irish Republicans, 1909-1923”, University of Oxford online database, accessed on 25 April 2013, <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/hungerstrikes.shtml>.

hand is not an integral but a cropped version of the original (unless it was the photographer's intention to have this cut so disturbingly noticeable). The exact brand of the car in the back –evidently an ordinary, passenger type– remains unknown to me; for those who seem to be less ignorant it is crystal clear that it must be a sedan (Yang 2011: 14). Its hood is open: nobody is inside the car or, at least, it seems to be the case. The very last layer at the background of the image remains unidentifiable. However, a more curious observer could have already found some other versions of the image in numerous reproductions available on the Internet, with expanded views onto the same scene. They show some kind of architectural setting in the background. It is conceived of small, simple house-like constructions. Additionally, a traffic-light at the far right clearly indicates the street-like open-air environment. It includes the presence of some other people at the far left and behind 'the people behind the car'. The casual clothes makes them look different from the aforementioned majority in their, at first instance, strange uniforms.

This rudimentary mode of analysis strips the image off its initial visual 'mystery' and provides its first iconographic layer of meaning. It detects the main and the side elements of the image, their mutual positions in the overall composition within the given size and depth of the visual field, and identifies certain attributes and details as more or less recognizable with respect to the human figures and objects therein. What this level of interpretation does not do is far more complex and challenging. Suffice to say that, for the moment, nothing indicates any particular –or particularly exciting– significance of this image in comparison to any other: nothing gives us a hint that it could be turned from a mere document recording some trivial event into one of the most iconic images of the twentieth-century. Given our preliminary visual experience of its current status (more or less ordinary), I propose to have our viewpoint on it called the 'ignorant' gaze. The 'ignorance' refers to our capacity to barely understand what we are looking at apart from the basic graphic contents of the image. For a better pronounced comprehension of its more exhaustive layers of meaning one needs to account for a better informed viewpoint, which is supplementary to the 'ignorant' one. The first set of questions arising in that regard is as follows: What is it precisely that we are looking at? Where does it come from? Who made it, when and why? For whom was it made? What does it 'do' to the viewer? Finally, what is the whole purpose of our discussion about this image?

In the narrative proposed from the outset of this paper ('Have you ever seen a human being burning in front of your eyes?', and so on), the rigidity of certain formal criteria proper to academic papers has been intentionally avoided. Instead, I have opted for a somewhat unusual 'dramaturgy' of storytelling in order to accentuate the very nature of rhetorical power behind the central subject of our concern: images of a burning human body. In other words, what plays the major role in this scenario around people setting themselves on fire is neither a *human being* engulfed in flames nor his/her *body* burning: rather, it is the *image (of suffering) itself* – the image of a publicly exposed human being

who suffers in-between the states of life and death (a 'living dead'), while his/her body is burning in front of our eyes. I will now take a less 'dramatic' tone towards the phenomenon of self-immolation in order to approach it within the limits given by actual scholarship on this and related issues. This is a necessary step for any further analysis. At a later point of discussion it will bring us back, once again, to the 'mysterious' image, while allowing us to see it from another perspective: in a visually more 'literate' and better 'informed' manner than the 'ignorant' one I have proposed at the beginning.

A 'receptive' gaze

What is *exactly* displayed by the image of the burning human body, earlier described? It is my hope that a clear-cut answer to this question will not only challenge the arguments here exposed but will provide some less 'ignorant' viewpoints onto the entire landscape of meaning where the 'drama' of image-analysis needs to be grounded in order for the story to be completed as it should. My aim is to show that it is not 'death itself' (of a human being burning in front of our eyes) what we see in the image that I insist on hereby, but something else, verging in-between 'life' and 'death': a very particular aspect of photography that makes the (visual) rhetoric of self-immolation not only properly thanatopolitical but also ethical, in the sense that the notion of 'suffering' combines with what I shall call the 'image ethics'.

This aspect revolves around the fact that what we see is a human being (a 'duplicate' of our own selves): a man, burning – no more alive but also not yet dead, caught in-between the zones of 'life' and 'death' and *suffering* in the process. What we look at is a 'living dead' suffering in front of our eyes, whose silence and stillness are not due to the state of 'death' (which, for a 'living dead', has already happened in this life) but due to the liminal state of being through which he exerts his power onto the viewers: the power to confront 'death itself' not by escaping it but by claiming something 'unthinkable' and 'unimaginable' – his own right to it. Through suffering (that comes less from the very process of burning and more from the sense of injustice, which made him set himself alight), he does not 'take his own life' –in the clinical sense of the word applicable to so-called suicides– but instead he *takes his own death back* to himself. And he does so in the face of sovereign (necro-) power that, in the given context, holds the keys to the 'death-worlds' or "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe 2003: 40) and, supposedly, also to 'death itself'. To take one's own death back to oneself –from sovereign necropower (and its self-proclaimed privilege to decide

about the populations' life and death *on the basis of human mortality*, in Mbembe's terms)–means, in the way I expose it here, to claim *one's own right to death itself*.

On one side, for a burning man, who communicates his suffering from the position of a 'living dead', 'life' is but a domain already invaded, contaminated and colonized by sovereign power. For a 'living dead', life is reduced and assimilated with death to the point where 'death itself' remains the only dominion to exercise personal control over one's own self against the ultimate control of the Other (i.e., sovereign necropower). To transgress the epistemic border imposed by 'death' and get access through it, which brings him closer to "discovering what prevents a human being from knowing himself as he is in reality" (Schumacher 2010: 213), makes his act tantamount to the epistemological break: he is discarding the ultimate legitimacy of epistemic sovereignty by discarding his own status of a 'living dead'. On the other side, it is through the reproduction (re-creation) of oneself in the image-world –while burning, before the moment of 'fiery death' actually occurs– that a 'living dead' exposes the image of his suffering to the world: not his dead body but the process towards it (a process emotionally powerful though brief). Here I imply the process where the notion of 'suffering' and the notion of 'image' intertwine to the extent that they invite my 'receptive gaze' to identify and recognize (the implication of) my own self in the scene: to look at a 'mirror', in empathy with the object of looking, as if it were myself – which is exactly the moment when the ethical interrupts the epistemological, as proposed, for instance, by Gayatri Spivak (2004: 83). So, for the epistemic border –imposed by 'death'– to be transgressed, an ethical border needs to be dismantled through and across the image of the other as one's own self. It is, perhaps, in this ethical instance where the effective and persuasive power of self-immolation (as properly *thanatopolitical* regime of self-sacrifice) ultimately resides. Without it, no self-immolation and no image depicting it could claim to operate in a system that mobilizes one's own death for the sake of survivors.

The image of 'a man, burning', that I continuously refer to in this paper, is anything but ordinary: on the contrary, it has a very particular status both in the history of photography and in the history of self-immolation. Hence, when I talk about *the* photography of a burning man I have in mind the very precise image: the one I have seen in the recent study analyzing "the rhetorical nature of the picture itself and the act of self-immolation" (Yang 2011: 4). It was published on page fifteen in the scholarly article written by a rhetorical critic Michelle Murray Yang (2011) and titled "Still Burning. Self-Immolation as a Photographic Protest". According to the author herself, the image she uses in her study is the reproduction of a photograph recorded by Malcolm Browne as it appeared in the U.S. daily newspaper *Philadelphia Inquirer* on June 12, 1963. Evidently, I pay too much attention to the issue of its exact origins. This is not without a valid reason: instead of opting for numerous and modified reproductions of the same image available across the media (including, most notably, the Internet), it is Yang's article that has provided the visual reference for my present study around a 'burning man'. Moreover, it is her analysis that has significantly informed the very

dramaturgy of my own ‘scenario’ around the image that has been of concern to both of us (I would dare to say that this image is, even more importantly, of ethical concern to the humankind as such).

There are several particular features of *that* precise image which make it valid for the present analysis. One of them consists in the fact that Yang uses, and rightfully so, the reproduction of its original version, that is, the image as it appeared in print media in the United States in 1963 only a day after it was made. Hence, it is significant insofar as we assume that this version –printed and publicly distributed before any other variant of the same image or of the same event– is the very image imprinted onto the collective memory of the humankind ever since it was exposed to the world for the first time. Via its reproduction in Yang’s article it is brought to light again in the way it was published and publicly distributed for the first time fifty years ago. This version corresponds to the black-and-white still photograph of the so-called ‘Burning Monk’. For the purposes of this paper I have preferably renamed it into “A Man, Burning”, for several reasons. First, because it is considered to be a *defining* image of the burning human body in the context of self-immolation as a form of protest (Biggs 2005). Second, because the burning human body at hand is considered to belong to a ‘man’ instead of a monk exclusively, that is, to a human being (in this case male) who –beside his predominantly *religious* role played in one society (in this case South Vietnamese)– also inscribed himself into the global history of *civic* social movements by means of this photography as a *citizen* of that society, regardless of his profession. Third, because I intend to pose one question, hopefully significant enough, by pointing out his status of a ‘man’ (i.e., a human being) rather than of a ‘monk’ (who is also a male): the question about humankind at large and what it means to be human for the one who *submits* him- or herself to the act of self-sacrifice by fire, but also for the ones who *observe* such an act? My assumption is that the question of our *humanness* at large intertwines with and depends upon our potential implication (as observers) within the given ethical frameworks around the image of ‘a man, burning’.

These points allow me to explain the reason why this and no other image (of the same man, burning; of the same event; or of other similar events coming after June 1963) is so important for the present study. I consider the difference between the ‘defining’ image and all the other possible versions or examples to be crucial. By ‘other’ images I hereby refer to three distinctive categories: numerous copies of the exactly same image, available elsewhere than its primary source of appearance – the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “the first American newspaper to print the image” (Yang 2011: 4); a variety of other representations within the same ‘family’ of images and pertaining to the same burning human body (recorded numerous times, from various angles, in various positions and various conditions of burning during the period of only ten minutes of monk’s self-immolation); and a variety of images applicable to other burning human bodies in their own acts of self-immolation, following the exemplary case which I am here discussing. Since I have excluded all the outlined categories, my preference towards a selected singular image (the ‘defining’ image, as it first appeared on June 12,

1963 and then again in Yang's article) distinguishes it from the rest for the following reason: it was *the first one to be publicly exposed*. Moreover, unlike its consequent variations as technically and digitally modified views of the same scene, it was *the first photographic record of the act of self-immolation in history, ever* – if by the notion of 'self-immolation' we still understand *the act of protest executed by setting oneself alight without harming anyone else*.² In that sense, the visual impact it exerted onto the virtual community of international viewers (first and foremost in the United States, where it was published) could be comparable, in a more up-to-date perspective, to the 'unimaginable' sights of shocking accidents or events broadcasted live over television-networks – such as the explosion of the NASA Challenger Shuttle live in front of millions of television viewers in 1986 (Virilio 2006: 83) or the more recent live camera-recording of the New York's World Trade Center collapse during the 'cinematic' crash of a (second) plane into one of its buildings. Yet, unlike these two examples, what we –as observers– witness in the photography of 'a man, burning' is the fixation of a body in pain, the sense of suffering we immediately relate to every time we take a look at the image while presuming that his stillness and silence disclose something almost unnatural and surreal. If imagining self-immolation, "the most awful example of self-inflicted suffering" (Biggs 2003: 14), has also been 'unimaginable' to humankind until the appearance of Malcolm Browne's photograph in the news, what is it exactly that makes it still so significant, so iconic and so 'defining' for the representation of suffering aligned with self-sacrifice by fire?

Browne's photograph was published with an accompanying caption: "An elderly Buddhist monk, the Rev. Quang Duc, is engulfed in flames as he burns himself to death in Saigon, Vietnam, in protest against persecution" (Yang 2011: 14). This piece of information is sufficient to disturb the preliminary 'ignorant' viewpoint we used to have about the decontextualized contents of the image, as earlier described, and now provides the very basic framework within which to situate the plot behind the scene. Yang takes this framework as a point of departure in her own article: the case of self-immolation as it was enacted on the morning of June 11, 1963, in Saigon (*South Vietnam*) by a local male Buddhist monk. His real name was, in a slightly Latinized transcription of its more complicated original version, Thich Quang Duc. This brief piece of textual information brings some new elements to the 'visual evidence' of the recorded event. It frames the image in a way that takes the veil of anonymity off its main protagonist and makes him more familiar to the public. Once his personal name is revealed ('Quang Duc') we also realize that he is not an ordinary citizen. The fact that he is presented as 'an elderly Buddhist monk' immediately denotes his professional orientation (a priest) and his rank in the religious hierarchy to which he belongs (his honorable status, a

² This, however, is not always the case: following Biggs, his typology introduces an important distinction between this and other types of sacrifice, such as 'suicide attacks', hunger strikes, and so on (Biggs 2012a, 2012b).

reverend). These features ground his personality within the sphere of public responsibilities instead of identifying him as a mere layman. Besides, he is presented as a senior figure ('elderly'). Why is this piece of information important? It is so because it reveals a certain age-bound, though not the officially highest, authority within the local hierarchy of South Vietnamese Buddhist congregation (yet, the highest authority still had to be asked for an official endorsement so that Quang Duc's act could have been formally sanctioned). This was a necessary institutional provision for his desire and decision to be finally fulfilled: "In 1963 Buddhist leaders explicitly sanctioned two deaths: those of Quang Duc and Thich Tieu Dieu. Both were elderly, while there is evidence that younger novices were refused permission. This is understandable: the elderly had less life to sacrifice and had presumably attained sufficient wisdom to make a responsible choice" (Biggs 2005: 192). It is therefore worth repeating that the main protagonist of the image was a mature, 67 year-old male, who was also the representative of a local clerical order. These basic facts weave a thread of complex meanings, and sometimes also confusions, into the motivations surrounding Quang Duc's readiness to offer his life in the act of self-immolation 'in protest against persecution'. This is where we find out the inextricable *connection between the ideas of self-immolation and protest for the first time*. The next questions are: what kind of persecution and what kind of protest are here announced? To come to this point, let us briefly consider, first of all, the role played by the photographer himself.

The image is considered to be iconic of the context defined by the Vietnam War (1956–1975), the conflict between North and South Vietnam where both parties were respectively supported by their communist and non-communist allies (China and the United States, most notably). The so-called 'Burning Monk' belongs to a series of photographs recorded in South Vietnam by the same author, recently deceased Malcolm Browne (1931–2012). Browne was a U.S. citizen and appointed chief of the Associated Press (AP) office in Saigon during the war. The biographical note from a British newspaper's obituary on the occasion of his death gives some basic ideas about Browne's early days. There we learn about his appointment to the AP "which sent him to Saigon in 1961" (Hodgson 2012). As a news correspondent and photojournalist he distinguished himself for several reasons. By having photographed Thich Quang Duc burning in 1963 he won, together with David Halberstam of the *New York Times*, the 1964 Pulitzer Prize for "their individual reporting of the Vietnam war and the overthrow of the Diem regime" (Hodgson 2012). What made him popular even before this occasion was, first and foremost, his ethical position: he was known for his skeptical and critical stance towards the Vietnam war, shared by his closest colleagues. As he was "extremely critical of how the war was being fought [it] had an immense influence on opinion back home" (Hodgson 2012; my emphasis). The 'encounter' between Browne and Quang Duc took place in this context, heavily charged with local and international tensions. This is also the context in which two ethical stances positively merge with each other: Browne's disapproval of *his own country's military* intervention in South Vietnam and Quang Duc's disapproval of *his own country's militant* intervention against the Buddhists

in South Vietnam (that is, the part of Vietnam supported by Browne's country). This regime was represented by the president Ngo Dinh Diem, who enjoyed the support of the United States at the times and was known for favoring the Catholic minority in the country while pursuing an extreme anti-Buddhist position.³

Given that Quang Duc, a Buddhist, set himself alight in protest against the local, religiously oppressive political regime, what needs to be addressed with regard to his motivations to 'die for a cause' is the connection between their political and religious dimensions perceived together. Although it has not been rare to consider them separately, and with due reasons (given the historical background of the phenomenon, as I have earlier described), Biggs insists on the combination of the two: when coupled with technological innovations (photography in the first place), this allowed for the emergence of a fundamentally novel concept (Biggs calls it a 'cultural invention') and impact produced therein. In that regard, he explains that "we can certainly find examples of self-immolation before 1963, but these were isolated incidents or episodes; they did not inspire people elsewhere to sacrifice themselves" (Biggs 2005: 178). So what is it exactly that makes Quang Duc's case of self-immolation a cornerstone event in the history of this act? According to Biggs, it closely relates to his historical impact of self-immolation worldwide concerning the following facts: "Quang Duc was the *progenitor of the great majority of these acts* including almost every case in which fire was used; they were modelled either directly on his action or indirectly on another's action that can in turn be traced back to him" (Biggs 2005: 174; my emphasis). This means that with Quang Duc (and Malcolm Browne) originated "the modern lineage of self-immolation [...] and subsequently diffused to dozens of countries" (Biggs 2005: 175).⁴ This also proves, though not always but only under certain conditions, that "the clustering of self-immolation in waves reveals how one individual's action tends to inspire others to imitate it" (Biggs 2005: 175), most notably for explicitly *political* reasons – which makes a big difference in comparison to strictly religious/spiritual motivations pertaining to the earlier cases of self-immolation informed by the Buddhist tradition (Crosby et. al. 1977; Benn 2007; Biggs 2012a). As Bradatan (2011) points out, "self-immolation in the Buddhist tradition is not the same thing as political self-immolation: the mindsets and motivations involved are different, and so is the societal impact. Yet even though the importance of religious-cultural background is undeniable in the case of the Vietnamese

³ The conflict between Buddhist and the Diem regime is described in detail by Biggs (2005: 179).

⁴ In Biggs's estimate, "there have been between 800 and 3,000 individual acts of self-immolation, including non-fatal attempts, in the four decades since 1963" (Biggs 2005: 174). In his more updated estimate, from a perspective focused on the ongoing waves of self-immolating protests among the Tibetans in China, Biggs claims that, since the period 1963-1970, "suicide protest was now indelibly associated with burning. Suicide protests before 1963 had not used fire, but other means of death. Since 1963, 85% of individuals have chosen burning. The imprint of Quang Duc's action endures" (Biggs 2012a: 146). Furthermore, the novel method has paralleled the increase of the annual rate of suicide protests: "Compared to the period 1919-1962, [it] was seventeen times higher in the period 1963-1970. Even excluding South Vietnam, the annual rate was eight times higher" (Biggs 2012a: 146).

monks, *political self-immolations* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have become a major symbolic gesture in their own right” (my emphasis). If the 1963 action indeed inspired many others (whose cases of ‘fiery death’ were unrelated to Buddhist causes in South Vietnam, though they were related to Quang Duc’s method) to imitate it elsewhere, one thing is certain: this would have been impossible, ‘unimaginable’, and ‘unthinkable’ without what Biggs calls the ‘cultural innovation’ of Quang Duc. In his own words, “like any cultural innovation, this was a creative mutation of pre-existing elements [or] creative redeployment of religious tradition in political struggle” (Biggs 2005: 321). In that sense, his arguments give the high priority to the presence of the photographer, the photographic medium itself and the role it played around Quang Duc. Hence, the *religious* and *political* dimensions of the event here mutated into a configuration that allowed for the act of self-immolation to have *itself transformed* before inducing a transforming (thanatopolitical) effect onto the observers. With Quang Duc, self-immolation entered a properly *civic* context due to the communication of protest (through suffering) mediated by a single photography in an unprecedented manner so far:

Quang Duc’s death by fire in 1963 was different because it inspired many others. As a result of his act, within a few years self-immolation entered the global ‘repertoire’ of protest (Tilly 1986). His act was an unexpected combination of modern technology and religious tradition. The availability of flammable liquids like petrol and kerosene made it feasible to burn oneself in a public space; without instant ignition, police could thwart any attempt. *The advent of photography –and technologies for the rapid transmission and cheap reproduction of images– made it possible for a single sacrifice to have a dramatic impact on a huge audience.* These potentialities, however, were discovered only in 1963. (Biggs 2005: 178; my emphasis).

Biggs here points out the significance of photography, and the development of ‘technologies for the rapid transmission and cheap reproduction of images’ as crucial for the dissemination of Quang Duc’s message to the world *in the aftermath* of the event. But this also relates to another significant decision *preceding* the event itself, because “when Quang Duc offered his life for the cause, the movement leaders initially spurned the idea” (Biggs 2005: 192). If the issue of age played an important role for Quang Duc’s community of fellow Buddhists to sanction his decision to ‘die for a cause’, the photographic element was even more significant. It was precisely the Buddhist leaders’ awareness about the role that images could play, especially in a diffuse manner of media impact, that turned their preliminary negative stance in another direction. In that sense, the issue of gaining this formal sanction would probably not have been that easily resolved without the support expressed by a single monk in favor of Quang Duc’s proposal. His name was Thich Duc Nghiep. He was “fluent in English [and] in charge of relations with foreign journalists. Did he grasp the potential impact on the American audience? After several days of prayer and fast, Quang Duc eventually won approval” (Biggs 2005: 179). In the scenario of little steps leading towards a potentially huge event, it was also Thich Duc Nghiep from whom “on the evening of June 10, 1963, American

news correspondent Malcolm Browne received a cryptic phone call [to be informed of] a large protest planned for the following day by South Vietnamese Buddhists. Nghiep mysteriously added, ‘I would advise you to come. Something very important may happen’” (Yang 2011: 2). And something very important happened, indeed. Yet, the importance of the local event (that had an unprecedented global impact) would have never been achieved or correctly comprehended without the *complex (and, to a certain extent, unforeseeable) configuration of meanings* that shaped the process around the event – before it took place, while it was taking place and, consequently, in its aftermath.

What Biggs only outlines with regard to the photographic recording of self-immolation, Yang expands much further: she places an accent on the aspect of human suffering ‘frozen in time’ by means of photographic recording. For her, the rhetorical power of the image itself would be unthinkable without the keynote element: understanding the configuration of self-sacrifice by fire vis-à-vis the image/suffering axis. This indicates that the ‘advent of photography and technologies for the rapid transmission and cheap reproduction of images’ (as Biggs maintains) were an important but not a decisive element: for the ‘defining’ image of a burning man to exert its communicative power onto the viewers and achieve its public/political effect the relationship between suffering and image is crucial. This condition pertains to one very particular visual property, a kind of tension occurring *within the photographic image itself* – its suspension in time, as Yang describes it, that provides the main substance to the viewer’s confrontation with the representation of a man who is not only ‘burning’ in front of our eyes, but does so *continually*. What the image of a ‘burning man’ exposes to us today is the mere fact of a continuous protest of a human being ‘not yet dead’: the self-immolator is “still burning” whenever we cast a look upon him, insofar as we have the ‘defining’ image in front of our eyes. Let us be attentive to what Yang has to say (especially by the end of her own description of the ‘defining’ image from an ‘informed’ perspective), which now properly contextualizes the previously ‘decontextualized’ contents as I had earlier suggested only from an ‘ignorant’ perspective:

In the center of the image, Duc sits on the street *as flames lap at half of his body and his face*. To the monk’s left sits the gasoline container used to transport the fuel, which ignited his body. Behind Duc is the sedan that he and three other monks rode in during the processional through the streets of Saigon. In the background is a line of Buddhist monks and nuns witnessing the event unfold. While one can faintly make out some of their features, it is impossible to accurately view their facial expressions. To the right of the sedan, one sees what appears to be the lower half of a monk’s body who appears to be walking away or walking towards the burning man. It is difficult to discern the direction of his movement as the upper half of the monk’s body is hidden by the cloud of smoke and flames radiating from Duc. [...] From the angle that the picture was taken, *it appears that only half of Quang Duc’s body is engulfed in flames* (Yang 2011: 14–16; my emphasis).

According to her description, the burning man is not represented as terminally and irrevocably dead (since ‘flames lap at half of his body and his face’). Even if we assume

that death could have arrived to him while ‘*only half* of Quang Duc’s body is engulfed in flames’, we do not actually see ‘death itself’ in this image or, to be exact, we do not see the *corpse* of a human being engulfed in flames or covered in ashes. In that regard, it is worth comparing the image I keep referring to as the ‘defining’ image with another image of the same event, that Yang also takes into consideration (an interested reader might want to consult how the image looks like on the page twenty-three in Yang 2011). She makes a clear distinction between –at least– two photographic records from the same family of images revolving around the event of our major concern here. “It is important to note that while this image was shot by [the same photographer] Browne, it [the second image] is not the same one that appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. In this photograph the monk is *completely* engulfed in flames, i.e., he is represented as irrevocably dead – a corpse. Beneath the picture in bold capital letters reads [a] declaration, ‘We, too, protest’” (Yang 2011: 22; my emphasis). This other image appeared a bit later than the first one –namely on June 27, 1963 and September 15, 1963– and in *another* U.S. newspaper (the *New York Times*, the paper that initially refused to publish the ‘defining’ image in the immediate aftermath of the event). As pointed out by Yang (2011: 21-24), it was “appropriated by other Vietnam War protestors” and appeared in “two advertisements created by the Ministers’ Vietnam Committee, which used the picture to gain support for the anti-war movement”. Says Yang (2011: 22):

The use of Browne’s photograph in the ad *enables supporters of the campaign to rhetorically join Quang Duc’s visual protest through textual discourse*. By declaring ‘we, too, protest,’ and including an image of the monk’s immolation, the organization is rhetorically entering into Quang Duc’s act of protest. Although The Ministers’ Vietnam Committee takes a very different approach in expressing its protest than Quang Duc, the organization identifies its cause and its concerns with those of the burning monk and, therefore, conveys a sense of solidarity with the South Vietnamese Buddhists. (my emphasis)

The existence of *another* image is here significant as it allows us to grasp the difference between the visual power of a ‘burning man’ who suffers and a ‘burning man’ who is already dead. What this difference effectuates in the eye of a spectator is the kind of impact it produces with respect to the image of a man suffering yet still alive, on the one hand, and the image of his corpse, on the other. This brings the aspect of (in)visibility of ‘death itself’ and the visibility of suffering ‘suspended in time’ to the crucial point for this paper. It brings to mind Mbembe’s suggestion around the ‘death worlds’ of social existence, forcing a human being to engage in an act as unimaginably painful as self-sacrifice by fire in response to the conditions that created such ‘death worlds’ (i.e., properly necropolitical conditions). This is but a possible framework through which to observe and analyze the complexity of death’s ‘ambiguity’ (the life-and-death’s in-betweenness of the burning man, so to say) among the varied cases of self-sacrifice as a properly *thanatopolitical response* to the necropolitical sovereignty of death. Quang Duc’s case (and the ‘defining’ image of his burning) is paradigmatic for

such thanatopolitical practice, and relates to other exemplary case-studies unrelated to Biggs' definition of the act (the Palestinian 'suicide bombers', the so-called economic suicides in the crisis-driven South of Europe, or even the candidates for assisted suicide in contemporary Switzerland, for instance). To complete the segment about her own account of Quang Duc's (constructive/thanatopolitical) power of burning himself in the 'defining' image, I want to point out the most significant part in Yang's description – the fact “that there is a chance that the events which caused him to take such drastic measures can somehow be ameliorated” (Yang 2011: 16). Says Yang (2011: 14–16):

The viewer can clearly see one of his tightly shut eyes and half of his gaunt mouth. *In this instant, the monk's death is indefinitely suspended in time.* The flames have not yet overcome his entire body; *his demise is not yet complete.* For a brief moment, captured by film, it appears that the outcome of this event can be altered. Quang Duc is *not yet dead*; there is a chance that the events which caused him to take such drastic measures can somehow be ameliorated.

Yang does not speak of thanatopolitics at all – yet, her point here gets very close to this faculty of death-politics. This means that self-immolation, as an extreme form of protest, aims at raising attention for the greater cause for which one burns him or herself. By this I understand that the attention to the act –but also to the cause itself– is potentially increased through the very act of withdrawing oneself from the world, and radically so: not only by setting oneself alight in merely corporeal terms *but also by 'bringing to light' the very cause, otherwise silenced or obscured, for which one decides to set oneself alight at all.* As Yang argues, for this act to make an impact it has to be 'indefinitely suspended in time'; for the indefinite suspension to last it has to be visually recorded and turned into an image that 'survives' the act itself; for this kind of survival it is not the mere material existence of the visual record that counts but its public exposure in terms of hyper-visibility. Hence, to expose one's own body to the others during the act of self-immolation means to bring oneself to light (literally, while burning in flames), to bring the common cause to 'public light', and to do so in view of other people (the high ranking officials, one's own fellow community, and/or the anonymous mass of worldwide media observers). Again, the image of one's own *suffering* put on public display (instead of one's own corpse) is here crucial.

The Image Character of the Ethical

If the public visibility of suffering 'suspended in time', rather than death itself, takes the most prominent role in the effectiveness of self-immolation in protest (as described

above with regard to the ‘burning man’), this obliges us to rethink the intricate relationship between the notions of images and suffering: how they partake in what Biggs calls “communicative suffering” and how, in turn, the viewers could recognize themselves in these images by responding to such a communication. By the notions of ‘communication’ and ‘response’ I do not hereby denote the moralizing reaction of a bystander who possibly aims at ‘altering the outcome of this event’ by distracting the protagonist’s decision to burn himself to death (in order to ‘save him’ from dying, eventually). Instead, I refer to our potentiality, as observers, to empathize with the human being burning and suffering in the process and to recognize the “image character of the ethical” (Bernstein 2012: xii), which is a necessary precondition for the thanatopolitical power of self-immolation to occur. What characterizes the image-character of the ethical? The emotional and political power of visual records configured by the empathizing elements of thanatopolitics is defined by Yang as an *instant (of the monk’s death) indefinitely suspended in time*. Therefore, the dimension tantamount to the issue of power in the context of ‘communicative suffering’ is not the image itself – although it pertains to the visual evidence of the image-world– but the *human condition itself*, hereby defined as ‘suffering by self-inflicted burning’. Furthermore, it is the human condition under particular circumstances: caught in a timely aspect of delay. This discloses the way according to which “images of people in pain seem to prolong a subject’s victimization by fixing situations of suffering and immobilizing a human subject as a victim” (Möller 2012: 24; my emphasis). Moreover, such images “may also undermine reductionist victimization. They show that this subject is *much more than a victim: he or she is a human being with whom we, the viewers, have something in common*. Images underline the ‘commonalities of being human’ (Möller 2012: 24; my emphasis).

If it is the vulnerability of the others, as Möller says, that I can experience as my own (rather than their status of a victim or the violence enacted upon them therein), then my own *viewing relationship* to the subjects of suffering can be emphasized through what binds us together as properly human beings. Another argument, shaped by the philosopher J.M. Bernstein, goes more precisely into this direction: it focuses on the synthesis between two types of ontologies in charge of our reception of the idea and the meaning of vulnerability. The argument consists, namely, in that “the ontology of the photographic image is, at least in part, an ethical ontology of the human, a framing of the meaning of the human through its singular, always vulnerable bodily appearing” (Bernstein 2012: xii). Accordingly, he contends, our vulnerability to violence is what allows us to be perceived through images not as images themselves but as properly human beings, captured by photography in all our ‘helplessness and vulnerability before the eyes of all others’:

What makes humans vulnerable to violence is, however, equally what allows them to be seen, imaged, painted, photographed, filmed, or videoed. Photography –with its inevitable indexical moment, with that moment’s attendant realist excess– has become a site of anxiety not because images of the body in pain raise intransigent ethical questions about the production, distribution, and consumption of such images,

although they do, but rather *because each photographic image pins the human to its helplessness and vulnerability before the eyes of all others*. In its capture of human vulnerability, *the domain of the photographic image of the human is coextensive with the ethical claim of the human body*. (Bernstein 2012: xii; my emphasis)

In that sense, due attention has to be paid to “displays of suffering as formative phenomena of our experience of the visual world” (Grønstad and Gustafsson 2012: xv). This is also the reason why the image of a *dying* body –and not of an *already dead* body– is more powerful in exerting the ‘communicative power of suffering’ onto its onlookers. This complies with Bernstein’s understanding that ethics begins “with the image of another, who already matters to me, in such pain as to require my intervention, my doing something: protecting, healing, or providing solace” (Bernstein 2012: xii). However, if the self-immolator is dead I can hardly do anything for him or her that would benefit his or her liberation from suffering – unless this person *prefers* to die. Those who immolate themselves prefer to die, and they prefer to do so in protest – for a cause which they aim to achieve through the very act of dying. So, how could ‘my doing something’ contribute to such a preference on behalf of the self-immolator if I am expected to react by ‘protecting, healing, or providing solace’ to the one who had already submitted himself to the act of ‘dying by fiery death’? In Quang Duc’s case, for instance, such an intervention was never meant to be done, it was not even expected from the viewers. This is not due to the fact that none of the people looking at Quang Duc’s self-immolation (including the photographer himself) were unable to sufficiently empathize with the burning man, but because the intervention itself was imagined on completely different grounds: if the act was disturbed, it would have meant ‘saving one person’s life’ while allowing for the death of many others to keep occurring in the name of the necropolitical regime of power. In other words, it would have meant the tacit approval of the necropolitical regime. Contrary to that, what was necessary for the ‘intervention’ to properly occur consisted in the expected visual materialization of the event: into a first-hand *public testimony* (the self-immolation was taking place in view of the others, who timely brought themselves around Quang Duc while he was burning), but also into a second-hand public testimony – via photographic images. In turn, the visual impact thus produced was expected to provoke a large public response (both within the given locality of South Vietnam and abroad) and to galvanize a wave of necessary political transformations – which is what, actually, happened. Disabling Quang Duc’s action for the sake of ‘saving his life’ would have probably provoked a different chain of public reactions while it would have, almost certainly, destroyed the initially conceived (constructive, positive, transformative) thanatopolitical potential of his engagement in the process and, consequently, the cause itself (for which he decided to fight, precisely through self-immolation).

The problem arising here consists in the following: what is the most proper question I should pose to myself in order to take an ethical stance towards the suffering of a burning man? Should I prevent him from dying? If I do so I am not making any good to

the cause he is fighting for: as mentioned above, those who immolate themselves *prefer to die*, and they prefer to do so *in protest* (for a cause they aim to achieve through the very act of dying). If I want to prevent someone's act of protest this might mean that I am instantly complying with his adversary. If I do not prevent someone's act of dying in protest (or self-immolation in particular), do I necessarily comply with the cause he/she is fighting for? Should I merely observe the 'burning man' and let him burn himself to death? If I anyhow decide to intervene, should I do it immediately or should I intervene later, in the aftermath of his act, while allowing him to express himself the way he intends to do so? Besides, what should my intervention consist of: saving someone's life at any costs or engaging (personally and collectively) in another form of life that his burning eventually opens to me and my community, the other kind of life (previously obscured) that his death 'puts to light' anew? Should I only look or take a picture of the 'event' (in case I were a photographer, for instance) in order to show it to the others and to do so publicly – which would make part of my intervention, in compliance with the burning man's cause? If I want to keep my 'safe' ethical position (without intervening at all into the context of the photographed event and without doing *anything but taking a look* at the photograph produced therein), does this reduction of my 'distant' and merely viewing position inform my ethical concerns as neutral enough? Or it could still implicate my position of an 'external' observer (which is a properly *viewing position*) into the represented act itself (and if yes – how)?

There is another related question: what can the posthumous photograph of suffering tell me *about my own self* rather than only about the 'burning man' depicted therein? Bernstein says that "we have an ethical life at all not because we can reason but because we can suffer" (Bernstein 2012: xi). Additionally, if our ethical life begins with the "emphatic identification with others" than the ethics relating to images of pain is in a reality a subset of the image character of the ethical: if he or she is doing it *for me* (in case I am a member of the same community persecuted by a political dictator and his regime, for example, especially if I am a member of community who does not do enough to oppose such persecution), or *against me* (in case I am that political dictator or one of his representatives), I cannot remain indifferent "to the recognition that the causing of pain by me in some fundamental manner would deny her, deny or suppress her intrinsic worth. Without emphatic identification with others ethical life could never begin" (Bernstein 2012: xii). So, should I intervene or not and (in case I am supposed to intervene on the basis of a single photographic record) under which conditions should I look at it or ignore it?

In their own response to this dilemma, Grønstad and Gustafsson (2012: xv) argue that "in a time when some institutionalized discourses of power and the rhetoric of the mass media sanitize the reality of suffering, perhaps we need a new critical conceptology that is able to resist the euphemisms so endemic to the vocabulary of political hegemonies". In the context of the present paper the question remains: what does this new critical conceptology consist of exactly? Following the need 'to resist the vocabulary of political hegemonies' as necropolitical hegemonies (in their self-proclaimed right to decide who

must be killed or left alive), I treat self-immolation as an act of protest that has a profoundly *counter-hegemonic* character: the strength to oppose the political hegemonies of sovereign necropowers by proposing a different *visual vocabulary of power*. Its properties lie within the visual evidence of a dying body –a human being as a ‘living dead’, no more alive but still not completely dead– whereas the expression of such evidence is fundamentally *counter-visual*. The counter-visuality of self-immolation thus resides in the victim’s position against the ruling authority while suffering, while dying (i.e., in his or her intention to look at the sovereign necropower in its face, while protesting against it through his or her own ‘fiery death’, but also in the intention to be seen by the others who should themselves get mobilized, in any other possible way, for the same cause). More precisely, the counter-hegemonic vocabulary of thanatopolitical power here denotes a process through which the self-immolating protesters inscribe themselves into the “constitutive assemblages of countervisuality”, as pointed out by Mirzoeff (2011: 4):

The right to look claims autonomy from this authority, refuses to be segregated, and spontaneously *invents new forms*. It is not a right for declarations of human rights, or for advocacy, but a claim of the right to the real as the key to a democratic politics. That politics is not messianic or to come, but has a persistent genealogy [...] from the opposition to slavery of all kinds to anticolonial, anti-imperial, and anti-fascist politics. Claiming the right to look has come to mean moving past such spontaneous oppositional undoing toward an autonomy based on one of its first principles: ‘the right to existence’. The constitutive assemblages of countervisuality that emerged from the confrontation with visuality sought to match and overcome its complex operations.

The counter-hegemonic and counter-visual rationality of self-immolation is, in my view, one of the possible ways to explain how the emotion of guilt can be induced among the direct observers (i.e., the ‘observant community’, in Bradatan’s terms) whom the act itself is supposed to address. This is related to the subversive potential of self-immolation. Hence, my definition of self-immolation complies with earlier exposed arguments insofar as it contributes to our understanding of it as a gesture of particular kind: radically and unconditionally opposed towards authority and capable of inventing new forms of power through what I shall call the *positive insults of counter-visual vocabulary*. As “Palden Gyatso, a Tibetan monk who spent more than 30 years in Chinese prisons and labor camps once said: ‘For those who use brute force, there is nothing more insulting than a victim’s *refusal to acknowledge their power*’” (Bradatan 2012; my emphasis). Hence, the power of images of suffering discloses self-immolation as a counter-visual strategy of resistance against the necropolitical hegemony *par excellence*. In conclusion, I will leave the question about self-immolation open in the following way:

On the one hand, *we should not look* at such images because to do so is to become complicit in the suffering they depict; on the other, *we must look* at them because by refusing to do so we yield our ability to respond to them. [...] *The moral double-bind*

seems to be resolved only to the extent that *looking at these images can be regarded as politically empowering*, in that it –rather than encouraging any kind of political emasculation– *changes our reception and acts as a buffer against forgetting* (Grønstad and Gustafsson 2012: xviii; my emphasis).

In the contemporary visual environment, images of pain, suffering, and agony have become constitutive elements of the reality this paper intends to put into question – especially with regard to phenomena such as self-sacrifice, self-immolation by fire and assisted suicide (besides the general yet misleading context of ‘suicide’). In this paper I have discussed the ‘moral double-bind’ associated with visual materialization of suffering preceding death in the context of self-immolation by fire, namely: how its public display changes our reception of ‘death’ (and of our own ‘surviving selves’ as properly human beings) without losing its politically and emotionally empowering efficiency. For some theorists –and especially those dealing with visual cultures and technologies– what really matters is *the global visualization of suicide* (or, to be exact – since I insist on a different terminology– of the thanatopolitical self-sacrifice) through “media mediated images” and their “migration across different media, genres, and visual practices” (Bernstein 2012: xiii). Therefore, I consider this research field to be in urgent need for conceptualization and critical exploration in the future, through what Grønstad and Gustafsson have named “the ethical phenomenology of images of agony.” Thinking with them, I kept arguing that one of the most important questions to be posed in this line of thought concerns the *subjects of looking as agents of social and political transformation at large*. I defend it on the grounds of visualized suffering of the ‘living dead’, or suffering put into images, through which one has (or should have) a capacity to develop an emphatic relationship, regardless of time and space in which the process of looking occurs. Therefore, instead of confirming or condemning the right to self-sacrifice by fire, I am rather standing against the obscurity of these and related social issues in order to oppose their further tabooization by inviting the reader to reconsider, for him- or herself (and without giving any immediate answer from my own side), whom those images are addressing, whose gaze they are inviting, who they are talking to, and why.

Chapter 8

A Man, Waiting with 'Death'

Over the course of history suicide has always been an issue of immense concern for humankind, not only when understood as a private torment but all the more so as a matter of public importance. Nowadays, when the phenomenon itself has reached an unprecedented and increasingly political dimension in its expansion across the world, the link between globalism of suicide and its disruptive social framework is to be taken more seriously into account. For a psychiatrist, it is through *preventive* policies of a public health system towards potential victims of self-destruction that the urgency of this issue must be encountered. Norman Sartorius is one of them. He says:

Suicide and its consequences are a global problem that is likely to become even more important in the future for a variety of reasons (ranging from changes of the demographic structure and the growing prevalence of chronic mental and physical disorders, to the increase of alcohol consumption and of other risks for suicide, and the many forms of social disruption leading to the reduction of sources of support in times of stress and destructive anomie. (Sartorius 2009: v)

Contrary to that, some human-rights defenders oppose exclusive approaches to suicide by its necessary regulatory prevention: they rather claim that “suicide is a marvelous possibility for a human being to restore themselves from a situation which is unbearable.”¹ These two extreme positions are but another confirmation that the question of suicide has always been the subject of plurality *par excellence*. It is permeated by diversity of views that have kept provoking not only public attention but also heated public debates. Throughout the twentieth century in particular, the provocative issue of assisted-suicide and euthanasia has grown in the sense of expanding such pluralism even further, especially after “the watershed event” in 1984, when the Netherlands became

¹ Cf. Ludwig Minelli in *The Suicide Tourist*, PBS Frontline, online transcript (accessed September 2012). <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/suicidetourist/etc/script.html>

the first Western country having legal sanction to some forms of assisted suicide and euthanasia, thanks to the Dutch Supreme Court's decision to permit them in the groundbreaking Schoonheim case.² In that regard, the ongoing public debates in some parts of the Western hemisphere are ethical, legal and institutional inasmuch as they question the moral, administrative, and political status of assisted suicide and euthanasia in a very intense, mediated and –last but not least– controversial manner. Nowadays, when suicide has reached an unprecedented level in its expansion and frequency across the world, the many forms of social disruption have become framed by what might be named *the globalism of suicide* in the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the global dimensions of suicide shall not be taken for granted due to its planetary dispersion only, but rather due to the fact that suicide has become all the more evident (i.e., *obvious*, literally speaking) as it has reached an unprecedented level of public visibility over all the available contemporary media formats. It has not only become another available piece of information over the television and internet channels but, furthermore, a piece of visual information materialized in images that aim at social and political transformations in certain parts of the world.

The Suicide Tourist

The Suicide Tourist is the title of a documentary movie by the Canadian director John Zaritsky. In 1997 it aired for the first time on Canadian Television (CTV) and, successively, in various media worldwide. Only a year later it was broadcast in Britain under a different title (*Right to Die?*, 2008), while the audience in the United States witnessed its premiere in 2010.³ Ever since, its online version has been available over the Internet channels such as YouTube: this is how I saw the movie, first in early 2010 and then, again, in 2012 and 2013.⁴ It was mainly recorded in the UK, but also in Switzerland – the country famous for the so-called ‘suicide tourism.’ This unusual practice has been

² See Jonathon T. Smies, “The Legalization of Euthanasia in the Netherlands,” *Gonzaga Journal of International Law* 7, 2003-04, available at <http://www.gonzagajil.org/> (accessed September 2012). Also: Craig Paterson, *Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia. A Natural Law Ethics Approach*, London: Ashgate 2008.

³ See Thomas Moore, “Death Was His Logical Choice,” in *Sky News*, December 10, 2008 (online), <http://news.sky.com/story/655023/death-was-his-logical-choice> (accessed January 2013). Also “Sky Television screens the suicide of a 59 year old Motor Neurone disease sufferer Craig Ewert,” YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=BE&v=foCPTavccsc> (accessed January 2013).

⁴ See YouTube, “The Suicide Tourist,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mde-kmZiek> (accessed November 2012).

legally sanctioned in that country since the late 1990s, when a medical group Dignitas was founded in Zurich by a Swiss lawyer Ludwig A. Minelli.

The plot revolves around a person determined to die in a legally assisted suicide. In that regard, I would like to stress out one important detail from the outset: similar to the first ever public display of self-immolation by fire in history (the case of Quang Duc), this was the first movie ever to publicly broadcast an assisted suicide on television. It tells the story of a 59-year-old retired university professor Craig Ewert, a native of Chicago residing in Britain, and his family. The center of attention is their decision to take advantage of the Swiss law in allowing assisted suicide by using chemical substance such as Sodium Pentobarbital. To them, this seemed to be the only option to end up suffering to which Craig (and, indirectly, his family) had been exposed after having been diagnosed with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), a motor neuron disorder often referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease.⁵

The movie borrows its title from a derogative vocabulary used by the Swiss right-wing proponents and sympathizers, among which the most prominent role is taken by two local social conservative political parties (the Evangelical People's Party of Switzerland and Federal Democratic Union).⁶ They have been known in the local context for their attitude against the "suicide assistance for foreigners, branding it suicide tourism" (Ger. *Sterbetourismus*). Their criticism has gradually increased over the years in order to condemn all the more popular practice that has, nonetheless, been sanctioned by the state. Hosting non-citizens in Swiss clinics, where the legally assisted end-of-life decision making is performed, has been a common practice ever since the early 1940s. According to the Zurich authorities, "about 200 people commit assisted suicide each year in Zurich, including many foreign visitors. It has been legal in Switzerland since 1941 if performed by a non-physician with no vested interest in the death. Assistance can be provided only in a passive way, such as by providing drugs. Active assistance – helping a person to take or administer a product – is prohibited."⁷ One of the most significant facts, in that regard, is that "in accordance with the Swiss law concerning assisted suicide, this practice is allowed under important condition that people who assist in euthanasia are not motivated by self-interest" (PBS Online, 2010). Accordingly,

⁵ See PBS Frontline, "The Suicide Tourist," March 2, 2010. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/suicidetourist/etc/synopsis.html> (accessed October 2012).

⁶ See, for example, "European Protestants Collaborate on Common Euthanasia Position," <http://www.christianpost.com/news/european-protestants-collaborate-on-common-euthanasia-position-34933/#xMrCfAHzWLeUFFcy.99> (accessed October 2012).

⁷ See BBC News, "Switzerland: Zurich votes to keep assisted suicide," 15 May 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13405376> (accessed October 2012). Also CMF, 'Suicide tourism' gets public backing in Switzerland – but what for British laws?, 16 May 2011, <http://www.cmfblog.org.uk/2011/05/16/suicide-tourism-gets-public-backing-in-switzerland-but-what-for-british-laws/> (accessed October 2012).

it is worth noting that the Swiss government has recently reacted by imposing greater restrictions on the sorts of cases Swiss doctors can approve for suicide, largely limiting it to those in the late stages of terminal illness who feel their lives have become unbearable (PBS Online, 2010).

On the other hand, the screams against the practice of voluntary euthanasia coming from the right-wing have been taken seriously into account by the government. A recently organized referendum clearly showed that the opinion among the citizens of Zurich is not unison regarding the issue. According to the local media reports, the referendum results expressed rejection toward proposed bans on assisted suicide and 'suicide tourism' by the majority of Zurich voters, due to the fact that "some 85% of the 278,000 votes cast opposed the ban on assisted suicide and 78% opposed outlawing it for foreigners" (BBC Online, 2011). Nonetheless, the public opinion of the city still remains biased: "While opinion polls indicated that most Swiss were in favor of assisted suicide, they had also suggested that many were against what has become known as suicide tourism" (BBC Online, 2011).

These and related facts, past and present, have provided a legal, political, and media setting for *The Suicide Tourist* to emerge in a documentary format in the late 2000s. What does the movie shed to light? The voice of an invisible narrator frames the U.S. television's premiere in the following manner: "A story about struggling to live and deciding when to die. Is this a choice everyone should have? From Academy-Award-winning filmmaker John Zaritsky, a portrait of one man's last days and a personal exploration of one of our most controversial questions (PBS Online, 2010). What is supposed to be 'one of the most controversial questions' of our times becomes gradually clear, through an opening scene. We no more hear the narrator but the main protagonist –Craig Ewert himself– who starts revealing the details of an intimate story about his own life (or rather its very close end). From this moment onward, a viewer becomes more and more familiar with one man's experience of an approaching death, not from a mediated but from his own, very personal perspective. Says Ewert:

I am dying. There is no sense in trying to deny that fact, nor my conviction that the end of my long journey through life is rather close. Rather surprisingly, I find that I feel much the way I imagine immigrants to America must have felt in the nineteenth century. I cannot stay where I have been, and I embark on a journey to *a destination of which I have only heard the vaguest rumors.* (PBS Online, 2010)

We hear his weak voice, broken by a distressing rhythm of his breathing – the first symptoms that something must be wrong with the person uttering those words. Still, beside hearing him, we also *see* something. The movie starts with the view of a residential building, shot from below and behind the leaves of a tree in front. The next scene is followed by a short zoom-in onto a computer screen where we see Ewert's words, quoted above, simultaneously as we directly listen to him, pronouncing them.

The story continues with the scene inside a moving car, on a gloomy rainy day, where we see for the first time a male person from behind, sitting at the front, yet with a strange prosthesis coming from his mouth – a breathing ventilator. This image is occasionally intercepted by the outside views from the car: they give us a better idea of everyday life on the streets, in a place that must be foreign to him since the plaques above shop-windows – such as “Bäckerei” [German word for a bakery] – bear titles in a language that is not English, which is the one Ewert speaks. As soon as the car stops, a female figure (his wife Mary, as we will soon find out) and two men help him get out. A wheelchair is waiting for him, giving us only a vague hint that something serious must have been troubling him. It appears in front of our eyes, just before we arrive to the point of understanding one possible answer to the central question posed earlier by the narrator: that one of our most controversial issues nowadays is inseparable from this man and his story. Apparently, it has also been inseparable from our own, either affirmative or negative perspectives, on what has turned to be the controversy of the so-called assisted suicide.

Assisted Suicide

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 various types of it, such as assisted suicide (among many others), seems to be an even more challenging and unsolvable task: “We are, however, so confused [both] about suicide [and about its use in battle]⁸ 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? First and foremost, what do we mean when referring to specific types of suicide by their specific names? Why do we call one of them ‘assisted suicide’? And what is, then, the difference between assisted suicide (physician aid-in-dying or PAD) and euthanasia, the two terms figuring often together in scholarly writing and popular media? According to one

⁸ In his paper, Hacking discusses suicide in comparison to the use of suicide in battle (so-called suicide bombings or suicide attacks) which brings the subject of largely conceived ‘self-immolation’ back to my own study, now with regard to ‘assisted suicide’ (unrelated to Hacking’s work).

possible definition, “assisted suicide involves enabling the person wishing to commit suicide to obtain a lethal substance, which he or she then takes without any external assistance.”⁹ The basic difference is explained from a viewpoint dealing with the question of *coercion* or *non-coercion* in using lethal medications, all in order to deliberately end someone else’s life. One of the possible descriptions of such a difference is as following:

While both physician aid-in-dying and euthanasia involve the use of lethal medications to deliberately end a patient’s life, the key difference is in who acts to end the patient’s life. In physician aid-in-dying, the patient must self-administer the medications; the ‘aid-in-dying’ refers to a physician providing the medications, but the patient decides whether and when to ingest the lethal medication. Euthanasia occurs when a third party administers medication or acts directly to end the patient’s life.¹⁰

If we would take a look at a map indicating places in the world where euthanasia is legal and where assisted suicides are legal, we will easily and misleadingly conclude that neither of these phenomena represents an issue of global concern.¹¹ Nonetheless, they do: people across the world have been fighting for their right to die, throughout the last decade even more extensively than ever. It shall also be borne in mind that euthanasia is illegal and it is so in most cases: as of 2011, active euthanasia is only legal in the three Benelux countries (the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg). Assisted suicide is legal in Switzerland and in the three US states (Oregon, Washington, and Montana). Further complication of the issue, especially in regard to euthanasia, comes from the fact that at least three sub-groups can be distinguished within its practice (voluntary, non-voluntary, and involuntary euthanasia), among which the voluntary one falls within the earlier PAD definition, while the latter two are considered illegal.¹² How are we supposed to resolve such a complicated issue should the need occur?

In his controversially titled book, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life*, Jeff McMahan (2002) acknowledges our acceptance of exceptions from absolutely condoned killing as existent and characteristic for humankind in general, no matter how tacit and unexpressed it may seem to be. Although he gives a certain priority to ethical

⁹ See “Assisted suicide and suicide in Switzerland,” in FSO. *Federal Statistical Office of the Swiss Confederation*, Neuchâtel, 03.2012, <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index.html> (accessed November 2012).

¹⁰ See “Physician Aid-in-Dying,” in *Ethics in Medicine*. *University of Washington School of Medicine*, available at <http://depts.washington.edu/bioethx/topics/pad.html> (accessed October 2012).

¹¹ The map is available at <http://www.euthanasia.com/euthanasiamap.html> (accessed December 2012)

¹² Euthanasia is categorized in different ways, which include its voluntary, non-voluntary, or involuntary forms. Voluntary euthanasia is legal in some countries and U.S. states. Non-voluntary euthanasia is illegal in all countries. Involuntary euthanasia is usually considered murder. See: Euthanasia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthanasia> (accessed October 2012); <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/euthanasia/overview/volinvol.shtml> (accessed October 2012).

considerations and “plausible defense of the permissibility of abortion” in comparison to other controversial issues at hand (among which euthanasia, assisted suicide, the killing of animals and severely cognitively impaired human beings), he proposes “four distinct categories into which we may sort most or all instances of killing for which there may be a reasonable justification” (McMahan 2002: vii-viii). He classifies suicide, assisted suicide and euthanasia within the fourth category under the heading of “beneficial cases ... in which death would not be a harm to an individual but instead a benefit, [especially when] the individual for whom death would be a benefit also desires to die and may request to be killed or helped to die” (McMahan 2002: vii).

Michael Cholbi (2011), on the other hand, gives another challenging view on assisted suicide. In a chapter of his most recent book *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions*, he contributes to the current state of debate about “whether individuals have a right to be aided in their efforts to end their lives – whether there is, so to speak, a right to assisted suicide” (Cholbi 2011: 139). By questioning whether “suicide can be a duty under any set of circumstances” he approaches his hypothesis from two ends in order to reach, in his words, “the murky middle” (Cholbi 2011: 139). The interpretation of assisted suicide, or aiding people in committing a suicidal act in broadest terms, depends on the variations of interpreting suicidal act as either “morally impermissible, permissible but not required, or required” (Cholbi 2011: 139-140). Three options are therefore put in focus by Cholbi: (a) if an individual’s suicidal act were morally impermissible, then it would be morally impermissible for others knowingly to assist that person to end her life; (b) assisting someone whose suicide is morally required is at least morally permissible (but not required); and, last but not least, (c) when a suicidal act is merely permissible, are we ever morally required to aid in that suicide?

In order to get closer to an answer to this question, Cholbi stresses the distinction between the two types of moral obligations, the difference between them being dependent on specificity of relationship people bear to each other. He differentiates professional or *role-specific* obligations from any other type of obligations (such as “the obligations that doctors owe their patients,” for example). From this viewpoint he explicitly suggests we do not have a duty to aid in the suicides of those to whom we bear no specific relationship, i.e., if we are “strangers to one another,” as he puts it:

After all, we are little better than strangers to one another. Strangers are certainly permitted to aid other strangers, but only in exceptional circumstances is such aid required (I might have a duty to aid a stranger in peril if I am the only one who could provide such an aid as Singer’s ‘drowning child’ example illustrates). What can transform a mere permission to aid in another’s suicide is the presence of a role obligation, for often, aid that would be morally permissible on the part of a stranger is morally obligatory on the part of someone with whom we have a specific role relationship. Parents are required to aid their children in ways that mere strangers are merely permitted to aid them. So too are medical professionals

required to help those who are ill, whereas strangers are merely permitted to help. (Cholbi 2011: 141)

While drawing on the essential difference between requirement and permissibility, Cholbi also highlights the difference between the *role-specific obligations* and any other type of obligation that he puts under umbrella term of *stranger's obligation*. Starting from this argument, he claims that it is the matter of competence and available means that prevent friends and family from fulfilling their role-specific obligation in complying with these two attributes that are crucial to the duty to aid in suicide (Cholbi 2011: 142).

In comparison to a few countries where assisted suicide is legal, the position of Switzerland remains specific inasmuch as it is the only country in the world that allows outsiders/ foreigners (or 'strangers', in broadly understood Cholbi's terms) to come in to end their lives: death is thus being 'outsourced' to foreign institutions which determine processes and procedures. This specificity, leading to criticism about 'suicide tourism' and Zaretsky's documentary movie produced thereafter, motivated me to find out more about the circumstances within which this particular migratory practice partakes in a production of another kind of specificity: the creation of images in relation to one's own voluntary death.

What makes Zaretsky's movie so particular is the *public overexposure of death (brought about by assisted suicide) in real time, while it is happening*. Death itself, happening in front of our eyes for real and without being cut away, is described in one of the movie reviews by the anthropologist Troy Belford (2012) who specifies "about how it differs from expected ways of presenting death in the tropes of cinema". Says Belford:

By unwaveringly staying with every aspect of the death the film frames the event with so much more depth and impact than any conventional cinematographic poetics. The choice of assisted suicide may be totally up to the person committing the suicide, but this film navigates the activity without the recourse to libertarian demands for personal freedom or becoming mired in a solipsistic framework. The incorporation of Mary and their children is an important and essential element that allows the event to exist in a place beyond a right practiced in cold existential atomism.¹³

Recording one's own death is neither a novel nor rare practice. Videotaped digital 'death masks' have been constitutive of farewell rituals as regards the mandatory legislative procedure in the practice of euthanasia and assisted suicide wherever the end-of-life decision making is formally allowed. The creation of images in relation to one's own voluntary death is here twofold. On the one hand, such images can exist as

¹³ See Belford, Troy (2012) Review of 'The Suicide Tourist.' *Anthropology Review Database*, August 6, 2012. <http://wings.buffalo.edu/ARD/cgi/showme.cgi?keycode=3747> (accessed September 2012).

private video-images: in terms of obligatory video-recorded materials with a specific legal purpose, yet always secluded from a public view. Assistants to the euthanasia clinic are required to film each client at the moment of their drinking the lethal dose of sedatives. The purpose is to make evidence of a voluntary decision: these films function as a legally admissible proof which could be used in any possible future legal dispute concerning the nature of the non-coercive agreement (as non-coercion itself is but a mandatory condition for the legally sanctioned assisted suicide in Switzerland).

The entirely private character of those video-recorded images is intended never to be made public: though they remain concealed from the public view, they open up an interesting field of knowledge. Such knowledge is produced and accumulated around the nature of the curious act of video recording, upon which the agreement between dying clients and their host institutions is made. This 'contract' is made through the integrative role of images that must remain 'invisible,' so to say. But how about *public* videos and documentary movies (*The Suicide Tourist* being one of them)? What is the specificity of public video-materials that overexpose the same visual situation around assisted suicide to millions of TV and Internet viewers? How do such materials integrate (or split) those who are dying, those who provide assistance in death, those who film it and –last but not least– those who look at it?

To Look or Not to Look

To answer this question one needs to account for the following assumption: that the relation between death and images is fundamental. It is fundamental inasmuch as it links the ideas of death to those of an image-world, "which can also be the spectrum or the soul of the dead, but also the entire history of art and funeral rites."¹⁴ In her seminal book *Introduction to Image Analysis* Martine Joly (1993, 2009) reminds us of the significance of this particular relationship. In etymology, a death-mask evokes the origins of the very term image (*imago*, in Latin). *Imago* is, therefore, an image that denotes a death-mask – an object that represents the facial features of a human being who passed away. By representing those features as recorded post-mortem, death-masks allow subjects of death to inscribe themselves into history (the history of death and dying, but also of life and living, for the sake of those who are still living subjects, the survivors or spectators of someone else's death). This denotes, on one side, a history

¹⁴ See Martine Joly, *Introducción al análisis de la imagen*, Buenos Aires: La Marca 2009, p. 22.

of self-reflection but also, on the other side, a history of one's reflection onto the world of others. By the latter, in particular, I refer to the faculty of images associated with 'death' to communicate certain messages to the community of (both direct and indirect) onlookers: the communication itself must occur in order to make an impact on behalf of the message transmitters (the dying subjects) onto the message receivers (i.e., the world of living subjects). Why and how are these two types of history interlinked?

The "morally vexed issue of looking/not looking" connects death and suffering (leading towards death) to a living community of spectatorship, as Grønstad and Gustafsson (2012) proposed in their most recent book *Ethics and Images of Pain*. For them, the domains of images and ethics intersect precisely at the point where our scopic experience of someone else's suffering meets the demand for action or inaction via the agency of visual images:

To look or to look away? [...] This is what constitutes the core of the question of an ethics of images of pain. Do we look away to protect the integrity of the subject photographed, or to protect ourselves? Does not looking absolve us from complicity, or is the ostensibly respectful act of averting one's eyes in fact to deny responsibility and foreclose knowledge? (Grønstad and Gustafsson 2012: xvi)

For the one concerned with issues of ethical life in general, and understanding of the ethics of self-realization through images in particular, the rationality of the *image* of a dying human being, a human being suffering on the road towards death or, as I shall call it, of a 'man waiting with death' (Biehl 2001) must be crucial. This resides in arguments that are central to what *could* or *must* be done about the state of affairs where there is no alternative so one would experience life otherwise than suffering. In the preface to Grønstad and Gustafsson's book, J.M. Bernstein (2012: xi-xiv) points out the traditional argument by which "the pulse of moral life must lie in our capacity to reason and deliberate." Yet, he opposes such an argument as an essentially *false* inference conditioned by our common presumption that "the possession of reason is what distinguishes human beings from the brutes". His own argument instead is based on *emphatic identification with others*, by which "we have an ethical life at all not because we can reason but because we can suffer." Says Bernstein:

Ethics begins with the image of another, who already matters to me, in such pain as to require my intervention, my doing something: protecting, healing, or providing solace; and thence to the recognition that the causing of pain by me in some fundamental manner would deny her, deny or suppress her intrinsic worth. *Without emphatic identification with others ethical life could never begin.* (Cf. Bernstein in Grønstad and Gustafsson 2012: xii)

If our ethical life begins with the 'emphatic identification with others', as Bernstein contends, where else does the identification process takes stronger place than through

the very practice of looking, i.e., in the process of *mirroring one's own self at another human being* over the screen of possible self-identification. This is where, instead of seeing only and exclusively the other, a viewer recognizes him-/herself in a 'mirroring effect'. For Bernstein, if I understand him correctly, the relation between ethics and images is crucial, in particular when it comes to the human vision and our capacity *to see the other as a subject vulnerable to violence*. This is where one's faculty of viewing demands for action, intervention, 'my doing something.'

Accordingly, I do not see the question such as "Is (assisted) suicide a right?" the most urgent one, in terms of eliciting a space for ethical reflection over the subject at hand. Rather, I am curious whether there is a space, the theoretical space still insufficiently explored, that provokes our knowledge on 'suicide' and related phenomena for a differently framed ethical reflection. Can we couple "To be or not to be?" with another set of similar questions such as "To look or not to look?" and why does this matter at all today? In that sense, I want to see images of suffering (such as Quang Duc's or Craig Ewart's, among others) not only as *visual* manifestations of personal will (to die, by self-immolation or assisted suicide, for example); also –and even more importantly– I see them as *public* manifestations of personal, i.e. *political* will: the will to expose one's own suffering and death, to make it visible to others, for the sake of changing the current status of neuralgic and complicated issues that contemporary societies feel reluctant to know of. One of them is the right to die by assisted suicide, especially in contexts where this act is still not only impermissible but far from any public discussion. In what follows I will discuss some other, equally silenced or condemned practices of 'impermissible deaths' (such as so-called suicide attacks) in hope that their mutual resonances –from two very different perspectives– could help us understand the vulnerability of humanness and what it means to turn oneself into an image from a position (both ethical and existential) that cannot but be described as 'waiting with death'.

I keep these questions open for the moment: to get closer to them I explore the issue further in the next, eighth chapter, but also – from a very different viewing position – in the twelfth chapter (Contested and Condemned: On Decoloniality and Counter-Hegemonic Visuality in Ahlam Shibli's "Death") and, to a certain extent, in the fourteenth chapter (Sueños del sur: Necrocapitalism, Social Collapse and 'Suicide as a Political Act'). Only when examined together they give a better idea around the 'image character of the ethical' and disclose the properly thanatopolitical potential of suffering – in particular when it comes to the self-violent forms of suffering that we still tend to read as 'suicidal' while my reading goes towards another, hopefully more adequate terminology and the common concept of 'radical withdrawal'.

Chapter 9

Are So-Called Suicide Bombers Our ‘Ritual Others’?

Within the First World scholarship,¹ 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 canonic and oversimplified views on the global insecurity under the threat of “human bombs” (Abufarha 2009).

¹ 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’ 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.

This study 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 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-juridical 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 ground-breaking 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 guerilla 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 becomes 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 emphasis)

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 emphasis). 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 emphasis)

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, online)

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)² 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-

² See, for example, Channel RT TV, "NSA Leaks," Autonomous non-profit organization (ANO) TV-Novosti, <http://rt.com/trends/nsa-leaks-snowden-surveillance/> (accessed on July 14, 2013).

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.

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.

In line with this goal, in the next chapter I explore 'death' through the concept of thanatopolitics while paying particular attention to the conceptual ambiguities of 'suicide missions' vis-à-vis the most aberrant conditions of today's necro-coloniality in contemporary Palestine. The issue is here approached from an anti-imperialist perspective: as a counter-hegemonic strategy of resistance against the colonial sovereignty of necropower. It challenges prevalent and ideologically biased views on Palestinian anti-colonial revolt as an epistemic problem, squeezed between the imperialist biopolitical theory and necropolitical practice. The aim is to expose one

possible way of mobilizing political life through the legitimate forms of self-sacrificial deaths for a cause, not through the 'suicide terror'.

Chapter 10

Palestinian Thanatopolitics Against the Necro-Coloniality of Power

This chapter examines the concept of death in relation to ‘suicide missions’ (‘suicide terror’, ‘suicide attacks’, ‘suicide bombing’, and so on). It starts from the assumption that the controversies around ‘life’ and ‘death’ therein have been provoked by the dominant views on the issue and its conceptual ambiguities. In what follows, I have undertaken the task of challenging such views. This particularly refers to the biased perspectives pertaining to the ongoing necro-colonial matrix of power in Palestine when confronted by the manifestation of violence on behalf of the so-called suicide terrorists.

The need to have myself engaged in the hermeneutic endeavors of this kind is a matter of ethical urgency. It primarily revolves around the necessity of probing comparative accounts on death, terror and resistance in the current context of globalization. The exemplary case of contemporary Near Eastern freedom-fighters and their public reception outside of the region, as an extremely biased matter of contestation, is more than challenging in that regard. I treat it as a complex and essentially *epistemic* problem squeezed between the sovereign biopolitical theory of life and its incessant necropolitical practice of death. The conflicting conditions where these two directions meet each other will be examined in the internal knowledge-world of Palestinian anti-colonial resistance through self-sacrifice. The external, transnational implications will be approached across the world of academic scholarship dealing, most notably, with the concept of thanatopolitics, as suggested by the Canadian philosopher Stuart J. Murray (2006) who profiles Palestinian self-sacrificial deaths as a way of mobilizing collective political life. This conceptual approach is all the more relevant when the position of a weaker party in a conflict becomes confronted with the disparaging and sanitizing opposition on behalf of its militarily and economically stronger counterpart. Broadly speaking, one of the aims of this paper is to contribute toward our global ways of resistant thinking and acting on the basis of contemporary

social theory, history, philosophy and political sciences, while offering counter-hegemonic arguments to the neoliberal and neocolonial epistemic hegemony. The intention is clear: the incessant reproduction, accumulation, and dissemination of historical ‘truths’ and ethical ‘values’ on behalf of the sovereign imperialist power must allow for voicing and exposing other possible kinds of local knowledges – most notably those that are not only ‘undisciplined’ (in terms of their resistance to any singular knowledge that claims to be normative and universal) but share the plurality of experiences in the global network of anti-imperialist consciousness and epistemologies therein. The radical re-positioning of our knowledge worlds is necessary both inside and outside the limits of sovereignty: across the manifold epistemic paradigms partaking in the current processes of de-linking from colonial, neocolonial, capitalist, and centralized logic of power. These paradigms are but an instrument for our gradual *epistemic liberation* from everyday practices of social and other types of fascism to which our knowledge-worlds have been submitted.

I have borrowed the notion of social fascism from the Portuguese scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007: 59-61) who describes it as “a social regime of extremely unequal power relations which grant to the stronger party a veto power over the life and livelihood of the weaker party”.¹ Similarly, I situate the notion of the necro-coloniality of power within what he calls the ‘veto power over the life and livelihood of the weaker party’ – or, in this case, of the Palestinians. To have one’s own life liberated or decolonized from this form of social fascism here means to engage in a struggle that applies thanatopolitics as a form of anti-colonial resistance. Moreover, this engagement expands beyond the specifically Palestinian forms of ‘violent death’ and dying for a cause under conditions of an even more violent form of life. It shows convincingly and to every one of us how to deal with the liberation in terms of decolonization: how to defend and save our own knowledge-worlds from the ruling authority of any imperialist, colonial and presumably singular form of rationality.² Given the Palestinian hard-core example, what is at stake here is the possibility of self-liberation from every sovereign (modern, colonial, capitalist, and racial) epistemic world-system that tends to maintain its global position of dominance over the plurality of knowledge-worlds: it opens up the space of ‘unthinking’ death as the exclusive instrument of sovereign power for the sake of its own rationality only.³ This paper invites us to ‘unthink’

¹ Santos distinguishes several forms of social fascism, among which most prevalent are fascism of social apartheid, contractual fascism, and territorial fascism. See Santos 2007 (especially pp. 59-61.).

² By this I relate to the oppositional forms of knowledge that, despite the global processes of hegemonic thinking and acting, allow for counter-hegemonic and anti-imperialist world-systems to co-exist with the dominant one. I situate such oppositional forms in the global anti-imperialist South, characterized by its proper “epistemologies of the South”. See: Santos and Meneses 2010.

³ In what he considers to be the way of ‘unthinking’ twentieth-century Eurocentric mythologies (i.e. universalist knowledges, decolonization, and developmentalism) some scholars propose the ‘second

Palestinian ‘suicide bombers’ as the figures of terror and to take part, together with them, in our own struggles for epistemic self-liberation.

‘Suicide Bomber’ in the Cartography of Epistemic Power

Although a conceptually ambiguous and epistemologically misleading term, ‘suicide mission’ has nonetheless been used within the Western or, largely speaking, First World scholarship in order to denote the organizational forms 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). This “involves an individual intentionally killing himself or herself on behalf of a collective cause” whereas the violence thus produced is “intended to cause physical harm or to inflict material damage” (Biggs 2005: 173). This kind of attack is here commonly considered to be “an extraordinary weapon of war” (Biggs 2005: 173). It is powerful inasmuch as it is “demonstrating to the world the devastating combination of a bomb, a vehicle, and a militant willing to die” (Biggs 2012).

The majority of Western scholars have been repeating the ‘historical fact’ that “since the 1980s suicide bombing has been taken up largely by Muslim insurgent and terrorist groups” (Biggs 2012). Consequently, this created a racially biased atmosphere: to think of a ‘suicide bomber’ nowadays means to think of a Muslim who ‘spreads fear’ around the world whereas the general idea of Muslim populations denote but one thing – ‘terror’. This is a highly problematic and, in my personal view, unacceptable condition. This way of looking, in which the so-called suicide bomber is the cause of terror induced by the members of Muslim population, has become a common pattern in the West. It has become all the more evident in the aftermath of the 9/11 events in 2001 when it disclosed a profoundly racist and, for that matter, ideologically deviated and contaminated perspective.

For the political scientist Ayhan Kaya (2011: 3) it is clear that Islamophobia, in its current state in Europe and the United States, has become “a form of governmentality in Foucaultian sense, [that] operates as a form of cultural racism in Europe”. Accordingly,

it has become apparent together with the process of *securitizing* and *stigmatizing* migration and migrants in the age of neo-liberalism [that] the growing

decolonization’ as an epistemic self-liberation from the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system. See Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodriguez 2002.

Islamophobic form of governmentality has produced unintended consequences on both minorities and majorities in a way that has so far led to the political and social instrumentalization of Islam by Muslim origin minorities, and to the deployment of an anti-multiculturalist discourse by the majority societies in the west. (Kaya 2011: 3-4)

The social practice allowing such a racist division to exist and grow within the contemporary world is what the anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2007) calls *a culture of exterminability*: in his words, “we in the Western world are already living in such a culture ... where the exterminable is located in the dominant imaginary of the Muslim other”. The consequences of general Islamophobic perspectives are far more complex than it might seem at first instance. For example, Ramón Grosfoguel and Eric Mielants (2006: 1) argue “that Islamophobia as a form of racism against Muslim people is not only manifested in the labor market, education, public sphere, global war against terrorism, or the global economy, but also in the *epistemological battleground* about the definition of the priorities in the world today”. They expand this understanding when observing it in a broader (decolonial, anticapitalist and antimodernist) framework and say that “any discussion of Islamophobia today has to depart from a discussion about the *cartography of power* of the ‘world-system’ for the past 500 years” (Grosfoguel and Mielants 2006: 1).⁴ Similar views are also reflected by Achille Mbembe (2006) who discusses the question in relation to our postcolonial thinking at large: as he maintains, “there is in the European colonial humanism something that has to be called unconscious self-hatred. Racism in general, and colonial racism in particular, represents the transference of this self-hatred to the Other”. Given these arguments, it is worth noting two things in relation to the conceptual ambiguity of ‘suicide missions’ and related terms as exclusively applicable to Muslim populations who are ‘terrorizing’ the ‘civilized world’. They are important for the discussion at hand for two reasons: first, with regard to the official aversion of Islam toward ‘suicide’ (i.e. that form of ‘self-destructive’ death as it is commonly understood in the non-Muslim world); second, with regard to the official responsibility of the non-Muslim world for the historical origins of the ‘martyrdom operations’ (otherwise understood as ‘suicide missions’) as practices of anti-colonial resistance which are not so recent at all but date back to the first wave of European colonial expansion five hundred years ago.

The first argument deals with the category of so-called suicide in the Muslim world and its ‘values’ analyzed from an Islamic perspective. According to Ahmed and Tarek

⁴ Ramón Grosfoguel spoke about this perverse relationship in December 2012 at the Islamic Human Rights Commission in London. His video lecture is available online at the IHRC website (accessed 23 December 2013). See: <http://www.ihrc.org.uk/news/event-reports/10358-is-islamophobia-racism-author-evening-with-ramon-grosfoguel>.

Okasha (2009: 49), the professors of psychiatry at the Ain Shams University in Cairo (Egypt), “all studies show that suicide is less prevalent in Islamic societies compared to countries associated with other religions: the cognitive schemata of Muslims follow the phrases of the Koran that humans were created for the main reason of worshipping God, and that life and death issues should be controlled by God and not by self-destruction. This faith can be a factor in preventing suicide attempts, especially in those practicing their religious rituals”. From a canonic religious perspective, self-destructive behavior is banned in Islam “as an act of violation of the will of God in taking away life” (Okasha and Okasha 2009: 49). Furthermore, it is prohibited and considered *haram* (forbidden) due to the following: it is “an act that manipulates life itself, which is meant to be only God’s concern; it indicates lack of trust in God who is capable of making things better; it also means acting in a way that is unjust to self and to others” (Okasha and Okasha 2009: 50). One vivid example of such a commandment is given by verses quoted from the Koran: “Take not life, which Allah has made sacred, *except by way of justice and law*. Thus does he command you that you may learn wisdom”.⁵ The subtle relationship between ‘suicide’ (i.e. taking one’s own life) and ‘knowledge’ (i.e. learning of wisdom) is here constructed upon the official prohibition of destruction and of destructive behavior towards life-taking – except by way of justice and law, as pointed out. It is the way to *knowledge*, and to the knowledge of wisdom in particular, that may become interrupted if the rule regarding the protection of life is broken – which is against the Islamic law and, thus, largely condemned in the Muslim world. From this perspective, there is no such a thing as the western notion of suicide that is allowed in the Muslim world.⁶ Thus the phrase ‘Muslim suicide missions’ is nothing more but the non-Muslim construction that is racially biased and essentially wrong. In their account on the attitudes of Islam toward suicide at large, Okasha and Okasha also explicitly mention (though very briefly) the controversial and widely debated aspect of ‘suicide bombing’. Their own view, whether biased or not, is that ‘suicide bombing’ is “denounced by high-ranking religious authorities in the region, refusing to describe the actors as martyrs” (Okasha and Okasha 2009: 50).

Still, the so-called suicide missions have been going on across the world and under common presumptions that the majority of their protagonists are of Muslim origin. In order to get closer to this puzzling situation another viewpoint must be called to mind. The second argument deals with serious historical gaps in understanding the so-called suicide missions as intricately linked with the Muslim world and, thus, with the specifically ‘Muslim terror’. What I want to invoke here centers on one of the major

⁵ The quote is taken from *The Holy Koran*, Surat Al Ana’am 151. See Okasha and Okasha 2009: 49.

⁶ This, however, does not completely exclude the cases of self-destructive death among the Muslim population – including the Palestinians. See Dabbagh 2005.

problems about our knowledge of the origins of 'Muslim suicide missions'. It relates to the missing historical links that keep our gaps of ignorance wide open around the pre-modern forms of such missions. The Western scholarship persistently avoids to acknowledge at least two significant points in that regard: first, the more profound (colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial) nature of conflicts involving 'suicide missions'; and second, their long-term dynamics encompassing the ancient, medieval and new-age periods, up to our own times. The Italian sociologist Luca Ricolfi (2005) is aware of these epistemic gaps: in his account of historical precedents to the more contemporary forms of suicide missions he clearly indicates the study by the professor Stephen Frederic Dale from the Ohio State University (USA), entitled "Religious Suicide in Islamic Asia. Anticolonial Terrorism in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines". For a disputable post-colonial European legacy this could still be a remarkably relevant resource, especially as regards the "deep roots of the historical relations between Islam and the West [since it perpetuated a centuries-long] Islamic way of resisting foreign occupation, especially European colonial powers" (Ricolfi 2005: 83). In Dale's own view (1988: 46),

it requires a considerable effort of will for many Westerners even to consider the attitudes of the indigenous populations of Asia who experienced European expansion, and it seems especially difficult for Westerners, who usually happen to be Christians or Jews, to generate a degree of sympathetic understanding of the Asian Muslims whose communities have been impoverished or destroyed in this, to the Europeans, heroic age.

Anti-colonial 'suicidal' revolts characterized the migrant Muslim communities in the Indian Ocean region who had to confront the stronger Western/Christian colonial economic and military powers expanding across that region five centuries ago. Their 'suicides' were the expressions of "protest against Western hegemony or the colonial rule" (Dale 1988: 39). This argument might be instructive in finding the basis for understanding the attitudes of Near Eastern Muslims in the more recent period. These attitudes –before being condemned as mere forms of 'terror' (which is predominantly the case across the contemporary Western world)– need to be properly taken into account and understood in relation to the prevailing European and North American oppression over the indigenous Muslim population in the Near East and their migrant members elsewhere. To question the historical roots of 'suicide missions' here means to question the responsibility of the Western colonizers for the emergence of such practices among the Muslim fighters for freedom from colonial domination. Dale's main argument is that "the suicidal attack, such as that which destroyed the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut [1983], has been used repeatedly over several centuries by Muslims in three Asian Muslim communities as a means of attacking militarily superior European and American colonial powers" (Dale 1988: 37). These powers, as pointed out by Dale, conceived of the British in Malabar (the south-western coast of the Indian peninsula),

the Portuguese and Dutch in Atjeh (Sumatra/Indonesia), and Spaniards and Americans in Mindanao and Sulu (the southern Philippines). In that sense, the origins of 'suicide bombing' are neither as recent as the contemporary analysts would preferably see them, nor related to the Near East as their geopolitical point of departure. Furthermore, they are not to be seen as a mere manifestation of 'barbarian' violence and terror against the 'civilized' other, but as an anti-colonial response to the forms of imperialist violence for the sake of domination and occupation. Thus they are entangled with an ongoing matrix of power of the European and non-European (North American) military forces since the late fifteenth century till today.

Dale's study traces back the origins and the increase of "dramatically staged acts of violence ... as a means of political coercion ... known to have occurred over a span of several centuries in three little known Muslim communities of the Indian Ocean region ... whose conflicts with European powers gave rise to suicidal attacks" (Dale 1988: 38-39). The significance of this specific territory is huge and its wealth in trading resources reveals the beginnings of conflicting interests between Asian Muslims and Western colonial powers since Vasco da Gama's epoch. As the Indian Ocean region belongs to so-called agrarian empires of South Asia and China, rich in "aromatic woods, hardwoods, spices, and especially in parts of Indonesia, gold deposits" (Dale 1988: 39-40), these resources were not only exploited by the new (Arab-Muslim) residents of that region, but also helped them "dominate Indian Ocean commerce from the tenth century A.D. onwards" (Dale 1988: 40). Dale traces the common, trade-driven roots of the Asian Islamic subculture as part of the Indian Ocean mercantile communities and their respective *commercial culture* in the coastal zones of the Indian Ocean region. Muslim settlements spread throughout this maritime Asian territory after their ancestors "from the mercantile centers of the Red Sea, southern Arabia, or the Persian Gulf" had started sailing into Asian waters "with the summer monsoons along trade routes" (Dale 1988: 39) ever since the first century A.D (that is, *fourteen centuries before Vasco da Gama's 'discovery' of the sea-road to India*).

This fact does not only shake our preconceived ideas about the European scientific discoveries (one of them being da Gama's 'discovery' of the sea-routes to India as early as the late fifteenth century). It also challenges and disturbs our general knowledge on historical causes and origins of the practice of self-sacrificial violence as a '*suicide culture*' linked to commercial cultures during the early colonial era. Though this 'culture' has been present since then not only in Palestine but across the world, it seems to be very rarely discussed in its relation to the colonial past and, especially, in its relation to the violently imperialist pretensions of our (European) colonial heritage. These layers of hidden or silenced knowledge remain cemented within the walls of 'historical regimes of truths' that we are supposed to know (or to ignore) without ever questioning them. One may add to the discussion by saying that this is only because history has always been written by the winning parties in international conflicts. Should we still keep the

voice of a weaker side blocked just because, as in this case, the weaker side is represented by the Muslim Asian communities, while the victorious rhetoric must remain in the hands of the stronger side (in this case, the colonial European powers)? If every attempt to explain the nature of 'suicide attacks' in the contemporary Near East should comprise the pre-modern forms of 'suicide missions', as I am arguing in this paper, the exposed situation allows the following assumption to be outlined as strongly as possible: that certain forms of behavior (such as 'suicidal attacks') have been undergoing the processes of continuous 'translation' from the colonial past into the neocolonial present, including those experienced in today's Palestine.

Dale also indicates that the earliest local Muslim merchant enclaves gradually evolved into the permanent, indigenous communities thanks to the large number of Muslim migrants to Asia in the sixteenth century – the same migrants that also started spreading Islam in Asia. This important fact mirrored not only a commercial but also a *religious* wave of migratory politics occurring at the times (Dale 1988: 40-41). It was exactly these Muslim communities of the sixteenth century, whose commercial *and* religious attitudes started to become increasingly intertwined, that the Europeans encountered when they entered the Indian Ocean (Dale 1988: 41). While paying particular attention to the new-coming Portuguese, Spanish, and, later on, Dutch, British and North American colonial forces, Dale (1988: 43-48) describes this “oceanic conflict [through] commercial objectives [of European colonizers] as an aspect of a centuries-long religious war” between the Euro-Christian and the Arab-Muslim worlds.

Following Dale (1988: 44), it was during the so-called Vasco da Gama Epoch in Asia that Muslim violent attitudes became more prominent *in response to* an even greater European violence. Such attitudes also started gaining the form of 'suicidal resistance' in response to “the creation of a grand strategy designed to give the Portuguese a monopoly over Indian ocean shipping”. These attitudes were self-defensive inasmuch as they expressed Muslims' determination to defend the integrity of their community against the European military, political, and commercial occupation in the Indian Ocean region, and to intimidate the main proponents of European colonial rule. They were also defensive in a very particular manner – through self-destruction under the form of a 'suicidal jihad'. One of the rare literary testimonies about the emergence of jihad in this region was written near the end of the sixteenth century by Zayn al-Din al-Ma'bari and titled *Tufhat al-Mujahidin – The Gift of Holy Warriors in Respect to Some Deeds of the Portuguese* (Dale 1988: 46). As a sanctioned form of protest and self-defense, “a war for the faith against the Portuguese” remained historically documented in internal literary sources, authored by a Muslim for the Muslim audience and reflecting the Muslim point of view (in contrast to the general prevalence of Western or external sources of the kind). “Pointing out that Muslims had been attacked in their own country”, Dale (1988: 46) insists on the exceptional nature of Zayn al-Din's work because “it is a manifesto rather than the more common *tarikh*, or chronicle, a genre that was usually characterized by

narratives of political sagacity and military triumph, the staple product of court patronized historical writing”. Additionally,

writing in Arabic, the language of educated Muslims throughout the Indian Ocean region, rather than Malayalam, the vernacular of southwestern India, Zayn al-Din supported his call to arms with historical evidence and Islamic legal doctrine. He painted a largely accurate picture of the symbiotic interests of Asian rulers and Muslim traders that had led to the foundation of flourishing Muslim settlements in Malabar, and offered a reasonable explanation – the inequalities of the caste system – for the substantial number of Hindus who had converted to Islam in the area. Then, *pointing out that Muslims had been attacked in their own country*, that their trade had been badly damaged, their mosques destroyed, and Muslims slain, *he argued that Muslims were obliged by Islamic law to undertake a jihad*, pointing out that those who would be killed in the struggle would be worshipped as *shahids*, or martyrs, by members of the Islamic community (Dale 1988: 46; my emphasis).

Following Dale, if we are to understand the origins of ‘suicide missions’ as a distinctively Muslim phenomenon we are obliged to consider the arguments by those scholars who do not avert their gaze from the historical facts of our distant and traumatic past. Dale’s exemplary case gives us a reason to consult further the historical writings of the past and in particular those originally coming not only from ‘our’ own side but from the ‘other’ (Muslim) side – such as aforementioned Zayn al-Din’s document. These kinds of sources are profoundly related to the issue of our concern here, and they provide valid counter-arguments to the prevailing myopic conclusions surfacing nowadays on the news and in the official political agendas, urging us to embrace the ‘war on terror’ against the Other. According to these ‘non-conventional’ or easily dismissed scientific sources, the historical precedents to the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century ‘suicide operations’ are to be found in the distant past and in distant geographical locations, and to be treated as forms of anti-colonial resistance. This applies to the period earlier than the twentieth century (i.e. the beginning of sixteenth century, the Vasco da Gama epoch in Asia) and to the geographic coordinates significantly further away from the Near East itself (i.e. Islamic Asia, or Muslim communities in India, Indonesia and the Philippine).

One of the curious aspects of Dale’s study lies in the fact that it was published in 1988, “before the phenomenon attracted the attention of the mass media and scholars” (Ricolfi 2005: 83). Anyhow, it gives us (even today) a valid account on what might challenge the dominant or short-sighted perspectives. In my view, it is necessary to think again and again about “the difficulty that Europeans and Americans have in understanding what European expansion, hegemony and colonization meant to Asian Muslims” (to quote Dale again). From this point on, it is also necessary to think about what colonial expansion and hegemony means nowadays for the global world in general and for the Palestinians in particular.

Necro-Colonial Corporeality

Every question concerning the Palestinian ‘case’ demands considering the “primary and absolute objective of the political” that, as Achille Mbembe (2003: 12) sees it, “under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror ... is as much means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill”. If the governed – their lives, their deaths and their bodies, “in particular the wounded or slain body” (Mbembe 2003: 12), are exposed to the order of power that has been rooted in epistemic and other kinds of violence, we must pose another question: what kind of (corporeal) inscription becomes manifest in the current narratives and rationalities of living and dying under the ongoing matrix of colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial sovereign power? Moreover, “imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body?... How are they inscribed in the order of power?” (Mbembe 2003: 12).

Biopolitical travesties and their *mode d’emploi* have produced a particular logic of sovereignty upon which one’s exposure to death correlates to another one’s right to kill. It means that one’s proximity to death (that of the governed) is in the sovereign’s own domain of control: thus the sovereignty exercises its self-proclaimed right to ‘measure the distance’ between the lives of the governed and their proximity to death. As a result, the distance can always be minimized according to the sovereign’s own will. But the power over distance is not only in sovereign’s hands. In relation to the effects of ‘suicide bombing’ Mbembe says: “War is the war of body on body (*guerre au corps-à-corps*). To kill, one has to come as close as possible to the body of the enemy. To detonate the bomb necessitates resolving the question of distance, through the work of proximity and concealment” (Mbembe 2003: 37).

This is the point where self-destruction and resistance meet in a struggle over sovereign’s control of individual and social bodies, of distances inherent therein, and of the question of distance itself. One’s position of subjection is conditioned by another one’s position of dominance: the sovereign, being in possession of ultimate power over death (or necropower, as Mbembe calls it), decides about the *figures* subjected to his control, which means that the decisions about their own existence are not in their own hands but subjugated to the sovereign’s will. In an exercise of control over the ‘materiality’ of their bodies, the sovereign power extends to the limits of corporeal *disfiguration*, the erasure of bodies and, accordingly, the erasure of the *figural itself*. In this execution of populations’ annihilation, death does not come out as an abstract idea rendered into countable traces by means of mere post-mortem statistics. It exposes itself through the humankind’s *total abstraction* in death. The curious notion of abstraction (from the Latin verb *abstrahere*, to detach from somewhere) might be of importance in current discussions of necropolitics, in particular those related to ‘suicide bombing.’ As a mode of comparison, in the context of an ultimately modernist

(imperialist) painterly style of the twentieth century – abstract expressionism – the erasure of the figural subject-matter has been pointed out on numerous occasions. I invoke it here in order to suggest a polemical yet challenging argument about the suicidal ideation of disfiguration, namely: that Mark Rothko “trapped the most absolute violence” in his works as his suicide was an inevitable consequence of his rejection to represent human forms. Hence by committing suicide Rothko exercised “the most nihilistic of freedoms of expression: that of self-destruction” (Virilio 2003: 38).

If self-destruction, as pronounced by Virilio, is the most nihilistic of *freedoms of expression* (which is a highly debatable statement), the following question arises: can we understand the sovereign’s destruction of his or her subjects as the most nihilistic result of *their own* unfreedom of expression (i.e. the unfreedom of those who are constantly exposed to inevitable processes of destruction by sovereign power)? The notion of unfreedom is here borrowed from Mbembe and his discussion on the “the twin issues of death and terror on the one hand and terror and freedom on the other” (Mbembe 2003: 35). It is also applied to the exemplary context of Palestine and its two logics – that of survival and that of martyrdom – where, “in the confrontation between these two logics, terror is not on one side and death on the other. Terror and death are at the heart of each” (Mbembe 2003: 36). The sovereign power pertains to what Mbembe broadly describes as the logic of survival through killing the others. The opposite side (i.e., the victims of sovereign power) involves the logic of martyrdom through ‘suicide bombing.’ In his view (Mbembe 2003: 36),

the survivor is the one who, having stood in the path of death, knowing of many deaths and standing in the midst of the fallen, is still alive ... the one who has taken on a whole pack of enemies and managed not only to escape alive, but to kill his or her attackers. This is why, to a large extent, the lowest form of survival is killing.

In comparison to that, Mbembe (2003: 37) introduces the logic of martyrdom, where “the will to die is fused with the willingness to take the enemy with you, that is, with closing the door on the possibility of life for everyone. This logic seems contrary to another one, which consists in wishing to impose death on others while preserving one’s own life”. It is this wish – to impose death on others while preserving one’s own life – that, in my reading, identifies the logic of sovereignty with the logic of survival. It equally keeps the privileged position of sovereign’s politics as ‘life-politics’ (or biopolitics) driven by the sovereign imposition of death on the others, which allows me to think of biopolitics as the *survival politics* behind the death-mask of necropolitics:

Even more radically, in the logic of survival one’s horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. It is *the death of the other*, his or her physical presence as a corpse, that makes the survivor feel unique. And each enemy killed makes the survivor feel more secure. (Mbembe 2003: 36)

This is where the death of the other (and not of a sovereign) makes the survivor (the sovereign) feel unique and, in that sense, unitary: this is also why I see the power of sovereignty on the side of the logic of survival. What Mbembe develops here is his own articulation of the so-called body politics linked to a 'suicide bomber'. Susan K. Morrissey (2006), for example, defines this curious type of politics through the nodal points between suicide, subjectivity, (social) body, and (sovereign) power. From quite a 'rational' viewpoint, though useful for my treatment of corporeality and resistance, she "tells a specific story of suicide that centers upon its complex nexus with sovereignty. At its core, therefore, are questions about the making of modern subjectivity ... the affirmation of the rational, autonomous subject, who possesses innate human dignity" (Morrissey 2006: 8). Hence, she uses "the term 'body politic' in this sense: not as a direct analogy between the human body and the polity, but as a metaphor for the simultaneously political and material character of suicide, its fusion of symbolic representation into social action" (Morrissey 2006: 8). This regulation of social powers over the human body (what I call here the 'neco-coloniality of power') includes the opposite forces: the individual struggles against the sovereign control over one's own body or 'thanatopolitics'(Murray 2006) which can be applied to the practice of 'suicide bombing.' When writing about the logic of martyrdom as opposite to the logic of survival, Mbembe (2003: 36-37) maintains that "resistance and self-destruction are synonymous", and continues:

The logic of martyrdom proceeds along different lines. It is epitomized by the figure of the 'suicide bomber' ... The candidate for martyrdom transforms his or her body into a mask that hides the soon-to-be-detonated weapon. Unlike the tank or the missile that is clearly visible, the weapon carried in the shape of the body is invisible. Thus concealed, it forms part of the body. It is so intimately part of the body that at the time of detonation it annihilates the body of its bearer, who carries with it the bodies of others when it does not reduce them to pieces. The body does not simply conceal a weapon. The body is transformed into a weapon, not in a metaphorical sense but in the truly ballistic sense. In this instance, my death goes hand in hand with the death of the Other. Homicide and suicide are accomplished in the same act. And to a large extent, *resistance and self-destruction are synonymous*. To deal out death is therefore to reduce the other and oneself to the status of pieces of inert flash, scattered everywhere, and assembled with difficulty before the burial.

This reduction ('of the other and oneself to the status of pieces of inert flash') brings us back to my earlier account on the notion of *abstraction* in relation to corporeal disfiguration. It is worth noting, in this regard, that Mbembe himself (2003: 37) refers to the same notion in what he describes as the corporeal power and value:

In the logic of martyrdom, a new semiosis of killing emerges. It is not necessarily based on a relationship between form and matter ... the body here becomes the very uniform of the martyr. But the body as such is not only an object to protect against danger and death. The body in itself has neither power nor value. *The power and value of the body result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity.* In that sense, 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.

Once again: if self-destruction is the most nihilistic of freedoms of expression (in Virilio's argument over Rothko's death), can we understand the sovereign's destruction of his or her subjects as the most nihilistic result of *their* own unfreedom of expression? What is missing from such expression of unfreedom with respect to the governed subjects so they could, eventually, regain their lost status of freedom? How can they avoid an ongoing process of subjection to sovereign's will towards destruction if not by taking *their own right to exercise their own control over their own bodies* (including the bodies of those whom they must necessarily take along to death while 'laboring under the sign of the future')? To 'labor under the sign of the future' here means to engage in 'giving birth' to new life, in bringing the promise of new communal life through one's own death in self-sacrifice, i.e., through thanatopolitical forms of resistance against the necro-coloniality of power. In the conditions of ultimate unfreedom of expression, the lives of the governed are inevitably *already destroyed* under the sovereign power. If we think of populations' self-destruction reversely, as their own mode of escaping from sovereign's self-proclaimed right to destruction, we can also think of 'suicide bombing' as a way of subverting such a right for the sake of *dying for a cause* (instead of *being put to death*). Hence, from the perspective focused on necropolitical corporeality, the issue of body politics becomes crucial in understanding 'suicide bombing': not only as a mode of resistance (against the imposed unfreedom and the colonial sovereignty at large) but also as the form of subversion against 'death' itself – against the instrumentality of death in the hands of colonial necropower or the sovereign 'rights' to put populations to death according to his or her own will. This form of Palestinian resistance and subversion is here understood by what Stuart J. Murray (2006: 191) calls thanatopolitics – or "the use of death for mobilizing political life" on behalf of the weaker.

Conclusion: Thanatopolitics, or The Martyrs' Politics of Life against Necrocoloniality

Murray claims that biopolitics presupposes a hegemonic condition: it conceives of the superiority of life not only against death but, more importantly, against the *values* inherent to the concept of death. He, like Mbembe, understands the predominant 'work of life' against the episteme that the 'work of death' embodies in itself. To theorize death is thus to engage in a process of discursive reflection subjected to the dominance of life: centering on life and life-related issues presupposes an *exclusion* of implicitly or explicitly 'sacrilegious' discourses (including those on dying and death) from the normative or 'sacred' discourses on living. The experience of exclusion thus produced makes part of sovereignty's negation (and condemnation) of the self-sacrificial Other. In other words, death and discourses around death have been 'sacrificed' for the sake of life (and discourses on life) as an indispensable condition of contemporary biopolitical rationality since they 'threat' this rationality at its core.

This can be summarized from a narrow viewpoint where the 'suicide attacks' are perceived as "an *economic problem* when individuals invest their lives in killing and self-killing rather than in making themselves and their communities materially better off" (Harrison 2006: 1). From an ultimately materialist, capitalist logic of the world, the 'suicide bombers' are bringing harm to their communities since they do not, supposedly, contribute to their well-being. This is exactly due to the fact that the 'suicide bombers' cannot fit the biopolitical system of control – hence, they are threatening for the system itself. This, however, collides with the ways that the communities themselves see the inscription of their members into the well-being of the social to which they belong by opting for self-sacrificial acts. The 'suicide bombers' *do* contribute to the future communal life – on the grounds of their thanatopolitical strategies: first, by taking their own right to deal with their own lives and give them for the sake of resistance and freedom-struggle; second, by using their own deaths for a certain cause – to mobilize political life of their own communities – which conforms to the values of thanatopolitics as proposed by Murray.

Here the 'suicide bomber' also implies a death-inducing subject, the one representing the ultimate threat to the idea of life-security in the collective consciousness of today's neoliberal democracies. Contrary to any notion of 'communal life' (within the knowledge-world of the 'barbarian Others'), what the 'civilized' world recognizes under the label of a mere 'terrorist' is the troublesome abstraction of fear: it is materialized to the extent of the violent imposition of death on behalf of a 'suicide bomber' against the Imperial Being. This is why such a threatening 'Other' radically usurps not only the idea of stability, imposed by the life-controlling biopolitical governance, but the very

premises of the imperial logic of overall security and control. One simple account of that complies with the following rationale: this happens “because detonation removes the possibility that the perpetrator will be captured and interrogated [thus] suicide bombings can sow *fear* in civilian populations, thwart economic development, repulse non-governmental organizations, and provoke military retaliation” (Biggs 2012).

This implies – on either side of a hermeneutic cord, the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic one, respectively – a knot of thoughts that are able to instigate the strategic abstraction of massive fear, both inside and outside the mere production of human victims and physical violence on behalf of the ‘suicide bombers’. In that kind of feat of tightrope walking, between the two knots of interpretation, I have argued about the following: that an aforementioned interruption of the overall security logic of imperial sovereignty results principally from the very attack against the ‘economy of reasoning’ in which two different sides operate. In their going ‘against the West,’ so-called suicide bombers dare to touch the supposedly untouchable and unquestionable rationality of the imperial world – its outspoken privileging of life’s sacredness or “the Western conception of rational sovereignty with which biopolitics is allied” (Murray 2006: 195). The ‘suicide bomber’ manages to fulfill one unimaginable task: “While the resistance of the suicide bomber is sparked within the circuits of power, this resistance also *approaches the absolute*: he or she destroys the very condition of possibility for biopolitical regulation and control” (Murray 2006: 195). Furthermore:

While suicide bombing is destructive, while it is clearly a force of negation, I argue that we must also understand this act as *productive* – it produces something, it has independent rhetorical effects which are not easily comprehended within a biopolitical logic. These effects impinge on everyday life and extend beyond war zones; their symbolic valence is unable to be contained or explained by our current moral norms or codes. How do we understand such death, the homicide-suicide, when it is explicitly carried out as a political act, an ultimate – and productive – act of refusal? What is ‘produced’? And how might this prompt us to reconsider our own faith in those liberal-humanist notions of the subject that have founded ethics and politics for so long? (Murray 2006: 195)

Murray (2006: 194) is, evidently, openly critical toward the hegemonic rationality of the biopolitical logic that “impose[s] some *colonizing vision* of causality or reason [motivating the suicide bomber]”. He enthusiastically goes on in discussing the issue by foreseeing yet unexplored horizons of our political life, through our rethinking of *death-giving-life* in the framework of thanatopolitics:

I address the effects of suicide bombing, and I read them as rhetorical, as effects which produce a particular response, a response that cannot be grasped through biopolitical reason alone. The hope is both to avoid the impasse imposed by the sovereign subject of liberal humanism, bequeathed to us from modern

Enlightenment philosophy, and (at the other end of the spectrum) a postmodern nihilism that seemingly destroys the ethic of responsibility that is traditionally aligned with sovereign agency. Rather than terminating in a well-worn discourse that would blindly condemn these acts by reaffirming the sacred value of (biopolitical) life, I argue that *a discourse on death will both challenge the hegemony of biopolitical reason while opening onto a renewed way of conceiving what is sacred in political life today.* (Murray 2006: 195)

He examines 'suicide bombers' from an epistemic perspective: as a category of knowledge differently positioned with regard to hegemonic views and through the lenses of what he calls thanatopolitics. Hence, the Palestinian thanatopolitics in particular gives us a novel possibility to understand the constructive and productive forces behind the sacrificial deaths, bringing them closer to 'life' than to 'death' itself. It demands the ways of looking at reality outside of the dominant logic of the capitalist epistemic sovereignty and its necro-colonial matrix of power operating behind the mask of so-called biopolitics. To oppose the hegemonic necro-colonial reason while using 'death for mobilizing political life' contributes to our understanding of the world at large – from the position rooted in the counter-hegemonic epistemologies. This is but a way to oppose the instrumentality of death for the sake of imperialist rationality and to propose a counter-hegemonic way of dealing with the sense of communal life: to invert the logic of necro-coloniality of the stronger side towards the logic of thanatopolitics in favor of the weaker side. Under conditions of permanent exposure to the imperialist 'terror of life' and its extreme forms of social fascism, the experience of thanatopolitics becomes the matter of *other kinds of life*: a collective response shared among the Palestinians through individual, self-sacrificial deaths as a radical form of anti-colonial struggle for the life worth living in the future to come.

Chapter 11

Is Violence a Cultural Category? The Epistemological Gaps of ‘Suicide Bombing’

Is violence a cultural category? Following the arguments exposed in the previous chapters, I am adding another, smaller segment of inquiry hereby in order to pose this additional yet polemical question. How should we understand the forms of violence as properly ‘cultural’? To approach potential responses to these questions, I establish a virtual dialogue with Neil L. Whitehead and Nasser Abufarha (2008) in order to come closer to their own perspectives on the issue of self-sacrifice and, especially, how it becomes informed by the *internal* experience of Palestinian anti-colonial struggles under occupation.

In their article entitled “Suicide, Violence, and Cultural Conceptions of Martyrdom in Palestine” the two authors center on the specificity of so-called ‘suicide bombing’. They treat it as a subject squeezed in the epistemological gap between two discourses, the ‘Western’ and the ‘Palestinian’. The starting point of their argument is that “the difference in the terminology of describing the act as ‘suicide’ in Western discourse – while it is referenced as ‘martyrdom’ in Palestine– signals the width of this epistemological gap” (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 395). Accordingly, they take a critical distance from “much of the scholarly discourse on ‘suicide terrorism’ [that] focuses on the *political* strategies of these acts of violence and fails to consider their *cultural* dimensions” (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 395; my emphasis). What they actually imply by ‘cultural dimensions’ refers to so-called ‘suicide missions’ as “forms of violence conceived in cultural forms” (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 395). The authors state that “the idea of violence in modern Western thinking indicates that orthodox solutions or responses to the problem of violence can only envisage its suppression as a behavior inappropriate or misjudged to its ends” (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 396), which is why we are supposed to unconditionally accept that “at its core violence represents the *breakdown of meaning*, the *advent of the irrational* and the commission of

physical harm” (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 395; my emphasis). They, however, conceive of the notion of ‘violence’ on different grounds.

Given these introductory notes, my first question is as follows: if ‘suicide bombing’ is a form of violence –as it doubtlessly is– does it mean that its execution, in practice, must equate with ‘irrational senselessness’ (the breakdown of meaning and the advent of the irrational, as proposed above) in a way that fits the idea of violence according to the dominant epistemological world-system, that is, the modern *Western* thinking (in Whitehead and Abufarha’s own terms)? Similarly, are we allowed to conceive of violence as a *rational* form of behavior that, instead of representing the breakdown of meaning, can be imbued with *certain kind of sense* (presumably even ‘cultural’) and how does this possibly ‘new’ rationality operate when situated in the very particular context of contemporary Palestine? This question obliges us not to break away from our ideas of ‘meaning’ but from our normative assumptions, usually taken for granted, about the meaninglessness of violence. Whitehead and Abufarha add to the discussion by posing a question that might seem quite controversial at first instance yet it resonates with Murray’s notion of thanatopolitics: “What if violence is considered ennobling, redeeming, and *necessary to the continuation of life itself?*” (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008; my emphasis). This is not a rhetorical question. In fact, it highlights the need to reposition our knowledge about the ‘codes of violent practice’ and the normative ways we look at ‘death itself’ from within the epistemological position of the global imperial North. With regard to the last question –and the link between ‘violence’ and the ‘continuation of life itself’ suggested therein– I assume the following: to pose such a question is to try and have “the historical importance of colonialism and neocolonialism in establishing certain codes of violent practice” more profoundly and properly understood. Why is this so? Because these codes touch the very essence of “meaningful and constructive human living” in the contexts such as contemporary Palestine, where the notion of ‘life’ is as contested as the notion of ‘Palestine’ itself. As Whitehead and Abufarha suggest, “the problem is 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).

Given this suggestion, I cannot but recall the words of Ghassan Hage –further specified by Nouri Gana (2008: 30)– who maintains that he is “certainly more comfortable with absolutely condemning the living conditions that make people into suicide bombers than with absolutely condemning suicide bombers as such” (Hage 2003: 67). Hence, I assume that the idea of anti-colonial struggle –in the Palestinian context under conditions defined as ‘a certain kind of madness’ (Mbembe 2003: 39)– manifests itself in the (violent) forms of engagement that intend to confront and oppose such conditions in order to change them for the better. The opposition itself is hereby

understood as a twofold task: to resist the effects of colonial 'madness' and to produce the desirable counter-effects in response to them, without accepting them as absolutely given. The violent behavior, as an expression of cultural behavior, is here not to be accounted for as responsible for generating an absolute negation (the negation of sense coming through the absence or destruction of any meaning). Instead, it is to be understood in terms of both destructive and constructive *forms of production* (including the production of meaning where 'death' might equate with new form of 'life'). Working 'towards life' through certain forms of death –under given colonial conditions– here equates with working towards some other possible forms of life (outside of the colonial matrix of power) informed by the desire towards the 'meaningful human living' – not the form of social existence proper to the 'living dead'. Drawing on Whitehead and Abufarha, I approach these forms of behavior as *cultural manifestations of violence* and as *violent manifestations of culture*. Though they manifest themselves through what the modern Western thinking conceives as 'violence', they also organize the Palestinian ambition to overcome the destruction proper to death itself. They also oppose the conditions of 'living dead', *imposed by the necrocolonial sovereign power*, while working towards the future construction proper to (decent) human life of the future Palestinian community. Evidently, this cannot but be done by means of anti-colonial liberation struggle – which is, at the same time, the struggle against living one's life as an 'already dead' (Cazdyn 2012) or a 'living dead' (Mbembe 2003). It means that one's own life, lost in the act of self-sacrifice (together with the lives of one's adversaries, attacked in the process), contributes to the idea of *new life* through the work of *self-engineered death*. The loss of life (for real) also works against the kind of 'life' constantly exposed to *sovereign death-politics under conditions of 'spatial regulation' and the colonization process at large* (by which I imply the colonization of one's life and death as well as one's right to decent life and death, beyond the mere issue of territorial occupation).

To examine the matters of life and death under such conditions, and beyond the normative conception of life-versus-death matrix, means to overcome the limits of modern Western thinking and its epistemic sovereignty. These forms of self-engineered lethal behavior are thus able to transgress the boundaries imposed by the epistemic sovereignty that considers 'death' as the ultimate counter-force against 'life'. 'Death itself' may be conceived differently (as a form of 'new life', for instance) whenever the sanctity of 'life' remains in the hands of colonial authority and its *necro-colonial power regime*, which exercises control over populations through their inherent condition to be mortal. If the necro-colonial ruling authority and its instrumentalization of death for its own purposes can be taken for granted (if we accept that it must 'absolutely' prevail – which, unfortunately, seems to be the case due to the international community's passivity regarding the Palestinian issue), then it also implies the following: that human life is exposed to death and subjected to necropower to the extent that the subjugated populations (in this case: the Palestinians) have less and less control over their own

lives. In this sense, 'to die' under the necro-colonial conditions means to 'give oneself' to the necropower (to accept the sovereign's self-proclaimed rights to decide about who must be killed and who may survive) and to give up anti-colonial resistance in the process. To oppose the rationality behind such sovereign decisions (in this case: by means of self-sacrificial resistance or 'suicide bombing') means to oppose the external control over death (managed by the powerful, the sovereign, the necro-colonial authority) and to bring one's own death back to the internal or self-engineered form of control: to claim one's own right to new forms of future life (through 'death') and to do so *in defense* – not only by defending oneself from the necro-colonial sovereignty as such, but by defending one's own right to personal death from the overwhelming presence of death, imposed over the subjugated populations by sovereignty itself. This, finally, means to defend one's own right to imagine the new life: not for oneself, but for one's own community – in this case, again, the Palestinians or, more precisely, the generations of new-born Palestinians to come in the future).

One of the ways –for many reasons radical– to resist the sovereign rationality which brings death to the people as it wills is to engage in the process of self-engineered death (self-sacrifice, for short). If the sovereign decisions can bring death to the Palestinian population according to the ruling 'ethical' code of colonial rationality, the resistant response to such decisions must lie in oppositional forms to such 'ethics' and such 'rationality'. To perform a self-engineered death is not the same as to be brought to death by the sovereign will: instead, it is to oppose the ways that one's own body has to undergo in its constant exposure to necropower by opposing 'death' as a unique privilege of the sovereign's decision-making. Conversely, it means to propose *other forms of life* as a counter-force against the idea of 'death' brought forward by the sovereign will: such proposals are enacted through self-engineered forms of 'dying for a cause' (be it individual or collective) which –unlike the necropolitical instrumentalization of death for the sovereign's own 'cause' (i.e., the *necropolitical sacrifice of the powerless*)– resonates with another, *thanatopolitical causality of self-sacrifice*.

Hence, to work out the processes of 'construction of life' is to work out the solutions of future life for the community threatened by the highest possible risk of extinction under the permanent status of the 'living dead'. Constructing future collective life over one's self-sacrifice means, first and foremost, to give away one's own life (the highest imaginable stake, according to the Western rationality). This, in turn, means to detach oneself in protest (in terms of *radical withdrawal*) from the living conditions by which an individual has already been denigrated to the status of a 'living dead'. Such denigration is due to the ruling necro-colonial politics of segregation, whereas the colonized populations (such as contemporary Palestinians) belong, unwillingly, to the lowest rank of humankind, bordering with the notion of non-humans or sub-humans. To opt for self-sacrifice as an expression of radical withdrawal one needs to be entrenched in a specific *communal* network whose long-term goals are fixed under exceptional *colonial*

conditions. If such conditions, where both legal and ethical norms are permanently suspended in order to create the state of exception, as Mbembe argues (2003: 12-13), could be allowed regardless of violence produced by the necro-colonial power therein, I assume that such an 'exception' itself must be ruled by some very 'exceptional' *cultural* norms. Its specificity consists in the irrevocable causality, by which the sovereign colonial 'culture of death' (the necropolitics in charge of subjecting and administering the so-called lives of the colonized by making them 'already dead') provokes the anti-colonial 'culture of self-engineered resistance' (the so-called suicide bombing). In this context, I treat the latter as an exemplary form of anti-colonial 'suicide culture' of our times.

The fact that self-sacrifices could be *culturally* defined through 'suicidal violence' is relative to the contested rationality on behalf of the Palestinian 'suicide bombers'. This rationality –otherwise understood as 'meaningless irrationality', which is meant to be nothing but 'absolutely condemned' (as pointed out by Hage 2003: 67)– pertains to the system of meaning supportive of such processes as properly cultural. They are sanctioned by a defined community (Palestinians) whose physical, political and ethical existence depends, to a large extent and under given conditions, upon these cultural forms as forms of survival. Here I refer to the processes that encompass and bring together the ideas and actuality of death and life in what is understood as the constructive relation to "local knowledge and historical memory" (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 395). Also, I understand it in a way that the so-called suicide terrorism can be approached as "a meaningful cultural expression, whatever its senselessness and destructive potential ...; [it] entails a questioning of assumptions as to the self-evident nature of 'violence,' how issues of legitimacy critically influence understanding of violent acts, and how such acts themselves are often *complex social performances expressive of key cultural values*" (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 397).

Accordingly, behaviors recognized as 'violent' (and life-threatening indeed) can be more than only that: their social and performative complexity, as postulated here, also legitimizes the function of these acts as vehicles of certain cultural values on the grounds of their *self-defensive* causality. Being inseparable from the categories of space (locality) and time (history), the collective knowledge and memory about such forms of behavior are not 'culturally given'; rather, they partake –in the given conditions– towards the processes *through which* they actually construct their own cultural dimensions. They should not necessarily be understood as *political* or *religious* strategies (from either 'Western' or 'Palestinian' perspective, respectively). Instead, as Whitehead and Abufarha (2008: 395) insist, they should be accounted for as *cultural forms pertaining to a specific locality* (Palestine) *in its specific historical conditions* (colonial occupation, ongoing not only since 1948, but also before, under the British mandate over Palestine) so that their cultural dimensions could be accounted for as the "key to understanding these acts".

An immediate question may be: why do we need *any* key to understanding these acts otherwise than the mere ‘acts of violence’ that are ultimately destructive and ‘universally’ unwelcome? Or, why do we need *another* key to understand these acts differently, in the sense of adding to already existent explanations around ‘suicide attacks’ as the forms of politically and/or religiously motivated violence? Finally, why do we need yet another interpretation to approach them as ‘cultural’ (instead of merely political and/or religious) forms of violence? Whitehead and Abufarha have an answer: since these forms of violence are “poorly understood by Western research and reporters” (due to the fact that the majority of them, including the academics, contribute to the formation of normative discourses about what is commonly recognized as ‘suicide terrorism’) a distinctively cultural approach needs to be addressed (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 395). They indicate the persistence of *violent epistemic conditions* within which ‘violence as a cultural category’ simply does not fit. Accordingly, my question is as follows: is it a mere coincidence that our general misunderstanding of ‘suicide bombers’ collapses into ‘absolute condemnation’ (due to our dependence upon the ‘universal’ Western rationality) or could it be that such a collapse also corresponds to something else, to some other possible reasons for misunderstanding?

In order to address this ‘something else’ Whitehead and Abufarha depart from something as explicit and communicative as language itself. For them, the linguistic constructions of knowledge and the use of language in different epistemological contexts represent the very first step to be considered in their accounts of culture and violence as mutually intertwining categories. This is all the more significant if epistemological gaps between the ‘universal’ treatment of violence, on the one hand, and its ‘exceptional’ variations (such as ‘suicide bombing’), on the other hand, are to be addressed as the critical spots of contestation: the points where the major problem around the (cultural) forms of violence is to be situated whenever they are differently interpreted and, therefore, differently understood, either correctly or poorly. Say Whitehead and Abufarha (2008: 395):

The difference in the terminology of describing the act as ‘suicide’ in Western discourse while it is referenced as ‘martyrdom’ in Palestine signals the width of this epistemological gap. These acts are far more complex than a desperate ‘suicide’ or a unstoppable desire to ‘kill the enemy.’ Through their performance and wider representation such acts generate *collective cultural conceptions* among Palestinians and at the same time continue *a violent dialogue* with the Israeli state.

The use of language is here crucial to understand the ‘collective cultural conceptions’ (of one entity) to establish and maintain a ‘violent dialogue’ (with another entity). Language here takes part in the construction of cultural dimensions of what is called ‘suicide terrorism’ by the Western (hegemonic) discourse – while serving as our “key to

understanding how these acts gain popular support and become potential individual motivations” for what is called ‘martyrdom’ by the Palestinian counter-discourse (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 395). In what follows, I will consider in more detail the linguistic aspects of this epistemological and discursive gap.

Whitehead and Abufarha discuss the very nature of Palestinian ‘suicide bombing’ through the process of naming, i.e., the language used to describe and announce the phenomena related to the acts of “exploding one’s own body in order to accomplish the mission” (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 397). The local Arabic language (as spoken in Palestine itself) is one of the tools to interpret the complexity of meaning revolving around these acts and their protagonists. Let us assume that the Arabic terms (instead of those in other languages) can help us identify both the acts and the protagonists as ‘native’ signifiers of the practice otherwise named (in English, for example) ‘missions’, ‘bombings’, ‘operations’, ‘attacks’ or ‘terrorism’ – all of them being prefixed by the term ‘suicide’. Let us temporarily discard such terms and focus on their counter-parts in Arabic. When doing so, Whitehead and Abufarha pay special attention to their relatively recent historical roots that go back to the cross-border actions of the 1960s and 1970s (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 397) and to the nuances of meaning present in terms such as *‘amaliyat istishadiya* (martyrdom operations) and *a‘maliyat fida’iyah* (self-sacrifice operations). Although closely connected and usually taken for granted as identical, these two conceptions –martyrdom and self-sacrifice– are *not one and the same*. There is a line of difference issuing from either religious or secular connotation and this line is here being clearly drawn in relation to two forms of naming. According to Whitehead and Abufarha (2008: 397), we can distinguish the acts in their predominantly *religious* (Islamic) sense as ‘martyrdom operations’ (as Hamas described it in Spring 1994) and the acts in their predominantly *secular* sense as ‘self-sacrifice operations’ (as pronounced by some local media, in their own way of interpreting the same Hamas’ acts). In that sense, two terms are emphasized: *istishhad* (martyrdom) and *fidai’i* (sacrificer). Both were used to address the same act, “operations which involved strapping the body of the *mission carrier* with explosives, who then exploded his/her own body to accomplish the mission” (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 397). The authors make it clear that the concept of *fidai’i*, with its exclusively secular connotation, is no more in use; it belongs to history and has been replaced by another term, *istishhad*:

The *fidai’i* was dominant in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) resistance in cross-border operations of the 1960s and 1970s where the *fidai’i* had to sacrifice self to accomplish a mission because rarely did they come back. Today, *istishhad* is the most frequently used term to refer to acts of sacrifice in the Palestinian resistance and is used by Islamic, secular, and Marxist groups alike. (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 397)

It is also worth noting that *istishad*, by replacing the earlier concept of *fida'i*, has become the predominant contemporary concept for the acts of 'self-sacrifice as martyrdom' (as I understand it from the previously given argument). This new version of the old concept has gained an expanded, polyvalent scope of meaning, characterized by the following aspect: it overcomes its previous, exclusively religious connotation, while it also overcomes the gap (issuing from such a connotation) between the religious and secular meanings of the term. In other words, the mutual recognition of *istishad* by differently connoted groups (secular and religious) has symbolically contributed to the process of their unification: the same struggle deserves the same name (though a significant difference still exists regarding the overall methods and objectives of resistance on behalf of both sides, respectively).

Within the largely conceived concept of *istishad* (the act/ mission/ operation), two terms describing its protagonists (mission carriers) are of crucial importance for our understanding of contemporary Palestinian resistance as a perpetuation of operations involving corporeal explosions. These two terms are *istishadi* and *shahid*. An essential difference between them (in terms of their proactive and passive implications, respectively), does not only delineate a borderline between the interpretations of 'dying in martyrdom' either as heroism or victimization, but something much more significant. In *istishadi* it is precisely through the idea of *intentionality* of dying (a heroic death in martyrdom) instead of falling victims ("at the hands of oppressive occupation") that a possibility of overcoming death becomes part of a certain cultural pattern, while simultaneously allowing a 'new life' to emerge - through death. This is specifically enforced by a wider popular belief in the construction of life through destruction of self in *istishadi*'s death. Consequently, this act has become accepted and glorified as 'an act of heroism' since the beginning of the twenty-first century, during the second intifada (2000-2005), when "a new discourse of *istishadiyeen* (martyrous ones) has been articulated in a way that highlights the *intentionality* of martyrdom as an act of heroism" (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 398; my emphasis).

At this point, it is important to properly understand the meaning of 'intentionality' (as constitutive of the resistance exercised exactly during the second intifada and not before) rather than only the meaning of 'heroism' within the act of martyrdom. Why is the notion of intentionality so significant here? Because it makes a clear and radical response to the very dynamics of political conditions in which Palestinians found themselves after the first intifada. As a response (a communicative tool), it has meanwhile become part of communicative actions or a vehicle of 'communicative suffering' (to borrow again Biggs' terminology). This is based exclusively on *self-reliance*: it excludes the earlier forms of reliance "on the international community's positive and meaningful involvement in the Palestinian question at the official political level" (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 398). This kind of reorientation is based upon 'self-reliance' as a determined voluntary form of struggle that is no more externalized

(towards the world in expectations of the international support against occupation) but *localized* (towards the [Israeli] enemy) and *internalized* (i.e., self-organized within the Palestinian community itself, without much expectations of *concrete solidarity* from the international community, as it used to be before). By 'concrete solidarity' I here imply the constructive international efforts to have Palestinian rights restored, as Whitehead and Abufarha (2008: 398) point out:

The second intifada emphasizes self-reliance, since Palestinians have given up on the international community's positive and meaningful involvement in the Palestinian question at the official political level. The move in the second intifada is to disregard the international community and further challenge the established international order and its rules. The international order tends to be understood by Palestinians as merely curbing Palestinian resistance while ignoring the *restoration of Palestinian rights and Israel's violations*. These political dynamics have resulted in the *reconceptualization of the resistance* to challenge Israel in Palestine through direct engagement with Israel and Israelis, thereby relying on their own resources to achieve their political aspirations.

Self-reliance became a new model by which the 'violent dialogue' through martyrdom began to aim at fulfilling a role structured differently than the one imagined during the first intifada. From a more insightful perspective, this is how Whitehead and Abufarha describe the differences:

The term *istishhadi*, which is now used in particular for those who carry out the martyrdom operation or 'suicide bombing,' is new and represents the equivalent of the *fidai* as the one who performs the self-sacrifice. The *shahid* (martyr) became the icon of the first *intifada* (uprising) of 1987-1992. The concept of the *shahid* –as a victim who falls at the hands of oppressive occupation– was in line with the political dynamics of the time in lobbying the international community to support Palestinians' quest for freedom. The first intifada primarily banked on the international community and global powers placing pressure on Israel to reverse its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and addressing other issues of conflict with Israel, such as the fate of Palestinian refugees. The main intended audience of the resistance was the international community. In contrast, when the second intifada broke out in September 2000, Palestinians directed their actions primarily at Israel and international, Israeli public, as well as inward at their own society. (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 398)

The 'reconceptualization of the resistance' involves reorientation from a previous (external) type of Palestinian reliance upon the international community's assistance, towards a new (internal) type of Palestinian reliance upon themselves, disregarding the international community while keeping their eye onto their enemies directly. This offers a possible key element to distinguish between two types of 'suicidal' protagonists (*shahids* and *istishhadi*, respectively) as they belong to two consecutive intifadas. This

also confirms that the process of naming either of those two options has not been a matter of simplified counter-identification of Palestinian resistance fighters with regard to the hegemonic Western terminology. Instead, the names, the process of naming and the meaning embedded within them disclose the dynamics of popular, social, cultural and political identifications. Such identifications have, most importantly, disclosed the network of impacts upon which the question of Palestinian ‘suicide bombing’ (in the framework offered by Whitehead and Abufarha) could be resolved as a twofold issue.

The first aspect centers on the notion of intentionality or voluntariness of acts. Here the meaning has to be ‘translated’ from the victimizing concept of *shahid* (characteristic of the first intifada) into the heroic concept of *istishhadi*. This legitimizes the latter’s entrance, in a more prominent manner, into the Palestinian ‘repertoire of protest’. Here the protest becomes a decisive concept of defensive struggle, based on self-reliance and intentional self-sacrifice (not on victimization and passive acceptance of death). The second aspect centers on the international community through its irresponsibility and incapacity to provide the necessary support for the Palestinians. This encompasses its lack of intentions (the lack of ‘intentionality,’ so to say) to engage not only in supporting the ‘Palestinian resistance’ (whatever this expression might mean to a Western man), but the Palestinian ultimate quest for the restoration of their elementary human rights, dignity and freedom: their quest to be acknowledged as properly *human beings* and to regain their status of human beings – under conditions where they have been treated, so far, as the ‘living dead’, non-humans or sub-humans. This also challenges the competency and legitimacy of modern Western thinking, which goes on in perpetuating the sovereign and ‘moralizing’ rationality of ‘absolute condemnation’ with respect to Palestinian ‘suicide bombers’ (i.e., those whose right to basic human rights and freedom has, somehow, escaped the ‘democratic’ horizons of Western powers and the historical role that the United Nations, for instance, are supposed to play in that regard).

On the other hand, voluntary victimization is intrinsic to the contemporary Palestinian martyrology: yet, what gives sense to the act of ‘dying in martyrdom’ is its pronounced *living* dimension as opposed to mere death. Since the act of *istishhadi* as a cultural act (unlike its political and military instrumentalization) is what makes its “image contain more life than that of the *shahid*”, it is ‘life’ and not ‘death’ that constitutes ‘dying in martyrdom’ (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 398). Hence it is the *meaningfulness* of life (and not the ‘meaninglessness’ of death) that, in the wider popular perspective, endows *istishhad* with its cultural capacities:

While the notion of *shahid* or martyr implies victimization, the *istishhadi* (martyrous one) is a proactive notion that emphasizes the heroism in the act of sacrifice over the victimization that is also part of the act. And since the *istishhadi* is proactive, the new term also makes the image of the *istishhadi* contain more life than that of the *shahid*. The *istishhad* (dying in martyrdom) has developed not only into a military and political strategy for groups and individuals but also into a

cultural act packed with wider popular meanings. At the same time it is primarily those meanings embedded in the act that give it its political and military instrumental capacities. (Whitehead and Abufarha 2008: 398)

The fact that 'it is primarily those *popular* meanings embedded in the *cultural* act that give it its political and military instrumental capacities' resonates with new possibilities of situating the notion of life –as a foreseen consequence of 'dying in martyrdom'– into a particular discursive field. This discursive field is sanctioned precisely by the community (the Palestinians themselves) and their collective memory, embedded in their witnessing of martyrdom as a manifestation of counter-power of 'life' through self-engineered death (in contrast with the power of death on behalf of the colonial necropower). According to Whitehead and Abufarha, it is this –popular, communal, social– approval of the meanings embedded in the act of *istishhad* that legitimizes further applicability or instrumentalization of the act in its political and military sense (and not the other way round), which also endows the act itself with its properly *cultural* –popular, communal, social– meaning in the broadest sense of the term.

So, is violence a cultural category? Evidently, for Whitehead and Abufarha it is. In the next chapter I will consider some visual elements of Palestinian self-sacrificial resistance in order to confirm their thanatopolitical dimension and give another positive answer to this question from a differently articulated position. Staying with the concept of death in relation to anti-colonial practices of self-sacrifice as experienced in contemporary Palestine, I will re-position my subject of inquiry vis-à-vis the hegemonic visions that condemn such practices when materialized into images. This inquiry centers on documentary photography and its public display in a museum, while the exhibition project *Phantom Home* by Ahlam Shibli and her most recent series of photographs ("Death") serves as my case study. Produced in the space where the notion of 'life' is as contested as the notion of 'Palestine' itself, these photographs were displayed throughout the year 2013 in three European institutions of contemporary art, not without any external opposition. While challenging our understanding of what it means to strive towards a meaningful and constructive human life under the ongoing necro-colonial regime of power, I argue that these images, when exposed to the transnational audiences, partake in the many and varied forms of global anti-colonial resistance: not only against the specific colonial sovereignty but against the imperial epistemic universe at large. Moreover, they implicate our own gaze into a complex matrix of power where the image character of the ethical probes our ideas of what it means to be *human* nowadays.

Chapter 12

Contested and Condemned: On Decoloniality and Counter-Hegemonic Visuality in Ahlam Shibli's "Death"

The new epistemic community being called for is necessary to name and deal with what is claimed to be a new object in the world of liberal democracy - terror.
Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (2007: 29)

How to turn the empirical world under the contemporary colonial occupation into an object of (visual) knowledge? This is the central question of the present article. "To live under late modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of being-in-pain" (Mbembe 2003: 39), "the *death-worlds*" created in the name of imperialist necro-coloniality, or "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003: 40). If the question is how to materialize such an existence into images, this article examines the ways of dealing with our right to look at the forms of life-and-death struggle in the zones of human "experiences of unfreedom" where "terror is a defining feature of both slave and late-modern colonial regimes" (Mbembe 2003: 38-39) described as follows:

Fortified structures, military posts, and roadblocks everywhere; buildings that bring back painful memories of humiliation, interrogations, and beatings; curfews that imprison hundreds of thousands in their cramped homes every night from dusk to daybreak; soldiers patrolling the unlit streets, frightened by their own shadows; children blinded by rubber bullets; parents shamed and beaten in front of their families; soldiers urinating on fences, shooting at the rooftop water tanks just for fun, chanting loud offensive slogans, pounding on fragile tin doors to frighten the children, confiscating papers, or dumping garbage in the middle of a residential neighborhood; border guards kicking over a vegetable stand or closing

borders at whim; bones broken; shootings and fatalities – *a certain kind of madness*.
(Mbembe 2003: 39)

In his “Necropolitics” Achille Mbembe gives but an indication about conditions where the smell of urine mixes with the bitter feeling of life under the most aberrant forms of human living one could imagine at the dawn of the third millennium – in contemporary Palestine. For him, living in such an environment means to experience a permanent condition of ‘being in pain’ (or a certain kind of madness). For me, it contributes to my thesis that the ultimate expression of liberating visions resides in one’s *right to look* across the imposed frontiers of colonial unfreedom. Hence, this paper is but an invitation to take a liberating viewpoint against prohibitions around the visual concept of Palestinian ‘suicide bombers’ in order to move the moralizing, hegemonic hermeneutic code of ‘unthinkability’ beyond the limits of mere condemnation. I intend to elaborate on ‘an account of suicide bombing as a narrative visualization’ in order to convert “the ‘anti-narrative’ nature of terrorism into a condition of narrativity” (Gana 2008: 23). As the Tunisian literary scholar Nouri Gana proposes (2008: 36), such a conversion is necessary in order

to inscribe the contemplative faculty in place of the spectacle of terror-ism, and, in turn, set in motion an imaginative and empathizing process through which *viewers can determine for themselves* the degree to which they might be unwittingly involved as subjects in historical circumstances that might not initially qualify even as objects of remote concern for them.

This chapter works towards such an aim: it calls for “*the new epistemic community* [...] to name and deal with what is claimed to be a new object in the world of liberal democracy – terror” (Asad 2007: 29; my emphasis).

The Samson Option, ‘Suicidal Resistance’ and Countervisuality

If one is determined to define ‘suicidal resistance’ as a form of violence that indicates an aberration, then “there must be conditions aberrant enough to precipitate it” (Gana 2008: 30). When Gana analyzes Hany Abu-Assad’s *Paradise Now*, “a contemporary Palestinian film [that] treads the fine line between interpreting and understanding suicide bombing, ensuring that these independent complementary and simultaneous hermeneutic tasks do not slither accidentally into the moral abyss of justifying ‘terror-ism’” (Gana 2008: 21), he argues that “the film makes use of cinematic conventions (e.g., the thriller genre and camera malfunctions) *in order to undo the spectacle of terrorism and to articulate a more nuanced and challenging narrative of Palestinian nationhood*” – he describes

it as 'a narrative that has been so far both impermissible and/or readily discreditable by the hegemonic system of Israeli occupation' (Gana 2008: 21; my emphasis).

Following Gana, one cannot but recall a farewell speech of the film's main protagonist (Sayeed) in his last confession. Chosen for a 'suicide mission', he describes his personal viewpoints on the most humiliating conditions in which Palestinian self-sacrificial practice occurs as a desperate call to justice, discredited both by colonizers and the world at large:

A life without dignity is worthless. Especially when it reminds you, day after day, of humiliation and weakness. *And the world watches cowardly, indifferently.* If you are all alone, faced with this oppression, you have to find a way to stop the injustice. They must understand that if there's no security for us, there'll be none for them either. It's not about power. Their power doesn't help them. I tried to deliver this message to them but I couldn't find another way. Even worse, they've convinced the world and themselves that they are the victims. How can that be? How can the occupier be the victim? *If they take on the role of oppressor and victim then I have no other choice but to also be a victim and a murderer as well.*¹

Better than anything else, his words demonstrate the conditions under which the Palestinians have been forced to take radical and, to a certain extent, only available measure –their own bodies– against the unjust modes of living imposed by the colonial occupation: "We have nothing left to fight back with except our bodies" (Gana 2008: 30). If the only answer to the miserable forms of life under the threat of a nuclear bomb (in the Israeli hands) is in the counter-threat of a human bomb (in the Palestinian bodies), then the 'suicidal' logic of the given conflict needs to be perceived from at least two mirroring sides. As Gana contends, both are invested in the exchange of 'suicidal capital'. On the one hand, this concerns the sovereignty of the modern (nuclear) nation-state and its congruence with its suicidal/self-annihilating foundation: "its nuclear 'new-clarity,' invincibility, and deterrence capabilities" (Gana 2008: 31). Accordingly, "the very idea that a few countries, including Israel, have a nuclear arsenal capable of permanently damaging, if not terminating, life on earth should alert us sufficiently enough to the suicidal foundation of the modern state – that is, to the consensual fantasy of the modern state with its annihilation" (Gana 2008: 30). On the other hand, the 'suicidal' resistance through self-sacrificial operations is intensified by "the refusal to countenance the integrity of the struggle against occupation, namely, its claims to narrative self-determination": this, in turn, creates "the war on terror campaign and the construction of suicide-bomber-monster" (Gana 2008: 31).

¹ See *Paradise Now*, a 2005 film directed by Hany Abu-Assad.

Gana does not see a radical difference between these two sides but, on the contrary, a situation of veritable proximity – a kind of perverse and dehumanizing twinning or mirroring insofar as the suicide bombing “enacts and duplicates the very suicidal foundation of the modern state, bringing about in the theater of the real its disavowed thanatophilic fantasy” (Gana 2008: 31). Supporting his own arguments further, Gana refers to an Israeli anti-Zionist activist Michel Warschawski: he explains “the suicidal phenomenon in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [as] reminiscent of the biblical story of Samson who, when humiliated by the Philistines, knocks down the pillars of their house, proclaiming ‘Let me die with the Philistines,’ and kills himself along with his enemies” (Gana 2008: 30). Similarly, “this parable of Samson recurs regularly today in Israeli politics under [...] ‘the Samson option,’ suggesting that ‘Israel’s course is unquestionably suicidal’ in that, *now that it presumably has the nuclear bomb, it is ready to destroy itself together with those who aim to destroy it*”(Warschawski 2004: 99, quoted in Gana 2008: 30; my emphasis).

What is the status of vision in the context of this theatre of the real? I argue that the image-making operations are capable of bringing about a certain experience of liberation: they play their role on the historical stage as a powerful aesthetic and political tool that aims at mobilizing the visual vocabulary of freedom for the sake of political change, most notably on behalf of the weaker. If the experience of suffering under oppression must be publicly exposed, this becomes possible insofar as such a display aims at defending the oppressed narratives and subjects from ongoing pressures of contestation and condemnation, imposed on behalf of the stronger. As articulated by the Portuguese social and legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1995: 581):

The moment of human suffering is the moment of contradiction between the life experience of the South and the idea of a decent life. It is a crucial moment because hegemonic domination lies primarily either in the occultation of human suffering or, whenever that is not possible, in its naturalization as a fatality or its trivialization as show business. The identification of human suffering requires, therefore, a great investment in *oppositional representation and imagination*.

In the same line of thought, this paper assumes that –in the conditions characterized by ‘a certain kind of madness’ under colonial domination– a photographer’s gaze could be the key element in exerting *a certain kind of agency* towards the oppositional representation and imagination: by investing their gaze in image-making, photographers inscribe themselves in the collective consciousness as political subjects *par excellence*. Within the visual arena of photographic practice, image-making subjects are able to create the necessary field of resistance *de minimis* in order to prove that images are “not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status” (Mitchell 1984: 504). Similar claim is given by a documentary photographer Michelle Bogue (2011: xv):

“More than ever before, the world needs professional photographers to record the issues threatening our planet, to be the moral witness of the evil that man still is capable of doing to man”. She proposes some instructive and valuable references that allow us to come to terms with a possible definition of what it means to be an image-producing subject *with a cause*, for the sake of people’s benefit and a broader social change. This particularly implies those parts of the world that have been seriously affected by human and natural catastrophes, as well as the situations where individuals, communities or entire populations become the subjects of victimhood and atrocities associated with inequality and injustice. The notion of activism here does not refer to “strident political action” (Bogre 2011: xii); rather it equals the forms of advocacy concerning the “intent and process [inherent to the medium of photography] to filter [the way] through which a photographer perceives the world [but also] the responsibility of the photographer to make a call for action” (Bogre 2011: xii).

To take a photograph thus signifies to take one’s own right to look and, by doing so, to regain the visual space of lost freedom as anterior to any other type of freedom. This also means to oppose the “fascist visuality [that] came to be the intensified modality of the imperial complex” (Mirzoeff 2011: 232) by proposing the forms of *countervisuality*. As Nicholas Mirzoeff points out, it is the reality of segregation that needs to be made visible and overcome by imagining a new reality which can be achieved by what he calls countervisuality – a product of resistance to (visual) fascism, or the oppositional representation and imagination, indeed. Countervisuality is but a possible way of having a distinctively counter-hegemonic ethical position against the imperialist, colonial, capitalist, and racist *viewpoints*. It is also the point of departure towards desirable anti-imperialist (visual) epistemologies, or the “epistemologies of the South” (Santos and Meneses 2010): they are not only capable of breaking the canons of ‘universal’ knowledge but also of opening up our viewing horizons across the limits of sovereign power. Countervisuality indicates the way to go beyond the borders of normative hegemonic thinking: it opposes the constraints of such thinking insofar as they contribute to what we are allowed to see and what we are, supposedly, not allowed to see at any cost.

This is the general framework within which, in the present paper, I approach the visual representation of Palestinian self-sacrifice as an anti-colonial form of resistance against the necro-coloniality of power. The need to do so coincides with the 2013 exhibition of artworks by the Palestinian photographer Ahlam Shibli at the Jeu de Paume in Paris (France). Moreover, it involves the boycotting attitude on behalf of

certain individuals and groups issuing a series of biased remarks in order to condemn the project itself under the pretext of Shibli's visuality favoring 'terrorism'.²

The complaints and verbal attacks came mainly from France's Jewish community supported by the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France: as stated by the CRIF President Roger Cukierman, it was "particularly lamentable and unacceptable that such a display should justify terrorism from the heart of Paris".³ Among some other negative opinions, this also included the televised statement by a Polish member of the European Parliament.⁴ Their target was a very particular segment of the project: Shibli's photographic series titled *Death*, her most recent body of work "especially conceived for this retrospective, [which] shows how Palestinian society preserves the presence of the 'martyrs' – in the artist's own words. *Death* contains a broad representation of the absent ones through photographs, posters, graves and graffiti displayed as a form of resistance" (Jeu de Pomme 2013). Additionally,

[...] it explores the representations of Palestinians who lost their lives during the second intifada. Posters stuck to the walls of houses and shops, photos exhibited in family homes or displayed on mobile phones, and graves adorned with images and inscriptions assure the imaginary presence of the men and women whom Palestinian society honors as national heroes. Shibli's photographs show *how the living relate to the ever-present absence of the dead* (Jeu de Pomme 2013; my emphasis).

When this particular aspect of Shibli's visual display came into public focus, the overall *political* nature of the opponents' condemnation against the exhibition arrogantly disclosed itself. What this case confirms is but an evidence about death becoming a serious point of contestation when displayed through popular icons of Palestinian resistance outside of Palestine itself. Such a contestation relates here to the context of a contemporary art museum – a widely honored institutional framework for public exposure of cultural artifacts (the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume in the center of

² The exhibition *Phantom Home* by Ahlam Shibli was organized and produced by the Jeu de Paume, Paris, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the Fundação de Serralves-Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Porto. It was curated by an international team of professionals, including Carles Guerra, Marta Gili, João Fernandes and Isabel Sousa Braga. Its French edition took place between 28 May and 1 September 2013. The project was accompanied by a monographic catalogue, published by Hatje Kantz, with texts by TJ Demos and Esmail Nashif. On its Web site, the Jeu de Pomme states that Shibli's project 'addresses the contradictory implications of the notion of home [while dealing with] the loss of home and the fight against that loss, but also with restrictions and limitations that the idea of home imposes on the individuals'. See 'Ahlam Shibli. Phantom Home', *Jeu de Paume*. Accessed February 6, 2014. <http://www.jeudepaume.org/index.php?page=article&idArt=1837&lieu=7>.

³ See: 'Suicide Bomber Art: Ahlam Shibli, Palestinian Photographer, Creates Controversy In Paris Show', *The Huffington Post*. Accessed February 6, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/11/suicide-bomber-art-stirs-controversy-with-ahlam-shibli-show_n_3423139.html.

⁴ See: 'Polish MEP 'deeply disturbed' by Paris museum exhibit glorifying suicide bombers, writes to EU Commissioner', *European Jewish Press*. Last modified 14 June 2013. http://www.ejpress.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=31898.

Paris). The troublesome case of verbal attacks – against Shibli's work and against the institution itself – imposes the need to have ourselves distanced from any *general idea* of death in order to better understand some of its *particular forms* (without falling victims to the so-called cultural relativism). The arising question is: what is so 'particular' about the visual representation of death in Shibli's photographs so it has to be condemned? Is this because her work does not satisfy some 'general' consensus about the 'universal' idea of death? In other words, "why is it that suicide bombing cannot be talked about without being condemned first?" (Hage 2003: 67).

Condemnation Imperative

When the Lebanese-Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage argues that "there is a clear political risk in trying to explain suicide bombings" he refers to the following: to be condemned (with respect to one's position of speech about the subject as contested as 'suicide bombing') is to be dependent from and conditioned by the "condemnation imperative" (Hage 2003: 67). This form of discursive conditioning is *absolutely* prohibiting to the extent that no narrative revolving around the subject of 'suicide bombing' is allowed to have any sort of neutrality. Thus, it shapes our morals and visions of justice exclusively and necessarily along the lines of speech impregnated with mandatory discursive prohibitions. In line with Hage's thoughts, I also find the situations involving such an imperative highly problematic and in need of critical counter-proposals. When he discussed the issue, more than ten years ago, this coincided with the central years of the Palestinian armed resistance against the Israeli occupation during the second Intifada (2000-2003). His arguments were formulated in reaction to the deviant conditions of a historical moment, very specific to the Near East: "in the days that followed the Israeli army's reinvasion of the West Bank in March 2002" (Hage 2003: 65). This was also the context in demand of action outside of the region itself and its warmongering scenarios. Hage assumed, and rightfully so, that intellectual discussions within the humanities and the university at large can contribute to the critical examinations of struggles taking place in the everyday realities of the outside-world. Therefore, it is the role and responsibility of academics, beside other public figures, to discuss and weigh the validity of their arguments regarding such realities. To do so, as legitimately as their professions allow them, they have the possibility to get engaged around the pressing phenomena in the discursive arena framed by academia. Since he was provoked by violence of an utterly dehumanizing nature *on both sides*, he decided to address the international community of his colleagues in a public letter targeting 'the actual material human being-ness of the situation':

I took it upon me to send Arab, Jewish, and other concerned friends an e-mail that attempted to think through the nature and ramifications of this violence. While addressing the Israeli government's use of Palestinian suicide bombers as an excuse for transforming cities into rubble, I pointed out that to a large degree the Israeli government shared with the suicide bombers *a lack of concern with the humanity of the people murdered in the course of the conflict*. (Hage 2003: 65; my emphasis)

In his awakening call about what it means to be *human* in such conditions, he refers to the material human being-ness while speaking against the mortal and 'dehumanizing gaze' pertinent to "communal Us versus Them logic" (Hage 2003: 65). To his great surprise, one *moralizing* reaction "from a colleague on the Jewish left" characterized Hage's language as 'strangely brutal' and supportive of 'voluptuously violent martyrdom', which Hage himself explains as follows:

I wondered how my matter-of-factly stated observation about the political imaginaries behind suicide bombing, regardless of whether one agrees with it, was transformed into support for 'voluptuously violent martyrdom.' It was as if the moral neutrality of my statement was itself self-condemnatory. Indeed, as I was later informed by a mutual friend, my colleague felt that the real issue was whether I 'absolutely condemn' suicide bombers. (Hage 2003: 66)

Hence, Hage learned that the so-called suicide bombers are to be *absolutely* condemned should they play any role in any debate whatsoever. But what does it mean to *absolutely condemn* something or someone, including the so-called suicide bombers? If the subject of such condemnation are the figures of speech recognized as 'suicide bombers' the question is: what do these figures stand for in order to be 'absolutely condemned'? Does their 'absolute condemnation' imply that no statement related to 'suicide bombing' (including the one issued by Hage in his public letter) can be morally neutral? In their micro-universe of permanent tensions and conflicts, as described earlier, the 'suicide bombers' make an indelible yet not the only part. Does this mean that – in the violent context Hage refers to – there also exist some other phenomena or other 'figures of speech' that should be *less* condemned, *less absolutely* condemned, or *not* condemned *at all*? Given his personal experience, Hage concludes that "apparently it is crucial to 'absolutely condemn' suicide bombers if you are going to talk about them, otherwise you become a morally suspicious person" (Hage 2003: 66). The presupposed moral neutrality in his own case was conceived upon questioning *the political imaginaries* behind the phenomenon and without taking sides (as he already pointed out). Yet, his conclusion is that the subject of 'suicide bombing' is destined to have no narrative unless it is approached – unconditionally – as a *contested narrative* pertinent to *contested identities* (i.e., 'suicide terrorists'):

The fact that my colleague decided that *only suicide bombing is necessarily a moral issue* raised questions about the assumptions implicit in our categorization of violence and about their significance in shaping our political and analytical judgment. The polemic also raised another question that pertained to *the political nature of the 'condemnation imperative' and its significance for academic practices in the social sciences* (Hage 2003: 67; my emphasis).

Following this exemplary case, I assume the following: it is impossible to avoid the risk of falling into the condemnation imperative whenever the issue of so-called suicide bombing is pointed out in the public sphere of discussions (academic or otherwise). The context outlined by Hage implies that every narrative surrounding 'suicide bombing' has a threefold nature: first, its existence is absolutely prohibited; second, it is condemned to non-existence; third, its prohibition and condemnation are issued on behalf of the sovereign narrative, that is, the dominant or the first-degree narrative (on the side of the stronger) which makes it properly *hegemonic*. Since its status is marginalized and subservient in comparison to the ruling-authority governing the world-system of discourses, the non-normative narratives around 'suicide bombing' – officially repressed by the condemnation imperative– constitute the grounds of *subaltern, non-normative discourses*. The subaltern status of these discourses is limited by their underground position among the discourses that are reduced to nonexistence. Hence, the voice or visual materiality given to this position of imposed nonexistence comes from the very urge to resist the imposed prohibition: it materializes the nonexistence of subaltern discourses into something else –the discursive existence– while resisting the hegemony of normative or master narratives. The discourse that *exists* despite the threats of being 'absolutely condemned' allows for the recognition of subaltern voices to emerge under a different label. In that case, how should we name discourses under the constant threat of extermination if there is any possibility for them to be named, pronounced and visualized? What is the most proper way to have them identified or reconstructed from the 'death-worlds' of knowledge under the necro-colonial matrix of exterminability and unthinkability?

Contested Identities and Counter-Hegemonic Narratives

The political nature of the condition that Hage defines as 'condemnation imperative' operates upon its self-proclaimed 'ethical' (moralizing) matrix of power with respect to 'suicide bombing'. It prohibits the subaltern, non-normative discourses and produces the 'morally suspicious' persons who dare not to absolutely condemn the so-called suicide bombing. This is but one clear example of the ongoing pressure exercised on

behalf of *discursive regimes* of power over contemporary critical thinking at large: one risks to be designated as a ‘morally suspicious’ person whenever the topic is embraced outside the limits imposed by the epistemic sovereignty and its self-proclaimed right to decide what is ethical and what is not, or who may be killed (according to its own logic) and who may survive. The inviolability of these limits is due to the following fact: the sovereignty in charge of discursive regimes continuously aims at enforcing and preserving the ‘universal’ validity of moral judgments while keeping the privilege of ‘normative’ rationality that is supposedly superior (and thus inviolable). Consequently, the topic of ‘suicide bombing’ itself is unconditionally destined to be ‘absolutely condemned’, to verge at the margins of unspeakable phenomena, or to evaporate for good in the graveyards of an imposed narrative obscurity. Hence, to speak in the name of ‘suicide bombers’ without absolutely condemning them is to speak from a subservient and *humiliated epistemic position* of the weaker: the position of speech violated by the sovereign power in order to be discarded and eliminated on the grounds of its ‘absolute’ moral impermissibility from the perspective of the stronger.

However, this paper assumes that in order to openly engage in the narratives of ‘suicide bombing’ – to bring them back to ‘life’ from their epistemic graveyards – one needs to approach them as the second-degree narratives or counter-narratives. As Nouri Gana (2008: 22) argues, due to the very contested identity of so-called suicide bombers “the war on terror is in equal measure a war on hermeneutics, on understanding, on counter-narrative writ large”. According to him, the challenges confronting contested identities lie at the very basic level of their impossibility to communicate and represent themselves:

A contested identity is essentially an identity forced not only to despise itself but also, and whenever possible, to reduce itself to (the status of) nonexistence, or, at least, of disposability – to liquidate or annihilate itself *tout court*. A contested identity is, above all, an identity that is usurped from the otherwise inalienable right to re-present, assert, and liberate itself – that is, in many ways, to narrativize itself (Gana 2008: 22).

Gana here insists on the essential difference between the verbs ‘to narrativize’ and ‘to narrate’: while an approved identity can *narrate* itself, a contested identity must *narrativize* itself. This is also true when applied to the most contested identity today, i.e., the identity of ‘terrorists’. Consequently, their lack of permission “to narrativize themselves out of their otherwise largely disposable condition’ produces the general prohibition on the ‘narrative terrorism’”(Gana 2008: 22). In a broader perspective, this outlines the challenges confronting contested identities in general, on the basis that “few things are worse than the contestation or negation that one might experience or confront of one’s own identity – national, racial, cultural, religious, sexual, or otherwise” (Gana 2008: 22). Thus, every prohibition on the ‘narrative terrorism’ is due to

the general conditions of contestation. The 'impossible' identity of 'suicide bombers' is linked to an identity that is forced to reduce itself to the status of non-existence, as Gana says, which means the following (as I understand it): a *contested* identity differs from an identity that is not contested insofar as the former is forced to be converted from its status of existence into the status of absolute non-existence – it must disappear from the world of narratives, given its 'absolute moral impermissibility'. For the disappearance to occur, the contested identity of a 'suicide bomber' – as a figure of speech – must pass through the ('suicidal') process of 'self-annihilation', which is not voluntary but imposed from the stronger. By modes of counter-narrativity (or counter-hegemonic narrativity) – as a strategy to bring themselves to existence despite the colonial logic of exterminability and unthinkability – the contested identities are not 'killing themselves': rather, they confront the imposition of death from the side of the stronger by taking their own *right to die* (together with their adversaries) for the sake of mobilizing political life of their communities, which is the basic definition of thanatopolitics (Murray 2006). They are *coming to existence, becoming subjects* and *envisioning a 'new life'* by opposing the forced conditions of their invisibility and their 'non-existence', which occurs in relation to those who claim their own rights to exclusive visibility and existence in the racially segregated (discursive) realm where there is no space for the 'other'. This also proves that so-called 'suicide bombers' have less to do with suicide and suicidal death than with the *procreation of subjectivity otherwise denied*. Hence, the impossibility 'to narrativize itself' makes any narrative around terrorism (that persists its own disappearance by forced 'self-annihilation') a subjugated or second-degree narrative: the counter-narrative *par excellence*. Nonetheless, this type of narrative is highly dependent from the dominant (and always condemning) master-narrative and subjected to it inasmuch as the latter claims its own right to keep the ruling authority over discursive powers, by any means, in order to govern the world of narratives undisturbed:

A contested identity *narrativizes* itself insofar as its narrative is isomorphic with an accented counter-narrative – its narrative is preceded and provoked by its contestation [...] As such, responsible discussions or representations of terrorism today are destined to muddle through a conceptual terrain marked by what might be called an *implicatory fallacy* – a stubborn imposition of a mantle of continuity and inseparability between interpreting and condoning terrorism (Gana 2008: 22).

Several important conclusions apply to the *narrativization* of 'suicide bombers' as a way of constructing the counter-narratives or counter-hegemonic narratives. First, I assume that if there is any possibility to position our speech about 'suicide bombers' this must be *in response to the power-position* or the master-narrative. Second, if such a position is to be recognized as the *counter-position* then it pertains to the counter-narrativity. Third, if the proposed counter-position is a *legitimate* though repressed position – as I assume in

this paper – its opposition to the normative power-position manifests itself in non-normative or counter-hegemonic discourses on ‘suicide bombers’. However, its legitimate status among many possible discourses depends upon three main elements: the *contested identities*, their exile to *counter-narratives*, and their subjugation to the level of discursive obscurity by the *condemnation imperative*. If we assume that these elements are present due to the pressures imposed by the ruling discursive authority, we may add that it is the *sovereign reason* (presumably universal) that decides upon the status and position of our understanding of ‘suicide bombers’. Accordingly, the sovereign (‘universal’) rationality can claim the power to distinguish between what is and what is not rational in the world of rationalities. Given such a power, the ‘universal’ rationality can decide what is to be accepted, contested and condemned within the world of discourses upon which it sovereignly rules. If this is so, we may conclude that the rationality of ‘suicide bombers’ is doomed to the form of ‘irrationality’ because it does not fit the sovereign form of rationality: it does not comply with the ‘universalism’ of the sovereign reason. Therefore, the issue to be questioned does not only pertain to the discursive legitimacy of ‘suicide bombers’ (in the sense of their right to self-represent themselves or to be represented by the others, outside of the ‘condemnation imperative’); instead, it is the very notion of dominant *rationality* (on behalf of the sovereignty) as opposed to the peripheral *rationality* (on behalf of the governed) that has to be critically examined, with regard to ‘suicide bombers’ but also with regard to the discursive epistemic power that condemns them.

This paper performs such a task while revolving around the contested (visual) representation of the Palestinian ‘suicide bombers’ and their self-sacrificial death, and allows me to argue against the imposed conditions of hermeneutic impossibilities in general and with respect to Shibli’s project in particular. If the question is how to have the contested identities visually exposed and interpreted from a counter-narrative perspective, I argue that it must be possible to speak in the name of Palestinian ‘suicide bombers’ without falling into the trap of condemnation imperative. To talk about ‘suicide bombers’ without being condemned means to convert the ‘anti-narrative’ nature of terrorism into a condition of narrativity (as Gana would say). Shibli’s project offers an exemplary possibility of such a *conversion* while putting the ‘Palestinian death’ on public display at the heart of Europe.

'Palestinian death' on Public Display and the Matrix of Epistemic Colonization

To pose the question of colonial expansion in Palestine today is to deal with the “late-modern colonial occupation [as] a concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical” (Mbembe 2003: 29). Under conditions of absolute domination, the case of Palestinian occupation is so unique in contemporary world that it discloses the most pathological local form of coloniality within the complexity of global coloniality. By ‘coloniality’ I am referring to “the imperial/colonial organization of societies” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009: 132) that overcomes the terminology commonly applied to the more traditional notion of historical *colonialism* (the latter denoting the white colonial powers –notably European– and their overseas expansion since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries across the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the Pacific and so on). To deal with the idea of coloniality here means to deal with “the colonial matrix of power [that] was constituted in the sixteenth century, and has operated since then [through] conflicts over control and domination in which the imposition of a particular lifestyle, moral, economy, structure of authority, etc., implies the overcoming, destruction, marginalization of the existing precolonial order” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009: 134).

Accordingly, I refer to ‘epistemic destruction’ to denote the period of five centuries of contested and repressed consciousness about the many and varied worlds of local knowledges under the ongoing *matrix of epistemic colonization*. This is in order to argue that the concepts of ‘contested identities’ in general and of Palestinian ‘suicide bombers’ in particular have to be analyzed within the same matrix of power and its pretensions towards global epistemic control. In response to such an atrocious process, that is, the political and economic imperialist process *par excellence*, the philosophical thought around the “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000), “imperial globality” (Escobar 2004) and “global coloniality” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009) proposes a valuable theoretical and, hopefully, empirical option against the conditions of “hegemonic knowledge in the modern world” (Lander 2002). It can be summarized as the *decolonial option* by which Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo understand that “decolonizing from this global coloniality becomes the main epistemological horizon of the decolonial option. Decoloniality means here decolonization of knowledge and being by epistemically and affectively de-linking from the imperial/colonial organization of society” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009: 132). For them, ‘coloniality is the hidden side of modernity. By writing modernity/coloniality we mean that coloniality is constitutive of modernity, and that there is no modernity without coloniality’.

Decoloniality encompasses the experience of resistance towards epistemic violence and control exercised on behalf of the sovereign/modern world-system of knowledge (Western European and, consequently, North American) – “the control of knowledge and subjectivity through education and colonizing the existing *knowledges*, which is the key and fundamental sphere of control that makes domination possible” (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2009: 135). Therefore, I pursue the following idea: in order to talk about the ‘Palestinian death’ and ‘Palestinian suicide bombers’ – without falling victims to the imperialist condemnation imperative – we need to *decolonize* our knowledge from epistemic control and the global coloniality of narrative contestations. In other words, we need to de-link, epistemically and affectively (as Shibli does), from the imperial/colonial organization of discourses that prohibit the idea of contested identities/ ‘suicide terrorists’ coming to existence as the proper subjects of discussions: we need “to relocate the analysis of violence in Palestine within an alternative paradigm that emphasizes long-term processes of global colonization” (Collins 2011: 139). This kind of *global coloniality* is but an example of broader epistemic ramifications across the world governed by the neoliberal capitalist matrix of power that is not only “necropolitical” (Mbembe 2003) or “necrocapitalist” (Banerjee 2008) but essentially *necro-colonial*. It is so insofar as it claims the right to put to death both the humankind subjected to it and the many knowledge-worlds pertaining to humanity at large.

Consequently, to question the Palestinian ‘suicide bombing’ (from our ‘comfortable’ and ‘safe’ positions in the Western liberal democracies where Shibli’s photographs were displayed) is to deal with anti-colonial forms of resistance against the global coloniality at large. While our attention is focused onto the local and most dramatic variants of such resistance (i.e., the self-sacrificial forms of liberation from the necro-colonial matrix of power in the context of Palestine) we should not lose from our sight the broader implications of ongoing coloniality of power happening elsewhere (in territorial, epistemological and conceptual terms). For this to be feasible, we need to practice the *politics of vision* that consists of two complementary steps: “the zoom-out effect of a telescopic vision and the zoom-in effect of the microscopic vision” (Santos 1995: 573). Their combination has a central role to play in constituting the *radical shift* in our accounts of epistemic powers: the movement from a dominant, imperialist epistemology toward anti-imperialist epistemologies or “a radical displacement within the same place [...] from the center to the margin” (Santos 1995: 573). Our *global* perspective onto the *local* anti-colonial resistance allows us to approach the issue of public display (concerning the ‘Palestinian death’ in general, Shibli’s exhibition at a European museum in particular, and the inevitable contestation therein) from a radically different position.

Conclusion

Shibli's case serves as an evidence that the condemnation imperative can also relate to the *visual* nature of contested identities whose *peripheral visual epistemologies*, apparently, must not be allowed. Since they are epitomized by 'suicide terrorists', they disclose the forms of visuality that pertain to 'absolutely' impermissible and unthinkable subjects, otherwise related to 'self-sacrificial resistance'. Such prohibiting arguments may be essential for our understanding why the public exposure of so-called suicide bombers must be approached as a matter of counter-hegemonic narrativity and visuality in response to demands for their official exclusion from the field of representability.

Rather than the mere representation of contested identities, what we are facing *through* Shibli's body of work is her photographic *response* to this contestation itself - and her significant contribution to the existence of visual epistemologies otherwise forced to disappear from public sight. Such forms of representation - as counter-narrative and counter-visual forms of resistance - play a significant role in the public disclosure of infamous 'monstrous' identities that are doomed to unconditional unrepresentability, unthinkableability and the preconceived ideas of 'suicidal terror'. Hence, the politics of condemned representation is not only explicitly repressive but also iconophobic. It is so due to its self-proclaimed rights to prohibit from public view not the 'suicide bombers' but the materialization of anti-imperialist visions at large. This is the critical point from which the 'Palestinian death' must work out its counter-visual strategy against the imperialist necro-colonial politics of condemnation. It is also a point of departure from which, for 'contested identities', the politics of uncensored representation finally becomes possible.

Allowing freer possibilities for photography here means allowing freer possibilities for the subject (photographed yet contested and condemned) and its humanness outside of the 'suicide bomber-monster' denominations. When turned into an image, a contested subject undergoes the process of conversion (from its discursive non-existence into a narrative visualization) and becomes the subject of visual representation. Thus, it threatens the sovereign reason because it can change "the 'antinarrative' nature of terrorism into a condition of narrativity" (Gana 2008: 23). The power such images produce consists in their *right to be looked*: despite the conditions of oppression in an intense existential situation, these subjects-turned-into-images demand their right to look at us - to address our own position of a viewing subject from their largely disposable conditions of being 'already dead' - and to be looked at in return. It is the photographer's moral and professional duty to contribute to this mutual exchange of glances: when Shibli mediates in the process of constructing visual narrativity on behalf of the contested and invisible subjects, she upholds the liberating

politics of vision that is inseparable from the liberating political process itself, unwelcome by the sovereign reason.

In that sense, I have not argued whether the visibility of so-called suicide bombers in general or in Shibli's photographic work in particular is 'polemical' because it renders visible either the terrorists or the heroes: this shall be the point of discussion for those who are not keen to negotiate anything beyond this common binary without proposing any critical alternatives. What I argued about is closer to the following need: to reflect upon today's epistemic world-systems as the systems of world-views (or visual regimes) that can be hegemonic as much as they can be counter-hegemonic. If the former pertain to *global necro-coloniality*, the latter favor a *decolonial (thanatopolitical) option* which allows them, through and across the borders of political and epistemic hegemonies, to pronounce their revolt against the injustice of colonial domination.

Here, the protagonists of state-terror and sacrificial counter-terror weigh their co-existence in a world of interpretation where the feelings of power, arrogance, humility, embarrassment and shame still prevail. This is a situation of mutually reversible and interdependent perspectives, where one does not go without the other: if the 'suicide bombers' are to be 'absolutely condemned' this cannot be done without the absolute condemnation of the local state-terror of occupation and its logic of self-annihilation. This, in turn, cannot be separated from the global terror of colonial matrix of power and the way it exercises control over its subjects, among which there are also those who cannot but respond (through self-sacrificial counter-terror) to the inhumanness of imposed control.

To see 'life' under such conditions is to face people completely deprived of their dignity as human beings. To see 'death', as in Shibli's imagery, is to see the costs these people had to pay in order to regain their personal and collective dignity – or the highest stakes they had to take in order to defend what makes them *human beings* (instead of 'suicide terrorists').

Part Three

Chapter 13

Is Europe Mentally Ill? ‘Economic Suicides’, Eurozone Crisis, and Life/Death Matters under Austerity Regime

The last part of this thesis examines the current trend of “increased suicidality amid economic crisis” (Economou et al., 2011). The accent is primarily placed on a peculiar social phenomenon that has been haunting Europe since around the year 2008: the so-called “austerity suicides” (Anast and Squires, 2012; Squires, 2012; Govan, 2012), “suicides by economic crisis” (Povoledo and Carvajal, 2012) or “economic suicides” for short (Cha, 2012). Meanwhile, these terms have become, in somewhat sensationalist manner, the buzzwords of the period. A number of international media reporting on the state of ‘economic crisis’ in the European Union have been using them to denote

small-business owners and entrepreneurs increasingly taking their own lives, especially in the most fragile nations like Greece, Ireland and Italy [where] the economic downturn that has shaken Europe for the last three years has also swept away the foundations of once-sturdy lives, leading to an alarming spike in suicide rates (Povoledo and Carvajal, 2012).

This couples with some alarming announcements concerning “effects of the 2008 recession on health” (Stuckler et al., 2011) or “the detrimental effects of the economic crisis on the mental health of European citizens” (European Parliament, 2012). They are notably explained in relation to the rise of unemployment, impoverishment and general dispossession accompanying the ‘economic crisis’ and the most pressing issue that “every 1% increase in unemployment correlates to a 0.8% rise in suicides” (European Parliament 2012: 10). This has led public health experts to conclude that “Europe is facing a mental health crisis” (European Parliament 2012: 10). Is Europe mentally ill?

To answer this question, I approach ‘economic suicides’ on several fronts while drawing upon three main types of data: normative (scientific) perspectives, popular

insights (local and international media) and critical theory (social and political philosophy). Being the central subject of my discussion, ‘economic suicides’ are perceived within the actual context of the “Eurozone financial crisis” (De Grauwe, 2010a, 2010b) or the “European sovereign debt crisis” (Lane, 2012) which allowed for the economic recession to be followed by a “severe austerity regime imposed by the troika of the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank” (Stuckler and McKee, 2012). Given this framework, I argue that so-called economic suicides do not exist: what exists instead is the politico-juridical system of ongoing death-production; thus, I discuss ‘economic suicides’ as political pseudo-suicides committed on behalf of the neoliberal matrix of necropower. By ‘necropower’ I imply “the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (Mbembe 2003: 40). The common perspective is here deliberately shifted from ‘economic crisis’ and ‘mental health crisis’ towards the sovereign politics of death itself. I insist on such a shift in order to confront some ethical and political dilemmas at the forefront of contemporary debates around two distinctive phenomena: the Eurozone austerity regime, understood as a necropolitical/ necrocapitalist regime (Mbembe, 2003; Banerjee, 2008), and the neoliberal state of ‘democratic’ governance over humanness, particularly in the South of Europe, understood as the authoritarian system of “hreokratía” or “debtocracy” (Kitidi and Hatzistefanou, 2011). In this regard, I have undertaken the task of examining the radical individual conceptions of withdrawal from the world of living (at the expense of our fixed preconceptions about ‘life’ and ‘death’) against the current state of democracy that is ‘basically authoritarian’ (Schinkel, 2013). To pinpoint what it means for a European citizen to act politically under ‘democratic’ conditions aligned with the so-called economic crisis, my aim is not only to engage with the polemics around the official announcements of a merely economic or yet another (mental health) crisis; rather, I want to challenge the issue of ‘economic suicides’ by linking it with a certain category of humankind – the “living dead” (Mbembe, 2003) or “abandonados” (Biehl, 2001) – directly exposed to ‘democratic’ forms of necropower, their social experiments over the populations of the South, their global necrocapitalist project, and the production of ‘human waste’ prone to ‘self-killing’.

The notion of ‘necrocapitalism’ here refers to “contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death” (Banerjee 2008: 1541). By this I imply that the growth of financial capital in the current context of liberal democracies develops not only along the lines of market-dynamics, but it runs parallel to the forced growth of human death. Hence, the global economic accumulation of material wealth is inseparable from the growth of human deaths on behalf of the necropower in pursuit of imperial interests. Similarly, the notions of ‘abandonados’ and the ‘living dead’ refer to the experience of social exclusion on the grounds of strategic partitioning of society: by means of necrocapitalist

practices, the “unclaimed lives in terminal desolation” are made “socially invisible as they are abandoned to this most extreme misfortune” (Biehl 2001: 133-134).¹ This signifies the processes of humankind’s ‘animalization’ by which “the ones incapable of living up to the new requirements of market competitiveness and profitability are *socially included through their dying in abandonment*” (Biehl 2001: 139; my emphasis).

Accordingly, the status of population that is no longer ‘useful’ reflects the ways “how new technical, political, and medical strategies were impacting processes of social and biological change among the poorest in urban centers” (Biehl 2001: 131). Following Biehl, I place an accent onto the human beings ‘socially included through dying in exclusion’ and devote due attention to the most aberrant cases in the EU countries drastically hit by the financial downfall (among which Portugal, Italy, and Greece take center stage here).

This allows me to talk about ‘economic suicides’ of the South European *abandonados* in terms of political pseudo-suicides or necropolitical homicides *par excellence*. They concern, most notably, those who are destined to live on the darker side of democracy as disposable forms of life that are “already dead”, as human beings deprived of human dignity to the extent when “one has been killed but has yet to die, or when one has died but has yet to be killed [...] a subjectivity that is specific to the contemporary moment of late capitalism” (Cazdyn 2012: 163). Accordingly, the main message I want to convey by the present paper is as follows: there is no ‘economic suicide’ without necrocapitalist violence and there is no ‘mental health crisis’ without the medico-scientific epistemic violence; whenever the destructive forces of unlimited market economy prevail in terms of necropower, the production of the ‘living dead’ operates through anonymous centers of the global financial power aligned with local political authorities and public health ‘economics of prevention’, all in the name of neoliberal capitalism – or what is left of it in its current state of impasse – at the expense of human dignity and life itself.

¹ I recall hereby the South American anthropologist João Biehl when he is discussing “the wasted bodies” or “what is left of the human” in extremely precarious conditions of existence in the 1990s in “a place in the South of Brazil called Vita; [...] an increasing number of homeless, mentally ill, and dying persons began to be dumped there by the police, by the psychiatric and general hospitals, by families and neighbors [...] where these human beings – most of them without documents or without names – were waiting *with death*” (Biehl 2001: 131).

Il lavoro che non c'è uccide: Media Perspectives on 'Economic Suicides'

To give but an example, I evoke the name of Mr. Vaggelis Petrakis, the fruit and vegetable dealer in Heraklion (Crete) whose crisis-ruined business left him in a debt-motivated despair. He had attempted killing himself already once before he eventually succeeded doing so in September 2011 (Walker, 2011).² When the issue “about the growing pressure on entrepreneurs and citizens due to the impact of the country’s debt crisis” reached the Greek parliament in June 2011, the officials (Greek Health Minister) spoke publicly about people taking their own lives in the country and declaring that their number “has increased by 40 percent” (Ekahimerini, 2011). Yet, according to the same media report, there was no “explicit link of the alarming increase to the economic crisis.” Nonetheless, the fact is that “one out of four calls” through telephone helplines across Greece concerns the issue of debt, and that many suicides are never reported due to the ongoing clerical stigma in the country: the Orthodox Church refuses “to conduct religious services for those who take their own lives” (Ekathimerini, 2011) which gives enough reasons to fear that the real number of cases (and debt-related motivations behind) could be much higher than officially reported. Is economy ‘guilty’ for these deaths?

Another exemplary case concerns Mr. Giuseppe Campaniello, an unemployed bricklayer who burnt himself in a car in March 2012 in Bologna (Italy). The media reported that

he had been out of work for several months, and his debts had grown, with penalty fees and interest, until he knew he would never be able to pay. Ashamed to tell his wife, he left home on 28 March and set himself on fire outside the tax office. He died after nine days in a burn ward (Vogt, 2012).

The choice of venue where his final act took place was by no means a mere coincidence. A decision to die in front of the administrative (tax office) building in his city of residence clearly indicates Campaniello’s last message: an expression of revolt against the authority that put him in a deadlock situation and urged him to commit the fatal act. It would also not be surprising to interpret Campaniello’s choice of the venue as a strategy to induce the sense of guilt among those whom he took responsible for his

² The media article discussing Mr. Petrakis’ death also reveals that “recorded suicides have roughly doubled since before the crisis to about six per 100,000 residents annually, according to the Greek Health Ministry and a charitable organization called Klimaka. About 40% more Greeks killed themselves in the first five months of this year (2011) than in the same period last year” (Walker, 2011).

helpless situation and death itself. A month later, the same spot turned to be the point of reunion for “a small group of grieving widows, friends and family of Italian men who killed themselves due to the country’s economic hardship” (Vogt, 2012). The public march that they organized was not only supposed to commemorate their beloved who passed away. Instead, the so-called ‘Bologna widows’ transformed the public spot where Campaniello took his own life into a temporary memorial place in order to express their protest. This was but one possible way to raise their voice in a plea to the government “to do something for the Italians” (Vogt, 2012). They brought themselves together in a small *civil protest* against the officials’ inability to maintain social order, “frustrated with rising cost of living, austerity cuts and new taxes being implemented to bring Italy’s debt under control” (Vogt, 2012).

These two cases, among many others, testimony about the ways that a contemporary European citizen has been *governed and put to death* under circumstances going beyond the crisis of economic and/or pathological nature. Suicides expressing protest –in terms of public acts, where an individual kills him or herself with the explicit idea of blaming or condemning the authority in charge of his or her despair– have been detected on a continuous basis across the South of Europe during the recent period of ‘economic crisis’. This primarily counts for Greece, France, Italy, Spain, and Bulgaria where (beside ‘private’ and ‘silent’ deaths) some people took their lives while acting in protest, publicly and ‘loud’ enough so their message could be conveyed to the others. When in September 2011 an anonymous “man set himself on fire outside a branch of Piraeus bank in the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki [he] was heard to shout out that he was in debt as he covered himself in petrol” (Milligan, 2011). In what eventually turned out to be a “non-life-threatening chest burns” (Milligan, 2011) – due to the prompt intervention of the local police – the presence of the loudspeaker in the man’s hands and the location he selected for the act itself testify about a certain strategy he applied while conducting the event. They reveal his readiness to ‘amplify his voice’ about the tragedy that is not only of his own concern but makes part of the *res publica* (public affair). Thus, it becomes synonymous with one’s own position which is properly political: the potential victim is not exclusively bound by his or her personal despair but by the awareness of a dispersed network of similar positions among other citizens hit by the same problem. Moreover, a series of visual records of the act (taken by the Greek photojournalist Nontas Stylianidis) lead to my presumption that the event could have been pre-arranged in advance.³ Although this sort of condemnation occurs in protests targeting the (local) power structures, it is worth noting that ‘public suicides’ do not always imply the victim’s outright intention to advance a ‘collective cause’ – instead,

³ For the visual materials regarding this and related cases in Greece, see Nontas Stylianidis’ photographs at <http://www.photoreportage.gr/index.php?event=6040>.

this aspect could be totally omitted, or it could be further amplified postmortem (as it was the case with the ‘Bologna widows’).

Numerous other examples of what the Italian media have dubbed “la catena di suicidi per crisi” (the chain of crisis-motivated suicides) or “il boom di suicidi ‘economici’” (the boom of ‘economic’ suicides) have occurred due to the rising unemployment in the recent period across the country, numbering up to 362 victims in 2010. According to the same year statistics, those who lost their job (288) outnumbered those who were in search for their first job (74), which brought up an interesting conclusion into headlines, namely: what kills is the inexistent job itself (i.e., “*il lavoro che non c’è uccide*”).⁴ This indicates that someone or something else, and not the victims themselves, was in charge of the ‘suicidal’ deaths: hence, their withdrawal is not to be considered as a result of mere ‘self-killing’ insofar as ‘the inexistent job’ has the power to end one’s own life. What makes a job ‘inexistent’? This is a challenging questioning point that could hopefully contribute to my further arguments about the non-suicidal nature of ‘economic suicides’. What I am highlighting is the inadequacy of the European ‘democratic’ system itself to cope with “the wrong solution for the wrong problem” (Johnston 2014) which makes it a potential culprit for people’s deaths: most notably those resulting from the lack of jobs and minimal labor-wages, for which the ‘democratic’ fiscal policy – or its necropolitical ‘terror’ – should be hold responsible.

Finally, I would like to point out some media perspectives focused on Portugal where the article titled “Crisis pushing more people over the edge” (*The Portugal News*, 2012a) performs an exemplary role. It was published in September 2012 by the biggest Portuguese news agency (LUSA) and exposes a brief overview of the local situation, given the data from the Portuguese EAAD branch (European Alliance against Depression).⁵ Ricardo Gusmão, the national coordinator of this support group for Portugal, discusses the most recent state of affairs through statistic results from 2009. They are showing, among other things, that “in Portugal, that year, one person took their own life every four hours meaning that during the first half of 2009 there were more deaths caused by suicide than by road accidents. Three years ago, on average, six people committed suicide every day – four men and two women” (*The Portugal News*, 2012a).

⁴ For the Italian media perspectives on the issue, see Loi 2012, web. Also, an online news article entitled “Suicidi, Rapporto Eures: una vittima al giorno tra chi ha perso il lavoro, rischi maggiori per esodati e imprenditori” (Tiscali 2012, web).

⁵ The ‘European Alliance Against Depression’ (EAAD) stands for an international network of experts committed to depressed patients and the prevention of suicidality. See the EAAD online presentation at <http://www.eaad.net>. See also: Lusa News (2013), “Poverty: Portugal Sees Suicidal Tendencies Rise Amid Financial Crisis”, 20 February, available at: <http://www.portugaldailyview.com/whats-new/poverty-portugal-sees-spike-in-suicidal-tendencies> (last access on 2/4/2014).

The telephone helpline (SOS – Voz Amiga) has detected four major categories inducing suicidal thoughts and actions among the Portuguese looking for assistance via this service, namely: “unemployment, hunger, domestic violence and loneliness” (*The Portugal News*, 2012a). In addition, the certainty of suicidal causes of death is dubious due to other forms of ‘violent deaths’. According to Gusmão, they indicate the possibility of inaccuracy around the official figures since those cases “that have been classified as ‘undetermined’ could point towards ‘probable suicide.’”⁶ The non-governmental organizations and related helpline volunteers in Portugal show similar concerns for ‘a key cause’ leading to the unprecedented increase in suicidal mortality, namely: the ongoing ‘financial crisis’. Again, a clear connection to the financial crisis and the causal relation between economics and self-inflicted death is repeatedly stressed out. However, what I find problematic is that such conclusions are usually supported by the claims that the financial crisis “will certainly have a very significant impact on the mental health of the population” as it is “plausible for there to be a rise in the prevalence of some mental diseases as well as an increase in the suicide rate of some sectors of the population” (Cf. Vogt, 2012).

The relation among ‘suicidal mortality’, ‘financial crisis’ and ‘mental health’ (as proposed here) complies with a normative, epidemiological perspective in health-care approaches to the issue that centers on human suffering from a pathological perspective. One of the major, if not predominant, characteristics of such a way of looking has been deeply rooted in the conviction established by medical and psychiatric experts: that suicide is an exclusive object of public health-care and it must necessarily relate to mental health inquiries without exceptions, although not all suicidal motivations are explicitly pathological or linked to mental anomalies (Biggs 2005). Gusmão’s ‘optimistic’ hint that “suicide is avoidable” actually comes from a pathologizing perspective: he says that “it is the result of mental disease, such as depression, which is treatable” (*The Portugal News*, 2012a).⁷ His arguments can be related to the ways that the economic recession intersects with everyday lives of common citizens through what public health experts tend to see as symptoms of suicidal pathology which are generally detected among the most vulnerable social groups acting in response to the hardships imposed on their everyday living by ‘taking their own lives’. The ‘economic suicides’ are thus galvanized by “the impact of the economic

⁶ As Gusmão makes it more precise, “for every suicide registered another probable one can be added to it, meaning official figures could be double. Therefore, based on the data available from the past 30 years, between 1980 and 2009, 56,213 people have died through probable suicide in Portugal” (*The Portugal News*, 2012a).

⁷ This is differently viewed by some neuroscientists, such as Christopher H. Cantor (2000: 9) who contends that although “suicide is a behavior – not a disease [...] epidemiological approaches are of value to the understanding of suicide”.

downturn on health and wellbeing” (Winters et al., 2012). My point is that such links can be analyzed differently.

According to the president of the Portuguese Society for Suicidology (José Carlos Santos) “it is to be expected that there should be a growth in the number of cases given the current economic and social situation that the country is going through” (*The Portugal News*, 2012b). Santos draws an important line among three factors: the rise of suicidal cases; the rise of unemployment in the context of economic instability; and the role that the social security plays – or *should play via supportive measures, now insufficient* – towards the most vulnerable population groups. He highlights the negative co-relation between the lack of employment and the social security measures. Disturbingly enough, this implies the fact that “the demand for consultations relating to cases of suicide” have been “on the rise” throughout the year 2012:

Unemployment rose significantly and it is a determining factor in suicide-related matters, and at the same time, we are witnessing *a reduction in support from Social Security*. If we are limiting people who are already in a difficult situation from an economic and social point of view we are not protecting them from suicidal behavior, but instead we are making them even more prone to this type of behavior (*The Portugal News*, 2012b; my emphasis).

I consider the views proposed by Mr. Santos as extremely valid for two main reasons: first, they are offering some concrete ideas in terms of alternatives that could shift our attention from the issue of ‘mental weakness’ toward the fundamental loss of concrete solutions sidelined by the local government(s); second, they are pointing out towards very pragmatic measures that should be taken in order to have the negative and tragic effects of socio-economic limits (i.e., ‘a reduction in support from Social Security’) gradually eradicated. The major issue here concerns what lies behind the Social Security policies, namely: the question of someone’s responsibility for the lack of a sustainable job market which ‘pushes more people over the edge’. In order to have the necessary support of Social Security policies increased (instead of having them progressively reduced), someone must take responsibility for these imbalances so that they could be corrected for the sake of a ‘collective cause’. As Santos indirectly points out, it is the Social Security (that is, the policies and structures inherent to local ruling authorities, or the *state itself*) that should be held directly accountable for an increasing suicidal behavior among the local population: the limits imposed onto the people (through the lack of labor-market projects, for example) are ‘making them even more prone to this type of behavior’ instead of assisting them to continue their lives as less disturbed by economic hardships. While Santos highlights the positive case of Danish social security, additional sources remind us of other Scandinavian nations, like Sweden or Finland, that “*avoided a rise in suicide rates in times of crisis because they invested in labor-market*

projects –initiatives to help get people back on their feet– instead of cash handouts” (Povoledo and Carvajal, 2012).

The Necropower of Economic Austerity Regime

Such constructive views are also very close to a group of scholars (Martin McKee et al., 2012) who analyze austerity from an angle unusually critical for medical scientists. They consider it “a failed experiment on the people of Europe [who are] *stagnating and struggling to repay rising debts*” which is why it turned out to be “a health as well as an economic failure, with increasing numbers of suicides and, where cuts in health budgets are being imposed, increasing numbers of people unable to access care” (McKee et al., 2012). Although they earlier declared that “the countries facing the most severe financial reversals of fortune, such as Greece and Ireland, had greater rises in suicides (17% and 13%, respectively) than did the other countries” (Stuckler et al., 2011), they now point out something optimistic that could transform the situation for the better:

However, there is evidence that an increase in suicides in an economic crisis is not inevitable. Research on economic fluctuations in Western Europe over the past three decades showed *how those countries with strong systems of social protection were able to maintain long-term declines in suicide rates despite rapid increases in unemployment*. The most important factor appeared to be *the existence of active labor market programs, designed to get people back into employment as quickly as possible*, and typically including youth training, exchange of information on vacancies and measures to support disabled people in the workforce. Unfortunately, programs such as these are being cut in many countries at the present time (McKee et al., 2012; my emphasis).

The arguments proposed by Martin McKee and David Stuckler are extremely valuable. This is not only related to their central research results on the issue of our concern here; it is also because their discourse avoids the rigidity that has been paradigmatic for normative arguments in the disciplinary field to which they, as public health professionals, belong.⁸ In their account of “the *human cost* of austerity policies [largely invisible, until recently]” they highlight the role that political governments should play

⁸ This is rather an exception than the rule within the current state of suicide scholarship. In that sense, I particularly want to point out their joint article “There is an alternative: public health professionals must not remain silent at a time of financial crisis” (Stuckler and McKee 2012).

in enhancing the citizens' social protection instead of imposing austerity measures.⁹ Unfortunately, this has not been the case so far in the European South.

A few preliminary though important conclusions can be drawn here: first, the lack of employment does not necessarily stir up suicidal behavior – it is incited by the inexistence of social protection under conditions of increasing unemployment ('the inexistent job', as earlier pointed out); second, the inexistence of social protection correlates with the inexistence of active labor market programs – their loss in the official political agenda is due to governments' cuts of those programs; third, to cut the active labor market programs means to 'cut' citizens' ties with life and the ways of living preceding the recession (i.e., to let them die *as they will*); finally, for any government that does not provide social security and *makes* its populations die (or supposedly let the people die by suicides, 'voluntarily', or 'as they will') the increase in 'suicidality' is but a consequence of that government's irresponsibility towards its own citizens who remain socially unprotected in terms of their intentional exclusion by the state or their 'social inclusion by dying in abandonment'. In that regard, the state *makes them die* rather than 'letting' them die. Paradoxically, they 'regain' public interest through state-supported suicide-prevention programs only when they are literally dead: their 'suicidal' and 'pathological' death counts post-mortem, in clinical statistical data collected and analyzed by the medico-scientific experts who are themselves in need of state's financial and political support (i.e., the 'economics of prevention', to which I will come later) to continue their research against so-called economic suicides.

My understanding of the argument outlined by McKee and his colleagues is as follows: a neoliberal government that cuts social security by cutting active labor market programs is the government that cuts the lives of its citizens (not the one that 'prevents them from killing themselves'). Therefore, it is possible to argue that the so-called economic suicides do not exist; what exists instead are the political pseudo-suicides committed on behalf of the neoliberal matrix of power (or the politico-juridical system of ongoing death-production) that, in accordance with Achille Mbembe's thesis, should be properly linked to the power of death-politics or necropower (Mbembe, 2003). Accordingly, I treat the crisis of subjectivity under the ongoing European recession and austerity from a perspective centered on power dynamics shifted from economics to politics proper: the instrumentalization of political power over the human lives and deaths, where 'economic suicides' serve as an indicator of the necropolitics that is the

⁹ The objection to the last argument could come from some exceptional cases that disturb the expectedly balanced relation between the strong social safety and the decreased suicide rate, like in some Scandinavian countries, for example: even if "formal and informal social protection such as active labor market policies and strong social support networks could mitigate the predicted increase in suicide [...] Finland, also with strong social protection systems, had an increase in suicides of just over 5% in the same period, by contrast with previous recessions" (Stuckler et al. 2011: 125).

consequence of neo-liberal capitalism. The notion of necropolitics, as applied here, concerns one's experience of today's world as a place in which human *death and mortality* have become the very central project of the sovereign power. This is in accordance with Mbembe's proposition about the ruling authority's use of death for the "generalized instrumentalization of human existence and material destruction of human bodies and population" (Mbembe 2003: 14). What Mbembe suggests is a radical reversal towards the ways contemporary humankind experiences life in the name of politics whose objective consists in organizing and accumulating death "that lives a human life" (Mbembe 2003: 15). To address the question of life –and life exposed to suicidal tendencies, too– requires the forms of engagement that assume the notion of 'life itself' as already inscribed into the politics of death by which "to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality" (Mbembe 2003: 12). This argument most properly shapes Mbembe's own understanding of the limits of sovereignty residing in his dictum "to kill or to allow to live" (instead of Foucault's "to make live and let die").

Mbembe's views have grounded my own position (with regard to 'economic suicides') as a counter-position against the normative readings of life/death dichotomies, rooted in the necropolitical conception of contemporary neoliberal capitalism which prevails in the present study. It is significant for the argument at hand insofar as it defines the hegemonic structures of capitalist power and its neoliberal governance as *necropower* that is directly in charge of populations' deaths (otherwise treated as 'suicides', most notably those that pertain to 'merely economic' reasons). Under the pretext of an increasing 'mental illness' among its populations, the system provides the deadlock conditions (for those who appear to be 'mentally ill') before entirely getting rid of them. To 'kill' the jobless and unemployed here means to allow them to live in 'democracy' as 'already dead' – before they push themselves to death.

Let us finally consider how the economic recession and austerity intersect with the dominant perspectives on suicide and mental health from the side of the 'sovereign power' regarding the global health (the WHO - World Health Organization) and its satellites: how the WHO operates (through the activities of its regional offices) in alignment with the international political elites, and how this shapes both experts' and popular understandings of the problem within the recently proclaimed 'mental health crisis' in Europe.

A ‘mental health crisis’

In accordance with the requirements imposed by the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the EU Parliament, the regime of austerity – instituted across the European Union in response to the alarming financial situation – has been intensified throughout the last few years across the continent. The measures proposed from the highest level of political and financial power were enforced in order to reduce spending while increasing taxes. Consequently, they have left common citizens in a helpless situation: without much space for existential maneuvers, facing financial debts, closure of their small businesses and the loss of jobs, many have taken radical measures and, in doing so, some of them have also taken their own lives. This has significantly contributed to the temporary yet ongoing disturbance and deterioration of elementary living conditions among the EU citizens, most notably in its Southern parts regarded as the “peripheral economies” (Stockhamer, 2011). A derogatory acronym PIIGS has often been used to denote the characteristics of economic situation in Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain with the following assumption: that a European citizen (particularly in the South) has become all the more prone to respond negatively to conditions directly provoked by his or her incapacity “to withstand negative macroeconomic and financial shocks” (Lane 2012: 49).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and its regional offices across the world, the indicated ‘negativity’ is explained as follows: “It is well known that mental health problems are related to deprivation, poverty, inequality and other social and economic determinants of health. Economic crises are therefore times of high risk to the mental well-being of the population and of the people affected and their families” (WHO 2011: 1). In that sense, the resolution about the new European policy for health and well-being (WHO 2013a) does not come as a surprise. It was in September 2012 in Malta when Health2020 was officially accepted by the EU Member States. This occurred on the occasion of the 62nd session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe and included, most importantly, the action plan for strengthening public health services and capacity. As described in the official report, “its purpose is to strengthen health systems, revitalize public health infrastructures and institutions, engage the public and a range of health actors, and develop coherent and evidence-based policies and governance solutions capable of tackling health threats and sustaining improvements over time” (WHO 2013a). Does this policy, no matter how important it may seem, guarantee any decrease of ‘economic suicides’ in the EU or their elimination once the provisions are implemented?

When earlier in March 2011 the WHO Regional Office for Europe expressed its overall concerns for public health in relation to current trends of economic recession, the issue of increasingly deteriorating mental health among the Europeans took a center stage.

Beside the general concerns expressed for health policy and primary health care improvements, a special focus was put on prevention and control of alcoholism, on the one hand, and suicide, on the other. From the outset it is made clear that “following the economic crisis that began in 2007, the WHO European Region has experienced changes – a rise in unemployment, an increasing number of people living in poverty, and cuts in public spending – that are detrimental to mental health” (WHO 2011). The mutually interdependent relationship between two major phenomena – ‘economic crisis’ and ‘(mental) health’ – is explained as follows:

Not only do crises have a negative effect on health, including mental health, but *poor mental health also has a knock-on effect on economic development*. The economic consequences of mental health problems –*mainly in the form of lost productivity*– are estimated to average 3–4% of gross national product in European Union countries (WHO, 2011; my emphasis).

This means that the loss of human lives (or the loss of people’s capacity to work due to their ‘mental health’ disorders) directly affects the economic productivity in a way that the loss of productivity exposes to economic risks those who are neither dead nor mentally ill (i.e., the ‘normal’ parts of society). In other words, the forceful social segregation is linked to the *decrease in mental health stability* (that is, the increase of ‘mental disorders’ resulting from detrimental economic factors) which provokes, in reverse, the economic problems and *further deteriorates the state of economic instability* ‘in the form of lost productivity’. Such a loss (and not the loss of human lives) is prioritized and unacceptable from economic and financial viewpoints: this allegedly becomes one more reason why we shall be more seriously concerned about the status of ‘mental health’ under conditions of economic recession. The loss of economic productivity on behalf of a population nominally recognized as ‘mentally ill’ (whose surplus in society becomes more present and persistent together with the persistence of crisis itself) produces the loss of economic wellbeing for those parts of population recognized as ‘mentally healthy’, i.e., those who are (still) outside of the clinical scope of interest. Following this logic, to ‘kill oneself for economic reasons’ only contributes to the economic downfall, which is unacceptable for capitalist rationality. In turn, suicide prevention (with the WHO policy makers on its institutional top) needs *financial support* so the preventive measures could be enhanced through an ‘economics of prevention’ (WHO 2013b: 10). I see it as just the variant of yet another capitalist accumulation of power where the public health programs become the fertile terrains for (financial) investment. As described by Dr Roberto Bertollini (Chief Scientist and WHO Representative to the European Union) during his speech on the occasion of the second meeting of the European Advisory Committee on Health Research in September 2012 in Copenhagen (WHO 2013b: 10), the work of the European Regional Office also consists in

“the ‘economics of prevention’ (*the case for investing in public health programs*) and the growing use of economic evaluation in health”.

Depending on one’s viewpoint (and mine is very suspicious in that sense), this could be the core example of necropolitical alliances in charge of ‘economic suicides’. As I argue, the increased ‘suicidality’ under ‘economic crisis’ is not to be treated as an exclusively pathological form of behavior according to epidemiological inquires, but as a form of social death orchestrated by the necrocapitalist (austerity) regime to which medico-scientific expertise necessarily belongs. Whether these alliances contribute to any viable changes in ‘economic suicide’ rates is open to further inspections: what is certain for the moment is that they contribute to the growth of ‘economics of prevention’. This is where politics, medicine and suicide come together under the economically self-aware ‘ethics of prevention’. The system of health-care is dependent precisely on such human tragedies in the sense of their ongoing mantras for policy-based supportive measures towards so-called suicide prevention: as such they have been part of political and economic debates (through WHO Regional Office meetings and alike) and have been ranking very high in European official political programs. In their urge for necessary financial investments, aimed for continuous suicide-related researches, it seems that political agendas are saturated by ‘preventive policy-making’ while remaining deaf to the screams of the victims of ‘self-inflicted’ death themselves. This may sound paradoxical enough, given that these victims and their own bodies count most for the ongoing policies towards governmental, inter-governmental and supra-governmental fundraising campaigns for suicide prevention. This may also be the reason why the mutual dependence between the economic production (of gross national product in the EU) on the one hand, and the social production (of a ‘mentally healthy’ population) on the other hand, rank very high in the agendas of health-care experts. These experts have properly detected the most pressing manifestations of actual problems (potentially – though not necessarily – related to ‘mental health’) in a relatively novel situation, characterized by economic slowdown and collapse. However, in order to confront us with the *real* seriousness of that situation, what they actually warn us about is not the health disorder as such but rather something else: the risk of getting even worse, both mentally and financially, unless one of the two elements (either health or economy) gets stabilized, improved and finally, recovered. The implementation of the so-called social protection measures allows populations in certain countries, where these measures are in force, to reduce the risk of mental health problems and so to enable “swifter economic recovery” (WHO, 2011). Nonetheless, this has not been the case in the zones most drastically hit by recession (as José Carlos Santos earlier pointed out with regard to the actual Portuguese situation). If the notion of ‘recovery’ is taken for granted, I am willing to ask: where is the expected recovery meant to lead the populations once the recession is over –towards the ‘stable’ state of affairs as it used to be before the recession had taken hold? Are the increased rates in

depression, alcohol use disorders and suicide –the three prominent elements in the aforementioned analysis– the ‘key factors’ to be considered in terms of the major and most problematic outcomes of poor mental health under the current recession regime? Or isn’t this regime itself problematic enough to be questioned anew, alongside its neoliberal framework of governance over humanness, so that no ‘recovery’ would ever take us back to the ‘happy lives’ of undisturbed capitalist exploitation that has, actually, brought us to the experience of its current collapse? To allow this happening again, one really needs to ask: is Europe mentally ill?

Conclusion

Europe is not mentally ill: instead, it is suffering from necrocapitalism and its economic policies sanctioned by the ruling technocratic governments and the perverted political conditions of governance over humanness at any cost. A system enforced by the necropolitical agenda, that has evolved during the most recent phase of neoliberal capitalism in the EU, has been ‘eating’ its own citizens – notably in the South – due to the so-called sovereign debt. This has gradually disclosed the darker side of liberal democracy and the bond upon which the political sovereignty exercises control over its subjects through the so-called debtocracy. It reveals the ruling and ‘unquestionable’ rationality according to which the present transnational financial sovereignty maintains its power over the world populations in a way which allows me to name this process as derogatory as *pseudo-democratic cannibalization*. Therefore, ‘economic suicide’ is not necessarily an indicator of growing instability concerning mental health among the members of European population that are the most vulnerable to the rise of unemployment and other economic hardships (Stuckler et al., 2009, 2011; Brauser, 2011); instead, the transnational politico-juridical structure (International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank being its main elements in this case) allows for ‘cannibalistic’ appetites of the neoliberal system to grow toward its citizens in an ever expanding way which ends up in increasing ‘suicidal’ death-rates. Due to its obligations to save enormous amounts of money related to debt interest payments – instead of investing in their own populations (in terms of social security, health and education policies) – national governments across the EU experience a fundamental threat to the sovereignty of their own countries by supranational corporate networks of necropower: they submit their own people to death, all in the name of ever-growing demands by transnational debt-claimants and their ‘anonymous’ politics of accumulation.

Given the framework where such arguments are officially presented (the European Parliament, for example), I cannot but conclude the following: what might have been

the matter of professionally biased (medico-scientific) perspectives now gradually and unfortunately gains its politically sanctioned legitimacy. From that point on, the current trend to pathologize everything in relation to social anomalies only nurtures all the arguments on behalf of the medico-scientific regime of power in conjunction with political elites, without eradicating the necro-political essence of the problem. The biggest part of it is that the medico-scientific *colonization of suicide* studies does not occur independently from other dominions of power, but through strategic alliances with political, economic and financial instances at the top level of policy decision making, both regionally and globally. In the context of this study, the explicit conjunction with the European Parliament and the WHO Regional Office for Europe takes center stage. The problem is the intricate relationship among the issues of public health (including suicide prevention), European socio-economic policies, and what has been recently dubbed the 'economics of prevention'. Whoever wants to claim that the so-called economic suicides do not exist (while instead it is the politico-judicial system of ongoing death-production that pushes people 'over the edge') –as I am arguing here– must count on 'strong' objections supported by hegemonic medico-scientific expertise aligned with political and financial power systems. "It is brutal enough to lose one's job or one's home due to the crisis, but when very little changes in the process then we lose on both fronts. We lose our savings and our exhilaration, if not our joy, at watching the system give way—not to mention our desire, however unconscious, for the world to be organized differently" (Cazdyn 2012: 3).

In the next chapter, I consider the *darker side of democracy* in relation to 'economic suicides' in the European South under the 'sovereign debt crisis' while assuming the following: if democracy is supposed to be 'ultimately the most human system possible', what makes it so profoundly authoritarian and inhumane nowadays? To approach this question, I take particularly into account the current Greek situation with one central death-case in mind. In April 2012 Mr. Dimitris Christoulas, an elderly Greek citizen, shot himself at the central Athens square (Syntagma) nearby the National Parliament. He did so in order "to 'send a political message' about the inequities of Greece's crushing debt crisis", as media reported (Smith, 2012). His public farewell note serves as a starting point for my inquiry into so-called economic suicides in the context of Eurozone crisis, about the issue of European democracy at large, and also about its proper regimes of life and death. I see it as an invitation (rather than a conclusion to this thesis) to discuss how the unequal distribution of powers along the North-South axis relates to the sense of humanity under austerity regime and what should be done for the world to be organized differently – at the dawn of the third millennium when, in terms of Walter Mignolo (2014), "democracy has turned into a noble discourse to advance by force the imperial interests".

Chapter 14

Sueños del sur: Necrocapitalism, Social Collapse, and ‘Suicide as a Political Act’

Δεν αυτοκτονώ, με σκοτώνουν!
[I am not committing suicide, they are killing me!]
--Dimitris Christoulas¹

What is the society you are dreaming of? When this question was recently posed to a middle-aged Greek man in front of the film camera, he was unconstrained to show tears in his eyes. His response was simple: “A society where you are able to survive” (Domoney 2012). This paper has been motivated by his words. In what follows, I will place an accent onto the human condition and the limits experienced in the South of Europe under the so-called Eurozone crisis, economic recession and austerity regime at the dawn of the third millennium. This is in order to raise some questions, hopefully significant, about the current state of democracy and how it intertwines with the populations’ life and death in the capital of Greece.

To approach the issue, I will draw upon the documentary visual material recorded by the British freelance photographer and filmmaker Ross Domoney, and his project “Athens: Social Meltdown” (2012) in particular.² The argument I put forward –with

¹ These words make part of a public farewell note left by Dimitris Christoulas, an elderly Greek citizen who shot himself on April 4, 2012 at the central (Syntagma) Square nearby the state’s Parliament in Athens in order “to ‘send a political message’ about the inequities of Greece’s crushing debt crisis” (Smith 2012, web; Meimari 2012, web). See also the related video document “Greek mourners: it was not suicide, it was financial murder” (Domoney 2012, web).

² Ross Domoney is an award-winning documentary film-maker, a member of the Aletheia Photos documentary and film collective and the film-maker for crisis-scape, a research project examining the transformations of public spaces in crisis-ridden Athens, Greece. See openDemocracy web page, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/ross-domoney> (last access on 17 April 2014). “Athens: Social Meltdown” was produced and directed by Ross Domoney, posted online on 24 September 2012, and hosted by Aletheia Photos [<http://aletheiaphotos.com/a-blog/2012/9/24/new-documentary-athens-social->

Domoney's project in mind, as I see it from the perspective of my own work on the present thesis– is as follows: the status of populations under the 'democratic' regime as experienced nowadays in the South of Europe equals what Mbembe calls the 'living dead' and what Biehl calls the 'abandonados'; accordingly, the so-called 'economic suicides' by the members of these populations oblige us to approach their deaths from a radically different angle, namely: not only as 'political' and/or 'financial suicides' (committed on behalf of the necrocapitalist sovereign power against common people) but primarily as thanatopolitical forms of citizens' self-sacrifice against such power (committed in the name of missing democracy, missing justice and missing dignity of living – or what, for those citizens, *used to be known* as 'life itself' before they were transformed into the 'abandonados' and the 'living dead').

A 'Weeping Man'

The 'weeping man' gives but an example of such practices: dreaming of a society 'where you are able to survive', where human life is no more a disposable material useful merely for the sake of a system which discards those 'worth nothing'. His role in Domoney's film is peripheral; yet, he is, in a certain way, also one of its central figures since he touches upon the core question – that of human survival under the so-called democracy. If by the notion of 'survival' he means to "continue to live or exist, especially in spite of danger or hardship" (Oxford Dictionaries 2014), my principal concern here is with the following question: how threatening a danger or hardship must be for a man to have a dream of this kind? What does he tell us about the society where the *ability to continue to live* is placed in the foreground of people's visions of the better future? One may be curious enough to presume that his attitude discloses his aspirations towards immortality. I would, however, preferably go in a different direction.

I assume that –in the society this man belongs to and identifies with– to survive is merely possible in people's dreams. If my assumption is correct, it indicates the liminal situation by which the kind of helplessness and despair expressed by a single man is applicable to the entire society out of which he makes but a part. If this man alone feels unconstrained to cry but constrained to continue to live, what could be the side effects of such a situation for individuals in societies where one is not able to survive but only

[meltdown.html](#)]. Aletheia Photos is an independent collective of photojournalists and filmmakers based in London, UK [<http://aletheiaphotos.com>].

to dream of living a *decent* life (instead of being a 'living dead')? What does he tell us about the *kind of life* that has a chance to go on instead of being interrupted, or completely stopped, by certain dangers or hardships? What grounds his fears from inability to survive and, if such threats have been imposed by an external party, who should be accountable for them? Finally, what are the possible perspectives to have these limits overcome and make his dream come true?

Domoney's film provides some answers to these and related questions. When he committed himself to a long-term endeavor to document the unsettled state of Greek civic life at the dawn of the third millennium, he started to record the city of Athens in the midst of an ongoing 'Eurozone crisis' (Spring 2010) in order to expose one of its most evident and growing features: the collapse of a society in the European South and the spirit of its population, harmed and resistant at the same time. Drastically hit by the financial austerity measures in a follow-up to the so-called sovereign debt crisis, the Greeks –instead of showing any positive appraisal of democracy– reversed the name of their antique 'trademark' into what has been popularly termed "debtocracy" or *chréokratia* (Hatzistefanou and Kitidi, 2011).³

As briefly pointed out at the Aletheia Photos web page featuring Domoney's overall project "Greece on Strike" (out of which "Athens: Social Collapse" makes but one significant part), the direct motivations behind the rapid structural changes can be summarized as follows: "Prime Minister George Papandreou passed on the controversial IMF/EU bailout package in an attempt to pull Greece out of its soaring debt. In exchange for this 110 billion euro bailout package, the government put plans in place to cut public spending such as wages and raise taxes".⁴ This bailout package, more or less directly, sets the stage for Domoney's visual project: what he basically records is the burning urban atmosphere developing among the Greeks, since 2010, in a chain reaction that the government's decisions provoked. How 'generous' the package in reality was explains Daniel Cohn Bendit, a member of the European Parliament and co-president of the Greens - Free European Alliance Group when (in an excerpt from another documentary film, "Debtocracy") he says the following:

³ "Debtocracy" is also the title of another documentary film, made by Katerina Kitidi and Aris Hatzistefanou in 2011 and relevant for the story at hand. It "mainly focuses on two points: the causes of the Greek debt crisis in 2010 and possible future solutions that could be given to the problem that are not currently being considered by the government of the country". For the online version of "Debtocracy", see INFOWAR Production web page: http://infowarproductions.com/debtocracy_doc (last access on 17 April 2014).

⁴ According to the early and optimistic expectations in May 2010, "Greece reached agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission, and the European Central Bank (ECB) on a focused program to stabilize its economy, become more competitive, and restore market confidence with the support of a €110 billion (about \$145 billion) financing package". See "Europe and IMF Agree €110 Billion Financing Plan With Greece", *IMF Survey Magazine* (2 May 2010), <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2010/car050210a.htm>.

This is all gross hypocrisy! In recent months, France has sold six frigates to Greece for two and a half billion euros, helicopters for more than four hundred million, and Rafales at one hundred million per piece. My 'insider information' does not allow me to say whether it's ten or twenty or thirty Rafales. That adds up to almost three billion euros! Germany has sold six submarine vessels for one billion euros over the coming years. We are really a bunch of hypocrites! We are giving the Greeks money to buy arms from us!⁵

His statement is further supported by Zara Vangenkecht, spokesperson of the German socialist political party *Die Linke*, who convincingly adds to the discussion:

When Germany became aware of Greece's position one year ago, the instructions were not to cease arms exports to that country. Greece needed to cut back on pensions and public services but not on weaponry. This shows the focus of certain interests. The German Government acted like the protector of German arms manufacturers and the export industry. They would like their exports to continue despite the crisis (Hatzistefanou and Kitidi, 2011).⁶

Given these two examples, among many others, the question of debts' legality enters the discussion at this point. Despite the fact that "in Greece, historians, economists and experts are daily discussing how to cope with it [the debt itself], there is a question, however, that few people have asked: *Do the Greek people really owe all that they are being asked to pay back?*"⁷ This question owes to "the concept of Odious Debt [and] how it is used politically", as economic specialists explain:

For a debt to qualify as Odious Debt, three conditions must be present, namely: it must be incurred by leaders without the consent or approval of the citizens; the funds borrowed must be invested in assets from which no benefits accrue to the citizens or the country; the creditor is perfectly cognizant of these facts but nevertheless contracts the debt in total indifference. (CADTM 2012)

Unfortunately, these conditions perfectly fit the current Greek situation: "Greece's most recent debt is both illegal and illegitimate", as suggested by Éric Toussaint, the Belgian political scientist, who has been officially advocating the annulment of the so-called

⁵ For the excerpt of Cohn Bendit's speech in the EU Parliament regarding the issue see also YouTube online video-material "Daniel Cohn-Bendit about Greece's financial woes" (last access on 17 April 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQGkP68AVTI>.

⁶ While Domoney's film revolves around the causes and impacts of the so-called Greek debt crisis, Kitidi and Hatzistefanou put much more focus on the transnational framework concerning the issue of 'financial debt' in general and its illegal ratio. See Jourdan, Stanislas. "'Debtocracy', le documentaire qui secoue la Grèce", OWNI, 9 June 2011 (last access on 17 April 2014), <http://owni.fr/2011/06/09/debtocracy-documentaire-choc-grece>.

⁷ See the transcript of the film "Debtocracy" available on the web page of the CADTM - Comité pour l'annulation de la dette du Tiers Monde (The Committee for the Cancellation of the Third World Debt), 18 March 2012 (last access on 17 April 2014), <http://cadtm.org/Debt-The-Greeks-and-Debtocracy>.

Third World debt: “When the authorities of a country receive bribes from transnational companies [which] paid money, i.e. bribes to officials, ministers and high-ranking public servants, for over ten years, to gain contracts, we can say that this is a mark of illegality and illegitimacy. From my point of view, it is patently obvious that these debts are questionable” (CADTM 2012). Domoney’s film brings us closer to such doubts while putting Greece in focus under conditions that question the form of government ‘best of all’. The kind of distrust exposed hereby came alongside the processes of conversion from the ‘people’s power’ (*dēmos + kratia*) to the power of the financial capital understood in terms of the so-called public debt (*chréos*). Due to “the rapid structural changes which Greece is undergoing” (Domoney 2012), the social downfall in Athens has been associated with an unprecedented level of political and economic hardships in recent history of the country. The recession itself plays a minor role here in comparison to the budgetary discipline measures undertaken by three most prominent instances or the so-called TROIKA: the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

As repeatedly highlighted in worldwide media during the last few years, their imposition of certain requirements to the people of Europe, in response to the alarming economic situation, turned to be not only unbearable for many but essentially wrong: the forcefully introduced regime of austerity has not managed to eradicate the problem but advanced its damages instead (McKee et al., 2012). In the beginning, the measures proposed from the highest level of European political and financial power were enforced in order to reduce spending while increasing taxes. Gradually, they have been intensified to the extent that they have hit the southern parts of Europe the most. As a consequence, the common people in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy (to mention but a few most vulnerable cases) were left in a helpless situation: without much space for existential maneuvers, facing financial debts, closure of their small businesses and the loss of their jobs, they have become desperate enough to take some radical measures. While the ones have been ‘adapting’ to the new situation, also by expressing publicly their anger and revolt against the novel living conditions imposed by force, the others have literally ‘taken their own lives’ – thus inscribing themselves into the current history of “increased suicidality amid economic crisis” (Economou et al. 2011). Without surprise, the public health experts kept arguing about the “effects of the 2008 recession on health” (Stuckler et al. 2011). At a recent meeting of the Health Working Group in the European Parliament, the health policy makers declared the state of European ‘mental health crisis’ due to the fact that “every 1% increase in unemployment correlates to a 0.8% rise in suicides” (European Parliament 2012: 10). Yet, the question remains: is the economy itself responsible for what psychiatrists and medical scientists usually tend to see as the symptoms of pathology pertinent to the so-called mental health crisis under recession? I oppose the rhetorical strength of such pathologizing discourses (in particular when it concerns the so-called economic suicides) inasmuch as I endeavor,

following Domoney, to turn our attention from the prevailing psychiatric and medico-scientific perspectives into another direction.

“I am not committing suicide, they are killing me!”⁸

Starting from the moment when the country had to face the imposed austerity measures. Domoney portrays Athens through his photographs and videos during the two-year period (between May 2010 and June 2012) around which his project principally revolves. He sees Athens as a European metropolis from which the idea of democracy has gradually faded away – despite being part of its ancient pride. Paradoxically, the notion of ‘Athenian democracy’ appears and reappears throughout the film by mode of its forceful disappearance “amongst escalating social unrest caused by the economic uncertainty, rising unemployment and the ever fading trust between the political classes and the population” (Domoney 2012). The opening scenes are centered on the general strike on May 5, 2010 that provoked clashes throughout the country while in Athens “scores of demonstrators tried to storm parliament, throwing rocks at police who responded with volleys of tear gas and stun grenades”.⁹ The story develops through imagery that exposes citizens’ continuous revolt against the local political authorities who (after the conclusion of official agreements with some of the most powerful transnational financial and political elites) allowed the austerity measures to take place in Greece.

A telling –and the most radical– example of such revolt was the death of Dimitris Christoulas, an elderly Greek citizen, who shot himself in April 2012 at the central Athens square (Syntagma) nearby the National Parliament. He did so in order “to ‘send a political message’ about the inequities of Greece’s crushing debt crisis”, as media reported.¹⁰ Domoney devotes a significant part in his film to this case, as commented by Dimitris Dalakoglou:

⁸ These words make part of the public farewell note left by Mr. Dimitris Christoulas. See an excerpt from Domoney’s film at *The Guardian*’s web page under the title “Greek mourners: it was not suicide, it was financial murder” (5 April 2012), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2012/apr/05/greek-mourners-suicide-video>.

⁹ See “Greek crisis: clashes across Greece as thousands protest against cuts”, *The Telegraph* (5 May 2010), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/greece/7681542/Greek-crisis-clashes-across-Greece-as-thousands-protest-against-cuts.html>.

¹⁰ See “Greek suicide seen as an act of fortitude as much as one of despair”, *The Guardian* (5 April 2012), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/05/greek-suicide-dimitris-christoulas-protest>.

The suicides in Greece are *financial murders*, so we get people who just go desperate, who cannot anymore afford the life, who see they cannot take it anymore, and they just jump from a roof or shoot themselves, like Dimitris Christoulas did. I think Christoulas was a very characteristic example of the kind of people who commit suicide in Greece: a retired pharmacist, who lived a life as a small business owner, with a university degree, and everything that everybody would expect – a decent lifestyle and a decent level of life. He was not someone who you would expect would be poor, but in his letter he wrote it would be soon that he would be searching for his food in the garbage. It's an example of the kind of people who commit suicide in Greece: *people who are losing everything which they thought they had achieved* (Domoney 2012; my emphasis).

Dalakoglou is straightforward when he comments 'financial suicides' in the context of "anti-systemic actions". However, he does not refer to death as an option; rather, he explicitly refers to people's innovative survival strategies in Greece (including the so-called potato movement) at the level of providing the necessary food supplies and products trade: "People start developing certain tactics in order to take care, by themselves, of their everyday life. [The potato movement] organizes the provision of food products, mostly potatoes but not only, which they buy directly from the farmer, without the intervention of brokers, supermarkets, etc." (Domoney 2012). He sees the light of hope exactly in the actions that could be recognized as 'anti-systemic' with regard to people's self-organizing methods and adds:

Within this dark period, within these dark times, there are a lot of things which are emerging, and in a way are giving hope. There are at the moment in Greece, twenty, I would say, non-monetary exchange systems. People start self-organizing themselves in order to address the urgency of everyday life. [...] What was manifested in the elections themselves, the fact that 40% of the voting body didn't bother to vote, implies that there is another, *anti-systemic world*, or a world that is completely outside the parliamentary politics (the high politics, the elite politics) which is going on today in Athens. *And unless this kind of anti-systemic force doesn't become bigger and doesn't develop more in ways that slowly create a system antagonistic to the dominant one, I think the future of Greece is very dark.* (Domoney 2012; my emphasis)

The 'logic of survival'

Evidently, the keynote to Domoney's film provides an interview with an anthropologist of Greek origin from the University of Sussex, Dimitris Dalakoglou, who interprets and

explains the situation in details. Dalakoglou's views are primarily centered on the issue of social segregation provoked by all the reasons mentioned above. What he describes, among other related issues, is the double configuration of actual physical violence in Athens –both economic and political– as it envelops around three main categories directly involved in the urban conflict: the 'people' (protesting citizens), the state (represented by the Parliament) and the banking system aligned with the state. Beside all of them, it is the police that takes the most intriguing role in the sense that it has a 'privilege' to exercise violence –in the name of the state– over the 'subjects' who dare to be on the streets and demonstrate against the sovereignty. The *economic violence* here merges with the threats of actual *physical violence* performed by police on behalf of the local political authorities. Hence, it is no wonder that those who decide to 'die in protest' (such as Dimitris Christoulas, to whom I will return) may do it in front of the Greek Parliament. Their act, doubtlessly tragic, does not exhaust its meaning in their commitment to the idea of performing a 'public suicide' for the sake of mere publicity or raising attention about their own ('single') case of despair; rather, it is their commitment to the *public cause* and to the question of *collective survival* that deserves our attention and respect. It encompasses the idea of opposing and denying the political structures that, while working against citizens' interests, bring bailout-package laws to 'save' the same people who are exposed to *police violence* as a proper form of *political (state) violence*.

In this context, Dalakoglou's arguments about the state of 'loss' give but a hint about how it feels to experience the actual 'financial crisis' in the Eurozone from the bottom-up perspective: "Suddenly, youth unemployment is over 50 per cent. [...] In Greece these days it is a hard life for the majority of the population, for the great majority of the population. People are losing their jobs, people are losing their homes, people are losing hope" (Domoney 2012). It seems as if the society of *loss* is replacing the society of *gain* and relegates any dream about survival –or about the society where one is able to survive, as the 'weeping man' would say– to the margins of mere utopia. The situation in Greece, as described here, resonates with a threatening imaginary about the collective submission of populations to the power of loss that has suddenly become real: when the 'loss' of everything ('everything' that the idea of a decent human life used to epitomize for them) starts equating the individual's uncertain chances for survival, the only certainty that comes to the fore seems to be the certainty of death itself. This logic conceives of the following formula, as I understand it: a 'lost society' becomes exposed to 'death' through its 'inability to survive', whereas this inability is due to an imposed set of external measures against the members of that society. For the one who assumes this logic to prevail in all spheres of social life, as I do in this paper (following Dalakoglou, among others), this corresponds with the idea of extermination: the kind of *destruction* that was formulated from another perspective as the sovereign logic of

survival, “which consists in wishing to *impose death on others* while preserving one’s own life” (Mbembe 2003: 37; my emphasis).

Achille Mbembe discusses this logic in a very different context, through the idea of martyrdom (self-sacrifice) on behalf of the anti-colonial freedom-fighters in contemporary Palestine. Here, the logic of martyrdom applies to the colonized and stands at the opposite side of the logic of survival, on behalf of the colonial sovereignty. Briefly, while the former is associated with the practice of so-called suicide bombers in terms of “my death [going] hand in hand with the death of the Others”, the latter is seen as the manifestation of sovereign power to decide about the colonized (‘the living dead’) in the sense that inverts the Foucauldian formula ‘to make live’ and ‘let die’ into the Mbembean formula ‘to let live’ and ‘make die’ (Grzanic 2013: 11). Accordingly, the logic of survival is “a moment of power [where] triumph develops precisely from the possibility of being there when the others (in this case the enemy) are no longer there. Such is the logic of heroism as classically understood: *to execute others while holding one’s own death at a distance*” (Mbembe 2003: 37; my emphasis).

At first instance, in his aspirations towards ‘a society where you are able to survive’, the ‘weeping man’ in Domoney’s film does not seem to pertain to either of these logics in the most direct way. Nonetheless, it is the logic of ‘survival’ itself (or its ‘austerity measures’, according to the neoliberal vocabulary) that pertains to this man as much as to his fellow citizens in a terrifyingly real sense. In the given context of Greek crisis, I see him as one among many ‘others’ upon which a moment of supranational financial and political power triumphs, to borrow Mbembe’s words, over the citizens’ bodies. They are inscribed into the ‘logic of survival’ (austerity measures) in a way that the question of humanness comes to the fore: the human beings become *sacrificed* on behalf of the austerity regime for the sake of financial markets’ survival and the longevity of global capital, not the other way round. Therefore, the austerity regime should be understood as the abstract form of government whose politics (as necropolitics) counts on human mortality in order to set its main objective: death itself. Or, to put it differently, what we are dealing with here is the very expansion of unrestrained market logic: its ‘universal rationality’ stands for the ultimate ruling authority of the Western man –allegedly deprived of ‘death’ (Schumacher 2011) – whereas such an expansion evolves along the ongoing matrix of colonial/capitalist/racial power across the ‘living dead’, always at the expense of dignified human life. This brings together the main protagonists of ‘economic suicides’, ‘protest suicides by self-immolation’ and Palestinian ‘suicide bombing’: the necropower hovering upon them has the ‘ultimate privilege’ to impose death at its whim, while it can equally exercise sovereign power by decisions to *postpone death* of a ‘living dead’ insofar as it suits its ‘evangelical’ morality centered on the sanctity of human life (as in the case of assisted suicides).

The power pertaining to such politics –or necropower for short, in Mbembe’s terms– lies in weapons “deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the

creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (Mbembe 2003: 40). These weapons can be either symbolic (financial measures) or, as earlier exposed by Daniel Cohn Bendit and Zara Vangenkecht, they can be very much real. It is also in relation to such policies (where weaponry trade is involved within the context of European ‘economic crisis’ for real) that I recall Mbembe’s theory of death-politics when focusing on contemporary Greek ‘debtocracy’. Beside the imposed financial measures as an indirect (‘symbolic’) instrument of human destruction, we also need to consider the market-driven motivations for direct involvement of actual weaponry trade through “the figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and material destruction of human bodies and population” (Mbembe 2003: 14). This destruction becomes the very central project of contemporary sovereign power in the space where necropower rules, and where the name of politics is exchanged for the name of death: “death that lives a human life” (Mbembe 2003: 15). As Mbembe points out (“on the basis of a distinction between reason and unreason”) in his critique of the “normative theories of democracy” and “normative reading of the politics of sovereignty”:

Contemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that it is possible to develop a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity. Instead of considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death (Mbembe 2003: 13-14).

Following this line of thought, there are three possible options for our ‘weeping man’ (or the ‘weeping society’ at large) in terms of ‘survival’ he aspires to. According to the first option, the ‘weeping man’ must be wrong: if the society he dreams of is ‘a society where you are able to survive’, then the ‘logic of survival’ (as Mbembe defines it) is bad and counter-productive for him. This is because it entails the survival of the sovereign at the expense of his/her subjects, not the survival of the subjects themselves: it is a *negative* ‘logic of survival’, so to say, which only satisfies the necropolitical power, not the humankind as such. According to the second option, he may be right insofar as the society he dreams of (i.e., ‘a society where you are able to survive’) implies a *positive* logic of survival, on the opposite side of the sovereign spectrum where Mbembe’s definition of the ‘logic of survival’ resides in its triumph of negativity. This may signify the continuation of life or existence ‘especially in spite of danger or hardship’ (as earlier proposed) where ‘to survive’ also means *to resist* the sovereign ‘logic of survival’. Following the previous two options, a third possibility may be introduced: if ‘to survive’ denotes something positive, it means to embrace the *logic of resistance* in order to oppose

the sovereign 'logic of survival' (which corresponds to thanatopolitical power). In Mbembe's vocabulary, this is a legitimate option and pertains to the *logic of martyrdom*. It also gets closer to Stuart J. Murray's understanding of thanatopolitics as a positive and constructive force that 'death' could bring outside of Western biopolitical ideology centered on 'life' (or its darker, necropolitical side behind the biopolitical mask, which is centered on sovereign's imposition of death onto its subjects). How does this thanatopolitical configuration of death-power apply to the current Greek situation and the so-called economic suicides?

Taking one's own death vis-à-vis taking one's own life

An assumption regarding the logic of martyrdom is valid in the context of the 'Eurozone crisis' insofar as we can expect from the 'weeping society' of the European South to take such a logic in its less radical sense (i.e., not under the credo that 'my death [goes] hand in hand with the death of the Others', as characteristic of the Palestinian type of resistance) but in its more 'solitary' version. This means that the 'suicidal' death of a 'weeping man' could be expected to come about on an individual basis without necessarily killing the others in the act – which is what has already been happening throughout Greece (and not only there) in the most recent period, as Dimitris Christoulas' case confirms.

Andy Dabilis describes this case in the international Greek news portal in English (GreekReporter) in an overview of most intriguing public events that marked the year 2012 in the country. He starts – expectedly enough – with the negative perspectives on austerity bailouts and ends with a warning insight into the rapidly increasing unemployment. The significance of Christoulas' death in the given context is also highlighted with respect to the choice of venue where it occurred ("under a tree in Athens' main center of Syntagma Square [...] across the street from the Parliament"). Nonetheless, the outreach of Christoulas' gesture was supposedly meant to be much bigger than it actually was: "It seemed the world finally realized how much weight ordinary Greeks were under [...] and it seemed his death would galvanize a movement. It didn't happen, *but the shot still resonates* (Dabilis 2012; my emphasis).¹¹

¹¹ Dabilis, Andy. "The 12 Events that bent Greece in 2012", December 29, 2012. Online. Accessed March 4, 2014. See more at: <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2012/12/29/the-12-events-that-bent-greece-in-2012/#sthash.9XCguYdJ.dpuf>.

Even though the Christoulas' gesture did not galvanize a movement, as noted hereby, the shot certainly resonates and its echo is more than evident in Domoney's film. In the aftermath of the event, the groups of Athenians, brought together around the venue where Christoulas died, are shown in tears while applauding. I understand this gesture of applauding as a way of acknowledging not death itself but the principles behind which it occurred: a tribute to the 'living dead' (one among many in Greece at the period) who used his own death to amplify his personal voice on behalf of the collective, against injustice of the politico-financial alliances to which the Greeks have been submitted at large. That Christoulas considered himself as a 'living dead' confirm the words in his last public note, where he wrote explicitly that "the Tsolakoglou government *has annihilated all traces for my survival*, which was based on a very dignified pension that I alone paid for 35 years with no help from the state".¹² Additionally, Christoulas did not leave any space for speculations around his motives to die: his urge for a 'dignified end to my life' was clearly pronounced ("I see no other solution than this dignified end to my life, so I do not find myself fishing through garbage cans for my sustenance"), while placing the accent onto the very question of one's humanness in the given situation and the issue of dignity therein.

Hence, the reactions that his words and his act provoked among the Athenians are not surprising. The citizens united the same day at the spot where he died – and applauded. They applauded in front of the tree, in a way to recognize the self-sacrifice of their community-member and to pay a tribute to his act, committed for the reasons that all of them already shared or could have potentially shared. The applause was a response of approval to the last words of the dead, but also to the 'irrationality' behind his act. I see it as a small public gift in return for the highest stake that Christoulas took in order to show the readiness of a 'powerless' individual to confront – by his own death – the system of power or necropower itself: the regime of collective death that systematically annihilates the traces of populations' survival while regulating a massive production of the 'living dead'. Taking one's own death into one's own hands from the necropower's sovereign dominion over mortality was for Christoulas a way to exercise a

¹² Christoulas here recalls the name of Georgios Tsolakoglou (1886-1948), a historical political figure from the Greek not so long past, who "headed the Greek collaborationist government during the German occupation of Greece in the Second World War", as stated by *The 4th Media* on April 5, 2012 in their report "Greek Pensioner's Last Words: Greek Government's Fate Similar to Mussolini" (see more at: <http://www.4thmedia.org/2012/04/05/greek-pensioners-last-words-greek-governments-fate-similar-to-mussolini>). This was intentional in the sense that it draws the clear line of comparison between the earlier nazi/fascist regime(s) and the policies of contemporary Greek government, characterized again as 'collaborationist', during the 'financial occupation' of Greece by the transnational monetary and political magnates at the time of Christoulas' last days. For the full text of Dimitris Christoulas's 'suicide note', translated from Greek to English, see the RT online report "Pensioner shoots himself at Greek Parliament, refuses to 'search for food in garbage'" from April 4, 2012, accessed March 4, 2014. <http://rt.com/news/greece-suicide-218/>.

sort of radical “anti-systemic action” (as Dalakoglou names the phenomenon) or what I preferably call the *radical withdrawal*.

Dalakoglou’s (revolutionary) call for mobilization of people’s self-organized forces – that could counter-balance, if growing prudently, the dominance of the system at place–ascribes, to a certain extent, the anti-systemic value onto the *extremely antagonistic* position that Christoulas himself, among many other Greeks, undertook in order to manifest the common desire of his national community for the urgent shift of balance: between the ‘power of the people’ (i.e., ‘democracy’ in Greek) and the power of the state (i.e., necropower, as I here present it). It is true that Christoulas’ death did not ‘galvanize a movement’, but it is not to be forgotten that popular movements in Greece have already been taking place around the time of his death, ever since the beginning of austerity regime in the country. Many of them have included the forms of insurgency through an open counter-violence (or ‘anti-systemic violence’) against the political (state) violence – here associated with the police violence (as Dalakoglou defines it in Domoney’s film). However, I see his case primarily as an example for what Murray suggests in relation to the positive/productive/constructive aspects of thanatopolitics. When using his own death to have the pressing ethical demands sharpened and brought into focus, Christoulas found the way to confront the transnational necropower: by claiming his own right to death, he claimed his *right to look* at the sovereign from a countervisual perspective of a mere human being ‘waiting with death’ (as Biehl would say). Christoulas died not only due to the hardships of everyday life, the dark projections into the even worse future and the despair thus invoked: he could have died in privacy for the same reasons, without exposing himself in death to his fellow citizens in front of the Greek parliament. What he wanted to achieve was calling for action by conveying a political message, both to his co-citizens (the local community, so to say) and to their common ruling authorities (the state itself). As Michael Biggs (2008: 27) points out:

Those who commit *protest suicide* understand the act to be an exchange between themselves and those around them [in demand for] a response from those affected by them; [hence] self-immolation relies on the public’s understanding of their obligation to respond – *if the public sees the suicide as an isolated act, rather than an exchange, it fails as a call to action.* (my emphasis)

With regard to the local community, Christoulas’ message was political in the sense that it imprints a powerful and militant warning to the present and, especially, to the future generations of Athenians: not to allow for the same situation to happen ever again if the similar culprits can be timely avoided; otherwise, “young people without a future will one day take up arms and hang the traitors upside down in Syntagma Square, as the Italians did to Mussolini in 1945”, as Christoulas himself wrote in his ‘suicide note’ (RT

News/The Athens News 2012). According to the same source, the Athenians remained neither indifferent nor deaf to his message:

In the wake of the tragedy, the Greek community issued calls for a ‘Syntagma afternoon.’ Over two thousand people signed up to an event announced via Facebook: ‘Everyone at Syntagma. Let’s not get used to death.’ In the evening, hundreds of protesters made their way across the street from the square to outside Parliament and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, chanting: ‘*This was not a suicide, it was a state-perpetrated murder*’ and ‘Blood flows and seeks revenge’.¹³

With regard to the local ruling authority, his message was political in terms of addressing the political representatives at the Parliament themselves: those who, although having been reluctant to listen to the people, still might be able to react to one’s death in order to inverse the situation for the better and for the sake of the Greek population at large. It was also political as it was meant to blame the same authorities for what they have done so far, most notably by accepting the external monetary policy, instituting the austerity regime, and increasing the ‘human cost’ therein – instead of providing alternative solutions for the people’s benefit: strengthening the national system of social security, or providing “active labor market programs” (McKee et al. 2012) as it happened to be the case in some Northern European countries (Stuckler et al. 2011: 125). Christoulas’ choice of venue was, therefore, not arbitrary at all; rather it was meant to be (as it was, indeed) the physical position right in front of the most representative public authority in ‘democratic’ systems of governance (the state parliament), which also grounds the personal, ethical and political position from which one intends to address the public and to expose such a position publicly (i.e., to make it visible despite the general conditions of invisibility) through ‘communicative suffering’.

The people’s statement that ‘this was not a suicide but a state-perpetrated murder’ is further supported by what Christoulas allegedly said just before dying: “I am not committing suicide, they are killing me!” (Gr. Δεν αυτοκτονώ, με σκοτώνουν!).¹⁴ In either case, whether a ‘financial murder’ in Dalakoglou’s terms or a ‘state-perpetrated murder’ (as suggested above), Christoulas’ death has been interpreted by the Greeks themselves as an *unequivocal political act*. This was also clearly pronounced by his daughter in her address to the local media: “My father’s handwritten note leaves no room for misinterpretation. His whole life was spent as a leftist fighter, a selfless visionary. This final act was a *conscious political act*, entirely consistent with what he

¹³ See the RT online report “Pensioner shoots himself at Greek Parliament, refuses to ‘search for food in garbage’” from April 4, 2012, accessed March 4, 2014. <http://rt.com/news/greece-suicide-218/>.

¹⁴ According to the Greek daily news web-portal *Espresso*, April 4, 2012. Accessed on January 21, 2014. <http://www.espressonews.gr/περιεχόμενο/65049/δεν-αυτοκτονώ-με-σκοτώνουν>.

believed and did in his life”.¹⁵ Curiously enough, I have not encountered the definition of his death in terms of the so-called ‘suicide as a political act’, the construction to which I will return at the very end of this thesis. Besides, the ‘unimaginable’ presence of a Greek Orthodox churchman at the site of Christoulas’ death, repeatedly shown in images across the media reporting on the event, is but another (visual) sign of ultimately non-suicidal nature of the act (given the ‘obligatory’ and traditional stigma on behalf of clerical authorities in the cases of ‘suicidal death’, now missing).¹⁶

Yet, if it was a political act indeed, should we consider it as a definitely non-suicidal act? Could it be that Christoulas’ death was an in-direct political homicide (executed by financial and/or state powers)? Or should we rather observe it through what some scholars call ‘suicide as a political act’ (Lester 1990)? Understanding Christoulas’ death beyond this dichotomy –which is where my argument aims– is but an attempt to understand it as an anti-systemic, counter-hegemonic and extreme form of withdrawal from the dominant system of necropower, that is: *a radical withdrawal* from necropolitics (the politics that claims its own right to populations of the ‘living dead’, stripped off their dignity or with their ‘traces of survival’ annihilated, as Christoulas himself wrote). I see such a withdrawal happening on the grounds of one’s own decision to take the thanatopolitical potentiality of death into one’s own hands –against the necropolitical potentiality in the hands of sovereign power– for the sake of the community to which he/or she belongs, and for the sake of its (better) future. I see it also as a personal attempt to change the existent balance of power between the governing and the governed, not by ‘giving up one’s own life’ but by giving away one’s own status of the ‘living dead’ – in full view of the public. This is not done out of ‘pathological despair’ but out of the need for personal action that could stop further exploitation of humankind allowing the financial capital to survive. Christoulas did it for the sake of present and upcoming generations of people who should not ‘deserve’ to inherit the same status of the ‘living dead’ – instead, they should keep up to their dignity of living, promised by democracy itself, which further grounds my arguments about the *thanatopolitical self-sacrificial revolt of radical withdrawal* against necropolitics in general and against necrocapitalism in particular.

¹⁵ See: Palash Gosh, “Greece: Economic Crisis Sparks Surge In Suicides”, *International Business Times*, May 16, 2012, online. Accessed March 4, 2014. <http://www.ibtimes.com/greece-economic-crisis-sparks-surge-suicides-698703>. Surprisingly enough, most of the data I am referring to here, with regard to the post-mortem interpretations of Christoulas’ death, have ‘vanished’ from their original source (The Athens News, an English-language media portal focused on Greece and the Greek capital in particular), while their traces are to be found elsewhere, most notably in independent web news editions (where the *International Business Times* seems to make but an exception).

¹⁶ The Network for Freelance Photojournalists contains one of those images on its webpage: http://static3.demotix.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/a_scale_large/1900-1/photos/1365104374-memorial-held-one-year-after-suicide-of-greek-crisis-victim_1932971.jpg (accessed January 31, 2014).

Necrocapitalism, ‘Suicidal Movement’, and the Economy of Destruction Today

A ‘weeping man’ in Domoney’s film dreams of survival. Surviving in the context of the most recent period of neoliberal globalization is inseparable from the notion of necrocapitalism: it stands for the ultimate sovereignty conferring the status of ‘living dead’ to populations hit by ‘economic crisis’. It also denotes an essential connection between two basic elements: death on the one hand, and the ruling authority of neoliberalism on the other. The latter is here understood in terms of a political and economic world-system whose modern/colonial/capitalist matrix of power has been ongoing since the inception of European colonial expansion overseas and the beginnings of capitalist modes of production and exploitation (of people, lands, natural resources, and so on). The term derives from two words: *necro-* (the Greek prefix signifying a relation to death) and *capitalism* (the English term for an economic system). The concept of necrocapitalism (Banerjee 2006, 2008, 2011; Härting 2006; Gržinić 2009, 2012) as I use it here implies an intertwining relationship between two systems of production: the *growth of financial capital* which runs parallel to the *growth of human death* forced by the logic of market-dynamics. Furthermore, global financial growth and economic accumulation of goods develop not only in parallel but precisely *through* the global growth of dying and the increasing worldwide production of death. Due to the fact that human beings in such conditions may be treated as disposable artifacts, necrocapitalism is able to make the maximum use of them through the market-dynamics centered on ‘people-objects’: being no more valuable for such a system once they are fully exploited, they become ‘qualified’ for that form of social existence that Biehl properly calls the ‘abandonados’ (the ‘living dead’). In terms of one of its foremost theoreticians, Subhabrata Banerjee, the concept of necrocapitalism implies “contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death” (Banerjee 2008: 1541): hence, necrocapitalist practices pertain “to different forms of power – institutional, material, and discursive–operating in the political economy [and] implying dispossession, marginalization, violence, and death”.

Banerjee’s concept of necrocapitalism is rooted in two basic premises: on the one hand, he refers to the notions of sovereignty and biopower/necropower as previously developed by Agamben, Foucault and, most notably, Mbembe; on the other, he develops his own inquiry around all the more pervading interconnections between the dominant world-system (the neoliberal political economy in its historical/colonial sense, nowadays only extended and further enforced) and its extreme forms of control, through which the humankind has been systematically subjugated to the power of

negativity in the sense that “some contemporary capitalist practices lead to dispossession, marginalization and death of certain populations” (Banerjee 2011). He treats necrocapitalism as a system conceived and put into force by the forms of organization and management that are based upon the *logic of accumulation*. This has less to do with the classical notion of capital accumulation as one of capitalism’s central elements (beside competitive markets and price dynamics). Instead, Banerjee proposes an alternative reading of the logic of accumulation: it involves the ‘materialization’ of human beings in relation to violence, in a way that highlights the production of (violent) death –including suicide– alongside the growth of the (violent) economic system:

While acknowledging the existence of different types of capitalisms in today’s political economy, I define necrocapitalism as specific capitalist practices or modes of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession, death, torture, *suicide*, slavery, destruction of livelihoods and the general organization and management of violence. (Banerjee 2011; my emphasis)

In other words, death –in terms of its systematic and systematically violent production and re-production by necropower– has been one of the main features of the neoliberal system as we experience it nowadays ever since the inception of capitalist mode of production, i.e., the ‘primitive accumulation’ preceding the industrial capitalism. Banerjee here recalls Marx’s description of primitive accumulation, also in relation to David Harvey’s description of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003, in Banerjee 2008: 1548). The relation between primitive and contemporary forms of accumulation, as Banerjee names them, is here crucial for a greater understanding of the relation between the old and actual patterns of imperialism itself. While recalling the origins of colonial conquests of territories and people (what he calls “the Sword of Commerce,” with the British Empire’s East India Company being a primary example in that regard), Banerjee is aware of the differences between the forms of organizational accumulation in colonial and post-colonial epochs. However, he stresses out the fact about the perseverance of fundamental strategies employed by both empires and modern nation-states in reaching their resource-and-profit-motivated goals thanks to the imperialist matrix of power, in either case (empires and modern nation-states) enabled by adequate military forces. What remains blurred nowadays is the actual borderline between two types of authority (public and private, state and market) whose exercise of sovereignty, pervaded by the logic of private ownership, is reinforced exactly by *private* military forces (which perpetuates the interventionist logic as described by Wallerstein in the first chapter of my thesis). When Banerjee writes about military interventions in the name of necrocapitalism, he refers to private forces contracted by transnational corporations in the zones of conflict (Iraq, for example) that are characterized by

“outsourcing of the ‘War on Terror’ [via] corporate warriors and the privatized military industry” (Singer 2004, in Banerjee 2006) and adds further:

The state played a crucial role both in the development of primitive accumulation and its transformation to industrial capitalism. From the days of the British Empire, where the East India Company conquered territories, pillaged lands, enslaved populations and set up colonial outposts to serve king and country, to the emergence of the modern sovereign nation-state and its organizational accumulator, the transnational corporation, military strength was always an enabling factor of the accumulation process. In the postcolonial era, the nation-state as the only legitimate purveyor of violence continues to play a key role in the accumulation process. However, the lines between state authority and market authority are not clearly defined: powerful market actors like transnational corporations often have their own ‘police’ or use private militias to ‘protect’ their assets in the Third World. (Banerjee 2011)

Banerjee does not entirely equate colonial and postcolonial patterns of accumulation; instead, he recognizes “old patterns of imperialism [that] can be seen in the dominance of neoliberal policies in today’s global political economy” (Banerjee 2011). He draws a clear historical line of continuation between the First Capitalist World and the Third World, whose ongoing dependency has taken novel forms of exploitation and sovereignty, yet under the same, illegitimate rules of the “economic extraction business”.¹⁷ In either case, death has become an inevitable and essential element upon which the system itself continues to succeed in producing and reproducing its managerial and organizational logic of accumulation. The accumulation of death, being one of the increasingly evident manifestations and results of the politics of coercion, imposed by the necrocapitalist system, has also become ‘vital’ for the system’s own survival: its own existence is thus organized and maintained by sovereignty whose ultimate expression resides, once again, “in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003: 11).

Banerjee’s arguments coincide, to a certain extent, with what the Croatian philosopher Lino Veljak calls “the economy of destruction” associated with the “civilizational decay” (Veljak 2012). In one of his recent interviews (“Europe to fall into barbarism”), he points out that death, with respect to the context of economic

¹⁷ In that sense, Banerjee points out: “Transnational corporations often wield power over Third World countries through their enticements of foreign investment and their threats to withhold or relocate their investments. In return for foreign investments and jobs, corporations are able to extract from impoverished and often corrupt Third World governments tax concessions, energy and water subsidies, minimal environmental legislation, minerals and natural resources, a compliant labor force and the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) which are essentially states of exception where the law is suspended in order for the business of economic extraction to continue”.

hardships, concerns common citizens who turned to be “people on the edge, invisible people” whereas their invisibility comes due to

banking policies, industrial downfalls, the failure of secondary and tertiary business activities so they are forced to live on the street. Their jobs have disappeared or were suppressed by younger and more capable workers on the labor market. There are also many who live in seemingly decent housings but without electricity because they are not able to pay the bills.¹⁸

He sees them as “collateral victims of an absolute freedom of the market and an absolute freedom on behalf of the employers to impose their own conditions to employees” (Veljak 2012). In his view, this process of de-industrialization runs parallel to an overall civilizational and cultural decay which he calls a “suicidal movement”. The reason why it occurs to such a dramatic extent is connected to “policies, implemented for the exclusive benefit of those *anonymous centers of world power*, which are represented by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, a kind of politics that is in the interests of local tycoons, who are of course in conjunction with these international centers” (Veljak 2012). Additionally, Veljak considers the fact that the European social democracy “instead of finding a third way between the *étatisme* and the neo-liberalism, surrendered in front of the neoliberal, self-destructive policies” which is

what we see going on today in the southern countries of the EU, the so-called debt crisis, and it seriously threatens the survival of the entire EU. But the main problem is, in fact, in the inability to establish a global plan bumper against the complete dominance of these anonymous centers of financial power, which hold the most important countries in the world in the position of hostages [...] So the basic question: Does humanity have the strength to resist these *self-destructive tendencies in the field of profits*, which are based on the senseless type of exchange, and do something that will bring the idea of the European Union to a renewal, and which will prevent the crises, such as those in Greece, Portugal, Spain, and most recently in Slovenia, from the formula of repetition and reinforcement. [...] And because of that, while there is still some time left, we need the *democratic laws* to restrict the ability of the capital's irresponsible spending, to exclude the ability of stock speculation and to impose radical taxes upon those who earn more than decent annual wages (Veljak 2012; my emphasis).

¹⁸ See: Lino Veljak, “Evropa pred padom u varvarstvo,” *Danas*, accessed on March 27, 2014, http://www.danas.rs/dodaci/nedelja/plave_strane/lino_veljak_evropa_pred_padom_u_varvarstvo.45.html?news_id=244573.

Significantly enough, Veljak argues that “the one who earns more than decent wages cannot do anything else but investing the same money into the *suicide of a humankind*” (Veljak 2012). This concerns the same people against whom the radical tax measures should be implemented, as Veljak points out. But before this could ever happen, what must precede is making the Emperor acknowledge his own ‘nakedness’ in front of the people:

As much as Comrade Stalin used to have the absolute truth –and we know that this, of course, was a lie because of the interests defended by the Soviet nomenclature and its expansionist policy pursued by the Soviet Union under Stalin– so it is also true that a financial speculator who has ‘legally’ earned his money has the right to do whatever he wants in an undisputable manner, even if a few million people have to die because of him, which is what happens every day (Veljak 2012).

Banerjee’s inquiry –here supported by Mbembe’s groundbreaking work on necropolitics– and Veljak’s insights into the so-called suicidal movement of contemporary necrocapitalism ‘strip bare’ the sovereignty of neoliberal capitalism to the extent where the sovereign power must admit its own ‘nakedness’ in front of the people: its exclusionary political economy as the politics of death or necrocapitalism for short. This, however, demands a radical shift of perspective about the world-system itself. Once this takes place, it would be easier to understand why so-called ‘economic suicides’ need to be analyzed under different terms and, also, why the increasing number of self-destructive deaths should no more be perceived within the ‘suicidal’ logic (which nurtures necrocapitalism itself, not its victims). Instead, the reversal of ‘suicidal’ logic into self-sacrificial forms of defense should prevail in our conceptions about victims, ‘the already dead’, who –under conditions of necropower and its death-regulating control– *claim their right over their own deaths in the name of a better (decent) life for the generations of humankind to come*. This makes their acts properly thanatopolitical.

If we would be able to take such a perspective –in order to perceive the world around us accordingly– then there is still some chance to believe that sovereign (similarly to Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes”) could also be willing to admit to himself that he is simply ‘naked’, instead of keeping being flattered by an illusion of possessing the knowledge of ultimate truth that allows him to exercise control over death from the position of ultimate ‘epistemic authority’ (within ‘ultimately the most humane system possible’, or so-called democracy). If this could ever be realized, once the Emperor’s clothes are off there will be no more reason for a human being to defend his or her death from any necropower. Finally, in such a world (you may even call it *democratic*) the human life could be lived in ‘a society where you are able to survive’ – the society where stories about the Brazilian *abandonados* and the Greek ‘weeping man’ would be relegated to the dark side of humankind’s history in

order not to be repeated ever again. If the definition of 'life' under necrocapitalism equates Biehl's definition of Vita (by which he implies "the end-station on the road of poverty, the place where living beings go when they are no longer considered people")¹⁹ then the thanatopolitical practice of self-sacrifice represents a counter-position to that form of life. Whenever a 'democratic' system (the 'power of the people') turns into its opposite –when it hijacks power from people so they become transformed into the 'living dead'– for us, the 'weeping men' of the South, such a democracy is not the society we are dreaming of. To have a better society –and better dreams of its future– what we need is a radically different experience of actual 'democracy' itself: because the experience of actual European 'democracy' is the political experience of social death where so-called 'economic suicides' might be the last signal to show what the 'power of the people' looks like: when justice is nothing but its opposite – that 'what is good for the ruling authority' or 'what is good for the stronger'.

Conclusion: European 'abandonados'

Contemporary Europe provides but a drastic example to João Biehl's arguments regarding the ongoing matrix of death-power where social segregation, from a trans-Atlantic perspective, comes to the fore. In the most recent historical period the South European *abandonados* have taken a different form of appearance in comparison to their South Brazilian counter-parts. They are not only largely provoked by failures of the US real-estate mortgage market, but they epitomize a paradigmatic turn of economic power attuned with the downfall of a globally interconnected neoliberal 'immunity-system' since around the year 2007.

This system itself has been most notably represented by the global centers of financial power (multinational corporations, the banking system at large and –unavoidably– the political authorities of the nation-states altogether). With the increase of so-called national sovereign-debts and the advent of a so-called global economic crisis, the state-abandoned workers and small business employers have been facing their own 'most extreme misfortune' which transformed them into the 'living dead'. It implies an increase of unemployment among the potential, new working force coupled with the massive, ongoing loss of actual job positions for former workers throughout Europe. This triggered an overall existential instability among the huge amounts of

¹⁹ See *Vita: Photo Essay*, accessed February 5, 2014. http://joaobiehl.net/vita/photo_essay/

populations, most notably in the South, and evolved to the extent that an adequate institutional care –in terms of social security and adequate labor-market programs– should have been installed as the prime demand for local governments. Surprisingly enough, this has been lacking so far (at least in the southern European zones such as Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy, to name but a few countries) while the new requests towards the public healthcare have increased. This allowed for the current state of affairs to be perceived not only through the prism of economic crisis but, moreover, of a ‘mental health crisis’ (as I pointed out in the previous chapter; see: European Parliament 2012: 10).

Everyday lives of the working communities have been rapidly and often tragically transformed due to numerous reasons. The vacant job positions, drastic cuts of the basic living expenditures, the loss of housing properties, and the accumulated personal debts have all contributed to the people’s progressive despair in liminal situations – to the extent of bringing a radical ‘solution’ to their mind and, consequently, contributing to the rise of so-called economic suicides. The conversion of individual despair, when multiplied, turns the ‘suicidal’ deaths into a social destruction at large. This has been so common in the European South that, given Biehl’s exemplary case of Vita, ‘life’ (another name for the Latin term *vita*) has become “the word for a life that is socially dead, a destiny of death that is collective” (Biehl 2001: 135). What has been going on in the last few years in that direction –due to the imposed austerity regime (across Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, and France but also Bulgaria and Ireland, among other EU-countries)– has provoked drastic changes in citizens’ everyday lives under the gradual process of neoliberal economic collapse into the state of evident ‘crisis.’

In this line of thought, I see the ‘economic crisis’ as just another term that masks or overshadows something else: a clear evidence of what I would preferably call the necro-governance over humanness. This term frames the process of control through which the sovereign redistribution of ‘democratic justice’ (including the supranational bailout packages to ‘save the people’ from financial hardships) falls into injustice and death-production: a continuous, ‘contaminating,’ and largely diffused wave of dying for which, like in Brazilian Vita, “there is no direct legal accountability [and] the notion of a perpetrator or killer has also been suspended” (Biehl 2001: 134). The unemployed, the recently dismissed, the new homeless: they constitute the most novel (South) European ‘class’ of impoverished, humiliated and dishonored citizens, those who are ready to ‘take their own lives’ into their own hands by turning a pistol against their head, jumping from skyscrapers or even burning themselves in public. In either case, on the other side of power line, the ‘invisible’ perpetrators (among the ‘anonymous’ centers of financial power) have so far escaped their own accountability for ‘taking life’ from the citizens: not in terms of *letting* them die but precisely in terms of *making* them die.

If “vita means life in a dead language” (Biehl 2001: 132), then the language of death might have been the way, for those citizens, to publicly communicate the extent of their

extreme misfortune and suffering as a public thing (*res publica*), which is aligned with the level of injustice to which they have been directly or indirectly exposed. To communicate one's own death is to send a message that must be of concern to those in charge of social death – many deaths – and, thus, it must be part of the official political agenda. However, some recent cases confirm the opposite: in the aftermath of Dimitrios Christoulas' death, a spokesman of the Greek government (according to the news) “described the incident as ‘a human tragedy,’ but said it should not become part of political debate.”²⁰ How is this possible?

So far, the silence of the nation-states and transnational governments has been broken only by voices that, in their respective public health domains, keep perpetuating the quantitative and statistical data while calling for ‘suicide prevention’ measures and related ‘mental health’ public policies (i.e., life-regulating technologies), always in the name of medico-scientific ‘universal’ reason. Hence, on the one hand, a human tragedy (and not a single one in the context here discussed) ‘should not become part of political debate’; on the other hand, the many voices of public health experts and suicide-prevention institutes have been amplified so much (concerning the ‘effects of economic crisis on mental health’) that they have increasingly saturated the top political agendas, especially when it comes to the public investments in ‘economics of prevention’ (as discussed in the earlier article). Under such conditions, one of my conclusions is as follows: if the potential or actual victims themselves are ‘not to become part of the political debate’, if the voices of the ‘living dead’ are not to be heard by the parliamentarians or public instances at large, then it should not come as a huge surprise that their self-orchestrated deaths increasingly become loud and “costly signals” (Biggs 2005). Despite so-called bailout packages, the citizens’ urge for public attention (which is missing, if one excludes the sensationalist media reports about ‘economic suicides’) concerns the collapse of everyday life into the forms of social existence known as the ‘living dead’. Citizens’ ‘suicidal’ deaths under austerity regime amplify their voice against an overall political and social apathy that makes the lives of the living closer to death before the death itself occurs.²¹

²⁰ See: http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57409263/elderly-greek-kills-self-in-busy-athens-square/

²¹ If personal ‘death’ can send the message, which otherwise could not be conveyed, to those in charge of political decisions, it turns into a form of “communicative suffering” (Biggs 2003) that recalls the necro-colonial and necro-capitalist dimensions of power that turned the lives of Mr. Petrakkis or Mr. Campaniello into the ‘living dead’ (as I described in the previous article). Similarly, I have observed the cases of Quang Duc, Craig Ewert, and Palestinian ‘suicide bombers’ as examples of humanness exposed to sovereign death-power, i.e., reduced to the status closer to death than to a decent life: this provoked their respective reactions against such conditions by their claims to have the right over their own death instead of having themselves ‘simply killed’. What makes a difference between the two – giving oneself to the sovereign power of death (necropolitics and/or disguised ‘biopolitics’) and taking one’s own death into one’s own hands (thanatopolitics) lies in the power of the latter to publicly claim justice through self-sacrifice.

In this sense, it is worth recalling Biehl's suggestion that we must understand death, "the experience of social death [as] a *socially authorized death, mundane and unaccounted for*" (Biehl 2001: 134; my emphasis). We must understand what he calls "the death's job" (either in the South of Brazil during the 1990s, or in the South of Europe during the late 2000s and early 2010s) whenever dying is "constituted in the interaction of modern human institutions" (Biehl 2001: 134) that remain bereft of any direct legal accountability. By 'institutions' he means: family, city, and the state, most notably "the police, the psychiatric and general hospitals, the families and neighbors" (Biehl 2001: 131). Whenever human beings are treated as 'mortal materials', as disposable living resources, their ways of dying under such conditions are exemplary for "the machinery of social death" (Biehl 2001: 136). Accordingly, we must "give death the place in reality and in our thought that is its due" (Biehl 2001: 134), because this death and this sickness – produced, constantly reproduced and managed by a symbiosis of various institutional powers – are inseparable from the system of political economy and its logic of free (unlimited) market. In its unlimited circulation, the market logic extends across the very domain of one's life in terms of neoliberalism's self-proclaimed right to exercise total control over the bodies of its subjects. Similarly, as it has been pointed out by some decolonial thinkers, such 'rights' could be understood as belonging to the "(global) coloniality of power" (Quijano 2000), that is, "the imperial/colonial organization of societies" (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2009: 132). This applies to the 1990s Brazil and the contemporary EU as prominently as it concerns a variety of death-forms following the 'market dynamics' of the same power around the world (the *abandonados*, the Palestinians, the homeless, the unemployed, the dismissed, the 'Southerners', and so on). This is only to conclude that "society operates through market dynamics; and the logic of the market is such that *if one is no longer useful one is worth nothing*" (Biehl 2001: 135).

Chapter 15

Radical Withdrawal: Necropolitics, Capitalismo Gore, and Other Kinds of Life

What is the political rationality and, accordingly, specific historical constellation of powers upon which contemporary theoretical debates about life and death are currently taking shape? Similarly, one could also ask how and why such debates differ from related theoretical concerns developed throughout the last four decades, most notably since Michel Foucault's 'invention' of biopolitics at the Collège de France in 1970s Paris.

This is only one among many possible questions that I would like to pose at the very outset of this paper. It explicitly tackles the configuration of relationships pertaining to the concepts of life, death, and politics. If the exercise of sovereign power depends precisely upon the technical apparatus administering a populations' life and death, what interests me the most within such a configuration is the status of suicide: not only what is generally conceived by this term from a normative medico-juridical and scientific Western perspective (defined by the World Health Organization as "the act of deliberately killing oneself [whereas] risk factors for suicide include mental disorder (such as depression, personality disorder, alcohol dependence, or schizophrenia), and some physical illnesses, such as neurological disorders, cancer, and HIV infection") but any possible alternatives to it focused specifically upon the recently coined phenomenon of 'suicides by economic crisis.'

Therefore, my preliminary question can also be re-phrased in the following way: what does a specific political rationality signify today in the context of theoretical debates around life and death since the turn of the new millennium? Here I want to point out the particular meaning of contemporary political rationality, understood as the matrix of ongoing colonial power, the function of which extends beyond the contemporary political economy, including the current Eurozone crisis. I want to address this matrix of power as a necrocapitalist engine of systematic destruction behind which so-called economic suicides occur today.

So-Called Life

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century the world has been profoundly influenced by manifold expressions of the so-called global crisis. Its most deviant turn became evident under conditions of dramatic change taking place in the aftermath of the events of 11th of September in the United States of America, opening the doors for what has become an unprecedented yet defining form of contemporary global regime in the first decade of the 2000s: the so-called 'war on terror.' The so-called 9/11 decade was also marked by the so-called global financial crisis. This turned out to be a phenomenon that has not only determined our everyday life but made a fundamental impact upon the overall organization of contemporary life worldwide. The life itself has changed in general by taking a novel form: it has more prominently turned into an aspect of global citizenship mutating in relation to neoliberalism (as repeatedly pointed out by Aihwa Ong in her book *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*).¹

In the European Union in particular this became significant since the summer of 2008. The consequences of the crisis have become all the more prominent, both in everyday lives of the European citizens and in the official political agendas of their local and international institutional representatives. The current rise of unemployment, impoverishment and general dispossession have taken an unprecedented turn. The regime of austerity, instituted in accordance with the requirements imposed by the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, has been intensified throughout the last few years across the continent. The measures proposed from the highest level of political and financial power were enforced in order to reduce spending while increasing taxes: they have left a common European citizen to face the austerity regime directly yet without much space for existential maneuvers. This has become all the more evident in the EU countries drastically hit by their national debts and financial downfall, namely in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, and Ireland, among others.

Gradually, our experience of being-in-the-world has come to be officially and popularly recognized as a way of living under the sort of crisis that is supposedly and exclusively characterized by its financial nature. However, if we want to understand the 'global economic crisis' as only one among many consequences of the dominant logic of neoliberal capitalism, then we also need to take into consideration another important point. Alongside the mutation of citizenship in relation to neoliberalism, humankind has also come to confront the limits of a political and economic system whose exercise of power over its subjects has reached a radical turning point. It is radical precisely in

¹ See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, NC, 2006, pp. 1-27.

the sense of stretching beyond the mere administration of life – or indeed, in recalling Foucauldian dictum on biopower, “that domain of life over which power has taken control” (Mbembe 2003: 12). In other words, we are facing a situation that demands to be perceived from an alternative perspective to those already cemented biopolitical viewpoints centered on overall life-management. And this perspective, or counter-perspective, allows us to see yet another determining aspect of neoliberal imperial authority: its relation to death and, besides, our own exposure to death under sovereign decision-making and control, all in the context of what has recently been recognized and analyzed by Subhabrata Banerjee (2008) as living under the regime of necrocapitalist world governance *par excellence*.

It is precisely at the intersection of these elements that suicide and suicide-related phenomena start occupying a dominant and often spectacular position in media, politics, and theory. Simultaneously, they exert an urgent need to profile our discussions regarding the effects of economic rationality precisely as political rationality over citizens’ lives in the times of this *multidimensional* crisis. Our task is to take a look at those dimensions of crisis (including current waves of suicidal death popularly named ‘economic suicides’) from a radically different yet critical perspective. My argument is that such a perspective must aim towards disclosing a certain kind of rationality, different from the one pertaining to medico-scientific and health-care industries. The key to understanding the aberrant conditions under which suicidal death has taken such a prominent place in various agendas (in media, hospitals, preventive centers, and even parliaments) must lie elsewhere than the already pronounced regulatory institutional entities sanctioned to control humankind via life-oriented technologies of power. We must look for epistemologies other than the dominant ones, imposed by sacrosanct biopower regimes typical of the global North. We must aim towards “doubly transgressive sociologies [and] rival knowledges” (De Sousa Santos 2012: 47). While maintaining “two good reasons to keep a distance from Eurocentric critical theory: the loss of critical nouns and the phantasmal relationship between theory and action” (De Sousa Santos 2012: 47), we must embrace our own epistemology – the epistemology of the South – for the sake of understanding the current political rationality that is stretching beyond the so-called economic crisis. This includes the historical and technological specificity and socio-ethical architecture upon which the current necropolitical power (under its biopolitical guise) institutes the so-called universal truth about citizenship under crisis. It is this power and its related dominant epistemology that must be put into question before we take any particular medico-juridical expertise for granted. This can lead us towards conclusions about why and how any ‘mental health crisis’ is caught up in the trap of the ‘economic crisis’.

This is important for at least two reasons. First, because biopower is authorized to regulate and control a populations’ behavior in what is left as a domain of life exposed, among other threats, to a suicidal death. Second, because its epistemology is rooted in

hegemonic institutional discourses engineered and voiced by scientific, clinical/medical experts in alliance with other politically relevant actors (national governments, supranational organizations, financial institutions, etc.) that have literally monopolized and colonized the discursive domain of life and life-related issues. They have done so in an attempt to 'prevent' populations from what can obviously not be prevented as it is going beyond the limits of biopolitical reason. And what escapes biopolitical reason is exactly the *political crisis of neoliberal model of governing* hidden behind the mask of the 'global economic crisis' in an urge for austerity measures. In other words, I want to argue that contemporary forms of self-sacrifice are inseparable from other forms characteristic of necrocapitalism. Their mutual dependence exists at the level of *radical self-exposure*, i.e. exposing one's own body in resistance to the biopolitical power through self-accomplished death. This constitutes some of the logic of necropolitics - the politics of the First World's neoliberal regime *par excellence* (Grzinic 2012). In a rather drastic way, when analyzing Santiago López Petit's essay "Claiming Free Hatred For a Global Era" (published in 2008 in Spanish as *Reivindicación del odio libre para una época global*), Marina Grzinic concludes about the lethal tension of life between the governing and the governed, produced by such a regime:

Today life itself is the field of battle! Therefore, a proposal put forward to dismantle the total subsumption of reality by capitalism is a proposal to make of our life an act of sabotage. In what way? His [i.e. Santiago López Petit's] proposal is for hatred. Petit states that those that hate their lives deeply can come to the point of changing it (Grzinic 2009, online)

Necrocapitalism - or slasher capitalism (*capitalismo gore*), as suggested by Sayak Valencia Triana in relation to the contemporary situation in Mexico - is a neologism that was first proposed by Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee in the context of theories and practices pertaining to the most recent period of neoliberal globalization. The term itself derives from two words, *necro-* (the Greek prefix applied to death) and *capitalism* (the English term for a particular economic system). Hence it denotes a connection between two basic elements: the neoliberal capitalist doctrine and death. The concept of necrocapitalism thus implies an intertwining relationship between two systems of production in which global financial growth and economic accumulation of goods develop not only in parallel but *through* the global growth of dying and increasing worldwide production of death. Hence contemporary capitalist practices are inseparable from practices of death and dying. As necrocapitalist practices, they pertain "to different forms of power - institutional, material, and discursive - operating in the political economy [and] implying dispossession, marginalization, violence, and death" (Banerjee 2008: 1541). The number of suicidal victims of economic atrocities therefore increases with neoliberal politico-medical 'preventive crisis-management'. Moreover, the global populations' everyday life is the very characteristic of such management.

This is one possible way to critically consider the lives of citizens who have *already* been killed but have yet to die - by their own hand, as it unfortunately becomes all the more apparent throughout contemporary Europe.

This is where we are obliged - theoretically, politically and ethically - to take a critical view on suicide and related phenomena: the view distanced from dominant clinical and medical impositions of truth surrounded by obsessive health-care concerns. Instead of approaching self-accomplished deaths as resulting exclusively from mental deviations proper to health-related disorders, imbalances and illnesses, we must look at the other side of the spectrum. We must attempt to pose different questions that search for the very origins of those 'deviating, imbalanced and ill' practices. We must look for other reasons and rationalities behind which the indirect submission to death occurs to those whose lives are governed by necrocapitalist regimes of life-organization and health-management. We must understand suicide as an instrument of necropower and the property of necropolitics, precisely in the sense that self-destructive practices take part among other "contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death" (Banerjee 2008: 1541). This is what the concept of necrocapitalism implies in terms of one of its founding theoreticians.

The So-Called Economic Crisis

The central point of this paper is the contemporary crisis of subjectivity as experienced through an increasing wave of self-accomplished deaths across Europe under conditions of the so-called economic crisis and related austerity regime. I would like to re-consider the supposed link between, on the one hand, suicides and suicide-related issues taking place in the European Union since around the 2008 and what is generally understood as the ongoing Eurozone economic crisis particularly prevalent across its Southern parts. The need to reconsider this relationship is of theoretical nature. Theoretically it is precisely in the way that, rather than being motivated by pragmatic or instrumental reason, in Enrique Dussel's critical terms, I consider my task reside in posing questions about the connection between suicide and political rationality behind it differently from expected canonic and normative views. This not only applies to the context of so-called mental health crisis in Europe (as pronounced by medical experts at a recent high-profiled meeting in Brussels backed up by the World

Health Organization).² It also does not apply to the so-called economic crisis, behind which hides the actual crisis of authority of the global neoliberal capitalist regime. Instead, and even more importantly, this task applies to the context of another, *epistemic crisis* (or the crisis of knowledge, its production and re-production) which is inseparable from the neoliberal project as we are experiencing it today. It is the crisis of the logic of modernity as instituted by the colonial matrix of power. Since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this matrix has been operative in engineering and designing the political, epistemological, and ethical universe sanctioned by monolithic, rationalist, ‘civilizing,’ ‘progressive,’ violent and violently exploitative universalism of Western European and North American narcissism. It created a kind of self-sufficiency by which the undisputable central role of the global North has been cemented in two directions: making of the ‘universal history’ of the world and interpreting its future, as Dussel (2006) argues.

The crisis of humankind in the face of a financial downfall is but one extreme consequence of this narcissism, this self-sufficiency and this very logic – the one that has paved the way throughout the last five centuries by means of three related processes: capitalism, colonization, and Euro-Americanocentrism (Dussel 2006: 493). It is within this matrix of power, I would argue, that the supposed link between suicide and so-called economic crisis needs to be critically reassessed and reconsidered. This has already been taken into analytical consideration by numerous experts from various fields since the beginning of the ongoing recession, predominantly voiced by medical, psychological and psychiatric professionals in normative, biopolitical and clinical discourses. However, the subjectivity-in-crisis and the severity of its effects, as experienced across contemporary Europe, must be re-articulated not only inside but also outside the normative health-care and life-care dominions of scientific knowledge. The proliferating quantitative logic, characteristic of preventive psychiatric concerns, statistical measurements and regulatory techniques, has subjected human beings (be they dead, alive, or at risk of self-harming) to the status of calculable living resources. Nonetheless, if we want to avoid normative epidemiological approaches we need other, less normative or till now silenced theoretical viewpoints and knowledge fields (philosophy, sociology, and ethics being the most urgent among them). We need to open up the gaps of *epistemic violence* prohibiting the causes of actual crisis to come to light behind the smoke screens of recession and austerity demagogies, on the one hand, and behind the medico-scientific power discourses, on the other.

This re-opening is to be activated by ways of de-linking and re-politicizing the existent normative interpretations situated in the comforting zones of hegemonic

² See *Mental Health in Times of Economic Crisis*. The European Parliament. 19 June 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2013.

universalist rationality, including those within the theoretical and applied scholarship of suicide. The aim is to reach towards other possible ways of understanding the horizons of today's political rationality from which one *is pushed* over the abyss by 'pushing his/her own self' into a death world - in order to withdraw, as dramatically and tragically as suicide can be, from the margins of *this* life. The notion of the abyss is understood here as being inherent to the very logic of such rationality and constitutive of such modernity. What this rationality and its logic have therefore exposed is the vulnerability of the status of a spectator (the Western middle class observer) whose life, supposedly always immune, comfortable and secure, is now put into question. This is occurring today to Europeans as it used to occur to their colonial Other centuries ago: exactly by the same logic that exerts the power to decide who should live and who must die (in Mbembe's terms) and all in the name of the transcendental spirit of capitalism (in Tlostanova's terms) as preached by the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization and World Bank, among others. The only difference is the fact that, unlike in the colonial past, the logic of living-and-letting-die has taken a lethal (suicidal) turn no more over the oceans but here at home, in European territory, among and against the indigenous Europeans themselves, at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

Recent economic crisis made it obvious for the Western middle class observer that he is also vulnerable and not exempt from the logic of the late and exhausted modernity, his life also becomes dispensable and his rights inverted in its deadly game which sacrifices lives in order to save the transcendental spirit of capitalism. Yet, the zombification of modernity remains intact even today, even at the point when the global crisis has clearly demonstrated the void of its epistemic, ontological and ethical dimensions projecting its own irresponsibility, cynicism, and arrogance onto the rest of the humankind making us all hostages of the deadly game of modernity (Tlostanova 2010: 57).

So-Called Economic Suicides

I propose to approach the points of intersection between actual suicidality and neoliberal matrix of power by two main criteria. Firstly, this should be done in a deliberately critical, *decolonial* detour around the pathologizing views pertinent to regulatory psycho-medical gaze and its contemporary biopolitical apparatus. Secondly, this detour should re-orient our broadly conceived *decolonial* view towards any possible alternative theoretical and empirical (necropolitical) gaze. A differing gaze is urgently needed so that it could, eventually, institute a counter-perspective to what has already been popularly termed 'economic suicides' or 'suicides under economic crisis.'

These are the phrases I define as *radical withdrawal*. A modality of radical withdrawal to be taken into account in this context applies to corporal practices of resistance. Here I refer to self-destructive forms of public protest produced within civil movements on both micro- and macro-scales. Such forms are recognized by what contemporary sociology understands as self-immolation or self-sacrifice. More precisely, in terms used by Michael Biggs, self-immolation stands for “an act of public protest, where an individual intentionally kills him or herself – without harming anyone else – on behalf of a collective cause” (Biggs 2005: 174). I consider self-immolation in another chapter of this study, complementary to the subject currently being discussed. I mention it here for the sake of demarcating two self-destructive types of necrocapitalist practices: the radical withdrawal under ‘economic crisis’ and suicidal protest through self-sacrifice unrelated to ‘economic crisis.’ Both signify thanatopolitical forms of protest against necropolitics.

As regards the radical withdrawal under ‘economic crisis’, I would like to add the following: in order to avoid falling into discursive gaps created by epistemological violence, so characteristic of neoliberal teleology, we must consider the properties of the very logic, political rationality and historical specificity within which reside not a single but “several more and less known models produced in the West, in the non-West and in the border zones in-between” (Tlostanova 2010: 55). All of these models are “focusing in different ways on defining the massive crisis of subjectivity, epistemology, and ethics, leading to much more devastating and far reaching consequences than the strictly economic or even social crisis” (Tlostanova 2010: 55). At least three of those models need to be taken into account, specifically in their relation to the rising and ongoing (ir)rationality of suicides as manifested throughout Europe during the last decade - the decade of neoliberal political crisis *par excellence*. This is valid if we are to undertake a task of suggesting possible alternative theoretical counter-visions toward the dominant readings of ‘economic suicides’.

Among such differing models, as suggested by Tlostanova, the most prominent and unavoidable will be those produced in the West (biopolitics), in the non-West (necropolitics), and in the border zones in-between (for example, the decolonial option, or decolonial (post)continental geopolitics and body politics of knowledge). The aim of this classification is not to confirm and re-confirm either Tlostanova’s or anyone else’s already articulated propositions. It is rather to focus our attention on the crisis of subjectivity as most prominently represented in the contemporary moment by suicidal regimes of behavior, and to address and re-address their logic by critically analyzing, what she calls, “the interrelated epistemic and ontological dimensions of the global crisis of modernity and [...] the possible ways out offered within various Western and non-Western paradigms” (Tlostanova 2010: 55).

In line with her thought, the imperative is to shift our *geography of reasoning* from hegemonic (universalist, normative, ‘modern’, regulatory, hygienic, calculable, statistic,

instrumental, asymmetrical) rationality of Western psycho-clinical gaze towards trans-modern views and decolonial views (as proposed by Dussel and Mignolo, respectively) and thus a different civilizational paradigm (as proposed by Tlostanova). If the unexplored horizons and avenues of thought and actions are now to be theoretically ‘colonized’ by epistemic subjects outside the Western logic of the gaze, such a radical shift shall open the gates of hope that there are indeed “other kinds of life” (as Tlostanova argues). Instead of opting for ‘final exit’ solutions in one’s own self-accomplished death, these gates of hope shall serve as a guide towards other possible kinds of life through other possible horizons of knowledge and other possible epistemologies – precisely the epistemologies of the South, the ‘South’ as a place to look and to envision other kinds of life.

The suicides (those who, once again, “deliberately kill themselves” according to the WHO definition) are neither those who deliberately erase themselves in the final acts of falling over the abyss of neoliberal modernity, nor those who are pronounced victims of the current ‘economic crisis’. They are precisely those who fall out of the ongoing logic of modernity and its colonial matrix of power by becoming misfit epistemic subjects and, therefore, no more desirable living resources. In the patriarchal and hierarchical system of neoliberal government their lives become objectified and zombified, turned into the *living dead*, by the instrumental reason of exploitation-extraction-exclusion (as Banerjee defined this necrocapitalist triad). This is all in order to eliminate, erase, and push over the *global abyss* into the death worlds those who are no more useful, no more worth living, and no more human - according to the necrocapitalist logic.

The Politics of Death Itself

I intentionally use the term ‘global abyss’ as suggested by Eric Cazdyn for this exploitative crisis in his book *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture and Illness*. Additionally, rather than talking about ‘life’, I deliberately employ the phrase ‘living resources’ following Aihwa Ong’s dictum by which “it is important to trace neoliberal technology to a biopolitical mode of governing that centers on the capacity and potential of individuals and the population as living resources that may be harnessed and managed by governing regimes” (Ong 2006: 6). Along the same line of reasoning, I understand the position of those caught in the trap of the to-live-or-not-to-live puzzle as being squeezed between what she proposes as two kinds of neoliberal optimizing technologies – technologies of subjectivity and technologies of subjection. This is the situation that she considers in terms of “implications for our understanding on how citizenship and sovereignty are mutating in articulation and disarticulation with

neoliberal reason and mechanisms” (Ong 2006: 6). In her view, “as an intervention of optimization, neoliberalism interacts with regimes of ruling and regimes of citizenship to produce conditions that change administrative strategies and citizenship practices,” more precisely:

Neoliberalism as used here applies to two kinds of optimizing technologies. *Technologies of subjectivity* rely on an array of knowledge and expert systems to induce self-animation and self-government so that citizens can optimize choices, efficiency and competitiveness in turbulent market conditions. Such techniques of optimization include the adherence to health regimes, acquisition of skills, development of entrepreneurial ventures, and other techniques of self-engineering and capital accumulation. *Technologies of subjection* inform political strategies that differently regulate populations for optimal productivity, increasingly through spatial practices that engage market forces. Such regulations include the fortressization of urban space, the control of travel, and the recruitment of certain kinds of actors to growth hubs (Ong 2006: 6).

In the context of dramatically changing administrative strategies under the current austerity regime operating in the EU, even more dramatic reactions are being practiced by its respective citizenship in the zones most vulnerable to such strategies (the South of Europe). My argument is, moreover, that Ong’s account of two technologies clearly frames the predicament of citizens’ entrapment in-between subjectivity and subjection, so characteristic of those considering a fatal escape through ‘self-engineered’ death that it cannot be omitted from any critical account of the biopolitical rationality behind contemporary suicidality. Since they no longer serve the demagogy of capitalist self-interest and their lives are no more *living resources* of capitalist accumulation, their death - underlined by the slow process of marginalization, deprivation, and extermination - needs to appear as ‘self-annihilating’. Hence, cynically, they are either no more human or no more worth living. Or, as defined by João Biehl in *Vita. Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, they are simply “worth nothing”: they - the unemployed, they - the homeless, they - the immigrants, they - the poor, they - the sick and the deceased, they - the disabled, either mentally or physically, they - the damned and condemned, they - the *abandonados* (the abandoned), they - the living dead.

This situation, in which the described categories of supposedly useless living resources find their *raison-de-ne-pas-êre*, corresponds to what is perhaps best described by Cazdyn. He argues that “as in contemporary medicine, which uses targeted drug therapies and biotechnology to manage rather than cure diseases, global capitalism does not aim for resolution but rather a continual state of crisis management that perpetrates the iniquities of the *status quo*. [...] In such exploitative crisis state, which he terms ‘the global abyss,’ Cazdyn posits the concept of ‘the already dead,’ a condition in

which the subject (medical, political, psychological) has been killed but has yet to die” (*The Already Dead*, book cover).

Since “contemporary regimes of living are increasingly brought into interaction with neoliberal logic” (Ong 2006: 23) we need to re-position ourselves towards questioning the notion of life. We need to do so nowadays precisely by understanding life as an aspect of citizenship *mutating* in relation to neoliberalism under conditions of dramatic changes, whereas the increasing desire for change through suicidal potentiality corresponds to this mutation itself. The darker side of this mutation is manifested, among other symptoms, in the suicidal technologies of resistance. This mutation will not cease to disclose its darker side until we take a different view of what has been officially proposed as global economic crisis. Or until we recognize it by its most proper name and by what it really stands for: the political crisis of neoliberal logic as necropolitical colonial matrix of power at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the status of suicide within contemporary theoretical debates about life and death in the context of the so-called Eurozone economic crisis, ongoing since 2008. The subject emerged from the need to scrutinize the specific political rationality and historical conditions under which the increasing practice of suicide or self-sacrificial death occurs in today’s European Union. I focus on this practice as it occurs among those EU citizens squeezed between two technologies (of subjectivity and subjection, in Aihwa Ong’s terms) and mutating negatively towards self-accomplished elimination induced and orchestrated by the necropolitical logic of neoliberalism. I have thus undertaken to question the link between the governmentality of the current state of crisis and suicidality of the governed. The chapter’s emphasis resides in the dominant necropolitical matrix of power (enforced by the historical roots pertaining to capitalism, colonialism and Euro/North American centrism, in Tlostanova, Mignolo, and Dussel’s terms) that currently extends beyond the contemporary political economy and so-called global financial downfall (including the current Eurozone crisis). Instead, while outlining readings of histories alternative to any singular, monolithic, and universal viewpoint, the current wave of ‘economic suicides’ is here no more perceived as an outcome of recession and consequent despair among those suffering the most. It is rather understood as the characteristic of all ‘living dead’ to radically withdraw from *this* life managed by a neoliberal death-world (according to Cazdyn), supposedly without any foreseeable alternative.

What I have proposed is a more optimistic perspective, stretching beyond the constraints imposed by an ill and 'irreplaceable' system of values administering populations' lives and deaths, while opting for our imagining other forms of living - resistant to the abyss of suicidal 'final exit.' Refocusing attention from the economic toward the crisis of *subjectivity* institutes a critical distance from the irreplaceability of normative systems of knowledge and governance. It also examines hidden epistemic gaps at the center of global power relationships, cemented for over five centuries by historical, epistemological and ethical violence toward the 'uncivilized' Other. I have approached the contemporary crisis of European subjectivity as a result of historically engineered misconceptions leading to the *political crisis* of the first degree (as we experience it today). I have also opted for less normative approaches around the Eurozone crisis to be examined and applied in the future studies of neoliberal necrocapitalism (in Mbembe and Banerjee's words), with particular attention to its 'suicidal' counter effects.

Conclusion

Where is ‘death’ if it is supposedly lost on the Western side of our epistemic horizons? In this thesis, I use the term ‘death’ as complementary to the term ‘life’ (Greek: *zoon/bios*, ζώή/βίος) with two basic etymological references in mind: *thanatos* (θάνατος), from the Greek word for ‘death’, and *nekrós* (νεκρός) from another Greek word for ‘a dead body’ or ‘a dying person’. I associate the latter with the prefix *nekró-* (νεκρό-), formative for compound words such as ‘necropolitics’, in order to distinguish it from the words such as ‘thanatopolitics’. The difference between the words ‘thanatos’ and ‘nekrós’ is here crucial for understanding not only certain antagonisms between ‘life’ and ‘death’, but also the conflicted forces within the ‘politics of death’ itself: in the present thesis I elaborate on this difference through the notions of ‘necropolitics’ and ‘thanatopolitics’ while relying upon the existent propositions offered by Achille Mbembe and Stuart J. Murray, respectively.

The fundamental connection between the limits of (epistemic) sovereignty and the exercise of control over mortality here comes to play through what Achille Mbembe calls ‘necropolitics’ in his seminal work on the politics of death as necropolitics. What he refers to, among other things, are “the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*” (Mbembe 2003: 40). Contrary to that, the instrumentality of ‘death’ can be understood as something positive and productive in terms of ‘thanatopolitics’, as Stuart J. Murray (*The Living From the Dead*, online) proposes when asking: “How, for example, could the ‘enemy combatant’ or suicide bomber’s death be represented as valuable, or even as a politically and ethically meaningful death, as it is in many cultures that are struggling to resist the biopolitical hegemony of the West?”

Murray’s theoretical insight is all the more interesting not only because it criticizes the ‘universal’ rationality of the Western system of values with respect to ‘death’ (and thus fundamentally contributes to what I elaborate further in this study) but because it does so, unlike Mbembe, from within the Western epistemic ‘universe’ itself. As Walter D. Mignolo (2002) would say when discussing the geopolitics of knowledge at large, Mbembe’s and Murray’s views around the instrumentality of death match each other

from two distinctive positions – the position of “colonial difference” (in the case of the former) and the position of “imperial difference” (in the case of the latter). With these two options in mind, the present study questions the strict division between ‘death’ and ‘life’ but also the plurality within the concept of ‘politics of death’ itself: this could, possibly, invert “our own moral and intellectual narcissism, and the willful suspension of our will to contain the world as a piece of rational knowledge” (Murray 2006: 211) – this is the task I see as fundamental for the sake of other kinds of life, so far unthinkable or unimaginable within the imperial epistemic universe where Schumacher’s ‘Western man’ remains deprived of ‘death’.

The main question arising from the present thesis is as follows: can ‘death’ –and to which extent, under which conditions– be considered as a positive and properly *democratic* category of knowledge? In other words, can certain (supposedly positive and constructive, i.e., not necessarily negative and merely destructive) aspects of death put forward the very notion of democracy so we could start thinking and talking about death in a significantly more open way. This, I sincerely hope, might broaden our horizons about contemporary forms of living and dying within the rigid frameworks of conventional considerations regarding the ‘power of the people’ (i.e., the right to vote, personal autonomy, freedom of expression, etc.). I highlight this question once again, at the very end of my thesis, to sum up the preceding discussion without giving an immediate or clear-cut answer to it; rather, I let the readers think for themselves about the potentiality of such question under the present conditions of ‘our current democracy [as] ultimately the most human system possible’, and what it might bring about in the future that has a ‘not-yet-character’ but invites the ‘new born’ epistemic communities to start getting ready for it already today. To approach such potentiality, or the pluritopic hermeneutic positions stemming from it, I have examined the following propositions.

First, I took into account the preliminary hypothesis about the loss of ‘death’ in the Western world, as outlined by Bernard N. Schumacher: in his quest for the return of ‘death’ to Western philosophy he opts for a solution that he calls the ‘thanatological philosophy’ proper to the Western world itself. In response to that, I have considered the thanatological *plurality* of contemporary Western knowledge on ‘death’: I examined selected theories of ‘death’, existent nowadays within the ‘democratic epistemic canon’ of the Western world, in order to object against the disappearance of ‘death’ from the West; furthermore, I proceeded by arguing about the implausibility and insufficiency of the Western epistemic canon to cope with a greater understanding of ‘death’ that must be looked for elsewhere, namely, among the transnational philosophical positions in the *pluriverse* of knowledges regarding death and related subjects. The intention of such re-orientation was to shift our perspective from the conventional (visible) epistemology of death towards the manifold epistemic positions subjugated to the dominant one (presumably democratic, rational and universal/ singular). Finally, I considered the

thanatopolitical philosophy (following, most notably, Stuart J. Murray's initial thesis in contrast with –or, rather, enhanced by– Achille Mbembe's work on necropolitics) as a proper alternative to Schumacher's proposal favoring the thanatological option (i.e., Western/ imperial/ Eurocentric/ 'democratic' philosophy of death). The nature of such an alternative, which is properly thanato-political, does not only encompass the pluriverse of transnational epistemological visions around 'death' (in comparison to the thanatological plurality, for instance); instead, it also implies a fundamental epistemic shift in demand of taking the viewpoint(s) towards the world of knowledges from the position of the global anti-imperial South (which makes such position and such viewpoints properly counter-hegemonic in comparison to the global imperial North).

This operation offers a double solution. On one side, it unmasks the sovereign democratic episteme from its 'exclusively' life-oriented (biopolitical) pretensions behind which the *sovereign politics of death* (necropolitics) continues to function in pursuit of its own (imperial/ 'democratic'/ capitalist/ colonial/ Eurocentric/ racist/ sexist) goals; on the other side, it discloses the subjugated politics of death (thanatopolitics), which is not only resistant towards the preeminence of necropolitics (and the imposition of death onto the 'others' on behalf of the sovereign power); moreover, it is endowed with the capacity to instrumentalize death for its own (anti-imperial) purposes, in a way that includes the positive/ constructive aspects of human mortality. In both cases, the thanatopolitical philosophy stands for a *decolonial epistemic option from the South* that detaches from the sovereign 'democratic' epistemic matrix (i.e., the canonic knowledge produced in the global imperial North and established worldwide through its epistemic matrix of colonial power). It de-links from a Western man's current (mis)understanding of 'death' verging between the two main poles: the imposition of 'loss' on behalf of the so-called biopolitics (that erases 'death' for the sake of 'life, liberty and happiness') and the thanatological option (that aims at bringing 'death' back to philosophy, though insufficiently – while relying upon the dialogue exclusively among the Western authors).

With such preliminary assumptions in mind, I have conceived the present thesis in an effort to confront 'death' as a philosophical and political question – or as a philosophical question that does not escape its political frameworks, both in terms of 'biopolitics', 'necropolitics', and 'thanatopolitics' (beside any other viable option that I have not consistently accounted for at this occasion). My point is that the subject of 'death' in the Western world needs to be properly *re-politicized*, epistemically re-contextualized, and philosophically re-articulated instead of being treated as lost/ depoliticized/ decontextualized. To do so I have opted for the pluriverse of transnational worlds of knowledge, centered on what is commonly understood as the self-violent form of death which, in turn, encompasses the varied theories and practices of so-called suicide. In the specific context of my thesis I preferably refer to them in terms of 'radical withdrawal'. The need for such an endeavor (and such renaming, too)

comes about in response to the complexity of protest-based 'suicide cultures' on behalf of the powerless (the 'living dead'), in light of contemporary reality and despite their evident differences ('suicide missions', 'istishad', 'assisted suicide', 'self-immolation', 'self-immolation by fire', 'austerity suicide', 'suicides by economic crisis', etc.).

To be exact, I question how the work of death operates when applied to the practices that I largely consider to be thanatopolitical: self-immolation by fire (committed in protest), the so-called suicide bombing in contemporary Palestine (to which Mbembe himself devotes a large part in his study on necropolitics), the terminally ill patients in demand of 'assisted suicide' (while 'waiting with death' - since their right to die is largely dismissed by authorities), but also to so-called economic suicides in contemporary Europe swept by the 'sovereign debt crisis'. Given the hermeneutic inconsistency of all these phenomena, I approach them together -as complementary to each other- and under the common term (the 'living dead'), but also through and in-between two intricate notions: that of subjectivity and that of subjection. They are understood as techniques of self-engineering, on the one hand, and of spatial regulation ("fortressization" or, even, colonization) of populations under conditions of the neoliberal state of exception, , on the other hand, (as Aihwa Ong proposed in her book *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*). I treat them broadly enough on three related fronts: as a *self-engineered use of death for mobilizing political life* (a thanatopolitical form of protest, instead of 'suicide'); as a *decolonial and anti-colonial self-sacrificial resistance* (a transnational manifestation of 'suicide culture' in response to injustice enforced by the ongoing necro-coloniality of power); and as a public channel to communicate one's own suffering, a vehicle for *individual and collective self-representation of a dignified humankind protesting against the dehumanizing (neco-colonial) imperial epistemological vision*. The latter most notably relates to the modes of visual self-representation, through images of suffering and exposure of one's right to death (against the sovereign right to 'make him/ her die'), whereas the protest itself comes about in the name of other kinds of life - the *life worth living* in the sense of dignity that is properly human. To protest *against* undignified forms of existence and, in the name of dignity, *for* the future democracy that has a 'not-yet-character' - instead of 'waiting one's own death' to be decided upon by the 'democratic' (and basically authoritarian) sovereign power - is where the basic premises of thanatopolitical thinking (may) reside.

I approach them together, across the philosophical speculations on human mortality and the political role they have played in the public sphere since the beginning of the twenty-first century (without losing an account about their histories preceding this period). Beside phenomena such as 'depression', 'personal despair', and 'mental disorder' -that constitute, to a large extent, the compulsory ontology of suicide studies (privileged, first and foremost, by medical sciences and clinical psychiatry)- my primary concern here is with the concepts of another kind, that I broadly examine as thanatopolitical forms of self-sacrificial (radical) withdrawal (not as 'suicide protest',

'suicide bombing,' 'istishad', 'self-immolation by fire', 'economic suicides', etc., which I critically take into account in the last two parts of the thesis). Thus, I place an accent on this set of issues under assumption that they have a common, thanatopolitical ground from which it becomes possible not only to discuss 'death' in a transnational framework of references, but something more: to challenge the conventions concerning a 'contemporary Western men', our ('Western') knowledge about ourselves and how it has been shaped, what the consequences of such geopolitics of knowledge construction are, in fact, at the dawn of the third millennium, and how they influence the human condition in general - and our (mis)understanding of it - in a world all the more increasingly characterized by the polemical notions of democracy, justice, and freedom. The thesis, thus, functions as yet another, hopefully relevant, nodal point from which to launch a critical discourse on the work of death in the context of an ongoing neoliberal and necro-colonial re-designing of the world.

While the first part outlines the basic theoretical premises from which my ideas towards the thanatopolitical philosophy of death are launched across the contemporary Western and non-Western philosophies on death and dying, the second part centers on the concept of self-immolation at large (and 'suicide missions' in particular), a phenomenon that 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 chapter 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. The aim is 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. Hence, I explore 'death' from an anti-imperialist perspective, through the concept of thanatopolitics, while paying particular attention to the conceptual ambiguities of 'suicide missions' vis-à-vis the most aberrant conditions of today's necro-coloniality. I treat 'suicide missions' as a counter-hegemonic strategy of resistance against the colonial sovereignty of necropower. This, I argue, challenges prevalent and ideologically biased views on anti-colonial revolt (Palestinian, in particular) as a form of 'terror' which is here explored as an epistemic problem, squeezed between the imperialist ('biopolitical') theory of life and its actual necropolitical practice on the side of the sovereign power. The aim is to expose the thanatopolitical nature of this revolt as one possible way of mobilizing political life through the legitimate forms of self-sacrificial deaths for a cause, not through the 'suicide terror'.

The third part centers on the modes of governance over humanness in the South of Europe as part of the global necrocapitalist project that produces ‘human waste’ – disposable forms of life living their death as ‘already dead’. If today’s production of the ‘living dead’ in the name of neoliberal capitalism – in its current state of impasse – occurs through anonymous centers of the global financial power, it is aligned with local political authorities wherever the destructive forces of unlimited market economy have prevailed as necropower. I examine the current trend of “increased suicidality amid economic crisis” (Economou et al. 2011) or, in a less dramatic tone, the “effects of the 2008 recession on health” (Stuckler et al. 2011). Both phrases designate the same phenomenon which has come to be popularly known as “austerity suicides” (Anast and Squires 2012; Squires 2012; Govan 2012), “suicides by economic crisis” (Povoledo and Carvajal 2012) or “economic suicides” for short (Cha 2012). It is primarily related to the context of European Union and the “Eurozone financial crisis” (De Grauwe 2010a, 2010b) or the “European sovereign debt crisis” (Lane 2012) and applies to conditions of a “severe austerity regime imposed by the troika of the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank” (Stuckler and McKee 2012). In this context, I argue that so-called economic suicides do not exist; instead, what exists is the politico-juridical system of ongoing death-production. Therefore, I discuss the ‘economic suicides’ as political pseudo-suicides committed on behalf of the neoliberal matrix of necropower. As a way of engaging with dilemmas at the forefront of contemporary debates around the current Eurozone austerity regime (i.e., a necropolitical regime par excellence, within the contemporary European ‘liberal democracies’), I have undertaken the task of exposing the polemics surrounding the matters of life and death by linking them with the question of ‘economic suicides’ on several fronts drawing upon three main types of data: normative (scientific approaches), popular (local and international media insights) and critical (social and political philosophy). They deal with tensions produced in the EU between the governing and the governed while showing a particular concern for the divisions between the North and the South. I devote due attention to the most aberrant cases in the EU countries drastically hit by the financial downfall, among which Greece (beside Portugal and Italy) take center stage in the present thesis. This, in turn, can contribute to the new ways we conceive of ‘politics’ itself – and what it means to ‘act politically’ under conditions of so-called economic crisis in order to inscribe oneself into the world as a political subject – from a radically thanatopolitical perspective.

What would it mean, then, to speak in the name of death and (as Murray asks) is such speech possible? My answer is: yes, such speech is possible and –under certain circumstances– even necessary. To speak in the name of death is to take a counter-hegemonic position of speech with regard to the ‘universal politics’ of life (or biopolitics proper) and its rhetoric of power. To speak in the name of death also means to break the code of ‘stony silence’ around the subject of death and to bring it back to philosophy

from an epistemic graveyard or death-worlds of knowledge. It is a double fold option that decolonizes the supposedly singular universe of knowledge from the preeminence of life: it reveals the darker side of biopolitics – the instrumentality of death in terms of its *ultimately negative* deployment of violence (necropolitics); but it also offers ideas, so far unthinkable, about the presumably less negative or positive politics of violence (thanatopolitics), the one that epitomizes forms of resistance against necropolitics and the necro-coloniality of power at large. Finally, to speak in the name of death is to speak from an anti-imperialist epistemological perspective about the imperialist necropolitical rationality: to look at the world (whose exercise of sovereignty, under the guise of ‘bio-power’, depends upon human mortality) from that place of epistemic resistance called the global anti-imperial South. This is not ‘the end’ but a ‘new beginning’: South is precisely the ‘place’ from which I envision, already now, to start my future, post-doctoral inquiry of the thanatopolitical philosophy as a decolonial epistemic option. The present thesis, therefore, makes a necessary and most significant step towards this goal.

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