



*more and more they went inside they lived there
they didn't know where they were they felt more
they were more like them inside of them
we were also inside of them they didn't know
we circled like birds and they flocked. more and
more our bodies drifted outside of the inside, in the great atmospheric
excess, of dark fluids flowing after the octopus.
(February 2015)*

1. Trance/Descending Gods

I realize now that I have forgotten all the gods. Their beautiful names, the colors associated with them, seem lost. Is it a mere fifteen or twenty years? They were not my gods but during several visits to Cuba in the 1990s, during what was then called *periodo especial*, the ethnographer with whom I travelled and his local friends explained the African roots of Santería to me and even took me along to some of the secret ceremonies.

I thought they were secret as we spoke about them carefully, and in hushed tones, respectfully, therefore I avoided unnecessary questions. The ethnographer, whom I had met in Chicago where

he attended a research program in performance studies, now and then made cryptic remarks about certain clothes or accessories that were worn only by the initiated. He pointed to the *bóvedas* (altars) in the private homes, and took me to a *babalawo* for a divination. He was an initiate, and I wondered, then, what it must have been like, for a white Anglo-American, to join the Ifà spiritual cosmos, its rites and ceremonies, learn its language and develop a strong bond with the *santeros* and the Afro-Cuban Abakuá society he had visited many times.¹ The ceremonies I attended involved food (what little there was at the time), music and dance, and my interest was roused by the sometimes terrifying possession ritual or trance, when a divinity, such as Ochún or Changó, descended onto initiates and took hold of them, when the trance became ecstatic and even dangerous. I remember having read Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953), where she speaks of these irruptions of spiritual revelation, and she sought to capture such *rituals in transfigured time* – those instances when the time of the gods and that of humans overlap – in her own cinematic trance works.

Such gods, I imagine, reveal themselves in seemingly (but not really) violent choreographies – watched and embraced by a community that looks out for those who enter into a state of trance. Given that I had come to Cuba to meet artists and to perform, to enact knowledge exchange about performance and cultural practices as we would say today, I was riveted by the experience and tried to make sense of it later by reflecting on the notes in my diary (I was not permitted to bring my camera to the secrets), fragmented reminiscences shadowed by a general sense of the surreal that I felt during these weeks in Havana and Alamar when we survived on poetry and an inexplicable *joie de vivre* I perceived amongst the Cubans living in a country whose revolution, many would argue, had gone terribly wrong yet sustained itself against all the odds. At no point during the four years that I intermittently visited Cuba did I feel any terror and oppression, despair or despondency. But there were human needs and hopes, many of them unfulfillable, and of course my impressions of the polymorphous underground rhythms and sacred poetics were purely subjective and non-analytical. The real living conditions during this time of extreme austerity, and the simple fact that most Cubans could not travel or leave the island, indicated that the existing socialist society was unsustainable, and that the destructive tendencies of global

¹ The special period of extreme austerity began in Cuba after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the impact of the U.S. embargo (*bloqueo*) and the relative isolation of the Cuban communist state made themselves increasingly, and devastatingly, felt. Travel to Cuba from the U.S. was forbidden and we had to take détours via Mexico to reach the island. My friend Ivor L. Miller performed extensive fieldwork in Cuba and West Africa between 1991 and 1999, and now resides in Nigeria where he was invested as a Chief by Ékpè leaders in Calabar in 2004. See his “Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance,” *TDR* 44:2 (2000), 30-55, and *Voice of the Leopard* (Columbia: University Press of Missouri, 2009). I wish to thank him for teaching me.

capital had hollowed out Fidel Castro's obstinate regime and threatened its cultural traditions, and thus the gods that descend.² The divinities that were mentioned most frequently to me were Eleguá (the trickster god), and Yemayá, evoked by many of my female acquaintances who danced with me and took part in a video production we initiated on the shores of Alamar in 1995 (*La lógica que se cumple*; the short film premiered at the Havana Film Festival in 1996). This poetic dance almost literally emerged from the sea. My own role – I was “shipwrecked,” a castaway on Cuba's shores, and I remember walking through the water to the shore on sharp rocky underground, cutting the soles of my feet until they bled profusely. I noticed nothing.

An ancestral divinity had descended onto me although I was not an initiate, nor did I believe in gods. The energy that drove us was a collective movement, however, and everyone who participated in the film shoot sensed a small privileged moment of embodied knowledge of some ecstatic beyond, later recognized as a kind of transfiguration suffused with melancholia.³ I tend to think now of this moment along the lines of what Maya Deren or Sergei Eisenstein may have felt about the optical illusions of their travels abroad. I recently watched the outtakes of Eisenstein's *¡Qué viva México!* at the V&A exhibition on *Russian Avant-garde Theatre: War, Revolution and Design 1913-1933* in London – Eisenstein's voice over declaring that “the Mexican” triumphs over death through mockery of it during the Day of the Dead festivities. Eisenstein's 1930 footage of the Day of the Dead is hallucinatory at times; the filmmaker seems completely entranced by what he wants to see – the revolutionary force of an Artaudian theatre of cruelty, an erotic death-mask carnival of movement, “so tender and sensual, and so cruel” (voice over in Russian, translated into English subtitles). Then the voice asks: “Whom shall we see behind the masks? The corpses of a doomed class, or the young soldiers who will fight for a free Mexico?”

2. *ISIS or Absolute Terror*

² Thinking about obstinacy and self-preservation, in regard to living labor and individual living conditions and interfaces with the cultural life-context, I note the vigorous discussion of the “Elements of a Political Economy of Labor Power,” in *October* 149 (summer 2014), with Alexander Kluge/Oskar Negt following the English-language publication of their *History and Obstinacy* (1981). Kluge and Negt point out that “the political economy of capital stands in opposition to humans who live in societies structured by capital, but who – along with large portions of their subjectivities, their ancestors, and elements of their labor capacities and essential powers – at the same time also belong to social relations not structured by capital” (p. 9) – and I am largely interested here in these latter ones and in the powers of the spiritual, both recuperative and violent (in the contemporary context of ISIS and jihadism).

³ See my chapter “La melancolía de la jaula,” in *Performance on the Edge: Transformations of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 210-39.

In the autumn of 2014, I exchange letters with friends in the U.S. and in Europe who express increasing anxiety over the jihadist violence emerging through the militant campaign of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Northern Iraq. Political attention in Europe is divided, as there is civil war and ethnic conflict rupturing the Ukraine, and stories are floated about the return of the Cossacks to protect the homeland (western or eastern Ukraine?). And by October, racialization – one of the primary ideologies of global capitalism and its neo-colonial modes of reproduction – slowly precipitates a boiling point in the aftermath of the local events in Ferguson, Missouri (as one in a series of violent stories of young black men killed by state forces or vigilantes in the U.S.) and the much longer, confused aftermath of the so-called war on terror (since the September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon). In November, Ferguson is burning as protests spill out on the streets. I receive daily messages from friends in the U.S. trying to explain what is happening. Early in 2015, the massacres in Paris refocus attention on Islamism and persistent anti-Semitism, after the fatwa attacks on journalists of a satirical magazine, and the random killing of Jews in a kosher supermarket.

In Mexico, 43 students of the Ayotzinapa rural teachers college go missing and are then declared dead, vanished to body dust; the incinerated remains, found along a river, sent off to be tested for identification at a laboratory in Austria. Although unrelated to the asymmetric jihadist campaign, the massacre in Mexico is linked up with the fearful symmetries of the negotiations of terror in the public sphere, with confused perceptions of insurgent, gang or police violence, and the kind of volte-face operations we remember from the raid on the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow (2002) by Russian state police, after the audience was taken hostage by Chechen rebels, resulting in the deaths of most hostages when poisonous gas was pumped into the theatre by the militia.

In Paris, at the memorial rally for the killed, the leaders of states walk in formation, in solidarity with the victims, their arms linked, to jointly perform or reflect the expressive sentiment of more than a million silent protesters: “Je suis Charlie Hebdo.” In the *New York Times*, an opinion article is overwritten: “I Am Not Charlie Hebdo” (David Brooks, 8 January 2015). In Paris, the heads of state from Saudi Arabia, Israel, Denmark etc. link arms with Angela Merkel, Francois Hollande, and David Cameron. An orthodox Jewish newspaper, *HaMevaser*, alters the photograph of the parade, erasing all the women from the picture.

These convoluted aftermaths, and the manipulations of truth, commingle with vectors of paranoia and Islamophobia in the West. The war on terror breeds terror, and the U.S and Western allies have engaged various crusades, including what whistleblower Snowden revealed as a massive covert campaign of data surveillance against their own citizens. Over in south-east Asia, Rustom Bharucha (based in Kolkata) writes a book on *Terror and Performance*, seeking to parse the deceptions, demonizations, and uncertainties of evidence in the widening discourse on terror that clouds our cultures of everyday life at the time when the “phantoms of the Muslim as a terrorist”⁴ dominate the news and the affective registers of many who look anxiously at the videos of beheadings posted by ISIS on YouTube. This is a theatre of cruelty not envisioned by Artaud, not even in his hallucinatory radio address “To have done with the judgment of god,” where he digs into the body to discover what was left alive, what – in the incantatory screams and rhythmic percussive beatings – was devastatingly lacerated, scorched by the black sun (*soleil noir*).

Artaud’s theatrical metaphysics of course signified a poetic language, a language that can express what it does not usually express.⁵ But surely it is not possible to approach these violent occurrences of the ISIS terror campaign through the lens of “performance”? Except, Bharucha proposes, if one were to disentangle some of the discourses and spectacles, and in fact looked at the realities of terror and terrorism as volatile and mutant phenomena that haunt us precisely because we are often forced to be spectators of mediated (and thus calculated, performed) violence if we are not directly experiencing it, as many do, on the basis of lived everyday life (those who inhabit the zones of conflict, war, and deprivation). The daily terror is the irreducible problem, especially with today’s so-called asymmetric war machine, when populations are framed as targets of destruction (as we see, just one example, in Gaza and the Occupied Territories) and when anyone in the public sphere can be recruited by the visual technologies of war, watching/experiencing closely or watching from a distance. Vicarious performance experiences, without the benefit of theatrical techniques taught by Brecht (*Verfremdungseffekt*). We are not distanced.

In order to question the vicariousness and examine complicity, we decide to stage a discussion on an international maillist (empyre) during the month of November, and more than sixty participants engage in a process that is not easy to describe, as the proposed question of *absolute*

⁴ Rustom Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, London: Routledge 2014, p. 71.

⁵ Cf. Allen S. Weiss, *Phantasmatic Radio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 20.

evil or *absolute terror* – and how such a question can be broached – does not lend itself to easy answers or definitions. The terror I hinted at is potentially everywhere, but not absolutely so. Is ISIS a terror organization or a state, and how does its organization differ from the self-radicalization of an islamophobic and xenophobic individual like Anders Behring Breivig?

Bharucha, discussing the massacre at Gujarat in 2002, argues that “violence is not arbitrary and follows specific cultural patterns and rituals of torture, killing, and the mutilation of targeted victims, *how one kills* is intrinsically related to *how one views the other*, and arguably, how one sees – or fails to see – one’s self in the process.”⁶ Above all, and this is what occupies me here in this brief essay, the monstrosity of evil and the violence of terror are not new to our common civilizational history, nor are fundamentalist religious wars, crusades, torture and persecution new phenomena at all. And yet we happen to live in the turbulent immediacy of the here and now, each here and now being different depending on your location and sphere of interaction in social and economic realities of the day; thus the question of ISIS, of an imaginary State of Islam, suggests that we pause for a moment to think about the gods that are descending.

This is my worry: that I do not understand enough of the religious fervor that may drive an increasing number of people to commit acts of unspeakable violence deemed justifiable; that I am not fully aware of the hundreds and thousands of young people from various European countries who travel to Syria and Iraq to join up with ISIS and contribute to the rise of violent jihadism in the Middle East (while other radically militant groups, such as Boko Haram, continue their murderous actions in Africa). Jihadi movements, as we now know, are not confined to an imaginary “outside” of the Occident or first capitalist world. Jihadist fighters can strike in Paris, Berlin, London, Sydney, Montréal, Brussels, anywhere. The formation of the new caliphate implicitly and explicitly pronounces the West, the infidels of liberal democracy, as a target. Thus you, publishers/readers of VLAK, are a potential target. As yet the appeal of the Islamic State to Sunnis in Syria, Iraq and across the world derives from a sense that its victories are God-given and inevitable, and that its holy war campaign reflects the utopian goals of a global cause. Some of my Muslim students in London may have already traveled south to be recruited. On February 21, 2015, *The Guardian* reports that “lured by ISIS: three young girls who revel in brutality are

⁶ *Terror and Performance*, p. 96 (italics in the original). Regarding the “recruitment” of those who must spectate the daily reports of terror and violence, see Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso: 2010), p. xii.

offered cause.”⁷ I am not part of this cause, and I cannot fathom what it could possibly offer young female teenagers from Britain.

Our discussion group about absolute terror, performed online and thus in a virtual realm, begins, falters, and begins again, as many of us participating are drawn to accelerating, isolated or interrelated events, such as news reports about the



An Islamic State fighter waves the Isis flag in Raqqa, Syria, after the group declared an Islamic caliphate in June 2014. Archive Photograph: Reuters.

persecution of the Yazidis, images of Mount Sinjar, the assault on Kobani, the U.S. negotiations with Iraqi Shia militia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Kurdish militia men and PKK insurgents, air attacks, drone attacks, the hostages in Raqqa, the kidnappings, the beheadings staged for us and disseminated by ISIS on social media. Referring to the image mediation of terror, Jon McKenzie enters the discussion group proposing to analyze the “society of the spectacle of the scaffold.” He points to the “tragic-prop scenes” offered, for example by the ISIS propaganda videos, which he calls “trailers,” released by soldiers/filmmakers dressed in desert camouflage or black costumes, the victims dressed in the orange outfits known to be worn by the prisoners at the U.S. offshore camp of Guantánamo.

⁷ Front page and page 6, *The Guardian*, “Race to find schoolgirls who fled UK to join jihadis in Syria,” 21 February 2015.



Video still released by Florida-based Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, depicting 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians purported to have been decapitated in the video entitled “Signed With Blood: To The Nation Of The Cross.” It was ruled to have been “staged” due to the excessive anomalies seen in the dramatic 5 minute film. (<http://21stcenturywire.com/2015/02/21/terror-experts-isis-video-depicting-egyptian-execution-footage-faked/>)

Alan Sondheim, who moderates the discussion with me, outlines our résumé that “the world appears to be descending into chaos of a qualitatively different dis/order, one characterized by terror, massacre, absolutism, Islamic fascism. Things are increasingly out of control, and this chaos is a kind of ground-work itself – nothing beyond a scorched earth policy, but more of the same.”⁸ Sondheim, struggling to give voice to a deeply conflicted, nihilistic sensation, here grasps for the echoes that ring in these terms of fascist terror, the absolute killing machinery set in motion by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust, the most terrifying form of historical realization of biopolitics as Robert Esposito argues in *Bios*.⁹ Esposito, however, relativizes the absoluteness immediately by suggesting that Nazism’s biopolitics and racial laws did not self-destruct; the end

⁸ Citations from the empyre list discussion on “ISIS, Absolute Terror, Performance” (November 2014) are taken from the collected postings now assembled in a manuscript by Alan Sondheim and myself. The postings and various threads of this vigorous online polylogue are in the public domain and can be accessed at <http://lists.cofa.unsw.edu.au/pipermail/empyre/2014-November/thread.html>.

⁹ Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 146.

of Nazism was not the end of the politics of letting live or letting die. Rather, biopolitics and the struggle for life's protection/negation have been generalized to the entire world.

Refocussing the question of contemporary fascism and racialization, Marina Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić have now proposed to historicize Foucault's notion of *biopolitics* (coined in the 1970s during the time of the Cold War) as a specific conceptualization of rationalist, capitalist governmentality, reserved for the First World, implying that what was going on in the Second and Third World was not at the "center" of the management of life. The *decolonial turn* Gržinić and Tatlić elaborate, away from the concentration camps in Europe (during World War II), intimates the formation of a *necropolitics* in the once named Second and Third Worlds.¹⁰ In their scathing critique of global capitalism, they analyze many facets of current dispossession, coloniality and racialization, especially how they affect racialized non-citizens (refugees, migrants, and deprived others such as gays, lesbians, transsexuals), and also how contemporary art and culture contribute to reinforcing necropolitical processes of calculation – including the popular discourse on the "post-human" – which conceal, abstract and evacuate the conditions of social antagonism or class struggle. *Necropolitics*, they surmise, now becomes the paradigm (precarization, financialization, depoliticization) of contemporary capitalism everywhere.

Although Gržinić and Tatlić do not directly address Islamic extremism, their critique enables further reflection on the rhetoric of performativity and the stories we hear, stories now told on the terror of repetition and how spectacular effects of traumatization, such as the beheadings staged by ISIS, recur as affective politics, how letting die is experienced – or operates on the unconscious – during and beyond our witnessing spectatorship. The role of spectatorship, since the first Gulf War and especially with 9/11, has changed to the extent that we now expect to witness instant communications and graphic over-exposure, and thus we witness what could be called a relentless and ceaseless media terror, a political violence constantly reframed by media in the battle of perceptions, i.e. in the production of terror in real-time.

What might be a cultural or artistic response to this? Is such a response possible at all? How does one deal with this psychologically and somatically, when every day brings new horrors? Even traditional analyses tend to dissolve in the absolute terror that seems to be daily increasing. The

¹⁰ Marina Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization and Global Capitalism: Historicization of Biopolitics and Forensics of Politics, Art and Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), p. 22. They credit Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15:1 (2003), 11-40, with having shifted Foucault's analysis of biopower, sovereignty, and the control society to more current concerns with terror, in-security and globalization.

discussion I participate in proves fruitful for me because, first of all, it is conducted without much recourse to academic language and theory, it does not make a meal out of theoretical loyalty to this Marxism or that Deleuzian philosophy or posthumanist theory, yet dwells on a disturbed, aggravated somatic response, singular bodies and minds giving rise to sensations of rupture, to sensations of excess. Here is a posting by playwright Erik Ehn:

St. Hesychios talks about a pathway of contemplation that moves from torch, to moon, to sun. [I get this from Martin Laird's nice, small book: *A Sunlit Absence*.] We start towards *enlightenment* by bearing our own light forward – searching by every means we can manage; managing darkness. Then our eyes adjust or the clouds clear and the moon shines; we don't need the torches, light shines on us. As we let more and more of our own species of control slip away, the sun comes, and we slip to union. The sun is in us and through us, ending with the threatened-but-withheld destruction of the self, we are fully present and fully empty, or surrendered, surrendered without consolation, we can't own our own surrender.

And it is difficult to tilt on the instant of this; *ecstasy is not generally durable*. Then in falling back into the working world, we can tear down, in the fall, the absolute gift of near-annihilation and seize on simple annihilation – a doubt of or hate for the human form. We can also hang onto a retrogression – a lament over losing the impossible presence of the completely other; one can feel robbed. Fascism (and other totalitarian ways of winning) are sentimental returns to a lost past, a past we've somehow been cheated of, or a past that was stolen, this, despite the fact that the past can't be "lost," *something isn't the past until it passes out of our hands*. This isn't cheating, it's just how time does business; the past is where it is; it isn't ours. All we can sustain are our framings of it, and the frames are always about our present state of mind, efforts to tilt or twist us into positions suitable to receive an anticipated future (a best-guess).

After the blessed kenosis of contemplation, one sometimes suffers nihilism and bitterness. This leads to entrepreneurship, which leads to advertising. Unhappy in the debris of contemplation's tear-down, we can indulge nostalgia for making and desperation, for that time when, in the darkness, we knew that what we needed was a torch, and we knew how to make one.

Our responses deal largely with emotional registers, while also delving into artistic practices, or philosophical speculation, which seek pertinent answers in non-violent protest, poetic reconciliations or impossible demands of justice, performing a kind of vigilance or urgency in the embodiment of resistance, concretely and poetically, this retrogression and dance under *le soleil noir*. Some of the participants in the discussion write scenes for a theatre of the oppressed (echoing Boal), dramatize their experience of exile, report from their fieldwork in Gaza and the Ukraine, in Romania and Uruguay, Poland and Iran, or explain their insistence on communal action and the kind of "stand" we saw in the silent protest of the young man who stood to

confront the government declaration of a state of emergency during the Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul. The Standing Man (*duranadam*):



Erdem Gündüz, “Standing Man” protest on Taksim Square as captured by Twitter/social media photo, June 17, 2013.



“Standing Man” after being joined by other standing men and women, captured by Twitter/social media photo, Hashtag #Duranadam (Standing Man), June 17, 2013.

How can one join in solidarity with the victims, and how are we to imagine resistance to the force of violence? Does the notion of absolute terror make resistance futile? In the case of ISIS, we already know that the media dissemination of terror, the beheadings of kidnapped victims, may be staged and thus performatively falsified. Bataille’s trope of *Acéphale*, the figure of the headless man, is a ghost image. Ghosting is (also) a theatrical technique, and Bataille’s surrealism belongs to the esoteric repertoire and the enchantment created by the ruptures in the images, the photography of grotesquely mutilated bodies, the cartoons of *violencia*.¹¹

Cartoon violence is not in excess of reality, however. The events that occurred in Turkey during the Gezi Park protest demonstrations which began in late May 2013 offer an example of what can happen when a demonstration wave initially contests an urban development plan (for Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park), and then civil unrest becomes sparked by outrage at the violent eviction of a sit-in at the park protesting the plan. Subsequently, supporting demonstrations take place across Turkey protesting a wide range of concerns, at the core of which were issues of freedom of the press, of expression, assembly, and the regime’s encroachment on Turkey’s secularism. With no clear leadership other than a small assembly that organized the initial environmental protest, the Gezi actions might be compared to the Occupy movement, although the level of violence with which they meet is much higher. Social media helps to disseminate the protests, not least because most of the Turkish media downplays them in the early phase. (3.5 million of Turkey’s 80 million people are estimated to have taken an active part in almost 5000 demonstrations across Turkey connected with the original Gezi Park protest; 11 people were killed and more than 8000 were injured, many critically, according to Wikipedia.)

If we pursue this outline, the particular pattern of protest and its repression by the military police resembles other public conflicts over spatial justice (and I experienced the sinister techniques of police kettling during student protests in London where I least expected them). What is remarkable in the Gezi instance is the diversity of dissent that united citizens from a broad spectrum, encompassing both right- and left-wing individuals, and complaints ranged from the original local environmental concerns to other issues such as the authoritarianism of Recep

¹¹ Cf. Michael Taussig, “The language of flowers,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Grave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 189-218. Taussig here discusses Bataille’s *Acéphale* in comparison with Juan Manuel Echavarría’s photographic series, *Corte de Florero*, which portrays cut up plants that look like human bones.

Tayyip Erdoğan's curb on alcohol, a recent dispute about kissing in public, and the war in Syria. The protesters also began to assume the names (calling themselves *çapulcu* – looters) which the Turkish Prime Minister chose to insult them. When I looked at films and photographs that protesters showed me, I noticed how the social choreographies of squatting and protesting involved two particular corporeal gestures that fascinated me: the dervish dance of a performer participating in the Gezi Park protests, and the action of the “Standing Man” protest on Taksim Square which began in the evening hours of June 17, 2013, the same day on which the government had announced a crackdown on demonstrations. You may well think of my reaction as romantic, but the Sufi dancer reminded me of the nights I had experienced in Cuba.



Whirling dervish dancer at Gezi Park protest in Istanbul, June 2013. Photo source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gezi_Park_protests (creative commons)

The dancing, in this case, is a political and spiritual gesture, a quasi-mystic ritual situated into a secular protest context that conjoined elements of a number of previously mutually antagonistic classes of Turkish citizens, including secular and pious Turks, Muslims, anti-capitalists, environmentalists, protesters of all stripes. Before we can address the political potential of movement, we need to look at the dancer and his (her?) mask: the face and identity of the mover is hidden behind a full gas mask, hinting clearly at the policing

power of the state willing to use tear gas against civilian protesters, to control behavior or channel movement of crowds. In this instance of protest, the lavishly dressed dervish dancer in the velvet robe (an image that quickly went viral), surrounded by protective onlookers who applaud the dance, taps into a mystic Sufi tradition (enacted most commonly by whirling dervishes of the Mevlevi order in Turkey, known to enact a formal ceremony called *Sema* that was forbidden [by Atatürk] after the founding of the Republic but after 1954 became allowed again and accessible as a cultural spectacle for tourists). The ceremonial dance connotes a sacred practice in a secular society now pressured to confront conflicting political imperatives shadowing all of the former “West,” in fact spreading onto transnational and intersocietal levels, cutting across almost the entirety of the Muslim communities, but also cutting down into individual countries (especially in the Middle East and Islamic Africa) and intimating a struggle between fundamentalist Salafis and tolerant Sufis (in Egypt, Libya, Mali, Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan and Ethiopia).

As I write this, I realize that dichotomies are useless and the lines separating believers and non-believers are porous. I cannot tell whether the dancer is a religious actor or a person using a desacralized symbolism, “looting” an icon of the pious Sufi tradition. The dance does not embody a struggle between secularism and Islamism, but weaves cross-references into a social choreography of a non-violent figure of protest, a kind of choreomantic *tekhné*. This whirling dance requires technique, and knowing how to move thusly, and non-conventionally (we note from the photo that both palms are facing up!), in the context, makes it politically provocative, almost as if an ancient shamanic act is harnessed to converge divergences, bind believers and non-believers.¹²

When I watched the dance, I tried to imagine a singular, local but inadvertently global, costumed dancer evoking a mystic form of ecstatic movement intended to calm the waves and eschew violence, connecting the sacred (of the Sufi tradition) to the secular political (displaying the mask to protect against tear gas, ironically mimicking the mask of Anonymous worn during Occupy protests). As a theatrical demonstration, this dance seems to capture an archetype of non-violence, countering terror by performing its courage through the ethereal process of spinning, circling within the circle of the on-looking community, directionless and yet directed at the wider (international) assemblage of witnesses (and cameras), extending repetition of this moment of security. It makes something visible, situating itself (like the Standing Man) vis-à-vis the

¹² See André Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics, or The Task of the Dancer,” *TDR: The Drama Review*, 57: 4 (2013), 13-27, for a thoughtful discussion of Hannah Arendt’s ideas of moving freely/politically.

lawscape, the regime, the atmosphere of danger and violence. The recognition of the ecstatic trance dance of Sufism will be divided and complicated by the fact that a religious and secular understanding of the dance cannot deny diverse interpretations, namely that Sufism is renowned primarily for its achievements in the fields of poetry and mysticism (its popular image in the West is that of an inner spiritual quest that avoids external action), while on the other hand the Sufi *tariqa*, or brotherhood, tends to entertain links ranging from quietist sects to militant splinter groups and current Islamic fundamentalism and jihadism.

3. Behind the Mask, in spite of unbelievers

If the sacred/secular motion represents a tremulous poetic image that resonates for a short while, one needs to ask whether the images of the ISIS stagings of terror have a different emotional or material impact or whether they will have been ephemeral trailers. Considerable media attention (at least in the UK) went into identifying one of the main masked executioners explaining the beheading on the videos released via YouTube. On February 26, 2015, the media report that a British man has been identified as the knife-wielding militant who appears in Islamic State videos claiming responsibility for the beheadings of U.S., British and other hostages, and *The Guardian* confirms that Mohammed Emwazi, a 26-year-old west Londoner and university graduate, is the militant who had been given the moniker “Jihadi John”



Screengrab from Islamic State video that shows killing of US-Israeli hostage Steven Sotloff. Photo: Isis video grab.

by a group of his hostages, describing him as part of an ISIS cell they named “the Beatles.”

Such revelations deflect from the campaign that ISIS is waging, and we need to approach the mask differently, questioning both the objectification of the terrorist as adversary, as alien other, and the religious or theological-political projections, the assumed transcendentalist, sacrificial ethos of fundamentalist subjectivity that we have been given by the West’s descriptions of the violent jihadist movement. The grotesque banality of the appellations (“the Beatles”) only confirms that it is very difficult to sketch an etiology of evil, to evoke moral philosophy and ask how one can evaluate beheadings and murderous actions in warfare or military conflict that has many complex political, religious and economic dimensions – especially when these actions involve the kind of faith we are perhaps uncomfortable associating with capitalism and the contemporary reorganization of coloniality.¹³ The identification of terror during warfare is made exceedingly difficult if one compares the ISIS military campaign with, for example, the struggle of the *mujahideen* (“those engaged in Jihad”) in Afghanistan, supported by the U.S. at one point, or the fight of the Kurds to obtain recognition of their ethnic/national autonomy (e.g. the Kurdistan Workers’ Party [PKK] fighting since 1984 for self-rule for the 15 million Turkish Kurds, some of whom live in northern Iraq).

The ISIS operations in Syria and Iraq also have to be seen in the context of geopolitical struggles for control over energy resources, and it must be mentioned that ISIS has succeeded, in the Syrian civil war, to obtain hold over a large portion of oil production in the region.¹⁴ They have thus clearly provoked geopolitical interests of the U.S. and their proxies in the Middle East, with Iran now ironically emerging as an ally of U.S. foreign policy maneuvers. The Islamic State, within the context of the “decolonial turn” suggested by Gržinić and Tatlić, thus must be seen as fighting against the believers in the “universalized colonial epistemology and power principles invested in reorganization of capitalism on a global scale,” in other words the principles of control over expropriation of resources and the distribution of global wealth by the First World.¹⁵ The forward march of ISIS, exploiting the erosion of the Syrian state (fostered by U.S. influence on the

¹³ Gržinić and Tatlić, in *Necropolitics, Racialization and Global Capitalism*, argue that Eurocentric racism has shifted from one form of racism (anti-Semitism) to another (Islamophobia) under the premise of the preservation of liberal, “civilized” values that are themselves rooted in racial hierarchies of First World modernity, rationality, and the universalized predicament created by the globalization of capitalism (pp. 170ff.).

¹⁴ I am grateful to anthropologist Maria Kastrinou for pointing this out to me during a recent lecture she gave on her ethnographic fieldwork in Syria amongst the Druze communities, exploring the relationships between sectarian or long-term ethnic-religious conflicts, current state-formation, and foreign and regional capitalist interests in energy resources (the politics of energy).

¹⁵ *Necropolitics, Racialization and Global Capitalism*, p. 170.

insurgency against Assad), is an example of a revolutionary nationalism with strategic economic policies which articulate political resistance against (western) racially defined interests, except that the campaign is perceived as an atrocity exhibition in the eyes of the West. But ISIS now controls energy in Syria and Iraq, and their “decolonial turn” in fact may very well have primarily economic, political motives in a struggle for state-formation, while the cinematic trailers of obscene symbolic violence they release on social media are an ideological mask, a form of theatrical ghosting to shock unbelievers and to ingratiate and recruit believers.

The obscenity of violence, therefore, is the virulent reaction of jihadism’s politics of denying the First World its prerogative to claim its hegemony as an essentially legal component in the preservation of the mimicry of that hegemony as the right form of liberty, democracy, and humanity – the authoring authority to have granted First World power to invade Iraq in the first place or stage/dissimulate its own trials of torture and humiliation (e.g. Abu Ghraib). When I recently watched the documentary film *Our beloved Sudan* (2011) by Taghreed Elsanhoury, in one scene Sudanese politician, Islamist leader, and former chairman of the National Congress Party, Dr Hassan al-Turabi, is featured in an interview, smiling at the camera and explaining that we ought to remember the reign of terror after the French Revolution. He waves his hand and chuckles, “revolutions always have slogans: *liberté, égalité, fraternité* – have you forgotten, it took them hundred years to realize a real working republic based on freedom and democracy and, haha, equality, and haha, fraternity?” In his smile, I also felt the tremendous irony in the citation of one of the foundational ideologies of Western democracy whose credentials were compromised from the very beginning (the era of colonial expansion and expropriation, as part of the wet dream of the “human” as white, male, heterosexual, northern-hemisphere property-owning resident of the post-enlightenment empire).



Khalid Younes, *Untitled no. 9*, from the series *Art from Syria*
 (<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.162800657190969.36503.161536270650741&type=1>)

Elsanhouri's ethnographic film, tracing the historical trajectory of a nation from birth in 1956 to its partition in 2011, unearths archival footage of Sudanese civil war, military training, and public speeches betraying the gap in understanding between north and south, intercut with private stories told by intergenerational women, mothers/daughters whose families were rent apart during the political liberation movement aimed at reconciliation and desire for justice and self-determination in Sudan. Compared to the film's narrative rhythms, Syrian artist Khalid Younes' series of paintings, most of which are untitled, refract civil war through disturbing, sinister icons and brutal (dis)figuration. Some drawings resemble caricatures that resonate with an article by Islam Sakka on ISIS as the "cinematic Caliphate" – except that I don't think filmic techniques of mock executions ought to be described as "audiovisual achievements."¹⁶ The ISIS videos remain perverse propaganda, providing ideological masks. The deadly trance behind the mask is nationalism's class struggle, sacredness transferred from the war-State to the victims.

¹⁶ Cf. Islam Sakka, "Slaying, Slaughtering, and Burning: ISIS, the Cinematic Caliphate," February 5, 2015, available at <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/23629> [accessed March 9, 2015].

Then what violent excess is terror? One of the participants in our discussion group, the philosopher of spatial law Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, suggests that we need to remember there is no outside. We need an outside, but there is none. He argues that there can be neither law nor justice that are not articulated through and in space, but such articulation can never be defined in a unitary manner but is always contextual and agonistic. In his new book *Spatial Justice*, which comes out just as he joins in our debate on terror, he presents a theory of the material, affective connection between space – in the geographical as well as sociological and philosophical sense – and the law, in a very broad manner that includes written and oral law, but also embodied social and political norms. On a fundamental level, he argues that spatial justice is the struggle of various bodies – human, natural, non-organic, technological – to occupy a certain space at a certain time.¹⁷

But surely we realize that the law of striation, the colonizer-law, as well as Kantian universal a priori imperatives are of no consequence to Islamic insurgents, to all those who withdraw from universalized capitalist space falsely believed to deliver justice.

The withdrawals and redrawals change the parameters. Is it not possible, then, to see ISIS as engaging just such a agonistic struggle, formulating a campaign for mobilizing the political, economic potential of space for the Islamic cause, claiming space through violent revolutionary agency, carrying the law “by and through their bodies”?¹⁸

Every body lawscapes. The law in the lawscape emanates from every body, without one discernible origin. In that sense, human, natural, artificial bodies come together in determining and being determined by the law.[...] things can on occasion overflow, exceed themselves and embark on a flight of radical self-definition.¹⁹

The ruptures (bodies differentiating themselves from others) imagined by Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos are not metaphorical, they are real and they are violent, by necessity, and what he calls “negotiation” we can also call war. When bodies claim the same space at the same time, the question of lawfulness is posed. There is, one fears, no adequate theorization of the connection between law and space, if the continuum of struggle is like a sphere (or atmosphere) where the

¹⁷ Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp, 69-70.

exterior is always included in the interior even as the spheres of oppression rely on a constant redrawing of spatiotemporal boundaries. Or, as Eisenstein intimated, there is always a mask underneath the mask, and it is death that provides the illusion, the power of imagination for human survival, for the time being, before the continuing shipwrecks and impossible movements (to belong somewhere where we are forgiven, and where restorative justice can be introduced to provide a compromise).