Beyond Language: A Derridean Analysis of Linguistic Dispossession

> The thought of security bears within it an essential risk. A state which has security as its sole task and source of legitimacy is a fragile organism; it can always be provoked by terrorism to become itself terroristic.[1]
>
> -Giorgio Agamben

> Each and every time refugees no longer represent individual cases but rather a mass phenomenon (as was the case between the two world wars and is now once again), these organizations as well as the single states – all the solemn evocations of the inalienable rights of human beings notwithstanding – have proved to be absolutely incapable not only of solving the problem but also of facing it in an adequate manner.[2]
>
> -Giorgio Agamben

Giorgio Agamben, in the above passages, echoes, fifty years later, Hannah Arendt's writings on the refugee, that figure who embodies the notion of bare humanness but, paradoxically, loses her claim to human rights at the precise moment when she is most in need thereof. She is, on Arendt's account, "the scum of the earth."[3] For Agamben, the conceptual paradox of the refugee illuminates the failings – and indeed, the illusion – not only of our understanding of human rights, but of the very concept of the Westphalian nation-state itself. The refugee is, according to Agamben, the figure who "brings the originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis."[4] This crisis of fiction is especially apparent today, given the devastating Syrian Refugee Crisis that is plaguing the Western, "civilized" world without, currently, any ethico-political resolution in sight.

Around the same time that Agamben was writing of the refugee, Jacques Derrida was developing his now-eminent concept of hospitality. Derrida distinguishes between unconditional and conditional hospitality – mirroring the antinomy between the ethical and the political, respectively – in light of our duty to the Other. In articulating this distinction, our impossibly infinite, self-contradicting responsibility to the Other is illuminated. However, it is when hospitality is considered alongside Derrida's post-9/11 writings that the illusion of the nation-state's promise to uphold its ethical duty to the Other comes into sharpest relief. Derrida writes of the "trauma" of 9/11 as an "unprecedented event," a moment in Anglo-American history that, in its immediate aftermath, was indefinable. This indefinability was made evident in the repetition of the date of the event as a means of talking thereof: "we repeat [September 11], *we must* repeat it, and it is all the more necessary to repeat it insofar as we do not really know what is being named in this way."[5] By failing to identify the "why" or "how" of 9/11, it became internalized by the people as a trauma, one not only of the past event but of the future *to come*, an inarticulatable wound that shatters the subconscious dependence and reliance on state security as a means of self-protection.

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[1] Giorgio Agamben, "We can say that politics secretly works towards the production of emergencies" (2001), https://libcom.org/library/on-security-and-terror-giorgio-agamben.
[2] Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights" (2008), 92.
[3] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), 267.
[4] Agamben (2008), 93.
[5] Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides" (2004), 87.

However, Derrida's analysis of thirteen years ago has transformed from the fear of the "*to come*" into the discursive legitimization of a tangible enemy, that of "Islam" (now the "Islamic State") and, subsequently, of "terrorism" carried out by those presumed to be "Muslim." By demarcating, through naming, the events that we internalize as "major" or "unprecedented" – and consequently, those regions and peoples of the world who are worthy of recognition – the state also has in its power the capacity to demonize and discount those it deems unworthy of ethico-political consideration. Working within the framework of Derridean hospitality, this paper aims to analyze precisely those ways in which discursive practices dispossess the political of the ethical. More specifically, it will examine how the Derridean Other of unconditional hospitality is dispossessed of her Otherness through language, by means of what Derrida calls the "Information Machine," in order to be rearticulated as a figure who the state can, from its vantage point, adequately manage. In her loss of Otherness, she becomes, ultimately, a figure, not only who is incapable of demanding hospitality, but whose claim to the ethical is altogether absent. And this phenomenon is nowhere more apparent than in the Muslim foreigner, the Muslim visitor, who today is paradigmatically the Syrian Refugee.

I. Hospitality: Unconditional, Impossible, and Neglected

Derrida's concept of absolute, unconditional hospitality focuses on the relationship between the "I" and the singular "Other," a relationship that is inherently ethical and demands of the "I" an ethical response. "I" – the host, the master of the spatial domain under consideration – am confronted by the "Other" – the wanting visitor whose "Otherness" comes from an alterity engendered precisely by her absence from my domain. The presence of the Other is not only a confrontation, but an interruption; she is not a guest whose arrival is expected, but rather someone *other* than the expected guest. And because my hospitality – my ethical responsibility – is absolute, I am in no position to select *who* may enter, which Other is given permission to enter: "I cannot ask for a certain identity, I cannot propose a contract or set limits about which and to whom I will be generous," without undermining the very concept of the ethical.[6]

This confrontation not only infringes upon my domain, but also obscures my understanding of my very being. Derrida reformulates the confrontation as a question, asking "is not hospitality an interruption of the self?"[7] Despite this moment of uncomfortable interruption – something akin to the Kristevian notion of the abject, or the Freudian notion of the uncanny – I have a responsibility to hospitality, to openness. It is a responsibility that simultaneously transforms me from "host" to "hostage": I am hostage with respect to my responsibility to the Other, and my hospitality is unconditional in that I can demand nothing from her. However, my status as host is one that is, *ipso facto*, a violence to the Other as well, a breaking of my promise to openness when I present myself *as* host, when "I am receiving, inviting, accepting or welcoming you, *allowing you* to come across the threshold."[8] The ability of the Other to cross this threshold is ultimately at my mercy, and mine alone. Even more, the existence of the threshold itself is antithetical to the concept of absolute hospitality;

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[6] Heather Worth, "Unconditional Hospitality: HIV, Ethics and the Refugee 'Problem'" (2006), 223-224.
[7] Jacques Derrida, "A Word of Welcome" (1999), 51.
[8] Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality" (2000), 6, my emphasis.

it "means that someone has the key to [its entry] and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality."[9]

It is these violent antagonisms – of the asymmetry of power, of the host as hostage, of the passage as provisional – that incorporates hospitality's opposition, "hostility," into the very concept. Hospitality – absolute hospitality – is a necessary impossibility; it is an infinite responsibility to an unconditional openness that can never be, never extended without also extending hostility. It is a paradox of meaning and "a self-contradictory concept and experience which can only self-destruct."[10]

Within the formulation of the nation-state, this impossibility is structurally actualized. In the nation-state system, absolute hospitality necessarily transforms into something constrained and conditional; the ethical transforms into the political, and therefrom emerges the antinomy. The absolute *Law* of hospitality must give way to the conditional *laws* of hospitality. It is an internal inevitability engendered by the very concept of the state: by recognizing political borders between geopolitical territories, the boundaries of the nation – the threshold of the home – are explicitly demarcated. The state, comprising the "internal and external sovereignty" of the political, protects and upholds the "political community" and cultural hegemony of the nation[11], and the conglomeration of the two necessitates that the nation-state is "responsible for the integrity of the territory, for sovereignty, for security and national defense."[12] By definition, openness is limited and in fact *must* be limited, else the nation-state itself would altogether cease.

But within borders comes the key to their unlocking, and so within the threshold of the nation-state comes the host in possession thereof: the political sovereign, manifested in the institutions that secure the nation-state's borders and uphold the legal, cultural, linguistic, economic, and altogether *national* homogeneity they protect. The infinite responsibility to the Other required by ethics is conceptually at odds with the political. Hospitality as an ethical responsibility is replaced by state borders to ensure political security, and passage becomes conditional upon one's potential to breach this security. Essentially, the responsibility to the Other is replaced by the responsibility of self-preservation. And indeed, in accord with the state's duty to security, the anonymous Other herself vanishes into either ally or threat, "friend" or "enemy."[13] *Who* is given passage is now legally provisional. As a result, there is no longer an Other-as-such, properly speaking; she must be classified – identified in some way – in the nation-state system.

II. The Nation-State and the Universality of the Universal

The concept of the nation-state is a relatively new one, its contemporary actualization having solidified after the First World War and the subsequent drawing of national boundaries by means of the Treaty of Versailles and the Sykes-Picot Agreement. In the aftermath of WWII and the rise of nationalist sentimentalities, the nation-state system began to draw criticism from political theorists, and notably from Hannah Arendt who observed, prophetically, that

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[9] Derrida (2006), 14.
[10] Derrida (2006), 5.
[11] Jürgen Habermas, "The European Nation-State" (1998), 109.
[12] Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (2000), 49.
[13] Derrida draws heavily from Carl Schmitt in his exploration of this distinction. See "On Absolute Hostility: The Cause of Philosophy and the Spectre of the Political" (1994).

> only nationals could be citizens, only people of the same national origin could enjoy the full protection of legal institutions, that persons of different nationality needed some law of exception until or unless they were completely assimilated and divorced from their origin.[14]

Nationalism brought with it a new, profound importance on collective identity and the preservation thereof as an essential component of the self, a self that embodies the very unicity – cultural, social, and ideological – of the nation-state. This unicity, under a Habermasian reading, is understood today as the "mechanism for repudiating everything regarded as foreign, for devaluing other nations, and for excluding national, ethnic, and religious minorities."[15] It is the confrontation with the foreign, thus, that incites nationalism, the assertion of the nation-state's identity "at the very moment when it is being overwhelmed and its power eroded."[16]

Within the confines of the self-titled "democratic" nation-state, the rights of the populace are composed of "human rights and civil rights, that is, into basic liberal and political rights of citizens."[17] The citizen thus absorbs those rights that we would intuit as belonging to the "human," and as such it is *she* who demands ethical consideration. Accepting this, Agamben makes the claim that within the nation-state system, the "so-called sacred and inalienable *human* rights are revealed to be without any protection precisely when it is no longer possible to conceive of them as rights of the *citizens* of a state."[18] As such, the rights of the human become integrated into – and consequently essentially equivalent to – the rights of the citizen, in which the erasure of the latter insinuates the erasure of the former.

It is ironic that at the time of Arendt's writings, the United Nations, in an attempt to prevent future atrocities like those carried out by the Nazi Regime, drafted its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a universality which means to uphold the moral worth of human beings *writ large*. Shortly after, the UNHCR approved the 1951 Refugee Convention, within which the ontological status of the refugee is explicitly defined and her rights of asylum enumerated. However, it is clear that, in practice, these two declarations are conceptually at odds. According to the text itself, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights promises to serve as a "common standard of achievement for all peoples and all *nations*, to the end that every individual and every organ of society" will have their rights protected, "both among the peoples of *Member States* themselves and among the peoples *of territories under their jurisdiction*."[19] Precisely because the "universal" rights of the Declaration extend universally *only to those bound to a particular political sovereign*, we may find Agamben's claim to be well-founded: universal *human* rights are universal among the nationals, that is to say, the *citizens*. Just as hospitality is legally constrained by immigration laws, per country caps, and stipulations articulated in asylum applications, universal human rights seem to be, similarly, juridically conditional.

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[14] Arendt, 275.
[15] Habermas, 113.
[16] Habermas, 124.
[17] Habermas, 112.
[18] Agamben (2008), 92, my emphasis.
[19] Eleanor Roosevelt et al., *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Applewood Books), Preamble, my emphasis.

External to this domain of universality stands the refugee, who is by definition a "person who is *outside* his or her country of nationality or habitual residence . . . and is unable or unwilling to avail him- or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution."[20] However, in being unbound to a state, the refugee is disqualified from claiming the nominally universal human rights promised in the Declaration; indeed, she has no sovereign who is duty-bound to grant them. And because she lacks a political sovereign to grant or uphold her status as *citizen*, there is no institution that is obligated to extend even *human rights* to her. Ontologically speaking, the refugee has no claim to human rights, nor does she have someone from whom to demand them; she is, instead, the anomaly that must be legally *protected*. The rights-bearing human is not a universality, but a status demarcating the citizen from the non-citizen. In the very act of defining either – naming either – a manner of analyzing, calculating, and qualifying is introduced. The incalculable ethical is cleaved from the articulated political, and the refugee resides somewhere in the antinomy between.

III. Muslim, Terrorist, Enemy: The West and the Other

In the aftermath of September 11, Derrida observed that the indefinable, traumatic event left an "impression" on the Anglo-American world. However, he held that the "impression" was, even if unbeknownst to those "impressed," manufactured: "a predominant system gave it form, and this form then [got] run through an organized *information machine* (language, communication, rhetoric, image, media, and so on)."[21] This Information Machine – political at its very core – is used to legitimize the hegemonic norms of the political community, of the nation; it works, essentially, to propagate the ideology of the nation-state, one that can be "constructed with the lexicon of violence, aggression, crime, war, and terrorism."[22] Under this framework, *language*, primarily through naming, is that which dispossesses: it robs the targeted group of its capacity to speak and account for itself, it silences (thereby de-legitimizing) those voices that challenge the ideology it aims to advance, and it dispossesses the political "problem" of ethical import. The Information Machine uses language "to legitimate, indeed to legalize . . . on a national or world stage, the terminology and thus the interpretation that best suits it in a given situation."[23] And as a result, the enemy – indefinable in the immediate aftermath of the trauma – has been given the name "terrorist," a label that is itself deliberately amorphous so as to metamorphose into whatever shape the sovereign requires. In so doing, the sovereign is able to amass support – by reviving a sense of nationalism – for militaristic retaliation or impenetrable border security as a means of overcoming its vulnerability.

The U.S., in light of 9/11, entered into a "War on Terror," using the vagueness of the title as a guise for invading – for the supposed promise of securing its national defense, preserving its "freedom," and perpetuating its innocence – Afghanistan and Iraq.[24] From our vantage point, the

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[20] "The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol" *UNHCR* (2011), 3. It should also be noted that this paper is exclusively examining the place of the modern *refugee* within Derrida's analysis of hospitality; there are subtle, but significant, ontological and legal distinctions attached to the terms "asylum-seeker," "migrant," "internally displaced person," and "expatriate."

[21] Derrida (2004), 89, my emphasis.

[22] Derrida (2004), 93.

[23] Derrida (2004), 105-108

[24] Let us not overlook the enormous profits amassed by American multinational corporations in Iraq War revenues – i.e. war profiteering – totaling approximately $17 billion, or the role of Blackwater's contracting out 20,000 to 30,000 armed

"War on Terror" can today be rearticulated as the "War Against ISIS"[25] which, through renaming, has offered us an enemy that is more concrete, more material, and more tangible in the mind. This renaming has been further perpetuated by the Information Machine, which even now continues to "[give] rise to public opinions that aggregate themes and attitudes to the point where they exercise political influence."[26] Language as naming is, essentially, the tool that determines, *prima facie*, who is "friend" and who is "enemy." And from our perspective, the enemy is no longer unintelligible, but one that comprises a proximate, geopolitical region: Iraq and Syria, the *place where the terrorists come from*, so to speak.[27] It is the place where the terrorists publicly declare themselves "Muslim," and outside of it recite verses from the Qur'an – verses in Arabic – before carrying out their abominable attacks in the West. The categorization of the "enemy" is thus further rearticulated, perpetuated through mass media, becoming narrower: Iraqi, Syrian, Muslim, Arab.[28]

Simultaneously, the Information Machine has worked to produce an association in the minds of the Anglo-American people between the word "terrorist" and carefully selected images of dark-skinned men, and "terrorism" with those acts most resembling the sort of attacks that had taken place on 9/11, and since. It thus informs – *it gives form to* – the ontology of the "terrorist." As articulated by Derrida, our capacity to develop such associations is itself a product of the circulation of "the discourse that dominates the public space . . . first of all through the technoeconomic power of the media."[29] Accordingly, a national sentiment of Islamophobia has been both manufactured and encouraged. However, it is a nationalism – one that rapidly devolves into a pathology – that is reflective of, according to Derrida, the *autoimmune logic* of the modern state. It is autoimmune because, by means of propagating its nationalism, the violence of the nation-state – the "perversion that turns weakness into force"[30] – reverses upon itself. Indeed, as Agamben had said, the state "can always be provoked by terrorism to become itself terroristic."[31] The post-9/11 United States, Derrida writes, claims that

> in the war it is waging against the "axis of evil," against the enemies of freedom and the assassins of democracy throughout the world, it must restrict within its own country certain so-called democratic freedoms and the exercise of certain rights by, for example, increasing the powers of police investigations and interrogations, without anyone, any democrat, being really able to oppose such measures . . . It must thus come to resemble these enemies, to corrupt itself and threaten itself in order to protect itself against their threats.[32]

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security contractors in Iraq in an effort by the Bush administration to privatize the military for economic benefit. See: Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Picador, 2008).

[25] Although even this is a rearticulation that is consistently debated. See Faisal Irshaid, "Isis, Isil, IS or Daesh? One group, many names" (December 2015), http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27994277.

[26] Habermas, 153.

[27] Not where they *reside*, it should be noted. The problem of terrorism is only articulated as a problem when it becomes a confrontation against dominant powers, in much the same way that post-WWII "quasi-instantaneous mass murders," according to Derrida, "were not recorded, interpreted, felt, and presented as 'major events'" if they were not deemed important to the political integrity of the West (Derrida [2004], 89).

[28] It is ironic that, prior to the presence ISIS and Muslim extremists, Syria was one of the few nations in the Middle East that was ruled under secular governance.

[29] Derrida (2004), 108.

[30] Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2005) 41.

[31] Agamben (2001).

[32] Derrida (2005), 40.

Where does this figure – the Syrian refugee – fall within the context of Derridean hospitality? It is a difficult question to answer, principally because she is not, as we have seen, an Other. The moment that she became a political problem, a crisis of politics, her embodiment of "Otherness" ceased. And because the refugee's capacity to return to Syria is virtually nonexistent, she is not even the visitor; visitation implies an eventual departure, while the Syrian refugee cannot do so. She is thus the foreigner, and yet even this articulation is insufficient. The state cannot handle, simply, the foreigner. The foreigner is vague, it is a term that can be subsumed under so many others – tourist, asylum-seeker, immigrant, criminal – and therefore both too much and not enough. The state cannot handle this surplus, this ambiguity, this deficiency; it can handle only the problem of the enemy, or the familiarity of the friend. And the refugee grows ever more threatening in the mind of the host, despite the cruel irony that she, too, is fleeing the violence that ISIS is wreaking in the Middle East.

The current crisis notwithstanding, the West has always had a difficult history with the refugee; difficult insofar as it has not had to confront her in today's volume since WWII (during which there was no Refugee Convention). Eighty percent of the global refugee population – of which there are approximately 15 million – are hosted by "Global South" countries, principally Pakistan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.[33] Over the last several years, Lebanon and Turkey have become increasingly impacted by the Syrian refugee crisis; today, 1 of every 4 people residing in Lebanon is a refugee, while in Turkey 1 of every 28 people is a refugee. The disparity in refugee hosting – in which, according to Saskia Sassen, "the forty eight least-developed countries provide asylum to about half of [the world's] refugees" – is not so surprising if we endorse UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres' attribution of "this imbalance in refugee hosting to xenophobia."[34]

This xenophobia – if we are to call it such – is not unfounded. With the birth of the Western nation-state came the birth of the political self, the focus of nationalist sentiments. And the more foreign the Other – the less civilized, the less Christian, the less European – the more interrupting she is to this self, the more she destabilizes self-identity. She is a source of discomfort, someone whose alterity is so radical that she can only, at best, disrupt our political and cultural homogeneity or, at worst, erode our sociopolitical homogeneity altogether. And the Syrian refugee might today be the most removed from our manufactured understanding of Western homogeniety. She is the alterity that engenders the "strategic self-assertion of the modern state against external enemies" and inspires the "existential self-assertion of 'the nation.'"[35] Within the Syrian refugee lies our fear of terrorism and the source of our nationalism, and it is linguistic dispossession that is the vanguard of both.

IV. A Return to Hospitality?

The ethical problem was of Derrida's Other; the political problem was of the Other-as-enemy. After 9/11, the problem became one of the terrorist; today it has become one of the refugee. And it is of the refugee precisely because she has absorbed – and has been absorbed by – the West's fear of terrorism, its fear of the "Muslim" enemy. The Syrian refugee comes from the place that the terrorists come from, she speaks the language that the terrorists speak, she is of the religion that the terrorists

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[33] And it should be noted that in these regions, the volume of refugees is never referred to as a "problem."
[34] Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (2014), 61.
[35] Habermas, 113-114.

invoke as justification for their actions. She cannot be the friend, because there is always the possibility that she is a terrorist hiding in plain sight, that she can at any moment compromise the security of the state or unveil its mask of performed vulnerability. Her singularity has transformed into the universal threat, her status as Other has been renamed as "refugee," "Muslim," "Arab," "enemy." Because she is not an Other, she has no claim to an impossibly unconditional hospitality; because she is not a citizen, she has no claim to the ethical demand of the human. The refugee has been dispossessed of her home, her origin, her name, and her Otherness, and this has been made possible through language. In the world of the political, language is no longer merely language, merely communication or dialogue or discourse; language has transcended language, gone beyond language, has become that which demarcates, names, and dispossesses.

Derrida has illustrated, quite acutely, the profound shortcomings of the modern state: its negligence of ethical responsibility, its pathological turn to paranoia in the face of alterity, its recourse to violence that is both radical and autoimmunizing. Nonetheless, I hesitate to declare the abolition of political borders – and thereby the nation-state structure itself – as the sole solution to this ethico-political antinomy, as many readers of Derrida are inclined to attribute to him and as Giorgio Agamben himself suggests. And yet, it is apparent that an ideological transformation of the nation-state is critical, one which calls for "an extension of the democratic *beyond* nation-state sovereignty, *beyond* citizenship."[36] Most especially, the manufacturing and manipulating of exclusionary nationalism – propagated by what Derrida calls the Information Machine – is a phenomenon that cannot subsist in a world that is growing, inevitably, ever-more pluralistic. I suggest, instead, that it is time to do away with the postmodernist concept of the "Other" altogether. The metaphysical recognition of the possibility of the "Other" already brings with it the suggestion of an unanticipated threat *to come* – one that will manifest itself precisely when "I" am interrupted by her. It is the fear of the Other that, I argue, contributes so heavily to the formulation of pathological, autoimmunizing nationalism; this nationalism subsequently gives rise to an illusive (indeed, elusive) self, a political self, one which realizes its illusiveness precisely through its confrontation with the Other. Benhabib articulates this confrontation as

> [t]he inability of an individual at the psychic level to acknowledge the otherness within herself [which] will, more often than not, manifest itself in the urge to split the 'other' off and project it onto an external figuration outside oneself; by placing it outside itself, the self feels secure in maintaining the boundaries of its own identity without being threatened by dissolution into otherness.[37]

By acknowledging an Other, we acknowledge the possibility of self-disruption and, thus, allow the state to name her in a manner that will allow for her exclusion. There can never be an ethical within the political if we hold onto this destructive concept. And perhaps by ridding ourselves of the Other, we might begin to fulfill Derrida's plea to "help what is called Islam and what is called 'Arab' to free themselves from such violent dogmatism."[38]

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[36] Derrida (2005), 87, my emphasis.
[37] Seyla Benhabib, "Reversing the Dialectic of Enlightenment: The Reenchantment of the World" (1998), 358-359.
[38] Derrida (2004), 113.

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