The Living from the Dead: Disaffirming Biopolitics by Stuart J. Murray (review)

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If we but listen, we can hear a voice from the grave—Jacques Derrida's mournful lamentation: "There is no longer, there has never been a scholar capable of speaking of anything and everything while addressing himself to everyone and anyone, and especially to ghosts. There has never been a scholar who really, and as scholar, deals with ghosts" (2006, 12), a scholar who "does not believe in the sharp distinction between . . . the living and the non-living" (12). But, then, as if in response, we witness the apparition of just such a scholar: Stuart J. Murray, the author of *The Living from the Dead*, who very much is dedicated to the ethical project of attending to those dead who continue to haunt the living. Indeed, the book's cover features a spectral image, entitled "Ghost," as it were, conjured by artist Si Lewen. As well, the very title of his work renders the "sharp distinction" between "The Living" and "The Dead" porous, quixotically indistinct, as signified by the unattached and unhinged preposition "from." That is, the title does not announce that Murray intends to *distinguish* the living *from* the dead, nor *separate* the living *from* the dead, nor *identify* the living *from* the dead—in some categorical, decisive demarcation. Rather, Murray's use of the preposition "from" might conjure—instead, a Derridean sense of a "borderline"—a relation marked by *différance* between the living and the dead. Etymologically derived from an Old English preposition, "denoting the distance, absence, or remoteness of a person or thing in fixed position"

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(*OED*)—in time or space, *from* evokes Derrida's neologism. "*Différance* as temporization [time/deferral], *différance* as spacing [space/difference]. How are they [time/space]," Derrida queries, "to be joined?" (1991, 61). Murray's syntactically incomplete phrase suggests that the living and the dead are conjoined in a relation of interminable deferral and indeterminable difference, entangled in a fluxed, symbiotic—parasitic, even—relation.

Much more could be said on this t(r)opic of deferred presence (and much more, indeed, of parasitic consumption and carnophallogocentrism), but to our immediate point, as Murray's work entreats us to consider, there is much to learn in conversation with the dead; and indeed, it is our ethical responsibility—*burden*, even, as he remarks—to "hearken" to their voices. Murray's *The Living from the Dead* undertakes this burden, listening to "the dead, the dying, the dispossessed" (1), endeavoring to articulate "[u]nder what conditions might we hearken those dead who summon us, and exhort us, perhaps to reckon with our unspeakable complicity in their deaths" (1), while offering the following caveat: "These pages, which arise in care of such summons, exhortations, and calls to reckoning neither speak *for* nor *as* the dead, the dying, or lives lost" (1), for as he will reveal in his refrain, speaking *for* or *as* amounts to an unethical co-option, a resentencing to death of the dead and dying.

Murray describes his work's writing "something akin to thanatography" (1), which is through and through a *rhetorical* enterprise, necessitating an attunement to and with biopolitics' "speech/acts and its tropological constitution of subjects, political identities, and lives lived" (10). That is, as Steven Mailloux has argued elsewhere, tropes are rotated in order to "rotate the troops" (1993, 299). Tropes, troops; life, death. Much is at stake.

The subtitle of the book, *Disaffirming Biopolitics*, foregrounds Murray's argument: that attending to these voices, to the dead, requires a certain *disaffirmation* of biopolitics, a disaffirmation of "a politics ostensibly devoted to life (*bios*)" (1), to the production of "life," which is "governed by increasingly autonomous efficiencies and economies of scale, through techno-administrative mechanisms that include systems of surveillance, segregation, health and welfare regimes" (2), as well as "through education, . . . law, biomedicine, and popular culture, too" (2). The production of "life" instantiates itself by way of a "sacrificial economy" (5) that necessitates *letting die* (1), even "acceler[ating] or mand[ating]" (2) death. In short, "[b]iopolitics kills, albeit indirectly and in the passive voice. It lets die in the name of life. This book begins here in the care of deaths disavowed—rather than from life's sacred vows and avowals" (1).

Murray undertakes his thanatographical critique of biopolitics with an introduction, four chapters, and a concluding "refrain." Through the use of case studies, examining sacrificial economies that mobilize tropes/troops, Murray listens to those—dead and dying—who are "let to die," according to the rhetorics and logics of bioethics, as employed during the COVID-19 pandemic, by suicide terrorism, during the hunger strikes of California prisoners, during legal cases of "untimely" deaths of young children, and surrounding the technologically distributed, videotaped death of a disabled Black man. Each case study is situated within a rhetorical framework, and—as ever—critically foregrounds Murray's own burden of "using," for analysis, for his evidentiary purposes, these very "precious perilous bodies in sickness and suicide; in hunger, subjects of medico-legal power, of time and race and technology" (161). "My 'uses' are abuses," he admits, "notwithstanding my intent" (161). This confession, which seeks no absolution, confirms, yet again, our/his irredeemable and "unspeakable complicity" in the violence of *letting* die (1).

The stakes are grave, indeed, in Murray's thanatographical critique—politically, ethically, and rhetorically, which remain, in refrain, indistinguishable, one *from* the other. In the face of "unconscionable state violence," "the revivification of nativist nationalisms and racisms," "merciless neoliberal governments and burgeoning authoritarianisms; and most recently, a deadly global pandemic": "We live and die today on a knife's edge of disaster" (1–2). Yet, the most devasting cut of his critique comes, on refrain, as an interrogation into *his, my, our*, individual and collective complicity in all. Once more, there is no option of good conscience, nor of absolution, although there remains "the future-to-come" (148). This should give us pause, to "wait abidingly" (148)—and should inspire a certain, disaffirming vigilance. At the gravest point, *The Living from the Dead* is a powerful, ethical invocation; a lyrical, performative provocation—and a promising, futural conjuration.

DEFINING/DISAFFIRMING BIOPOLITICS

Murray begins his rhetorical investigation citing Foucault's halting attempt to "define" "biopolitics," as worked through during a lecture at the College de France in 1976, where Foucault postulates that "one of the greatest transformations political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that, I wouldn't say exactly that sovereignty's old right—to take life or let live—was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right

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which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. . . . This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the power to 'make' live and 'let' die" (qtd. in Murray 3).

Murray astutely notes that Foucault's description of this "epochal transformation" of power can be articulated only in the *passive* voice, and Murray argues that this is Foucault's only grammatical recourse precisely because this new right somehow manifests "seemingly by no one, or nothing, and yet in the name of an incipient 'life itself'" (3). However, Murray continues, although this new right is, in contrast to sovereignty's supreme agency, "decentralized and reticulate" (4), the grammar of liberal humanism has "become a great biopolitical ruse" (4), propagating the continuing illusion "that I freely choose and choose the very conditions of my own choosing—a grammatical 'I' propped up in its delusional sense of rationality, autonomy, and enlightened agency. An entitled 'I' through which 'life itself' would speak" (4).

This grammatical habit—like Nietzsche's worn coin in "On Truth and Lying" (1989, 250)—remains, circulating in this sacrificial economy as zombie currency: the illusion of individual sovereignty. This "lie"—supported and reproduced by "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms" (250)—further belies that "the object of that [new] power, its site of application, is not a singular body to be disciplined or punished. Biopolitics makes live and lets die en masse. No longer concerned with given individuals, it is applied systemically on—and constitutes—particular 'populations'" (Murray 2022, 4). Further, still, Murray maintains, not only is the grammatical "I" a rhetorical invention, but "life itself" is, also. That is, biopolitics mobilizes "a tropological regime that fabricates a vital 'truth' from which all else seems to follow" (3). This "truth" belies a so-called "concrete biological body," which incarnates a trope of a "most disincarnate, sacred, or transcendental notion," which is "neither given nor natural" (3). *The Living from the Dead* "surfaces" these mobilizations of metaphors—the tropes of "life itself" (14).

Disaffirming biopolitics' tropological moves is in response to scholars who advocate an "affirmative" or "democratic" biopolitics, who proffer a "kinder, gentler" biopolitics (12). Yet, as Murray convincingly argues, "to *affirm* is the performative speech/act of a (neo)liberal political subject and iteratively both relies on and shores up a problematic underlying ontology" (12). In this way, citing Nancy Fraser's criticism, such affirmative attempts, therefore, do not "disturb," but rather reify "the underlying social structures that generat[ed]" the very injustices, which we are interrogating and asking to be held accountable (12).

Disaffirming, in contrast, is a thanatographical endeavor—a rhetorical one: "To critique is not to judge the truths or lies of biopolitics (it proclaims both), or whether it is good or evil (it can be both); rather, critique would pursue rhetorical questions concerning the conditions in and by which such statements could be voiced, circulate, and recruit desiring subjects as agents of the biopolitical apparatus" (13). In this way, "[t]o disaffirm is a devastating undertaking. It is not self-righteously censorious, neither a disapprobation nor a condemnation issued from a posture of moral superiority or a secure sense-of-self. . . . Instead, it would turn its gaze inward to reckon with *my* collusion and complicity in systems that let die in the name of my own livingness" (18). And, would amount to—if not a burial of the liberal, humanistic subject, certainly "a mortification of *this* subject, 'I,' who writes—here" (19).

THE REFRAIN: APOSTROPHIC ADDRESS AND THANAPOLITICS

And then, what *remains* of *The Living from the Dead* is its refrain. After careful exegesis of the case studies, themes repeat. What remains, like a refrain, which repeats, remains. A refrain, etymologically, also carries the signifying saturation of the sense of "burden," which Murray carries with him in his thanatographical study. As chorus or burden, Murray's refrain through the book is to amplify, in its repetition, like a death dirge, the incalculable, immeasurable ethical burden that "we," that "I," that "he," the author, carries as the ethical obligation in the face of the recognition of our own complicity in the letting die, in the knowledge that our, my, his, *very* living is at the purchase of the disavowal of so many deaths, the disavowal of all whom "we"/"I" have let die in this sacrificial economy (see also 171).

Yet we must lend our ear. The responsibility to "hearken" to, address, and dialogue with "the dead, the dying, the dispossessed" (1) ("however fictively" [144]), however rhetorically, however lyrically, Murray argues, necessitates the use of *apostrophe* as a non-co-optive, non-cannibalizing trope. Through a careful explication of the distinction between the tropes of apostrophe and prosopopoeia, Murray makes clear that the latter, prosopopoeia, speaks *for* and *as* the dead—a making present, as a projection of the *addressor*, and, as such, is "the master trope of biopolitics," "whether expressly in the service of making live or letting die. It is a voice that impatiently projects the response it wishes to hear. It refuses to wait; inattentive, it willfully mistakes the echo for origin" (145).

In contradistinction, apostrophe attends to a nonpresent absence (144), and eternally awaits a response—an impossible response, because

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the "impossible possibility of the reply ontologically precedes the call, and calls-forth that call, hearkening in advance: the apostrophe is summoned (by the absent addressee), the apostrophe in turn summons, and we tarry in this space. The address is always in the eternal return of this refrain" (145).

And the address, "if we seek possibilities for a critical response that might disaffirm biopolitics," requires a different "rhetorical register" (145). Hence the apostrophic address, the address summoned by the absent addressee, requires the "mortification" of the liberal human subject, perhaps summoning a sort of sacrifice of "letting die." In this impossible space, unmoored from "our liberal subjecthood" and the illusion of agentic sovereignty, Murray takes up the (un)timely question: How then? What now? How might "we" proceed ethically (19)? In this concluding chapter, Murray faces the impossible, ethical injunction: How, then, to "deal" with these ghosts—with all these dead and dying with whom I have some complicity—by my very "livingness"? He turns/tropes his thanatographical eye from other systems to himself—to the very act of writing about the dead, about those lives that have been allowed (accelerated or mandated) to "let die." The repetition is palpable. The lament has a corporeal texture. One feels the weight of corpses; the burden is heavy. This grave acknowledgment, however, is not cause for despair—but rather hope; here for a future-to-come, for a new way of being—for a new relation between the living and the dead.

Murray suggests that there is a rhetorical, ethical responsibility to hearken to, to address—in a mode of call-and-response. How, then? Murray, thus, queries: might "we" (as tentatively as he inscribes such a collective), alternately, "gather around the impossible possibility of death, rather than life itself—a thanatopolitics rather than a biopolitics" (170)? Murray explains (and I realize I am quoting him heavily, but his prose is so gorgeously citation-worthy): "We must not think that by saying yes to 'life,' one says no to power and to death; on the contrary (to continue borrowing on Foucault's phraseology), one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of biopolitics. And yet, in the sanctimonious affirmation of my 'life,' biopolitics demands that I say No to death, that I possess my life by locating death elsewhere, producing it there clandestinely, outsourcing it, as the condition of my living-on" (171).

Speaking yes to life or yes to death, indeed, presumes that one can address such, and—to our purposes—presumes that one can, in present circumstances, "own" one's own death, where nothing could be further from the "truth." To speak the "truth" would acknowledge that "*we ourselves* are

stuck in the universal contexts of death and cooperate with the death industry" (Sloterdijk 1987, 203). And this is where Murray resurrects the ancient Cynics, who acknowledged "the death-warranting of our established order. They refuse[d] to uphold the broken liberal contract, its 'free speech,' its false equalities" (175). Rather, they called for a "life which is radically other" and which "itself responds to—perhaps it has hearkened—death's address" (175).

By way of explication, he conjures Foucault's late work on Cynic philosophy, as "a sort of parallel history to Western philosophy" (165). That is, Foucault contrasts the philosophical impulses as advocated by Plato's *Alcibiades* with that of Plato's *Laches*. In the former, the well-rehearsed Delphic injunction to "know thyself" is contrasted with a much different, proposed relation to the self, as articulated in the *Laches*. Murray explains the import of the contrast: the first, centered on the pursuit of an ethical self's relation to itself, as a focus "on the soul (*psyche*)," manifests itself "as a psychologized—and ultimately Cartesian and epistemological—relation of rational self-knowledge in opposition to the body (*soma*)" (166), becoming the bedrock "of that long psychodrama we call Western philosophy, Enlightenment, and liberal self-consciousness" (166). In the *Laches*, in contrast, "the self's relation to itself . . . redounds not on the care of the soul (*psyche*) . . . but on the care of life (*bios*)" (166). *Bios*, here, within Cynic philosophy—in contrast to the "disincarnate" and "transcendental" notion of life within biopolitics (3)—is "about rhetorical form, the modality or manner by which I stylize my life and come to question it critically" (166).

Cynic philosophy—or, rather *kynicism*, as embodied by Diogenes of Sinope, as proffered by Peter Sloterdijk—"is a first reply to Athenian hegemonic idealism that goes beyond theoretical repudiation. It does not speak against idealism, it lives against it. . . . [K]ynicism gives a new twist to the question of how to *say* the truth" (Sloterdijk 1987, 104). It responds to the dialectician's logic with "a dialogue of flesh and blood" (104). An incarnate, disaffirming mode of being enacts a mode of resistance, of transgression against hegemonic "regimes of truth" that codify one's life and one's death—even before one is born or has died, before one is made to live or let to die.

This track or trace of the Cynics has been a step taken previously by scholars in our field, notably as featured in a "Forum" responding to Arthur Walzer's (2013) published piece on Michel Foucault and the notion of *parrhêsia*, the early Greek term, meaning to speak all, to speak freely, and to speak boldly. The concept has a rich, textured, and contested history within the rhetorical tradition (see Walzer, and responding authors' "Forum" [Gehrke et al. 2013]), but of import is the impulse to "speak truth

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to power" when, as today, democracy is on the line, and deliberative rhetorics have lost their efficacy to effect critical change. This is a point made by Barbara Biesecker, who carefully unpacks Foucault's notions of power, transgression, and style-as-resistance, who argues that "those practices that we will call 'resistant' are, quite simply or nominalistically speaking, those practices that do not make sense within the available lines of intelligibility or discernment" (1992, 357). "*Parrhêsia* is, then, not frank 'speech' in the conventional sense," according to Kelly E. Happe, "as much as it is an opening up, a rupture" (2015, 217). The *kynical* mode of being, thus, embodies this critical intervention, as that "which opens up the possibilities for thinking beyond, or outside of the constraints of the present" (216). Happe continues to argue that "Socrates may have engaged in fearless speech that cost him everything, including his life, but he nevertheless articulated a set of principles that could render commensurable one's mode of life" (217)—and render commensurable one's mode of death. "In the figure of the Cynic, no such assurances are possible or even desired" (216).

Yet, even if we track this trace, Murray, stresses in refrain, Cynic philosophy, the interventional, *kynical* rupture, "promises no redemption, no erasure of an unwanted past, no paradise, but it may help us to imagine another future" (165–66).

WHAT THEN REMAINS?

What, still, remains—on repeat, on refrain, are the remains, the rendering of remains, and the "burden," or ethical injunction, to attend to them. Derrida has explored, mournfully, the work of attending to remains, to remains that persistently do not remain, as the "trace," the impossible nonpresent absence that renders all impossibly possible. Derrida, thus, offers "cinder"—or "ashes"—"as the better paradigm for what I call the trace" (qtd. in Lukacher 1987, 1) in order to acknowledge that which haunts, the "remains without remainder" (1). How then to "live on," rendering the surviving, remainder effects of remains? How then to sur-vive the haunting work of negotiating our complicity in the systems of bioethics? How then to respond, responsibly, to the remains, to our complicity with systemic injustices, in order to "call into question the coming of the future," to address—in Derrida's words—the question "of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (1995, 34)? This is what Murray is responsive to—as a scholar who deals with ghosts, who hearkens to death's address, who hopes for a future of "life" that "resounds in one's relation with the living and

the dead—an ethical relation that would critically disaffirm our biopolitical regime and would welcome not just an *other* life, but, before it is too late, an *other* world in which an *other death* will one day be possible" (175). This is his refrain; this is what remains.

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