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**Not Just Peace:
Living and Giving Life in the Shadow of Imperial Death**

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Resisting Imperial Peace

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As a New Testament scholar, when I hear the term “imperial peace,” I cannot help but think of *pax Romana*, the claim that the ancient rule of the Roman empire was a time of peace.

Interestingly enough, the Gospel of John, which was written when the Jewish nation and people were colonized by the Roman empire, tells us not only that Jesus was violently executed by Rome (18:28-19:41) but also that Jesus claims to give a peace that the world cannot give (14:27; 16:33; see also 20:19, 21, 26). Reading the Fourth Gospel will give us insights into not only the logics and logistics of imperial peace but also the possibilities and limits of resistance.

Death Threats and Death Bound

Johannine scholars have long observed that John's Jesus is very conscious of his impending death, and that he seems to have come to this consciousness very early. After a couple of days of recruiting disciples and before he performs his very first sign at Cana, Jesus already talks about his coming "hour" (2:4). As John will make crystal clear, Jesus' "hour" is none other than his time of crucifixion (see, for example, 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1). While the mortality rate was significantly higher in the Greco-Roman world of the first century C.E. than, say, the average in today's geo-political West, it is also well known that life expectancy became relatively "decent" for those who managed to survive the first five or ten years of life (Frier 1999: 86-88; Kelly 2006: 102-106).¹ If death was supposedly to be most threatening to infants

¹ In a debate with Jesus, some characters in John express the view that Jesus is not yet fifty (John 8:57). If one goes by the projection that Bruce W. Frier develops on the basis of Justinian's *Digest*, a person between the age of thirty and forty-five in the Roman empire of the third century C.E. would have an average life expectancy of between twenty-three to fifteen years (1982: 245).

and children, why do we find John's (adult) Jesus being so conscious or obsessed with his own death?²

Frier, in his essay on "Roman demography," correctly points out that the so-called law of average must not blind us to the differences that existed within Roman society (1999: 90).

Although Frier himself focuses on class difference—or how the Roman elites generally enjoyed a longer (and better) life than the lower classes—one should keep in mind that while class/status and race/ethnicity are not collapsible, they do have a tendency to intersect. This is particularly so in colonial situations, in which an entire population may be put into a limbo zone of "included exclusion" or "excluded inclusion." That is to say, the colonized, being generally impoverished and/or racially/ethnically marked, are a part of but also apart from the empire. They form and belong to a somewhat separate, but surely secondary social stratum.

This paradox of being simultaneously included and excluded—or, more accurately, being included on the premise of exclusion—is precisely how Giorgio Agamben characterizes what the

² Given (1) Martin Heidegger's existentialist philosophy on the need for *Dasein* to acknowledge the certainty of death to be authentic; and (2) Rudolf Bultmann's interests in and indebtedness to Heidegger's philosophy, I wonder if Bultmann's interest in the Fourth Gospel (1971) is not at least partially related to the prominence of death in John's story of Jesus, even if there is no entry under "death" in Bultmann's English index. One should not forget either that Heidegger advocates such an essential relation between language and death that he thinks animals just "perish" and are incapable of experiencing death as humans do (1971: 107-108). If so, John's Jesus, as the Word (1:1-14), would have an even more particular relation to death. Of course, the whole idea of a life-and-death struggle between master and slave goes back to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) within the European philosophical traditions. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, in his insightful reading of Lacan, has suggested that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is itself "a speculative version of the Passion," although Borch-Jacobsen's reference is Paul's letter to the Philippians instead of the Gospel of John (1991: 12).

Romans categorized as the *homo sacer*, or “sacred person” (1998).³ Pointing to Pompeius Festus’ second-century Roman text (*De verborum significatione*) and its reference to one “who may be killed but not sacrificed,” Agamben locates not only an act that is beyond law and sacrifice, but also a zone where rule and “exceptions to the rule” become indistinguishable. This zone is the zone of the sovereign, where power can suspend the very judicial order that it itself establishes. The powerless subjects within that same zone, being liable to the whims and under the threats of the sovereign, are all potentially excludable or killable without recourse to law or sublation to the sacred. As such, they also reside in a zone of indistinction as *homo sacer*, which Agamben further glosses as “bare life.” Putting sovereign power and bare life as two sides of the same coin or uncanny doubles within the same zone, Agamben aims not only to show how sovereignty is always already reliant on its threat and execution of death, but also to stress that more and more people are falling into this category of *homo sacer* or “bare life.” Rather than thinking that “bare life” is the state or the fate of only, say, Holocaust victims, political refugees, or those imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay, Agamben points to the overcomatose patient—as one who is being kept in a zone of indistinction between life and death by contemporary medical technology, and yet subject to the fluctuating criteria of death given by the medical and legal establishments—to suggest that “today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man ... because we are all virtually *homines sacri*” (1998: 115).

³ Agamben also describes such a person as “dwell[ing] in the no-man’s-land between the home and the city” (1998: 90). As we know, this spatial characteristic of being “in-between”—if not exactly that of “included exclusion” or “excluded inclusion”—is also significant for John’s world-traveling Jesus.

Agamben's argument about the widening or expansion of the "bare life" zone should not, however, lead one to forget that historically some people have indeed been more vulnerable as bare life than others.⁴ Writing about the experiences of African Americans, Sharon Patricia Holland has suggested, for example, that blacks in the United States have been living in a "space of death"—a death zone, if you will—for five hundred years, and that the story of African Americans is basically one of "death-in-life" (2000: 3-5).⁵ Citing John Edgar Wideman's mournful words that in Africa America, "black lives are expendable, can disappear, click, just like that," Karla FC Holloway argues that untimely deaths among African Americans in the twentieth century alone have been so pervasive and persistently "color-coded" that what she calls "black death" has become nothing less than a "cultural haunting" within African America (2002:

⁴ One also need not see Agamben's emphasis on readily killable bare life and Michel Foucault's emphasis on subject formation through discipline as mutually exclusive. Instead, I am inclined to see the two as mutually informative. While not mentioning Agamben specifically, Saidiya V. Hartman's book on the violence, terror, and outrage of slavery scrutinizes both direction of pleasure and punishing domination, and helps to elucidate in the process the relational dynamics of how power might be exercised through repression and/or production (1997).

⁵ One can, of course, add to this, as Holland does, Native Americans, or even Asian Americans. Anne Anlin Cheng, for instance, has proposed that Asian Americans suffer a "phantom illness" and occupy a "ghostly," "unstable position in the ethnic-racial spectrum" in the national imagination of the United States because of, say, "our" being racialized as "foreign" (2001: 69). Being Asian American, or "foreign American," is to find oneself in a zone of indistinction that may bring about deadly consequences. I have, however, intentionally chosen not to focus on Asian American experiences because I want to pursue a minority subjectivity that is not tied to identity politics. Given this essay's "exorbitant" focus on death, allow me to quote from the late Edward W. Said, who said in an interview, "What is much more interesting is to try to reach out beyond identity to something else. *It may be death*. It may be an altered state of consciousness that puts you in touch with others more than one normally is" (Rose 2000: 25; emphasis added). Perhaps the experience of being in the "death zone" will help bring minorities beyond identity politics to be in touch and in coalition with each other. For an attempt to bring biblical scholars from different racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States into a conversation, see Bailey, Liew, and Segovia forthcoming.

1-3, 7-8). This kind of haunting is arguably best expressed by Richard Wright, who writes that by the time he was eleven, “[although] I had never in my life been abused by whites, ... I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings” (1969: 84), because he knew “there existed men against whom I was powerless, men who could violate my life at will” (1969: 83). Using Agamben’s work as a lens to read the writings of Wright, Abdul R. JanMohamed—in a thesis that resonates with the work of both Holland and Holloway—presents Wright as one who writes *as* and *about* a “death-bound-subject” (2005). JanMohamed means by that a black subjectivity that is “formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death” (2005: 2).

What I am getting at is within empire, whether that of Rome or of the United States, a particular segment of population under its colonial “sovereignty” tends to become particularly vulnerable to death, and such a susceptible segment is often singled out by class/status and/or race/ethnicity.⁶ Imperial peace, in other words, is always already dependent on death threats and executions against certain marked groups under its rule. For these groups, being who they are and being dead are almost always one and the same, because their vulnerability to death—

⁶ The connection between first-century Jews and slavery is also not without warrant, since one major source of Greco-Roman slavery came from war captives (Glancy 2002:77-79). In fact, Jews of the first century C.E. could be and often were presented as “born slaves” (Isaac 2004: 463-64). In addition, they, at least as Josephus’ representation indicates, did compare their colonial existence to slavery (*AJ* 20.120). This link between Roman colonization and slavery can also be connected with Agamben’s readily killable “bare life” by way of Latin etymology within ancient Roman legal discussion: “Slaves (*servi*) are so-called, because generals have a custom of selling their prisoners and thereby preserving (*servare*) rather than killing them: and indeed they are said to be *mancipia*, because they are captives in the hand (*manus*) of their enemies” (*Digesta* 1.5.4.2-3; cited in Harrill 2006: 30). In other words, slaves were “spared,” and hence bare life. Here is an even more definitive statement by Moore: “The Roman Empire, as is commonly noted, had as its fundamental enabling condition the institution of slavery” (2006: 61).

whether it is fear or direct experience of it—is not only known but also deeply internalized (Holloway 2002: 58-59). The thought that this idea is useful across time and locations can be seen in the early work of Frantz Fanon, who—writing about black men in the Caribbean and Africa living under French colonization—describes them as living in “a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region” (1967: 8).⁷ Not only does Fanon stress later in the same work that his fellow blacks are colonized with “a sense of nonexistence” rather than one of inferiority (1967: 139),⁸ he also mentions specifically in a footnote that he had wanted to write about “death wish among Negroes” when he started writing *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967: 218n. 6). Even if or even as we follow Agamben’s argument that sovereignty is turning more and more people into “bare life,” we must not forget that there have always already been groups or communities that are more exposed than others. In fact, Agamben himself states that “the Jews are the representatives par excellence and almost the living symbol of the people and of the bare life that modernity necessarily creates within itself, but whose presence it can no longer tolerate in any way” (1998: 179). Keeping in mind, however, that (1) Agamben traces *homo sacer* back to the Roman empire of the second-century, and (2) Jews and their land were

⁷ Paul Gilroy, commenting on current colonial and racial relations, also writes, “The natives, whose bodies are comparatively worthless, already exist in a space of death, . . . [and] the colonial insurgent, rather like the slave in earlier phases of imperial dominance, already [belongs] among the socially dead” (2005: 11, 22; see also 48, 50).

⁸ Kelly Oliver suggests that these statements in Fanon should be read as allusion to and disagreements with Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential phenomenology (2004: 4, 13-17). Oliver’s helpful observations do not necessarily, in my view, mean that Fanon does not see black (male) existence as “death bound.” Perhaps the difference or disagreement between Fanon and Sartre lies less on the concern with “non-being,” but more on whether “non-being” is an imposition or a choice. One may say the same about Fanon and Hegel; while Hegel needs conflict or struggle to have self-consciousness, Fanon argues that black self-consciousness is always already intruded by an hostile force from the outside (Marriott 2000: 67).

colonized by the Romans during the same period of time, I would contend that the treatment of Jews as bare life should not be confined as a *modern* phenomenon. Since codification generally lags behind lived reality, I would go further to argue that what Agamben identifies, highlights, and explains in terms of bare life is helpful to think about not only resisting imperial peace in general, but also Jews within the Roman empire of the first century C.E.—and hence John’s portrayal of Jesus—in particular.

Jews and John Within the Death Zone of the Roman Empire

As is well known with its gladiatorial combats, the Roman empire was not only capable of violence, but also clever in combining punishment with entertainment for the sake of empire building. While Rome was never shy in executing its own when “treasonous” or “rebellious” acts were involved,⁹ one should remember that gladiator shows and other similar “game[s] of death” (Plass 1995) generally doubled as—and perhaps had their origins in—the empire’s machinations to rid itself of its enemies and captured aliens. According to Polybius, the Roman parades of booty and captives known as the “triumphs” were basically recreations of military victory (6.15.7-8). To perform such a parade, however, not only required that the victory had registered a casualty of 5,000 on the part of the enemies, but also involved—as part of the parade

⁹ I placed “treasonous” and “rebellious” in quotation marks here to connote that what counts as treason and rebellion is often based on the arbitrary decisions of those in power. For an example of what Romans would do to even one of their own on the count or suspicion of conspiracy, Juvenal has the following to say about the abusive killing of Sejanus despite his birth as an equestrian: “Sejanus is being dragged by a hook—a sight worth seeing. Everyone’s celebrating” (10.66-67). Unless indicated otherwise, English translations of Greco-Roman sources are taken from the Loeb Classical Library of the Harvard University Press.

performance—the public execution of the enemies’ captured leader (Kyle 1998: 42). By the time Julius Caesar hosted his “mock battle” in the Circus in 46 B.C.E., the pretend fighting had become the occasion in which captives were genuinely executed in mass (Dio Cassius 43.23.3-6; Suetonius *Iul.* 39.4; Appian *B Civ.* 2.102). Captives, along with criminals and slaves, were also condemned to be the “original” gladiators, though later other persons desperate for a chance of fame and fortune were also recruited to perform voluntarily in this kind of “indirect” death sentence (Coleman 1990: 54-56, 61-62).¹⁰ In addition, the Roman empire employed a variety of “direct” death penalties, like decapitation, crucifixion, or immolation. Not all “direct” death penalties were equal, however. By the time of Hadrian, there came a clear articulation of a difference between “simple death” (*capite puniri*) and “ultimate punishment” (*summa supplicia*), with the latter—which would include crucifixion and immolation—generally reserved for those who had low or no status, particularly non-Roman citizens (Garnsey 1970: 122-36).

In other words, the Roman empire not only made torturous and aggravated death a routine (see also Glancy 2005), but also targeted foreign victims of Roman military conquests and colonial enterprise for such a routine. It is important to point out also that in a sense, there was nothing routine about these deaths, since the Roman empire made a point to “ritualize” them into public and stylized displays, or what Donald G. Kyle tellingly calls “spectacles of death” (1998). Like Fanon’s “Look, a Negro” (1967: 111-12) or Pilate’s “Behold the man” in John (19:5; see also 19:14), these performative sights assail and confine the colonized

¹⁰ It is important to remember that, as Seneca points out, gladiators were not necessarily armed, armored, or trained; as feeble and pitiful victims of mass murder, they brought out of the entertainment-seeking crowds frustration and even rage rather than compassion (*Ep.* 7.3-5).

simultaneously. Since the spectacle nature of “indirect” death penalties like the gladiatorial shows is obvious, let me just emphasize that even “direct” death sentences in the Roman empire—like crucifixions—were rarely, if ever, executed without an audience. This is clear even in John, given John’s reference to persons who are there near Jesus’ cross (19:25-27), the proximity of Golgotha to the city, and the number of people who read the trilingual inscription on his cross (19:20). Turning killing, especially of aliens, into a “satisfying spectacle” (Seneca *Ep.* 95.33), was satisfying because it was a ritual that revealed and reinforced Rome’s imperial power (Martial *Spect.* 5.65), which is what Roman imperial peace is really all about.¹¹ While many in the Greco-Roman world formed and joined voluntary associations of all sorts to partly ensure a proper burial (Kloppenborg 1996: 18-21; Klauck 2003: 47-48, 52), imperial Rome would deny the bodies it executed a proper burial to signal a deep disrespect of or disdain for these often alien bodies in life *and* in death. Again, John seems to be alluding to this when he has Joseph of Arimathea asking Pilate for the permission to take Jesus’ body to—along with Nicodemus—give it a proper Jewish burial (19:38-42). The torment, torture, and finally death suffered by the victims functioned, then, as threatening object lessons and a kind of visual terror that a similar fate would await anyone who dared to question or challenge the empire, and were hence vital to its order, security, and so-called peace. To put it in Agamben’s vocabularies, Rome’s imperial sovereignty—and we may add, peace—were built upon the definition of its subject—particularly its colonized—populations as bare life. Seeing the colonized as disposable by-products, damaged goods, or abject leftovers of its imperialist projects, Rome basically placed them under

¹¹ For instance, the authority of Caesar was displayed not only in his power to decide on the fate of the gladiator but also in the seating arrangement of the amphitheatre (Edwards 2007: 54).

a death sentence that it might commute at will, at anytime, and without any legal or religious consequence. Like the lynchings witnessed by Wright as he was growing up, publicly displaying death as simultaneously a trauma for the colonized but a “gala” or even a “gallery” for the colonizers positions bare life as victim and spectator—or, more accurately—spectator *as* victim (Marriott 2000: 4-6, 14; see also Holloway 2002: 62-64). A “death bound” subjectivity comes into being precisely in the move from looking *at* to looking *away from* these various spectacles of death, or when these spectacles turn into specters of death. Roman spectacles of death are, in other words, ritual acts that interpellate subjectivities on both sides of the colonial divide.

Jews of the first century C.E. were no strangers to Rome’s imperial sovereignty. They were, in other words, bare life that was readily or always already killable. Unlike Plato, who famously declares philosophy as a necessary means to practice death (*Phd.* 64a, 80e), Jews of the first century C.E. seemed to live almost necessarily under the threats and executions of death. Philo, for instance, talks about how under the governorship of Flaccus, non-Jewish Alexandrians in 38 C.E. were given free rein to take Jewish homes, shops, and lives (*In Flacc.* 6.41-43, 8.53-57, 10:73-75). Philo goes on to report that even during celebratory season, Jews were flogged, hung, run over, tortured, and executed at a theater (*In Flacc.* 81-85). Things were, of course, not much better in Judea. Pilate, as the procurator of Judea in 26-36 C.E., killed many Jews who protested against him for using the resources from the Jewish Temple treasury for public works (Josephus, *AJ* 18.60-62). The mere sight of the Roman troops sent in by another procurator over Judea, Cumanus (48-52 C.E.), during one Passover—because Jews flocking into Jerusalem for the festival were enraged by a Roman soldier who “flashed” himself in front of the

gathering pilgrims—caused so much panic and pandemonium that 20,000 Jews died in a stampede (Josephus, *AJ* 20.105-122).

Perhaps one can say on the basis of Josephus that the Romans during the first century C.E. basically adopted a “kill deal” as their default policy with the Jews. Whenever there was any sign of unrest—even when it involved a conflict between the Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors, not to mention any form of disrespect or challenge of Roman authority, including any prophecy or promise making that stirred up popular imagination or yearning—the Romans would tend to respond with a military crackdown to ensure or enforce the so-called *Pax Romana*. Cumanus, for instance, would do so more than once. He would unleash a military show of force again when a slave of Caesar’s was robbed outside of Jerusalem immediately after the Passover debacle, *and* when a conflict broke out between the Samaritans and some Jews of Galilee (Josephus, *AJ* 20.113-14, 118-122-22). But he was hardly the only one to do so. According to Josephus, procurators of Judea like Fadus (44-46 C.E.), Felix (52-60 C.E.), Festus (60-62 C.E.)—as well as Roman officers who had jurisdictions beyond Judea, like Quadratus who governed over Syria or Catullus over Libyan Pentapolis—all employed the mighty Roman armies to kill off and threaten Jewish lives (*AJ* 20.2-4, 97-98, 125-33, 167-78, 188; *BJ* 7.443-46).

As shown by an earlier case referred to by Philo, Jewish lives were threatened and lost not only because of direct crackdown from the Romans, but also because of hostilities and aggressions from other non-Jewish groups. Just before the onset of the first Jewish-Roman war, non-Jewish inhabitants of Caesarea slaughtered more than 20,000 Jews. When some of the Jews

retaliated, the people of Scythoolis slaughtered 13,000 Jews who were not even part of the retaliation (Josephus, *BJ* 2.457-68).

Of course, the best-known mass killing of Jews happened around the first Jewish-Roman War (66-70 C.E.). On the eve of the war, the Romans had supposedly killed another 50,000 Jews in an effort to quell a conflict between Jews and Alexandrians in Alexandria (Josephus, *BJ* 2.487-98). Josephus tells us not only that 500 or more Jewish captives were crucified a day for several months in 70 C.E., but also that Titus did so to intimidate the Jews within the walls of besieged Jerusalem to surrender (Josephus, *BJ* 5.446-51). Most likely, Josephus was writing in hyperbole, but the Romans clearly meant business with their execution and threat of death. Regarding the crucifixion, Josephus wrote that “[t]he soldiers out of rage and hatred amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures; and so great was their number, that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies” (*BJ* 5.451); and once the Romans were able to break into Jerusalem, they killed so many that “they choked the narrow alleys with corpses and deluged the whole city with blood, insomuch that many of the fires were extinguished by the gory stream” (*BJ* 6.403-406; see also 7.407-419). In typical Roman fashion, they also held a triumphal procession that concluded with the execution of one of the leading revolutionary, Simon, son of Gioras (Josephus, *BJ* 7.142-57), and sent numerous Jewish captives into various provinces to entertain—that is, to be killed—in those Roman theaters and games of death (Josephus, *BJ* 6.418; see also 7.23-24, 37-40, 96). Depending on whose statistics one chooses to go by, either close to 1,100,000 or 600,000 Jews were killed because of this war (Josephus *BJ* 6.420; Tacitus *Hist.* 5.13).

Can we or should we not say that Jews in the first century C.E. in general—and after the First Jewish-Roman War in particular—found themselves living in a “space of death” or under the “cultural haunting” of being “death bound”? Of course, Josephus was writing from particular perspectives and with his particular agendas. After all, being a client of the Roman emperor, he might be inflating the frequency of the conflicts and the number of each death toll to glorify Rome’s military might. On the other hand, since Josephus was also writing to justify his own actions in—as well as his place *after*—the First Jewish-Roman War to both the Romans and his fellow Jews *and* to promote a more peaceful Jewish existence under Roman rule, too much exaggeration would make the Romans seem ruthless and unbearable. While one may want to suspect the details of Josephus’ narrative, one should respect the overall picture—the tension, the extreme power differential, and the ability/willingness of the Romans to kill—that he was depicting for us.

The threat and reality of death were particularly relevant to my purposes given the general scholarly convention to date the Fourth Gospel to the end of the first century, which effectually situates John between the two Jewish-Roman Wars (66-70 and 132-35 respectively). While Louis H. Feldman and Meyer Reinhold are surely correct that there were various attitudes toward the colonized Jews not only at any given time but also over time (1996: 306), the fact that there were three major Jewish revolts—the two Jewish-Roman Wars, plus the Lukuas-Andreas Rebellion or the War of Quietus in 115-117 C.E.—against the Romans in seventy years certainly

indicates that things were tense and less than peaceful or benign during this time span.¹² Perhaps the kind of death anxiety that first-century Jews lived with—one that I tried to describe via the example of African Americans as well as modern Jews—come together most forcefully in Norman Mailer’s post-Holocaust manifesto, “The White Negro” (1959).¹³ According to Mailer, “we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc ... upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years ... we have been forced to live with the suppressed knowledge that ... we [are already] doomed to die” (1959: 338). Under the Roman machination of death threats and death executions as a result of “games,” penalties, and wars, Jews of John’s time can be understood to be living a collective experience that became increasingly similar to Mailer’s description, particularly after the First Jewish-Roman War.

Writing about the slave trade to the so-called New World, Hortense J. Spillers states that “flesh”—rather than “body”—is a particularly helpful way to register and reflect on the violence suffered by African Americans (2003:206-207).¹⁴ “Flesh”—as Spillers’ moniker for the “cultural

¹² The Jewish death toll in these two later revolts were also significant, if we can assume our extant records to be accurate. Supposedly 220,000 Jews were killed in Cyrene and 240,000 more were killed in Cyrus during the Lukuas-Andreas Rebellion (Dio Cassius 68.32). Again, according to Dio Cassius, during the Second Jewish-Roman War, 985 Jewish villages were razed, 580,000 Jews were killed in battles, and countless more died because of thirst, disease, and fire (69.12-15). Judea was like a desert, while “the Jewish community in Alexandria and throughout the rest of Egypt became virtually extinct” (Feldman and Reinhold 1996: 291).

¹³ The Middle Passage and the Holocaust point to the nation building of the United States and Germany respectively. As such, both speak to Agamben’s relations between bare life and sovereignty.

¹⁴ For Spillers, “flesh” is a (more?) “primary narrative” that is also “the concentration of ‘ethnicity’ that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away” (2003: 206-207). Spillers suggests that African American “flesh”—having received and registered all kinds of violence—continues to haunt African America even if the captured bodies appear to have been liberated.

vestibularity” (Spillers 2003: 207; emphasis in the original) of being captured, displaced, colonized, violated, and always already vulnerable—is related or comparable to Agamben’s bare life (see also JanMohamed 2005: 10).¹⁵ John, of course, famously introduces Jesus with the phrase, “the Word became *flesh*” (1:14; emphasis added). How may John’s story of this “flesh” or “bare life” that straddles between “worlds” come across in light of Rome’s colonization of Jews in general and Rome’s “spectacles of death” in particular? Is there a space to talk about Jesus’ death in John *as* a human condition?¹⁶

Dying, Dreaming, and Dreamreading

In addition to Jesus’ obsession with his “hour,” we also find in John other references to death. In fact, keeping in mind that John presents Jesus’ death as the slaughtering of the Passover lamb (19:13-16, 31-37), one may say that death already makes its appearance in John’s very first chapter, when the Baptizer presents Jesus as “the lamb of God” (1:29, 36).¹⁷ After

¹⁵ As something primary to or before “body,” Spillers’ “flesh” can also be compared or connected to Julia Kristeva’s “abject” as an “not-yet-object” or an “in-between-ness” that threatens boundaries (1982). The connection between Agamben’s bare life and Kristeva’s abject should require no elaborations, especially if one thinks about bare life in terms of “included exclusion” and abject in terms of being “in between.”

¹⁶ This is a play on the title of a recent essay by Craig R. Koester, “The Death of Jesus and the Human Condition: Exploring the Theology of John’s Gospel” (2005), which is developed within the framework of four traditional theological concepts (love, sacrifice, evil, and divine revelation).

¹⁷ Alexandre Kojève, commenting on Hegel’s death struggle, suggests that constant death threats can cause one to come across as a mad person or a menace to society (1965: 28). It is interesting that although Holland does not mention Kojève, her work on reading death and black subjectivity does devote quite a few pages to the Hollywood picture, *Menace II Society* (2000: 6, 19-28, 122-23). I wonder if one cannot read Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple in John (2:13-22) as an expression of this rebellion or aggression, especially since John does make a point to link this episode to Jesus’ own awareness of his imminent death.

Jesus' first reference to his own "hour" before the performance of his first "sign" (2:1-11), we will find Jesus healing—as his "second sign" (4:54)—a royal official's son who is about to die (4:47, 49). In the aftermath of yet another one of Jesus' signs, he will contrast his living bread that leads to eternal life with manna that cannot keep one from dying (6:49-50, 58), while his dissenters will accept death as an inevitable reality even for Abraham and the prophets (8:53).¹⁸ In light of the protracted trial and controversy over his healing of the one born blind, John's Jesus will talk about how—in contrast to a good shepherd who dies for his flock—thieves and robbers come to steal, kill, and destroy, as well as how wolves snatch and scatter the sheep (10:10-18). Then, of course, John narrates the story about Lazarus (11:1-44) to transition to the last week of Jesus' life (13:1-19:42). Even in the epilogue, one will find a "prediction" of Peter's martyrdom (21:18-19; see also 13:36-38), and an "explanation" of the beloved disciple's death (21:20-23). One can say, then, that John's Gospel or "good news" is, ironically, one that begins and ends with death, or one that moves from Jesus' death to the deaths of his followers.

Instead of thinking that John is a direct and unproblematic reflection of a historical situation, I would like to see John as an ideological product *and* production that comes out of as well as seeks to act upon the ideological structure of its time (see also Conway 2002). Catherine Edwards, in her book on death in Rome, has suggested that literary accounts of deaths were popular inspirational readings in the first two centuries C.E., and that gladiatorial combats were not only spectacles of death but also occasions of "death as spectacle" (2007: 20-21, 46-77, 131).

¹⁸ This reference to food, and other related references to hunger and feeding in John, may also function as signals of death (4:8, 31-34; 6:1-15, 22-35, 55; 21:9-17). John's statement that the people, after getting fed, want to make Jesus king (6:15) may also serve as an indirect attack on Roman's inability to take care of those under its sovereignty.

That is to say, these literary and live performance of death taught and disciplined Roman citizens how to face death as military men, and hence why, for instance, the first gladiator shows were connected with aristocratic funerals before they became monopolized by the imperial family (Edwards 2007: 47, 49, 52-53). What if we treat the threat and reality of death that we have identified thus far as an ideology that works its way into the Gospel's structure like—or better yet, *as*—both a nightmare that haunts and a dream that works out Mailer's "suppressed" or repressed "knowledge"?

It has been well recognized in Johannine scholarship that time slows down in the Fourth Gospel. While it takes something like eighteen verses to move from a time beyond time to the time of the Baptizer (1:1-18), it takes John's first half to move through three Passovers (1:19-12:50), and almost the entire second half of the whole Gospel to cover the last week of Jesus' life (13:1-20:31). Along with this slowing down of time is, I propose, a heightening depiction of death that not only gives coverage to the death of more characters but also gets more nuanced about the causes of Jesus' death in John. As I have pointed out a little earlier, John—in its first ten chapters—does refer to Jesus' awareness of his coming but not yet arrived "hour" (2:4), unfulfilled desires or attempts on the part of others to kill Jesus (7:1, 19, 25; 8:37, 40, 59; 10:31-33), Jesus' discussion or debate with others that brings up the reality, inevitability, or finality of death (5:21, 24; 6:49-50, 58; 10:10-18), and the near death experience of the royal official's son (4:47, 49). Henry Staten has suggested that Jesus' earlier signs in John, in comparison to his raising of Lazarus, "do not concern the bestowal of life directly but rather the preservation and repair of a life already in existence" (1993: 38). Notice, moreover, how these

references tend to be isolated and, perhaps more importantly, how Jesus or the royal official's son is able to avoid death. In contrast, beginning with the story of Lazarus in chapter 11, John will have different Johannine characters actually experiencing death (Lazarus and Jesus), or being "foretold" of their deaths (Peter and the beloved disciple). Not only are the narratives about death—especially those of Lazarus and Jesus—lengthy and detailed, but they are also given in explicit relations to each other. For instance, John's narrative literally goes for overkill in stressing that Lazarus is dead (11:4, 13-14, 17, 21, 32, 39, 44), but in the process of doing so, John also weaves in Thomas' statement to the disciples that they will all accompany Jesus to die with him (11:7-8, 16). Similarly, it is Peter's upcoming martyrdom that leads to the question surrounding the death of the beloved disciple (21:18-23). In spite of or in contrast to Jesus' statement in John that Peter should not be concerned with the fate of another (21:22), we see Jesus' own death being presented as closely tied to that of Lazarus. Lazarus' death and resurrection renew the determination of some to kill Jesus (11:46-53), and Jesus' raising him from the dead leads to a desire to kill Jesus as well as re-kill Lazarus (12:9-11). There is therefore a kind of ripple effect in this latter part of John, where death becomes more like a chain reaction than just an individual experience.

Since John, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, has Jesus cleanse the Temple early (2:13-22) rather than late in his Gospel, some scholars like to describe his raising of Lazarus as the last straw that causes the Jewish authorities to resort to murder. This description is, however, not very accurate, since John has narrated desires or attempts to kill Jesus before chapter 11 (7:1, 19, 25; 8:37, 40, 59; 10:31). What is strategic about Jesus' raising of Lazarus is thus not the desire

or even determination to murder Jesus, but a new revelation of what is behind this desire to murder. Previously, we learn that the desire to murder Jesus has something to do with an inability or unwillingness to accept Jesus' words (8:37), because those words sound blasphemous (10:32-33). After Jesus' raising of Lazarus, John suddenly introduces into the narrative a whole new set of characters: the Romans.¹⁹ We learn from Caiaphas that the Jewish authorities need to keep things peaceful and the Jewish people under control so as not to arouse suspicions and bring about the preemptive strikes of the Romans (11:47-53). In other words, the high priest and the authorities want to eliminate Jesus to protect not only their own privilege, but also the Jewish people and nation.²⁰ Obviously, in Caiaphas' estimation, Roman attention and intervention must be avoided at all costs since the Romans are bound to engage in a "shock-and-awe" operation if they detect any smell of trouble. Not only is Caiaphas' reasoning repeated in 18:14, but Roman characters—from the cohort that arrests Jesus to Pilate who tries him—also begin to play a more direct and explicit role in the Gospel. Their appearance leads, in turn, to the open acknowledgment—not once, but twice—that the sovereign right to kill belongs to the Romans and the Romans alone (18:31-32; 19:10). This sequence of giving two different reasons for killing Jesus—first, because his words offend the sensibilities of certain Jewish authorities; and

¹⁹ I am not counting the "royal official" of John 4:46-54 as Roman because his identity is simply too ambiguous. Moore would also see John's passion narrative as heavily foregrounding the Romans; see Moore 2006: 54.

²⁰ Pilate, in contrast, is willing to kill Jesus to show his own loyalty to Caesar, and to both reveal and reinforce the power of Roman sovereignty (19:12-22). See also Koester 2005: 143. Caiaphas' statement in John actually also echoes a sentiment that can be found in Greco-Roman writers like Polybius (6.54.1-4), Cicero (*Phil.* 10.20), and Lucan (2.306-325). For the Romans, this "one-death-for-many-lives" rationale was often presented as a potentially productive way to end civil war (Edwards 2007: 39).

second, because of the need or desire of some Jewish leaders to demonstrate their loyalty to Rome—is repeated in a condensed form in 19:7-16, after an indirect and ironic allusion to the exclusive Roman right to crucify (19:6).

I would suggest that these two movements—(1) from scattered and isolated references of death to more pervasive and connected descriptions of death; and (2) Jesus’ death from being the result of an intra-Jewish power struggle to one that is framed by Roman colonialism—are comparable to the movement in dream-work, in which a latent content struggles to work its way through the unconscious to manifest itself.²¹ The latent content here is basically a Roman ideology of death that formed, informed, and deformed Jewish existence, especially in the period between the two Jewish-Roman Wars. While J. B. Pontalis makes a connection between the workings of death and dream in Sigmund Freud (1978), and Said a distinction between a latent and a manifest content in colonial ideology (1978: 201-225), I would like to talk about how death can become a latent, nightmarish structure that haunts colonial subjectivity (see also

²¹ As L. William Countryman comments, there is a long tradition of understanding the Fourth Gospel as “mystical” (1994: 2). I am, however, suggesting that we read this “mystic” quality of John in terms of dream work. If texts or narratives also have to do with, as I have been arguing, fear, desire, or generally domains of the psyche (see Brooks 1994), then perhaps “anatomy” or anatomical dissection is not entirely adequate for the task of interpretation. Fanon has suggested that for the colonized, their muscles, emotions, and psyches are paralyzed during the day, but can only run free in dreams at night (1963: 52). The motif of misunderstanding in John that Culpepper has helpfully summarized (1983: 152-65) can also be read in light of dream-work.

JanMohamed 2005: 22-27).²² This structure is latent not only because being “death bound” is—as Mailer points out in “The White Negro”—a “suppressed knowledge,” but also because manifesting one’s own station as “bare life” involves a complicated spec(tac)ular crossing on the part of the colonized (Spillers 2003: 397). As W. E. B. Dubois points out in *The Souls of Black Folk*, colonized or displaced people live with a “double consciousness,” or “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (1953: 2-3). Seeing oneself as a “spectacle of death”—which, as we have seen, Wright has learned to do by the tender age of eleven—means that living as “bare life” may become what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus* (1977), or those socialized actions and reactions that one acts out more or less unconsciously or subconsciously. To articulate or explain this *habitus*, one will need to go beyond Dubois’ “double consciousness” to develop a third eye: one will need to see oneself seeing as one is seen. This need for the third eye may also help explain why John devotes a total of nine chapters (12-20) to the last week of Jesus’ life. These chapters not only follow his raising of Lazarus, but also contain a significant

²² In addition to Freud’s work on dream and death, which both Pontalis and JanMohamed have sought to put together in their theorization and practice of reading Freud and with Freud, I would suggest that when it comes to John, there is a third aspect of Freud’s work that may be put in the mix. Since the Fourth Gospel is a retelling of Jesus’ life and death several decades after the fact—thus a sort of memorial of or for Jesus—Freud’s work on memory would also seem appropriate to the task. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to go any further into this direction, but let me simply suggest two more thoughts. First, psychoanalysis is in many ways an intriguing lens to read John, since it is also concerned with resurrecting a burial of the past. Second, I need to differentiate my own interest in reading John in terms of memory work from the approach employed by Tom Thatcher (2006). While Thatcher’s approach focuses on the politics of memory vis-à-vis textuality (that is, texts that are written down) within the Christ-following communities, I have in mind something not only more psychoanalytical but also more broadly socio-political; a model that is closer to what I have in mind can be seen in Assmann 1997, although its focus is not on a biblical book per se, let alone the Gospel of John.

amount of soliloquy on the part of Jesus. They can be read as the site or the process through which John works out and clarifies his understanding of (Jesus') death.

Just as this complicating of the spec(tac)ular may be helpful or even necessary to manifest a latent structure, reading John's manifest content as a struggle to express a latent content can also help to complicate—or even make a different sense out of—passages that would otherwise seem rather anti-Jewish. When one reads in John Jesus' accusation that his Jewish opponents have a devilish human-killer as their "father" (8:44), one may well read this as a latent or veiled reference to none other than Rome, given (1) how John gradually comes to articulate killing as exclusively a Roman prerogative (18:31-32; 19:10); (2) how John nuances the move or motive to kill Jesus beyond blasphemy to the threat of Roman interventions (11:47-53); and (3) how Roman ideology presents Caesar as the empire's paternal patron or even *paterfamilias* (Agamben 1998: 88-89). In addition, John shows—though in the circuitous ways of a dream—that Roman imperialism and peace are not only—as Agamben's work suggests—contingent upon turning colonized Jews into bare life or potential victims of its machination of death but also rely on making them into extensions of that machination, or living appendages of its killing machine. For the sake of self-preservation—whether the "self" here is referring to a personal or a collective life—subjects who are themselves "death bound" may end up binding others to death. Put differently, the desire to live in a colonial situation can easily turn into a desire to kill even one's own. The perverse logic of colonialism means that it is often through murder that a colonized person or people may concretize one's own desire to live. The Roman machination of death, then, "not only shapes one's view of things but demands an endless response" that

predisposes relations between Jews and Romans as well as poisons relations among Jews (Spillers 2003: 378). Imperial death threats and sentences can make the colonized collaborate in oppressing their own and hence in their own oppression.²³

John's Improvisations and Inventions of Death

If one reads John in terms of both death-work and dream-work, one must remember that according to Freud, every dream is also a wish (1953-74: 4.124). That is to say, the Fourth Gospel is not only a site through which John works through and makes manifest—no matter how laboriously or obliquely—the latent structure of death that binds the colonized and underpins imperial peace, but it also represents a desire to get out of the “death zone” to which the colonized have been confined. Hence one finds in John no narrative of the Last Supper before Jesus’ crucifixion, but only a post-crucifixion and post-resurrection meal (21:1-14) to remember the dead and restore the living to life (Lucian *Luct.* 24; see also Morrison 1993: 142-43).²⁴ Likewise, one finds more than a Jesus returning to demonstrate the physical scars of his crucifixion, a show-and-tell that may be read as similar to Emmett Till’s mother deciding to have an open casket during his son’s funeral “so that the world could see what they had done to my child” (cited in Holloway 2002: 25; see also 130), and to “pass on” the “cultural haunting” of

²³ In other words, it is tunnel-vision or short-sighted to see John’s depiction of the *Ioudaioi*—particularly their attitudes and actions toward Jesus—as “anti-Jewish.” One must not fail to see the Roman empire always already looming and lurking in the background.

²⁴ In fact, I tend to see Toni Morrison’s other novel about the return of a dead Beloved (1987) as sharing many of the dynamics and topics with the Gospel of John, including colonial oppression, death as a cultural haunting *and* awakening, as well as the movement of dream work in literary texts that end up speaking the unspeakable or unspoken.

being African American (Holloway 2002: 136). In addition, one reads in John—besides the resurrection of Lazarus and Jesus—numerous promises of and references to “life,” whether in terms of its resurrection, eternity, and/or abundance (2:19-22; 3:14-15; 5:21, 24-29; 6:39-40, 44, 54; 8:51; 14:19). We should also remember—given John’s portrayal of Jesus as the Passover lamb—that (1) the Passover sacrifice is not only about death but also *deliverance* from death (Koester 2005: 145); and (2) this deliverance from death is set within a context of Israelites being displaced and enslaved in Egypt.

According to Michael Taussig, “the space of death is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness, nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes. We may think of the space of death as a threshold that allows for illumination as well as extinction” (1987: 4). Virgil, who also figures regions of the dead as places of revelation and inspiration, would have agreed (Edwards 2007: 17). It is important to point out here and now that even in Bourdieu’s theorization of *habitus*, he insists on making room for improvisation within this socialized repertoire that one inhabits (1977: 79). I would suggest that John’s Jesus, in a way that parallels those in gay communities living in the shadow of the AIDS epidemic at the end of the twentieth century, ends up improvising a subversive and threatening way of life. According to Judith Halberstam, many gay persons, as a result of and in response to the threat and reality of AIDS, improvise to produce a “queer time,” or “alternative temporalities ... [and] futures [that] can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2005: 2). This they do, Halberstam suggests, in spite or perhaps because of how often

and how much they are considered to be expendable bodies whose premature deaths are taken for granted rather than taken seriously by mainstream society. Yet, “by rethinking the conventional emphasis on longevity and futurity, and by making a community in relation to risk, disease, infection, and death,” there arises “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” and one that “show[s] little or no concern for longevity” (Halberstam 2005: 2, 4).

I have already argued for reading John’s Jesus as a colonized Jew who lives knowingly in the shadow of death,²⁵ let me now point to his belief in the productive potential of death. John’s Jesus does not only look at his life in light of his imminent death, but he also reinterprets death for the purposes of life. The best expression of this is arguably when, in response to a group of Greeks who come looking for him after his raising of Lazarus and several days before his last Passover, Jesus makes the somewhat enigmatic statement that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12:24). Immediately after that, Jesus will give what I take to be his key improvisation in making death productive. Like Halberstam’s description of those who proceed to live life with abandon in the shadow of AIDS, John’s Jesus suggests that “the one who hates his life in this world will keep it into life eternal” (12:25). In other words, if imperial sovereignty and peace control its subjects via a threat of death, one way to begin resisting this control is to let go of one’s fear of death and be willing to die. Is this why John tells us that this dying and resurrecting Jesus is “the truth” and

²⁵ I have also argued elsewhere for a reading of John’s Jesus as a queer or transgender subject, see Liew forthcoming.

that “the truth will make you free” (8:32; 14:6)? Is this what Fanon is referring to when he talks about Vietnamese having an “Asiatic attitude toward death” that confound the Europeans (1967: 227)? Not only does John present Jesus’ crucifixion as Jesus’ glorification (3:14; 8:28; 12:32)—and thus Jesus’ “triumph” in a sense (Koester 2005: 141-42)—but John also surprises many Johannine scholars by presenting Jesus as one who seems to remain in control during his arrest and passion (Ashton 1991: 489). I think Helen C. Orchard is onto something when she suggests that John’s Jesus is not only a victim of violence in John, but also a colluder or conspirator in his own betrayal and death (1998). Rather than following Orchard in pitting these two views as if they are mutually exclusive, I would propose that what is in fact most impressive about John is how the Gospel implies a change of Jesus from “bare life” to one being in control of his own death and life. Midway through the Gospel, we find Jesus announcing that he is willingly laying down his life “on his own accord and in his own authority” (10:17-18). Instead of stopping Judas from betraying him—even though we are told that Jesus is fully aware of Judas’ intentions (13:21-26)—Jesus lets Judas go from his “light” (1:4-5, 9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46) into the “night” (13:27-30; see also 11:9-10; 12:35-36). During his arrest, not only does he stop Peter from attempting to fight back with a sword (18:10-11), but he also seems to welcome rather than avoid his coming captors. John says that Jesus “knowing everything that was coming upon him, *went out* and said to them, ‘Whom are you looking for?’” (18:4; emphasis added). As if this is not enough to emphasize Jesus’ agency and initiative, John tells us that Jesus “surrenders” himself in this fashion not once but twice (18:7-8). I put “surrender” in quotes because it is really an inaccurate description of what happens in light of the strange phenomenon that we read

between 18:4-5 and 18:7-8. When Jesus voluntarily identifies himself as the very one whom the Jewish delegates and Roman cohort are coming for, John tells us that these captors, despite their “lanterns, lamps, and weapons” (18:3), “withdrew backward and fell to the ground” (18:6).

This dramatic or even unrealistic contrast of Jesus stepping up to speak and his captors stepping back to fall is in line with not only what Norman R. Petersen has called the “special language” or “anti-language” in John (1993), but also the often expressionist or fantastical characteristic of dream-work (JanMohamed 2005: 27).²⁶ Whatever else this strange verse may signify, I think it shows how Jesus gains control over the “death zone” set by the Romans by being willing to step right up to and into death. Another good place to think about this is 14:25-31. Not only does the reference to the Holy Spirit—particularly its function in reminding and elucidating—intimate the dynamics of John in terms of dream-work (14:25-26; see also 15:26; 16:13-15), but Jesus’ emphasis that “the ruler of the [Roman?] world . . . does not have any power over me” also shows that at issue in John is not just the affirmation and the gift of life, but also the ownership of death. In other words, Jesus’ consistent claim that he is the one who is laying down his life is nothing less than a declaration of choice and agency. John’s Jesus is not only detached, but also deliberate in death.

In contrast to reading John as providing some kind of “pie-in-the-sky” to overcome death (Reinhartz 2001: 113-15), JanMohamed’s work on what he calls the “death bound subject” is particularly helpful here. Linking Agamben’s bare life with Orlando Patterson’s work on slavery

²⁶ Koester has also noticed this dramatic or unrealistic characteristic in John’s rhetoric, although Koester chooses to make sense of this difficult characteristic by referring to the workings of symbols or symbolism (1995: 27).

as a form of powerlessness, natal alienation, and social death (1982), JanMohamed suggests that bare life signifies social death. Even if such a person is physically alive, the fact that he or she can be killed at any time and for any reason means for JanMohamed that such a person does not really count and has no legitimate place in the social body (2005: 16). JanMohamed goes on to propose that bare life, or the life of a “death bound subject,” is “*defined by the need to avoid the possibilities of life as well as the possibility of death*” (2005:19; emphasis in original). Feeling the threat of death and not wanting to die, a “death bound subject” ends up controlling or repressing his or her desires for a fuller life. As a result, he or she stays within this death or deathly zone of “neither quite alive nor quite dead” (JanMohamed 2005: 19). I think John can be read as alluding to this also in a dream-like—that is to say, an indirect and inexact—manner. Jesus, John tells us adamantly and repeatedly, comes to give (eternal) life (1:4; 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:21-26, 39; 6:27-68; 10:10, 28; 11:25; 14:6; 17:2-3; 20:31). John also tells us, however, that some Jewish persons who have come into contact with this giver of life decide to keep a certain distance from this source of life because they are fearful of being “put away from the synagogue” (9:22; 12:42; see also 16:2). The reason for this fear can be seen in the comparison that Patterson makes between what he calls the slave’s “natal alienation”—that is, being socially dead with no rights or claims of birth—and a “secular excommunication” (1982: 5). Being separated from a synagogue was a particularly severe form of social death for a Jew living under Roman colonization, since—as I have suggested in the previous section—living under Roman rule in the aftermath of the First Jewish-Roman War was in itself already a form of social death. The irony is, of course, for John, being distant from Jesus is itself death (8:21, 24). John is

therefore pointing to a situation in which certain Jews are choosing one form of death to avoid another form of death.

This is in effect what JanMohamed is also describing as the conundrum of a “death bound subject” or bare life. He or she settles for living a social death in order to avoid a physical death, since he or she knows that one tiny step out of the “death zone” that has been circumscribed for him or her will result in a literal death. To break out of this conundrum, JanMohamed argues, on the basis of Wright’s writings, that a “death bound subject” must become aware of this non-choice, but then proceeds to choose to fight back with a counter-threat. If sovereignty’s control over bare life is contingent upon a threat of death, what may break that control is the threat on the part of the bare life to “‘actualize’ his [*sic*] potential or postponed death” (JanMohamed 2005: 17; see also Agamben 1998: 184-85).²⁷ JanMohamed calls this willful counter-threat—this willingness on the part of bare life to risk actualizing the death threat of the colonial master—“symbolic death” (2005: 17). More specifically, JanMohamed defines this “symbolic death” as being “constituted by the death of the slave’s subject-position as a socially dead being and his *rebirth* in a different subject-position” (2005: 17; emphasis added). It is a switch from “living within death” to “dying within life” (JanMohamed 2005: 128, 275), or to making a life out of re/signing death. By “re/signing death,” I mean here the doubled sense of resigning to die, and deconstructing the death zone in terms of Agamben’s connection between sovereignty and bare life.

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard seems to be saying something similar though in a more economic vocabulary of gift and counter-gift. According to Baudrillard, if power consists in a unilateral giving and taking of life, then “the power of the master has to unilaterally grant life will only be abolished if this life can be given to him—in a *non-deferred death*” (1993: 40; emphasis in original).

JanMohamed's work provides not only a mirror to a strand of Greco-Roman philosophy that seeks to embrace death as a response to or cure of one's fear of death—like Lucretius by way of Epicureanism or Seneca through Stoicism (Edwards 2007: 78-112)—but also a different lens to read and think about Jesus' emphasis in John on being “born anew” or “born from above” (3:1-8), as well as the two resurrections that are recorded in the Fourth Gospel.²⁸ The symbolic nature of Lazarus' resurrection is, in my view, particularly pertinent. While most Johannine scholars would read Lazarus' resurrection as a symbolic foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection, I would suggest doubling its symbolic function to include the sense that is being proposed by JanMohamed. Put differently, Lazarus' death and resurrection may signify in John a change of subject position rather than something literal, and this may be the case not only for Lazarus but also for Jesus. Notice how John's Jesus clarifies from the beginning of the episode that Lazarus' sickness does not lead to death (11:4), and refers later to Lazarus' state as having fallen asleep (11:11). Although it is conventional within Johannine scholarship to read these as merely references to Lazarus' resurrection, it is important to keep in mind that John also makes a specific reference to a desire to (re)kill Lazarus after his resurrection (12:10-11). In other words, Lazarus can die (again).²⁹ If so, his (first) death *and* resurrection may well be symbolic in the

²⁸ Despite their similarity in emphasizing liberation from death *through* death, I must emphasize the need to keep in mind that a colonized Jew and a Greco-Roman philosopher occupied very different location of exploration in the first century C.E.

²⁹ Koester argues that Lazarus' resurrection functions to foreshadow Jesus' resurrection rather than the resurrection to be experienced by believers, because Lazarus obviously will die again (1995: 110). But if Lazarus' second death disqualifies it from being a model of the promised resurrection of believers, why is it acceptable for Jesus' resurrection? In other words, why is the implication of a second death not agreeable for believers, but agreeable for Jesus?

way JanMohamed describes it, especially if one considers the workings of death in terms of and through dream.

This altering of subject position is an improvisation, or even an invention like a discovery produced by death. It is so decisive, important, and influential that one can only compare it to a new birth (Kristeva 1982: 31; Spillers 2003: 212). Death, in other words, is understood by John here as actually a ground for being, or a new being who cannot be easily recognized (20:14; 21:4). Derrida has made a similar suggestion in *Aporias* (1993), where he further compares death to border; both, for Derrida, are figures of passage and non-passage involving a certain “step” and “not” (1993: 3-11). John will likewise present Jesus’ death and resurrection as involving his passing of numerous borders. John’s Jesus passes from the “world above” to the “world below.” He also crosses the Jordan back into Judea to raise a dead Lazarus, a crossing that is in many ways a “step” into his own death despite his disciples’ initial “not” (10:40-11:16). These “steps” that Jesus takes into death will ironically, according to John, also provide Jesus a ticket back to the “world above” and his followers a path or a way through the death zone (13:1; 14:2; 16:5, 7). Instead or in protest of being circumscribed to a death zone—a state of “living within death” that is also a liminal space between life and death—we find John dreaming and writing of a Jesus who can not only defy death but also travel between worlds and go through closed doors (20:19; 26). Since part of the rationale for providing a proper burial for the dead has to do with safeguarding the realm of life from that of the dead (Klauck 2003: 72), Jesus’ resurrection and his ghost- or phantom-like appearances seem to suggest that—the good intentions of Joseph and Nicodemus notwithstanding (19:38-39)—nothing can secure a space

from Jesus' intrusions and egressions. Mark W. G. Stibbe (1991) has helpfully pointed to John's Jesus as an elusive character, since other Johannine characters often find themselves playing "hide-and-seek" with Jesus (1:38; 5:13-14; 6:15-25; 7:1-11, 30, 44; 8:20-22, 59; 9:12, 35; 10:39-40; 11:1-6, 46-57; 12:36; 18:4, 7; 20:15). There is a politics of mobility in John that must not be overlooked.³⁰ Jesus will continue to haunt the world below with his return, whether in his own bodily form, the form of the Holy Spirit (7:39; 14:15-27; 15:26; 16:7; 20:22), or the bodies of his disciples (16:16-22).

Derrida is, of course, known for suggesting that writing spells both the death of *and* the resource for logos (1976: 73). Linking, then, death with resource or invention, one may further point to Derrida's understanding of invention as an opening to the other (1989), and ask if the death of the Word in John functions also inventively as such an opening. John's Jesus has declared himself a "gate" or "door" (10:9). I have also argued elsewhere that building community is one of John's purposes, and that Jesus—while dying on the cross—facilitates a new adoptive relation between his mother and the beloved disciple to signify the coming together of such a community (19:25b-28; Liew 2002: 195-96). If one can read Jesus' so-called high priestly prayer before his suffering and death (17:1-26) as his will—and if Seneca (*Ep.* 26.6) and the Younger Pliny (*Ep.* 8.18.1) correctly indicate the popular belief in Rome that one's will tells the truth of a person's character and commitment—then we should know that the community of

³⁰ The rhetoric of this politics is extremely "dreamy" or dream-like in John. Within this state of being in-between consciousness and unconsciousness, we read about a Jesus, whose spacing in between worlds functions to represent both the liminal state of a bare life and the liberating freedom of an uncircumscribed life.

his followers is of utmost importance to John's Jesus.³¹ He sees his life and his work continuing in the community that survives him. Spillers, writing about the bare reality of flesh, conveys that displacement of people often includes a displacement of genitalia (2003: 217-18). Her argument that displacement in general and slavery in particular lead to a crisis of blood relations and hence the threat of kinlessness becomes even more alarming if one factors in the threat and reality of death. That is to say, Spiller's displacement of genitalia signals a danger of not only an orphan people, but also a crisis of "progency *and* ethnicity or 'race'" (Holland 2000: 47; emphasis in original). In other words, the bare life and death zone that are associated with displacement and colonialism often augur or bespeak not peace but genocide, especially in the eyes of the victims (Holland 2000: 79; see also Roberts 1997).

In this light, John's insistence on Jesus creating a community through his death is all the more striking. Jesus prays for his community in his so-called high-priestly prayer in John 17, because it is not enough for Jesus to be reborn or resurrect from the death zone alone. As shown by both Lazarus and the beloved disciple, re/signing oneself to death—or "symbolic death"—does not necessarily mean that one will not literally die. Jesus needs to create and continue a community to keep his fight against the colonial master alive.³² According to the late classics

³¹ According to Roland Barthes, death in Tacitus' *Annals* functions similarly and "symbolically as the purest moment of life" (1982: 166). They are, for Barthes as they are for Edwards, sites or sights for inspiration and instruction (1982: 163).

³² For Emmanuel Levinas, community—or more specifically, fecundity—is one way to overcome death (1969; 1996: 50). While Levinas' suggestion has to do with Heidegger's existentialist understanding of death as one's own and hence individualistically non-relational or not related to others' (1962: 281-311), Levinas' sex-specific, or even sexist, definition of fecundity as a resurrection of a son (1969: 56) not only echoes what we have in John's Gospel, but also resonates with the concern over genocide that I am referring to through the work of Spillers.

scholar, Nicole Loraux, funeral oration had a role in the “invention of Athens” (1986). More specifically, Loraux argues that as a didactic speech, the funeral oration “does not so much console as it explains and exalts” heroic deeds, militaristic virtue, and most of all, fidelity to the *polis* (1986: 48). In doing so, Loraux further contends that the funeral oration provides the crucial bridge or transition through which a person’s primary loyalty would move from one’s family to the city of Athens. Loraux writes, “when the mothers, as members of the family, are moved away from the funeral pyre, they are integrated for the first time into the civic universe. Referring to their sons as *kleinotatous en Argeiois* (the most illustrious of the Argives), they recognize at last the rights of the city over the children whom they had wanted entirely for themselves” (1986: 49).

Not only does this provide another perspective to read the new relation that the crucified Jesus facilitates for his mother and his beloved disciple (19:25b-28), but it also reinforces a political reading of Jesus’ death in John. It is as if John is insisting, through his writing of Jesus and Jesus’ death, that despite threats of social death, physical death, and even genocide, a new community will come into being and keep generating and regenerating. By embracing his impending death, John’s Jesus ends up reentering life in the “world above,” *and* regenerating life as well as conceiving a fictive family in the “world below.” Again, given the fluidity between the death and resurrection of Lazarus and those of Jesus in John, one may say that Jesus’ death and resurrection function to “unbind” the (biological) bindings—and hence also the imperial ties—that keep Lazarus (socially) dead, entombed and separate from other human beings, family and community (11:44). This exchange of adoptive love and relations over social death through

symbolic death can also be seen in the conversation between Jesus and Peter after Jesus' resurrection (21:15-19). Love for Jesus after his resurrection is expressed by caring for others, but doing so necessitates one's awareness or acceptance of one's own death, just like Jesus did.³³

Community, or caring for one another *within* the community (13:34-35; 15:12, 17), is a well-recognized theme in the history of Johannine scholarship. Again, I would suggest that reading John in the colonial framework that I have outlined provides a rationale for this emphasis. As I have intimated earlier, the Roman machination of death can turn bare life into extensions of that machination and poison relations among the colonized. We see that in the

³³ The ironic relation between life and death, or life through death that I have been arguing for John may also be seen in the way John associates food and drink with both life and death. We see John's Jesus getting thirsty and promising the Samaritan woman "living water" (4:1-14; see also 6:35; 7:37-39); when we find Jesus being thirsty again in John, he is hanging and dying on the cross (19:28-30). John's Jesus also proclaims himself the "bread of life" in contrast to Moses' manna that cannot prevent death (6:1-59). The next time we read about "bread," it has become a means to identify Jesus' betrayer who will facilitate Jesus' death (13:10-30). "Bread" appears again in the last chapter of John, when Jesus cooks a post-crucifixion and post-resurrection meal for his disciples, which leads to the commission to Peter to feed Jesus' flock (21:9-17). The offering of food and commission to feed are, however, followed by the references to the death of both Peter and the beloved disciple (21:18-23). Referring to both literary texts and material culture (including monuments, mosaic, and other artifacts), Edwards suggests a connection between dining and dying in the Roman world, whether in terms of one's inevitability to leave life as one needs to leave a dinner party, or one's self-destruction or death because of one's over indulgence in food and other bodily cravings (2007: 161-78). If so, the fish barbecue or funeral banquet in John 21 plays a curious function. It may double as a resolution of Jesus' death as well as an introduction to his followers' death. Their eating or consuming of food, just like Jesus' drinking of the sour wine on the cross, ends up anticipating the consummation of their lives. Peter's feeding of Jesus' flock would then not only lead to Peter's martyrdom as Jesus implies, but also signal the death of those whom Peter will feed or has fed. Reading John 21 in light of the relations of dying and dining, one may exegete the mysterious "these" in Jesus' question to Peter (21:15) as referring to the fish that he ate through the provision of Jesus; that is to say, Jesus wants to know if Peter loves him more than bodily cravings so Peter would, like Jesus, be willing to give up feeding his own life for the feeding or nourishing of others (see also 4:31-38; 6:25-27). Not to forget here is Jesus' proclamation in John that completing his Father's work is his consumption of food (4:34).

desire of some Jewish authorities to kill Jesus, perhaps for the sake of pacifying their Roman masters. James Baldwin seems to be alluding to a similar dynamics when he writes, “For who has not hated his black brother? Simply *because* he is *black*, *because* he is brother (1967: 213; emphasis in original). Something similar to this transference of what David Marriott calls “negrophobic fantasies” by blacks to other blacks (2000: 82) may also take place among late first-century Jews, given what Peter Schäfer calls “Judeophobia” in the Greco-Roman world (1997). When the African American author and activist, Joseph Beam, “dare[s] *us* to dream that we are worth wanting each other” (1986: 239; emphasis in original), he is writing to counteract two hostile fronts simultaneously: heterosexism within the black movement and racism within the gay movement. In other words, Beam’s *dream* is not unrelated to the intra-communal love commanded by John’s Jesus. In emphasizing how the “world” will hate him and his followers (15:17-16:3; 17:14), Jesus’ love command for his community may well have something to do with his recognition that hate can be both internalized and transferred. Fanon has repeatedly alluded to this dynamics of “projection” and “transference” (1967: 190-91) with what he calls “the racial distribution of guilt” (1967: 103), particularly how Antilleans would not only distance themselves from but also denigrate other blacks, particularly Senegalese (1967: 26, 38, 101-103, 113, 148, 162-64n. 25, 180-83; see also Marriott 2000: 82-84). Competing for the colonizers’ recognition and possessions, colonized people often end up committing violence against each other (Fanon 1968: 307-309; see also Willett 2001). It is, in this light, significant that Jesus’ community of followers in John is made up of not only Jews, but also Samaritans, Greeks, and potentially many others. The (potentially?) wide base of Jesus’ community in John, however,

does not invalidate my suggestion that Jesus' love command is partly based on the need to address the psychic transference of and among "death bound subjects." Notice how John, while acknowledging coverage limits (20:30; 21:24-25), nevertheless devotes noticeable space to detailing the relations between Samaritans and Jesus. Not only does Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman end with many Samaritans coming to believe in Jesus (4:39-42), but the *Ioudaioi* have also mistaken Jesus himself as a demon-possessed Samaritan (8:48). Jesus' inclusion of and identification with the Samaritans are even more striking in John because John has also made a point to tell us not only that Jesus is an *Ioudaios* but also that "*Ioudaioi* do not associate with Samaritans" (4:9; see also 19:21). Instead of projecting or transferring the hatred of the (Roman) world toward Samaritans (as most *Ioudaioi* have supposedly done) or other *Ioudaioi* (as some *Ioudaioi* are doing to Jesus), John's Jesus dies to bring the colonized into a unified and loving community (11:51-52), or what Holloway calls "a macabre fraternity" (2002: 57, 67).

Dreaming Ambiguities

For John's Jesus to build this community of love and resistance among the colonized, his dream or desire must be recognized. John seems to recognize the difficulty of this, given his own repeated references to the teaching role of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' departure (7:39; 14:26; 15:26; 16:13; 20:22). John's dream of life and death, or life through death, is difficult, because it is full of complications and ambiguities. I have just mentioned that community may allow one's work of resistance to continue beyond one's own death, as it seems to be the case

with the beloved disciple (21:18-24). At the same time, Jesus' conversation with Peter about Peter's upcoming death, as well as John's somewhat veiled comments about the beloved disciple's death seem to indicate that one's change of subject position—that is, one's embrace of one's own symbolic death—must be so pervasive and deep that one must, like Jesus, be ready to embrace even the deaths of one's family, fictive *and* otherwise. If it is through one's willingness to die that one may live on an individual level, a similarly ironic and difficult dynamics is true on a communal level. One's life may perpetuate through one's "siblings" and "offspring" only if one resist the desire to protect them from dying.

While the potential efficacy of John's invention can be seen in a couple of examples from Josephus—where the willingness to die actually caused Pilate and Petronius, a Roman governor of Syria, to turn back from carrying the image of the Roman emperor into Jerusalem or the Temple (*AJ* 18.55-59, 261-83)—there is no guarantee that what JanMohamed calls "symbolic death" may not entail actual or literal death. After all, a couple of studies have shown that the symbolic and the literal in John are far from stable, but that they leak, flow, and evolve into each other (Staten 1993; Moore 2003), so one should not metaphorize the materiality in John too quickly or too completely. In a sense, one may say that it is because of the proximity and fluidity between symbolic and literal death that make community indispensable to the continuation of one's life and work. John's dreamy distinction between symbolic and literal death turns out, then, to be a disturbing one, for it implies also a very fine line between murder and suicide. If (1) symbolic death means being unafraid or even willing to die, and (2) literal death is not only possible and probable in a colonial situation, then John's *Ioudaioi* actually have good grounds to

read Jesus' action and articulation as an intent to commit suicide (8:21-22). When Thomas—in response to Jesus' decision to go to Judea for Lazarus despite the known danger ahead—suggests to the other disciples that they will accompany Jesus to die with him, he is in fact also reading Jesus' action as suicidal. Holloway, writing about “black death,” points to a similar ambiguity that exists between suicide and accidental death or even homicide, because blacks who died in living risks may well be committing “suicide-by-other-means” (2002: 91, 94, 98). If Agamben sees death as political and not just biological, Emile Durkheim has shown years ago that suicide is social instead of merely individual (1951). Perhaps JanMohamed can help to pull all these together by explaining how Agamben's “bare life” is stuck with the choice of killing or being killed. Since a bare life cannot really kill the colonizer, he or she can only kill another colonized person, kill oneself symbolically or literally, or continue to live under the killing threats of the colonizer. That is why JanMohamed also sees rebellion, suicide, and murder as a mixed bag (2005: 21, 229, 277). It is noteworthy in this regard that Agamben himself, in discussing “bare life,” also mentions suicide (1998: 136-37), although he insists on differentiating “bare life” from sacrifice in a ritual or religious sense (1998: 113-14). John shows, however, sacrifice in a different sense may yet be factored into this already complicated and ambiguous mixture of rebellion, suicide, and murder. When Caiaphas suggests that Jesus “should die on behalf of the people than to have the entire nation perish” (11:49), he is in effect understanding the murder of Jesus as a sacrifice in at least the sense of surrendering or destroying someone or something for the sake of a larger or higher goal. More disturbing is that John does not only support Caiaphas' understanding, but also proceeds to further enlarge this larger or higher purpose from benefiting

a single nation to the gathering of God's dispersed children (11:51-52; see also 18:8). Durkheim would call this an example of "altruistic suicide" (1951: 217-40).

Paul Plass has interestingly compared Roman political suicides to game theory (1995). Like Baudrillard who links death with economic exchange (1993), Plass argues that Roman suicides, as political games, were governed by implicit rules, and were hence uncertain or ambiguous in how things would turn out. With moves and countermoves, those who threatened suicide as a political protest against the emperor might actually find clemency, or they might end up paying the heavy price of losing their life. Plass' metaphors, whether it is game theory or gift exchange, underscore what John's Caiaphas and narrator both point to: the politics of death is often a matter of mathematics.³⁴ Whether the numbers are John's "one" against "many," symbolic death involves a calculation—and hence always already the possibility of miscalculation—of costs and returns. Even understanding symbolic death—especially its "suicidal" or "sacrificial" aspect—as but a desperate means to make sense of bare life—that is, as something that is done out of an already passive rather than active position in relation to life—the absence of choice, non-choice, or what looks like a number zero, may itself be an inaccurate entry that will make all the difference on a balance sheet. Just as challenge and compliance, there is an ambiguity between choice and coercion. The stakes are admittedly high when a miscalculation may need to not only a literal loss of life, but also a waste of death.

Starting with feminist voices, various scholars have been articulating their hesitations and reservations with this kind of ideology of sacrifice, particularly within the so-called Judeo-

³⁴ Edwards points out that "[the] term *ratio*, in the sense of calculation, recurs frequently in Seneca's discussion of when is the right time to die (2007: 99).

Christian traditions (for example, more recently, Boyarin 1999; Castelli 2004). To go back to my reference to Loraux's work, this ideology can be read in terms of what Jean Francois Lyotard calls the "Athenian 'beautiful death,'" which he glosses as the "exchange of the finite for the infinite, the *eschaton* for the *telos*: the *Die in order not to die*" (1988: 100; emphasis in original). John's ambiguity between symbolic and literal death—or the fine line between dying well, being willing to die, and wishing to die—becomes even more questionable given Romans' celebration of suicide as not only a heroic act but also a continuation of Rome's military and masculinist traditions (Edwards 2007: 1, 7, 32, 97). The problem then is more than just what John thinks, but if and how his thinking may be duplicating the ideologies of his colonial master.

In addition, even Jesus' agency in embracing his "hour"—which supposedly signifies a change in his subject position from being a "bare life" to one that features will and choice—is ambiguous in light of his ubiquitous references to his "Father." While John makes a point to distance Jesus' own choice and the desire of Jesus' mother in the wedding at Cana (2:3-4), the same cannot be said about the relation between Jesus and his Father. There is a sense, of course, that John's appeal to the Father may function to resist the power and so-called peace of imperial Rome. We see this, for example, in Jesus' response to Pilate's claim over Jesus' life that Pilate's own power is derivative of another (19:8-11). In addition to highlighting the guilt of Caesar and hence the entire Roman apparatus in 19:11, Jesus' reference to "from above" may also refer to the existence of an authority even above that of Rome (3:31; 8:23). A helpful picture here then is the familiar one of the Roman magistrate with the *imperium* and the lictor who always accompanied and went before him. On one level, Jesus is pointing out that Pilate is but a lictor

who executes the sentence in the power of Caesar; on another level, Jesus may be suggesting that the entire Roman empire is but a lictor under the power of his Father (see also Moore 2006: 64). As good as this latter meaning may sound to an anti-imperial ear, Agamben points out that the only reason why Roman custom would allow a son to place himself between the magistrate and the lictor is because the son was always already “subject to a power of life and death with respect to the father” (1998: 89). In other words, the son’s presence does not contradict, but rather confirms the sovereign power of the magistrate as father or father as magistrate.

The Father’s role then not only makes Jesus’ own agency ambiguous, but also doubles that of the Roman master. Aside from the Roman ideology of *paterfamilias*, John’s emphasis on a relation with this Father that is not based on blood and biology but on *obedience* makes it all the more troubling (1:12-13; 8:31-32, 51; 14:15-15:11; 17:6-9). Not only is such a paternalistic relation similar to the one that exists between colonizer and colonized, but it—considering its emphasis on obedience—also implies a view of others as infants at best and instruments at worst. John’s insistence on the Father’s invisibility (1:18; 5:37; 6:46) further implies that, unlike Jesus and Jesus’ followers, the Father is not flesh (4:24). This contrast implies an even more significant differential in power in light of Spillers’ and Agamben’s work, despite John’s characterization of the Father’s relation with Jesus and Jesus’ followers as one of love (3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 14:19-23; 15:9-11; 16:26-27; 17:20-26). The politics of mobility that I referred to earlier is also framed in terms of a world of light above and a world of darkness below (1:9; 3:3-8, 18-21, 31; 8:12, 23-24; 9:1-5; 11:7-10; 12:44-50; see also Dube 1998). In other words, it is—despite small doses of more horizontal or fraternal expressions (10:30; 15:15)—

hierarchically conceived, and—given Jesus’ emphasis on returning or going to the Father—vertically oriented. Take, for instance, the intra-communal love commandment we discussed earlier. Since (1) John’s Jesus also declares that laying down one’s life for another is love per excellence (15:13; see also Levinas 2000: 216), and (2) Jesus immediately specifies obedience to his commands as prerequisite of friendship with him (15:14), love and death seems to be always already mingled in John. More importantly, it is hard not to conclude that being willing to die is not a command performance, as it seems to be the case with Jesus (10:18).³⁵ If John’s Jesus—as well as those who follow John’s Jesus—are supposed to be fully subjected to the will of the Father to the point of death (6:35-64; 10:1-18; 15:1-16:4; 21:15-19), then are we not back to a scenario in which a Caesar-like head sits comfortably in a choice seat and watches bare life performing death for his purposes and his enjoyment? This is all the more troubling since John feels no need or compulsion to explain or account for this hierarchical relation between Jesus and his Father; in other words, John basically takes a hierarchical paternal function for granted.

Similar to the way the *Ioudaioi* present Jesus’ challenge as a contest between a king and a Roman

³⁵ As I have mentioned, Levinas, in arguing for an ethical rather than a Heideggerian or existentialist reading of death, sees community, fecundity, or sacrificing oneself for others as a “meaningful” death. Although Levinas is adamant that no one has the right to ask another person to sacrifice for others (1998: 126), “voluntary” sacrifice is also problematic on at least two fronts: first, what appears “voluntary” is not necessarily without force; and second, even “true” volunteering may still be a sincere wrong.

I do not have the space here or the ability to work through all the questions surrounding death, sacrifice, and suicide, but do need to point out that these are indeed postcolonial questions. From her early work on the problematic reading of a young Indian revolutionary’s death in 1926 as suicide in terms of *sati* (1988: 294-308), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has been concerned with not only the reading of death of the colonized in the binary terms of “victimage versus cultural heroism,” but also how ignoring “the role of violence in the development of [colonial] conscience is to court the repetition of suicide as accountability” (1999: 291-92).

emperor (19:12, 15), John seems to see his situation as a struggle between two paternal and paternalistic authorities who reward obedience with life and reprove disobedience with death (6:50; 8:21, 24; see also Moore 2006: 50).

Reading Anatomies and the Art of Mourning

I think the mixture of rebellion, murder, sacrifice, and suicide in John points to the depth of death within John as a death-bound subject. He sees his choices as but different types of death: social, symbolic, and/or actual. These are severely limited choices, if they are choices at all. Not only is John “caught up in an infinite labyrinth of death” (JanMohamed 2005: 265) even in resistance, but the structure and logic of imperial sovereignty and bare life also seem to be so pervasive and deep-seated that John is consciously and unconsciously subjected to them even as he dreams of a different subject position. Perhaps more accurately, John’s dream of a changed subject position is possible or thinkable only within the structure and logic that bind, subjugate, and “subjectify” him. To use a familiar vocabulary in both Johannine and Derridean studies, John’s aporias or inconsistencies actually—and ironically—reveal the consistent and constitutive power of colonial sovereignty. Writing about slavery in nineteenth-century America, Hartman correctly warns against any romantic celebration of slave agency even in resistance (1997: 54-56). We must remember that John, just like his *Ioudaioi*, is a colonized—thus victimized—agent, even or especially when we point to the inadequacies of his invention of or intervention over death. At the same time, as the term “victimized agent” implies, we must remember that John is not only a victim, his invention or intervention shows not only that others—including the

colonial masters—are constitutive of his own subjectivity, but it also points to the need to remain open to the other. After all, John reminds us that there are not only many deeds of Jesus that he fails to record or tell, but also that even all the books in the world cannot contain every act of Jesus (21:25). Since this concluding statement of John is given right after his references to the death of both Peter and the beloved disciple (21:18-23)—the latter of whom is also credited as the source of John’s book about Jesus living and giving life in the shadow and experience of death (21:24)—I would suggest that John ends by foregrounding his corpus as but traces of the departed. Like the wounds and scars that Jesus shows his disciples after his resurrection (20:19-28), John also makes visible the cuts that he has performed on his Gospel. In a sense then one can say that even his Gospel emerges as a corpse; it is declared an aborted text immediately upon its birth. Our attention is thus turned away from the corpus back to—shall we say?—the corpses. Given the pervasiveness of death in John, perhaps one may think of “reading [the Fourth Gospel] ... as an ... interminable and unforeclosable work of mourning” (Michaud 2002: 83). In retelling Jesus’ story, John honors and portrays the struggles of one colonized and departed Jew or Jewish community. Derrida has suggested mourning as “a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generation” (1994: xix; emphasis in original). This memory or mourning politics must involve for Derrida both a respect and a betrayal of the other, since betrayal is necessary to welcome and to make room for what this other has been awaiting (see also Derrida 1999; Krell 2000). What John awaits is life beyond bare life. In memory of John’s memory of Jesus, we must not only recall, but also rework what John has written.

After all, learning about one who has departed or seeing another's corpse may remind one of one's own mortality as well as one's vitality. In other words, knowing that you are—unlike the departed or the corpse—still here and alive can become moments of empowerment. As John 20:30-31 indicate, we are empowered or at least asked to think about our own life and perhaps even to rehearse our own death. If so, then John's Jesus is, like a Roman gladiator, dying for an audience, and John is performing the role of a master of ceremonies. Since John's Jesus needs witnesses and John needs readers, so John's portrayal of Jesus' life and death is every bit as spectacular as other Roman spectacles of death. But how will his audience respond? Will they mourn as Derrida suggests, and/or will they objectify the departed or the dead as passive and hence feminized (Bronfen 1992: 30, 65, 102, 120; Edwards 2007: 43-44)? What may this second potential response imply about female readers of John? All these questions must remain open and the responses ambiguous. This element of ambiguity should not be surprising if one considers not only John's own specialty in double-speak, but also the agency of the reader or spectator. Just like John who internalizes and improvises on the death bound subjectivity given to him by his colonizers, we who live under the "effective history" (Gadamer 1994:301-302) of colonialism and the Fourth Gospel can also invent a different future. While we are grateful that John's Jesus does not say anything about "letting the dead bury their own dead" (Matthew 8:22; Luke 9:60), we also need not be stuck in John's accounting or algebra of life and death in our

own understanding and practice of living, reading, and writing.³⁶ As Friedrich Nietzsche suggests, critical students of the past “must possess the strength, and must at times apply this strength, to the destruction and dissolution of the past in order to be able to live” (cited in de Man 1983: 149). To mourn the dead is to keep engaging, including disagreeing with them. After all, to reanimate the dead is to give them “new,” and hence at least a partially different life. In and through the Fourth Gospel, I find and participate in movements between worlds to be in touch with others—including the memory, mourning, and betrayal of the dead—for the hope of life.³⁷

³⁶ I see this as one way to move, as Said does, from a “rhetoric of blame” to a “contrapuntal reading” that makes connections not only between a work of culture and its larger socio-political world, but also between its past and the present of its reader (Said 1993:51, 66, 96; Said 2004). My point about improvisation—for both John and those who read John—is also meant to dispute the criticism of some that new historicism inevitably “reduces” a writer to his or her historical circumstances to the point of making authorial agency an oxymoron (Posnock 2007: 144, 164). In my view, there is a lot of space between a liberal humanism that advocates an extreme form of individual freedom or autonomy and a determinism that eliminates human agency.

³⁷ An earlier and briefer version of this essay was published under the title, “The Word of Bare Life: Workings of Death and Dream in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Anatomies of the Fourth Gospel: The Past, Present, and Futures of Narrative Criticism*, ed. Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore (Atlanta: SBL, 2008) 167-93. I thank the publisher for permission to expand that earlier essay here.

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