Translating the Ineffable: Deconstruction and the Political

by

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A Note on the Text

Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* is perhaps the most foundational text for deconstructive criticism to date.\(^1\) However, the level of critical analysis required to employ this text effectively lies outside the scope of this thesis. Therefore, my central argument will not explicitly engage with *Of Grammatology*, even while drawing on many of its themes; readers familiar with *Of Grammatology* will, I hope, recognize a number of the book’s problematics in the backgrounds of most of my inquiries in this thesis.

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Introduction

Preface

Translation has been a topic of conversation in my own home for as long as I can remember. I have become accustomed to the constant back and forth of growing up between two languages, in my case, English and French. The philosophic relevance of translation as a concept, however, became of interest to me only a few years ago. I was first introduced to Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction in Professor Axelle Karera’s Continental Philosophy class my sophomore year. In a way, deconstruction can be understood as a philosophic movement that challenges conventional understandings of identity, culture, and politics by critically examining the relationships between text and meaning. Derridean deconstruction gives us the impossible yet necessary task of thinking difference. Tracing Derrida’s conceptualization of translation proves a difficult mission. One soon finds that, for Derrida, everything is translatable and yet, at the same time, nothing is translatable.²

It is precisely this paradox that I have become interested in. How is it possible to recognize translation as specifically important while also claiming that it relates to everything? And why are there some aspects of our lives for which there are no words?

My thesis investigates what it means to translate the ineffable. The word “ineffable” can be traced to Old French, coming originally from the Latin ineffabilis, joining the prefix in-, meaning “not” with effabilis, meaning “capable of

² Monolingualism of the Other, or, the Prosthesis of Origin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 57. This paradox is also brought up by Derrida in "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?," Critical Inquiry 27, no. 2 (2001): 179.
being expressed.” And if we look at effabilis, we find it comes from effari, meaning “to speak out,” which in turn comes from ex-, meaning “out” and fari meaning “to speak.” The ineffable (as realm and word) has been theorized by many philosophers across history, including William James, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Blanchot, and Judith Butler. In this thesis, I understand the ineffable as that which exceeds our conventional use of language, both in its function and utility. In extending critical understanding of the ineffable, I will draw specifically on the works of Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, Jared Sexton, and Saidiya Hartman. Ultimately, my main concerns in this thesis are of a political nature. I am interested in the role that translation plays in the wake of Trump-era antagonisms, from border wars to state-sanctioned police violence, and the accompanying (at time frenzied) politics of protest. I ask, what do we lose by the constant desire for translating radically opposed political claims? What happens when we are forced to constantly account for one another through language and action? How do we translate radically contested and seemingly unregistrable political demands?

**Thesis Structure**

In the first chapter, I will provide a comprehensive analysis of Jared Sexton’s intervention in his widely read interview titled “On Black Negativity, or the Affirmation of Nothing.” Sexton is concerned with the current “anxiety about conserving radical thought under reactionary conditions” that structures our

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relationship to academia and activism.\textsuperscript{4} I will engage with Sexton’s account of a radical politics of negativity that opposes itself to rights-based struggles for social justice. Sexton advocates for a politics of groundlessness, a form of resistance that begins from dispossession rather than self-determination. For Sexton, the field of black studies is full of potential because it stretches across all other disciplines. Thus, he finds it necessary to work within black studies in order to address current reactionary responses to post-civil rights era social and political upheavals in the United States. For this reason, Sexton centers the position of the black slave in his discussion of radical resistance. He looks at slavery not just as an economic condition, but as a sociopolitical status. The status of blackness, for Sexton, “relates to the undoing or unraveling of every social bond.”\textsuperscript{5} Here, Sexton draws on Saidiya Hartman’s interview with Frank B. Wilderson III titled “The Position of the Unthought,” in which Hartman examines the erasure of black life within the archive of Atlantic slavery.\textsuperscript{6} For Hartman, this lack of archival information makes it impossible to provide a coherent narrative for the slave. Sexton’s argument also relies on Frantz Fanon’s \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, in which Fanon looks at the experience of the black subject in the wake of European colonization. For Fanon, this is an experience of being psychologically “uprooted.”\textsuperscript{7} Therefore, Fanon calls for a kind of liberation that is as much psychological as it is political. For Sexton, this experience of deracination can be read as the very condition for liberation. Sexton challenges our

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{7} Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, ed. Charles Lam Markmann (New York : Grove Press, 1968), 2.
conventional understandings of productivity and success. Indeed, Sexton unsettles the very distinction between activity and passivity, arguing that the state both absorbs and solicits political protest. Rather than arguing specifically against political activism, Sexton urges us interrogate our conventional understanding of political resistance itself.

The second chapter will juxtapose Sexton’s politics of groundlessness with Derrida’s investigation of language and identity in his semi-autobiographical book *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. In unpacking the contradictory statement: “I have but one language– yet that language is not mine,” Derrida examines the relationships between colonialism and nationality. He argues that there is no such thing as a universal language. Rather, one language always exists only in its division from the other. Thus, for Derrida, language is always plural. By juxtaposing Derrida’s *Monolingualism* with his widely-read essay “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” I will examine the relationships between justice, translation, and the law. What does Derrida mean when he asserts that language’s division is the “law itself as translation”? Using Geoffrey Bennington’s reading of Derrida in his unpublished essay “Non-Political Opening of Politics,” I will argue that translation is a matter of indefinite deferral. By this I mean that it complicates the very arrival of justice. I will then turn to Spivak’s contribution to the question of translation. I will provide an exegetical reading of her essays “Questioned

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10 *Monolingualism of the Other*, 10.
on Translation: Adrift” and “Translation as Culture,” in which Spivak situates the universalizing forces of translation within an increasingly globalized economy. 12 Spivak is highly critical of the ongoing human rights interventions by first-world countries. Such attempts, she argues, focus on making individual people responsible for their conducts and decisions within an inclusive free-market model of conflict resolution. I find the definition of “neoliberalism” included in Kate Bedford and Janet R. Jakobsen’s “Toward a Sexual and Economic Justice,” published by The Barnard Center for Research on Women, to be pertinent here.13 Bedford and Jakobsen write that in much of the Global South, “neoliberalism has been associated with reductions in state sovereignty and the attempt to insulate economic policy from popular participation or debate. For such reasons the term has considerable activist import and ability to mobilize resistance, and it is used by many social movements.”14 The various facets of neoliberalism, including the deregulation of markets and privatization of social services, solicit global activist responses. Spivak is concerned with the “impatience of human rights interventions,” which she calls a “failure of translation.”15 Spivak argues that the global human rights movement, in its very impatience, actually works to spread European hegemony. Thus, it is precisely through the question of translation that Spivak addresses the problems of economic and cultural globalization.

"Translation as Culture," Parallax 6, no. 1 (2000).
14 Ibid., 5.
In Chapter Three, I will revisit the themes of language, identity, and representation through Derrida’s logic of the “archive” in *Mal d’archive* (“Archive Fever”). First, I will provide an analysis of Derrida’s conception of the archive. In short, Derrida defines the archive as a process of synthesis and exclusion that structures conventional politics. I will investigate the relationship between the archive and memory by appealing to Soraya Tlatli and Rebecca Solnit. In her essay “Algeria as an Archive,” Tlatli argues that the concept of the archive is inseparable from Derrida’s own experiences with French colonialism. She helps us understand the archive as a process of nation-building, that is, of writing nationalist ideology and history. In her 2013 book *Savage Dreams*, Solnit provides an account of the violent history of colonial naming in the American West. She discusses the erasure of indigenous peoples and languages through this process of mapping and archiving by European settlers. After elucidating the political consequences of the archive, I will juxtapose *Mal d’archive* with “Force of Law.” I will offer a reading of Derrida’s work that relates the role of the translator to that of the law enforcer. Here, I draw on Michelle Alexander’s 2012 book *The New Jim Crow*. Alexander argues that the racial caste system lives on even after the formal abolition of slavery. She investigates this specifically through the U.S. criminal justice system. I will, thus, attempt to show how Derridean deconstruction can help us understand the unequal application of the

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law in both the U.S. and the world at large. Here, I locate a point of convergence for Spivak’s concern with failed translation and Sexton’s account of passive activity. To conclude, I argue that if we are to take seriously Sexton’s politics of groundlessness, then we must pose the question of translation. I advocate for an ethics that emerges within the necessary but impossible act of translating the ineffable.
Chapter One: The Unthought

A Politics of Groundlessness

In an interview conducted by Daniel Colucciello Barber titled “On Black Negativity, or the Affirmation of Nothing,” Jared Sexton explores the negative dimension of blackness within modern political culture and language. He investigates both the implications and the potentialities of black studies as an “unlimited field”– that is, an area of study that not only permeates all other disciplines but also disrupts disciplinary boundaries.20 He advocates for a politics rooted in dispossession that finds possibility in embracing the unknown.

For Sexton, the posing of the question of blackness within discourses of the universal is precisely what enables black studies to become an unlimited field. Rather than offering us a foundational or comprehensive analysis of blackness as form or identity, Sexton reminds us of the mysterious ability of black studies to lead anywhere and in every direction through its constant and unrelenting encounters with the unknown. I use the term “unknown” here to refer to the realm of things that lie beyond our intellectual grasp. In other words, the unknown is that which is obscure or unfamiliar to us– i.e., a mystery. Drawing on Angela Davis’ 1999 essay “Prison Abolition,” Sexton situates the black slave within a negative discourse of fear; a fear of being consumed by slavery in the very attempts to remember it.21 “What could this possibly mean?” Sexton asks, “What happens to us if we are, so to speak, consumed by slavery? Do we lose the ability to differentiate ourselves from or to imagine

20 Sexton, "On Black Negativity."
ourselves other than slave?" For Sexton, this fear of remembering is both an outcome of the conviction that slavery has ended and an indication that slavery lives on. Thus, far from being a thing of the past, slavery is in the here and now. Sexton considers slavery to be more than just an “economic condition or legal standing.” Rather, he understands slavery as a “sociopolitical status” – a status that blackness continues to occupy in the modern world. What Sexton means by this is that, even after formal emancipation, black subjects continue to be treated as antithetical to society. Slavery persists in the form of incarceration, poverty, homelessness, the denial of health care and education, and premature death. In other words, blackness continues to occupy the slave’s position of exclusion within liberal democracy.

For Sexton, to think through slavery means to think through the unthought, a process that challenges historically- and economically-based understandings of struggles of oppression and freedom. He writes: “Black studies as a field is, or black studies as iterations of an internally differentiated project are, involved in an ongoing attempt to think about things not only unthought, but also perhaps unthinkable.” This argument relies on Hartman’s interview with Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought,” in which Hartman points out, “On one hand, the slave is the foundation of the national order, and on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought.” For Hartman, the slave is integral both to the history of Western

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21 Ibid., 3.
24 Ibid.
expansion and the current global economy. Interested in the limits of language in constructing a narrative for the slave as subject, Hartman argues that the slave is unable to ever occupy the position of a political agent. She thus asks: “What does it mean to try to bring that position into view without making it a locus of positive value, or without trying to fill the void […] it’s about more than the desire for inclusion within the limited set of possibilities that the national project provides. What then does this language – the given language of freedom – enable?” For Hartman, this language of freedom works within a greater nationalist project of inclusion. It is rooted in integrationist politics and the protection of the subject’s sovereignty. Therefore, Hartman argues, this language does not liberate the slave; it works only to reinforce the slave’s condition of oppression. Thus, the slave remains in the position of the unthought. And for Sexton, thinking the unthinkable always involves a struggle with articulation, and thus always imposes a deferral of what is articulated in response to a question, a deferral that we come to embody in our relation to the world.

Sexton finds the concept of “dehiscence” helpful in understanding the deconstructive potentiality of black studies within contemporary politics and philosophy. He borrows the term from Jacques Lacan’s Écrits, in which Lacan uses the term to describe how the imposition of language splits the subject into experience and articulation. The subject is subsequently confronted with the following dilemma: it must struggle with language to “articulate the inarticulable.” In other

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28 Ibid., 185.
words, the subject runs up against the problem of the ineffable.\textsuperscript{31} Thereafter the subject is forced to live out its life “at the level of embodiment, affect, memory and the like.”\textsuperscript{32} Thus, for Lacan, language is always plagued with the problem of reality. Unable to account for its own reality, the split subject relies on the constant translation between experience and language.

Sexton reminds us that dehiscence is a versatile term, having been translated across botany, medicine, and philosophy.\textsuperscript{33} In botany, the term dehiscence refers to the splitting of a plant structure along a seam of weakness. In medicine, dehiscence refers to a rupture along a surgical incision, often due to infection or post-surgery trauma. Thus, the splitting of the subject into language and experience can be read as a process of tearing and wounding. Confronted with the ineffable, the subject splits open. In his earlier essay, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” Sexton tells us that black studies “lead everywhere, especially in their dehiscence.”\textsuperscript{34} For Sexton, dehiscence helps us understand how black studies tear apart our traditional understandings of the world. Having been used throughout botany, medicine, and philosophy, the term dehiscence itself traverses disciplinary boundaries. Black poet and theorist Fred Moten articulates a similar idea. In a 2008 essay titled “Black Op,” Moten writes: “Black studies is a dehiscence at the heart of

\textsuperscript{31} Lacan discusses the ineffable in the context of madness and hallucination, which, he argues, is a problem of language. Unable to find the words to express their hallucination, the mad subject “runs up against the problem of the ineffable, as if language did not posit this without the help of madness” (136).

\textsuperscript{32} Sexton, "On Black Negativity," 5.

\textsuperscript{33} As Annabelle Dufourcq explains in her 2014 essay “The Ontological Imaginary: Dehiscence, Sorcery,” dehiscence is also the first principle of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ontology in his manuscript titled \textit{The Visible and the Invisible} (published after his death, in 1968).

\textsuperscript{34} Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," in \textit{Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations} (Routledge, 2016), 9.
the institution and on its edge; its broken, coded documents sanction walking in another world while passing through this one, graphically disordering the administered scarcity from which black studies flows as wealth.”35 For Moten, this dehiscence is specifically important within the context of academia and institutionalized knowledge production. The term emphasizes how the presence of the black academic disrupts traditionally white institutions, metaphorically ripping academia along its seams.

I am interested in how this term, dehiscence, can also be related to Sexton’s notion of “deracination.”36 Early in the interview, Barber characterizes dehiscence as “the ungrounding entailed by deracination.”37 In his discussion of “deracination,” Sexton appeals to Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. Towards the very beginning of this text, Fanon tells us that the experience of the black man is one of being “uprooted, pursued, baffled, doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths that he has worked out for himself one after another.”38 What Fanon is describing here is the black man’s experience of exile in the wake of European colonization.39 And for Fanon, this kind of exile takes place in the black man’s psyche. In other words, oppression is internalized. Sexton tells us that in another context, “this might be how Fanon describes the deracination, the loss of metaphysics, characteristic of the slavery of history, i.e., modern racial slavery.”40 In other words, in the “afterlife of slavery”

37 Ibid., 2.
38 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 8.
39 I stick to Fanon’s use of “man” over “person” to stay true to his text. Fanon, like other thinkers of his time, takes the male as the norm. The archival exclusion of the black woman (or not-man,) will be important to feminist theorists such as Saidiya Hartman. I will elaborate on Hartman’s discussion of this in Chapters Two and Three.
that constitutes our world today, black life continues to be an experience of exile.\textsuperscript{41} Thus, Sexton depicts “deracination” as an existential state of being. How, then, does dehiscence help us think through this state of deracination? If deracination occurs on a “psycho-political” level,\textsuperscript{42} then defining dehiscence as “the ungrounding entailed by deracination” makes dehiscence an existential process. Dehiscence rips the self apart. Thus, Sexton’s project of disalienation requires a reconfiguration of the self that begins from dispossession. And if this kind of resistance has to do with “articulating the inarticulable,” then it requires an ongoing translation between the known and the unknown.

\textit{Ineffability and the Ethical Subject}

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Sexton advocates for a politics of groundlessness because he wishes to complicate scholarship’s relationship to resistance. For Sexton, the grounding of political engagement in a dialectics of truth and liberation has led to a fear of failure by intellectuals and activists alike. Thus, he calls for a politics of groundlessness that opens the space for “invention into existence.”\textsuperscript{43} Here, again, Sexton draws explicitly on Fanon. In \textit{Black Skin: White Masks}, Fanon discusses the ongoing legacies of European colonization. Pretending to be a superior form of civilization, European society imposes its culture onto the other. The colonized, thus, becomes alienated from themselves. Ultimately, Fanon tells us that the project of disalienation must go beyond historical accounts of slavery and colonization. “I am not a prisoner of

\textsuperscript{42} Sexton, "On Black Negativity," 16.
\textsuperscript{43} Fanon, quoted in ibid.
history,” he tells us, “I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny.”44 Thus, Fanon looks not to the past for his own liberation. Instead, the real challenge “consists in introducing invention into existence.”45 Self-liberation, for Fanon, is a matter of resisting a purely historical account of the present. It requires the emergence of something novel into the world.

Concerned with the heated urgency of academic and activist scholarship around freedom and justice, Sexton urges us to engage with politics through an “intensification of negativity.”46 This means a willingness to work with negative terms and concepts (including terms like dehiscence, deracination, unthinkable, unspeakable) that resist notions of productivity and positive change. He reminds us of the etymological root that intensification shares with tenderness, “emblematizing the outstretched hand.”47 This tender gesture suggests a sort of critical correspondence of care between questions and beings, always involving the multiple through a relationship of separation. It requires a willingness to become vulnerable and destabilized, throwing the self into the unpredictability of the other. And this is precisely why the offering of the question provides the condition for a relationship of care. For Sexton, the offering of the question of blackness is a “dangerous, disorienting offering because it opens the space for articulating what is unthought - and encountering what is unthinkable.”48 Sexton does not mean to say that thinking

44 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 229.
45 Ibid.
46 Sexton, "On Black Negativity," 6. This term is actually used by Barber, not Sexton. Barber uses “intensification of negativity” to describe how these negative terms used by Sexton allow for the “simultaneous articulation” of certain seemingly opposing concepts.
47 Ibid., 7.
48 Ibid.
blackness immediately renders legible that which exceeds our conventional use of language. Rather, that the question of blackness asks us to re-think legibility. It challenges our desire for positive affirmation. Thus, the question of blackness creates a space for the introducing “invention into existence.”

I find Judith Butler’s phenomenological discussion of touch in her 2015 essay, “Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche,” helpful for reading through Sexton’s account of tenderness. This essay is part of her larger collection, Senses of the Subject.49 Throughout the collection, Butler works carefully through theories of embodiment by philosophers ranging from Hegel, Descartes, Spinoza, and Merleau-Ponty to Freud and Fanon. For Butler, we are all already implicated in the linguistic structures that create norms, that bequeath our identities before we are born. Language awaits us, she argues. Therefore, Butler is more interested in a feminism that theorizes the very conditions of language and representation than one that pushes for political success through the attainment and manifestation of a true identity.50 This is also the underpinning of Joan Scott’s 1990 essays on gender and history, in which Scott endeavors to recover a history of the category “gender” and power as going beyond the triumphal study of progress, emancipation, and “experience.” In her earlier book Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative, Butler argues that language is the “condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument.”51 Because in Senses of the Subject, Butler is generally concerned with

50 This also was an important idea for historians such Judith Walkowitz and literary scholar Mary Poovey. These feminist thinkers were interested in the changing conditions of possibility and representation in relation to earlier moments in history and feminism.
that which lies beyond language, Butler posits the condition of the “I” of the subject as experience itself, giving particular attention to the experience of “touch.” Hence, she writes: “Touch […] not only is the animating condition of sentience, but continues as the actively animating principle of feeling and knowing.”\textsuperscript{52} This means that our experience of touch, the sensation that allows us to know ourselves, always relies on the other, a force outside of ourselves that we cannot know in the way that we know ourselves. For Malebranche, Butler shows, this force is God. In this regard, she thus asks: “Where is the other? If it is the touch of God that animates me, am I then animated only in relation to an irrecoverable and ineffable origin?”\textsuperscript{53} Butler offers us a reading of Malebranche’s theology that “gives us a way to consider not only the primary conditions for human emergence, but the requirement for alterity, the satisfaction of which paves the way for the emergence of the human itself.”\textsuperscript{54} And it is precisely the ineffable origin of the other that provides the condition for this emergence of the subject. Therefore, the ethical, the way in which we govern ourselves in relation to others, is grounded in the ineffable itself.\textsuperscript{55}

If touch, for Butler, is the condition for the emergence of the other, and tenderness, for Sexton, is the condition for care towards the other, then the condition for care also lies in this ineffable origin. So, a correspondence of care always involves a struggle with articulation. Sexton appeals to the martial art Aikido to illustrate a form of self-defense that also reveals and protects the attacker. The techniques of Aikido include different kinds of joint locks and throws such as \textit{irimi} and \textit{tenkan}.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Senses of the Subject}, 42.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{55} See Amia Srinivasin’s reading of Butler in her essay “The Ineffable and the Ethical,” 2018.
Irimi is a sort of counter intuitive movement that requires entering an attack by moving towards the opponent rather than shying away from them. Tenkan is a common foot move that involves turning and stepping to the side of one’s attacker, who is thus thrown off balance by extending themselves into the space. The throws and turns of Aikido are supposed to allow the attacker and defender to blend their contrary forces together. Sexton is drawn to these kinds of movements because they insist on opening oneself to the defender in order to be both thrown off balance and, at the same time, be taken care of. He tells us that in Aikido there is “no such thing as a positive aggressive strength, only a negative defensive one.”56 Attackers never truly attack the defender. Rather, they are always in the process of exposing themselves. For Sexton, the relationship between attacker and defender in Aikido is helpful in thinking through our relationships with each other in the world. He writes: “We can truly approach another only in the experience of our mutual weakness.”57

In Aikido, the attacker makes themselves vulnerable by reaching out and striking into space. This act of reaching out invites the defender to respond with their own move. What happens, then, when we translate these principles of Aikido into our social and political life? While advocating for the uncomfortable and precarious movement of vulnerability, Sexton simultaneously recognizes the inherent racialized power dynamics involved in this kind of self-exposure. He asks: “Is it any surprise, in an anti-black world, that these gestures are confused by so many, those that mistake an invitation for a threat? How many have resented the invitation blackness makes

57 Ibid.
and defended themselves against it with lethal violence?"58 The most extreme example of this can be found in the recurring atrocities of police violence and brutality against black victims, often unarmed. The image of black persons raising their hands in a forced act of vulnerability demanded by the police comes to mind here. Furthermore, this act of vulnerability is often conversely taken as a threat by the officer at hand. “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” or simply “hands up” became a slogan common at Black Lives Matter protests, which targeted police violence following the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown and the eyewitness account by Dorian Johnson who claimed that Brown had his hands up when shot.59 His death followed that of Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and Trayvon Martin. When Charles Kinsey was shot by a police officer in 2016, he was unarmed and lying on the ground with his hands in the air.60 Charleena Lyles was shot and killed in Seattle after calling 911 and letting the police into her own home.61 And the number of victims shot by officers who have perceived the black victim’s movement of retreat to be attempts to reach for a gun in their pocket is countless.62 All this to say that the gesture of the outstretched hand is not some metaphor for the peaceful coming together of people from different cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds in a celebration of a common humanity. Rather, the negative defensive gesture must be about radically rethinking the construction of

58 Ibid., 9.
62 Terence Crutcher, Alton Sterling, and Rumain Brisbon are just a few names among many.
aggression within contemporary politics, recognizing all the potential dangers and precarities of living in an anti-black world.

**On Passivity and Resistance**

Sexton is interested in the contradictory role that *passivity* plays as a type of *activity*. He describes our passive state of being in the world as a type of response to the things around us. “We are, in a very basic way, always responding to the world,” he writes, “to ourselves, to ourselves to the world in ourselves, to ourselves in the world, more than we are initiating in thought and action.” \(^63\) This notion of passivity as a state of response creates room for other beings, known and unknown, to emerge, exist, and communicate. Here, Sexton is concerned with the constant demand for action by activists and intellectuals alike. He thus asks: “Why, in our political and intellectual circles, all the pointed concern about activity, why the worry, or fear, about being misunderstood as passive, individually and collectively?” \(^64\) For Sexton, it is precisely the “tension between active/passive states,” our fear of being passive and therefore complicit by not taking action, that provides the foundation for the various reproductions of differences of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. \(^65\) Drawing on Fanon’s psycho-political account of self-liberation (i.e. liberation from the racialized self), Sexton explores the generative potential of passivity as a form of intervention. In doing so, Sexton draws on a question, posed to him by Wilderson, regarding a specific passage in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In addressing a black patient’s

\(^{64}\) Ibid.  
\(^{65}\) Ibid.
unconscious desire to “turn white,” Fanon explains that his own duty as a 
psychoanalyst is to “help his patient become conscious of his unconscious […] to put 
him in a position to choose action (or passivity) with respect to the real sources of 
conflict— that is, toward the social structures.” Sexton tells us that Wilderson’s 
question went something along the lines of: “Is there such a thing—ethically, 
politically— as radical passivity?” Following Wilderson, Sexton asks: “Does it make 
sense to speak of a need for ‘passivism’ (not to be confused with the homophonic 
term ‘pacifism’)?” Appealing to Zizek’s notion of “passive aggressive behavior” in 
The Parallax View as well as French philosopher Frédéric Neyrat’s discussion of 
passivity and politics in his essay “On the Political Unconscious of the 
Anthropocene,” Sexton explores passivity as a means to envisage or read possibilities 
that cannot be imagined by the impetuous character of contemporary leftist 
activism. He thus writes:

It’s worth thinking about this [passivity] seriously in the Trump era (using 
Trump here as a symbol for the consolidation of a whole post-civil rights, post-
cold war, post 9/11 dispensation), given how greatly the ongoing reactionary 
campaign benefits from and requires any and all imagery of protest, political or 
pedestrian, as evidence—“alternative factual evidence”—supporting a 
narrative, ultimately, of white victimization and oppressive black power (and 
all the conflictual transliterations of this antagonism seen today—from the land 
and resource battles in the heartland to the travel bans at the borders). Given, 
that is, how frustratingly ineffective that protest seems to be in the face of an 
entire infrastructure that not only absorbs resistance, but solicits it too.

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68 Ibid., 13.
For Sexton, the certain kind of hyperactivity that constitutes collective rallies and protests is actually *solicited* by the State. These patterns of public insurgencies are feeding the very discursive and material fabric of increasingly globalized and already racist social, political, and economic regimes. We might think of the BLM, Women’s March, No Dakota Access Pipeline, and Abolish Ice protests as some of these large-scale protests targeting the state that have gained significant attention in the media. I do not think Sexton would say these protests are insubstantial or pointless, rather that we might still recognize the important work of large-scale organization through protest while also understanding the ways they nurture a larger system of state-controlled power, thereby re-inscribing state-sponsored necropolitical practices. It is also crucial to note that Sexton is not arguing against (specifically black, queer) rage or violence. Saidiya Hartman is also skeptical of this kind of discourse. “It’s as though in order to come to any recognition of common humanity, the other must be assimilated […] that is the logic of the moral and political discourses we see every day— the need for the *innocent* black subject to be victimized by a racist state in order to see the racism of the racist state.”71 In other words, the (white) ally requires the (black) subject to be a model of goodness in order to be sympathetic to their position. A passive politics, for Sexton, is not about holding the state accountable through making visible the innocence of the black subject. Rather, Sexton calls on us to reissue the question of what constitutes violence and revolutionary change and success to begin with, challenging the very conventional understanding of political resistance itself.

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In a 2016 article titled “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” Sexton investigates specifically the #SayHerName movement as a response to BLM’s perceived emphasis on black men as the sole targets of police brutality.\textsuperscript{72} While #SayHerName is “framed as a corrective,” Sexton points out that BLM is itself reliant on the labor of black queer women and the discourse of black feminist and queer theory. He thus writes:

How might an exploration of the possibility of black feminist violence reframe even those contemporary campaigns of support for black women in defense of themselves? For Cece McDonald who stabbed to death Dean Schmitz in the defense against a racist, transphobic attack by Shmitz and his friends; for Marissa Alexander, who fired a warning shot from a pistol to stop an attack from her abusive husband; for the New Jersey 4 (Patreese Johnson, Renata Hill, Venice Brown, and Terrain Dandridge, who were accused of beating and stabbing Dwayne Buckle in the course of defending themselves against sexist, homophobic harassment and assault; for Montilla Seewright […] for Cyntoia Brown.\textsuperscript{73}

These cases all involve self-defense from the specific racialized and sexualized violence that disproportionately affects black women and black trans folks. Black women and black trans folks have been challenging traditional views on violence precisely because of the necessary use of violence in their own experiences of self-defense. Perhaps we, in the academic institution, can learn from this. Drawing on Hortense Spillers’ work, Sexton writes that meditation on these issues of violence in the university reveals “not only matters of oversight or exclusion, however, severe, but also the active production of the illegible, the illegitimate, the illicit – terms that motivate and justify an unrelenting suffering.”\textsuperscript{74} The questions posed by black

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 33.
feminism are thus central to Sexton’s work. What might revolutionary change look like if we start from a position of negativity; of illegibility, illegitimacy and illicitness? Sexton asks: “Is there not a way to think by contrast about a violence indifferent to hope, violence unmotivated by rage, violence irreducible to the dialectics of love and hate?”

Appealing to Fanon, Sexton argues that the disalienation of the black subject will always involve an ongoing project of liberation from the self, from the power of alienation so deeply inscribed onto and into the self. This is not only a matter of introspection, however, but of a radical reconfiguration of the self. For Sexton, the work of disalienation involves thinking the unthinkable, speaking the ineffable— it is thus a colossal work of translation. Sexton’s take on passivity, however, should not be confused with an anti-politics of silence or quietism. Rather, Sexton, using Fanon, argues that our task is to engage with the world through a never-ending project of psycho-political self-liberation:

Introducing invention into existence, for Fanon, is not about unleashing our potential and fostering our creativity. This is no expressive model of political transformation. Fanon’s oeuvre is, in my view, an exploration of the ways that the powers that be are not only upon us but also, more importantly, within us. Not because the external battle is easy; no it is nearly impossible. It is just that the internal battle is even harder; it is actually impossible and no less necessary for that.

Sexton puts the emphasis on the word “actually,” drawing attention to the fact that Fanon’s internal battle is impossible in reality, that it will never be realizable, while still remaining absolutely necessary. “And there is no help for us in any of this,” he

75 Ibid., 24.
writes, “[...] there is nothing to hold onto, no foothold, no supports, and no sustenance. It is the loss of everything that is comforting or meaningful.”77

A Failed Translation

What is at stake in Sexton’s account of contemporary politics and radical self-liberation is the configuration of black personhood. Sexton investigates this through the pro-life movement’s efforts to analogize the 1857 supreme court decision of *Dred Scott* to the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973. The former decision legally denied the citizenship and freedom of black slaves while the latter partially legalized abortion. By morally equating the rights of a (presumably white) fetus to the rights of a (black) slave, the rhetoric places black life under a constant threat of the denial of personhood. Sexton thus explains:

So what the analogy enables – in this perverse desire to be black in order to defend against the conditions of anti-blackness – is a demand, not to treat fetal life as well as black life is treated before the law, but to protect fetal life from being treated as if it were black life before the law. In sum: don’t treat the (white) fetus as if it were a (black) non-person, unless it is a (black) non-person. This is how we can wind up with the same organizations supporting the re-criminalization of abortion in the name of white pro-natalism and supporting efforts to sterilize black women and other women of color.78

I understand this process of relating precedents as kind of translation, one that equates the status of the slave with the unborn child. For Sexton, the very conditions for this particularly warped translation of *Dred Scott* to *Roe v. Wade* lie in the dialectics of personhood and rights, manipulating the very language of black feminist abolition movements and turning it against itself through the discourse of reproductive justice,

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 19.
a term coined by Loretta Ross and the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective in the early 1990s. Reproductive justice emerged as a concept and movement in response to the exclusion of black women and other women of color from women’s rights movements. SisterSong considers reproductive justice to be not only about choice, but about access: “Even when abortion is legal, many women of color cannot afford it, or cannot travel hundreds of miles to the nearest clinic. There is no choice where there is no access.”79 And this is precisely this kind of language that is appropriated by racist organizations for the purpose of population control. In her 1997 book Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty, Dorothy Roberts discusses the history of systematic and institutionalized control over black women’s bodies in America. Recalling the eugenic sterilization programs in states like North Carolina during the first half of the 1900s, she investigates more recent government plans to keep women on welfare from childrearing. She looks specifically at the distribution of two kinds of birth control: Norplant (implanted in the arm) and Depo-Provera (injected as a shot) to poor black communities across the country.80 The distribution of these contraceptives has been encouraged by family-planning clinics supported by Medicaid. Roberts writes that policymakers have “promoted Norplant as the solution to teenage pregnancy.”81 They argue that by preventing pregnancy, “Norplant will allow teenage girls to pursue a career and prevent additional children from being born into poverty and dependence on

79 See “Reproductive Justice” in SisterSong.net
81 Ibid., 113.
government aid.”

Roberts investigates the role of Republican politicians such as Newt Gingrich, Kansas state representative Kerry Patrick, Connecticut state representative Robert Farr, and Louisiana state representative and former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke in financially incentivizing poor black women to use this contraceptive. She writes: “Underlying these measures are the twin assumptions that the problem of black poverty can be cured by lowering Black birthrates and that Black women’s bodies are an appropriate site for this social experiment. Once again the notion of Black women’s reproductive liberty has dropped out of the picture.”

For Sexton, the undermining of platforms for reproductive justice using the language of abolition in the *Dred Scott* case is way of “using the discourse of black feminism – insofar as we acknowledge its roots in the fight to resist and abolish slavery and all of its vestiges – against itself – insofar as we acknowledge that black feminism best provides for the reproductive justice for all.”

Within the failed translation of the legal archive is precisely where we find the location of the black fetus. In this regard, Sexton writes: “We find that the blackened not-blackened fetus is stuck - suspended between a blackness whose freedom cannot commence and cannot be withstood, a blackness that cannot be born and cannot be borne.”

Suspended here, between life and death, the fetus loses its bearings before even exiting the womb. This suspension can also be read as a deracination. Black life loses its ground even before being born, excluded from the world before even entering it. Thus, the translation of the legal archive becomes a process of exclusion.

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82 Roberts, 113.
83 Ibid, 149.
and foreclosure. Sexton argues that, by definition, the black subject is denied personhood. In other words, black life is foreclosed. In my third chapter, I will further examine the relationship between translation, the archive, and the exclusion of black life. For now, I am interested in how this exclusion creates the very condition for liberation. That black life is excluded from the archive does not mean that it does not exist. Sexton argues that despite – or perhaps because – of this deracination, this perpetual pre-natal groundlessness, black life continues to exist. In fact, according to Fanon, black life is caught in a veritable existential crisis. And it is for this reason that Sexton engages with a politics of groundlessness that takes seriously Fanon’s call for self-liberation.

Drawing on a presentation by Christina Sharpe, Sexton examines a politics of disappearance that has emerged as a product of racial slavery. He focuses on Sharpe’s account of the death of millions of enslaved blacks throughout the Middle Passage, posing the question of representation and visibility within a discourse of loss. The double bind here is that black life becomes apparent only through its own disappearance. For Sexton, this problem becomes “a form of appearance that annuls itself, a self-canceling utterance, an involution of scale, a torqueing of the frame, all perhaps as a means of exercising some influence over what cannot be controlled.” And for Sexton, we must come to embrace the possibility of losing control, which he explores through the idea of “being a mystery.” We must recognize the impossibility of being free while still attempting to control some kind of liberation of the self. This involves a process of “establishing a rapport with the uncanny, the unconscious, the

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87 Ibid, 24.
unimaginable, which is also to say the inescapable and the ungraspable."\textsuperscript{88} This requires, of course, being a mystery to oneself as well as to others, constantly fluttering between the realm of representation and non-representation in an attempt to lead somewhere, in some direction. We are afraid of the incomprehensible, of everything we deem ineffable. And this is precisely why Sexton asks us to take seriously the potentiality of relating to and with the unknown.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, 24.
Chapter Two: The Dispossessed

The Division of Language

In his semi auto-biographical book *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Derrida explores questions of linguistic and cultural identity. Raised under French colonization in Algeria to a Sephardic Jewish family, Derrida is interested in the relationships between colonialism, language, and belonging. In this book, Derrida deconstructs the concept of monolingualism—i.e., the condition of being able to speak only one language. From the beginning, he offers us the following paradox: “I have but one language—yet that language is not mine.”89 While writing and speaking always in French, Derrida claims that the French language is neither foreign to him nor under his control. For Derrida, unpacking the contradictory phrase “I have but one language—yet that language is not mine” allows us to see what lies behind the very possibility of inhabiting and wielding language. How can this phrase “[speak] the impossible”?90 How can language belong to someone yet not be under their possession at the same time? For Derrida, this question has to do with issues of inheritance, community, and various movements of colonization. He is concerned with how these issues shape identity. Thus, he asks: “What is identity, this concept of which the transparent identity to itself is always dogmatically presupposed by so many debates of monoculturalism or multi-culturalism, nationality, citizenship, and, in general, belonging?”91

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90 Ibid., 2.
91 Ibid., 14.
Derrida’s intervention relies heavily on the Moroccan writer and literary theorist Abdhelkebir Khatibi.\(^92\) Much of Khatibi’s work explores the positionality of the Maghrebian writer, centering themes of diaspora, multicultural identity, and living between languages (in his case, Arabic and French). Having grown up in French-occupied Morocco, Khatibi spoke Moroccan Arabic at home but learned to write French in school. In his writing, Khatibi examines the troubling yet radical experience specific to the child growing up under colonial occupation.\(^93\) The Maghrebian writer develops a sort of double consciousness, an experience of split identity, in which they operate constantly in two languages. In his novel *Amour Bilingue* (in English, *Love in Two Languages*) Khatibi explores complex relationships through a love story between a North African man and a French woman. In the exergue, Khatibi claims that language “belongs to no one” and that he “knows nothing about anyone.”\(^94\) He develops the term *bi-lingue* as opposed to *bilingue* (bilingual) to emphasize the constant in-betweenness of translation, the simultaneity of the maternal and the foreign language. This term challenges the notion that any one language is pure or original. For Khatibi, language is configured through the unknowable other. *Love in Two Languages* examines the position of the *bi-lingue* between languages. “Speaking to you in your own language,” he writes, “I am yourself without ever really being

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\(^92\) Several scholars have written on the underappreciated magnitude of Khatibi’s influence on Derrida. See Tina Christensen’s “Towards an Ethics of Bilingualism: An Intertextual Dialogue between Khatibi and Derrida,” in which Christensen argues that a comparative reading of Khatibi and Derrida “reveals not only the explicit political engagement of Khatibi’s work, but also the political underpinnings of Derrida’s” (in *Interventions*, 466). And in his introduction to his translation of Khatibi’s *Le luteur de classe à la manière taoiste* (In English, *Class Warrior – Taoist Style*) Matt Reeck discusses the lack of regard for Khatibi’s work in the English-speaking world, mentioning Edward Said’s dismissal of Khatibi’s work as “peripheral” contemporaries Derrida and Foucault.

\(^93\) See, for example, *La Memoire Tatouee* (“Tattooed Memory”).

you.”95 Even when the bilingual chooses the language of the other, that language is not theirs to inhabit.96 Thus, language is always plural. For Kahtibi, this means that traces of Arabic writing are always present in the French language, even as it is imposed as a monocultural language. Most importantly, writing can become a political tool. For Khatibi, the task of the postcolonial writer is to defy colonial hierarchies through a “pensée autre” and “pensée plurielle” (a “thinking-other” and a “plural thinking”)97 whereby the translation between the center (the dominant European language) and the periphery (the mother tongue) dismantles any coherence of the established hegemonic order. Thus, the maternal language and the foreign language translate each other.

Responding to Khatibi’s claims about being’s fundamental linguistic dispossession, Derrida asks: “Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession?”98 Then he gives us these two contradictory propositions: (1) We only ever speak one language, and (2) We never speak only one language.99 He offers us this following passage from Khatibi’s presentation at a Louisiana University State conference (the presentation was then archived in a collection of essays titled Du Bilingualisme):

If (as we are saying along with others, after them) there is no such thing as the language, if there is no such thing as absolute mono-lingualism, one still has to define what a mother tongue is in its active division, and what is transplanted between this language and the one called foreign. What is transplanted and lost there, belonging neither to the one nor the other: the incommunicable.100

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95 Ibid., 5.
96 Christensen writes in “Towards an Ethics of Bilingualism” that “bi-langue is the embodiment of ‘difference’; it is not a dialectical struggle, but a constant movement between languages and cultures” (463).
98 Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, 10.
99 Ibid., 7.
100 Khatibi, quoted in ibid., 8.
For Khatibi, the ability to speak or write in a mother tongue relies on the division between one language and the other. If the very existence of a language hinges on its “active division” from another, then there is no such thing as a pure language, a universal language, a metalanguage. One language is always inevitably multiple already in itself, because it carries with it the trace of division. For Khatibi, this active division is what gives rise to the “incommunicable.” While I have kept Patrick Mensah’s translation of Khatibi’s text, I want to draw attention to a word that requires closer scrutiny. Mensah translates the French word “greffe” as “transplanted.” In French, greffer (meaning literally “to graft”) sustains multiple connotations that the verb “transplant” does not quite carry through. Greffer in French, like “graft” in English, can be used in both medical and botanical contexts. While it does indeed refer to the surgical transplanting of tissue in medicine, Greffer also refers to the horticultural technique in which tissues from two plants are attached so that they appear to grow as a single plant. In grafting, the upper part of one plant grows on the root system of another. Additionally, Greffe refers to the records kept by the Greffier (a somewhat outdated title for the court clerk). The word has its roots in the Latin graphium, an ancient implement consisting of a rod with a pointed scratching tip used to write on wax-covered tables (also known as a stylus), as well as the Greek graphein, “to write.” To graft, to transplant, to inscribe are all processes that leave marks— the bulge of the tree’s graft collar, the scar tissue after surgery, the scratch marks on the tablet. We can think back to Sexton and Moten’s treatment of the

multifaceted term “dehiscence” discussed in the first chapter, where dehiscence refers to splitting and rupture in both botany and surgery. *Greffe* encompasses the same notions of wounding and marking and additionally connects these themes to the movement and inscription of writing.

If we stick to Khatibi’s use of the word *greffe* in the passage provided by Derrida, we see just how complex and multi-layered Khatibi’s understanding of *bi-lingue* is. The active division between two languages is a process of fusion, (re)writing, and scarring. Thus, the incommunicable (my topic of concern in this thesis) is not simply something that can be traced back to an original. The incommunicable is what is always lost in this process of grafting between one language and the other. And yet, the incommunicable does not disappear completely—like a trace, it remains. The experience of speaking in one language and writing in another, this “asymmetry of body and language, of speech and writing” is at “the threshold of the untranslatable.”102 Belonging neither to one language nor to the other, the untranslatable (the incommunicable, the inarticulable, the ineffable) shimmers and lingers at the in-between, dispossessed, dividing languages.

**On Language and the Law**

If we wish to take Sexton’s call for a politics rooted in dispossession seriously, then we must account for language’s division, which occurs in the process of translation. I have shown how Khatibi’s account of language relies on the division of language by the untranslatable. I am interested in how Derrida uses Khatibi’s

102 Khatibi, *Love in Two Languages*, 5.
account of language to expound on the notion of writing’s “anamnesia.”103 The division between one language and the other, for Derrida, also takes place in the body. It is in the body that writing, “fascinated by its own ‘division,’ before any other memory […] destines itself, as if acting on its own, to anamnesia.”104 By this, Derrida means that writing recalls its own memory. And writing summons this past life as if acting on its own. In other words, our writing does not belong to us— it has a life of its own. For Derrida, the division between the mother tongue and the tongue of the other is always a relationship of impossible translation. According to him, this contradiction is “not only the very law of what is called translation. It would also be the law itself as translation.”105

To understand this notion of the law as translation, we must first look at Derrida’s account of the relationship between the law and justice, which he discusses extensively in “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority.” For Derrida, the distinction between the law and justice is not as evident as we have conventionally assumed it be. He associates laws with calculation, with the enforcement of rules and norms. Justice, in contrast, is incalculable. It demands, as Derrida asserts, “that one calculate with the incalculable.”106 Enacting justice through the law always requires making decisions based on reasons and calculations. This condition exposes the impossibility of justice. What, then, makes justice impossible? In an unpublished essay, “Non-Political Opening of Politics,” Bennington describes the relationship between law and justice by looking first at Rousseau’s Social

103 Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, 8.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 10.
106 Derrida, "Force of Law," 244.
Contract, Book II. I use this essay as an attempt to elucidate what Derrida means by the formulation above. Bennington shows that, for Rousseau, politics exist because “things don’t go along by themselves.”\textsuperscript{107} There would be no need for politics if the sovereign were self-sufficient in their sovereignty, if things went along harmoniously by themselves. Similarly, if we were able to have access to justice in the absolute sense, we would not need laws. We would be able to govern ourselves. Thus, for Rousseau, the existence of laws “is already sufficient proof that politics implies absence of justice.”\textsuperscript{108} Because we are not able to formulate the law as justice for ourselves, we rely on a third-party legislator to impose this law upon us. And this legislator comes from “a radical elsewhere” and “structurally speaking, we understand not all the language that he speaks.”\textsuperscript{109} If we were able to truly understand the law of the legislator, we would already be able to impose it on ourselves. Because we are unable to govern ourselves, we translate the law of the legislator into a language we can understand. Laws are only understood through the translation of the other’s speech. Politics emerges as the failure of sovereignty, and the law as the absence of justice. Thus, politics becomes a logic of failure and of non-fulfillment.\textsuperscript{110}

This brings Bennington to his account of Derrida’s “necessary possibility”\textsuperscript{111} and the “trace,”\textsuperscript{112} which loom in the background of Khatibi’s account of the mother tongue. In French, the word “trace” can also mean “mark,” “path,” or “track.” Derrida defines this term in a number of ways, including the “irreducible component of

\textsuperscript{107} Bennington, "Non-Political Opening of Politics," 1.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{111} This is developed, as Bennington tells us, in Jacques Derrida, \textit{Signature Event Context} (1988).
\textsuperscript{112} This is developed in \textit{Of Grammatology}. 
absence,” the “originary lack,” the “formation of the form,” and “the condition of experience.”\textsuperscript{113} While Derrida withholds from a singular concrete definition of the
trace, Bennington gives us a clear and helpful explanation of its structure. He begins
with the letter X. When we see this letter X, we are also seeing the absence of all the
other letters in the alphabet. Thus, he writes: “These absent letters are, as it were,
present in their very absence. So that they are not simply absent.”\textsuperscript{114} In other words,
the appearance of X relies on the occultation of every other letter that could have
appeared instead of X. Underlying the appearance of X is the possibility of every
other letter appearing in its place. Bennington connects this structure to the opening
of politics in Rousseau’s work through Derrida’s account of the role of the postal
system.\textsuperscript{115} If things simply went along by themselves, Bennington explains, then the
postal system would not need to exist because something like God (or the self-
fulfilling Sovereign) would have guaranteed the appearance of the letter \textit{a priori}.
Alas, things do not go along by themselves, and the postal system exists precisely
because there is always a possibility that the letter does not arrive at its destination.
The arrival of the letter is conditioned by the possibility of something else arriving in
its place. This possibility of (non-) arrival, thus, is necessary for the structure of the
postal system to exist in the first place. It is a “necessary possibility.” For
Bennington, the logic of the trace insists on a certain reading practice. Because a sign
generates meaning through its difference from other signs, the sign contains the trace
of what it does not mean. We must always read the X in its own difference from the

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 47, 63, and 67, respectively.
\textsuperscript{114} Bennington, “Non-Political Opening of Politics,” 8.
\textsuperscript{115} This example of the postal system is developed in Jacques Derrida, \textit{La Carte Postale: De Socrate \`a Freud Et Au-Del`a} (Flammarion, 2014).
other, as both itself and everything else that it has crossed out. This kind of reading interrupts the teleological impulses of our cognitive inclinations. It also complicates the very possibility of justice. This reading is not “organized in view of truth but rather of a justice always to come” and is thus “always as such involved in a question of responsibility which itself opens onto politics.”\textsuperscript{116} It actively resist any kind of ensured arrival, including the onset of democracy, which is so often articulated as the arrival of justice for the world and its peoples.

For Derrida, in order to communicate with the other, one must address them in their language. This is the condition of all possible justice while, paradoxically, the latter remains impossible.\textsuperscript{117} Addressing the other in their language is the only way to initiate dialogue between individuals and communities, to make oneself understood and to understand the other. However, this is an aporetic encounter because (as I have shown within my discussion of Khatibi’s “active division” of language) one can never truly inhabit the language of the other. Since things do not simply “go along” (otherwise, there would be no need for communication with the other) one can only appropriate the language of the other through translation by a third-party legislator. Thus, this legislator exists by virtue of our failure to inhabit the language of the other. Translation, like politics, is a logic of failure and non-fulfillment. In “Force of Law,” Derrida tells us that speaking the language of other is the very law of democracy enacted through hospitality. Yet democracy, interrupted constantly by the logic of the trace, does not arrive in the form of an event. Taking Bennington’s practice of reading seriously shows that translation – like justice – is a matter of indefinite deferral.

\textsuperscript{116} Bennington, "Non-Political Opening of Politics," 14.
\textsuperscript{117} Derrida, "Force of Law," 245.
Interested in the complex relationships between language and colonial hegemony, Derrida analyzes colonization through the two “tricks” of the master. Mensah translates the word “tour” in French as “trick.” A more literal translation of “tour” would be “round” or “turn,” as in the round of a game or a player’s turn. Discussing the process of colonization through two rounds (the “premier tour” and the “second tour” respectively)\(^{118}\) will immediately remind the French speakers of the two rounds of presidential elections. “Tour” can also mean to play a farce on someone, which is most likely why Mensah decided to use the word “trick.” However, a closer look to the original French reveals that Derrida plays with these notions of farce, politics, and games all contained in the word “tour.” By associating the process of colonization with the French electoral process, Derrida implies that the master is not only the historical figure of the king, but also the contemporary political leader as sovereign.

The first trick occurs when the master imposes his language and culture onto others. He demands that the colonized conform to a single language. By doing this, the master upholds the illusion of possessing language as such. Because language refuses to be possessed by the master, the master must then pretend to appropriate language “through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial” in order to impose it has his own.\(^{119}\) This linguistic homelessness – so to speak – is the very condition for linguistic and cultural hegemony. It enables the master to act as if language was his innate property. His goal is to make the other


\(^{119}\) *Monolingualism of the Other*, 23.
share this language with him either by force or trickery, to make them believe he somehow miraculously has power over language. The master enacts this trick through “rhetoric, the school, or the army.”\textsuperscript{120} He needs this trick of language to work in order to dominate, to have control over the other. The very attempt to reduce all languages to a single language is what makes the monolingualism of the other the Law. This law is the universal structure of colonization. And Derrida tells us this process does not just occur through overt colonial conquest, but through “religious missions, philanthropic or humanitarian good works, conquest of markets, military expeditions, or genocides.”\textsuperscript{121} A current example of this might be the increasing numbers of TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language) instructors, who mainly teach language overseas in schools, community centers, or refugee resettlement agencies. This pedagogic institution has a long history, of course, with Christian missionary expeditions abroad as well as Puritan missionaries to indigenous tribes throughout the Americas.\textsuperscript{122}

Derrida is especially interested in the school as a site of this linguistic imperialism. He examines the first trick of the master through his own experience as a Franco-Maghrebian Jew within the French-Algerian schooling system. In 1940, with the abolishment of the Cremieux decree of October 24\textsuperscript{th} 1870 that granted French citizenship to Algerian Jews, Derrida was stripped of his French citizenship and expelled from school (which remained reserved for French citizens). Both forms of

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{122} See, for example, George E. Tinker’s book\textit{Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide} in which Tinker gives a history of U.S. Christian missions, outlining the ways in which European Christian conversion relied on the cultural and physical genocides of indigenous peoples across the U.S.
discrimination, for Derrida, left marks upon this “belonging or non-belonging of language, this affiliation to language, this assignation to what is peacefully called a language.”\(^\text{123}\) While, in Derrida’s view, citizenship should not be used to encompass all forms of cultural, linguistic, and historical belonging or participation, it is also not solely a superficial structure imposed onto experience.\(^\text{124}\) Rather, exclusion and language here become intimately bound in the very “artifice and precariousness” of citizenship.\(^\text{125}\) Thus, Derrida is not so much concerned with individual loss of citizenship. Rather, he is concerned with the collective loss– the group of people that “finds itself one day deprived, as a group, of its citizenship by a state that, with the brutality of a unilateral decision, withdraws it without asking for their opinion, and \textit{without the said group gaining back any other citizenship}.”\(^\text{126}\) In this way, the non-belonging in citizenship is linked to a non-belonging in language. This traumatic memory of destitution creates a “disorder of identity.”\(^\text{127}\) And such destitution was the sole responsibility of the French, who “decided it all by themselves, in their heads.”\(^\text{128}\) The banning of native languages in the school becomes inseparable from the act of stripping citizenship. This is the first trick of the master. The act of othering by the colonizer through language and by language, \textit{is} in fact language itself. Citizenship and language exist only alongside the threat of their removal and the fear of their failure.

\(^{123}\) Derrida, \textit{Monolingualism of the Other}, 17.  
\(^{124}\) Ibid., 15.  
\(^{125}\) Ibid., 17.  
\(^{126}\) Ibid., 19.  
\(^{127}\) Ibid., 14.  
\(^{128}\) Ibid., 16.
Under French Occupation, Arabic in Algeria disappeared as the official, administrative language. Instead, it became an alien language, the language of the other. Derrida explains how the Vichy government forbid the teaching of native Algerian languages, such as Berber, in schools. Arabic was offered, but only as an optional foreign language. Derrida learned the language of the colonizer, of the mother land across the sea. Thus, he writes: “My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other.”129 In her essay “Derrida’s Le monolinguisme de l’autre: Linguistic Educational Rights,” Denise Egéa-Kuehne draws attention to the same kind of linguistic imperialism occurring within the United States. In the U.S., the same anomaly is “lived by many minorities when they are denied growing up in their respective native languages (Spanish, Navarro), only to have to (re)learn it later, but ‘as the language of the other.’”130 Derrida tells us that his responsibility, then, lies in the constant critique of his own language that was “right away a political culture.”131 He explains: “‘My mother tongue’ is what they say, what they speak; as for me, I cite and question them. I ask them in their own language, certainly, in order to make them understand me, for it is serious, if they indeed know what they are saying and what they are talking about.”132 The language that Derrida speaks does not belong to him. Hence, he must make himself understood in the very language of the other. Therefore, language becomes immediately political. Thus, our

129 Ibid., 25.
131 Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, 34.
132 Ibid.
task at hand requires a constant interrogation of language, articulation, and meaning—i.e., a deconstruction.

The second trick of the master, specific to Western colonialism, is derivative of the first. It is the promise of liberation, emancipation, and revolution. Thus, Derrida writes: “It will provide a freedom from the first while confirming a heritage by internalizing it, by re-appropriating it.”133 This second trick provides the colonized with a discourse of freedom—freedom from the control of the master. It is important for Derrida, however, that language can never be truly appropriated, since language is not a natural property. Rather, the first trick generates a sense that language can be re-appropriated in the absolute sense. For Derrida, the urgency of protest, of revolution, of re-appropriation, is conditioned by this linguistic and rhetorical trick of the colonizer. We can see the connection here to Sexton’s account of state-sanctioned protests that I discuss in Chapter One. Recall that Sexton’s concerns reside in “how frustratingly ineffective […] protest seems to be in the face of an entire infrastructure that not only absorbs resistance, but solicits it too.”134 In a 2018 Symposium curated by Nikhita Dawan and titled “Planetary Utopias – Hope, Desire, Imaginaries in a Post-Colonial World,” both Spivak and Angela Davis discuss issues of postcolonial criticism and anticolonial struggles.135 Towards the end of the symposium Davis brings up concerns about the nationalism that permeates black movements of resistance. Davis’ main problem with this nationalism is the ways in which it “does

133 Ibid., 24.
135 Angela Davis and Gayatri Spivak, interview by Nikhita Dawan, 2018, Berlin Akademie Der Kunste.
its ideological work through those of us who think that we are contesting the state."\textsuperscript{136} She links the rhetoric of BLM to the civil rights protests of the 1960s and compares both movements’ efforts to reclaim black identity while fighting against institutional racism. To this, Spivak interjects by pointing to the ways the state is pharmakon – that is, both “medicine and poison.”\textsuperscript{137} It is the source of conflicts as much as it can be their very cure. We can think of numerous instances in which nationalism has been central to movements of liberation and autonomy across the world. The kind of leftist nationalism that motivated revolutions throughout Latin America is one example, along with the ongoing conflicts surrounding ethnic nationalism in the middle east.\textsuperscript{138} But, neither Sexton nor Derrida are willing to prescribe formulas through which one could escape the double bind of state-sanctioned violence. What seems important to both is that – to use Derrida’s terminology – the discourse of liberation and of necessary appropriation “opens out onto a politics, a right, and an ethics.” We can see this kind of necessary appropriation through the transformation of terms that have historically been used for racist, misogynist, homophobic, and ableist, etc., agendas. The re-appropriation of \textit{queer}, for example, has been a productive recovery of language for community-building, empowerment, and resistance. It is, of course, crucial for the feminist academic to learn the violent and repressive histories of the use of the word \textit{queer}, concurrent with hate speech and homophobia since the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. In \textit{Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative}, Butler explores the power of injury that language holds over subjects.\textsuperscript{139} She is interested in language as

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Spivak, "Planetary Utopias."
\textsuperscript{138} See, for example, Thomas Olesen’s \textit{Power and Transnational Activism} (2011).
\textsuperscript{139} Butler, \textit{Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative}.
the “condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its
instrument.” Butler looks specifically at the performative power of hate speech. In
this regard, she asks the following questions: “What kind of language ought we to
use? How does the language we use affect others? If hate speech is citational, does
that mean that the one who uses it is not responsible for that usage?” For Butler,
language is never entirely in our control, yet it also does not have complete control
over us. The power of language, rather, lies in its repetition. Hate speech becomes
injurious when it is constantly repeated, which is why we are far from being “not
responsible” for its usage. We are complicit in the persistence of hate speech, as is
language in its iterability. How, then, might we use repetition against itself while
working within the constraints of discourse? For Butler, language’s iterability is also
the source of its vulnerability. Language is malleable and vulnerable and thus exposes
hate speech’s fragility. The process of reclamation, for instance, interrupts injurious
speech. For Butler, gender is a useful tool through which we can understand how the
force of a term “works in part through an encoded memory or a trauma… [that]
depends not only on its iterability, but on a form of repetition linked to trauma.”
Hate speech is traumatic, it causes real injury. It is critical, however, to understand
how certain appropriations of hate speech might work within racist agendas. Butler,
for instance, points to the conservative attack on rap by feminist scholars. She thus
writes: “sexual injury to women is to be understood through racial tropes [;] the
dignity of women is understood to be under attack not by the weakening of rights to

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140 Ibid., 28.
141 Ibid., 27.
142 Ibid.
reproductive freedom and the widespread loss of public assistance, but primarily by African-American men who sing.\textsuperscript{143}

Derrida claims that the active division at the heart of language precedes any notion of responsibility. It creates a structure of “alienation without alienation.”\textsuperscript{144} What Derrida means by this seemingly contradictory term is that we experience, on one hand, a perpetual distance from the language we claim is ours, while still maintaining a closeness to that very language. We might feel completely comfortable wielding the language we grew up with, existing within and through that language, but that same language is always determined by its relationship to the other. “My language,” he reminds us, “the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other.”\textsuperscript{145} Language can never be appropriated in the absolute sense, for it exceeds property relations and ontological possession. Our native language always comes from somewhere else, whether that distance is the length of an entire the sea (in the case of Derrida) or the distance between rural and metropolitan areas, suburbs and the inner-city, or home and the school.\textsuperscript{146} Derrida claims that this inalienable alienation “is not only the origin of our responsibility, it also structures the peculiarity [le propre] and property of language.”\textsuperscript{147} While Mensah translates “le propre” to “peculiarity” in English, “le propre” in French also means “propriety,” which connects this inalienable alienation to the compulsions of hospitality and

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{144} Derrida, \textit{Monolingualism of the Other}, 31.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{147} Derrida, \textit{Monolingualism of the Other}, 25.
respect that are contained within the structure of language. After all, language is always used to address the other. This inalienable alienation also occurs in the body. It gives rise to articulation itself, of “hearing-oneself-speak in order to mean-to-say.”

For Derrida, this inalienable alienation that structures the experience of language has very real consequences. “It is a traumatic event,” he writes, “because at stake here are blows and injuries, scars, often murders, and sometimes collective assassinations.” We might think of the mass genocides of the indigenous peoples and their languages, resulting in the near extinction of indigenous languages across the Americas. Or the 176 people who died in the Soweto uprisings in South Africa, when African students protested the implementation of Afrikaan as the language of instruction in their schools. We can think of the bans on indigenous languages in Africa during the 1950s that resulted in severe punishments for those who refused to assimilate under British settler colonialism. In an essay titled “Recovering the Original,” Ngugi wa Thiong’o discusses the eradication of native African languages in Kenyan schools during these years. Punishments included brutal lashings by schoolmasters. Furthermore, students were forced to surveil each other. Speaking African languages at school was crime, and if one student caught another student

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148 And “propriety” also links this alienation to notions of class and status. In his 1981 book _Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary_, Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes that in some government departments in Kenya, “the ability to speak the Queen's English, exactly like an upper-class English gentleman, is the sole criterion for employment and promotion.” However, “Since few, if any, Africans can speak the language exactly like those native to it, only Englishmen get employed or promoted to critical positions of authority” (59).

149 Derrida, _Monolingualism_. p25


speaking in a banned African language, “he would pass a token called a monitor to
the culprit, who would carry it around his neck till he caught another speaking the
forbidden tongues.” In 1977, Thiong’o was arrested for writing *I Will Marry, When
I Want*, a controversial play performed in the Gikuyu language. He was detained at
Kamiti National Security Prison. Concerned with the problem of representation in
postcolonial Kenya, Thiong’o highlights the tension of writing in English about
postcolonial resistance by Kenyan peoples operating within Gikuyu, Kiswahili and
other Kenyan languages. He recounts: “Mau Mau fighters against the British colonial
state, in their hideouts in the forests and mountains, did not strategize and plan in
English; they talked Gikuyu, Kiswahili, and other Kenyan languages. Yet I wrote as if
they were doing so in English.” Writing these narratives of resistance, then, always
already involves the translation of an original text into English. Thiong’o continues:
“The original text is lost, and we can only access it through English. In my educated
hands, Gikuyu language, culture, and history came out wearing an English-language
mask.” In learning to write in Gikuyu, to write his novel in his mother tongue,
Thiong’o claims he “was not being sentimental.” Rather, he “needed to make that
contact in order to survive.” What is at stake in translation is not just a politics of
visibility but also survival. I mean survival in multiple senses here: on one hand, I
refer to the survival of the mother tongue that threatens to disappear under

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152 Ibid., 102.
153 Ibid., 106.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid., 109.
156 Ibid.
157 See also Audrey Lorde’s poem “A Litany for Survival” (1995), in which speaking becomes a matter
of survival and resistance for the oppressed.
colonialism, and on the other the need to learn the language of the colonizer in order to survive. Derrida is concerned that people who speak “minority” languages must “yield to the homo-hegemony of dominant languages.”158 He worries that they “must learn the language of the masters, of capital and machines; they must lose their idiom in order to survive or live better.”159 Derrida refers here to the necessity of learning dominant European languages in order to survive an increasingly globalized economy in the wake of linguistic colonialism. Numerous scholars have written on the tension between assimilating to and resisting English as it becomes increasingly the dominant language of the world.160 Learning English is no longer a choice. It is a (non-) decision in the “tragic economy” of globalization.161

The Violence of Translation

In “Questioned on Translation: Adrift,” Gayatri Spivak responds to questions about her own experiences with the task of translation. Acknowledging the difficulty of theoretical self-reflexivity, Spivak asserts that even the act of responding to these questions is a form of translation itself, “from the subject of a colleague interested in me as a translator and my stereotype of myself, unavailable to me.”162 Believing all acts of reading to be a form of translation, Spivak reminds us of her concept “RAT”

158 Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, 30.
159 Ibid.
160 Angela Davis mentions in the “Planetary Utopias” symposium how this is true even in non-English speaking European countries. She discusses, for example, the increasing number of non-translated English books in French bookstores. See also Smita Ray’s 2016 article “We Somehow Survive: English Language Learning, Social Cohesion and Questions of Identity,” in which Ray critically examines the tension between assimilation and resistance in English Language Learning among immigrant Gujarati women in the U.K.
161 Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, 30.
(Reader-As-Translator), first introduced in *The Politics of Translation*. Spivak pushes for this kind of reading over *reading to identify* as a way of complicating the relationship between reader and author. The responsibility of the RAT is to preserve a certain kind of fidelity to the original while simultaneously allowing it to stray beyond its origins. Thus, she explains: “When we forget this, and read to identify, at worst to see our own face in the mirror of the text, we lose respect for the other as placeholder for the origin(al)…Do I believe in ‘fidelity of the original,’ you ask. Yes, yes, not because it’s possible, but because one must try.” For Spivak, RAT is the only way to engage in a dialogue between reader and author without erasing the other, knowing that errors and mis-readings are a part of the creative process.

As a Professor, Spivak tells us that to teach foreign language texts in English requires a relentless task of translation. In the classroom, Spivak asks her students to think about the different translations of the Greek word *eleos* as “pity” in Aristotle and as “mercy” in a Christian hymn, from “Greek-to-Greek, when there was not yet an English to pass through,” to show her students that understanding texts does not always have to do with translating them into English, “the dominant language that has no history.” Spivak is interested in what emerges between language and understanding. For Spivak, even the act of becoming a human subject emerges

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164 In her final commentary in “Adrift”, Spivak defines translation “by its difference from the original, straining at identity” and argues that “the only way to get rid of translates is to feel the authority as well as the fragility of the ‘original,’ by way of resonance with its irreducible idiomaticity” (21).
166 Ibid.
through this process. “I have even suggested,” she writes, “learning from Melanie Klein, that becoming-human is an incessant economy of translation.”167

In her 2010 essay “Translation as Culture,” Spivak takes up Klein’s notion of translation as a shuttle, the constant going back and forth between consciousness and the world. Spivak gives us the image of a human infant who grabs onto things in the material world and then codes these things into a sign-system. She defines this back and forth process as “violence translated into conscience.”168 The act of grabbing is the violent act that is then coded into the psychological realm of recognition and representation. Spivak reminds us of the etymology of translation, coming from the Old Latin meaning of translatus, “carried over” (trans meaning “across” and lātus “carried”), as the past participle of transferre, “to transfer.” In the Kleinian sense, translation is an ongoing process. It does not end once something is carried over. And this shuttling is not controlled by the subject. On the contrary, the human subject is “something that will have happened as this shuttling translation, from inside to outside, from violence to conscience: the production of the ethical subject.”169 The notion of “violence” in the context of transcoding has to do with the act of “grabbing” something, of reaching out and seizing it in order to understand it. Translation in this sense is about epistemic production. One reads and learns the world through violence. What emerges through this process of grabbing and reading (the shuttling between violence and conscience) is a system of representation and re-representation, the creation of a language in which we are responsible. Once we can represent

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167 Ibid.
169 Ibid., 14.
something, we are able to account for it. We must account for it through language. The ethical subject is constituted in this responsibility, through the violent process of translation that remains outside of its control. Thus, a “responsibility-based ethics” emerges in translation.\textsuperscript{170} Spivak differentiates “responsibility-based ethics” grounded in a fundamental obligation to the other from a “rights-based ethics” focused on the attainment of certain essential positive or negative rights. For Spivak, it is this violence of translation, that is not necessarily conscious, that “constitutes the subject in responsibility.”\textsuperscript{171}

Sexton similarly urges us to consider what is “thought before (the inherited critical) thinking commences,” which is, according to him, a violence underlying other forms of violence.”\textsuperscript{172} He is interested in how thinking about an underlying violence can help us think through the specificity of anti-blackness. In his 2008 book\textit{ Amalgamation Schemes: Anti-Blackness and the Critique of Multiracialism}, Sexton claims that anti-blackness is prior to a range of racial inequalities, formations of globalizing capital, and gender power and the regulations of sexuality.\textsuperscript{173} Anti-blackness is not just at the intersection of racism, it precedes racism. It is thus singular in its historicity. Thus, for Sexton, anti-blackness inherently challenges notions of rights and inclusivity, the “form and content of our political struggles as such.”\textsuperscript{174} Sexton distinguishes between affectability (the capacity to be affected, to be

influenced or susceptible to something) and violability (the capacity or likelihood of being violated), two aspects of vulnerability that are entangled in this violence.175 Sexton recognizes that discussions around violability are crucial in understanding contemporary black life. They reveal the complex histories and current manifestations of racial slavery. However, he is concerned that these discussions, focusing mainly on questions of sovereignty and rights as they relate to class, gender, race, ability, etc. fail to account for an underlying violence that structures existing social and political systems. Indeed, they revolve around a certain compulsive obstruction of speech—i.e., a “taboo.”176 Hartman is worried about this too, telling us “it is much too late for the accounts of death to prevent other deaths.”177 In her essay “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman reveals the inability of the archive of Atlantic slavery to account for enslaved black women and girls. Attempting to narrate the lives of two slave girls based on what little information the archive has to offer, Hartman wrestles with “the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives.”178 Thus, an ethics of historical representation is a question of translating and re-writing the impossible. For Sexton, the “taboo” that underlies the discourse of violability takes the form of “something whose approach threatens us with an incomprehensible inexperience of disintegration […] a total failure of sense perception as such.”179 Violence becomes a matter of affectability, which he suggests is the very “ontological condition of absolute vulnerability that is disclosed – or provoked – by the political

175 Ibid, 27.
178 Ibid., 3.
In other words, the capacity for being violated is predicated on a certain vulnerability to sense perception. Spivak, too, is interested in an underlying violence that structures our relationship to the other. Her account of the emergence of the ethical subject, after all, is a process that involves the constant translation between sense and perception. If, as Sexton claims, affectability means that we cannot ground ethics “in a transcendent principle to which we could abandon final responsibility,” then our task is to engage with an ethics of translation. Accordingly, Spivak begins her essay with the sentence “in every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible.” It is impossible because a translation can never do complete justice to an original, because translation always involves representing that which cannot be represented. It is necessary because it conditions our responsibility to the other and “animates our desire for a liberated future.”

**The Problem with Human Rights**

In responding to questions on universal language in “Adrift,” Spivak reminds us of her notion of “transnational literacy,” which calls for an ethical reading practice by educated first-world readers. For Spivak, this kind of literacy expands beyond conventional notions of reading and writing to include the complex geopolitical power relations at work in movements of globalization. A transnational literacy is one that interrogates the “uneven relationship of different nation-states with

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180 Ibid., 28.
181 Ibid., 27.
182 Spivak, "Translation as Culture," 13.
183 Ibid.
the agencies of universalization."\textsuperscript{185} Spivak demands that we call attention to “transnational discrimination” by questioning the geographic and political movements of economic globalization. We must ask the questions: “Who needs and leads the movement for universalization? Who celebrates it? In what interest? Why? There’s never a satisfactory answer to these questions but learning to ask them is required.”\textsuperscript{186} In this way, literacy becomes a relentless task of discerning movements of power and domination. It requires a careful reading of the universalizing processes that allows for the very articulation of the names of nation-states.

Spivak is interested in the ways that linguistic and political structures inform each other. Inspired by philosopher Roland Barthes’ work at the intersection of literary criticism and structural linguistics, Spivak writes: “Nation-states are to geopolitics as letters are to an alphabetic articulation.”\textsuperscript{187} While nation states might make up the existing world order and are helpful in comprehending power relations across the globe, geopolitics cannot simply be reduced to nation-states. Rather, Spivak argues that we must consider the complex translations and articulations of power that occur across and between nation-states within the process of globalization and international divisions of labor. Anti-globalization strategies must take place in the various movements of translation, not within a single nation-state. And this is precisely why Spivak calls for transnational literacy, a way of addressing our historical and current political situations that is always through multiple cultures and languages.

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid, 15.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid, 15.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid, 15.
The sort of strategic globalization that Spivak calls for, however, should not be confused with homogenizing investments in bringing all world cultures together. “I wonder how the general trend toward uniformity of communication will be negotiated in terms of the multiplicity of language?” she asks. In our practice of transnational literacy, we must be cognizant of Western enthusiasms to represent the subaltern subject made visible by urgent human rights interventions. In her famous 2008 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak deconstructs the representation of the non-European marginalized Other (most often represented by the third world woman.) Spivak uses the obscured account of the rite of sati in colonial archives as an example of the epistemic violence done through the misrepresentation of ritual and the brutal imposition of knowledge by the elite. The abolition of this rite, in which widows burn themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres, becomes a product of “white men saving brown women from brown men.” The white men call for the abolition, the brown men oppose it, and brown women cannot and do not speak. Their truth has already been spoken for by those so determined to “make sense” of them. We can track the same violent process in Western attempts to save Afghan women from the Taliban. A universal feminism, like a universal class struggle, excludes the subaltern. Spivak is highly critical of these interventions. She argues that the translation of first-world human rights activism across borders has become a tool for neo-colonialism, “working in the interest of the manifest destiny of the United States

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188 Spivak, "Adrift," 103.
190 Ibid.
191 See Saba Mahmood’s essay, “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency” (2002).
as the last best asylum for all.”¹⁹² We can see this happening in the flows of migration from countries that continue to suffer under U.S. intervention, economic deregulations by the World Trade Organization, and the global war on drugs.¹⁹³ The cycle of immigration and deportation between Latin American countries and the U.S., for example, is conditioned by western powers that demand the incorporation of these countries into a global system of an end-all democracy.¹⁹⁴

In “Translation as Culture,” Spivak discusses the violence of translation as transcoding – the two-step process through which information is converted from one form of code to another. She explains this process in the context of so-called “lost” Australian Aboriginal tongues, and movements to include Aboriginal culture into Western education curriculums. She makes it clear that to “lose one’s language” in this context does not mean that the persons involved do not know their Aboriginal mother tongue. Rather, they have lost touch with their own cultural foundation, a language that they “no longer compute with it.”¹⁹⁵ In other words, in the wake of settler-colonialism, the Aboriginal mother tongue loses its ability to account fully for the lives of its speakers. In the following passage, Spivak claims that the demand for a bilingual education is precisely the product of a history of colonial movements across borders:

Given the rupture between the many languages of Aboriginality and the waves of migration and colonial adventure clustered around the Industrial Revolution narrative, demands for multilingual education here become visible. All we have

¹⁹³ See, for example, Vanda Felbab-Brown’s 2009 book Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs.
¹⁹⁴ See, for example, Ana Arana’s “How the Street Gangs took Central America” in Foreign Affairs Magazine. Council on Foreign Relations (2005). Arana discusses the role US interventionism has played in the rise of street gangs in Central America.
¹⁹⁵ Spivak, ”Translation as Culture,” 16.
¹⁹⁶ Ibid.
is bilingualisms, bilateral arrangements between idioms understood as essentially or historically private, on the one side, and English on the other, understood as the semiotic as such. This is the political violence of translation as transcoding, the contemporary translation industry about which many of us write.\textsuperscript{196}

Thus, the very urgency involved in the desire to make Aboriginal language visible through the English language emerges within the political and economic forces of global and technological capitalism. In this case, the English language remains the dominant cultural and linguistic model that all other non-European idioms are understood by and translated through. “All we have is bilingualisms,” she writes, and this kind of bilingualism resembles Derrida’s monolingualism. The division between the language of the colonized and the language of the colonizer is not an equal splitting, as the former becomes understood only through the latter. Therefore, Spivak is suspicious of interventions that attempt to make visible a “historically private” idiom through its translation into a dominant language. Edith Grossman, for example, is someone who believes translation must fill this role. She argues that translation is important because it allows writers of minority languages to reach a much wider audience.\textsuperscript{197} Having one’s work translated into English specifically benefits the writer because it is the only language that all judges of the Nobel prize read.\textsuperscript{198} For Grossman, translating a minority language into a majority language is also valuable because it affords the reader (of the dominant language) the “ability to explore through literature the thoughts and feelings of people from another society or another time.”\textsuperscript{199} In other words, it deepens our knowledge of ourselves by giving us

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 10.  
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 14.
information about other cultures, allowing us to “savor the transformation of the foreign into the familiar and for a brief time to live outside our own skins.” Thus, by giving us increased access to foreign texts, translation, for Grossman, actually allows us to encounter the stranger, to broaden our perspective of the world through this embodiment. Grossman tells us that translation recognizes and celebrates languages in their difference while also providing the possibility for a “coherent, unified experience of literature in the world’s multiplicity of languages.” However, a few pages later, Grossman undermines her own claims. She argues that the translator is, in fact, the writer. While asserting that a good translator will attempt to stay as loyal to an original text as possible, she also implores us never to forget the “obvious fact that what we read in a translation is the translator’s writing.” Thus, the subtext of her claim is that we can never know the original or fully occupy the position of the other. We can only encounter the stranger as they are translated in terms of the dominant language system. Furthermore, Grossman ultimately reveals that the goal of translation is to guarantee an essential freedom of speech and of press. It is a matter of protecting and enforcing democratic liberty across the globe. While Spivak insists that she is not interested in censorship, she also wants to warn us against Grossman’s homogenizing prescriptions. For Spivak, these are the effects of a guilt inherited from a history of colonialism, that is, a “founding crime of the world

200 Ibid.
201 Grossman, 31
202 Grossman, 32
203 Gossman writes: “It seem to me that the defense and furtherance of literary translation, in particular the translation into English of young authors writing in what are so dismissively termed ‘exotic languages’ is – or should be – an intrinsic element in our commitment to free speech and civil liberty in this and other countries” (33).
we live in.” Grief for the loss of the other yields an obligatory sense of restitution, the desire to rewrite histories and revive dying languages. Yet, for Spivak (as for Hartman) the task cannot be reduced simply to “unwriting or rewriting” histories. In this regard, Spivak objects to “the kind of silencing that is operated when the transcoding of diasporic cultures mingling becomes in itself a radical gesture.” “It is that claim to effortless resistance,” she continues, “the short-circuiting efforts to translate where ‘languages have been lost’, about which I feel dubious.” Indeed, Spivak wants to resist the notion that multilingualism is itself an act of resistance. It is not enough to simply read translations of other societies and cultures. The coming together of scattered populations under the umbrella of multiculturalism and free speech actually works to silence the colonized, and more specifically the subaltern. The recovery of lost languages mirrors the recovery for lost origins through the misrepresentation of the sati ritual by Western imperialists. We must look critically at the driving forces behind a call to translation in the name of democracy.

For Derrida, the mother tongue is always one that has already been imposed on us by the other, and one that we impose on the other. Monolingualism, then, is a law that conditions the first colonial movement, the reduction of all idioms to a single language. Culture, for Derrida, is colonial, for it establishes itself through the imposition of language. The monolingualism of the other is therefore primarily “that sovereignty, that law originating from elsewhere, certainly, but also primarily the

204 Spivak, "Translation as Culture," 17.
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
very language of the law.”

This law is the tendency of language toward becoming One, a tendency to forget that language exists for the other. Recall that for Khatibi, language forgets its own process of “active division,” and thereby hides the fundamental impossibility of translation. The monolingualism of the other operates on the basis of a sovereignty “whose essence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogenous.” Reducing language to the One means hiding language’s relation to the other and forgetting that language exists as and for the other. This hiding and forgetting is the process of colonization. Thus, the search for the language that is not One, that is not colonial, that is not “homo-hegemonic” is a search for justice– a search for the impossible.

The Language of Commodities

This brings Derrida to his famous hyperbole: “In a sense, nothing is untranslatable; but in another sense, everything is untranslatable.” Everything is translatable, for Derrida, only if the translator is not restricted in terms of quantity. The translatable is related to the untranslatable through an economy of property on the one hand and quantity on the other. He writes: “The untranslatable remains – should remain, as my law tells me – the poetic economy of the idiom.” Derrida discusses this further in “What is ‘Relevant’ Translation?” In this essay, Derrida explores the double bind of the translator. A “good” translator, always exercising

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208 Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, 39.
209 Ibid., 40.
210 Ibid., 57.
211 Ibid.
discretion, must supplement, in their language, what is inevitably lost in the process of translation. At the same time, they must strive to remain as faithful to the original as they can. This is what makes translation an “unpayable debt.” The translator stands in front of the law and struggles to make a decision in the space left open by the original author. It is this economy of translation, this unpayable debt, that gives rise to the urgency of translation. If we broaden our scope of translation to include, as Spivak does, cultural and political movements, then the law as translation conditions the various impatient human rights interventions of which Spivak is so suspicious.

Spivak is interested in the failed process of translation that is inherent to our capitalist system of production. “This entire mechanism,” she writes, “works on coding that famous difference between labor-power given and wages returned as non-existent.” “This machinal pattern,” she continues, “is the figure of the disavowal of the failure of translation of work into pay.” It is important here to understand Marx’s labor theory of value as it relates to translation. For Marx, a commodity is an object or good that has use-value and exchange-value. It also has, simply, value, which is equal to the amount of work that goes into making it. This kind of value is an expression of socially necessary abstract labor time, meaning the commodity is valuable for someone other than just the person who made it. Thus, the commodity is defined in its relationship to the other. For Marx, the ability to relate and exchange commodities relies on a certain abstraction. When we make a trade, we exchange an

212 Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?,” 186.
214 Ibid.
216 Ibid., 131.
217 Ibid.
equivalence. Accordingly, we are forced to relate the commodities by translating them into a common unit. We create a common language under which commodities can be related and exchanged. Thus, money becomes an expression of this process. It becomes the language through which we can relate objects with values. And what we are really talking about with value is socially necessary labor time. This is important for Spivak’s argument. Marx tells us that commodities circulate in two different ways. He gives us two formulations: (1) C-M-C and (2) M-C-M (with C standing in for Commodity, and M for money).\textsuperscript{218} In the first instance, a commodity is sold, and the money earned is used to buy another commodity. The money is spent, the deal done. In the second formulation, however, a commodity is bought in order to be sold and reconverted into money. The money is not spent, but advanced and circulated.\textsuperscript{219} This movement transforms money into capital. Really, the formulation becomes M-C-M’ with the change in M becoming surplus value. Thus, value “acquired the occult ability to add value to itself.”\textsuperscript{220} Value valorizes itself, taking on a seemingly mystical power. Thus, Marx attempts to understand where this “occult ability” comes from, which is where the failed translation of labor-power to wages comes in. For Marx, a worker sells their labor to an employer in return for wages. The capitalist wants to pay the worker as little as possible yet still enough for the worker to be healthy and reproduce. The subsistence wage bundle is the minimum amount of money a worker can survive on, and necessary labor is the amount of time a worker must work to produce the equivalent of their livelihood. Wage workers, however,

\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 247.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 251.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 255.
must work a full working day and therefore over their necessary labor time, as the capitalist wants to extract as much labor as possible. Any labor that goes beyond necessary labor time is surplus labor, the products of which are collected by the capitalist. Therefore, not all work is paid for. Ergo, the failed translation. The translation of work to pay is not one of equivalence. The amount of work put into one day’s work is not accurately represented by the wages earned. Thus, it is a failed translation that allows the money (M) used to buy the commodity (C) to capitalize on itself (M’) and continue to circulate. This is what happens in the hidden mode of production, what allows valorization to obscure itself. And at the root of this failed translation lies another translation, the abstraction of commodities into a common language.

For Spivak, the production of money in our increasingly globalized capitalist system relies on this initial failed translation of equating labor-power to wages. However, the solution to this is not a disavowal of globalization (for we are too deeply embedded in this system) but rather a strategic globalization that acknowledges how the initial failed translation uses the difference in capital for redistribution. The very condition for this redistribution is this inherent failed translation that produces surplus labor. Thus, Spivak advocates for a socialism that “persistently and repeatedly [wrenches] capital away from capitalism.” She argues that if this utopian project of redistribution were to succeed, “international socialism

221 Ibid., 341.  
222 Ibid., 325.  
would be strategic globalization.”

However, Spivak argues that strategic socialism will be impossible to accomplish in systems of globalization as they exist today. In this vein, she reminds of her term “restricted permeability,” developed further in an interview with Meyda Yegenoglu and Mahmut Mutman titled *Mapping the Present.* Spivak uses this term to describe the marginalized status of subaltern languages in contrast to hegemonic European ones. While the subaltern is subject to various state and NGO policies and the global trafficking of goods and services, subaltern languages do not permeate political reform and policy-making across borders in the same way that European languages do. Thus, the subaltern is restricted from participating in the very policies that shape their existence. For Spivak, it is precisely this restricted permeability of translating languages and cultures that is the very condition for the impossibility of a utopian international socialism. To ignore this unequal participation in global politics is to engage in a “triumphalist celebration of globality.” Thus, for Spivak, transnational literacy “can become a ground of its persistent critique— but only with effort, not by itself.”

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224 “Adrift,” 17.
225 In *Death of a Discipline,* Spivak defines globalization as the implementation of the same system of exchange across the globe, treating the earth as a sort of grid that now includes the “virtual lines of Geographical Information Systems” (72).
226 Ibid., “Adrift,” 17.
227 Ibid.
228 Ibid.
Chapter Three: The Archive

What is the “Archive”? 

It is clear that by “translation” I am referring to more than conventional writing, reading, and speaking practices of conversion. In this thesis, the term encompasses a broad range of linguistic and politico-cultural movements. Translation extends beyond writing though it remains inseparable from writing. Thus, translation is neither reducible nor indissociable from writing. I have also used this term to describe anything from traditional translation of an original text into another language, to the process of articulating experience (and experiencing articulation), to the mapping of one culture onto another, to the movements of power between nation-states, to the unbearable task of representation. Why, one might ask, make a term so comprehensive in its meaning and application? What makes translation a concept or metaphor worthy of this breadth? If both Derrida and Spivak have suggested time and again that translation is at once necessary and impossible, it is because translation has the potential to challenge social incommensurabilities, open up political dead-ends, and alleviate historical antagonisms, which still remain globally on the steady rise.

In my first chapter, I offered a reading of Sexton’s interview, which confronts various forms of ineffability. I attended to Sexton’s and Hartman’s work on the difficulties to construct a coherent slave narrative. In “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman uses Venus as an emblematic figure of the enslaved woman in the Atlantic archive. I understand both Sexton and Hartman to be grappling with how to account for both past and present-day narratives of slavery without the comfort of a coherent and intelligible archive of slavery. Joining Sexton and Hartman in conversation around
themes of untranslatability reveals from the beginning language’s various forms of failures and, thus, the impossible work of representation.

In order to understand the complicated relationships between translation and the archive, I turn to Derrida’s essay *Mal d’archive*. Here, Derrida investigates the concept of the archive, which refers both to the material collection of historical documents as well as to the very process of archiving. To archive is to collect and preserve historical documents, to record and file information about people, places, and institutions. In other words, archiving is a process of writing history. The root of this word comes from the Latin “arkhe,” signifying both origin and commandment. Its meaning comes from the Greek *arkheion*, namely a house or dwelling. The *arkheion* was also the residence of the archons (those who held public office) who were charged with both guarding and interpreting the archives. And these guarded documents stated the law. Thus, the process of the archive leads to the unification of political power and its exercise. Decision-making becomes private, enacted only by those entrusted with the archive. Derrida tells us that political power cannot exist “without control of the archive, if not of memory.” Furthermore, successful democratization is always measured by “the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.” One is only able to participate in politics if one has access to these documents, in both their content and their very localization. Democratization, thus, extends political power to the people by giving them access to the archive in its materiality and in its process of formation. While the

229 "Archon" is also used in Modern Greek colloquially to someone that holds status or power.
231 Ibid.
U.S. library of congress might now be open to the public, one is still obligated to read the documents *inside* the library (unless that person is a member of congress). The current project of digitizing the library of congress, in an effort to amplify its accessibility, certainly complicates the divide between public and private spheres but does not completely obliterate it.\(^{232}\) What I find important here is that, even in the era of digitization, politics and residence remain inseparable. Those who can participate in politics must also be, in some ways, protected by its shelter. We might think of all the ways that the homeless are punished for being just that—without a home. The National Coalition for the Homeless has called attention to the increasing number of violence against homeless people in conjunction with the appearance of laws that criminalize homelessness, including making panhandling illegal, enforcing “quality of life” ordinances, and carrying out city-wide sweeps.\(^{233}\) Mandated by the constitution, the U.S. census counts every resident in the United States every ten years in order to determine the number of seats in each state. Hence, the counting of personhood is tied to having a home. In 2018, the San Francisco Chronicle published an article written by Kimberley Veklerov that revealed the complete lack of data concerning homeless deaths in the bay area.\(^{234}\) San Francisco has been known to have one of the highest rates of homeless people throughout the country. While there have been concerted efforts to count the current homeless population in San Francisco, Veklerov tells us that there exists hardly any official mandate for recording people

\(^{232}\) Accessibility remains a complicated issue in the digital age with the growing disputes around cyber sovereignty and cross border data flows. See, for example, George R. Lucas’ *Ethics and Cyber Warfare: The Quest for Responsible Security in the Age of Digital Warfare* (2016).

\(^{233}\) See the National Coalition for the Homeless website.

dying on the streets. Furthermore, if investigators can track down any address associated with the dead, they might not write down that the person was, indeed, homeless. If they find no address, investigators might write “homeless” or “transient” in the death record. The lack of systematic data in accounting for homeless deaths reveals not only, of course, the failure of our country in providing affordable housing and health care, but also the fundamental exclusion of homeless life from the archive, and therefore from participation in politics. This is not to say that homeless people do not find ways of being politically engaged or active in communities. Rather, the archive forces the homeless to engage with politics from the position of the outside.

In her essay “Algeria as an Archive,” Soraya Tlatli offers a reading of *Mal d’archive* that connects the archive to nationhood. She conceives of the process of the archive as “one of community membership based on the mechanical repetition of memory.” Tlatli is interested in how Derrida’s autobiographical texts inform his understanding of the archive, asking “to what extent do Derrida’s own narrated recollections of his childhood in Algeria and his later conception of the archive mirror each other?” The themes of wounding and dispossession that permeate *Monolingualism*, for example, are also at work in *Mal d’archive*. Tlatli looks at the configuration of nationhood through the logic of the archive, focusing on the archiving of Algeria throughout two moments in history: (1) the colonization of Algeria by the French and (2) the creation of postcolonial Algeria through its appropriation of French archival law. The moment one begins to write a unified history in the name of the unified body of the nation-state, one is “required to make

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235 Tlatli, "Algeria as an Archive," 177.
236 Ibid., 178.
cuts, to reject and destroy."237 Derrida’s understanding of the archive, according to Tlatli, allows for “a new understanding of the relationship between the writing of history and nationalist ideology in postcolonial Algeria.”238 Tlatli is concerned with the various re-appropriations of identity that occurred in Algeria in the wake of French colonialism. The creations of new states, brought about by political and social revolutions, are projects of unification and thus of exclusion. In the wake of all the cuts and exclusions imposed by the French regime (such as the interdictions on Arabic and Berber), Algerian nationalism attempts to re-appropriate certain origins erased by French colonization. This act of re-appropriating identity and origins is one that Tlatli finds characteristic of any nation constructing itself.239 The “disorder of identity” that occurs through Derrida’s own dispossession of citizenship and language is precisely a problem of national belonging. If the archive is a process of writing a unified history, then it is also a process of unifying memory. The act of choosing simultaneously includes the act of discarding, which means remembering necessitates forgetting. Thus, the construction of nations in the wake of postcolonialism, through the archive’s process of synthesis and elimination, engenders a politics of memory and amnesia.

The archive’s amnesia is not solely specific to the nation of Algeria. Many scholars have written on the political control of collective memory in postcolonial countries.240 In her 1993 book Savage Dreams, Rebecca Solnit tracks the colonial and

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237 Ibid., 182.
238 Ibid., 191.
239 Ibid., 192.
240 See, for example, Michael Rothberg’s Remembering Back: Cultural Memory, Colonial Legacies, and Postcolonial Studies (2013), Elizabeth Jelin’s State Repression and the Labors of Memory (2003) and Dominick Lacapra’s Writing History, Writing Trauma (2014,) among others.
patriarchal histories of the names of places in the American West, focusing on the
history of specific names of places that have been mistranslated or forgotten. Solnit
uses the name of her own childhood town as an example. She writes: “I grew up in a
town called Novato, named after a Coast Miwok chief who had been baptized with
the name of the obscure Saint Novatus.” Solnit tells us that the history of this name
has been mostly forgotten by the townspeople; not just the saint and the chief, but the
Miwok too. Her town is but one of many whose name holds histories forgotten by its
current inhabitants. “Nor do the people of Kentucky reflect much on the meaning of
the word, which means ‘dark and bloody place,’” she writes, “or the Missourians on
the origin of their state’s name in a Lakota word for ‘water flowing along.’” In the
wake of settler colonialism, we have inherited a scattering of names on the great map
of America. This amnesia systematically continues to erase indigenous peoples and
their languages.

Recently, the name of the highest peak in North America was changed from
Mt. McKinley to Denali. An article on the National Park Service website claims that
the renaming “shines a light on the long human history of the park and illuminates a
naming debate that has lasted more than 100 years.” There is no record of
indigenous attitudes towards the naming of this mountain. Furthermore, this act of
naming is framed as a restitution, but the article itself states that over nine different

241 Solnit, Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West, 313.
242 Ibid.
243 “Denali or Mount McKinley?,” NationalParkService.gov (2018). The article, however, focuses
mainly on the initial lamentation of the name Mt. McKinley by European American naturalists Charles
Sheldon and Belmore Browne. In this article for NPS website, it is written: “In addition to the
legislative record, the attitudes of Browne and Sheldon were documented in their respective memoirs.
It was clear that the name McKinley bothered them.”
indigenous tribes have their own names for the mountain (most of which express in some way its enormity.) Thus, Denali becomes a sort of “best-fit” name– a site of capricious translation, ironic appropriation and misplaced guilt. While the re-naming of the mountain seems like a progressive step towards acknowledging indigenous cultures, the history behind Europeanized indigenous names is much more complex. Solnit claims that native names were sometimes used by settlers “out of a nationalism determined to keep American places from becoming homages to the Old World.” Native language was appropriated in the violent process of America becoming its own, independent country. This kind of taking-ownership over indigenous language is equally as harmful as its explicit erasure. Hence, Solnit writes: “This relocation of indigenous names to places seems to imply that the originals are gone and no longer need them, much as the giving of one’s own name prepares the place as a monument, but McKinley is gone and the Cherokee are not.” We must remain especially vigilant to acts of naming that claim some sort of reversal in the name of social justice. It is for this reason that I appeal, in my second chapter, to Spivak’s call for an ethics of reading that is critical, unexcusing, and situationally productive.

The Translator’s Decision

In my second chapter, I investigated the relationships between law, justice and translation in Derrida’s Monolingualism. Going over Khatibi’s own views on bilingualism, I not only complemented Derrida’s work with Khatibi’s interventions, I

244 Solnit, Savage Dreams : A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West, 316.
245 Ibid.
246 I appeal here also to Spivak call for an ethics of reading in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present (1999)
also showed how the latter’s notion of language’s “active division” is essential to Derrida’s account of the law as translation. Attending to “Force of Law,” I related the role of the translator to role of the law enforcer, which always entails making decisions based on reasons and calculations. The task of the translator, as Derrida explains in “What is ‘Relevant’ Translation?” is to strive as much as possible for a faithfulness to the original text. However, some words or phrases will inevitably lose their meanings across cultural and linguistic borders. Thus, the translator must always enhance the text in their own language. A relevant translation is a translation whose economy is “the best possible, the most appropriating and the most appropriate possible.”

Derrida relates “relevance” to the French verb “relever” which means “to lift” or “to rise.” Relever also means to enhance flavor in cooking, to make certain flavors more distinguishable. A relevant translation, for Derrida, is one that stays faithful to the original text all the while enhancing its original flavor.

In “Force of Law,” Derrida is captivated by the English idiomatic expression “to enforce a law.” This expression implies that the law is an “authorized force,” that there is always a source of power behind its application. The law only exists insofar as it can be enforced. And this source of power has to do with justice. If laws are applied in the name of justice, then the force of law is the very idea of justice as the law. Justice both legitimates the law and becomes legitimate through the enforcement of law. On the one hand, justice is expressed as a universal principle of morality. On the other, it is defined by the meting out of rights and punishments in

247 Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?"
249 Ibid, 233.
accordance with the law itself. As we know, the role of law enforcement officers (including police officers, county sheriff’s deputies, and state troopers) is to prevent crimes and protect people and property. Officers can arrest offenders and even give testimony during court. They are supposed do so in order to keep the peace, in the name of moral righteousness. In turn, justice is supposedly upheld through the various rules and norms that govern a society. What then, Derrida asks, do we make of violence? What is the difference between the force that is authorized by justice and the one who is deemed unjust? How do we distinguish between the threat of a policeman’s gun and the menace of the criminal?

This distinction between just and unjust violence is precisely what poses the problem of right, law, and justice. To answer these questions, Derrida tells us we must look at the whole history of relations between force and form, between the institution of law enforcement and the criminality that constitutes the outlaw. As Bennington points out, the law exists precisely because every decision cannot be decided in advance, because things do not simply “go along.”250 The state of turbulence that defines our existence in the world corresponds to the very temporality of the moment of decision. And in this moment of undecidability, the decision falls to the discretion of a third-party legislator, the state executive—i.e., the president or police officer. Thus, determining between “just” and “unjust” violence becomes a matter of law enforcement, of decidability and calculability. The practice of discretion by law enforcement has proved time and again to afford the grounds for

250 Bennington, "Non-Political Opening of Politics," 1.
racial discrimination. How does the criminal become coded as black and the upstanding citizen as white? I emphasized the Black Lives Matter “Hands Up Don’t Shoot” slogan in my analysis of Sexton’s work precisely to underscore the racialization involved in determining the distinction between “just” and “unjust” acts.

In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander argues that the racial caste system which permeated America before the civil rights movements has far from ended. While America might claim “colorblindness,” Alexander demonstrates how the U.S. criminal justice system and the war on drugs maintains a system of racial control based largely on the extensive reach of the carceral system, going beyond the confines of the prison. For example, while white drug crime is just as, if not more, prevalent than black drug crime in the United States, black men are thirteen times more likely to be imprisoned for drug use and distribution than white men. In 2006, 1 in 14 black men were in prison, compared to the 1 in 106 white men behind bars. While discussions of racism within the criminal justice system have focused largely on men, the growth rate for female imprisonment has doubled since 1980. Women in state prisons are actually more likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses than men. In 2016, the imprisonment rate for black women was twice that of white women. The prosecution of drug offenses and the criminalization of women with histories of sexual abuse and drug addiction makes the “war on drugs” a war on black women.

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251 See Carter Deane’s undergraduate honors thesis *Prison Necropolitics* for a Derridean analysis of the carceral state, and more specifically of “stop and frisk.”
252 Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.
253 See the analysis of the Washington, DC Bureau of Justice Statistics on The Sentencing Project website.
254 For more on the consequences of the war on drugs on women and families, see Lenora Lapidus’ article “The War on Drugs = A War on Women and Families” (2011) for the ACLU.
And trans folks face numerous additional challenges behind bars such as the denial of medical care and longer periods in solitary confinement.\textsuperscript{255} For Alexander, the glaring statistics regarding race in prisons cannot simply be explained by higher rates of drug activity among black Americans. Rather, the racial disparities in our criminal justice system must be explained through the enforcement of the law. “The first step” writes Alexander, “is to grant law enforcement officials extraordinary discretion regarding whom to stop, search, and arrest.”\textsuperscript{256} This is precisely the kind of discretion that, for Derrida, constitutes the police officer’s urgent decision-making before the incalculability of justice in “Force of Law.” The next step, for Alexander, is the systemic disavowal of unconscious racial stereotyping by declaring that the legal system racially impartial. This step requires demanding that “anyone who wants to challenge racial bias in the system offer, in advance, clear proof that the racial disparities are the product of intentional racial discrimination– i.e., the work of a bigot.”\textsuperscript{257} By simultaneously relying on the supposedly unbiased decision of the police officer before the law and denying the racial foundation of the criminal justice system, the latter continues to perpetuate a system of social control over black and brown bodies.

By turning to Bennington’s preferred reading practice, in his essay “Non-political opening of Politics,” I revealed the connection between translation and the impossibility of justice, claiming that laws can only be understood by translating the other’s speech. In “What is ‘Relevant’ Translation?” Derrida associates the act of

\textsuperscript{255} See the National Center for Transgender Equality website.
\textsuperscript{256} Alexander, \textit{The New Jim Crow}, 99-100.
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 103.
translating with reasoning and calculability, his unit of measurement being the word. I suggested, in my second chapter, that the role of the translator is similar to that of the law enforcer. If the law enforcer is required to make a decision in the absence of justice, the translator is forced to make such a decision in the absence of language. The latter is the space left open by the ineffable. What is at stake in the unequal distribution of the law is not only the limits of the law but those of language. For Khatibi, the incommunicable divides language. If law requires calculating with the incalculable, then translation requires assembling and consolidating irreducibility. I spent a great deal of time, in this project, with untranslatability and incommensurability because I was ultimately attempting to write about justice. It is obvious, for Derrida, that “discourses on […] the undecidable, the incommensurable or the incalculable, on singularity, difference and heterogeneity are also, through and through, at least oblique discourses on justice.”

Our relationship to the other, for Derrida, is one of difference. Understanding the other always requires an act of translation, that is, an attempt to recon with the irreducible. Thus, the discourse on translation and difference in this thesis is one of justice. By engaging with illicit utterances, forbidden speech, illegibility, and incommensurable linguistic exchanges, perhaps we can discern what gets lost with conventional distinctions between just and unjust violence under the law. Recall that change, according to Sexton, involves the quasi-impossible work of “disalienation.” “The powers that be are not only upon us,” he writes, “but also, more importantly, within us.”

For Alexander, the racial discrimination that grounds our current criminal justice system is a matter of inherited

histories of anti-blackness and racial slavery, which manifests themselves in both conscious and unconscious legal decision-makings. However, as I point out in this chapter, revolutionary change cannot simply be a matter of introspection. It must also include rethinking what constitutes the self in the aftermath of slavery. And for Sexton, this requires a radical rethinking of violence and alterity.

**Violence and the Archive**

The archive, for Derrida, can exist neither “without a technique of repetition” nor “without a certain exteriority.”260 First, let us address the matter of repetition. Those in power reread the past in order to act on the present. Our current legal system, for example, relies heavily on precedents, whereby a principle established in a previous case is used to inform or decide subsequent cases with similar facts. While precedents can be overruled or disregarded, the legal system always involves a process of translating the legal archive. Thus, the archive is more than just a thing of the past. It shapes the future through its own repetition. And this kind of appropriation of the legal archive extends beyond the courtroom and into the realm of public discourse and political action. Recall that Sexton’s account of the configuration of black personhood relies precisely on this process of relating precedents. In their attempts to analogize *Dred Scott* to *Roe v. Wade*, proponents of the pro-life movement equate the rights of the fetus to the rights of the slave. Located at the very brink of legal (non-) personhood, black life becomes suspended “between a blackness whose freedom cannot commence and cannot be withstood.”261 This suspension can

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also be read as a deracination, as a loss of ground that throws black life into the realm of the unborn and the undead. For this reason, Sexton constitutes blackness as persistence, constantly suspending the differences between life and death. I see Sexton’s account of blackness as a challenge to certain theories of immanence that essentialize forces of life and activity in their various appeals to philosophies of biology and nature.262 Rather than investing in a concept of freedom that enables action and productivity, Sexton urges us to consider the project of liberation as one that challenges this kind of positivist discourse, one that embraces rather than abandons the passive and the unknown, demanding justice “without a reasonable expectation of realization.”263

With this in mind, let us return to the matter of the archive’s exteriority. Derrida argues that the archive exists only in relation to an outside. The process of archiving is one of gathering things together. Documents must be collected, sifted through, and assembled. Throughout this process of collecting, the archive localizes and unifies political power. However, any process of collecting is also a process of elimination, of discarding that which does not fit in. Thus, the unification of political power relies on the archive’s necessary exclusion. After all, archiving is a process of inscription, of cutting out, of deciding what belongs and what is discarded. It is for this reason that, in the words of Tlatli, the archive “poses, in an oblique way, the

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262 For this understanding, I appeal to Axelle Karera’s 2019 essay “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” in which Karera outlines the failure of Anthropocene Ethics to adequately addressing black suffering. I am thinking here, for example, of works by material feminists that re-appropriate Bergson, Spinoza, and Deleuze to argue for feminist liberation, such as Elizabeth Grosz’ “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom” (2010) or Jane Bennett’s Vital Materialism (2009).  
fundamental question of belonging or not belonging," which means it poses the question of inheritance and identity. This, of course, reminds us of Khatibi’s account of the grafting of language within colonial contexts. One language exists only in its differentiation and splitting from the other. As I have already detailed, the incommunicable is what is grafted and lost between the local and the foreign language. Belonging neither to one language nor the other, the incommunicable is expelled from the archive. This notion of *grafting*, then, can be understood as a process of archiving. While the incommunicable divides language, the archive divides the communicable from the incommunicable. The word *grafting*, like *dehiscence*, is poetic to be sure, yet I have focused on this word not just to add some whimsical description to my argument. Rather, like Sexton, Derrida, and Khatibi, I see the very experience of identity to be one of wounding, vertigo, division, scarring, and *(re)writing*. To have a “disorder of identity” is to have the *mal d’archive*, to be in a veritable crisis of belonging. If the archive is a process of unification, then it is defined by its will towards becoming One. An *arkhe* refers to the beginning, to the first command. Thus, the archive is originary. Therefore, archival violence underlies all other forms of violence. Tlatli tells us that the first definition of the archive “is of a classification effected not by chance, but in the form of a totalizing assembly. According to this interpretation, the archive is potentially the central principle of all violence.”

The process of synthesis and exclusion in the movement towards becoming One is what constitutes this violence of the archive. “As soon as there is the One,” Derrida writes, “there is murder, wounding, traumatism... The One makes itself

264 Tlatli, "Algeria as an Archive," 184.
265 Ibid., 178.
violence. It violates and does violence to itself, but it also institutes itself as violence.”266 The existence of the One requires splitting off the One from the other. And the knowledge of the other marks us, inscribing us with the knowledge of ourselves.

**A Crisis of Belonging**

For Derrida, the repetition of the archive is also compulsory, meaning it lies outside of our control. He associates such coercion to Sigmund Freud’s “death drive”– i.e., a being’s inherent drive towards self-destruction. For Freud, all humans have a drive towards life (Eros) as well as an opposing drive towards death (Thanatos).267 Life instincts are generally those that deal with survival, pleasure, and reproduction. While death instincts are usually channeled into outward aggression, they can also be directed inwards, which can result in self-harm or suicide.268 In his reading of Freud, Derrida argues that repetition remains inseparable from the threat of the death-drive. Thus, the archive has a will towards self-destruction that it enacts through its own repetition.

The danger of rewriting slave histories, Hartman claims, includes reproducing the same acts of violence that constitute the life of the slave. However, the alternative seems even more bleak– to retreat from history and refuse to engage with its violence would amount to the re-inscription of such founding violence. In this vein, Hartman asks: “what is required to imagine a free state or to tell an impossible story?”269 In

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268 Ibid.
other words, what are the conditions for being able to escape this double bind? For Hartman, the task at hand is a sort of counter-history that works “at the intersection of the fictive and [the] historical.”\textsuperscript{270} In the previous chapter, I used Hartman’s critique of historical representation in “Venus in Two Acts” to underscore Sexton’s concerns with current debates around violability, namely the ways they fail to account for the violence that structures existing social and political systems. Hartman is worried about the “scandal and excess” that flood the archive and, consequently, the lustful devotion to violence that “is everywhere apparent in the documents, statements and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past.”\textsuperscript{271} To have the \textit{mal d’archive} means to suffer from “archive fever.” In other words, it is to be in fervent need of the archive, to have a “compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire… an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness.”\textsuperscript{272} For Hartman, this yearning for lost origins manifests itself in a certain investment in violence and an urgent desire to rewrite slave narratives. “The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them,” she writes, “so it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none.”\textsuperscript{273} It is tempting she continues, to “create a space for mourning where it is prohibited[,] to fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed.”\textsuperscript{274}

In her latest book \textit{Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval}, Hartman centers the lives of rebellious young black women in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, writing a narrative “from nowhere,” out of the archive’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{270} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 5.
\item \textsuperscript{272} Derrida, \textit{Archive Fever}, 91.
\item \textsuperscript{273} Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 8.
\item \textsuperscript{274} Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
fragmented lack of information or interest in these very lives. 275 Weaving together archival research and literary fiction, Hartman reveals how the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s were a formative time for black radical politics. “A revolution in a minor key unfolded in the city,” she writes, “and young black women were the vehicle.” 276 “This upheaval or transformation of black intimate life,” she continues, “was the consequence of economic exclusion, material deprivation, racial enclosure, and social dispossession; yet it, too, was fueled by the vision of a future world and what might be.” 277 Wayward Lives, thus, can be read as an enactment of Sexton’s politics of groundlessness, a willingness to work with the unknown in the attempt to lead us somewhere, in some direction.

The problem of writing impossible stories is precisely why Sexton turns to the structural violence of anti-blackness. If the archive is a process of synthesis and exclusion, then we must ask the question: what is excluded throughout this process? If Sexton urges us to investigate the underlying violence of existing social and political systems, a violence that precedes questions of sovereignty and rights, it is because his ultimate concern is the structural exclusion of black life. While Sexton does not argue that anti-blackness is necessarily a universal or founding violence, he does claim that the continuing isolation and criminalization of black people make blackness the political enemy not only of America, but of the world at large. 278 In the United States, this comes about mainly through racial profiling and policing.

276 Ibid., xv.
277 Ibid.
278 Sexton, Amalgamation Schemes : Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism.
Globally, we see anti-blackness at work in the “virtual expulsion of sub-Saharan Africa from the global political economy.” Sexton examines this expulsion specifically through the modern fear of AIDS. The global fear of AIDS is also a fear of sexual contact with black bodies, and thus a fear of blackness. It is a fear that “sexual contact with black bodies will turn over into violence, that such contact in and of itself constitutes violence, a site of brutality or morbid contamination or both.” If the underlying violence of the archive is originary, then anti-blackness and the archive are always already folded into each other.

For Hartman, the tension between the obligation to account for the death of Venus, the slave girl, and the inevitable failure of such recounting can be productive for thinking dispossessed and enslaved lives. In the previous chapter, I claim that the economy of translation gives rise to the urgency of translation. I related this to Spivak’s concerns with various impatient human rights interventions across the globe while I suggest that the law as translation is precisely what conditions these interventions. What I refer to here is the growing demand to make texts in different languages accessible across the world. The United Nations prides themselves on being one of the largest employers of language professionals. The role of these professionals is to take the content of various official documents and to render them accurately into one of the six official languages of the organization (English, French, Russian, Arabic, Chinese and Spanish). Every human rights conflict is thus understood only through one of these six languages— the current dominant languages

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279 Ibid.
280 Ibid., 242.
281 See the description of the role of U.N. translators described on the official U.N. website.
of the world. The idea that international rules and regulations can make for a more peaceful world is predicated on the idea that these rules can be translated across nations. In the name of upholding fundamental rights to self-determination, international law attempts to do just that.282 The role of international law is to address a large scope of international issues including human rights, immigration, the treatment of prisoners, problems of nationality, the conduct of war, among others. It is also to regulate the global commons, such as environmental development, global communications, and world trade. Thus, the U.N. determines the condition for intervention by the severity of abuses in these different areas. Samuel Moyn has written extensively on the troubled history of human rights and its implications on international justice. In his most recent book Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World, Moyn traces the rise of human rights activism alongside neoliberal globalization and growing economic inequality, questioning why activist responses by NGOs have failed to adequately challenge wealth.283 In their report on economic and sexual justice for the Barnard Center for Research on Women, Bedford and Jakobsen explain how the economic and socio-political movements of neoliberalism, including the deregulation of markets and privatization of social services, solicit global activist responses.284 A certain coalitional politics is engineered within the context of globalization and international divisions of labor. Global feminism is one


example; the inexorable vehicle paving the road towards international liberation.

What I find important here is the politico-linguistic underpinning of the global order that sets the terms for activist engagement. Global human rights issues are only made understandable through the dominant languages of the world. In other words, subaltern languages only permeate political decision-making when they are translated.

The growing demand for translation can, thus, be situated within the corelative growth of both worldwide market fundamentalism and international human rights. In my second chapter, I also discussed Grossman’s vision for the potential of translation to bring all cultures together as an example of the kind of impatient multiculturalism that worries Spivak. Grossman’s vision also eerily reminds us of the liberal projects of multiracialism that Sexton writes about in *Amalgamation Schemes*. Sexton explains how multiracialism came about as a response to the one-drop rule, claiming itself as a political antithesis to exclusionary white supremacy. At the heart of multiracialism, however, is a call for a post-racial society. Thus, multiracialism is inherently anti-black. Sexton highlights the ways in which multiracialism has led to the privatization of the political through contemporary identity politics. In the current age of biologized ontology, freedom is now defined as declaring oneself definitively as non-black. It is the goal of contemporary multiracialism to allow for mixed race individuals to self-identify as “mixed.” With this privatization of the politics of sexuality and identity comes the ability for the state to absolve itself from any responsibility of working against systems of white supremacy. The solution to language marginalization seems to operate through the same homogenizing impulse.
as the solution to segregation. We must be careful, therefore, of the ways in which Western enthusiasm for multiculturalism, calling for a seemingly innocent translation of cultures and experiences across borders, works in the interest of the state and the globalization of capitalism. In my previous chapter, I related Hartman’s and Sexton’s concerns about vulnerability to Spivak’s account of the emergence of the ethical subject through a violent process of translation. I suggested that translation always involves representing that which refuses to be represented. If the ineffable has been the thesis’ topic of concern, then locating blackness within the violent process of translation is crucial. By connecting the inevitable failure of historical representation in Hartman’s work to Spivak’s account of the inherent failure of translation, we can situate the production of exclusion in the processes of financial globalization. If I emphasized Spivak’s concern with the impatience of human rights interventions, it was because I saw connections between her demand for patience and Sexton’s account of radical passivity.

In his 2010 article “Human Rights and History,” Moyn argues that the very cornerstone of human rights is property and that the protection of property has been tantamount to the right to liberty for most of modern history. Human rights, according to Moyn, were employed in order to promote democracy, to justify intervention and liberal warfare. The history of property cannot be divorced from that of racial slavery, when black slaves in the United States were considered property until the addition of the thirteenth amendment in 1865.285 It is for this reason that Hartman urges us to

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285 See Paul Finkleman’s “Slavery in the United States: Persons or Property?” for a historical account of the laws of property under slavery.
“listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity.” In Wayward Lives, Hartman discusses racism and the criminalization of prostitution in the early 20th century, demonstrating how the trafficking of black women during this time carried traces of human commodification under slavery. During slavery, “the law of property dictated that black women submit to any white man who wanted them; now poverty dictated their course.” Thus, the task at hand, for Hartman, is to render intelligible the lives of those who have been made into objects and property, who have provided the very foundation for the national order, while also recognizing the impossibility of doing so. In the second chapter, I also discussed Spivak’s account of the failed translation between work and pay. I explained Marx’s analysis of the “hidden mode of production” in which he reveals how this failed translation allows money to capitalize on itself. If the concept of money is based on the abstraction of commodities into a common language, then the commodification of the slave is established through the translation of the slave into this common language, the translation of life into property.

Indeed, I have significantly focused on human rights’ various shortcomings because I am concerned with the ways in which liberal democracy operates upon a politics of property. While human rights law is often discussed in tandem with abolitionist movements, Moyn argues that “given the right to private property in natural law, rights talk easily cut in in the direction of slavery, rather than against it.” Both Alexander and Hartman have demonstrated how the racial caste system

287 Wayward Lives, 97.
persists after the abolition of slavery, bearing the impressions of western settler colonialism and the deployment of property law. And While *Amalgamation Schemes* reads essentially as a critique of liberal democracy in the wake of a “painfully discernible antiblackness,” Sexton’s interview with Barber delivers a critique of the same forces at work in current leftist projects. Sexton’s politics of groundlessness offers a conceptualization of freedom that is neither immanent nor transcendent but rooted in what we cannot articulate or comprehend.

I appeal to Derrida not out of nostalgic desire to return the “father” of deconstruction, but because I am unsettled by the current discursive disregard about absence and exteriority in favor of immanence and agency. While my own concerns are of a political nature, I have attempted, in the words of Bennington, to “read Derrida at the level of his own thinking and reading.” I have advocated for an alliance between continental philosophy and black studies in addressing problems of responsibility through the question of translation. By folding Derrida’s work in with Sexton’s, I have tried to show the relevance of deconstruction in thinking antiblack violence. I do remain skeptical of a politics of translation that mimics one of relationality, in which beings and objects are entangled within saturated webs of meaning. If my conception of translation has come to encompass a wide range of relationships between so many entities, then what remains at stake is precisely the question: what is untranslatable? I find Spivak’s contributions to the question of translation helpful because she grapples head-on with issues of epistemic violence within processes of economic and cultural globalization. For Spivak, the subaltern

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290 Bennington, 5.
within post-colonial economies of globalization is precisely what remains untranslatable, a subject that is both needed by the narrative of imperial aid, and by its continued privileges. If Derrida tells us that there is “a summons to translation at the very threshold of all reading-writing,”291 it is precisely because we will never have access to justice in the absolute sense, because all we can do is continue to translate incommensurable politico-ethical demands into a language we can understand. In the words of sexton, “the political task that remains is neither a restoration nor a restitution, but a creative deconstruction.”292

291 Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?," 175.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate what is at stake in translating the ineffable, that which is incapable of being expressed in our conventional use of language. In the first chapter, I provided an exegetical reading of Sexton’s “On Black Negativity, or the Affirmation of Nothing.” In this interview, Sexton refuses to give us a definitive conception of blackness. Drawing on Hartman’s interview with Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought,” Sexton argues that slavery lives on in the modern world. Blackness remains a constitutive outside, excluded within liberal democracy. Hartman has repeatedly argued that, because black life has been completely left out of the historical archive, it is impossible to create a coherent narrative of the slave. Thus, the slave occupies “the position of the unthought.”

Thinking blackness, then, becomes a matter of thinking the unthinkable and communicating the incommunicable. Thus, the respective works of Sexton and Hartman are works of translation. Sexton complicates the very opposition between passivity and activity by reissuing what constitutes revolutionary change or success in the first place. In other words, he attempts to depict the untranslatable within the frameworks of contemporary politics. Rather than focusing on freedom as a question of sovereignty and rights, Sexton advocates for a politics of groundlessness—i.e., a form of resistance that begins from dispossession. He urges us to take seriously the potential of working with negative capabilities. In my reading of Sexton, I attempted

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to demonstrate how this form of resistance challenges conventional understandings of political resistance.

In the second chapter, I investigated the question of translation by attending to the relationships between linguistic imperialism and historical representation. I focused primarily on Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other*, the central themes of which rest on Khatibi’s conception of bilingualism. In short, Khatibi argues that one language exists only in its active division from another. Thus, there is no such thing as a universal language. Responding to Khatibi, Derrida argues that, if the existence of one language relies on its active division from the other, then the relationship between two languages is always one of impossible translation. I sought to relate this impossibility of translation to the impossibility of justice in Derrida’s essay “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority.” I used Bennington’s insightful essay “The Non-Political Opening of Politics” to understand what Derrida means when he tells us that justice is, indeed, impossible. Bennington explains that Derrida’s account of justice relies on Rousseau’s account of the law in the *Social Contract*. For Rousseau, laws exist because we cannot make sense of justice in the absolute sense. Thus, politics becomes a logic of non-fulfillment. Translation, I argued, is also a logic of non-fulfillment. In the absence of a universal meta-language, we must communicate with the other through translation. Thus, I argued that translation can be thought of as a matter of indefinite deferral. I then analyzed Derrida’s account of the universal process of colonization. Derrida explains this process through what he calls the “two tricks” of the master. The first trick occurs when the master pretends that language is under his control. I contextualized this trick through Derrida’s own
encounters with French linguistic imperialism after World War II as well as Ngugi wa Thiongo’s experience with the eradication of Gikuyu in Kenya during the 1950s. The second trick, for Derrida, is the promise of liberation, emancipation, and revolution. I related this second trick to Sexton’s concerns with the hasty reactionary politics of today progressive Left. If we accept Derrida’s linguistic account of the process of colonization, then we can see how the kind of hyperactive leftist activism that worry Sexton are contingent on the workings of linguistic imperialism. At the heart of Sexton’s critique of politics, thus, is the question of language. I then supplemented Derrida’s work with Spivak’s contribution to the question of translation. I used Spivak’s account of translation in “Adrift” and “Translation as Culture” to situate the movements of language and power across borders within current processes of cultural and economic globalization. I contrasted Spivak’s views on translation to those of Grossman, who envisages a multilingual world governed by rights to freedom of speech and press. In my critique of Grossman’s widely acclaimed book, Why Translation Matters, I argued that the movement for global multilingualism, having in sight a world in which all languages and cultures come together in the name of world peace, requires assimilating all other cultures into the Western model. Unlike Grossman, Spivak claims that translating minority languages into dominant ones always creates an unequal arrangement. The minority language is understood only through the semiotics of the dominant one. Like Hartman, Spivak is concerned with the double bind of representation. On the one hand, Spivak warns us against Western enthusiastic endeavors to access subaltern subject—endeavors that lead to their exclusion and erasure. And yet, we cannot escape the problematic of representation.
Spivak tells us that we are only able to account for the other once we are able to read and represent them. Thus, if representation gives rise to accountability, then this process of translation immediately implicates us in an ethics of responsibility. But, Spivak sees this process of translation as an act of violence; thus, violence constitutes our difference from the other. It is for this reason that I have put Spivak in conversation with both Sexton and Hartman. As with Derrida, all three theorists are concerned with the violence that generally subtends political animosities. Both Sexton and Hartman worry that data-driven accounts of racialized violence and inequality fail to consider the structural status of anti-blackness. They are interested in the underpinnings of violability itself. This kind of structural violence stretches beyond mere calculability and is thus immeasurable. Hence, I appealing to Spivak, I advocated for an ethics of translation.

In Chapter Three, I investigated the relationship between translation and the archive. Derrida traces the etymological roots of archive to the ancient Greek *arkheion*, which was at once the home of the archive and the ones who commanded. Thus, the archive is bound up historically to political power and government. The space of the archive was historically privileged— it was the very place of law and commandment. I understand the archive as simultaneously a process of synthesis and exclusion. Using Alexander’s book, *The New Jim Crow*, I offered a reading of Derrida’s work that connects the unification and localization of the archive to contemporary issues of homelessness and racial discrimination in the United States. I also contextualized the archive through Solnit’s account of the erasure of indigenous peoples and languages in the aftermath of Western colonialism in her book *Savage
Dreams. Finally, I used the logic of the archive to explain the process of creating nation states in the wake of postcolonialism, appealing to Tlatli’s essay “Algeria as an Archive.” In connecting translation to the archive’s process of exclusion, I looked again at the relationship between law and translation discussed in Chapter Two. I compared the role of the translator to that of the police officer in “Force of Law.” Unable to reduce the incommensurability of justice into reasoning and calculation, the police officer must use discretion when enacting the law. The translator, I argued, must do the same. Because there is no universal law of language, perfect translation is impossible. Thus, the translator always assumes discretion when re-writing a text in another language. In fact, “doing justice” to a text relies on this discretion. Going back to Alexander, I argued that the discretion assumed by the police officer affords the grounds for the dangerous distinction between just and unjust violence in front of the law. In the United States, the criminal justice system claims to be completely objective and unbiased. Therefore, a police officer’s racial biases are easily dismissed as non-existent in court. For Alexander, this twofold process is precisely what allows the criminal justice system to perpetuate a structure of racial control.

For Derrida, the archive exists only through its own repetition and in its relation to an outside. For this reason, I connected the violent repetition of the archive to Hartman’s discussion of the dangers of re-writing slave histories. The double bind of the archive is that one cannot make history visible without repeating its violence. However, the solution to this cannot be one of ignorance. By refusing to engage with the archive, one risks dismissing completely the histories of oppression and genocidal
conquest that have shaped the world we live in today. Sexton and Hartman problematize the archive not to do away with historical accounts of colonialism and slavery. Rather, it is important to both take seriously the strategic claims to retribution from marginalized communities while also investigating the underlying systems that structure how we think about justice. Following the logic of the archive, I demonstrated that the exclusion of blackness is constituted through the archive’s exteriority. My objective was not to give an account of what blackness is, but to examine the various forces at work in the exclusion of blackness. My goal was to reveal how urgent political demands are questions of translation. For this reason, I connected the increasing demand for translation by the U.N. and various NGO’s alike to the advancement of global capitalism. I located a point of convergence here between Spivak’s critique of multilingualism and Sexton’s critique of multiracialism in *Amalgamation Schemes*. Sexton argues that the multiracial movement stemmed from conservative and reactionary forces attempting to dismantle radical black politics. He explores how this has codified normative sexuality within and across the color line. In short, multiracialism calls for a post-racial society. Furthermore, it erases not only black life as a whole, but more specifically the position of the “dispossessed black female confronted, invented, by the slave estate and its undead symbolic mechanisms.” Thus, it is at once patriarchal and anti-black. In this vein,

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294 For example, I am concerned with the ways in which feminist thinker Rosi Braidotti challenges pursuits of restitution in her essay, “The Politics of ‘Life Itself’ and New Ways of Dying,” published in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010). Braidotti argues for an ethics that “suspends the quest for both claims and compensation” through a “depersonalization” of pain (213). Rather than complicating the relationship between the personal and the political, Braidotti appears to want to do away with the personal altogether, essentially telling oppressed peoples to accept their position, to simply cope.

the figure of the post-racial and ambiguously mixed-race human of the future comes to mind as the homogenizing image of a global fear of blackness. While claiming to incorporate blackness into the realm of social and political recognition, multiracialism operates according to a logic of assimilation that reinforces this underlying fear of blackness. In this chapter, I argued that there is a similar logic of assimilation at work in projects of multilingualism. By making multilingualism and multiculturalism about the sharing of language and customs between individuals across borders—rather than about the various articulations of power across nation states—the state is able to absolve itself from any responsibility for white supremacy and global capitalism.

The goal of this chapter was to make Derrida’s concept of the archive relevant to Sexton’s account of blackness. I do not aim at providing a neatly packaged solution to the double bind of representation. I also cannot definitively assert what the ineffable is. If the point of my thesis has been to engage with the ineffable, the incommunicable, and the incommensurable, then my very topic of concern necessarily exceeds what discursive demands for coherence rigidly solicit. Like the philosophers I have attended to, I wish to complicate the very ability to determine that something is (or is not). Indeed, Derrida’s logic of the trace challenges this notion of presence and arrival.

Ultimately, I do not want to argue that leftist activism is not useful or that we should do away completely with identity politics. On the contrary, I agree with Moyn and Spivak that we must address the problem of redistribution—global socialism and coalitional politics can be strategic. But the human rights movement has defended itself for far too long by arguing that it is better to do something rather than
Nothing. Spearheaded mainly by Western elites, the human rights movement emphasizes often only the bare amenities and basic rights of human life. It fails to address the root of economic inequality – that is, the enormous wealth gap that accelerated after decolonization. Sexton and Hartman argue against identity politics not to diminish the claims of marginalized groups, but because most coalitional politics obscure the unequal arrangement of identities in the wake of slavery and Western colonialism. Thus, the task at hand is not to feign ignorance or deny history. Rather, we must engage in the constant interrogation of conventional understandings of identity and politics. I have not necessarily sought to reconcile Derridean deconstruction with critical philosophies of race, but I have attempted to show the importance of deconstruction in thinking through the complex questions of violence and representation posed by Sexton and Hartman in their respective philosophic interventions. The question of translation offers us a way of interrogating the violent articulations of political structures. If translation, like justice, is a matter of indefinite deferral, then it also concerns our responsibility to the other. In other words, the impossible yet necessary translation between the effable and the ineffable opens the space for thinking ethics otherwise.

Moyn discussed the problems with this kind of justification of the human rights movement at a talk given at Wesleyan this past April on his recent book Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World (2018)
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