

## 書 評

### Reviews

***Sovereignty & Life***. Edited by Matthew Calarco and Seven DeCaroli. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. Pp. 282.

David Barton\*

Language is a virus, a half-life that requires human bodies to complete it. It thrives, spreads, consumes and dies. That's the bare requirement for language. It needs bio-power provided by the human organism. This is the core thesis of William Burrough's research into language. He finds that this virus requires a disguise, an armour to protect it from degeneration. And yet only in degeneration, the kind of abjection witnessed in Burroughs' writings *Naked Lunch* and *Soft Machine*, does the language virus cast off its armour, ideology, to reveal its viral life form. Language degenerates lose their individuality, language degenerating becomes increasingly viral seeking other individuals to infect in order to survive. Language degenerates recognize each other through their state of need, their loss of protective armour. This armour is the ideology of language and of language communities. These are not imagined communities. These are bare knuckle enforcers, gangster thugs of ideology and their language is tough guy cryptic, understood only by those they are oppressing, ignored by all the others of the language community who are shielded from the police, the military, the corporations that make them think they are protected from the virus of degenerate language.

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\* Professor, Department of English, National Central University

The unprecedented discovery made by Levi at Auschwitz concerns an area that is independent of every establishment of responsibility, an area in which Levi succeeded in isolating something like a new ethical content. Levi calls it the ‘gray zone.’ It is the zone in which the ‘long chain of conjunction between victim and executioner’ comes loose, where the oppressed becomes oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim. A gray, incessant alchemy in which good and evil and, along with them, all the metals of traditional ethics reach their point of Fusion.<sup>1</sup>

This quote from Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz* is made by Dominic LaCapra in the Stanford University Press book of essays on Agamben, *Sovereignty & Life*. LaCapra identifies the common ground of resistance to Agamben’s most radical political metaphor; that the concentration camp is the garden of a politics to come and the *Muselmann* who inhabits or inhabited the concentration camp, is the new Adam. Ernesto Laclau follows LaCapra in condemning Agamben’s project: “Instead of deconstructing the logic of political institutions, showing areas in which forms of struggle and resistance are possible, he closes them beforehand through an essentialist unification. Political nihilism is his ultimate message.”<sup>2</sup>

Another attack on Agamben’s *Homo Sacer/ Muselmann* comes from an overall quite helpful essay by Steven DeCaroli called “Boundary Stones.” In this essay DeCaroli mentions “Agamben refers us to the person who goes into exile as a consequence of committing homicide (HS, 110), and to the ancient figure of the homo sacer, whose transgressions expel him from both human and divine law, but the specific character of the transgressions made by this figure, while mentioned, are left largely unexamined.”<sup>3</sup> DeCaroli goes on

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 151.

<sup>2</sup> Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 46.

to explore the terrain of this banished character through Aristotle, Cicero, Livy and Thomas Hobbes. The *Muselmann* might most easily be recognized in Hobbes description of bare life as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” DeCaroli’s essay is an exemplary compilation of quotations on the problem of banishment and the reasons for it, which he understands to be less the crime than the influence wielded by the figure banished. This comparative approach of political theorists avoids the problematic of the institution busting rhetoric employed by Agamben. “Whatever Politics,” an essay by Jenny Edkins, addresses this problem directly. The *Muselmann* produced by the Nazi concentration camps is the prototype for the new identity-less ‘form of life’ politics.

It is elaborated further in his consideration of the anthropological machine that produces the life of man, as opposed to animal life. His concern throughout is with stopping or interrupting the machine. He proposes that form of life or whatever being, being such as it is, in itself, would evade capture by either machine; ironically, for-of-life is closely related to the very form of life, bare life, produced by the machine, which thus, it appears, contains the seeds of its own destruction.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to think of the *Muselmann* and the machine that produces him without thinking of Kafka’s “Penal Colony” and its punitive writing machine. In fact it is difficult not to consider much of Agamben’s writings on Homer Sacer and sovereignty as an extended meditation on Kafka. As with Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka Toward a Minor Literature* Kafka becomes the touchstone for meditations on possible and impossible escape. Kafka’s concern with ‘becoming animal’ as Deleuze put it bear remarkable similarities to Agamben’s meditations on the *Muselmann* and the separation between bios (political/anthropological life) and zoe (bare life). This is the gist of Mathew Calarco’s contribution to *Sovereignty & Life* in his marvelously titled essay:

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<sup>4</sup> Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 72.