

The Name of the Shadows

Displacement, Bodies and Translation in Spaces of Extreme Violence

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*No-one leaps beyond their shadow
No-one leaps beyond their source
No-one leaps beyond their mother's vulva*
Pascal Quignard

Contemporary history reveals unforeseen patterns to us, in which the walls erected between individuals and nations create *unequal territories*. Under the indefinite movement of a *humanity in transit*, the contemporary political and economic order has engendered *space without place*: a space that shatters the sense of a place, defines it as a territory for the *deracinated*: a *topos* deprived of people who have put down roots there. In this context, *figures* that are intimately associated with a *territorial space* – *the displaced, refugees, the exiled, the errant* – are re-created there. All these human groups signify in relation to a sedentary space where, under a totalitarian form of rationality, the divisible territories of a mapping of the *same* and the rejection of the *foreign* are marked out.

The excess of refugees, of the dead and the displaced is an *event* that signifies in reference to a *territory* that not only exposes a geographical notion but that is the enunciation of a juridico-political notion through which a space controlled by a determinate type of power is sketched out. By virtue of its cultural, legal and political memory, and by implicit reference to the rigid lines of this territory, each discourse harbours an image of the particular kind of body that it accommodates. That is to say: each discourse possesses the codes by means of which one individual can be recognized by another, by being constituted as an object that is given to be read as material evidence. Inside this discursive theatre, contemporary politics creates *spaces of abandonment* that try to transform singular bodies into organic spaces of annihilation.

Nevertheless, faced with this sedentary cartography of sense, there are *impossible bodies* – the bodies of those who, from an unstable locus [lieu] of signification, confront this geography in the very space of their corporeal experience. History, then, is constituted as a perpetual return of the *other* whose presence demands a questioning of common figures and discursive practices. The stateless, refugees, the displaced – and so many other figures that fracture the regimes of power and truth – are *excentric* in relation to the centre of a converging political, social and economic sense. From the interior of a sedentary space of rationality, their existence confronts us with a *movement* that splits the territory from historical narrativity. They move indefinitely where memory traces the physical cartography of another language, close to what Deleuze, referring to Foucault, would call the *other side* [l'envers] of the experience of language: *a book that is only written on the body, in blood and*

The Other Side of History. The Sedentary Narrative of Sense

In the contemporary era, Western history is built on a territory of loss. Against the backdrop of insufficient economic growth and the incitation to ancestral hate, convulsions resulting from multiple conflicts – social unrest, wars, religious, ethnic and tribal tensions that precipitate the exodus of civilian populations – cross the continents. In all geographical spaces, *displacement, flights, concentration* in holding *camps, internment camps or camps for refugees* become *movements* that uproot the political meanings of discursively recognizable practices. The result of a latent violence, *movements of displacement and errance* cannot be definitively enclosed in an apparatus that permits them to be understood. Even if the sedentary nature of these *apparatuses* is inscribed in the materiality of the facts that these apparatuses define as being inscriptions of order that are capable of inverting the event [événementiel] itself, the system of conceptual references that is possessed for the interpretation of reality no longer supports the materiality of events.

How is one to speak of a reality in transformation, when existing terms don't allow emergent reality to be designated? That is to say, when the conceptual instruments that we possess do not allow what is internal to the conflictual manifestations that characterize temporal spaces (where the root is *displacement* itself) to be thought? According to Foucault, it is the relations that we are not in the present moment able to think as they might be, that must be thought. This signifies that *to be* something is *to become* something, without it being possible to know the end point of a process of becoming.

Shifting along the axis of a totalitarian rationality, which defines the linear vectors of time in the direction of an ultimate reconciliation with itself, Western history presents itself theoretically as a *sedentary* narrative. In it, the story of progress forgets the dynamic proper to the advent of the event.

And *progress* precisely defines this idea of an indubitable perfectibility of the human journey, according to a process of legitimation created by dominant discursive practices. "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a conception of history that accounts for this situation" (Benjamin, 2000: 433).

In confrontation with this *state of exception* to which we continually return, as if moved by a rule encysted in the impossibility of the meaningful *again*, history takes the form of a concept that tries to anchor the creation of significations that humans tear away from memory in a sedentary narrative territory. However, barbarity returns obsessively. And history has shown violently that master narratives have cracks, that they are *fictions* of memory and of meaning: "one writes history, but it is always written from the point of view of the sedentary and in the name of a unitary State apparatus [...] What is missing is *anomadology*, the contrary of a history" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980: 34).

Before a history that presents itself as a *sedentary narrative of sense*, there exist *becomings*, events that are incrustated in the historicity of the present like nomad wounds. *Becoming* – that Deleuze names concretely as the *peoples* that subtract themselves from power as domination, those who rise up and resist, with no place nor return announced – is made up of *events* that rupture the linear vector of historical time, and which recreate the traits of a nomad sense. Processes of resistance inevitably assume a nomadic character.

“When one says that revolutions do not have a good future, one has said nothing about the revolutionary future of people. If the nomads interested us so much, it is because they are becoming, and are not a part of history; they are excluded from it but metamorphose only to reappear otherwise, in unexpected forms in the lines of flight of a social field” (Deleuze, 1990: 209)

This *nomadology of sense* doesn't signify that the instability of the movement of history presupposes an *aesthetic and political renunciation*. Nor even an indifference with regard to the uncertain movement of time where, by the total relativisation of values, all events would be equivalent facts. Nomadology presupposes the necessity of thinking the *event* – which doesn't mean a submission to the order of the *accident* – as the kernel of thought. And this thought, which runs counter to what Deleuze designated as a *thought of the classical world*, is rooted in a fertile mode of contamination between what is not thought and thought [itself].

Now, in the context of the form of *thought of the classical world* – identified with *the philosophy of representation* – the recuperation of a fact, a sensation, an object or a knowledge is realized through a movement of representation that is instituted in reference to a principle of order, relative to which things, events and subjects are distributed according to certain attributes. In this configuration of thought, the *same* is defined according to a strategic distribution – of proximity or distance – faced with an order that incarnates the unity out of which multiple figures of power and knowledge emerge.

Also, thought conceives itself through a strategic model of positioning in space. According to a sedentary distribution, *identity* is configured thanks to the relative position that it occupies in relation to a space of *signification* that is defined as a fundamental principle of order. Hence the necessity of a principle of *re-presentation* through which the signification of a present fact or object is founded on the *re-discoveries* [re-trouvailles] of the *same* that *re-presentation* maintains.

It is precisely in this sedentary mode of organization of the gaze that Western thought will constitute territories of gnoseological, political, social and hermeneutic legitimation in which the exclusion of all subjects, objects or events that resist these *regimes of truth* is demanded. Thought then develops in a referential circularity that, by means of experience, sketches out forms that exist beforehand as the condition of possibility of experience. Even before the phenomenon or object presents itself in its singular existence, these forms allow it to be foreseen, anticipated or judged. In this way, signifying space is deployed as a sedentary space that corresponds to the obsessive manifestation of a *will to truth* configured with the traits of a fundamental *order* to be established violently at the heart of subjects and things. These spaces do nothing but expose a politics of the programmed destruction of the other, backed up by a geography of fear in which the body takes the figure of, on the one hand, an *object-effect* of the localization and development of power, and on the other, a fundamental element in the *games of power and truth*.

Faced with this sedentary and violent signifying space, which institutes an unhearing intelligibility of the world, recuperating the *event* as the kernel of thought turns out to be fundamental. And it is so because *public space* – the space of visibility that Hannah Arendt considers to be an essential condition of political life – does not exist as a *scene*. It depends on the gestures that create it, on the political implication of singular beings. And this opening doesn't presuppose a uniquely theoretical choice, but the assuming of a political sensibility that, from the present moment, interrogates a narrative of power in which *translation* has *deserted the places of history*.

Spaces of Abandonment: Where you are when you are nowhere

The history of *waiting* in refugee camps corresponds to the progressive imprisoning of feeling and of the gaze in a time that is converted into an immobile space. Neither the bodies nor the spaces are symbols: in an equivocal manner, *life* is understood as a space of political-legal intervention and the body is envisaged as a space of inscription of order linked to a *regulatory law*. In this sense, as *spaces of exception* that are characteristic of the modern form of *biopower*, refugee camps present themselves as scenic spaces where a mode of silence instituted as an instrument of power is at stake. A form of social narcissism, different to that of subjective narcissism, develops in these spaces, bringing about a mode of renunciation that is characteristic of the modern form of power: *abandonment*. The biopolitical body is placed in *spaces of abandonment*, where it exhibits, according to Agamben's formulation, *the tangling of zôé and bios that seems to define the political destiny of the West*^[1]. In being determined as a form of dependency rooted in a *regulatory law* and camped out in spaces of abandonment, naked and starving bodies henceforth exist as objects of a *normalizing* action exercised by another form of power. Regulatory law is constituted, then, as a *speech wound* because, as writing of the law that circumscribes it, it is cut off from the dimension of origin that speech upholds. It is the mark of belonging that ruptures alterity. The statement by which these spaces of exception are organized is not that of a *dynamic of inclusion*, but that of a *decree of abandonment* elaborated by a regime of disciplinary management that is visibly exercised over the bodies of the *living mass*. Overcoming the difference marked by Foucault between the mode of enunciation of the sovereign power of the territorial State – *to put to death and to allow to live* – and the mode of enunciation of modern biopower – *to keep alive and to allow to die* – the objective of which is the exercise of power over the *life of the species* and of *populations*, Agamben signals the emergence of a third formula that would state the specificity of the *biopolitics* of the 20th century:

“No longer *putting to death*, no longer *keeping alive* but *making survive*. Because it is no longer life, no longer death, but the production of a virtually infinite and modulatable survival that constitutes the decisive service for the biopower of our times. Each time, it is a matter of separating the organic life of the animal, the non-human from the human in man [...] The supreme ambition of biopower is to realize the absolute separation of the living from the speaking, *zôé* from *bios*, the non-man and the man in a human body: survival” (Agamben, 1999: 204 – 205).

Through a strategy of the preservation of living bodies - feeding the starving body and treating the sick body – a perverse action of modern power develops: by means of the deprivation of speech, it inscribes biopolitical reason and mute suffering in the flesh of a multiple body. In these spaces, words have no reverse side. And the perverse hold of a grammar of power in which one assumes the right of speaking *in the place* of the victims ruins the consistency of their language, as if this *universe of victims* was a distressing landscape outside of any human belonging.

In his book *Yesterday, Tomorrow* – the central theme of which is the Somali diaspora, dealt with starting from the crisis at the beginning of the 1990s that forced Somalians to seek refuge in other countries – Nuruddin Farah tries to reconstitute the voices of the refugees, the exiled, displaced persons as they are: “Here are the tales of a nation taken hostage, an ocean of stories told by Somalians who find themselves in the space between” (Farah, 2001:20). Farah begins his book with an evocation of the rebellion on the faces of those who, fleeing Somalia, arrived in Kenya^[2]. Following the movement of the fleeing masses, his father and mother had left Mogadishu to get to Kenya by sea, thanks to a boat crammed with bodies^[3]. Farah found himself in the refugee camp near Mombasa (the *camp* at

Utange) with other Somalians, who were left with nothing but their mortified memories. They talked incessantly of horror that they had survived, in a mixture of prostration and melancholy. When he asked a refugee how he envisaged his future, the latter replied “I have the impression that night has fallen on my life, a premature night that has plunged me into a darkness that is total and without variation” (Farah, 2001: 41).

The refugees took flight in waves, and it was in one of these fluxes that Mohammed Abdullah arrived at the *camp*. A Somali, he left Mogadishu and traveled for four days between the coast of Somalia and Mombasa. Mohammed reported that Mogadishu had become an abattoir. After a progressive deterioration in living conditions, a degradation of social values, the dissolution of a cosmopolitan city and the destruction of the State, the violence had taken on a face that no-one had seen before: a spectacular violence that touched all the faculties, from intelligence right down to the sense of smell, given the hundreds of unburied bodies that were decomposing in the streets: “once it had embraced absolute despair, even the noises and the silences that populate a city take on a different signification” (Farah, 2001: 53).

At one point, the pain of the memory of these still recent events prevented him from talking. His entire body shuddered with tears, torn between suffering and anger. He fell into silence, then, in an unhopd-for fashion, he said:

“Our memory lingers on the horrors of the past, and what is at the centre of our reflection is the uncertainties of the future, because we are frightened of confronting our painful destiny. During this time, the fear that lodges at the heart of us multiplies all sorts of phobias; these phobias overwhelm us and haunt us cruelly. For a while now I have started to feel some of my childhood fears again – like my fear of the dark or of unknown places, for example. These fears haunt me ceaselessly and they reduce all my efforts at rationalization to nothing” (Farah, 2001: 56).

Interspersed with long silences, Mohammed’s testimony broke off at one point, to give way to another type of – dense – silence that announced a difficulty that it was impossible to repress. Deeply shaken by pain, he finished his story by saying that for the good of the whole of Somalia, he wished that Farah could meet witnesses that were better informed than he was and that these might tell him everything there was to know about the violence of which they were the victims in Mogadishu. And he let Farah leave without saying another word.

In the camp at Utange, it was possible to identify the origin of refugees quickly. On the one hand, there were middle class refugees, for whom the camp in Kenya was only a transit point between their country and their place of exile, in Europe or North America. On the other hand (in truth, the most numerous), there were the poor villagers or immigrants who had come from the borders of Somalia, half of them illiterate, totally ignorant of city life and thus lacking in any privileges: “they were irretrievably uprooted, as if the feeling of alienation had set up an ambush so as to trap them. They looked beaten, their nails were dirty and bitten to the quick, their skin furrowed, their gazes lost in the void” (Farah, 2001: 83).

Over time, the accommodation of Somali refugees in Kenya became more and more difficult. Sometimes, the new arrivals spent more than a week on board the ship that they had use in their flight. The representatives of UN High Commission for Refugees were continually making the bridge between the ship and the Commission, where the authorities in Mombasa were keeping in constant contact with the authorities in Nairobi, without any decision being taken, because before welcoming these people, the Kenyan government was trying to get as much money as it could from the UN: “Solemnly the Somalians stayed silent; language proved to be powerless faced with the extent of their affliction. Their stillness made them resemble the bereaved, waiting to recover in the colours that serve as their shroud” (Farah, 2001: 92)

Tearing bodies away from speech and dream, power makes of them living but deserted bodies. And humans become pure symptoms. These spaces are a portion of words and of earth that envelop the bodies as they collapse. These are *marginal* beings, they constitute a *non-world* faced with the *world*

Without words in the face of one's destiny

In these spaces of abandonment, life has the consistency of a shadow. The thickness of the *relation* is erased here. Engendered on the discursive plane, this political experience of dissolution of the force of life brings about profound material consequences, as much for singular bodies as for social bodies. One forgets that *roots* are a place left open between things, words, persons and meanings [sens]. And in the thickness of an instant, the displaced and the refugees stop creating a landscape around themselves. *Loss* consists in the abandoning of the body and of speech in a zone of ruins where time becomes indistinct and night remains, dissecting each gesture like a short, traumatic breath[5].

In the void of a space without identification or belonging, the impossibility of speech is, at root, the expression of an a-signifying place linked with a double loss: the loss of *belonging* that allows the recognition of a form of sharing out similar to *social memory* and, moreover, the loss of the *relation* that allows the recognition of an internal language similar to *individual memory*. So much so that beyond the recognition of the extreme and unsurpassable form of law as validity devoid of signification, abandonment is equally an *abandoning of the self*, an abandoning of the *symbolic* and of the *act* by the singular individual. An abandonment by which *I* become a stranger to myself, where one can no longer inhabit simple, original, elementary speech.

In the course of their displacement, in the refugee *camps* and the orbital roads that lead into the metropolises – in infinite waiting and infinite errance – humans are confronted with despair when they face up to the concrete impossibility of speech. In a mute movement of contamination, the space of abandonment invades plural and singular memory with a sterile silence that swoops down on bodies.

Here, silence is a wound that spreads from the body to speech. There is neither *jouissance* in solitude nor mortification, understood as the paradoxical affirmation of the self as *presence*. The event is nothing more than the *fact of falling* in an internal aridness where memories are rocks. The *act* is the abandoning of the body that struggles. Errance is physical: a material definition of an apprenticeship to solitude and to death. Lost in the body of the world, in an absolutely *exterior* space, how is one to remain faithful to a *space* that has marked the displacement of the body, even though the refuge is nothing but one more *wound*.

Insidiously, like a destructive ballast, the silence that inhabits the spaces of abandonment is a *silence-without-name*, like the remnant of a fear that is born during any moment, when history is configured as an *event-time* of abandonment. The space between the body and world is lost, *place* is lost because the desire to stay or go is worn away. And memory, the signifying place of individual history, decomposes. Bodies become oblique when faced with the light, capitulating before the ground, where shadow is the light of a sun in reverse. The possibility of return vanishes. And these spaces are constituted as *spaces without name* where silence obeys an experience that makes muteness emerge as a flat figure of silence. Muteness is then constituted as a figure of silence that is intimately linked to the *politics of silence*.

Silence envelops the bodies of those who have lived the *limit-experiences* of displacement and refuge. The different forms of silence that haunt the survivors of spaces of extreme violence account for the unavoidable presence of untranslatable pain. A pain in which – in a body become a tomb – desire covers over the need to forget the country and the family that take the place of substance. In the language of the survivors, extreme violence has transformed the meaning of some words and has emptied out the meaning of some others. A listener must be attentive to these perturbations of

meaning. This signifies that language in common, anterior to a limit event, cannot give a signification to an event that has reduced every possibility of meaning to silence. It thus proves necessary to reinvent linear semantics and to start from the perturbations of meaning that open up fissures in the body of language. One must look the world to speak to us, by creating another language - between silence and the body – from the spectre of a dying language. In different limit-histories, this silence assumes forms in which shareable language breaks, giving way to a fractured and enigmatic language. In his testimony, and after one of the long silences that punctuate it, Mohammed Abdullah, a Somalian refugee in the Utange camp in Mombasa, told the story of his eight year old niece, who had been raped and had seen her parents being murdered. His vocabulary was made up solely of “what, when and why”, not always in the form of questions. Farah recounts:

“That day they seemed terribly depressed [...]. She had the habit of repeating from time to time certain words that her uncle had uttered, in the same way that a child of two repeats a word to infinity. But she didn’t speak to me once. The day I visited her family, she didn’t stop crying “when” with an air of defiance” (Farah, 2001: 57).

In these haunted times, breath becomes the completed movement of a word repeated continuously until it loses any recognizable contour. Here the loss of speech is much more than the loss of words that remain after all the pain, because it is also the loss of what made it possible to *mourn* everything that has been definitively lost. This loss of speech inhabits a time in which nothingness is constructed in the flesh; in which it is impossible to mourn a profound pain, because names and dates have been extinguished.

In these spaces, the frontiers are interior but not intimate. Their existence has its root in a fragmented sedentary time in the depths of the past. Intimacy is demolished as soon as one leaves ones country behind: when a body is reflected outside of itself and is internally united with a universe in which fear inaugurates territories that time disorders. To survive, it was necessary to live the half-light, the void, in the company of all the dead. And the gap between emotions, struggles, persons and places becomes radical.

In the isolation of a body that is a mute name, and of words that do not manage to prop up their own consistency, there is no longer any but the linear present of a pain anchored in the past, also forgotten. In these spaces, bodies have lost their shadow. Pain is opaque and indivisible. Silence is henceforth deep and non-signifying. The shadows are themselves abandoned bodies.

However, on the margins of a speech exploded by the discursive order that is exercised on abandoned bodies, one hears silence like the breath of a material meaning. The bodies that inhabit space of abandonment are the presence of a singular wound in the body of the world. These *impossible bodies* inscribe a dense and deep silence in the theatre of politics and the social. They constitute a gesture-wound that is the *origin* of a form of life without definite translation.

Breaking the figure of a linear and homogeneous time, each *gesture* fractures the legitimate forms of signification: it makes an impossible voice emerge in the possibility of the real. And *initial speech* - which permits complicity with the *beginning* - occurs in the clandestinity of bodies, anterior to any exposition in the register of language. This *bare language* constitutes the effort to initiate a political thinking that is created as a *translation-power*.

In the erratic movement of *displacement*, one grasps through bodies the *translation-gesture* of a time that is the beginning of a forever unfinished appeal. A moment in which being born and dying are confused. Translation, then, is born from the convulsive return of an instant burned by the silence that surrounds beings and things. Its origin doesn’t follow from nostalgia for a total signification of the world, but it refers to a meaning inaccessible to recognized speech. A memory of cinders, it is the matter of a presence covered over by absence. Translation is, itself, a wound. An infinitely finite

- [1] “After the camps, there is no possible return to politics in the classical sense [...] The possibility of making the division between our biological body and our political body, between what is mute and incommunicable and what is communicable and expressible has been taken away from us for once and for all. We are not only animals in whose politics our life as living beings is at stake, according to Foucault’s expression, but also citizens in whose natural bodies our very political being is at stake” (Agamben, 1997: 202).
- [2] “I remember the tears of rebellion that flowed down the cheeks of the refugees. My sister had been one of the first of the fleeing Somalians to arrive by ship at Mombasa. She told me what had happened, in a mournful tone. ‘We fled, that’s all’ she told me when we found each other again in the refugee camp at Utange, Mombasa. We left behind us unmade beds, chairs in a mess, dirty kitchens, the dishes from the last meal still in the oven, we left our future in abandon. We fled at top speed, without worrying about our eventual destination, whether in Somalia as displaced persons or abroad as stateless, fugitive refugees” (Farah, 2001: 27)
- [3] “We fled because we encountered the monster that is found in the depths of us all, [a visage decouvert] In the steps of those who were fleeing, my father continued, we heard fear. And it was enough to hear the beating of our hearts, faster even than those in flight, to sense our own fear. In my opinion, it is wiser to join the mass of those in flight and then to ask oneself why these people were saving themselves, than to wait to be grabbed, to be raped or to be left by the wayside, like a corpse, without a grave” (Farah, 2001: 29 – 30)
- [4] “In the days following their flight, the refugees experience a veritable feeling of panic, because the immensity of what they have lost is brought to light in an unforeseen way. In the first place, the only thing that they are concerned with, given how terrorized they are, is to survive. They sit down in groups, forming circles in the search for friendly faces; they assemble one next to the other in the shadow of a tree or in the luminous halo of a streetlight, the new totem synonymous with a life in common. The refugees celebrate their afflictions and remember together. Their activity as refugees consists in consecrating millions of hours of the working day to introspection and the examination of their consciences. That is why they feel still more depressed at the end of the day than they were at the beginning. To be a refugee is to be suicidal” (Farah, 2001: 73). “Later, much later, in the middle of the night, in intimate and sleepless obscurity, with insomnia as their only audience, most of them entrust their most secret of worries to the intimate companion that lives in them [...]. What separates them from Somalia is a journey by sea of only four days, but the distance is much greater when they recollect it” (Farah, 2001: 73- 74).
- [5] Speech has been affected at the very heart of its *raison d’être*: the relation to the other. [...]. It would be a speech without other, insignificant, and pain prevents it from being uttered. It marks symbolic withdrawal from the world [...]. Individuals who have suffered a personal trauma remain without a voice, withdraw short of language, unreachable, [...] even if this silent refuge resembles a cry walled up in the flesh, a story fixed in pain. To speak would mark a return to the social relation, and therefore a rupture of the system of defence protecting the recollection of the horror” (Sibony, 1995: 108).

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Notes
