**The Secret Agency of Dispossession**

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**Biographical note**

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**Abstract**

What happens if the homo sacer kills before he can be killed? What if the dispossessed repossess what was taken from them? What if some agent declares a state of exception to the state of exception? Starting from the observation that Agamben and Butler/Athanasiou characterize bare life and the dispossessed, respectively, in terms of radical passivity, my paper sets off in pursuit of the secret agency that may yet be hiding in the interstices. It finds it in the language of spectrality and haunting that animates Butler/Anathasiou’s writing about dispossession and the concept of the zone of indistinction so central to Agamben’s theorization. As a result, I argue, we may usefully conceive of the spectral as bare life with agency. In illustration of this thesis, I undertake a brief reading of Joseph Conrad’s richly evocative tale of terrorism, bare life, dispossession, and spectral vengeance: *The Secret Agent*. My conclusion broadens the reach of the foregoing theorization to challenge the audience to think beyond the extinctionist paradigm of the Anthopocene as advanced by Timothy Morton and others, and to seek a secret agency whereby we can yet disrupt the total extension of bare life and the state of exception to the entire planet and all species on it.

**Keywords**

Agamben, agency, Athanasiou, bare life, Butler Anthropocene, Conrad, dispossession, homo sacer, secrecy, spectrality, terorrism

**Résumé**

L’agentivité secrète de la dépossession

Que se passe-t-il si l’homo sacer tue avant d’être tué ? Si le dépossédé reprend ce qui lui a été retiré? Si un agent déclare un état d’exception à l’état d’exception? Partant de l’observation d’Agamben et de Butler/Athansiou qui caractérisent la vie nue et les dépossédés en termes de passivité radicale, cet article se penche sur l’agentivité secrète qui peut toujours se cacher dans les interstices de la dépossession. Elle se niche dans le langage de la spectralité et de la hantise qui anime l’écriture de Butler/Athanasiou sur le sujet de la dépossession mais aussi dans le concept de la zone d’indistinction si central à la théorisation d’Agamben. Je postule que l’on peut imaginer la spectralité comme vie nue dotée d’agentivité. Pour illustrer cette démonstration, je me penche sur le roman de Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, qui évoque le terrorisme, la vie nue, la dépossession, et la vengeance spectrale. En conclusion, j’élargis ma théorisation pour inviter les lecteurs à penser au-delà du paradigme extinctionniste de l’Anthropocène avancé par Timothy Morton parmi d’autres, et à chercher une agentivité secrète par laquelle il est toujours possible d’interrompre d’endiguer l’avancée de la vie nue et de l’état d’exception.

**Mots clés**

Agamben, agentivité, Anthropocène, Athanasiou, Butler, Conrad, dépossession, homo sacer, secret, spectralité, terrorisme, vie nue

As a child growing up in the 1970s in the age of imminent nuclear threat, I was accustomed to the fact that at any moment, the missiles could already be in the air and we would never know. The authorities would never tell us—only panic could result. And once the missiles fell, we would all be dead. The possibility lingered at the edge of my mind always that if the missiles were already in the air, we were effectively already dead. I didn’t know it then, but I was experiencing the strange in-between state identified by Giorgio Agamben as a reduction to bare life. A potentially posthumous subject, at once vital and spectral, I tied my shoes and went to school every day simultaneously alive and—possibly—already dead: Schroedinger’s schoolboy.

Today this condition of precarity has been particularized, generalized, and even universalized. On one hand, the reality of global terrorism means that at any given moment anyone currently alive may also be *de facto* dead, pending the trigger on the suicide vest. At any given moment a bomber may invoke a state of exception, visiting sudden death upon us and evading prosecution—killing without sacrificing, reducing each of us to bare life, dispossession, *homo sacer* by fiat. On the general level, the nuclear threat has not gone away. It is more global than ever, with thousands of nuclear weapons missing from the former Soviet Union, and more and more nations obtaining nuclear capabilities each year—not to mention stateless or rogue regimes that actively seek such weapons. Finally, on the universal level there is climate change. Geologists have spoken: we are now in the age of the Anthropocene, an epoch defined by the capacity of human activity to bring about planetary changes with effects long outlasting even the most optimistic projections for human species survival. Thinkers such as Timothy Morton tell us that the tipping point has been reached, and we are already consigned to a Sixth Mass Extinction: the death of all complex life forms on earth. Even if we die of natural causes individually, even if our children live out their lives, the species itself is already posthumous. Its death is an inevitable result of the exceptionality we have granted ourselves on earth. The sentence is pronounced, though the zone of indistinction persists in the fabricated controversies over the root causes and final outcomes of climate change, and all we can do now is sit tight and await our slow extinction. As Eliot had it, not with a bang, but with a whimper. The prospects are overwhelming. In each case, we are always already subject to a state of exception which dispossesses us and reduces us to bare life. We can, it seems, be killed but not sacrificed: the sacred is fled and there is no prospect of redemption. Such, it seems, is the view put forward by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, by Judith Butler in *Precarious Lives*, and by Butler with Athena Athanasiou in *Dispossession*. It’s a view of dispossession that posits radical passivity, an abject lack of agency, at its core, foreclosing the very possibility of agency precisely when it is most desperately needed.

But what if we ask a different set of questions? What if we ask about the possibility of declaring a state of exception from the state of exception? After all, if the state of exception is generalized to become the norm, then it is no longer exceptional—it is susceptible to sovereign intervention. What happens if the *homo sacer* kills before he can be killed? How could the law punish someone who has already been expelled or excepted from its reach? What if the dispossessed repossess what was taken from them? If their passivity is not constitutive but contingent and susceptible to overturning? What happens if he kills *after* he has been killed? What if the ghostly posthumous existence to which we appear to have been reduced is not a state of abject passivity, but the locus of a residual agency—a place of radical freedom? The language of such spectrality permeates Butler and Athanasiou’s work in particular, providing a tantalizing possibility for thinking the *homo sacer*/dispossessed otherwise. Against Agamben, and Butler and Athanasiou’s visions of bare life/dispossession as in some key sense definitively passive and abject, the spectral articulates an alternative. It tempts us to excavate the occulted potentialities of abjection in the key of the hauntological. Building on this possibility, I want to attend to the spectrality that explicitly haunts Butler and Athanasiou’s work and, by extension, Agamben’s. This approach yields my main contention—that *the spectral is bare life with agency[[1]](#endnote-1)*—which I go on to test on one of twentieth-century literature’s keenest blades, Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*. My exploration of spectrality’s secret agency in that novel culminates in a broad conclusion about the status of the dispossessed vis-à-vis radical freedom and violence, offering a means of understanding—but not excusing—the spread of terrorist violence today.

It seems abundantly clear that Butler and Athanasiou's conception of the dispossessed emerges directly out of Agamben’s genealogy of the *homo sacer*. Certainly, *homo sacer* correspondswith the dispossessed, both of them produced by sovereign power, though in Butler/Athanasiou this is more broadly construed and more firmly anchored in the present. Indeed, there are numerous parallels between the two, and also in Butler’s notion of precarity, ranging from the question of what sort of life can be grieved/sacrificed through the exercise of sovereign power to reduce an individual to a suspended state outside the social and between life and death, to sovereign power’s capacity to suspend the law, the reduction of the individual to animal (or quasi-animal) status, the creeping extension of homo sacer/dispossession to all individuals, and so on. This similarity should not be surprising; though Butler only refers to Agamben twice in *Precarious Life* and not at all in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, and she and Athanasiou refer to him but once in *Dispossession*, it is clear that the notions of precarity and dispossession they embroider are firmly anchored in Agamben's account of *homo sacer*.

Agamben’s conceptualization, and the genealogy he provides in works such as *Homo Sacer* and *The Open*, is certainly more rigorous and historically aware than Butler and Athanasiou’s, but that very historical consciousness limits its effectiveness for thinking potentiality in the present. By contrast, Butler and Athanasiou eschew the genealogical dimension of Agamben’s approach for a more immediate and freewheeling view that is, ultimately, more productive. Their approach is inherently risky, though, because it attempts to theorize the possibility of agency for the dispossessed where Agamben is solely concerned with constructing a genealogy of the generalized state of bare life today. If in what follows, therefore, I critique Butler and Athanasiou rather more vigorously than Agamben, it’s not because I find their work more problematic, but because they have taken more risks and made themselves more vulnerable. Theirs is clearly a project undertaken in good faith and I would not hope to imply otherwise, even as I must insist upon some fundamental problems with it. As they themselves say in the opening pages of *Dispossession*, ‘Dispossession is a troubling concept. It is so troubling that as we seek to write about it, it is highly possible that it gets us into trouble’ (1). Of course, “trouble” is a term with an honoured pedigree in Butler’s work,[[2]](#endnote-2) so I hope that my effort to trouble the conception of dispossession at work in *Precarious Lives*, *Dispossession*, and *Giving an Account of Oneself* below will be taken as a productive rather than a destructive troubling.

Perhaps the most significant point of contact between Agamben’s notion of the *homo sacer* and Butler and Athanasiou’s notion of the dispossessed lies in its essential passivity and abjection. For both Agamben and Butler/Athanasiou, the figure of abjection is radically acted upon, but rarely if ever acting. The *homo sacer*/dispossessed appear to us in the guise of someone to whom *something has happened*. So radical is this situation for Agamben that he says the logic of exception which governs Western politics traps us all in a state of incarcerated and enforced passivity:

until a completely new politics—that is, a politics no longer founded on the *exceptio* of bare life—is at hand, every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile, and the “beautiful day” of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it. (11)

Existing outside both human and divine laws, the *homo sacer* is barred from doing anything to rectify or react against its status. It lives in a zone of indistinction, awaiting the fatal blow. It has no status or legal standing, and as such no social existence per se. It participates in the community only in the form of that which can be freely killed: ‘*homo sacer* belongs to God in the form of unsacrificability and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed’ (82). It can make no recourse to the law or even to social norms, since it is the constitutive exception that lends coherence to those systems themselves: ‘from the beginning this sacred life has an eminently political character and exhibits an essential link with the terrain on which sovereign power is founded’ (100). That is, the *homo sacer* becomes essential to the foundation of sovereign power by figuring forth that which such power may act upon without restraint: pure passivity. It is the embodiment of abjection.

Moreover, the *homo sacer*’s status as that which can be killed without being sacrificed places it beyond the realm of human recovery: ‘*homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns’ (84). It is not sovereign with regard either to others or to itself, existing as that upon which all can act, but which is by definition incapable of action. As Agamben traces it, the *homo sacer* is radically dispossessed of the ability to act. In its extreme formulation, things get even worse, since the *homo sacer* *may be* acted upon by anyone else, but rarely ever is. Instead, the *homo sacer* is held in a past-perfect stasis, having always already *been acted upon*, standing now outside virtually all possible activity—barring its final termination:

in the body of the *homo sacer*, the ancient world finds itself confronted for the first time with a life that, excepting itself in a double exclusion from the real context of both the profane and the religious forms of life, is defined solely by virtue of *having entered* into an intimate symbiosis with death without, nevertheless, belonging to the world of the deceased. (99–100, emphasis added)

The bottom line, for Agamben, is that the essence of bare life is radical abject passivity as a constitutive quality, perhaps *the* essential character of the *homo sacer*. This very passivity is the condition of possibility for sovereignty’s agential plenitude: for the sovereign to be truly sovereign—to be able to do anything at all—the *homo sacer* must be abjectly inert.

Making matters worse, Agamben views bare life as a category in more or less constant expansion. He agrees with Walter Benjamin that the state of exception has become the norm, and that the concentration camp is the paradigm of late modernity (Agamben 12). If we *have not already been* reduced to bare life, according to Agamben, it is only a matter of time until we are. Each of us exists in a potential state of exception, subject at any moment to being dispossessed of our subjectivity: ‘If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*’ (115). Agamben views the extension of bare life to all people as the means by which modernity levels the ontological playing field, reducing humans to the same status of killability afforded animal and plant life: ‘Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being’ (140). With this sort of depiction, Agamben reaches levels of gloom worthy of Timothy Morton. Though he works in a different register (the political rather than the ecological), he clearly reads the endgame of Western political life in the totalizing reach of bare life across ‘every living being’—and sees that reach as tending ever more fully towards death/extinction.

Let’s leave Agamben there for now, bracketing for the time being the rather more hopeful perspectives he offers in *The Coming Community*, among other works. Let’s turn instead to Butler to see how she and Athanasiou work through this problematic.

In the conversations gathered in *Dispossession*, Butler and Athanasiou extend Butler's earlier work on precarity in *Precarious Life* and *Giving an Account of Oneself* to develop the notion of the dispossessed as a double phenomenon. For them, dispossession has positive and negative valences, both of which ‘involve the subject’s relation to norms, its mode of becoming by means of assuming and resignifying injurious interpellations and impossible passions’ (2). In its positive vein, dispossession

stands as a heteronomic condition for autonomy, or, perhaps more accurately, as a limit to the autonomous and impermeable self-sufficiency of the liberal subject through its injurious yet enabling fundamental dependency and relationality. […] In [this] sense, avowing the trace of primary passions and losses—as one’s psychic and social attachment to the law that determines one’s disposition to alterity—is a necessary condition of the subject’s survival. (2)

In this respect, *dispossession* describes liberation from the liberal notion of a coherent internally-consistent autonomous subject. It insists that we are in fact not in possession of ourselves, that we are dispossessed from the outset by virtue of our entry into subjectivity through the agency and modes of address of others. Extending the view begun by Butler in *Precarious Life*, *Dispossession* contends that we only become aware of ourselves as subjects—as subjects of address© because others have seen fit to address us in the first place. We thus enter into a complex subjective ecology in which all subjectivity is relational and incomplete, permanently wired into all the others in existence rather than moving freely among them in splendid isolation, engaging when and where we choose, but in no way constitutively implicated in, or indebted to, anyone else. This mode of dispossession marks an end to the mode of possessive individualism that understands the self in terms of property; it *deconstitutes* the sovereign subject. For the sake of clarity in what follows, I will refer to this strand of dispossession as *ontological dispossession*.

Ontological dispossession finds its negative counterpart in what I will call *material dispossession*.[[3]](#endnote-3) In this mode, ‘dispossession implies imposed injuries, painful interpellations, occlusions, and foreclosures, modes of subjugation that call to be addressed and redressed. […] [I]n [this] sense, dispossession is a condition painfully imposed by the normative and normalizing violence that determines the terms of subjectivity, survival, and livability’ (2). In terms of lived experience, Butler and Athanasiou enumerate some of the ‘various modalities of valuelessness’ by which material dispossession is enacted, ‘such as social death, abandonment, impoverishment, state and individual racism, fascism, homophobia, sexual assault, militarism, malnutrition, industrial accidents, workplace injuries, privatization, and liberal governmentalization of aversion and empathy’ (19). In contrast to the liberating potential of ontological dispossession, material dispossession entails oppression and constraint on all sides. This mode of dispossession produces a class of people for Butler and Athanasiou, the dispossessed *per se*, who have suffered from it. Far from enjoying the autonomy associated with possessive individualism, the materially dispossessed find themselves interpellated and constructed as subjects of oppression and abuse, as objects more than subjects, even—given their role in constituting the social wholes from which they are excluded—abject. Material dispossession is, for Butler and Athanasiou, a condition to which one is subjected, not a liberating deconstitution like that of ontological dispossession.

Despite their presentation as roughly equivalent, ontological dispossession is profoundly asymmetrical with material dispossession.[[4]](#endnote-4) The difference is one of kind, not degree. Butler and Athanasiou’s embrace of ontological dispossession marks an epistemological shift: where we used to believe in and pursue liberal selfhood we know recognize the reality of post-liberal deconstituted, relational, subjectivity. This move presents itself as an advance in knowledge, a shift in our knowing that denaturalizes the former model of rugged competitive (capitalist, Enlightenment) individualism. At the same time, however, it installs its replacement as necessary, universal, and true: ‘every life is in this sense outside itself from the start, and its “dispossession” in the forcible or privative sense can only be understood against that background’ (5). Butler and Athanasiou’s embrace of dispossessed subjectivity changes the content of the universal and necessary, but not its universality or necessity. In this respect, they establish ontological dispossession not as one side of the dispossession coin, the other side of which is material dispossession, but as the foundation, the unmarked background, against which one either suffers *also* from material dispossession or not: ‘We can only be dispossessed because we are already dispossessed’ (5). Crucially, the ontologically dispossessed are identified with the second-person plural *we* both here and throughout the book, signaling that Butler and Athanasiou locate themselves firmly in this camp. It signals that the materially dispossessed are a *they*, someone other than the speakers/writers: an object of discourse and thought rather than agents of them. This move further naturalizes ontological dispossession, shifting the characteristics of privilege, but not the topography. Butler and Athanasiou retain their individuality (and, by extension, their universality) as figures of ontological dispossession, while the materially dispossessed are represented as homogenous despite the breathtaking variety of individuals and circumstances they comprise. In this, the materially dispossessed are just like the *homo sacer*, an abstracted limit concept that lends coherence to hegemony and ratifies sovereignty, even when—in Agamben just as much as in Butler and Athanasiou—that sovereignty is understood as cognate with abjection.

If ontological dispossession is necessary and universal, material dispossession is arbitrary and contingent. It is not a condition that obtains for all subjects whether they recognize it or not, as is ontological dispossession. Instead, it is the result of power differentials exercised to oppress certain kinds of deconstituted subjects. It is not a matter of advancing knowledge to recognize a fundamental truth but of real world inequalities. Where the recognition that one’s subjectivity is not coherent and autonomous—ontological dispossession—may have no palpable effect on how one lives day to day, being deprived of community, language, home, family, *identity*—material dispossession—can change virtually every aspect of one’s life. Material dispossession is not a matter of having the scales fall from one’s eyes with regard to subjectivity, but a matter of radical loss of freedom. Understanding that one’s subjectivity is not autonomous, volitional, and whole stands as virtually nothing compared with, losing one’s home, job, community, or citizenship.

In fact, if Butler and Athanasiou are right about ontological dispossession, that would seem to exacerbate the plight of the materially dispossessed rather than providing the basis for solidarity. The loss of identity attendant upon ontological dispossession risks depriving the materially dispossessed of agency precisely when it might be most useful. As bell hooks put it many years ago in a slightly different—but highly relevant—context, ‘Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the “subject” when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time?’ (2482). Gayatri Spivak makes a similar point in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, writing that such moves reintroduce

the constitutive subject on at least two levels: the Subject of desire and power as an irreducible methodological presupposition; and the self-proximate, if not self-identical, subject of the oppressed. Further, the intellectuals, who are neither of these S/subjects, become transparent in the relay race, for they merely report on the nonrepresented subject and analyze (without analyzing) the workings of (the unnamed Subject irreducibly presupposed by) power and desire. (264–65).

Spivak follows up on this damning view by declaring unequivocally that ‘This S/subject, curiously sewn together into a transparency by denegations, belongs to the exploiters’ side of the international division of labor’ (265). And while I would not go quite this far in characterizing Butler and Athanasiou’s approach—after all, they do not exempt themselves from the S/subject construction, but insist upon their inclusion in it—critiques of such conflations are a hallmark of postcolonial challenges to Western intellectual approaches. Even theorists so thoroughly associated with Western intellectualism as Julia Kristeva have recognized the risks involved in positing continuities between ontological and material dispossession (see, e.g., *Crisis of the ~~European~~ Subject).* From Butler and Athanasiou’s privileged perspective, ontological dispossession looks like but one strand of dispossession, susceptible to interweaving with material dispossession. I make no claim to speak for the materially dispossessed—as Spivak writes, ‘the oppressed can know and speak for themselves’ (264)—but it seems likely that, from the perspective of the materially dispossessed, Ontological dispossession may look like something other than a liberation that will make activism possible. Advocating it from a place of relative privilege risks adding insult to injury by making the loss of agency a natural fact, rooting material inequality in a universalized vision of non-possessive individualism. To put it bluntly: it’s a lot easier to be comfortable with non-possessive individualism when you have both possessions and agency either way, than when you have been robbed of all you hold dear and lack even the capacity to try to remedy the situation. The materially dispossessed woman sitting in a refugee camp seems very unlikely to find much solace in the Berkeley professor’s announcement that she too has been dispossessed, just ontologically rather than materially. Not only does the fact of universal ontological dispossession not alleviate the materially dispossessed’s situation of abject alterity, it actually compounds it. The materially dispossessed exist in a relationship of dependency upon the ontologically dispossessed theorists who theorize about them and with whom they seek to identify (but not to the extent of giving up their agency). The asymmetry between the ontologically dispossessed and the materially dispossessed thus uncomfortably reflects the asymmetry between the sovereign and the *homo sacer*. Though in each case both sides share a fundamental alienation from the social order, one side preserves agency, the choice to suspend the system, to declare the state of exception. The mere fact of choice, of agency in declaring the state of exception, constitutes a world of difference, an insuperable gulf that organizes the asymmetry between the two sides of the equation and gives the lie to any claim of solidarity or equivalence between them.

The asymmetry between the ontologically and materially dispossessed further undermines the ostensibly dialectical relationship that allows each to find its truth in the other and, thus woven together, to uncover modes of resistance to possessiveness in all its modes. In the pseudo-Hegelian dialectic that underwrites both *Precarious Life* and *Dispossession*, this relationship slips into a troubling consolidation of the foundational asymmetry: first, of the ontologically dispossessed as volitional agents; and second, of the materially dispossessed as Other, as the means by which the ontologically dispossessed confirm and consolidate their own humanity. In this, Butler and Athanasiou revise the Hegelian dialectic along Levinasian lines but with a decidedly self-congratulatory and self-consolidating outcome. Of course, Hegel is a long-term concern of Butler’s, going back to *Subjects of Desire* (1987), but he punctuates Butler and Athanasiou’s discussions of recognition and mutuality with the insistence of a symptom. Explicitly invoking the Lordship and Bondsman section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Butler and Athanasiou appear to overlook the extent to which they—as privileged figures of ontological dispossession—occupy the role of the masterly consciousness vis-a-vis the slavish consciousness of the materially dispossessed. The very process by which they describe themselves as having been dispossessed of their possessive individualism in favour of a deconstituted subjectivity replays the Hegelian dialectic—but with a crucial difference. In the Hegelian original version such deconsolidation follows from a dialectical movement of going out from oneself into the other, being mediated by that other, and returning to oneself with the enlarged consciousness of one’s fundamental failure to coincide with oneself: a dialectical expansion of consciousness that ought to bring about a qualitative shift in thought that recognizes the interconnectedness of all alterity with selfhood, of all subjectivity with objectivity, of all particularity with generality (and vice versa). In Butler and Athanasiou’s deployment of this dynamic, the dialectic of recognition places the ontologically dispossessed in the place of the Lord and the materially dispossessed in the place of the Bondsman. The ontologically dispossessed humanize themselves by humanizing the other, the materially dispossessed. They rediscover their own humanity in constituting it in and for the other. Animated by pity, and responding according to an ethics of alterity that discovers the truth of the self in the other, the ontologically dispossessed consciousness goes out from itself, engages with the slavish consciousness of the dispossessed and returns, thus mediated, to itself. It learns the lesson of its own humanity by ethically constituting the humanity of the dispossessed. (Mis-)recognizing the truth of their own deconstituted subjectivity in that of the materially dispossessed, the ontologically dispossessed (here, specifically Butler and Athanasiou), get to have it both ways: they retain their position of privilege even as they claim kinship and common cause with the oppressed others about whom they think and for whom they speak. It claims kinship with the materially dispossessed but consistently reinscribes their status as abject and non-agential. It uses the other to mediate self-knowledge and to consolidate its sense of its own humanity *without necessarily conferring equal humanity upon the Other.* In this, Butler and Athanasiou’s version of the dynamic is *pseudo-*Hegelian, an apparent movement that merely reinscribes the asymmetry it purports to alleviate, even when it alters the terms by which it is known, however marginally. And while this subterfuge may not quite constitute ‘moral narcissism’ (Butler and Athanasiou 107), it nonetheless exposes the sleight of hand behind Butler’s subsequent claim that ‘I do not augment myself with my virtuousness when I act responsibly, but I give myself over to the broader sociality that I am’ (107–108). It seems clear, when we break it down like this, that giving oneself over to the broader sociality that one is actually *does* augment one’s virtuousness. And let’s be clear on this point: the mis-recognition at the heart of this manoeuvre bears real material benefits for the theorists conducting it, who gain credibility on the political front even as they augment their careers and consolidate their status as leading Leftist thinkers. By contrast, it may or may not enhance our understanding of the conditions obtaining for the global materially dispossessed. It almost certainly has no impact whatsoever on their real, immediate, material conditions. A basic question of ethics thus emerges as urgently in need of address.

Butler and Athanasiou strive to maintain an ethical comportment vis-a-vis the materially dispossessed, but, as I have tried to show, their account of the materially dispossessed risks reinscribing in conceptual terms precisely the denial of agency that is core to their plight in the first place. In doing so, they exoticise the materially dispossessed as radically passive. The very term Butler and Athanasiou use to describe them is in the passive voice: the dispossessed. Like *homo sacer*, their fundamental defining characteristic lies in their passivity, in *having been acted upon* and thus dispossessed of the capacity to act. Their status as non-subjects in a world of possessive subjectivity and individual agency robs them of the capacity to act. For Butler and Athanasiou, the dispossessed do not act, but *have been acted upon* and in their reduced state appeal to us to continue to act upon them. They are consistently figured as victims, figures of bare life who *have been* deprived of space and time, subjectivity, identity, recognition, representation, and so forth. They *have been* pushed aside by capital, by nationalism, by sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, fundamentalism, misogyny. They *have been* rendered voiceless and abject, presenting only as a form of suffering appeal to which we can respond if we are ethical or not if we are not. In this pervasive figuration of the materially dispossessed as having been acted upon, as abject, Butler and Athanasiou risk appearing to consolidate their passivity just at the moment when they want to articulate the possibilities for resistance. Butler and Athanasiou’s logic thus appears to undermine its stated Levinasian commitments. Those commitments, always hedged or qualified but discernible nevertheless, manifest throughout the works under consideration here. In *Precarious Lives* and *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler borrows significantly from Levinas in formulating her notion of the dispossessed: ‘The other’s actions ‘address’ me in the sense that those actions belong to an Other who is irreducible, whose ‘face’ makes an ethical demand upon me’ (Butler 2005, 90). Though Butler problematizes the normative framing that allows a face to emerge at all (2005, 29–30), she preserves the notion of the Other as an appellant, whose ‘address’ takes the form of an ‘ethical demand.’ The face he or she presents constitutes an appeal—with all the legal implications of ‘appeal’ in play. The Other’s passivity is itself the substance of the appeal, insofar as he or she demands that we act on his or her behalf, precisely because he or she cannot. Dispossessed of subjectivity and always already excluded from its configurations, the dispossessed thus expose the ontological pyramid scheme of ‘possessive individualism’ (Butler and Athanasiou 2): ‘The “I” is breaking down in certain very specific ways in front of the other or, to anticipate Levinas, in the face of the Other […] or, indeed, by virtue of the Other’s face, voice, or silent presence. The “I” finds that, in the presence of an other, it is breaking down’ (Butler 2005, 69). In this deconstituting effect, the Other illustrates starkly the deep interdependence of all beings, an ecology of existence in which each of us owes everything—down to the very fact of being at all—to an infinite number of Others. We are mutually constitutive and mutually constituted, unable to exist in isolation: ‘it is precisely because I am from the start implicated in the lives of the other that the “I” is already social, and must begin its reflection and action from the presumption of a constitutive sociality’ (Butler and Athanasiou 107). In Levinasian terms, we owe Others everything and have an absolute final obligation to do justice to them: ‘we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings, for the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fiber of the boundary that contains me (one meaning of “incorporation”), but they also haunt the way I am, as it were, periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded’ (Butler2004, 28). This elemental appeal is the ground for Butler and Athanasiou’s quasi-Levinasian understanding of bare life and its inescapable ethical dimension[[5]](#endnote-5): ‘To respond to the fact, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life, or, rather, the precariousness of life itself’ (Butler 2004*,* 134). Responding to the fact of the Other’s precarity, and recognizing therein the truth of our own precarity as deconstituted subjects, constitutes the ethical situation *tout court*. It repeats Agamben’s claim that ‘we are all virtually *homines sacri*’ in different terms, but with much the same import, and furnishes the basis upon which Butler and Athanasiou begin to formulate their theory of political responsibility and mutual obligation.

According to Levinas, we must learn to live alongside the other with a non-intentional consciousness, neither reducing the Other to similarity nor annihilating her out of antagonism towards the unassimilable. To annihilate would be to fail radically to honour the Other’s right to be, while to recuperate the Other under the sign of the self-same equates knowledge with being and overcomes difference: ‘The *Wisdom of first philosophy* is reduced to self-consciousness. Identical and non-identical are identified. The labour of thought wins out over the otherness of things and men’ (78). For Levinas, the Other is to be treated as sovereign but unknowable, not abject or destitute, and thus not reliant upon the self for its existence. The onus rests entirely upon the self to comport itself ethically vis-à-vis the Other not because the Other needs our ethical comportment to survive, but because *we depend upon the Other*. We owe our very existence to the Other and as such depend upon him/her for our continued existence. The infinite hospitality we are required to extend to the Other is a function of gratitude, of the fundamental indebtedness that structures relationality and which we can only ever experience or know from our own perspective, from the perspective of the one who owes, who depends.

The affect of unease that accompanies this holding pattern, neither knowing the Other as a version of the self nor eliminating the alterity that prevents us from the comforts of homogeneity is what Levinas calls *mauvaise conscience*. *Mauvaise conscience* issues from the combination of such acceptance alongside the knowledge that we owe everything to the Other. We *are* only by virtue of others: both their existence and their non-existence, their lives-other-than-our-own and their impossibilized lives: killed, aborted, thwarted, averted. As Levinas powerfully puts this point, ‘My being-in-the-world or my “place in the sun”, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?’ (1984 82). To remain aware of this responsibility is to abide with a constant affect of *mauvaise conscience*, persistent uneasiness, feeling of the uncanny, sense that we ultimately fail to coincide with ourselves, that there is a significant shard of alterity embedded in our sense of self, of abjection in our subjectivity.

No such affect appears to obtain in *Dispossession*. Butler and Athanasiou’s revision of the Hegelian dialectics of recognition pre-empts their articulation of a quasi-Levinasian ethics in its insistence that the Other be recuperated under the sign of the self-same instead of allowed to continue to exist in a state of incomprehensible alterity. It seeks to make the Other knowable by theorizing her mode of dispossession as continuous with the ontological dispossession by which the thinker is identified. It presumes, on these terms, that the Other is somehow not fully other but in fact a variety of the same, that the appeal presented by her face is readily comprehended and susceptible of ethical response. In Levinas’s terms, this amounts to an insistence on ‘the correlation between *knowledge* […] and *being*’ (1984 76). Such insistence is a mode of epistemological violence for Levinas. While it may assuage the guilt of the privileged self faced with a suffering Other, it fails the ethical test in Levinasian terms in its erasure of the Other’s radical alterity.

Clearly, there are some real problems here. But it’s not all bad news, abjection, and despair. Even in the midst of their project’s compromises and challenges, Butler and Athanasiou manage to smuggle in a genuine *alter*native, a capacity for thinking otherwise. This alternative manifests in the form of something promising, something secret and powerful at work: the spectral.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler writes that ‘The critical image […] must not only fail to capture its referent, but *show* this failing’ (146). The ‘critical image’ in Butler’s and Athanasiou’s consideration of bare life is precisely that of the spectre. As the counterpart to bare life, the spectral provides Butler and Athanasiou with a means of thinking agency for the dispossessed. The spectral pervades Butler and Athanasiou’s treatment of dispossession, repossessing it in the name of a secret agency they cannot quite bring themselves to articulate. They repeatedly invoke the language of haunting and spectres in characterizing the dispossessed, particularly in terms of how the dispossessed appeal to us. The logic of subjective interdependence manifests for Butler and Athanasiou as haunting in the first instance: the dispossessed typify hauntology (16, 17), present an ‘unarchivable spectrality’ (19), ‘haunt’ them (28), exist as ‘neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral’ (33–34), and circulate as ‘the spectrally human’ (91), to list just a few of the occurrences. The terms ‘haunt,’ ‘spectral,’ and ‘spectre’ appear on average every five pages,[[6]](#endnote-6) sometimes with such density as to overwhelm the syntax (e.g., 189). For Butler and Athanasiou both, the spectral is the privileged metaphor for the appeal of the dispossessed or abject Other. It describes a substantive persistence beyond the reduction to dispossession or bare life. They write, paradoxically, of spectral bodies and how various absences or disavowals haunt presence. They also invoke it as the source of bad conscience—guilt, not *mauvaise conscience*—describing how they are personally haunted by certain questions of how to approach the Other (94).

The spectral is not so easily contained, though. It inhabits a zone of indistinction every bit as ontologically, politically, and ethically ambiguous as that inhabited by *homo sacer*. And, though Butler and Athanasiou most often use the spectral to characterize the victims of dispossession, they also use it to describe sovereign power itself, referring to ‘a ghostly and forceful resurgence of sovereignty’ (59). They continue, ‘we have to consider the act of suspending the law as a performative one which […] reanimates a spectral sovereignty’ (61). Indistinction is central here—both the dispossessed and the sovereign power are spectral, just as the sovereign and the *homo sacer* share the zone of indistinction in Agamben. This indistinction allows them to present the spectral as passive precisely insofar as it is aligned with dispossession, even as they activate Schmitt/Agamben’s notion that ‘“sovereign is he decides on the state of exception”’ (Schmitt, qtd. in Agamben 11). By making sovereign power into a ‘spectral sovereignty’ *animated by* the declaration of the state of exception, Butler makes it into an object, something that is produced in the performative instant rather than the agential subjectivity that acts with freedom and volition to declare the state of exception, as it is in Schmitt and Agamben. Sovereign power is spectralized in the very act of spectralizing the dispossessed. Agency flies from the scene, as Butler and Athanasiou refuse it safe harbour in the concept of sovereignty and chase it further down the line.

As Butler and Athanasiou know, though, the language we use simultaneously uses us. It lends itself to our purposes, but also bends our purposes to serve its own character. Just so with *Dispossession*’s predilection for the spectral, which refuses to be fully domesticated. It rejects dispossession and instead takes possession of the text. In doing so, it exploits the zone of indistinction to carve out an alternative to both Agamben’s doomsday formulations and Butler and Athanasiou’s equally grim, though more diplomatically articulated, liberal guilt. To elaborate this alternative, we must first understand something of the salience of the spectral, so that we can fully comprehend what it means to say that *the spectral is bare life with agency*.

Ghosts—spectres, phantoms, spirits—differ in some key ways from the figures of dispossession and bare life as Butler and Athanasiou, and Agamben, describe them. It is true that they are the epitomes of dispossession, having lost their very lives along with their worldly goods, connections to family, and social standing. And yet, spectres are also uncanny figures of possession, perpetually threatening to dispossess us, to take over our homes, our lives, our selves. They are always already in the houses they haunt, prior inhabitants who linger precisely because they *will not* be dispossessed. They take possession of places, people, events, often in the name of ethical imperatives that have been betrayed or contracts that have been violated. When they are simply evil, ghosts appear only to want you to die, to join them in the zone of indistinction inhabited by souls that have failed to find rest. When they are familiar and comforting, they remind us of our connections to the past and our obligations to the future. They assert the continuity of the subjective ecology and of the interminability of mourning. Frequently, they present a failure of grieving, something incomplete, inappropriate, unjust, violent, about their own deaths.[[7]](#endnote-7) They demand reburial, a proper ceremony, acknowledgment of an historical wrong: a sacrifice. In this sense, they are precisely those who have been killed but not yet sacrificed: the mirror image of the *homo sacer* who can be killed but not sacrificed. At other times, they represent the undesirability that mourning will conclude, that the living will move on and forget the dead. They assert a gentle, affectionate agency that insists upon renewed memory—an ethical comportment that embraces the Other *as other* and yet equally familiar, as constitutive of uncanny presence per se: *mauvaise conscience* in ectoplasm. They manifest an ethical aspect of hauntology, of the non-coincidence of subjectivity, of being’s inability ever to coincide fully with itself.

Spectres thus uncannily assert precisely the flawed logic of representation—epistemological, aesthetic, psychological, and political—upon which depends both the juridic-legal history Agamben outlines and the ethico-political world Butler and Athanasiou deplore. The spectre challenges representation itself, being neither the person of whom it is an image nor simply a detached signifier floating free. It indicates a prior bodily existence, but insists at the same time that its existence is free from the demands of the physical. Yet, it appears to us as more or less solid, depending on the circumstances, and can act upon the world around us. Less materially, spectres can ‘scare the wits out of us,’ dispossessing us of our senses through their actions—even by their simple appearance—rendering us unconscious, driving us mad, or even taking our lives.

All this boils down to a single term: agency. Spectres can act upon us and force us to act for them. They have agency and very often make agents of the living to transact business in the world. They do not sit patiently, suffering abjectly in a passive appeal to the living to behave ethically. Instead, they demand, urge, threaten, and cajole those to whom they appear. Crucially, when they appear, they do so with intent—this is what give them their possessive character. When a spectre materializes before you, it comes *to you* and *for you*: it lays a claim upon you. It implicates you in its indeterminacy, associates you with its suffering, and presents a demand for restitution. A demand, not an appeal. It does not offer the choice outlined by Levinas in terms of the difference between ethical and ontological exigency: ‘the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity’ (1995, 87). Instead, it fuses these two, and asserts, contra Levinas, that the ethical imperative is in fact *precisely* a modality of ontological inconsistency. It is bare life with agency, a demanding, active, volitional counterpart to the possessive sovereign subject. It is not the broken figure of the concentration camp inmate à la Agamben, nor the suffering figure of dispossession à la Butler and Athanasiou. It is, instead, a secret agency running through the tropes we use to navigate the treacherous shoals of late modernity, as we try to understand where we are, and how exactly we got here.[[8]](#endnote-8) It finds its way into the interstices of our language—and thus our thought—to defy our conclusions and to reassert possibility precisely where it seems most proscribed. It breaks the ban on thinking agency for bare life, on abandoning the dispossessed to their fate, on accepting our own precarious exposure to exceptionality.

What does this look like in practice? Where can we find a case study to explore? As it turns out, the body of twentieth- and twenty-first century British literature is replete with efforts to think precisely this problematic, perhaps most presciently in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, a richly evocative narrative of terrorism, states of exception, dispossession, bare life, and secret agency. The novel concerns a botched terrorist attack on the observatory at Greenwich. It is undertaken by Mr Verloc, who is a double agent—he works for a foreign power, infiltrating an anarchist group in London. Continental powers view England as problematic because it provides safe haven to terrorists who use it as a base from which to foment unrest and attacks abroad. At the novel’s outset a conference of European powers seeking a solution to the spread of revolutionary politics is about to begin. The threat of tougher laws in Europe is already driving revolutionaries from Europe to England for safe harbour (69). Verloc’s role thus far has been to inform on the anarchists in London, but now he is ordered to take things to a higher level and bring about an actual attack. Such an attack is necessary to provoke the English government into cracking down on the anarchists living in London. Threatened with the loss of his livelihood, Verloc undertakes to do it himself—or almost. He obtains a bomb and hands it off to his mentally challenged brother in law, Stevie, to carry to the location where it is to be left and detonated by timer. Stevie trips, the bomb goes off, and everything flies apart. As the police close in on Verloc, his wife—Stevie’s sister—learns of the events. In her grief and anger, Winnie kills Verloc and then flees towards France with the assistance of Ossipon, one of the armchair anarchists who formerly associated with Verloc. Ossipon abandons Winnie on the boat train, absconding with her money, and returns to London. Winnie jumps to her death on the crossing. These are but the bare bones of the plot, but they will furnish enough for us to proceed.

When Mr Vladimir orders Verloc to bring about a violent attack, he explicitly commands him to provoke a state of exception. Frustrated by the laxness of English law, Mr Vladimir seeks an outrage so offensive that it will provoke the government to suspend its own laws in a sovereign state of exception—that is, to dispossess the English people of their rights in the name of the sovereign power to punish those responsible. The attack itself must be exceptional to cause this response: ‘“an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable; in fact, mad”’ (67). Verloc has but one month to bring about the attack, during an interim itself defined in terms of suspension—the meetings of the ‘Milan conference’ have been ‘“suspended”’ temporarily, providing a window of opportunity (70). During this state of suspension, a state of exception must come into existence, one that will make England as inimical to revolutionary thought as the continent. Already we have the double exceptionality so essential to spectral agency: an exception to the exception.

Cast into the middle of this complicated and tense political scene is Stevie, Verloc’s mentally challenged brother in law, and little brother to Winnie. Already, his role in the novel is that of a secret agent inasmuch as Winnie decides to marry Verloc instead of the boy she loves specifically on Stevie’s behalf: she seeks security *for him* in wedding the stable, middle-class Verloc rather than the insolvent young man she truly loves. In this, she is Stevie’s agent—seeking security for him on his behalf. Within the novel’s structures of meaning, Stevie belongs to the dispossessed, to bare life, by virtue of his disability. He has virtually no legal standing, belonging permanently to the realm of childhood and practically *infans* in fact as well: he can speak but just barely, being easily reduced to inarticulate animal noises. His total lack of property rights further identifies him as a member of the dispossessed. Along with Winnie, Stevie has been dispossessed of most of his familiar surroundings in moving into Verloc’s house—the furniture and his mother have been carted off to live elsewhere. He is totally subject to Verloc’s generosity and goodwill, and thus equally exposed to any change in Verloc’s attitude. This precarity is the key to his instrumentalization by Verloc as the bomb-carrier in the plot to blow up the Greenwich observatory. In him, Conrad presents an ironic version of the *vitae necisque potestas*—the father’s absolute right of life and death over family members—whose origins in Roman law Agamben traces so carefully in *Homo Sacer*.

Moreover, Stevie presents multiple layers of indistinction that make it hard to identify and locate him decisively. Though he is not a complete figure of *homo sacer*, Stevie functions for Verloc in that role, as someone who is killable but who cannot be sacrificed. He is sacred to Winnie, and the occasion for the many sacrifices that have determined her life so far. He is, that is, at once banned from participation in the *polis* by his mental incapacity and yet sacred in his role as little brother to Winnie. He seems insensible to the political life around him, yet utters the most incisive phrase in the novel: ‘“Bad world for poor people.”’ He can be killed but not sacrificed precisely because he inhabits a zone of indistinction between *zoē* and *bios*. He is human, to be sure, and an English citizen, ergo a figure of *bios*. But he is marginal in the extreme, identifying more closely with the cabman’s starving and beaten horse than with the institutions of his country. He is easily reduced to incoherence and a state of physical and emotional incontinence that makes him seem more animal than human, ergo a figure of *zoē*.

When Stevie is killed, a new mechanism is set in motion. Verloc’s indifference to his death, manifest in his gross negligence and lies to Winnie about it, betrays the ethical appeal Stevie embodies. Ironically, his death provokes Winnie into a sovereign act. She establishes a state of exception to her otherwise stolid commitment to life with Verloc and to avoiding looking too deeply into reality. Blasted to her core by Inspector Heat’s revelation that Stevie has died, and driven further to distraction by the realization that it is Verloc’s fault, Winnie pointedly keeps her face veiled from her husband upon his return to the house. She refuses to look at him, refuses to present to him the face of suffering, and equally to grant him the order of subjectivity he seeks in sympathy. As he gives vent to his self-pity, Verloc notices that Winnie seems to apprehend a ghostly presence—she gazes past him so fixedly that he even turns to see what she sees:

when he looked up he was startled by the inappropriate character of his wife’s stare. It was not a wild stare, and it was not inattentive, but its attention was peculiar and not satisfactory, inasmuch that it seemed concentrated upon some point beyond Mr Verloc’s person. The impression was so strong that Mr Verloc glanced over his shoulder. There was nothing behind him: there was just the whitewashed wall. The excellent husband of Winnie Verloc saw no writing on the wall. (204)

The language gets increasingly spectral in the ensuing pages. Ruminating on her fate, Winnie again hears words from her past ‘in a ghostly fashion’ (206), and thinks of Stevie as ‘the unconscious presiding genius of all their toil’ (206). She has a vision of Stevie once again alive (207), before assuming the aspect of a corpse—when she responds to Verloc ‘it was as if a corpse had spoken’ in her place (209) and she comes at last to consider herself completely free, ‘enjoying her complete irresponsibility and endless leisure, almost in the manner of a corpse’ (220).

This spectral register climaxes in a moment of outright possession at the decisive moment. As Winnie stabs Verloc with the carving knife, she is rendered indistinct, and apparently possessed by Stevie: ‘As if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, guardian and protector, the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes’ (219–220). Stevie’s soul—dispossessed in its homelessness—takes control of Winnie, transforming her face and informing her actions with a secret agency that remains, however, impossible to ascertain: is it Stevie or Winnie who strikes Verloc? His ghost or her person? Murder or sacrifice? Justice or a crime? It’s a difficult moment, one of repossession/possession in which the dispossessed and bare life come together in a fog of indistinction that is ultimately agential. It is a moment in which the dispossessed visits violence, an exceptional act, upon the secret agent of sovereignty.

In it, Conrad uses spectrality to articulate an alternative to the radical passivity accorded bare life by Agamben and dispossession by Butler and Athanasiou. By deploying a logic of indistinction, Conrad yet preserves agency for those apparently least able to act autonomously. He thus also limns a different form of possessive subjectivity, one in which possession is fluid, fungible, and mobile—and in which agency resides with collective resistance to sovereign power. I don’t mean to claim too much for Conrad—he is not formulating a rejoinder to Schmitt, still less to Agamben, Butler, and Athanasiou, *avant la lettre*. He is no theorist of sovereignty on the same order as these others, though his work is fully engaged with its problems from start to finish. Rather, as I hope this brief excursus has shown, Conrad affords something of an object lesson, a means by which literature can teach us something about political and ethical possibility by imagining *otherwise*.

Prompted by Conrad, I’d like to conclude by suggesting that, today, it is not a moment too soon to begin thinking about what possibilities for agency are yet embedded in the condition of bare life and permanent exception towards which we are tending. If thinkers like Timothy Morton are right, then the Anthropocene has but one probable outcome: the Sixth Mass Extinction—the end of all complex life on earth. In this frame, what might it look like for bare life to act? For *homo sacer* to kill before he is killed? Or even for him/her/us(?) to kill after we are killed—as we surely will continue to do long after the species *homo sapiens* has gone extinct. For the dispossessed to repossess on their own terms instead of relying upon sovereign subjects to behave ethically? For the spectral to assert its ontological priority over the vital, *spectro-* over *bios* or *zoē* or *vita*? What does it look like when the only name we have for such assertion is terror, an existential fear and trembling?

For bare life is general today, about that no one who has seen the Jungle at Calais, the favelas of Rio, the slums of Manila, the bodies of refugees washed up on the beaches of Greece and Turkey, those tortured to death by the Islamic State and the United States alike can harbour any doubt. Each of us is menaced every day by the state of exception, by reduction to bare life. Whether it is called terrorism or not, terror is the outcome. Sovereignty, modernity, Enlightenment the triumph of *sittlichkeit* over *moralität*—the generalized victory of the Rights of Man achieved at the expense of a global class of the dispossessed and dependent from the very outset upon the reduction to bare life of those who had to be sacrificed in the name of a greater justice—Virtue, Robespierre called it—have populated the earth with legions of spectres. Following Hannah Arendt, Agamben points out that the refugee is the ultimate figure of bare humanity (126–135). It is also the world-historical figure of haunting, an overwhelming tidal return of the repressed produced by Western constitutionalism *per se*. As Conrad shows, such spectrality is the condition of absolute freedom fully as much as of bare life. Agamben concurs, writing, “In the state of exception become the rule, the life of *homo sacer*, which was the correlate of sovereign power, turns into an existence over which power no longer seems to have any hold” (153). The agency it harbours manifests in violence on an almost daily basis.

How then are we to respond? Conrad did not know: Winnie is dispossessed of her money by Ossipon and kills herself in despair—hardly a utopian outcome. Is her killing of Verloc just? Could it ever be? If the state of exception reduces people to bare life, then can doubling down, declaring a state of exception to the state of exception—making *homo sacer* of us all—ever be understood as justice? The worldwide spread of terrorism suggests that a significant portion of the dispossessed think so. I would suggest that the terrorist fatally misunderstands his violence as divine violence, sanctioned by an extra-historical justice—or at least it is misrepresented to him (and us) as such. And indeed, if the *homo sacer* is by definition sacred—already possessed by the gods—then might his violence not be a form of divine violence after all? This is, I suggest, the actual tenor of Vladimir’s demand that Verloc’s outrage be inassimilable to existing political discourses. In fact, though, the authentic terrorist act may resonate more fully with the Sartrean act of radical freedom—a deafening response to the intolerable condition of bare life. How are we to judge? How respond? So long as we continue only to conceive of bare life, the dispossessed, *homo sacer* as radically passive, we will be at a loss for answers.

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1. This formulation bears some affinity with Esther Peeren’s notion of “spectral agency,” outlined in *The Spectral Metaphor*, but there are key differences (see, e.g., 1-32). Where Peeren equates bare life with spectrality, and the bodily with the disembodied, I insist upon their distinction. For her, the spectral is a situation of abjection that can be turned to disruptive or resistant uses, where I see it as the agential alternative to the abjection of bare life. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, the opening pages of Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, in which she considers the perils and rewards of causing trouble, getting in trouble, and troubling. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Naturally these are not mutually exclusive categories, each of them encompasses and relies upon some aspects of the other for its existence. The terms nominate a predominant emphasis rather than a categorical distinction. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Butler and Athanasiou give each equal space on the page, balancing the sentences almost identically, and rounding out the paragraph with an implied dialectical resolution in their vision of an interweaving of them (2-3). This is, however, a false equivalence, or at best a false comparison. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a full discussion of how Butler approaches Levinas, but supplements his ethical theory with the psychoanalytic developmental notions of Jean Laplanche, see *Giving an Account of Oneself*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The frequency in this book in particular is symptomatic; in *Precarious Life* there are fewer than ten such references, and in *Giving an Account of Oneself* approximately five. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Tellingly, *Precarious Life* begins with the question of what constitutes a grievable life (see, e.g., xiv-xv). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For a terrific overview of the spectral turn at the turn of the millennium, see Blanco and Peeren’s introduction to *The Spectralities Reader* (1–36). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)