Speaking of Grief and the Grief of Speaking: Martyrs’ Speech and the Perils of Translation

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I. Injury and expression in colonial life

“In what respect, therefore, can the passion of a Franco-Maghrebian martyr testify to this universal destiny which assigns us to a single language while prohibiting us from appropriating it, given that such an interdiction is linked to the very essence of language…? (Jacques Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, 27)

Jacques Derrida, a hugely influential figure in the literary movement of deconstruction (he indeed coined the very term) and what later came to be called the “linguistic turn,” has been read extensively for his universalizing theory of language as slippery and profuse, rendering meanings that always elude. One cannot “have” language, one cannot “grasp” meanings; texts are always and essentially unresolved, founded on an “irreducible” complexity and absence, a deferral of meaning that he calls difference (Derrida 1993). In Monolingualism of the Other, for instance, Derrida waxes on the multiplicity of language – no language is ever “one” – but he also offers an extensive account of the divestment constitutive of speaking, a basic alienation of the speaking subject in, and through, language: language is in fact an original condition of estrangement (Derrida 1998).

Perhaps most striking about this book, however, is that his ground for theorizing the fundamental divestment in speaking is his experience as an Algerian Jew, one for whom French is simultaneously his only language, and a language which he cannot fully own: “I have only one language; it is not mine” (1). He is, he contends, disowned by the French language, and his disjoint within it is revealed in things like his accent and intonation (45).
But his condition is not exclusive, he notes, and indeed “mastery” of the colonial language by those for whom that language would seem to be more original, is an illusion.¹

Derrida continually oscillates in this book between general postulations about language and the particularity of his experience as an Algerian Jew and uncertain citizen of France.² He writes:

All culture is originarily colonial. Every culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some ‘politics’ of language. Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations….The question here is not to efface the arrogant specificity or the traumatizing brutality of what is called the modern colonial war in the ‘strictest definition’ of the expression, at the very moment of military conquest, or when a symbolic conquest prolongs the war by other means. On the contrary…But once again, it reveals the colonial structure of any culture in an exemplary way. It testifies to it in martyrdom, and ‘vividly.’

Derrida emphasizes that he does not wish to lose the extremity of French colonial violence, but neither does he wish to make it exceptional. He repeatedly stresses the physical violence connected to this colonized condition within language, using the word “martyr” or “martyrdom,” and even sometimes “passion,” to characterize his relationship to the French language. But his “passion” involves both a passiveness or subjection, and a kind of aggressive devotion. As Rey Chow characterizes it, his condition is a kind of surrender, but not as much an “acceptance of defeat by an enemy” as “an affirmative, binding gesture of submitting to the force of an inexorable, impersonal other” (Chow 2014, 30). He describes, for example, his encounter with French literary culture as one characterized by captivation – an uncertain combination of love and capture:

I seemed to be harpooned by French philosophy and literature, the one and the other, the one or the other: wooden or metallic darts [fleches], a penetrating body of enviable, formidable, sentences which it was necessary to appropriate, domesticate, or coax [amadouter], that is to say, love by setting them on fire… (Derrida 1998, 50)

The “martyr” for Derrida is someone who “suffers and testifies,” more deeply implicating language and speech with violence (19). But the testimony that this martyr gives is of a
“universal” structure: the (colonial) subject in language. To speak is to have been injured, and thus to testify to and about that injury.

Derrida’s association between speaking dominant languages and martyrdom is a loaded one for sure, but it is not presented as historical. He’s evoking the associations of martyrdom (violence and confession) strategically – and ironically, given the associations of martyrdom with Christianity, the religion of the very colonial culture inhabiting him. But what if we take Derrida’s associations seriously as a kind of historical proposition? What if we read Derrida “backwards,” and against the universalizing move Derrida and those following him make: what if martyr stories are, at least in part, staging scenes of cultural/colonial divestment?

Indeed I would like to take cues from Derrida’s predominant concern with language, and pick up on the associations in martyr stories between imperial/disciplinary violence and speaking, to suggest that one of the functions these stories have is to reflect on the fraught place of language within colonial experience. What do these figures say as they are about to die, and what might it mean?

“Marytr stories” is a bit of a misnomer here, however, in that I want to take that term as a more general frame of reference than to the stories associated with the apparent literary phenomenon of Christian martyrdom in late antiquity. I am more interested in the more expansive category of noble death traditions of which these later stories are partaking, and from where the term “martyr” derives. Indeed, the current scholarly consensus on noble death and martyr stories is that they are retrojected literary construction, the purpose of which is to aid in the presentation of the “witness” (martyr) as loyal and unmoved to the very end, as well as to offer a justification for dying: a cause worthy of one’s extreme pain. The most recent scholarship has also read the speeches and confessions of martyrs as part of the
larger literary task of the construction of identity as innocent victim or masculinized hero, and/or claiming that identity as an inversion of power, or a subject made through suffering (Boyarin 1999; Burrus 2007; Castelli 2004; Cobb 2008; Perkins 1995, 2009). But despite the fact that so much of the recent scholarship on this literature has questioned the veracity of such stories of (particularly Christian) persecution, as well as noticed the highly ornamented and generic dimensions of the narratives themselves, the content of the identity apparently being constructed has been the primary focus. The juridical scene of the speeches and confessions and the productive effects of that scene haven’t received attention, perhaps because these scenes are so obviously staged.

The notion that martyr stories might construct an identity, sometimes even a “Christian” one, is not wrong, of course, but Derrida pushes us to consider other dimensions of these stories. So at least as interesting as the production of identity within the juridical scene, and not unrelated to it, is what desires, attachments, pains, and frustrations are being recorded between the lines in such stories of heroic deaths, specifically around the experience of speaking as a colonial subject and the perils and inescapable expenses of entering dominant cultural “languages.” That is to say that while such stories are clearly not factual accounts of events, these stories do document something, and what they document is neither literal nor incidental to the content of these narratives. Indeed it is their generic quality that makes them richly available as “archives of feelings” (Cvetkovich 2003), and dramatizations of more generalizable experiences. So much scholarship has critiqued the ideological implications of such texts and their repurposing – and rightly so, since the legacy of the trope of the innocent victim has been a volatile, if not even toxic, one. But it seems that there simply has to be some way to give the possible ideological problems of such stories of victimization/persecution their weight and respect the reality and severity of the
violence depicted in them, all the while still entertaining them as meaningful, even valuable reflections for the contemporary moment.

II. The grief of speaking in the Gospel of Mark

When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the holy spirit. (Gospel of Mark 13:9-13)

At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Some of the bystanders who heard it said, “Look, he is calling Elijah!” (Gospel of Mark 15:33-35)

In the Gospel of Mark, speaking is often fraught. One of the gospel’s principle themes, secrecy, suggests high stakes around speaking. Jesus is always talking in parables that are meant to confound and confuse outsiders, speaking so that they may “listen, but never quite understand,” but then needs to explain himself even to those who should ostensibly get it (4:1-13). Almost from the beginning of the story, some word starts to spread about Jesus and he gets nervous:4 “Don’t tell anyone,” Jesus repeatedly warns those who witness to his acts of healing.5 Even while speaking and spreading the word about the kingdom of God is one of the central tasks of Jesus and the disciples,6 there is ambivalence about the speaking of that good news: the gospel famously ends with the first, and apparently only, witnesses to the empty tomb running away afraid and telling no one what they saw there. This abrupt ending ironizes the characterization of the story as “good news” but then problematizes the very story as an account itself (if they didn’t tell anyone, how does the author hear about it?). It is on this landscape of problems with speaking – indeed problems that circulate around speaking and witness – that the two passages above appear.

In the first passage, some kind of “trial” is referenced,7 and the one under trial is left speechless, perhaps doesn’t know what to say. Someone or something else will have to speak for them. In the second passage, Jesus’ last words on the cross are a quote from Psalm 22 in
Aramaic; or rather, Mark renders the phrase in Greek transliterated Aramaic, further explaining in Greek to its audience what the phrase means. Then, in the next verse, some onlookers misunderstand Jesus – they think he is calling out to Elijah – and they taunt him for it. Why does the Gospel of Mark use Aramaic at this moment? What does one make of the Greek transliteration of the Aramaic? To make things even more complicated, it turns out that the phrase is a Hebraicized Aramaic one rendered in Greek transliteration (Collins, 2007), and the bystanders misunderstand Jesus. Did they mishear him, or do they perhaps not understand Aramaic (even while they seem to know who Elijah is)? Finally, how might one think about these two scenes together?

Scholarly explanations for the Aramaic in this scene, and in the Gospel of Mark at large, have hovered around questions of textual, historical, and/or cultural authenticity. For example, one highly traditional reading suggests that Mark was originally written in Aramaic (Schenke 1974). In her commentary, Adela Yabro Collins contests and nuances this but nonetheless suggests the gospel was composed for bilingual followers who are translating for the benefit Greek-speaking audience (Collins 2007, 734, 755). Another possible reading is that the uses of the Aramaic trade on the exotic appeal of Judean culture in almost a fetishized fashion to appeal to a Greek audience, for example (Stowers 2011). Each potential explanation produces different tensions between translation and authenticity, and the subtext in each case is the question of how fully or authentically Judean Mark or Mark’s audience might be (which is inextricably tied to the question of Mark as a “Christian” text). Jesus has with few exceptions been speaking Greek the entire rest of the gospel. Does the fact that the writer clarifies the meaning of the Aramaic (for non-Aramaic speakers) suggest perhaps a non-Judean audience? Is the fact that the Aramaic is a Greek transliteration representative of a hybrid identity on the part of the writer? Does this gospel point to a transition away from
Judean belonging and toward a Greek or gentile constituency? A Greek-speaking/Judean spectrum is usually presumed, with Mark falling somewhere in between, and the earliest tradition (Jesus or an earlier version of Mark) is more closely aligned with Aramaic and thus Judean belonging.

Yet Mark is a gospel steeped in questions of Judean sovereignty and belonging. Scholarship has noticed this on some level by situating Mark in the period of, and more often immediately after, the Roman-Judean war. Indeed I have argued that the entirety of the Gospel of Mark could be read as a response to the traumatized extended moment in the wake of the war (Kotrosits and Taussig, 2013). To understand the Gospel of Mark as “Christian” is anachronistic, since neither this gospel nor any other extent texts of this period use the term, and it misses the intensely Judean character of its reflection. To offer one of the more obvious (and poignant) examples of Mark’s preoccupation with Judean politics: in the passion narrative, Jesus has just been given a crown of thorns, and the words “King of the Judeans” have been inscribed over his head. It’s a painful satire of Judean aspirations of sovereignty. Likewise, at the climactic moment of Jesus’ death, Gospel of Mark describes the temple veil as being torn in two, a detail from the sack of the temple by the Romans, also given by Josephus (Jewish Wars 6.5.3), thereby suggesting that Jesus’ death does, or should, resonate with the trauma of the war and the destruction of the temple.

The scene is dark and tangled: Jesus is being crucified under the auspices of a Roman centurion, and as he dies he quotes scripture in Greek transliterated Aramaic (with a little Hebrew mixed in) about being abandoned by his god, and the defeat of Judea is referenced. Then the Roman centurion speaks something that only God or spirits had spoken or known in other parts of the gospel: the identification of Jesus as God’s son. Specifically, the centurion’s words seem to echo God’s words at Jesus’ baptism and the transfiguration (1:11,
God’s voice, it seems, is ventriloquized through the mouth of the Roman soldier. Or differently said, in this moment of naming, the voice of God and the voice of the torturer become one.

Given the broad resonances of the term “son of God,” which in Hebrew literature could mean a king or simply anyone belonging to Israel, and also given the exemplary rather than singular status of Hebrew figures and figures in the noble death tradition (Patterson 2004, Nickelsburg 1974), it seems that Jesus is a representative figure, one through whom aspirations and losses of Judean sovereignty get reflected and considered. But as such, this scene registers a kind of signal or symbolic moment in which state disciplinary violence yields both questions about belonging (“Why did you abandon me?”), and an interpellated ethnic specificity, as he appeals to his “native tongue.” In other words, while this moment is full of questions about God’s sovereignty and Judea’s place relative to it, it also seems that it is at the very moment when Jesus is most given over to the colonial power that he is most authentically Judean.

Despite Mark’s constant reliance on irony as a literary strategy, this is not simply a Markan irony. It is rather a poetic capture of colonial and/or diasporic subjectivity at large, in which cultural authenticity, itself a form of sovereignty, and its terms of articulation are not somehow in tension with colonial experience, but rather produced by it. Building in part on Derrida’s experiential and culturally specific framing of language in Monolingualism of the Other, Rey Chow has offered something of a phenomenology of the “nonnative speaker.” Chow notices, among other things, that Derrida expresses no nostalgia for an apparently more “original” language, but still expresses dis-case at his inability to fully authenticate himself within the French language – a dis-case he can only ever express in French. She writes:
In addition to inducing in the colonized an unfulfillable yearning for linguistic purity and thus a general sense of incompetence and disability, this monolinguism of the other legitimates itself by getting rid of likely competitors, by making sure that native languages such as Arabic and Berber become increasingly marginal and useless….The monolinguism of the colonizer means that the development and refinement of the mind that come with the literary, philosophical and humanistic learning…were in Algeria’s case allowed to take place only in French. (Chow 2014, 24)

In other words, the totalizing nature of dominant languages means that even “original” or “native” languages appear within their frame, a cultural distinctiveness produced in and by colonial interpellation: “Toi, le Juif-d’Algerie”

Indeed as Rey Chow’s other work has shown, appeals to cultural authenticity, especially by non-dominant populations, are nearly always a function of colonial constraint (Chow 1993). Not only does the notion of the “authentic” minority subject support a fantasy that someone could be untouched, unadulterated by the colonial encounter (a fantasy appealing to people on both sides of the colonial relation), but the content of that authenticity is always caught up in colonial representations of what counts as real belonging (Hall 2003).

As a poetic capture of experience, though, this scene seems to register or archive something more than the ironies of cultural authentication. Not only are colonial/diasporic identities always already spoken in the dominant language, but that speaking, not insignificantly, coincides (in Mark and in Derrida) with physical pain: translation is affliction. Mark places alongside the extremity of government torture and execution the more minor pains and frustrations of communication. Jesus is crying out, and part of his humiliation is that people can’t understand him or, perhaps, they are mocking his accent (“Look, he’s calling Elijah!”).

Why pair the extremity of torture with more everyday pains of speaking? Both Mark and Derrida’s texts are imbued with more than the inherent ideological violence of language
imposition or the ironies of colonial subjectivity. Significantly, Chow connects “languaging” to racialization, to the embodiment of race and the injuries that constitute it. This is in part through being hailed in the classic Althusserian sense as other (as black or as nigger, for instance), a process that both deeply wounds and naturalizes itself on the surface of the skin – what she calls the “epidermalization of naming and calling” (Chow 2014, 7). But Chow also notices the way languages themselves register with a racial charge. She quotes Franz Fanon: “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ration to his mastery of the French language” (4). This is what Chow calls “biosemiotics.” Not only is it that “language possession is translated into and receives its value as skin color” (3). It is also that language means the appearance and legibility of the subject, doing so only at the price of injury; a recruiting of one into the dominant language or grid that is simultaneously an “amputation” (5).

The use of Aramaic throughout the Gospel of Mark echoes this association between injury, authenticity, and speech: each instance of Aramaic accompanies a moment of physical precarity – illness, exorcism, resurrection, healing, as well as the place and moment of Jesus’ execution. Each use is a transliteration, and each time the author of Mark translates for the reader. The use of Aramaic along the lines of both illness and healing resonates with Derrida’s and Chow’s notion of the “prosthetic” dimension of coloniality: it incurs injury even as it enables. But two of these instances of Aramaic are also associatively rich with questions of speaking and mouths. For instance in Mark 5:35-43, Jesus has just healed the daughter of a synagogue leader, explaining that she is not dead, simply sleeping, and tells her “Talitha koum” [“Little girl, get up.”]. Jesus’ immediate next words are that no one should know about this, and he tells them to give her something to eat. A few chapters later, Jesus heals a deaf man with a speech impediment, first by putting his fingers in his ears, and then he “spat and
touched his tongue” (7: 33). Looking up to the sky, he “sighed” and said, “Ephphatha,” or “be opened” (v. 34). The text then says that immediately the man’s ears were opened and his “tongue was released, and he spoke plainly” (v. 35). As in earlier episodes, Jesus warns the crowd to tell no one, but “the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it” (v. 36).

Healing is politically charged, not only in Mark, but as a symbolic act of power in ancient Roman culture more generally. But the political charge in these scenes extends beyond the illustration of Jesus’ power (or its limits). Read as a phenomenology of colonial life or an archive of colonial grief, the latter scene might easily ring with questions of cultural legibility: a man is tongue-tied, calling forth the many experiences in which, for instance, non-white English-speakers are asked incessantly to repeat themselves or speak more “clearly.” (A colleague who is of Indian descent often gets comments on “her accent” – and she grew up in New Jersey.) It is the deployment of Aramaic that makes the man understandable: appeals to cultural authenticity are the antidote to illegibility. Immediately after, however, speech is out of control: the more people are told to be quiet, the more they talk. Jesus’ Aramaic instruction, “Be opened” seems to have opened a kind of Pandora’s box: what might get said? Ambiguous dangers attend speaking, even while (as the women running from the tomb also painfully show) not speaking also has its problems.

The instruction to feed the little girl in the earlier story ties speaking to eating. These are not only two activities of the mouth, but two activities that are culturally loaded. Rey Chow connects these two forms of orality in her work, as well, through the trope of the “consumption” of culture. Just as language might be understood as “prosthetic,” joining its inherent injuries to its capacities, food and eating provide their own complex opportunities for agency. She observes the way food and eating are evoked specifically in the work of
Chinese writers Leung Ping-Kwan and Ma Kwok-Ming, however she waxes more broadly on the idea that if one “imbibes” culture, it makes sense that literal consumption would be a site of cultural investment:

When far away from home, it is often the taste of something familiar that reminds us not only of what we have eaten before, but also of who we are. To be sure, there is nothing extraordinary about such a revelation, but what is unusual is that it is consumption, normally considered a passive, unproductive act, that serves as the agent of generating cultural difference, at a time when such difference is thought to be lost or in the process of disappearing. (Chow, Not Like a Native Speaker, 85-86).

Aramaic in Mark seems to offer a “taste,” or lend the aura, of something culturally familiar, whether or not Mark’s readers actually speak Aramaic – perhaps the way hearing Polish spoken reminds me of my grandmother, even though she only spoke a dozen Polish phrases anyway. (In this way, exoticism and familiarity are not mutually exclusive.)

But more to the point, questions of what you take in and what comes out (consumption and expression) are a matter of certain anxiety for Mark. “Do you not see that what goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” Jesus says (7:18-19), responding to the Pharisees’ accusation that his disciples hadn’t washed their hands before eating. “He thus declared all foods clean,” adds the author reassuringly. Mark’s Jesus is making both a scatological joke and an admonishment about intentions and behaviors. “For it is from within, from the heart, that evil thoughts come,” Jesus says, offering a classic list of sins. “All these evil things come forth and defile a person”(7:21-23). Not incidentally, the debate is framed as one about “tradition” (paradosin, v. 5, 13) – what is essentially a synonym, or even euphemism, for cultural authenticity.

That is, in the matters of “tradition” and cultural production, you are not what you eat, but you are the shit that comes out of you (at least according to Mark). This negotiation of cultural purity is both disillusioned and strangely idealized: the closest to purity one can
get is in intention, as if everything else is impossibly alloyed. It is significant then, that what so often “comes out” of Jesus are words in his “native tongue,” or at least words struggling to be so, the sounds and intonations of which are expressed through the prism of Greek. The intention of his speaking is pure. This is even while Jesus is also periodically exorcising colonial forces from others: “Get out of him!” he yells to the demon “Legion” who, among other torments, speaks through the man he is possessing (5:1-20).

But again this knot of speaking and cultural purity/authenticity is so often tied into scenes of physical anguish. This is no wonder, since as Page duBois has demonstrated so graphically in Torture and Truth, the Greek term for torture or torment (basanos) also (and more originally) meant “touchstone” – that which tested purity, and differentiated the good/true from the bad/false:

The Greeks first use the literal meaning for basanos of ‘touchstone,’ then metaphorize it to connote a test, then reconcretize, rematerialize it to mean once again a physical testing in torture....The slave on the rack waits like the metal, pure or alloyed, to be tested…. The test assumes that its result will be truth.... (duBois 1991, 35-36)

DuBois notices a certain fantasy in these ancient associations with torture: truth is not just possible, it is accessible, and can be revealed through the body of another. Truth is hidden, it is a secret, waiting to be discovered, extracted, and the instrument of that extraction is violence. That is to say that secrecy also represents a desire for disambiguation. The famous “secrecy motif” of the Gospel of Mark, which plays itself out most often around these scenes of bodily precarity, has almost entirely been treated theologically as about “who Jesus really is,” meaning his identity as an exclusive figure, which finally gets “revealed” by the centurion at Jesus’ crucifixion. But perhaps it simply reflects a broader network of associations, and resonates more with the pains of the production of identity and authenticity at large – not to mention the perils of speaking at all as a colonial/diasporic subject. One’s language, always prosthetic and constantly, frustratingly misunderstood,
instantly “reveals” one as the true cultural other, the “ethnic” subject who is made so through the discipline of the state.

In these scenes in Mark, the terms of cultural authenticity and the terrible means of truth production are staged again and again. Truth, including the “truth” of who one is, is ever haunted by the means of its extraction. But even as what actually gets said under duress is ambiguous and speaking is perpetually fraught, the desire for purity, for authenticity, for clarity – in other words, the attachment to the terms of legibility – also seems to infuse Mark. The assurance “Don’t worry about what you will say, the holy spirit will speak for you” suggests that truth, secret even to its bearer, will make its way out somehow, even as the “good news” remains unspoken.

III. Bearing tradition: apology and the perils of translation

“But you God will speedily overtake, since you are cutting out the tongue that sang songs of praise to him.” (4 Maccabees 10:21)

Mark is not the only text in which a “martyr” makes recourse to a native language at their death. In fact, in the Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Paul in Rome, Paul’s final words are a prayer recited in Hebrew (5:27). Even more chillingly, in a Latin expansion of the earlier Greek story, Pseudo-Linus offers the following detail of Paul’s decapitation: “After [his head] had been severed from the body, it called out the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in Hebrew in a clear voice” (16:46).

In 4 Maccabees, too, the mother of seven sons who are tortured and die at the hands of King Antiochus offers her encouragement to them “in the Hebrew tongue,” and the detail that her speech occurs in Hebrew is mentioned twice (12:7; 16:15-16). Curiously, perhaps, the mother is the only figure to speak in Hebrew in 4 Maccabees. She is not the only figure who testifies to the grief of speaking or the perils of translation, though. Eleazar’s torture and death in the first part of the book is framed not only by his Stoic endurance, but
by his apologetic speech that describes Hebrew law as fully reasoned *philosophia*. Both his endurance and his apology constitute moves towards legibility – an act of cultural translation.

Eleazar’s story is directly preceded by the cultural assimilations of the high priest, Jason (appointed by Antiochus). Then, as Antiochus drags a group of Hebrews in to choose between eating unclean food or dying, he singles out Eleazar, who is “of priestly stock, expert in the Law and advanced in age, and known to many of the tyrant’s entourage for his philosophy” (5:4-5). Antiochus mocks Eleazar for Hebrew cultural curiosities, saying that his devotion [*threskeia*] makes him “anything but a philosopher”:

> “Why should you abhor eating the excellent meat of this animal which nature has freely bestowed upon us? Surely it is sheer folly not to enjoy harmless pleasure, and it is wrong to spur nature’s good gifts. But in my judgment it will be greater folly still if you indulge in idle conceits about truth and continue to defy me to your own cost in suffering. Will you not awaken from your preposterous philosophy, abandon your nonsensical calculations, assume a frame of mind to match your years, and accept the true philosophy of your expediency?” (4 Macc 5:9-13)

The terms of legibility have been set: “philosophy” is the frame of reference offered by the Hellenistic ruler and his world. The text describes the grid on which Hebrew piety and culture must be placed, either as a “reasonable” and “true” philosophy, or a “preposterous” one full of folly, but a philosophy no less. In what follows, Eleazar’s speech and virtue answer that call in spades: he endures violence and death with steely will, illustrating how thoroughly Hebrew law inculcates one in the arts of wisdom and self-control. But in demonstrating how deeply reasoned and worthy of philosophical devotion Hebrew law is, 4 Maccabees affirms the grid.

This move to render Hebrew law understandable by translating it into the terms of Hellenistic philosophy is echoed in writers such as Philo and Josephus, and it is illustrative of broader social impulses issuing from the 4th century BCE on, but becoming distinct during the Roman imperial period, when 4 Maccabees was composed (Mason 1996). Steven Mason
comments on the scene between Antiochus and Eleazar as part of 4 Maccabees’ rhetorical strategy for its first century CE context: “By repeatedly preferring to call Judaism a threskeia, [Antiochus] links it with superstition, in which taboos are observed through fear (cf. 5:13)” (42-43). While being associated with philosophia hardly meant immunity from Roman suspicions (35-36), it was certainly better than a charge of superstition (Wendt 2014).

While 4 Maccabees doesn’t “invent” Hebrew law and piety as a philosophy, or offer an historical account of that cultural translation, it does capture the dynamics of cultural legibility within dominant culture, and the production of subjects, ethnically specific ones, within disciplinary machinery. Scholarship has puzzled about 4 Maccabees’ consonance with Christian martyrdom accounts, as well as its concerted “Greekness.” But similar to considerations of Mark’s Aramaic lines, these questions carry the subtext of 4 Maccabees as a “culturally mixed” text, somehow not quite as “purely Judean” as perhaps some others. Indeed 4 Maccabees seems to be at the very crux of questions of what constitutes “truly Jewish” literary/cultural production (Rajak 2002, 99-124; Boyarin 1999, 115-117).

To reiterate, however, Chow, Derrida, and recent theorizing around diaspora at large (Braziel and Mannur 2003, Axel 2001, Edwards 2003) demonstrate that, paradoxically, there is no such thing as an authenticity unmarked by colonial relations; that the very diagnosis of something as “more” or “less” authentically Judean is a reproduction of colonial/diasporic discourse. 4 Maccabees’ overt rhetorical strategy of cultural translation alongside its dogged insistence on cultural purity, and even nationalism, makes it more of a target for these questions. But is not exceptional or strange – it is exemplary of diasporic/colonial collectivity. Neither does 4 Maccabees’ consonance with Christian texts, to my mind, jeopardize its emphatically and “authentically” Judean status since, as I have argued, so many of what we now consider Christian texts are doing the very same thing (Kotrosits 2014b).
But more than a poetic capture of a colonial dynamic, 4 Maccabees archives the costs and agonies of translation: Eleazar’s belabored translation does not spare him pain, of course, it *coincides* with pain. Likewise later in the text, the third of the seven sons to die under Antiochus has his tongue cut out, a form of torture both graphic and symbolic. “But you God will overtake, who cut out the tongue that sang songs of praise to him.” (10:21).

The mother’s speech makes sure to offer an explanation of what that endurance, what those deaths, yield:

“My children, noble is the struggle, and since you have been summoned to it to bear witness for our nation, fight zealously for our ancestral Law. Shameful were it indeed that this old man should endure agonies for piety’s sake, while you young men were terrified of torments. Remember that it is for God’s sake that you were given a share in the world and the benefit of life, and accordingly you owe it to God to endure all hardship for his sake, for whom our Father Abraham ventured boldly to sacrifice his son Isaac, father of our nation; and Isaac, seeing his father’s hand, with knife in it, fall down against him, did not flinch.” (4 Macc 16:16-21)

Speaking “in the Hebrew tongue,” this unnamed mother tells whoever is listening that the deaths of her anonymous sons translate into a *nation*.

Tessa Rajak has observed not just the nationalist and masculinist aspirations of 4 Maccabees, but the thoroughly “de-personalized” character of the story. Not only are the mother and the sons never named, but Eleazar itself is a “generic name, given in both the Letter of Aristeas and in 3 Maccabees to the venerable priest in the story” (Rajak 2002, 118).

Rajak continues that this tendency, one she ascribes to “Jewish martyrology,” “discourages any possible focus on personalities and, ultimately, to curb the cult of individuals. The martyrs must represent Israel as a whole.” Jesus’ death in the Gospel of Mark, as I’ve read it above, fits this description, substantiating Rajak’s observation – though she contrasts this tendency to the later Christian martyr cult and, of course, would not place Mark as “Jewish martyrrology”. But Rajak’s point additionally corroborates a reading of these kinds of stories
as not really about the singularity of heroes at all, and as perhaps holding more unexceptional, if still extreme, experiences of violence and grief.

Curiously, the text makes sure to note – not just note, but fully play out – what the mother of seven murdered sons might have said instead, and what she might have said is a fierce lament, nearly as long as the speech she makes to rationalize their collective suffering. As many have noted, through her resolute refusal to be given over to her grief and vulnerability, the mother of 4 Maccabees becomes a model of masculine virtue and impenetrability – a theme played out in other stories of martyred women (Cobb 2008). But it seems that the dramatization of what she could have said functions not just to highlight her fortitude, but also to actually express that grief. 4 Maccabees, for all its desire to fortify against helplessness, allows (obliges?) the reader sit for a long time, line after line, with the uselessness of the mother’s loss.

The mother makes recourse to the book of Daniel, a text not only portraying miraculous survival under tyrannical violence, but one caught up in its own dense symbolics on the arts and perils of translation: one might recall that Daniel manages to ascend through foreign administrations because of his ability to interpret dreams and, not incidentally, translate the “writing on the wall” to King Belshazzar – a phrase in Hebrew that predicts the end of his rule (Daniel 5:5-6). While Daniel survives, his survival becomes increasingly incredulous, and the association between translation and precarity stands nonetheless. Similarly, the fact that Eleazar is the name of a priest in the Letter to Aristeas is no small detail, since the Letter of Aristeas is a narrative imagination of the translation of the Hebrew Law into Greek, a deal made by the King of Egypt in exchange for the return of Hebrew slaves. The exchange value of slaves for the Greek translation implicitly and hauntingly suggests the cost, in corporeal terms, of such cultural labor. Here, too, we find a thick web of
associations, as one of the primary sources for the *Letter of Aristeas* is Josephus, a Judean general captured by the Romans and commissioned by them to write a histories of his people. Out of his ambivalent survival (and perhaps his own work of translation), Josephus indeed identifies strongly with the figure of Daniel (Mason 1994). He in fact describes his own work in the preface of the *Antiquities of the Jews* with a heart-rending exhaustion “…[B]ut in the process of time, as usually happens to such as undertake great things, I grew weary and went on slowly, it being a large subject, and a difficult thing to translate our history into a foreign, and to us unaccustomed language.”

Translation is both enabling and disfiguring. Cultural “survival,” which is inevitably cultural production, occurs only at the price of bodily integrity. The torture and death of the martyrs in 4 Maccabees surely testifies to this. But the emphatic “willingness” of martyrs in this story to die testifies to something else: it signals a devotion not just to their “philosophy” but to the very disciplinary scene that renders them comprehensible at great expense, a rapt devotion to the grid on which they have been pinned.

Jesus’ death in the Gospel of Mark does not bespeak willingness to die – quite the contrary, Jesus expresses ambivalent and hesitating submission and a sense of abandonment. But it does illustrate with striking and visceral detail the ways in which disciplinary or juridical scenes might produce both cultural distinctness and crises about belonging in one and the same move. What’s more, the production of the truth of “who one really is” within disciplinary scenes is a constitutive feature of the noble death tradition. Typically, violence reveals the true character, the virtue, of the hero/heroine, as well as the veracity of the cause for which they die. This is no less present in the texts comprising the classical canon of martyrological literature, of course, but many of these texts layer additional truths into the scene. Not unlike the alignment of God’s voice with that of the centurion in Mark, in many
of these stories, God’s cosmic truth aligns with the discipline of the state, giving the juridical scene an absolute and existential value. In Peter’s final speech in the Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Peter, for example, one finds an emphasis on God’s truth being revealed in violent death:

After coming to the cross and standing beside it, [Peter] began to say, ‘Oh, name of the cross, a mystery completely hidden. Oh, grace inexpressible, spoken in the name of the cross. Oh, unspoken and inseparable love, which cannot be revealed through unclean lips. I am compelled to begin revealing it and making it known to you, oh person, whoever you are, until the end of my imprisonment here. I will not conceal the mystery of the cross, which for a long time has been closed up and hidden in my soul. Do not let that which is visible be for you the name of the cross, oh you who hope in Christ, for it is something other than what is visible in you.’ (Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Peter, 8)

Here inscrutability is fetishized as “mystery,” and just as in Mark 13, the truth buried in that “mystery” is not necessarily accessible to the one that bears it.15

In the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, one finds an even more theological ontologizing of state power, and even more spellbound attachment to the disciplinary scene. His letters – especially, and not insignificantly, his letter to the Romans – suggest an elaborate, almost erotic fantasy life about the moment and meaning of his death. He begs the Romans, “Allow me to be bread for the wild beasts” (Rom 4.1), wishing to be completely destroyed and dissolved (Rom 4.2) in that most spectacular disciplinary theater of the arena. He insists there are no pleasures in this life, but imagines deep pleasure in the food and drink of Christ’s flesh and blood: “I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, from the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is imperishable love” (Rom. 7.3). Here, too, danger and possibility, pain and pleasure attend the activities of the mouth: in fusing himself with Christ, not only is his death a feast, but in being eaten, he gets to eat.

Indeed what Ignatius becomes at the moment of his death is no small thing: he not only describes himself as becoming a disciple of Christ, “attaining” Christ but, not
insignificantly, becoming a “Christian.” Yet Ignatius’ transformation is always “in process,” as Castelli notes: it is not fully achieved until his death in the arena. In fact, the term “Christian” in Ignatius’ letters is mostly subjunctive or aspirational: he hopes not only to be “called” (λέγωμαι) a Christian, but hopes to be “found” (εὑρέθω) one. That is to say, Ignatius does not die for being a Christian; he rather hopes to fulfill his interpellation, nonetheless suggesting a captivity to the grid that makes him not just consumable, but legible.

IV. The untranslatability of grief (“martyr” stories as archives)

In reading this particular group of texts as stories of cultural divestment, colonial and juridical attachments, and the knotty politics and feelings around speaking as a diasporic/colonial subject, my hope is strategic, rather than reductive or conclusive. In other words, I don’t wish to argue that all martyrdom or noble death literature is entertaining these colonial/diasporic questions – even if I am convinced that such questions are part of what gave the texts discussed here so much purchase. My point is rather that interpretations of “martyr” texts have been over-determined not only by ideological-critical impulses, but by questions of identity construction that wonder more about the content of the identity being produced than the other possible resonances of the difficult scene of its production. So many of these particular texts, not to mention the classical texts of Christian martyrdom at large (the Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs, the Martyrdom of Perpetua, the letters of Polycarp, for instance) have been read primarily as being “about” Christian identity – and an assumed or broadly claimed Christian identity at that. Christian identity then becomes only perceived social/cultural meaning or investment these texts evince. Reading these texts as archives of colonial experiences, among other things, allows us to both expand and refine our senses of what such stories of empire and violent death, of apology within juridical scenes, might be accomplishing for their writers and readers.
Indeed, circling back to Derrida, we can and should pause for a long moment on the colonial particularity of the grief, the longing for truth, the devotion to frames of cultural legibility—even ones that terrify or impale you—archived in these stories. The traction of such stories has overshadowed that particularity, not unlike Derrida’s (and his readers’) own persistent stretching toward more generalizable conditions. Along with the eventual universalization and abstraction accorded to “Christian” and “Christianity,” respectively, came a certain loss of culturally and colonially specific meanings. Again, we need to read against that grain, in part to make such texts newly meaningful to us. But we must do this even while noticing that the power of these stories has been precisely that their graphic severity and standardization provided a kind of cathartic hyperbole; or, better said, they provide a capaciousness into which one can almost seamlessly slide. They give expression to, among other things, one’s own desires to become who one “truly is” against the inherent dispossession of violence, pain, and mortality in general. They chart the ways that part of what is so injurious about being hurt is one’s ongoing, but perhaps not necessary, dependence on that hurt for understanding who one is. These stories have an alarming prolixity—alarming because grief, or any experience, involves its own untranslatability, and such stories provide an ambivalent grid through which so many have made, and continue to make, their own lives and pains legible. But their prolixity only further testifies to their efficacy as archives; not to mention that their unbridled ability to speak, to say more or differently than the speaker might intend, is ever haunted by the sense that there is some other language, long gone, being murmured in the background.

1 “Quite far from dissolving the always relative specificity, however cruel, of situations of linguistic oppression or colonial expropriation, this prudent and differentiated universalization must account, and I would even say that it is the only way one can account, for the determinable possibility of a subservience and a hegemony. And even account for a terror inside languages (inside languages there is a terror, soft, discreet, or glaring; that is our
lay off his head. A (the god of healing) had some imperial resonances as the son of Apollo, the patron deity of Julius Caesar and performed by Vespasian, and the treatment of healing and social power in Perkins including (and not insignificantly) Roman emperors. See for example Tacit.

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community both from without and within, including the chaos and cataclysm of the Roman-Judean war. Not
incidentally, the chapter mentions “false prophets and false Christs” who perform signs and wonders “so as to deceive” (13:21), suggesting that perhaps one of struggles for Judeans following Jesus was, following the work of Heidi Wendt, debates about authenticity and expertise. Wendt’s work has illustrated not only how this language was common rhetoric for a competitive the field of independent or “freelance” experts on (ethnically coded) religious traditions which pervaded the social world of the ancient Mediterranean. She has also suggested that such figures were seen as suspicious to imperial authorities, in part because they had not official links to cultural/social/religious institutions, and were regularly subject to legislation trying to target and describe them. Indeed, she suggests that one way to understand “martyrdom” is that so-called Christian martyrs were such freelance experts, since the punishments and accusations were so similar. See Wendt (2015, 2016).

One might add that these voices become one to painfully ironic effect: “Alethws atos o anthropos wos theou” spoken by the torturer seems to mock, rather than proclaim in earnest.

Louis Althusser (1971) theorizes the production of identity through state institutions, and to illustrate this
dynamic (which he terms “interpellation”) he used the example of the police officer calling out to someone on the street, and the “someone” turning in response. The juridical framing is an important one, and has been taken up in the history of philosophy and contemporary theory by many thinkers, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler being two of the most prominent.

The episode with the Gerasene demoniac, whose name is “Legion” (a reference to the Roman military) most obviously illustrates this. But healing powers were attributed to all kinds of powerful and divine figures, including (and not insignificantly) Roman emperors. See for example Tacitus Historiae 81:1-1 on the healing performed by Vespasian, and the treatment of healing and social power in Perkins (1995). Likewise, Asklepius (the god of healing) had some imperial resonances as the son of Apollo, the patron deity of Julius Caesar and Augustus.

The earlier version notes that it was only after Paul stopped speaking, and was silent, that the executioner cut off his head.

“In total disregard for the Law, Jason change the nation’s whole mode of life and its polity; not only did he lay out a gymnasium on the citadel of our native land but he also rescinded the service of the Temple.” (4 Macc 4:19-21)
Likewise, the transformation of Eleazar’s old and feeble body into an athletic and virile physicality under torture is a fantasy that registers vulnerability as much as it offers an imagination of overcoming it.

This is also echoed in the Gospel of Truth, for instance, in which the Father’s inaccessibility, abandonment, and implication in violence regarding those for whom he ostensibly cares, are continually affectively re-valenced as and with pleasurable experience. In that text, Jesus’ death on a “tree” becomes fruit that one can enjoy guiltlessly. See Kotrosits (2015).

As Ignatius writes, “For me, ask only that I have power both inside and out, that I not only speak but also have the desire, that I not only be called a Christian but also be found one. For if I am found a Christian, I can also be called one, and then be faithful, when I am no longer visible in the world” (Romans 3:2). He writes to the Magnesians that “it is fitting not only to be called Christians, but also to be Christians” (4:1). As I argued elsewhere: “The notion that for Ignatius, his Christian-ness is in question until he dies, that he anticipates the revelation of his being Christian in the arena, would seem to confirm that ‘Christian’ carries the valence of imperial targeting, if not tortured-induced truth production, rather than an identity with obvious or given content. The ‘truth’ of being a Christian, for Ignatius, is revealed primarily in the crosshairs of state discipline. Indeed the only real content to “being Christian” for Ignatius is imitating Christ in death (as someone else who died under the auspices of the state): he hopes to become worthy of ‘the name’ by dying honorably and voluntarily. In anticipation of his death, he figures himself as Christ, or as about to “attain” Christ, thus becoming a ‘sacrifice.’ Consonant with the noble death traditions that shaped understandings and representations of Jesus’ death, for Ignatius, “Christian” what gives meaning to his death or, put differently, what rescues his death from meaninglessness, rather than what causes it.” (Kotrosits 2014b)

References


