The Syrian Corpse:
The politics of dignity in visual and media representations of the Syrian revolution

Abstract:
This essay explores the material, phenomenological, and political meaning of the Syrian corpse and the question of its dignity as represented in a series of media and visual outputs from 2011 to the present. The essay begins by arguing that the violence in Syria now targets the dead as much as the living. As such, the essay highlights the forms of 'necroviolence' that the Syrian corpse has been subjected to: mistreatment, erasure of markers of identity, denial of burial, mutilation, and ultimately an attempt to erase it from memory. The essay concludes by arguing that the Syrian corpse is not merely the passive subject or victim of 'necroviolence' but can also become the paradoxical agent of what we might call "postmortem resistance".

Keywords: Syria, revolution, corpse, visual, media, dignity.

Introduction

In the award-winning Syrian documentary, *Ma'a al-Fidda* (*Silvered Water, Syria Self Portrait*, 2014), a collaboration between Oussama Mohammad, a Syrian film director living in exile in Paris, and Wiam Simav Bedirxan, a school teacher in the besieged city of Homs, Wiam asks Oussama: 'If your camera were here, in Homs, what would you be filming?'. To answer this question, *Silvered Water* synthesizes 1001 cell-phone recordings and other amateur film footage shot in the city into one single harrowing narrative. Yet, arguably the most shocking and persistent image in the film is that of the corpse. In a succession of scenes, we see a young boy kissing his dead father's face; a crowd attempting to recover a dead body from no-man's land; a father crying over the body of his young daughter; blood pouring out of numerous corpses left on the street and the open unseeing eyes of a dead body which haunt the screen and the viewer.

It is now possible to detect an emerging body of literature across a number of fields - critical theory, visual studies, biopolitics - on the 'necropolitical' figure of the corpse. As a succession of critics including Jason de Leon, Banu Bargu, David Campbell and Kathryn Verdery have argued, the dead body is not only the site for a new theatre of war but also a possible locus for political resistance. To recall de Leon's *The Land of Open Graves*, this new war on, and for, the corpse can be described as a form of 'necroviolence': 'violence performed and produced through the specific treatment of corpses that is perceived to be offensive, sacrilegious, or inhumane by the perpetrator and the victims" and the cultural groups to which they belong (2015, p. 68). In the same way, Bargu labels the forms of violence that are inflicted on dead bodies as a result of armed conflict 'necropolitical violence': 'mutilation, dismemberment, […] the destruction of local cemeteries and other sacred spaces that are designated for communication with and commemoration of the dead, the delay, interruption, or suspension of the conduct of funerary rituals, […] and the repression and dispersion of funeral processions for the newly dead'. For Bargu, necropolitical violence also ʿrefers to an entire ensemble of diverse practices that target the dead as a surrogate for, and means of, targeting the living' (2016, unpaginated).

If the corpse itself is the object of a new necropolitics of violence, however, visual representations of the maltreated dead body in art, photography and other media are increasingly recognized as furnishing the grounds for a possible necropolitical resistance. For David Campbell, war photography offers an immediate historical document of atrocities that can be more powerful than any written narrative: 'seeing the body and what has been done to

it is important. Images alone might not be responsible for a narrative's power, but narratives that are un-illustrated can struggle to convey the horror evident in many circumstances' (2004, p. 71). In Campbell's account, though, war photography also marks the beginning of a new politics of resistance on behalf of the corpse because '[…] images of war dead could be the basis for mobilization against atrocity and violence' (p. 61).

This essay explores the material, phenomenological, and political meaning of the Syrian corpse as represented in a series of media and visual outputs from 2011 to the present. Firstly, I highlight how Oussama Mohammad's documentary *Silvered Water*, the sound installation *Gardens Speak* and the Campaign *Syrians Are Not Numbers* commemorate and mobilise the figure of the corpse as the privileged site of a politics of resistance. Second, I analyse the work of two artists - Palestinian Amjad Ghannam and Syrian Youssef Abdelke - whose work can be characterized as an attempt to re-individualize a corpse which has been stripped of its identity. Finally, I examine visual representations and media discourses surrounding Aylan Kurdi - the young boy whose body was found on a beach near Bodrum in Turkey - as a way of exploring the ethics of representing, or speaking on behalf of, the corpse. In summary, the essay seeks to argue that the Syrian corpse is not merely the passive subject or victim of *necroviolence* but can also become the paradoxical agent of what we might call *postmortem resistance*. What symbolic affect or resonance is attached to the Syrian corpse at home, abroad, or in the space in between? Who or what inscribes or produces these meanings? Who, if anyone, has the right to speak for the corpse? To what extent, more precisely, might it be possible to speak of a politics of dignity which paradoxically centres around the unburied dead body?

Politics of the corpse

In Western culture, the politics of the corpse has a long history: cultural historian Thomas Lacquer observes that '[…] the dead body matters, everywhere and across time, as well as in particular times and particular places.' '[I]t matters,' he argues, 'because the living need the dead far more than the dead need the living. It matters because the dead make social worlds. It matters because we cannot bear to live at the borders of our mortality' (2015, p. 1). At the same time, the figure of the unburied corpse has a particular place within this larger cultural history that stretches all the way back to Greek antiquity. For Sophocles, of course, Antigone's deep conflict with Creon is precisely over the corpse of her brother Polyneices and its unburied status. If Antigone's willingness to risk her life to provide her dead brother with a proper burial articulates the cultural meanings attached to the figure of the corpse in Greek culture, then we can perhaps find an equivalent to this politics of dignity in modern Arab culture. In Arab culture, the dead body is subject to an elaborate code of conduct and practice designed to protect and defend the dignity of the corpse.[1]

To begin with, Arab cultures, like Greek and Roman societies, ensure that their dead are washed, perfumed and properly shrouded before burial. This attention to the status of the dead body can even be detected in the history of Arabic science, which contains descriptions of ointments and balms that should be applied to the dead body to prevent it from smelling.[2] In the enactment of these various duties towards the dead, amongst both Christians and Muslims, Sherine Hamdy notes, 'family and community members are understood to enact their respect to the dead and to experience moral edification for their own lives' (2012, p.104).

It is perhaps not surprising then that one of the best-known narratives regarding the treatment of the dead in Arab culture is Prophet Mohammad's warning that 'breaking the bones of the dead is like breaking the bones of the living.' The Prophet's *hadith*,[3] along with the detailed instructions on how to bathe, shroud, pray, and bury the dead, has often been

understood - both by Muslim theologians and the public at large - as a clear message regarding the importance of respecting and maintaining the dignity of the dead. This duty of care in handling and burying the dead has even influenced the ways in which funerary architecture was designed and developed during the Muslim era. For Gehan S. Ibrahim, 'funerary architecture, which is illustrated by construction of the mausoleums, is an expression of the ethics of the dead that was practiced in Muslim cultures' (2014, p. 233). In Ibrahim's account, this practice was later extended with the building of 'adjacent mauseleums' or 'burial chambers' which were erected in crucial locations within the complex,[4] as well as public institutions linked to these mausoleums to '[ensure] a continuous source of blessings and benedictions' towards the dead (p. 233).

In the modern Arab world, ethical, religious, and political debates around organ transplantation and medical dissection have often returned to the Prophet's *hadith* about the inherent dignity of the corpse to make the case for, or against such controversial questions. Yet, arguably the politics of dignity come into sharpest focus not in the domestic sphere of medical ethics, but the sphere of political wars, civil wars, and revolutions. To turn to the Syrian Revolution (2011-) alone, we can observe an ongoing war over the political, ethical, and religious significance of the corpse which is being played out not only on the battlefield but in visual (film, photography, art) and media (campaigns, social media) productions as well. What form does this war for and against the dead body take?

Mobilising the Dead

Silvered Water (2014)

In the words of Oussama Mohammad, *Silvered Water* is an attempt to capture the capacity for 'human expression' through the very filming process that the Syrian people are keen to partake in (as cited in Badt, 2015). It is also a meditation on loss and trauma: Mohammad himself is, from his exiled status, haunted by dreams of the young boy who once snatched his camera from him and was shot to death. On the one hand, Mohammad's dreams are clearly signs of the trauma and guilt he feels for not being able to save the boy and for not being at home with and amongst his people during such a traumatic time. On the other, the child in the dream is, as Jane F. Thrailkill puts it, indicative of 'the belatedness or failure of representation', for the child is now a corpse and is 'beyond assistance' (2003, p. 118).[5] Yet, the crowd we see on screen risking their lives to tie a rope around a corpse in order to transport it to a truck tells a different story to that proposed by Thrailkill. In Syria, it seems even the corpse needs assistance and must be saved from a brutal and degraded disposal.

To retrieve the corpse is necessary for the crowd, because without it the event of death cannot take place and the funeral rites cannot begin. By the same token, it is necessary to give the corpse a proper burial to protect its dignity in death and honour its sacrificial deeds in life. If the treatment of the corpse has become one mode through which politically violent forces in Syria inflict further suffering on individuals and groups - it is well-documented that funerals themselves have been targeted both by the regime and the opposition - then the recovery of the corpse (even when it proves life-threatening to do so) is a further extension of the act of resistance. In this sense, the Syrian conflict is quite literally a war to the death.

For R. Parker, 'treatment of corpses remain[s] one of the means by which men could hurt, humiliate or honour one another, express contempt or respect' (1983, p. 43). If Parker's insights relate to ancient Romans, it remains relevant in many modern contexts and is clearly so in the Syrian context of *Silvered Water* (2014). To recall Mohammad's own description of the scene where the crowd attempt to recover the corpse:

This sequence for me has a title: *The Society of Dead Poets*. Syria is the society of dead poets. When people were trying to save the dead body, I can say that it is very beautiful. Why? That man who died was just trying to get bread for his children. Snipers were trying to kill anyone who got this body. Those people were sacrificing themselves to save a dead body! To bring back human value. This is where poesy comes from. (as cited in Badt, 2015)

The attempt to control the fate of the corpse becomes an attempt to resist the powers that are seeking to destroy and humiliate the human subject within Syria. This is because failure to dispose of and honour the dead is a failure of the very revolutionary spirit that has led to the event of death. In Lacquer's words, to leave the dead unattended and the body uncared for, 'to desecrate or mutilate it is to erase it from culture and from human community: to deny the existence of the community from which it came,' adding that 'conversely, the willfully brutal disposal of the dead - […] - is an act of extreme violence, an attack on the order and meaning we look to the dead to maintain for us' (2015, p. 4).

Gardens Speak (2014) and 'Syrians are not Numbers' (2015)

In the interactive sound installation *Gardens Speak* (2014) by London-based artist Tania El-Khoury, we encounter another attempt to commemorate and preserve the identity of dead Syrian bodies. *Gardens Speak* memorialises the bodies of ten ordinary Syrians who were buried in domestic gardens in Syria by retelling their stories via audio recordings of their final moments. As part of their experience of El-Khoury's installation, the living audience are asked to dig into the soil and extract an audio file that will enable them to listen to the story of one of the dead bodies. For El-Khoury, the stories that are quite literally excavated from the grave ensure that these deaths do not remain anonymous, unrecorded, and invisible. If the corpses were buried anonymously inside Syria, then *Gardens Speak* gives these corpses their right to a gravestone and performs their funeral rites to a spectator outside Syrian territories. By inscribing names, dates, and narratives onto a theatrical space which has been rendered a graveyard, this installation is an exercise both in literally digging these bodies up and, symbolically, laying them to rest. In this context, the stories of the ten corpses expose the ways in which political violence in Syria has, for a very long time, stripped away the subjectivity of the living as well as the dead: all ten corpses in El-Khoury's work had lived like the dead even before dying.

To pursue the same restorative politics of dignity, the campaign 'Syrians are not Numbers' (2015) also attempts to preserve the rights and identity of the corpse. The campaign was launched by Syrian activists inside and outside the country - including Rami al-Asheq (the founder of the campaign) and Mais Edward and Eiad Charbaji, who reside in Sweden and the US respectively. It came in response to leaked photographs of thousands of Syrian corpses who had visible and severe signs of torture on their bodies following imprisonment in the regime's prisons. The only means of identifying any of these anonymous corpses was a number written on their forehead. In 2015, the photographs became part of an exhibition on the Syrian conflict which was put on display at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

In 'Syrians are not Numbers', the campaigners set themselves two main tasks: one was to contact the families of tortured detainees (primarily those with dual passports) and urge them to file an international lawsuit against the Syrian regime. The other task was to urge international bodies to work towards releasing those detainees who still remained in the regime's prisons. At the same time, the campaign's social media activities invited people locally and internationally to show solidarity with the unidentified dead by 'sharing' and posting photos. The campaign's poster itself - which featured a large collection of images of

martyrs with numbers on their foreheads, along with its accompanying slogan 'Syrians are not Numbers' - underlined the most essential of facts: the right of the Syrian corpse and the Syrian people to dignity and respect.[6] Perhaps most significantly, the campaign sought to re-individualise the anonymous corpses and to bear witness to the violence they have endured. For David Sherman, 'a relation to a corpse is constituted by responsibility - by a nonreciprocal, asymmetrical, and nonrational duty.' He goes on to note that this responsibility can often entail the need 'to acknowledge the body in speech and attitude, to witness it, to refrain from exploiting or abusing it, to not be indifferent to its presence and condition, to arrange for others to tend to it, to pay others to do so' (2014, p.13). In the collective bearing witness organised and produced by 'Syrians are not Numbers', this act of acknowledgement was performed on a global scale as people across the world shared pictures of themselves with numbers on their foreheads in a show of human solidarity.

What is at stake then in the representation of the Syrian corpse in *Silvered Water*, *Gardens Speak* and 'Syrians are not Numbers'? To summarize, each visual text graphically underscores the necropolitical dimension of the Syrian conflict: it is a war which, to borrow Bargu's words, takes as 'its object the realm of the dead' (2016, unpaginated). By challenging what David Campbell has described as the cultural prohibition against images of the dead in Western culture, they repeatedly and serially return to the figure of the corpse to construct a political and revolutionary narrative and and to mobilise a counter-politics of dignity and commemoration. In recent Arab art (painting, drawing, mixed media), as we will now see, we find a further attempt to de-anonymise and re-individualise the Syrian corpse.

Re-individuating the Dead

Amjad Ghannam and Youssef Abdelke

In the Palestinian artist Amjad Ghannam's painting, *Rihab Allawi, Deir ez-Zor, Architecture Student* (2015)*,* he focuses on the corpse of a Syrian martyr detained in prison (Figure 1). Interestingly, Ghannam's painting does not depict the full corpse but rather it is the disproportionally large and distorted head and shoulder that occupies the space of the canvas. This, in turn, is painted in dull shades of grey with only the number 2051/2593 inscribed in green on the corpse's forehead. More striking is that the painting supplies a name, identity, and an occupation to the depicted corpse in its very title. By giving the corpse its proper name back, Ghannam again seeks to re-assert the identity of the dead body and to give it public recognition.[7] In Jessica Auchter's account of the intricate relationship between corpses, names, and identity politics, this naming process becomes fundamental to the individuation of the corpse: 'When we cannot identify bodies, it becomes disruptive,' she writes, adding that 'the attachment of the name with the dead body exemplifies the status the body can have in our society and the complex set of discourses and identities in which it is enmeshed. It is not simply an object, but it asks important questions about subjectivity, and is also not simply a taken for granted subject' (2014, p. 31).
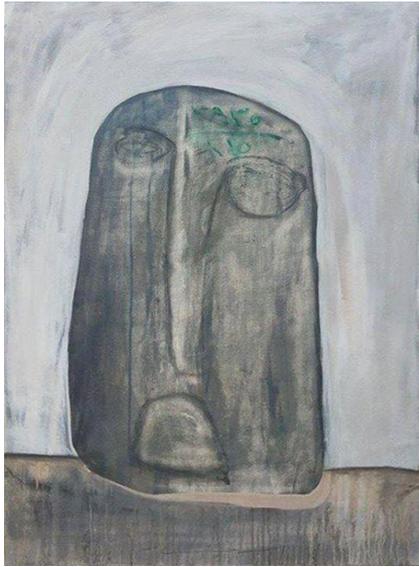
Fig. 1. *Rihab Allawi, Deir ez-Zor, Architecture Student*, 2015, Courtesy of Amjad Ghannam.

If Ghannam's painting draws attention to the ways in which the Syrian corpses in the leaked photos were stripped of any marker of identity at the same time as he provides the necessary details for the re-inscription of this identity, other depictions of Syrian corpses in paintings and drawings offer a more complex account of this corpse as well as the political and revolutionary meanings it has acquired. Perhaps nowhere does all this stand out more than in a series of charcoal on paper drawings by the leading Syrian artist Youssef Abdelke.

In Abdelke's body of work, which has been produced from the outset of the uprisings, the themes of death, tragedy, and grief dominate. The artist - whose work over the years has focused more often than not on still life paintings - brings new elements to his recent artistic expression and these elements appear at odds with the characteristic features of his earlier works. To give a few simple examples, the human figure, inscriptions, and the colour red make their way into his drawings and attest to Abdelke's desire to 'let people break into his paintings to tell their own story of their heroic tragedy' (Abi Saab, 2014). Except the people who now occupy his pictorial space are mainly the dead: the human body in its dead repose as well as mutilated human parts have, since the uprisings of 2011, become a recurrent trope in his work. For example, *The Martyr of Daraa* (2011) (which is one of the first drawings he produced at the beginning of the uprisings,) depicts the dead body of a demonstrator dressed in a white shirt lying flat on his back (Figure 2). On the martyr's forehead is a bleeding bullet wound.

Fig 2. *The Martyr of Daraa 1*, 2013. Charcoal on paper, Courtesy of Youssef Abdelke.

In another charcoal on paper drawing entitled *Saint Chrysostom is buried in Damascus* (2013), the dead body of Saint John Chrysostom - a Saint who lived in Antakia, Turkey in the fourth century and became archbishop of Constantinople - is lying flat on his back atop a wooden box with dark stripes (Figure 3). The Saint is naked except for a thin, white cloth around his midriff while his eyes stare blankly upwards and his open palms rest by his side. On his chest is a bullet wound and the blood from the wound is trickling onto the wooden box. In the right-hand corner of the drawing and atop the Saint's body are five lines of Arabic text which read: 'Saint Mar John Chrysostom lying in the Hassan mosque of the Midan quarter in Damascus.' The inscriptions themselves are written in blood and water.

Fig. 3. *Saint John Chrysostom is buried in Damascus* ..., 2013. Charcoal on paper, 150 x 200 cm. Copyright Youssef Abdelke. Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris.

In many ways, Abdelke's depiction of the wounded corpse of Saint Chrysostom can be read as a reflection upon the Syrian uprisings and its complex relationship to the dead body. Firstly, the image of the dead Saint in the white cloth along with his side wound and the elements of blood and water in the drawing itself is reminiscent of the image of the sacrificial Christ we see in many Western art forms. On the other hand, the features of Saint Chrysostom as they appear in the drawing are identical to his image as it is depicted in Byzantine art ('Youssef Abdelke's Saint …,' 2016). Except in Abdelke's drawing, the Saint is wounded and the wooden box he lies on is placed in a mosque in central Damascus. In the view of many commentators, this re-contextualization of the Saint's body is central to the picture's meaning: 'What was he [Saint Chrysostom] doing in a mosque and why is he

depicted by Youssef Abdelke as a wounded corpse? And why [has] the artist located the scene in the Damascus' Hassan Mosque in the quarter of al-Midan?' ('Youssef Abdelke's Saint …,' 2016).

To be sure, Saint Chrysostom is here employed to symbolize and champion the Syrian uprisings. Chrysostom, who defied the Roman authorities during his time, is famous for his eloquence and oratory skills as well as his revolutionary sprit. As such, his well-known characteristics and the life he led becomes - according to Abdelke - 'a symbol of defiance towards authority' at the same time as it establishes a bond with the revolutionaries in Syria today (as cited in 'Youssef Abdelke's Saint …,' 2016). Just as the Saint withstood all hardships to oppose the Roman authorities, so do the Syrian revolutionaries withstand all suffering and pain to defy the regime. But Saint Chrysostom does not remain a symbol: he returns as a revolutionary figure in present day Syria and is even rendered a martyr of the revolution. The corpse of Saint Chrysostom does not exist in isolation to other contemporary Syrian corpses but rather is situated amidst the contemporary dead. In a sense, Abdelke's drawing deconstructs the 'cultural tendency to treat the dead body as nothing more than a symbol, an instrument for either the promulgation or the defiance of social change' (Fuss, 2013, p. 61). By drawing an analogy between the life and actions of Saint Chrysostom and the Syrian revolutionaries today, Abdelke's drawing enhances 'the ways in which the dead body might signify' (Fuss, 2013, p. 61).

The political significance of the Saint's dead body is further underlined by the very locale where he rests, i.e. Hassan mosque in Damascus and in the heart of al-Midan. After all, Hassan mosque was the point where demonstrators gathered in Damascus and became 'a symbolic place like Deraa.' On his decision to re-locate the Saint's body to this venue, Abdelke explains: 'People called for unity […]. They were speaking a reasonable language, asking for reforms that any authority in the world could have listened to. There was nothing provoking or violent in their slogans.' Similarly, the reference to the Midan quarter occurs because, according to the artist, 'it is a historical place where several events of Syria's past had occurred. Citing it is a way to assess that all Syrian people are included in this scene, and not just a faction of them" (as cited in 'Youssef Abdelke's Saint …,' 2016). In this context, we find that the wounded corpse of the Saint is reproduced to support and participate in the revolution and to offer an account of the sacrifices incurred today through his own body and wounds. Consequently, the Saint's dead body interacts with and bonds with the bodies of other dead revolutionaries. As past and present figures merge into one, the body of Saint Chrysostom and other Syrian bodies become potent icons of the revolution and, more significantly, provide a key visual account of the unfolding violence.

Perhaps most importantly, the evocation of the suffering of Christ in *Saint Chrysostom is buried in Damascus*[8] further suggests the theme of resurrection: the drawing seems to imply that like Christ, the Saint and all the martyrs of the revolution will one day rise from the dead. They are 'living corpses' who will never die or be erased from any account of the Syrian uprisings. Moreover, the incorruptibility of the Saint's body and its inherently dignified status lends dignity to the bodies of the dead revolutionaries in Syria today through its very intactness. The Saint's body becomes the site through which the revolutionaries can resist the erasure of their dignity in life and death.[9]

Yet, this emphasis on resurrection and intact bodies is not a theme that Abdelke is able to sustain. If the subject of *Saint Chrysostom* is rendered a living corpse, then the other corpses that are featured in his later drawings seem more permanently or definitively dead: mutilated and dismembered body parts as well as pieces of the body (rather than intact bodies) occupy the center of his other art pieces. For example, *The Martyr of Darayya* (2013)[10] depicts a decapitated head of a man wearing a wool hat and staring directly at us while thick blood oozes from his neck (Figure 4). Atop the man's head are four lines of

Arabic text: 'Oh morning star, you rose above Syria. You took away the good people, and left the bad ones.' The lines are from a famous Palestinian song entitled 'Morning Star'. In *The Martyr of Homs* (2013), we see an amputated arm with the hands lying atop a pool of blood and in another piece entitled *Pierced Heart* (2013), we see a heart pierced with a large needle while *Skull and a Butterfly* (2012) features a skull with a butterfly hovering near it. In the latter two pieces, it is not clear whether it is the heart of a human or an animal.[11]
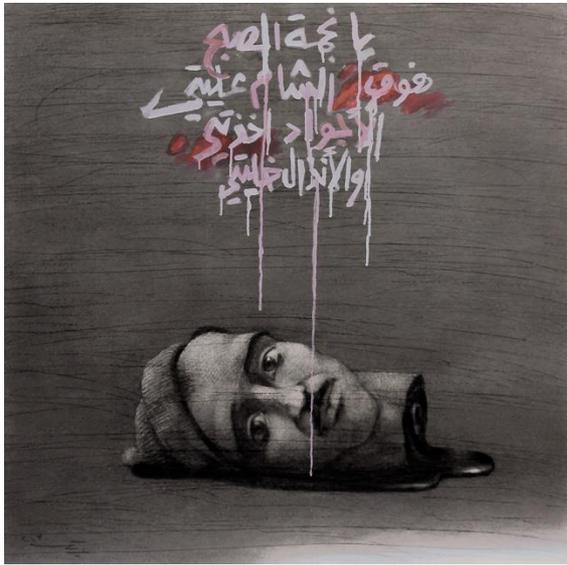

Fig. 4. *The Martyr of Darayya,* 2013. Charcoal on paper 99.7 x 102 cm. Copyright Youssef Abdelke. Courtesy Galerie Tanit, Beirut.

This focus on the mutilated body highlights what Deborah Harter calls a 'a quest for unity in a world whose wholeness has been lost to view' (1996, p. 28). From visual accounts that reflect the crisis of mortality, the drawings move on to capture the extreme level of violence that has gripped the country through the very representation of mutilated dead bodies. The visible, intact corpse in *The Martyr of Daraa* and *Saint Chrysostom* is slowly erased and is replaced with body parts in *The Martyr of Darayya* and *The Martyr of Homs*, thus heightening the radical anonymity and lack of identity that the Syrian corpse now occupies. In the same way, the ambiguous nature of the heart and skull drawings attest to the blurring of the divide between animality and humanity: the heart and skull point both to the animality of the humans who inflict such violence on a corpse and a corpse whose humanity is stripped from him.

Finally, though, I would like to argue that a more complex tension underpins all of Abdelke's art. On the one hand, the drawings of the corpses appear to mark a movement from wholeness to fragmentation and from a semblance of visibility to a troubling invisibility. On the other, the artist subtly but persistently tries to evoke or restore a sense of identity and narrative to these corpses and body parts, thus undercutting any attempt to remove them from the realm of the social and the political and to obscure them completely. To pursue this aethetico-political project, Abdelke juxtaposes images with texts and, in the process, allows the text to compensate for the gap that the fragmented body part featured in the drawings creates. The drawings challenge any attempt to annihilate any political testimony the dead in Syria have to give. In fact, the writings - especially 'Morning Star' (in *The Martyr of Darayya*) - are akin to 'corpse poems' or elegies lending a voice and biography to the dead: the texts are at times subtle accounts of where the uprisings unfolded (as in *Saint Chrysostom*) and at others the lyrics of songs which have powerful resonance in the Arab world (as in *The Martyr of Darayya*).

In this sense, Abdelke's drawings once again seek to evoke a politics of dignity for the dead, despite or perhaps because of fragmentation and mutilation. This is best exemplified in the fact that the drawings do not simply allow us to gaze upon the corpses; instead, the viewer is at times forced to confront the defiant gaze of the dead even in their mutilated state. For example, the eyes of the decapitated head in *The Martyr of Darayya* stares at us directly and unflinchingly, refusing to be merely the object of a viewer's gaze and instead enters into a relationship with this viewer. The dead are wounded, tortured, discarded and mutilated, yet they remain defiant: 'It is [….] a metamorphosis of death into a live existence' (Jouffroy).

Who Speaks for the Dead?

Aylan Kurdi
In all the texts this essay has examined so far, the same paradoxical logic is repeated: it is through the dead that the living Syrian subject resists. From the attempt to bury the dead in *Silvered Water*, memorialise the dead in *Gardens Speak*, restore their identity in 'Syrians are not Numbers,' up to the assertion of the corpse's defiance in Abdelke's drawings, what is taking place is a process whereby the dead act on the living. Writing in the context of the Zapatista movement of the 1990's, Howard Caygill notes that what marks the Zapatista struggle is the repeated reference to the 'resistant dead'. Along a similar vein, the representation of the Syrian corpse reflects the ways in which 'the resistant subjectivity' of the living is maintained and kept alive through the presence of the 'resistant dead' who motivate the living (Caygill, 2013, pp. 122- 123). In other words, the 'litany of resistance is the injunction from the dead to the living to resist with dignity, and is issued in the name of everyone living, dead and yet-to-live' (Caygill, 2013, p. 125).

Yet, there is one final story to the Syrian corpse that this essay would like to trace. It is the corpse whose life trajectory has been marked by a movement away from Syria and by struggles to cross borders without documents or rights. As millions of Syrians flee to neighboring countries and to Europe, photographs of homeless, wounded, and dead Syrian refugees and migrants have become a haunting presence on media outlets and the internet. However, it is the image of the three-year-old Syrian toddler who drowned and was washed up on the shore of Turkey that embodies, as *The Guardian* newspaper put it, 'the full horror of the human tragedy' that is taking place (Smith, 2015). In many ways, Aylan Kurdi, photographed face down on a beach close to a resort in Bodrum in Turkey in 2015, is the single most famous or notorious representation of the dignity or indignity of the Syrian corpse.

It is significant, for instance, that Kurdi's body has become the subject of political discourses promoted by both Islamic extremist groups in the Arab world and right wing groups in the West. Following the circulation of Aylan's photographs, ISIS issued its own narrative of the fate of the dead toddler. In an article published in *Dabiq*, the propaganda magazine for ISIS, the group employed the toddler's corpse to issue a warning to all those who are fleeing lands controlled by them. The article features Aylan Kurdi's corpse with the following headline: 'The Dangers of Abandoning Darul Islam.' It then moves on to condemn the 'Hijrah' of Syrians from ISIS-controlled land describing it as a 'dangerous major sin' that will cause 'one's children and grandchildren to aban[don] Islam for Christianity, atheism, or liberalism' (as cited in Paraszczuk, 2015).

On the other hand, the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published a cartoon depicting Aylan as a grown-up man sexually assaulting terrified women. This in the wake of reports of sexual assaults in Cologne, Germany in which migrants and asylum seekers were allegedly involved. Entitled 'Migrants,' the cartoon asks: 'What would little Aylan have

grown up to be?' only to answer: 'He'd have groped women's arses in Germany.' At the top left hand corner of the cartoon is a caption of the toddler's image dead on the beach. Here, the recovery of Aylan's corpse on the shores of Bodrum marks the beginning of the narration of an imagined biography which can be summed as follows: innocent childhood, to terrorist, to migrant terror.

To be sure, the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon sparked condemnation by many journalists, politicians, and the public at large. For others, though, such negative reactions missed the point of the sketch: 'It's an attack on our own fickleness. We can't enjoy satire that holds politicians to account while condemning anything directed towards ourselves,' wrote Jessica Brown in *The Independent* (2016). Irrespective of the intention behind the cartoon, what is striking really is the ways in which Aylan's dead body has become 'symbolic of a political order' (Verdery, 2013, p. 28) in Syria and in the West and, as such, carries political weight.

The toddler's corpse has been relentlessly mobilized so that the position of diametrically opposed political and extremist groups could be expressed and legitimized. As a Syrian boy escaping ISIS-controlled land in his country, Aylan's corpse is utilized by the Islamic extremist group for the construction of a threat narrative to those attempting similar escapist journeys. Similarly, the toddler's corpse is part of a threat narrative to a European subject - whether this threat refers to the proliferating number of migrants, particularly Muslim migrants, heading to Europe or to European attitudes towards them.

If Aylan's body - lying lifeless at the border of Europe - continues to trouble Europe's social, aesthetic, and political borders, it is perhaps because it embodies what Julia Kristeva famously calls the abject. To recall Kristeva's famous hypothesis, the abject is 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, position, rules,' adding that the corpse especially 'seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us' (1982, p.4). Accordingly, Aylan's body occupies the realms of the abject in the very fact of its status as a corpse. But, as the discourse surrounding Aylan's photograph exemplifies, the abject does not simply remain at the site of his body. The abject, as Katherine Fowkes sees it, moves away from the dead body to an opponent who must be ferociously fought because of his immoral, evil, and destructive qualities (1998, p. 60).

For ISIS, this abject opponent is a Western other described in their *Dabaq* article as an 'infidel' who threatens the religious order that ISIS is implementing. In ISIS' narrative, the Western infidel is the 'immoral' abject who will lead to a state of abjection of all Syrians fleeing the country and distancing themselves from 'Islam and the language of the Koran' (as cited in Paraszczuk, 2015). *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoon, on the other hand, links abjection to the figure of a Muslim migrant subject - potentially an extremist - who takes on a socially abject status and provokes abject fear amongst Europeans at large. After all, this abject figure threatens social order and law; he is seen as 'immoral, sinister scheming and shady: a terror that dissembles […]' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). In short, this Muslim migrant subject is considered borderless, illegal, and alien.

Finally, though, I would like to consider one last controversial re-staging of Aylan Kurdi's death scene. Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist and activist, posed as the drowned Syrian toddler in a staged photo shoot that sparked much controversy in international art circles and beyond ('Artist Ai Weiwei …,' 2016). The photo - taken in 2015 while Weiwei was in Lesbos, Greece working on a project pertaining to the refugee crisis - was commissioned by *India Times* and featured in one of the magazine's issues along with an interview with Weiwei himself. This image was also part of an exhibition entitled 'The Artists' at the India Art Fair. For many art commentators, the image of the middle-aged, heavy-set Weiwei lying

face down on the beach, in a pose that replicated that of the dead toddler, was at best distasteful and at worst offensive. In the view of others, it was a powerful and haunting reminder of the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

Clearly Weiwei's photo-shoot was well-intended: the artist, as many have noted, is a human rights activist who has suffered persecution himself at the hands of the Chinese government. He has also been vocal about the refugee crisis and has even withdrawn his work from two Danish museums in protest against a Danish law that permits the Danish authorities to confiscate valuables in possession of migrants.[12] Yet as Ryna Steadman of *The Observer* asks: '[H]as Mr. Weiwei gone too far in emulating this tragedy?' Speaking to CNN, Weiwei himself explains: 'For me to be in the same position [as Kurdi] is to suggest our condition can be so far from human concerns in today's politics" (2016). Weiwei's (over-)identification with the dead Aylan is in sharp contrast to the discourse of abjection and alien-ness that both ISIS and the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon have reinforced in their different ways. Nevertheless, this attempt to identify with the toddler and by extension the refugees is, according to Niru Ratnam, not possible: 'He [Weiwei] is not in the same position as Kurdi for the simple reason that, after the photo-shoot, he got up, dusted himself down and returned to whatever leading international artists do, as opposed to Kurdi, whose dead body was carefully picked up by a police officer' (2016).

In the same way, Hamid Dabashi questions the significance of Weiwei's image, its intended purpose as well as the problem of over-representation in his article 'Portrait of the Artist as a Dead Boy' (2016). Dabashi asks: 'What are we supposed to feel, think, do when we see this picture of Ai Weiwei? Will it enhance or neutralise our terrorised sensibility to the original incident; will it underline or mock, ennoble or ridicule, the actual incident that has occasioned this "artwork"?' He adds: 'Does Ai Weiwei's picture sublate and ennoble the occasion of that tragedy or does the figure of an overweight man pretending to be a lifeless child equally border with obscenity even despite the artist's intentions?' (2016). If Weiwei's intention was ultimately to show solidarity with the fate of the toddler and the many refugees fleeing Syria, it remains the case that its very nature speaks, according to Dabashi, of a crisis of artistic representation in the face of such tragedies: 'The enormity of the tragedy we are witnessing in places such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya […] is yet to find its own aesthetic idiomaticity - and assimilating those horrid realities into conventional, even cliche and crude, conceptual art as articulated and staged by the North American and Western European curatorial provincialism is no longer sufficient. It is in fact positively revolting' (2016). In short, and despite all purposes, the Chinese artist's work - together with the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon - reaffirms 'a fundamental failure of contemporary art in its European provenance (even when staged by a Chinese artist and commissioned by an Indian venue) to come to terms with those realities' (Dabashi, 2016).This controversy - around representation and over-presentation, exposure versus violation or exploitation, the dignity of public recognition versus the 'the dignity of a private mourning' (Dabashi, 2016) - returns us to the central problem or aporia of this essay. Who has the right to speak of the dead body which cannot, by definition, speak for itself?

Conclusion

In their essay 'The Life of the Corpse', Deborah Posel and Pamila Gupta argue that 'if the exercise of sovereignty is tantamount to the prerogative of pursuing war on life, then it is equally pertinent to consider its war on the corpse'. It is their contention, further, that the act of 'how to dispose of the dead is as politicised, and as integral to the practice of sovereignty, as the act of determining who dies and how' (2009, p. 306). To re-iterate the central hypothesis of this essay, I have argued that Arab and international artists and filmmakers

answer this sovereign question of 'how to dispose of the dead' with a new politics of resistance which seeks to affirm the dignity of the Syrian corpse. By resisting the erasure of its identity, and restoring its personal, historical, and political 'life', they seek (not always successfully as Ai Weiwei's case demonstrates) to transform the Syrian corpse from merely the passive subject or victim of necroviolence into the paradoxical agent of what we might call postmortem resistance. The production and transmission of visual and media representations of necroviolence in relation to the Syrian conflict thus has at its heart an attempt to 'dismantle or critique hierarchies of power' (Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999, p. 34) and to articulate a counter-politics that is capable of opposing sovereign power. In this sense, we might argue that the famous demand for 'a life of dignity [*al-aish bi karama*]' (which echoed throughout the Arab Revolution) encompasses not only the living but the dead as well. What might it mean to demand a life – and death – of dignity for the Syrian corpse?

Notes

*In this essay, I use the common spellings of Arabic names and phrases that are most familiar to English-speaking readers. For all other terms, I use a simplified version of the transliteration system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. I also omit all diacritical marks except for the ayn (') and Hamza (').

[1] On philosophical discussions of the concept of dignity see Rosen (2012). On whether the dead have dignity see Glahn (2012).

[2] See, for example, the work of pharmacist and physician Ibn al-Baytar (1197–1248 AD), especially *Kitab al-Jami' li-Mufradat al-Adwiya wa-l-Aghdhiya* [Dictionary of Simple Remedies and Food].

[3] *Hadith* is the body of literature related to the sayings and action of Prophet Mohammad. Muslims regard them as second only to the Quran.

[4] These were erected during the Mamluk period (1250–1517).

[5] Thrailkill's postulation is made in the context of an analysis of Cathy Caruth's argument on the dead child and his father and the impossibility of representation.

[6] See 'Syrians are not Numbers' facebook.
https://www.facebook.com/events/1056029197760332/

[7] Rihab Allawi was a Syrian activist who, according to the campaign, was tortured to death. Allawi was from the city of Mohassan in Deir ez-Zor and was studying civil engineering at Damascus University. She was arrested on 16 January 2013. Her face was later identified among the leaked pictures.

[8] I will subsequently refer to it as *Saint Chrysostom.*

[9] For a doctrine on incorruptibility see Moss (2016).

[10] This drawing is also known as *Shahid* and *Morning Star.*

[11] *Pierced Heart* and *Skull and Butterfly* can be viewed online. See Galerie Claude Lemand's website http://www.claude-lemand.com/artiste/nouvelle-traduction-youssef-abdelke?souspage=oeuvres&type_oeuvre=Works%20on%20paper&id_rub=15

[12]The two museums are the Aros museum in Aarhus and the Faurschou Foundation in Copenhagen.

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