



## Resisting Necro-biographies

Michael J. Shapiro

### Abstract

In order to determine whether an individual or a specific identity-bearing group has potential for terrorism, the state engages in a systematic practice of constructing biographies, which could warrant its use of lethal power. This practice privileges a security consciousness while discounting the vagaries of everyday life contingency, which plays a crucial role in creating who we are and what we do. The element of contingency becomes more visible when we focus on the lives of migrants and their movements. The State's excessive concern with security inhibits the opportunity spaces for role exits from the indemnity economies it invents. In this brief response to such actions of the state, I take an ethical stance that affords victims the right to refute their constructed identities and to presenting counter-biographies.

**Key Words:** Character Assassination, Contingency, Drone Targeting, Necro-biography, Security.

### Bio-Juridical Issues

A biography can take the form of character assassination. For example, Otto Eisenchimi's biography of Edward Stanton, who was Abraham Lincoln's War Secretary, assassinates his character by making a (controversial) case for his complicity in Lincoln's assassination.<sup>1</sup> Now if a biography of an individual can verge on character assassination, what do we make of stereotypes that assassinate the character of an ethnic group or various identifiable groups whose cohesion is the trajectory of their movement? My initial conjecture is that such character assassination of an ethnic or other specific identity-bearing group is a form of proto-genocide. In this connection what becomes crucial to ask is: what are the recourses? We know that the protection of an individual whose character is assassinated can result in a libel suit. In contrast however, the juridical protection for a people often remains ambiguous. I have highlighted this juridical ambiguity elsewhere in the case of the Nazi collective biography for Jews, or *their* "proto

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Shapiro is a professor in Political Science at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, HI, USA. Email: [Shapiro@hawaii.edu](mailto:Shapiro@hawaii.edu).  
ISSN (Print): 2520-7024; ISSN (Online): 2520-7032.  
[www.reviewhumanrights.com](http://www.reviewhumanrights.com)

genocide.” Alfred Hoche, for instance, wrote the famous Nazi anthropology in which Jews were identified as “life unworthy of life.” However, I have pointed out that in response to Nazi anthropology, a counter-biography emerged, which universalized worthiness of all types of life. It was equivalent to an anthropology recognizing and designating the standard of “humanity,” which later became the basis for the Nuremberg Trials. In these trials ex-Nazis were tried and punished for their “crimes against humanity.”<sup>2</sup> However, those tried under that category “crimes against humanity” (originally employed in 1906 by E. D. Morel in reference to the Congo atrocities perpetrated under Belgium’s King Leopold II) had recourse. Presented with the evidence of their crimes they had an opportunity for refutation.

In this brief intervention my initial focus is on the character assassination of another group of people whose cohesion is both ethnic and circumstantial, for instance those individuals who are designated as terrorists and/or enemy combatants by U.S. agencies involved in drone targeting. Drone targeting involves a shifting combination of decision makers, which includes the US President, the Pentagon, and the CIA. In his *A Theory of the Drone* Gregoire Chamayou refers to a deadly epistemology that is deployed in the selection of individuals for targeted assassinations. Such an epistemology, he asserts, is derived from “[t]he tools of human geography and the sociology of networks...[employed] to pick out dangerous individuals.” He adds that normally officials would claim that these methods ensure selective targeting, but in actual practice as a U.S. counterterrorism official notes, “You can track individuals and – patiently and carefully – build up a picture of how they move, where they go and what they see.” In this way those who end up being killed “are those people whose actions over time have made it obvious that they are a threat.”<sup>3</sup>

Looking at Pakistan, where most of the drone killings have occurred, I want to note that “those people whose actions over time have made it obvious that they are a threat” have tended to share two characteristics: they are Pakistani tribal people and they have gone to meetings with other tribal people. What becomes problematic in their preemptive drone targeting is that the terrorist role that they are assigned simply bypasses any opportunity for rebuttal. To borrow a venerable sociological concept introduced by Vilhelm Aubert, they have no resources for “role exit.”<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere I have referred to the brief (CIA-authored) scripts/biographies that make them “obvious” drone targets as “necro-biographies.” Necrobiographies are “a series of murder-justifying biographical speculations which rapidly turn what is arbitrary into what is regarded as ‘obvious.’”<sup>5</sup> I have located those murder-justifying

biographies in the context of a history of biography with an emphasis on the extent to which diverse biographies are subject to contestation.

To invoke Hannah Arendt's observation about stateless people who have been historically deprived of the right to have rights,<sup>6</sup> those selected to be killed on the basis of a haphazard "research" of biography writers working for the CIA have not been given the right to confront the accusations immanent in their necro-biographies. As I've put it, "the brief bios of targeted victims rarely emerge outside of the archives created by the militarized gaze and apparatuses of implementation that order assassinations on the basis of the accreted 'evidence.'"<sup>7</sup> The victims lack an opportunity to confront the bio with an exonerating counter-biography, and there is little opportunity for sympathetic biographers to contest the CIA versions because the victims' deaths rarely rise above the threshold of global recognition. As I've noted:

[...]what is available to the average US media consumer – major network news whose coverage controls both the visual frame and the discourses within which most people experience US policy – thought provoking challenges to official images and languages of counter-terrorism are not widely disseminated. Few media consumers become aware of the on-the-ground consequences of US drone strikes around the world, which murder scores of innocent non-combatants.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Slower Violence**

Heeding Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence",<sup>9</sup> I want to point to another lethal form of character assassination taking place in the vicinity of diverse national borders. It is the identification of migrants with potential for terrorism. Such character assassination involves role assignment that deprives people of the right to have rights, and it is implemented by various security and law enforcement agencies involved in border control. There are two antidotes to the terrorist role assignments that I want to posit, one literary and one a result of political activation, the former deriving from a novel by Russell Banks and the latter from the political activity of a French farmer.

### **Genres of Resistance**

Banks' novel tells parallel stories that ultimately cross "the sad story of Robert Raymond Dubois [which] ends along the back streets and alleys of Miami, Florida"<sup>10</sup> and the story of Vanise Dorsanville, a young Haitian woman, who at the beginning is introduced along with her infant and her adolescent nephew. The novel's narrative is about the contingency of the way lives cross. The two ultimately meet (when Vanise ends up on a boat that Robert is using to transport

Haitian migrants) after the novel has followed their movement toward Miami – his is an attempt to escape financial ruin and hers is to escape punishment because her nephew has stolen a ham from a wrecked truck and all three face dire consequences when the authorities close in. However, the novel’s narrative space transcends such specific journeys as Banks punctuates the dramatic narrative with a metaphorical observation about the forces that make bodies move:

It’s as if the creatures residing on his planet in these years, the human creatures, millions of them, traveling sometimes as entire nations, were a subsystem in side the larger system of currents and tides of winds and weather, the drifting continents and shifting, uplifting, grinding, cracking land masses.<sup>11</sup>

So much for the novel, which with its imagery of radical contingency, effectively constitutes a rebuttal to the identities and intentionalities used to deprive migrants of a right to move. I want to conclude with reference to another, active intervention exemplified recently in the actions of Cedric Herrou, who with accompanying volunteers has run a contemporary version of the underground railway. He “makes regular swoops down the winding mountain road<sup>12</sup> on his property at the edge of the French-Italian border to smuggle migrants into France: “They are rounding up blacks in the train stations....They are taking children, and they are sending them back. Either I close my eyes, or I don’t [he says]. These are people with no papers at all. That means they have no protection. I don’t see how we can be inert.”<sup>13</sup> While on trial and asked by the judge, “Why do you all [he and his assisting neighbors] do this,” he responds “There are people dying on the side of the road...It’s not right. There are children who are not safe. It is enraging to see children, at 2 am in the morning, completely dehydrated” and perhaps most telling he adds, “I am a Frenchman.”<sup>14</sup> This last self-assignment evokes a historical identity that legislates hospitality and assigns rights to those who move.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eisenchimi, *Why Was Lincoln Murdered*.

<sup>2</sup> Shapiro, *War Crimes, Atrocity, and Justice*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Chamayou, *Theory of the Drone*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Aubert, “The Criminal and the Sick.”

<sup>5</sup> Shapiro, *Politics and Time*, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

<sup>7</sup> Shapiro, *Politics and Time*, 123.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 127–128.

<sup>9</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

<sup>10</sup> Banks, *Continental Drift*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Nossiter, “A French Underground Railroad, Moving African Migrants.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Nossiter, "Farmer on Trial Defends Smuggling Migrants."

### References

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, NY: Harcourt Books, 1994.
- Aubert, Vilhelm. "The Criminal and the Sick." In *The Hidden Society*. Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press, 1965.
- Banks, Russell. *Continental Drift*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1985.
- Chamayou, Gregoire. *Theory of the Drone*. New York, NY: The New Press, 2015.
- Eisenchimi, Otto. *Why Was Lincoln Murdered*. New York, NY: Grosset and Dunlap, 1937.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Nossiter, Adam. "A French Underground Railroad, Moving African Migrants." *The New York Times*, October 4, 2016, sec. Europe.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/05/world/europe/france-italymigrants-smuggling.html>.
- . "Farmer on Trial Defends Smuggling Migrants: 'I Am a Frenchman.'" *The New York Times*, January 5, 2017, sec. Europe.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/05/world/europe/cedric-herroumigrant-smuggler-trial-france.html>.
- Shapiro, Michael J. *Politics and Time*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2016.
- . *War Crimes, Atrocity, and Justice*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015.