Torture and the Material-Semiotic Networks of Violence Across Borders[1]

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The intimately local violence of torture is, simultaneously and increasingly, a global phenomenon. This paper explores a transnational convergence in the local morphologies of torture practices across time, space, and state-type through an inquiry into its global ontologies. Drawing on the insights of Actor-Network Theory, the papers introduces a material-semiotic mode of inquiry into violence in order to locate the (re)emergence and (re)convergence of torture practices within a hitherto unnoticed space of violence constituted by the circulation of violence-enabling knowledges, visual and textual inscriptions, human persons, and non-human material objects. This analysis is based on evidence gathered from interviews conducted with Syrian victims and perpetrators of torture, alongside primary and secondary sources detailing torture in other localities, which stresses the importance of tracing local instances of torture through to these material-semiotic networks of violence across borders. Concluding with a theory of the spatio-temporal oscillation of violent practices, which highlights the analytical limits of both the constructivist literature on norms and the decisionism of literatures on political exceptionalism, the paper argues that its mode of inquiry provides novel and important insights for comprehending the stubbornness of the "global crisis" in torture that Amnesty International has described for over forty years.

Torture is "globalized" (Open Society Foundation 2013). It took the transnational scope of the post-9/11 US-led rendition, detention, and torture program to bring this "global crisis" to widespread attention. Nonetheless, Amnesty International (1973, 2014) has been warning of its spatio-temporal scope for over forty years. Indeed, close inquiry reveals that the cross-border spread of violence has still more puzzling manifestations than the collusion-to-torture of rendition. Consider, for example, the following two descriptions:

> In the early phase of interrogation . . . access to [the] shower was totally denied and [to the] toilet . . . was either provided in the form of a bucket or not provided at all—in which case those detainees shackled in the prolonged stress standing position[2] had to urinate and defecate on themselves and remain standing in their own bodily fluids for periods of several days. (ICRC 2007, 20)

[2]"Shackled to a bar or hook in the ceiling by the detainee's wrists, typically while naked" (ICRC 2007, 11).

[Y]our hands are handcuffed behind your back. And then they hang you so you would not be able to stand or sit . . . There are no people watching you. There is nobody. And you can't stand, you can't sleep. If you are hung like that for three days, four days, you urinate, you defecate, you are totally dehydrated . . . [it] was so painful that I felt it was better to die. (United Nations 2014, 214)

Here, the violent practices of the United States (in the first instance) and North Korea (in the second) meet, starkly symmetrical in form. What the United States terms the "prolonged stress standing position" is known, rather more euphemistically, in North Korea as the "pigeon torture" (ibid.) Names aside, the techniques are identical. This example, to which I will return, encapsulates the subject of this paper: a transnational convergence in the *morphologies* of torture. By morphologies, I mean the performative and physical format that the mundane motor movements of torture techniques take: the comportment and corporeal locomotions of bodies inflicting and being inflicted with pain. A convergence in these morphologies radically contradicts the common (often anthropological) observation that violence usually displays "bewilderingly complex and polysemic" patterns of practical variation across sites (Kalyvas 2006, 7). How is it possible, this paper will therefore ask, that polities of entirely distinct institutional form, situated in completely different geographical sites, and often possessing few formal links, employ torture in *precisely* the same ways across time and space? How exactly have torture *practices* been "globalized"?

Torture has long been "understood as a uniquely international issue" in terms of normative opprobrium and legal prohibition (Kelly 2012, 24). These concerns have nonetheless translated into remarkably little practical or analytical leverage over its global persistence and have paid only minimal attention to the transnational spread and convergence in/of torture practices. These shortcomings can be attributed to the limited focus of the subdiscipline most concerned with torture: human rights. A majority of scholars working therein have been silent on the question of *possibility*. The focus vacillates instead around the question of propagating antitorture norms and holding those who break them legally accountable. The issue of *how* the requisite knowledge to torture a body travels very freely, and with tight morphological consistency, from CIA black sites to North Korean prison camps, and the role these circulations play in the persistence of torture *in spite of* its normative prohibition, is rarely discussed. Kathryn Sikkink (2011), for example, has expounded on the post-9/11 employment of torture by the Bush administration, hypothesizing an eventual holding to account of those involved by a global "justice cascade," thus suggesting that these events have *not* undermined the norm against torture. This claim relies on the view that the abrogation of norms, any "backsliding" in their progress, is consequent upon moments of dialectical negotiation ("norm contestation") that will, nonetheless, eventually be corrected by the juridical contours of democratic states.

However, we have already seen how North Korea and the United States sometimes draw on precisely the same forms of torture. Democratic states, therefore, appear not to be simply "backsliding" in their normative progress, but sometimes to be situated in precisely the same space of violence as their autocratic counterparts. The central place that state-type takes in human rights accounts, which view those institutions as indicative of state propensity for violence, is thus problematical. To assume innate differences in the "origins" of violent practices as generated by state type is both to gloss over convergences and, potentially, to miss the location of violence in a shared ontological space. This risks ignoring important reasons behind the tendency for violence to reemerge in autocratic and democratic states alike, at least paritally irrelevant norm internalization. It is thus that Browyn Anne Leebaw (2012, 306) has critically noted how the human rights literature has yet to consider Hannah Arendt's insight "that the struggle against state-sponsored

atrocities requires something more than the internalization of norms." This paper introduces a mode of inquiry allowing the development of explanations, which take this call for there being "something more" than norm internalization seriously in demonstrating how material-semiotic networks play a central role in sustaining and spreading torture across borders.

The mode of inquiry introduced draws on the "terms and sensitivities" (Mol 2011, 265) of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which can be seen to represent an "empirical version" (Law 2009, 145) of Deleuzian or Foucauldian post-structuralism.[3] ANT sees social practices through the lens of material-semiotic networks of relations between geographically distinct sites and constitutionally distinct entities, as well as human and nonhuman (material) objects. The micro-sociological mapping of these material-semiotic relations can explain in granular detail the *how* of the emergence of particular phenomena. What is attempted hereafter is one such mapping of the emergence and convergence of torture. The mapping moves back *before* "ideas" (language, discourse or norms) and "institutions" (democratic or autocratic) and turns to relations through a fresh topological unraveling of the spaces of violence and an analysis of how the knowledges, materials, and persons circulating within those spaces are (re)assembled (Best and Walters 2013). In different but cognate terms, I chart the ways in which violences like torture emerge through a particular "economy of horror" and spread therein "through social space like the 'rhizome' described by Deleuze and Guattari" (Ophir 2005, 417). If the human rights literature is concerned with norms *against* torture, then this material-semiotic mapping alternatively seeks to discern how a *coexisting* norm *of* torture is assembled across time, space, state-type, and world politics.

In order to trace this material-semiotics of torture, I draw first on a series of ethnographic interviews conducted with Syrian victims and perpetrators of torture, as well as literary and cinematic sources of data alongside historical, anthropological, and human rights studies describing torture by *both* democratic and autocratic states.[4] I chart out the rhizomal relations between these usually distinctly considered (autocratic/democratic) fields of pain to sketch a holistic material-semiotic portrait of torture as emerging and converging within the same ontological space. The first section thus describes the semiotics of torture in terms of a global circulation of torture practices driven by both archaic and novel information technologies that transcend borders. It then moves, in a second part, to stressing the materiality of this process of diffusion. Taken together, it is demonstrated that comprehending any *local* atrocity requires a *global* mapping of the subjectivities, social and discursive practices, material objects, and stores of knowledge, which made this act of violence possible. This mapping enables us, in turn, to identify the genesis of homologous torture practices across the globe as rooted in the spread and circulation of those heterogeneous webs of human and nonhuman elements over borders. On this empirical basis, the final section of the paper turns to theoretically articulating the importance of this material-semiotic mode of inquiry for understanding recent "oscillations" in violent state practice, which perturb "democratic" or "autocratic" identity labels by revealing certain latent or "shadowy areas of archaic violence" (Serres and Latour 1995, 213).

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[3]This paper presumes familiarity with the basic concepts of ANT, which are drawn out herein principally through empirical material. For an introduction, see Latour (2005).

[4]All interviews quoted were conducted in Beirut, Lebanon, by the author. Pseudonyms are used throughout. The interviews drew on the "ethnographic" approach, outlined by Spradley (1979), which seeks to elicit the performative contours of social practices.

The Transnational Semiotics of Torture

Before the revolutionary protests and civil war that followed, *Jihad*, a low-level Syrian intelligence agent who later defected and fled to Beirut, Lebanon, woke early every morning to censor newspapers before their distribution.[5] With the start of popular protests in early 2011, however, *Jihad's* role shifted to identifying protestors ("subversives") from video footage. The facility in which he was working became a makeshift detention center, part of the now expanded "torture archipel-ago" that has always been maintained by the Baathist *mukhabarat* (secret police; HRW 2012). This *domestic* network of torture sites has long been slotted, however, into a wider transnational field of torture. This was most visible in the post-9/11 era when the CIA used facilities like *Far' Falastin* prison in Damascus for proxy-torture following acts of "extraordinary rendition" (Grey 2006). Similar interconnections between domestic sites of oppression and a trans-border traffic in suffering are common across the Middle East and beyond (Open Society Foundation 2013; Amnesty International 2014). Nonetheless, it was less obvious global flows in the practices of pain that my discussions with *Jihad* focused on.

Sipping tea on a comparatively calm Beirut balcony, *Jihad* described in detail the brutality that he witnessed at a detention center in Homs. Syria, he said, "was turning upside down" and there was "a lot of pressure . . . to return things to how they were." Interrogators thus "wanted to make [the prisoners] speak" even though "normally they knew nothing." In one case he described, a prisoner accused of being a leader in the protests was refusing to confess and, despite being "beaten hard," replied to all questions with the words: "*wala ma ba'rif ya mua'lim* [I swear I don't know, sir.]." In response, "the interrogator came back up to the offices one day, really boiling, angry, shouting" and began trying "to find ways to make him suffer more." *Jihad* continued, as I inquired into how they went about this, with the following remarks:

> They would experiment, use stronger electricity. With this case they used the Internet for research . . . they would search *YouTube* in the office, and ask 'how about that?' They would be searching for methods from the outside; Nazis, Americans, Israelis, if you search *YouTube* there is a lot about that. For the case I was speaking about the interrogator said he wanted to turn this place into a worse Guantanamo . . . Other times they would call somebody in a different bureau for advice; how do we break him, make him play with us more? Questions like that. They were always looking for more ways to make the . . . '*game'* they called it, more painful.

This understanding of torture as a *game* is certainly not restricted to the dungeons of the Syrian police state. Take, for instance, the following US Army soldier's description of torture in Iraq:

> It was sort of like I told you when they came in it was *like a game*. You know, how far could you make this guy go before he passes out or just collapses on you. From stress positions to keeping them up fucking two days straight, whatever. (HRW 2005, 9)

The contours of this global "game," as Elaine Scarry (1985, 29) noted long ago, center on the distortion of language to "world destroying" effect such that confessions—of any type—can be derived. Importantly, however, although "the content of the prisoner's answer is only sometimes important to the regime," "the form of the answer, the fact of his answering, is always crucial." Indeed, the interrogators that *Jihad* describes realized that most of their prisoners "knew nothing." The goal of torture is rarely intelligence gathering, at least in the here and now. Instead, torture first seeks a destruction of the prisoner's *being-in-the-world* through

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[5]Interview with *Jihad*, conducted by the author in Beirut, Lebanon, on August 15, 2013.

the infliction of pain so as to (re)construct a social-semiotic lifeworld that allows things to "return . . . to how they were."[6] This is true even in cases presumed to be largely intelligence-orientated, such as the post-9/11 US rendition, detention, and torture program. For example, following the release of the U.S. Senate (2014) report criticizing CIA activities, those defending its actions against the report's claim that "actionable" intelligence was never derived from torture noted that the goal of these techniques was *not* to gain intelligence.[7] Intelligence might, or might not, be gained after torture, but the goal, first, was to render detainees "helpless" by way of violence. Indeed, the very notion of an *interrogational* as opposed to *terroristic* torture has been critiqued elsewhere on empirical grounds (Matthews 2012). The key issue for this paper, however, is that the *purposes* of torture are similar for democratic and autocratic authorities; in other words, the use of democratic–autocratic binaries can sometimes hide violent symmetries across state-type.

The morphologies of torture, *Jihad's* words further reveal, are dependent on the circulation of certain forms of knowledge that are not restricted to any neatly delineable sociocultural space. Instead, the specific practices utilized to destroy the world of the victim are situated in a global space of violence. Interrogators deliberately conduct "research" into this field when layering torture practices into repertoires of conducting suffering. The Syrians' references here were thus states transnationally recalled as possessing particular expertise in violence (Nazi Germany, the United States, and Israel) and a specific place (Guantanamo). Although autocratic states like Syria are normally seen in Political Science as internally predisposed to violence (as "protorture regimes"; Vreeland 2008, 69), the origins of specific practices utilized to commit violent acts have transnational dimensions. They are at least partly formed by a rhizomal web of relations with geographically distant places and ideationally distinct entities. More than this, there exist a variety of knowledge technologies transporting torture practices from site to site; these bring together and connect the various objects that dictate the morphology of its violence into a set of material-semiotic relations that "build meaning" at any moment of violence (Akrich and Latour 1992, 259). *YouTube*, *Jihad* suggests, is one such knowledge technology and disembedded information technologies do appear to be playing a significant role in homogenizing the morphologies of violences, such as torture, across the world. Al-Qaeda militants in Iraq, for example, mimicked the visual vocabulary of US torture practices, diffused by the media, in their macabre videos of beheadings during the occupation (Caton 2006). *Daish* (ISIS/ISIL/IS) militants have similarly waterboarded prisoners (Callimachi 2014). Another example of these cross-border circulations is found in an interview with *Halim*, a Syrian involved in the early protests against Bashar Al-Assad, who describes the events leading up to a particular instance of his being tortured:

> They called me back for interrogation. There was a new guy there asking me questions. I was honest, like before, about working for the revolutionary groups, about our ideals for the future, about everything. He got very angry when I talked about human rights . . . He slapped me across the face and left the room. Three minutes later he came back holding a book in his hand. I knew it; it was Human Rights Watch's report on Syria. He began saying: 'You see what we are doing here? *I never knew*! Do you think it works?' I was silent. 'Let's try.' For the next hours they used everything in the report on me, and before each thing he would read the description from the report.[8]

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[6]On the phenomenology of torture, see Scarry (1985).

[7]This claim was made by the "architect" of those techniques, James Mitchell. See Fox News (2014).

[8]Interview with *Halim* conducted by the author in Beirut, Lebanon, on December 20, 2014.

Here, a human rights report disseminated with the precise goal of advocating against torture became utilized in its enaction. It was, indeed, the very report I cited in the opening paragraph of this section: Human Rights Watch's (2012) dissection of the Syrian "*torture archipelago*." A simple textual inscription, then, was introduced into a web of Syrian meaning so as to affect the performative structure of violence therein. These examples can be fruitfully linked to Karin Knorr-Cetina's (2005, 2009) discussions of both economics and terrorism as being embedded in "complex global microstructures" that bring together geographically disparate sites into the same place through the technological compression of time and space. The "distance-demolishing" (Scott 2009, 259) effects of modern technology have, in other words, a disturbing dark side. They work to allow violent knowledges to "exist [and circulate] without the *copyright*" that would define knowledge or practice as produced through the "immaterial act of a subject" with a core (autocratic/democratic) identity (Kittler n.d.). Violence circulates *without* any "originary" source.

Indeed, in Bruno Latour's (2005, 207–16) terms, inscriptions traveling through these webs of relations can be seen as creating the conditions of possibility for action by serving as *circulating subjectifiers* or *psycho-morphs* that "literally lend you the shape of a psyche." In his exploration of the economies of knowledge, Dominique Foray (2000, 5) likewise describes how "knowledge can be codified— so articulated and clarified that it can be expressed in a particular language and recorded on a particular medium," through "the exteriorization of memory." Here, "knowledge is detached from the individual, and the memory and communication capacity created is made independent of [individual] human beings." It is this detachment of knowledge from its origins, its subsequent circulation, and its later rediscovery that subjectifies, or shapes the psyche, of those who meet it afresh. Violence workers sometimes employ knowledges that they had no hand in imagining, creating, or first employing. Take, for example, the following description of how one fighter during the Lebanese civil war learned the violence that became his everyday life:

> We had barely started shaving. We were children in love with war. We copied the style of shooting in films like *Gun Smoke*, and *Rin Tin Tin* films, and Westerns. We thought people would get back up again. We didn't understand that we'd really killed them. (Borgmann, Slim, and Theissen 2004; 00:10:20–00:10:53)

In this example, it is the circulation of films that ends up enabling violence by subjectifying the viewer in certain ways such that, when placed in a particular (conflictual) situation, they draw on these stores of knowledge. They are lent the psyches of mediated violence workers. Such examples are not isolated. Joshua Oppenheimer (2012) has observed precisely the same mimicking of the visual vocabulary of motion pictures in Indonesia, and others have discussed the use of the *Battle of Algiers* to train soldiers in both the US and Argentine militaries (Robin 2004; Ten Brink and Oppenheimer 2013). As these examples indicate, the lending of violent psyches under discussion often occurs without direct *intentionality*. This disrupts the quite common view, described by both human rights practitioners and "critical" academics over many decades, that the emergence and convergence in torture techniques across borders is attributable to an intentional (neo-imperialist) dissemination of such knowledge. For example, substantial attention has been given to the diffusion of torture techniques to Latin America by way of US military training programs and the distribution of their training manuals (Blakeley 2006) in order to support the notion of a "universal distributor" of torture across the globe (Rejali 2007, 27). The origins of the *knowledge* those manuals contain tells, however, a rather more complex story. Alfred Mccoy (2012), for example, has shown how much of the knowledge inscribed by the US military and

the CIA, which was then disseminated to Latin American governments, was derived from their own mimicking of Soviet torture practices. Indeed, it is here that we find the origins of the peculiar linkages between the United States and North Korea, which opened this paper. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its allied polities once preferred "positional tortures and sweating, often in conjunction with rope tortures" of the kind exemplified by the stress positions employed by both North Korea and the United States today (Rejali 2007, 188; Hawk 2012, 8–9).

The convergence in violence across borders is, then, not one of unidirectional diffusion. The semiotics of the knowledge being described can be acutely decentered to the degree that, for instance, the United States has recently relied directly on the expertise of autocratic states in torture. They have even flown Jordanian and Egyptian interrogators to Guantanamo Bay to torture detainees such as Mohamedou Ould Slahi (2015) in more (physically) brutal forms than its forces usually employ. These occurrences are accelerations of the view, expounded by US government officials in their rendition program, that "if you send a prisoner to Jordan, you get a better interrogation. If you send a prisoner . . . to Egypt [or Syria], you will probably never see him again" (Grey 2006, 42). It is the density and diversity of these inter-relationships between practitioners hailing from institutionally distinct states (as well as the private sphere[9]), and the multi-directional flow of knowledges they draw upon, which calls into question the idea of any form of unidirectional export of the knowledge of how to torture. Likewise, it disrupts those traditional "critical" theories of "policy transfer" as occurring between an imperial center and a subjugated periphery (e.g., Chomsky and Herman 1979). In addition, the multiple affordances of this space of pain disrupts one alternative explanation for the convergences under discussion here, glossed over by some in the literature (Rejali 2007; Vreeland 2008). This suggests that universal mechanisms of human rights monitoring have led "autocratic" states to employ cleaner "democratic" torture techniques because, simply, "democratic" states have today come to adopt more brutal ("autocratic") techniques in a way that this unilinear explanation ignores.

The emergence and convergence of torture through this decentered semiotic web of relations has significant historical precedents. We can therefore speak of a (re)emergence and (re)convergence of this phenomenon across time. Indeed, as Rejali (2007, 4) once noted, "virtually all" modern torture techniques

> appeared first in military punishments, especially among British lists of punishments; in the context of American slavery; in penal institutions; or during policing and military operations in French and British colonies.

There is a direct lineage between domestic European forms of punishment and their rearticulation outside the metropole. These techniques are typified by "clean" methods that inflict pain without leaving visible scars; their ascent is related to the need to construct "drilled bodies" (Law 1986) through the use of painful techniques that, nonetheless, preserve the body (cf. Dinesh 2006). The central novelty of this process in contemporary times is its acceleration, with new technological mediums seeing diffusion, within the space of violence described, shift from movie theatres to *YouTube*, from hard copies of training manuals to *Google*-derived documents, and so on. The key implication of this historical continuity, punctuated by periods of change, is that the emergence and convergence of the morphologies of torture is a fragile process. It is dependent on the exact ways in which those knowledges are assembled and relations built between actants at any particular historical moment in time and space.

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[9]On private security contractors and torture, see Khalili (2010).

This semiotics of torture exists across borders. Their relations bring together Nazi Germany, the United States, the Middle East, and other localities into the same space of suffering and, when pragmatically drawn on by (human) agents in practice, can thus affect (subjectify) agents in an accordingly multiple fashion. To add the usual dictum, knowledge may be power, but power or control over knowledge and its circulation is a far more ephemeral affair given *knowledge is (also) multiple* in its spatio-temporal horizons: inscribed through a panoply of textual and visual inscriptions to which no identarian "copyright" accrues. It was thus that the United States surprised itself by the ways in which certain "augmented [torture] techniques," intended for use *only* at Guantanamo Bay, "*migrated* to Afghanistan and Iraq where they were neither limited nor safeguarded" (Schlesinger 2004, 14). Knowledge travels, immigrates, emigrates, and changes, therein, its identity so as to allow the (re)emergence and (re)convergence of violences through a decentered "field of complex sociomaterial assemblages" (Suchman 2007, 283) that are constituted by the inscriptions explored above. This argument ultimately suggests that, as opposed to any "implied fantasy of a masterful, separate actor," a deterritorialized perspective on modern forms of violence is sometimes necessary (Mol 2011, 256). Importantly, however, ANT has long been concerned with localizing that which was seen as global (capital, finance, terrorism, etc.), the imaginary hold of torture as a very *local* enaction of despotism requires the opposite move: mapping out the transnational relations of what is usually seen as locally contained. Understanding of the emergent homologies of world politics demands that we follow the actors involved in specific micro-practices like torture through the local and transnational resources of torture practice in order to understand the *how-possible* conditions of violence. It is this rhizome-ontology of associations between particular forms of knowledge, whether *Youtube* or military advisors, that enables the use of violence at any particular moment. So far, I have focused on texts and images, and less on the *material* side of a *material-semiotic* approach to torture, as ANT's generalized social symmetry would demand. The next section thus moves directly to the issue of torture and materiality in order to affirm the claim that any local setting of suffering must be followed through to its transnational fields of torture in order to comprehend the (re)emergence and (re)convergence of torture today.

The Materials of the Semiotics of Torture

The Syrian poet, Faraj Bayrakdar, spent thirteen years as a political prisoner and, in his *The Treasons of Language and Silence*, seeks to describe the structure of torture. As that title hints, however, language is rarely adequate to express suffering.[10] Indeed, at one point Bayrakdar (2006, 26) refers to the impossibility of explaining "this dreadfully engineered madness," which reflects not only the phenomenological difficulties of pain's articulation but also the materiality of its construction: its *material-semiotic engineering*. The materials around which pain and meaning are built in torture are simple, everyday, mundane artifacts, and Bayrakdar (ibid., 28–29, 32) spends quite a bit of time describing one such object in particular detail:

> Imagine the reaction of people as you talk to them about that chair, the chair which sits on the man.
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> Yes . . . *the chair sits on the man*, not the other way around . . .
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> A brutal chair, deaf to suffering . . . curse that chair, which they named 'the German Chair.' . . . Although I don't wish any harm to the German people, I prefer the name: the chair from hell.[11]

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[10]On the problem of expressing pain, see Scarry (1985) and Kelly (2012).
[11]Translations from the Arabic are my own.

The *German Chair*, a piece of furniture with a split back that can be pulled "until [a detainee] feels his spine will snap," is used across the Middle East for torture, but its origins most likely lie with the machinations of either Nazi Germany or the East German *Stasi*. Indeed, many torture tools or practices are similarly named as foreign to the localities in which they occur, even where they are not directly related to any foreign practice (Miller 2011). The *Palestinian Hanging*, for instance, is an extreme stress position in which the victim's hands are pulled upward behind their back and tied to an object (such as a hook) so as to suspend them. This technique, common again across the Middle East, but also infamously used by CIA interrogators (Mayer 2005), is entirely unrelated to Palestinians. The name appears intended only to evoke a visceral fear of Israeli torture practices because "Israeli torture too, like Chinese and German, is now legendary" (Rejali 2007, 355). Further instances of this phenomenon include one older name for waterboarding, *Chinese Water Torture*, and foreign references to pain-inducing "American handcuffs," which tighten around the wrists as one moves (Rejali 2007, 101).

The grammar of Bayrakdar's description of the *German Chair* is particularly interesting, however, for rendering this material object a subject inflicting pain without human intervention: *the chair sits on the man*. In these words, the nonhuman object of the chair is given the agency of a (usually human) subject by a victim of torture. Such statements cannot be reduced to mere poetics. Indeed, a similar account of the personification of immaterial objects was given to me by *Khalid*, a Syrian refugee from *Daraa*.[12] *Khalid* was detained for attending protests and, after already having been beaten and refusing to confess, described how the agent interrogating him:

> left the room for one minute and returned pushing a tyre in front of him . . . He looked at me and smiled. He said, this is *Allah*, looking at the tyre. Then he said to me again *confess*. I still had not said anything. Then he asked 'Who is your God?' I replied 'There is no God but *Allah* and Mohammed is his prophet.' Allah? He shouted and stood up. The guards pushed me onto the floor and bent me into this tyre . . . my back cracked . . . they beat me with cables while pushing me around the room.[13]

Khalid was describing another torture technique common across the Middle East known as the *dulab* (tyre). Its use follows a typical performative logic of creating fear through anticipation of the unknown. Thus, the tyre is left outside the room and, more importantly, is blasphemously named by the interrogators such that each and every time they returned they would say "*Khalid . . . you have a meeting with Allah*." Here, torturers themselves shift agency onto inanimate objects for performative[14] effect. The experiences those performances evoked for Khalid and Bayrakdar reflect their intimate knowledge of Scarry's (1985, 40) words that:

> The torture room is not just the setting in which torture occurs; it is not just the space that happens to house the various instruments used for beating and burning and producing electrical shock. It is itself literally converted into another weapon, into *an agent of pain*. All aspects of basic structure—walls, ceiling, windows, doors— undergo this conversion.

Material agents like these are something ANT is preoccupied with. Famously, its relational ontology "implies no special motivation of human individual actors,

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[12]Interview with *Khalid*, conducted by the author in Beirut, Lebanon, on July 27, 2013.

[13]This use of the ascription of *Allah* is common in Syrian torture. See Human Rights Watch (2012, 72, 32) and Amnesty International (2002, 25–26).

[14]Performativity refers to the notion that "relations, and so realities and representations of realities . . . are being endlessly or chronically brought into being in a continuing process of production and reproduction, and have no status, standing, or reality outside those processes" (Law 2004, 159). Thus, in this case, the ascription of material agency is made "real" through its performance in Syria, whether or not it would be "real" in other contexts.

nor humans in general" but, rather, nonhumans "are [also] capable of producing effects and making something happen" (Pyyhtinen and Tammimen 2011, 140). Though the precise nature of this claim is hotly contested within social theory, I use it here to refer principally to "nonhumans as mediators" who are "necessarily seen as adding something to a chain of interaction or an association" and so understood to be "continually modifying relations between [human] actors" (Sayes 2014, 138). As Latour (1999, 176–77) once put it, "who, with a knife in her hand, has not wanted at some time to stab someone or something?" This remark gets provocatively at the situated action of violence and therein the question of the degree of (conscious, deliberative) human agency behind its enaction and morphologies. Consider, in this respect, the words of one interrogator who tortured detainees in US-occupied Iraq and described a:

> mechanism of many interlocking parts that pushes the thing forward. It grows like an ink stain and spreads like a disease, and along the way its face changes, so you end up in a place totally unlike where you started. (Lagouranis 2007, 244)

Most instances of torture reflect this self-described lack of agency on the part of the *torturer* (cf. Tognato 2010). This impotence appears to be partially attributable to the material forces (the material engineered in Bayrakdar's words) that make up this "mechanism of many interlocking parts." Indeed, the organizational theorist, Stewart Clegg et al. (2013, 336), suggests that people "are more prone to behave evilly when surrounded by evil materials." What constitutes an "evil material" and how it is both constitutive of, and constituted by, a material-semiotic network of "many interlocking parts" in the context of torture is, indeed, where we turn now. We do so through *Khalid's* further description of a week during which he was held in a collective detention cell with other prisoners. During that time, *Khalid* described how a young detainee began chanting *yala irhal ya Bashar* (get out oh Bashar). In response, guards entered the cell, one "punched him in the stomach" and then another:

> arrived with a hose…like for gardening, you know what I mean? They turned it on and the room filled with water. Then, I don't know what machine they used but from outside they dropped wires into this pool of water and the electricity flowed through all our bodies. People screamed without meaning to…people passed out-my body shook and I wanted to try to climb the walls…This feeling is like being cooked alive. Then they left.

Whenever there was a further disturbance in the cell, or somebody did not respond when their name was called for interrogation, the guards would call out, "do you want everybody to go for a dance *habibi*?" As *Khalid* explained, "this meant they would do the water-electricity thing again."

Hosepipes, naked wires, chairs, gardening, and dancing. *Khalid* and Bayrakdar's descriptions are striking for demonstrating the employment of simple, everyday, and mundane objects in violence. Such ordinary materials become "evil" principally, it seems, through a certain material-semiotic *poverty* within the settings of torture's enaction. Torture most frequently emerges in one of two settings: topographically "dislocated" places (Guantanamo Bay, the Syrian desert prison of *Tadmor*, North Korea's mountain prisons, the basements of buildings) or, alternatively, in the context of wider warfare. In consequence, torture sites are rarely sophisticated, even when their preordained purpose is such abuse (for example, CIA black sites), and they never resemble the panopticons of pain envisaged by torture "scientists" (cf. Mccoy 2012). The material-semiotic *poverty* of these settings relates principally to their lacking a stable set of alliances with "ethical" nonhuman objects that might prevent the enrollment of mundane objects like chairs and hosepipes into abuse. Ethical objects refer here to the notion that

nonhumans also exist as "members of moral and political associations" (a form of inter-*objective* morality) by providing the material building blocks through which ethico-political norms are upheld *in practice* (Sayes 2014, 138–40). In the context of detention, such "moral" objects might include tape recorders, video cameras, detainee-accessible telephones, textual inscriptions of legal norms, and so on. Humans placed into contexts populated by relations with such objects behave, it is quite clear, differently than in their absence, but many such objects are naturally missing in the most common settings of violence. In these contexts, individuals possess far fewer ready-to-hand objects to guide or structure any personal or institutional ethico-political *habitus* laid down through rules, training, and/or abstractions of morality, which—in most cases—*prohibit* torture. It is thus, for instance, that Michael Keller (2007, 55), a soldier based at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq *after* the images of torture there emerged, wrote how:

> The environment here is completely different. It's like living in the Wild West or something—the normal rules don't seem to apply. For example, here we kill people for driving too close to us, so I guess soldiers figure what's the big deal about a restraint chair or double litters, after all 'it's still a lot better than what Saddam was doing to them.'

Here, Keller justifies the violent use of a *restraint chair* (consider, in contrast, the Syrian *German Chair*) based on the "completely different" material-semiotics of the setting in which he was based (the *Wild West*). Similar recognitions of a connection between violence and material poverty are also found, tragicomically, in the Syrian play *Kasak Ya Watan*. In this popular-political theater performance, the young daughter of the protagonist, Ghawwar, dies suddenly because the doctors at the hospital where he has taken her for treatment are preoccupied with treating the sexual impotence of a government official. Ghawwar's daughter was:

> poisoned by unpasteurized milk and 'killed' as Ghawwar puts it, by the unjust and systemic practices that normalize the privileges of officials who are paradoxically both powerful and impotent. (Wedeen 1999, 95)

Later, Ghawwar is detained by the *mukhabarat* and tortured for trying to gain justice for the death of his daughter. As his body shakes with the electric current applied to it, Ghawwar remarks, giddily, "The electricity has reached me before it reaches our village!" (ibid., 96).

These farcical stagings of suffering stress the perversity of political violence in places like Syria and other spaces outside the metropoles of world politics where complex socio-material networks enabling public goods (for example, pasteurization, electrical grids) are not only weak but can be rerouted toward the perpetration of violence (Callon 1986; Latour 1988). Whereas material infrastructures that might do good—electricity that could reach Ghawwar's "village"—tend to circulate with substantial temporal lags, material objects able to cause pain circulate far more freely (see below, also). It is thus that the material poverty of states is linked, in such renditions of national memory, to acts of torture. Simply put, those who torture prisoners are sometimes "paradoxically both powerful and impotent" in their actions. One value-added of the material-semiotic approach is in tracing precisely where such impotence over endemic violence might be rooted, both through following the circulation of practices via conduits like *Youtube*, motion pictures, and/or training manuals, as we saw above, and—now—material objects. To follow this logic, we can see how places like Keller's Abu Ghraib and Ghawwar's prison cell (and thus the roots of the similar impotencies located in those places) are linked through the circulation in both places of a series of more specialized (than chairs or hosepipes) objects that are equally implicated in torture. These objects

complement, we will see, the previously described circulation of textual and visual inscriptions by also acting to inform, modify, and transform violent practices. Consider, for instance, the following list of available "technical support" found in a document held by the Iraqi *mukhabarat* after the fall of Saddam Hussein:

1. Binoculars
2. Electrical Sticks
3. Small Tear Gas Canisters[15]

Those "electrical sticks" appear to refer to some form of stun device commonly used in torture. Their mundane inventorying in this way reflects a cross-border spread in such electric torture devices, developed and distributed by individual inventors and corporations who claimed their *nonlethal* nature made them more "humane" than the use of lethal firearms in law enforcement operations. Indeed, electrical torture technologies are particularly interesting for representing an unusually "high-tech" method of inflicting pain through the development of devices like the *Taser* and other law enforcement-cum-torture tools (Rejali 1999). Typically, however, and following Latour's *knife-in-your-hand* logic, such devices have, from Baathist Iraq through to domestic police systems across the world, served both as "mediators" provoking greater, not lesser, violence and as mechanisms by which the morphologies of violence naturally converge. Such a global circulation of devices *intended* to cause harm is, however, comparatively rare. More common is the global dissemination of objects like the US military field telephone TA-312/PT, a very simple device "widely used by US personnel and soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to interrogate prisoners" (Peterson 2007). Torturing someone would require, simply, attaching the wires normally used to transmit a signal to some part of their body and then turning the device's "hand crank." The circulation of this object transnationally through military campaigns and the later selling of surplus material is one core example of how such objects find themselves in *different* places, at *different* times, enabling the *self-same* violence. It also demonstrates the ways in which the intentionality behind objects (a radio, to send messages, a stun-gun, to *minimize* physical harm) is disorientated when placed into new situations and new material-semiotic webs of relations, such that they become perverted toward violent purposes.

Generally, then, the *material* emergence of torture can be linked to the similarity of the everyday objects found in torture settings. The circulation of those objects through the material-semiotic networks of violence that we have been elucidating leads to physical violence, just as fast food, converging in form. Such material factors underlying torture's (re)emergence and (re)convergence are, furthermore, inextricably linked to the nonmaterial (or, rather, less "independently" material) ones described previously (such as motion pictures, training manuals, etc.). To bring both sections together through a single, real-world example, take another US soldier's description of a prisoner in Iraq who was:

> bound to a chair and interrogated. During the course of the interrogation the team beat him, shocked him at various places on his body with the electrical cord torn from a lamp. That technique was suggested by a squad member who claimed to have seen it used in a movie. (Tsukayama 2014, 186)

Here, a US soldier formed an "alliance" with one of the few material objects ready-to-hand (a lamp), in this particular instance of violence, to carry out torture (despite its widespread military prohibition). This innovation was based on having

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[15]See document IRDP-NIDS-633135 at the *Iraq Memory Foundation*. Available at http://www.iraqmemory.org/documentation/NIDS/index.html, accessed June 16, 2015.

previously been subjectified toward such a possibility by a circulating visual inscription of violence (a movie). In sum, the materials of the semiotics of torture are engineered through the incorporation of the agentic affordances of particular nonhuman objects into scripts for action. At the same time, those scripts are themselves always being illuminated by memories of temporally and spatially distant textual or visual inscriptions and drawn together in the here-and-now, with more-or-less intentionality. To conclude, what this focus on human/nonhuman generalized symmetry ultimately foregrounds is that particular practices of violence are sometimes made possible by material agencies, and that the spread of those material agents across time and space leads to a convergence in torture across borders.

The Oscillations of Violence

Having sketched the material-semiotic contours of torture, this section explores the theoretical implications of its understanding for the study of violence. To begin, consider Michel Serres' (1995, 59–60) remark that:

> Everyone is amazed that after 1935 the Nazis, in the most scientifically and culturally advanced country, adopted the most archaic behavior. But we are always simultaneously making gestures that are archaic, modern, and futuristic . . . Every historical era is likewise multitemporal, simultaneously drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic.

These words are forbearers for what ANT would later term the principle of *multiplicity*. This refers to the "claim that there are many realities rather than one" when practices (like torture) enact objects (like states) in "unpredictable ways" such that "there are always interferences between different realities" (Law 2004, 162; see also Mol 2002). Recall *Jihad's* words that interrogators in Syria would search *Youtube* for Nazi, American, and Israeli torture methods. The first reference to Nazi interrogation techniques speaks to Serres' understanding of "making gestures" toward the past, while the Syrians' equal use of *Youtube* and other technologies looks to the "modern" (United States, Israeli, etc.) present. The instantiation of torture thus follows Serres' (1982, 58) nonlinear conceptualization of time, which "passes, and also . . . doesn't pass" because "time doesn't flow; it percolates." Syrian torture is neither medieval nor modern but, rather, a chaotic sieving of time's violent hand-me-downs. The same is true in the United States or Europe, where repertoires of violence are (re)assembled through material-semiotic webs in much the same way. What follows is an understanding of violence (or its morphologies) as made possible through the assembly of a multiplicity of spatiotemporally heterogeneous parts. These symmetrically "draw together" *both* "democratic" and "autocratic" states/objects into the self-same time and space of pain such that their "identities"-cum-"realities" intersect, shift, and/or converge *despite* their institutional formats remaining unchanged (Latour 1986). To follow Law et al. (2013), violence thus possesses a *both/and* ontology: *both-modern-and-archaic, both-autocratic-and-democratic, both-human-and-nonhuman, both-local-and-global*, and so on. Considered in these terms, the (re)emergence and (re)convergence of torture should not be all that surprising to our eyes.[16]

A certain banality of violence is thus the order of the day for a material-semiotic approach. This intuition harks back to Hannah Arendt's work on the nature of evil. For Arendt (1964, 56), Eichmann and the Nazi regime demonstrated how:

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[16]The humanism of most social theory still refuses such a flattened, decentered, and deliberately symmetrical articulation of the ontology of violence, either due to the constraints of their analytical frames or, alternatively, due to worries about its ethico-political consequences. See Pickering (1993, 561, n. 5).

> Evil is never 'radical'...it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It
> can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a
> fungus...It is 'thought defying'...because thought tries to reach some depth, to
> go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because
> there is nothing.

Violence's banality rests in the flatness (the lack of *depth*) that its material-
semiotics displays. Whether spreading "like a fungus" or, as one US soldier
described for us above, "like a disease," it cannot be grasped through its "radical"
attribution to human or (nondemocratic) institutional intent. The especial value-
added of the material-semiotic approach is to displace (though not ignore) the
center and source of our sociological accounting of this banality away from hu-
mans (i.e., Eichmann) who have been involved in evil acts by drawing on the gen-
eralized symmetry of ANT to flatten this last humanist hierarchy. Serres and
Latour (1995, 191) advocate this approach because the failures of discourses like
human rights can be seen to relate to their having "exhausted the possibilities for
accusation" through their central legal strategy for change. This strategy has, for
decades, held individual humans or human collectives (Arendt's bureaucracies)
responsible for violence and yet seen no "notable change in the ravages of evil."[17]
This failure of (humanist) accusation necessitates an alternative understanding,
one in which:

> Evil, hate, or violence has every object but no subject. Rain, hail, and thunder fall
> on everyone, without there being a hand that dispenses them or controls the electri-
> cal current. Active evil is conjugated like an impersonal verb: it is raining, it is freez-
> ing, it is thundering. (Serres and Latour 1995, 191)

Thinking torture as an impersonal verb would immediately call into question any
idealist account of its (re)emergence and (re)convergence in linear, rather than
turbulent (chaotic, nonlinear, etc.), terms. Indeed, despite the recent movement
within the constructivist literature to incorporate the notion of *bad* norms into its
repertoire, which recognizes the potential for negative actions to become discur-
sively permissible in all states, this move simply introduces a mutually exclusive du-
alism ("bad" vs. "good" norms) into the debate (Heller and Kahl 2013). That
dualism seems sometimes too simplistic when, as we have observed throughout this
analysis, "good" norms (*against* torture) *coexist* with "bad" norms (*of* torture). Good
norms do not have to (though they may) "die" for bad norms to emerge and it is
therefore misleading to speak of the enaction of torture as a "regression to a prior
moral vision" (Mckeown 2009, 21). Thus, although the virtue of the constructivist
literature on norms has been its effort to comprehend the discursive construction
and spread of ideals that become, eventually, "global scripts that guide behavior"
(Heller and Kahl 2013, 414), this focus has overlooked the *co-presence* of equally
"global scripts" guiding violence. This blind spot in the literature likely emerges
from a bias toward privileging human agency and so seeing norms as requiring a
process of (deliberative or dialectical) advocacy. It has been harder to perceive the
impersonal flux of norms spread by texts, objects, and knowledges through the ma-
terial-semiotic networks described above. It is the norm *of* torture contained therein
that, however, renders violence a *both/and* phenomenon in which any social agent,
human or nonhuman, contains a multiplicity of possible and co-existing affordan-
ces: norms against torture, norms of torture, etc., which are kept alive by the fact
that the knowledges, technologies, and material resources they require to be en-
acted continue to circulate across borders. Practices enact objects, multiply, and

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[17]For a counter-argument, see Steven Pinker (2011).

the possibility of practice depends on the circulation of those resources and the violent morphologies they guide our hands toward.

The coexistence of norms *against* and norms *of* torture thus implies, to speak with Eugene Holland (2011, X), that the violence of "the contemporary State" is not a form of ("norm contested") *regression* but, rather, of "*oscillation*" between the "modern" and the "archaic" or the "good" and the "bad." Holland notes that "the danger" in distinctions between "an apparently more archaic, 'despotic' or 'sovereign'" form of state power and "an apparently more modern, 'civilized' or 'biopolitical'" form is that they be considered "stages in a historical progression" (ibid.). This, essentially, is the view of the human rights literature. Holland alternatively suggests that we would do better to consider these forms as resembling the *innate* oscillations of the "business cycles of boom and bust" and, linking up more closely with violence, others have suggested we see the flow of violence as embedded in a certain flat cross-border "economy of horror" (Ophir 2005). Again, key to this comparison is the *coexistence* of phenomena—norms of torture and norms against torture, economic development and economic depression—rather than a mutually exclusive dialectic of progression or regression. It echoes Law's *both/and* descriptor for social phenomena that exhibit multiplicity. This perspective challenges not only the historical teleologies of the human rights literature but also its explanation for "backsliding" as consequent of a dialectical negotiation of emergent political phenomena (e.g., D'Ambruoso 2015). This notion of a "reverse norm spiral" (Heller and Kahl 2013, 420) sees violence as an *exceptional* regression within that overall progressive teleology and continues to fail to account for the banal persistence of violence and the equally scripted continuity of its morphologies.

Holland's core suggestion is to think "creatively" by "looking outside the State" to explain oscillations in practices like torture (ibid. XI). This injunction is particularly important given the post-9/11 dominance of discourses of exceptionalism and emergency (Caton 2006; Ek 2006). Giorgio Agamben's (1998) work has focused these discussions around precisely the Foucauldian–Deleuzian divide between sovereign and juridical forms of *state* power that Holland nuances. Indeed, further to Holland's critique, Jef Huysmans (2008, 180) has also noted the ways in which the dominance of this "jargon" of the exception "soaks up critical energies" and "erases the societal as a realm of multi-faceted, historically structured political mediations and mobilizations." That act of erasure relates to the ways in which (Schmittian) decisionism portrays the removal of juridical constraints as opening up a space for "emergency" decisions to be made by ("sovereign") state agents. The vision is of a blank space (the "camp") in which aberrant violences are employed. This space is impenetrable because the abyss it portrays exists outside a "thick" understanding of the human and nonhuman "mediations and mobilizations" of world politics. Thus, Carl Schmitt (in Andijar 2004, 45) wrote that martial law works to create a space that permits "the objective technical execution of a military operation, and in which *anything can be done.*" The problem here is that if "anything *can* be done," then why is everything *not* done? Why does violence resist its polysemic potentiality to manifest an infinite number of forms? Why, if *anything* can be done, do North Korea and the United States employ the self-same techniques of violence?

The answer that the mode of inquiry presented here suggests, is that the spaces of violence are structured through a set of material-semiotic relations that are equally as pre*scriptive* as the juridical contours of human rights or related "liberal" regimes. Oscillation is not simply dialectical, with a decision to classify an "exception" (an Other) as outside apparently normatively good juridical "global scripts" and thus subject to "anything" being debated among political communities. Instead, the oscillation of violence follows Holland's economic metaphor of cyclical events (growth and depression) that are coexistent and *subjectlessly* emergent. This flat perspective stresses that whatever the means by which political

exceptionalism emerges, the practices of violence drawn on afterward may not be hierarchically imposed ("decided"). Rather, they may *flow* from the flat yet thick set of relations that exist between states of all type, persons of all proclivities, archaic and novel information technologies, visual and textual inscriptions, and nonhuman objects. Mapped out together these relations reveal a space of violence that, contrary to the image of the camp as the *sui generis* site of decisionist invention, is "spread like a fungus over the surface of the earth" such that it returns in oscillating jumps of violence carried out in very similar ways across time and space. It is this *impersonal* flow of actants across borders that both makes violence possible and sees its morphology converge across time and space. This understanding is important, finally, because if the apparently accurate "meta" diagnosis at the heart of the *jargon* of the "exception" (the oscillation from juridical to sovereign forms of state power) is to recover critical sociopolitical content in its empirical applications then it requires both a more "critical" sociological analysis of historical structure (the dialectics of humanist political mediations) *and* a material—semiotic filling in of its grammar through an analysis of the mundane circulations that dictate in advance how the practice of torture will be carried out.[18] The latter move critically reveals the *ease* with which state practice oscillates toward violence and abrogates norms against it by showing, simply, that there is often no need for us to "decide" what (violence) to do.

The mode of inquiry developed above has sought to reveal the ontological *being* of practices like torture by questioning their alleged source or origin "at the essence of man's body or soul or of the political regime" (Ophir 2005, 11). Naturally, this perspective does not claim that the enaction of torture can be understood *solely* through an analysis of its material-semiotics. Its purpose rests, nonetheless, in helping us to understand torture as *being* in, yes, people but also, yes, in chairs, radios, and *YouTube* and thus to usher in a new understanding of the *production, emergence, convergence,* and *oscillation* of torture across sites and states. Above all, the account stresses the limits of normative regimes in both comprehending and preventing violence. Though norm internalization and the strengthening of jurdicial regimes of political order are critical, this paper has opened up an entirely different space of violence that requires intervention. What kind of political program *against* torture and violence is possible that can tackle this everyday and flat circulation of torture objects, knowledges, and texts? Although often maligned for its lack of attention to politics, the very possibility for seeing the need for political interventions into this space of violence rests on the coordinates that ANT has helped us map out herein. As Arendt put it above, the banality of violence was "thought-defying" precisely because traditional forms of sociological thought have sought to "reach some *depth*, to go to the roots" when, in fact, "there is nothing." If the *being* of violence is flat, then a material-semiotic mode of inquiry helps us *think* how this flatness sees it spread across borders and so realize its banality. This thinking-through is but a starting point for a future political coming-to-terms with the ways in which we are always "simultanously making gestures that are [violently] archaic, modern, and futuristic."

Conclusion

Torture leaves marks on bodies, body politics, and world politics. This paper has sought to map out just a few of those marks in order to sketch the beginnings of a

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[18]A "critical" sociology of the oscillations of torture cannot be conducted here. The risk of this, helpfully highlighted by one anonymous reviewer, is that we ignore "the broader genealogy of the mentalities that make torture possible" and, especially, "the historical understanding of the relationship between knowledge and body." See Silverman (2001).

novel cartography of violences like torture. It has done so by introducing a mode of inquiry that sees the (re)emergence and (re)convergence of the morphologies of violence as part of the mundane and everyday circulations of objects, knowledges, and texts through material-semiotic networks that reach across borders. It was in those circulations that we found an answer to what the "something more" than the internalization of norms might be (Leebaw 2012, 306). The worlds of violence were argued not to be generated solely through the machinations of "evil" personalities, the institutional form of particular political regimes, or the weakness of global norms. Rather, the form that violence takes was suggested to sometimes emerge through the ways in which the circulation of mundane knowledges and objects through a complex, decentered and multidirectional set of relations works to 'network' practices together. By combining this mapping of relations with a theory of *oscillation* in violent practices, which refers to the ways in which states do not *regress* toward violence but, rather, are always situated in a space of violence outside the purview of the idealism of constructivist literatures and which sees them return without any necessary moment of "decision" to those violent practices, we finally found an avenue toward understanding Michel Serres' (1982, 194) suggestion that a certain "terrible and secret equation" sees "the same amount of violence . . . conserved at the heart of any given human distribution." This notion that any "human distribution" retains the same capacity for violence was unpacked through the idea that practices oscillate between different "scripts" for behavior. While the norms literature has foregrounded "good" (human rights) scripts, this paper has identified the *coexistence* of, rather than regression toward, equally global scripts for "bad" behavior. These scripts *oscillate* in their enaction and whereas the former "good scripts" tend to be framed in the humanist terms of intersubjectively shared norms (*against* torture), the latter are circulated and persist *subjectlessly* through the web of relations mapped out in this paper. The unveiling of this latter space of violence as central to the how-possible of the emergence and convergence of torture across time and space was finally argued to foreground the limits of normative regimes in combatting violence and so to pose new questions as to the possibility of a political coming to terms with this everyday, flat, and banal conceptualization of violence. Doing so may be key to finally overcoming the "global crisis" in torture that human rights scholars and practitioners have been seeking to halt for over forty years (Amnesty International 1973, 2014).

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