

A Book Forum on Arthur Bradley's *Unbearable Life*

THE POETICS OF DISAPPEARANCE

In the Introduction to *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), Arthur Bradley speaks of an Ancient Roman punishment that was believed to be more terrible than death: *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of memory).¹ To penalize a citizen who was deemed to have brought disgrace upon the state, the Senate would decree that every trace of that citizen's existence be removed from the city as if they never existed in the first place. If *damnatio memoriae* officially died out around the 4th century, Bradley goes on to argue that it has never really gone away. In political modernity, the condemned Roman citizen passes under many different names – “Enemies of the People;” the “Missing,” the “Disappeared,” all the way to “ghost” detainees policed by “black” units in “black” sites – but the same gesture of political erasure persists: *they never existed*.

To quickly introduce his larger project, Bradley seeks to write the – hitherto unwritten – history of this sovereign power to render life un-lived, unborn, and unbearable from Ancient Rome to the War on Terror. Straddling the disciplines of political theory, theology, philosophy, and literature – and encompassing readings of Augustine, Shakespeare, Hobbes, Robespierre, Schmitt, and Benjamin, thus *Unbearable Life* offers a singular new perspective on the over-populated field of sovereignty. In Bradley's verdict, sovereignty emerges as neither the power to make die and let live (as the ancient Roman formula puts it) nor the power to make live and let die (as Foucault's reversal of the Roman dictum puts it) but the power *to make life neither live nor die*.

What, then, is the obscure “life” of this unbearable life? How does it appear and disappear across sovereign time and space, from empires to republics, from gods and emperors to kings and presidents? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to what extent can unbearable life be resisted, overcome, or at least “lived” otherwise? In this special Roundtable for the *Journal for Religious and Cultural Theory*, Agata Bielik-Robson (University of Nottingham), Niall Gildea (Lancaster University) and Boštjan Nedoh (Institute of Philosophy, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana) give new critical

¹ Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

readings of Arthur Bradley's *Unbearable Life* and Arthur Bradley responds.