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CAVEAT LECTOR: INTRODUCTION

In introducing this Roundtable, I would first like to thank Carl Raschke and the team at the *Journal for Religious and Cultural Theory* for giving me the opportunity to read a new book called *Unbearable Life*, written by someone called Arthur Bradley, who is, apparently none other than myself.<sup>1</sup> To begin with such a Borgesian *caveat lector*, I obviously don't mean to disown all responsibility for the book – I am Arthur Bradley and I did write it – but merely to draw attention to the curious fate that seems to befall every writer: we all end up becoming more or less detached observers upon the life of our own work. If this forum takes the familiar format of “Author-Meets-Reader” – which accords me the privileged position of having the last word – I want to stress, then, that I very much see myself as a (by no means uncritical) “reader” of *Unbearable Life* as well. In what follows, I am less interested in the (frankly tedious) task of explaining or defending what I've already written – I'm not sure I always can or even want to – than in creating, together with my interlocutors, a new reading community whose interests extend far beyond the scope of any one single author or book.

To be sure, this book – like all books – emerges out of an idiosyncratic nexus of personal and intellectual, conscious, and unconscious, interests, investments, and debts. Firstly, I do not speak about this in the book itself, but I grew up in a time and place – Belfast during the so-called “Troubles” of the 1970s and 80s – where real acts of political disappearance took place that, even today, remain unresolved. If I thankfully never had any direct experience of such acts, I think I did intuit even as a very young child that “politics” was something both inescapable – everything was always already political whether it was your name, where you lived or what school you went to – but also curiously unspeakable: I knew that politics was never to be spoken about openly, even amongst family or friends, and I would be admonished for doing so. For me, this book also emerges out of a career-long intellectual fascination with philosophical negativity – which is to say with negative theology, with negative dialectics and the afterlives of the Hegelian legacy up to deconstruction – and, in particular, the question of what a

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). I borrow this joke from Alain Badiou, “Author's Preface,” *Theoretical Writings* ed. and trans. by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004), xiv.

particular French tradition from Bataille to Derrida call unrestricted negativity: a negativity that is never sublated or recuperated into positivity.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I should add that *Unbearable Life* is a work of something that we must still apparently call “political theology” – a term whose only real value today consists in its manifest, indeed almost ostentatious, inadequacy – and which really only names a set of problems or questions for me rather than any kind of religious or political agenda.<sup>3</sup>

In drawing this Introduction to a close and opening the Roundtable proper, I also want to thank my three distinguished interlocutors, whose work I have read and admired for a long time, for taking the time away from their own projects to participate: Agata Bielik-Robson, Niall Gildea and Boštjan Nedoh. It has been an intellectual honour and challenge to respond to their contributions and they have compelled me to think harder about what the book is really trying to say and do. As the reader will see, they approach *Unbearable Life* from very different perspectives, but I was, nonetheless, intrigued to see certain recurring themes emerging from their contributions. To begin with, I was struck by how they each raise an important theoretical or methodological question: is it possible to write a genealogy of unbearable life without lapsing back into the twin antinomies of vitalism and nihilism that the book seeks to move beyond? If no book is written in a vacuum, I was also struck by the extent to which my interlocutors all sought to position it within – or against – philosophical traditions that, for better or worse, are rarely mentioned within it such as Lacanian psychoanalysis and/or Derridean deconstruction: is the book too close to Derrida and not close enough to Lacan or vice versa? Finally, of course, I think all three contributors also address what is perhaps the most contentious aspect of the book, namely, what exactly is to be *done* – whether politically, ethically, or philosophically – in opposition to unbearable life. To what extent does the book’s attempt to construct new *dramatis personae* of resistant subjectivities – Robespierre’s already dead, Benjamin’s never born – create a genuine alternative to the sovereignty of life

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004). See also my “God sans Being: Derrida, Marion and ‘a paradoxical writing of the word *without*,’” *Literature and Theology*, 14: 3 (2000): 299-312; “Without Negative Theology: Deconstruction and the Politics of Negative Theology,” *The Heythrop Journal*, 42: 2 (2001): 133-47; “Thinking the Outside: Foucault, Derrida and the Thought of Negative Theology,” *Textual Practice*, 16: 1 (2002): 57-74; “Derrida’s God: A Genealogy of the Theological Turn,” *Paragraph*, 29: 3, (2006): 21-42 and “Mystic Atheism: Julia Kristeva’s Negative Theology,” *Theology and Sexuality* 14: 3 (2008): 279-92.

<sup>3</sup> See Arthur Bradley, “The Future of Political Theology and the Legacy of Carl Schmitt” (with Antonio Cerella), *Journal for Cultural Research*. Special issue on “Carl Schmitt and Political Theology” ed. by Arthur Bradley and Antonio Cerella. 20: 3 (2016): 205-216.

and death or does it merely double down on the axis of vitalism-nihilism? In beginning my own response to these questions, though, let me re-assert the *caveat lector* with which I began: reader, I am myself just one more reader of *Unbearable Life*.