

AVANT-PROPOS

A guide to reading *Traces of Violence*

We must be several in order to write, and even to “perceive.”

JACQUES DERRIDA,  
*Writing and Difference*

Violence is expansive. It sneaks up on people, hits them hard, shears like shrapnel into bodies, mind, and matter. It sears through the world through vehicles of force, sight, and sound, and burrows into the memories of a life or a people. Remnant traces of violence can so easily get embedded in a landscape or urban terrain. Violent harm leaves marks, wounds, scars, absences, silences, potentialities. Violence is reiterative in time and space; it's often generative of further violence. Its very possibility is difficult at times to comprehend. At the same time, any history of violence is caught up in other histories of violence—genealogies of colonial conquest, imperial domination, genocide; chronicles of the tortured and disappeared, of saturation bombing and drone strikes, border surveillance, expulsions, internment camps; annals of military brutality, police harassment—a knotted tangle of violent histories that shadow a city mired in life, death, and wounding. In the midst of such harsh tracts of violence, where there are no easy answers or explanations, it's important to find ways to live generatively and co-constructively in relation to others.

On the night of 13 November 2015, a commando acting on behalf of the organization then known as the Islamic State perpetrated a string of attacks throughout the greater Paris area. Starting at 9:16pm, three explosions occurred outside the Stade de France, a national sports stadium just north of

Paris, resulting in four deaths, including three suicide bombers. In that same hour, armed gunmen approached several bars and restaurants in the 10th and 11th arrondissements and shot into the crowds gathered there, killing a number of people and wounding others. Three gunmen raided the Bataclan, a music venue on boulevard Voltaire, where they took hostages and shot at those attending a concert that night; hours later, police forces entered the Bataclan and fought with the hostage-takers. Ninety people were killed at the Bataclan and over two hundred were wounded. In all, the attacks that night resulted in 130 deaths. Some 413 people were injured, one hundred of whom were wounded seriously. Seven of the attackers also died when French police and security forces searched for the agents of the attacks and for accomplices. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or Daesh, in line with its Arabic-language acronym, claimed responsibility for the attacks, stating they were in retaliation for the French airstrikes on ISIL targets in Syria and Iraq. The attacks, commonly known as *les attentats* in French, were reportedly planned in Syria and organized in Belgium.

The attacks caused concern and alarm throughout the world. Television and newspaper reports spoke in dramatic, mournful terms to shocked, distressed audiences. Much like with the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris in January 2015, the events took on a political and symbolic significance far beyond the specific lives and deaths involved.<sup>1</sup>

It was as if the space and values of the nation had been attacked, and the Republic responded with national acts of mourning and commemoration, combined with intensive security measures that sought to identify terroristic threats while shoring up the country's borders to protect its citizens. François Hollande, then president of France, called the attacks "an aggression against our . . . way of life" and an act of war by ISIL. On 14 November 2015 the French government declared a national state of emergency, a legal mandate that banned public demonstrations and allowed the police to carry out searches without a warrant and put anyone under house arrest without trial. With these sovereign powers in place, the government mobilized fifty thousand police officers, fifty thousand military police (*gendarmérie*), and seven thousand soldiers in order to find those responsible for the attacks. On 15 November France launched airstrikes against ISIL targets in Syria. Around dawn on 18 November a joint-police operation of the RAID and the BRI approached a building in Saint-Denis, north of Paris, where one of the alleged organizers of the attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, was hiding. He was killed

in the assault, along with two accomplices. By then, 296 home raids (*perquisitions*) had taken place and 114 people had been placed under house arrest (*assignation a résidence*). By July 2016 these figures had risen to over 3,500 home raids and four hundred house arrests.<sup>2</sup> These various operations are part of the broader ongoing Vigipirate program, in which security measures are undertaken to encourage vigilance at both the collective and individual level.

Many residents of Paris and its neighboring communities were deeply affected by the 13 November attacks, even if they did not experience them firsthand. More than a few would say that they were traumatized by the violence that occurred. The violent events affected different peoples in disparate ways, from those who directly mourned lives lost to the nervous residents of neighborhoods in north Paris and the *banlieue* suburbs, where French security forces were concentrated. In the weeks that followed, the focus of political violence moved from the site of the massacres to the stigmatization of particular urban spaces and the social groups that compose them, chiefly immigrant and French Muslim communities. France became a society supposedly at war in Syria and Iraq, at war within its own borders. Relying on existing legal, police, and military protocols, these operations have worked alongside broader discursive and affective constructions. They have allowed for a retracing of national borders, as lines of demarcation between the “civilized” and the “barbarian,” between the French nation and the lurking “internal enemy,” come to be signified anew. Out of the sequence of events of 13 November 2015—in the wake of previous attacks and foreboding future acts of violence—thus emerged a landscape of phantasms: a phantasmagoria of terrorist threats and enmity and governmental responses.

This book is concerned with the aftermath of the attacks. The writing tracks how certain trace elements of the violent events of 13 November 2015 have come to exist, recur, erode, or vanish altogether in the streets, bodies, inscriptions, archives, memorials, and collective memories within the cityscape of Paris. It gives thought to the ways in which certain marks of violence come to be effaced or denied, often for complicated political reasons. These considerations lead, in time, to a broader reflection on the ways in which certain histories of violence, from the French colonial era on into the contemporary moment, shape the contours of life and death in Paris.

Several key themes guide this inquiry, including: the disastrous effects and charged potentialities of violence in people’s lives; forms of militarized vigilance and state security in contemporary life; the politics of traces, archives,

and collective memorialization; demeaning and oppressive police strategies of harassment and forceful control of marginalized residents of north Paris; dynamics of haunting, phantasms, and spectrality; and the lingering wounds of (post)coloniality. These themes recur throughout the text, either implicitly within the narratives and images at hand, or in more overt conceptual statements. The book entails an integrative, interdisciplinary reflection on processes and effects of collective violence in Paris, France, and elsewhere, with the book's motifs conveyed through a historically complex terrain of traces, marks and inscriptions, spectral hauntings, wounds and scars.

It's worth noting several themes and methods integral to this work, so that readers have a clearer understanding of the book's organization.

1. *Collaborative anthropology.* The work is a collaborative effort in anthropological-sociological inquiry, in which we, the two authors, draw from our respective research engagements in Paris to reflect on forms and histories of violence in France and elsewhere. While such a collaborative anthropology has often been called for, there are surprisingly few examples of published works in which two or more authors write in an integrative way on a particular subject of ethnographic inquiry—especially when the authors come from different sociocultural backgrounds and political circumstances.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, few works attest to collaboration as a work of coauthorship, wherein reflexivity and dialogue work toward a constant questioning of the way the authors construe their object of study. In these pages, the co-construction of the object of study is articulated through an exchange in methods and in concepts. This book is the product of this process of contrasting and using each other's tools to sharpen one another's gaze.

Significantly, the approach undertaken here is a decidedly *dialogical* one, in which the two authors write in response to each other, making for a work of interlacing voices and displacements. Specifically, the main text of each chapter is followed by an "interruption" that works in relation to, or against the grain of, the main body of that chapter. Each text and interruption is written by one of the two authors, as indicated by the initials found at the end of each text (i.e., "K. H." or "R. D."). The authors bring to this dialogue distinct but nonetheless interlinked perspectives, academic traditions, socio-political and cultural worlds, and universes of meaning.

Khalil Habrih was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1995 and was raised between Villejuif (south of Paris), Toronto, and Ottawa. His father is the son of Algerian emigrants who progressively settled in France starting in the early 1950s; his mother, the eldest daughter of Romanian socialist lawyers,

immigrated to France shortly after the December 1989 Revolution. Habrih was educated in the French national education system, in a French lycée in Canada, and later at the Paris Institute of Political Studies. A visiting student at Oberlin College in 2014, he arrived in Paris in 2015. Between 2015 and 2017 he engaged in ethnographic research on policing in Paris and began a master's program at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (EHESS). His current research engages with the fields of surveillance, racialization, and gender, with a focus on ethnographic methods and sociohistory. As of this writing, Habrih is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Ottawa.

Robert Desjarlais, in turn, hails from a secular Catholic, culturally American, middle-class family of Quebecois-Polish heritage in western Massachusetts. A student of state universities in Massachusetts and California, and once a research fellow at Harvard University, he has taught for some twenty-five years at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. An anthropologist by training, Desjarlais has conducted ethnographic research in Nepal, the United States, and now in France. Over time he has become increasingly ambivalent about the ethics and politics of ethnographic research, and he has sought out alternative modes of anthropological thought, writing, and image-making.

The two authors first met after Desjarlais had already written draft versions of several of the chapters that now appear in this book (in greatly revised form).<sup>4</sup> This was in March 2017, at a time when Habrih was conducting ethnographic research on police practices and strategies in the Barbès-Goutte d'Or areas of Paris and Desjarlais was conducting research of his own on the aftermath of the violence of November 2015. We met at the EHESS, where Desjarlais was presenting on his research during one session of a year-long academic seminar.<sup>5</sup> We met again several weeks later. While taking a long, drifting walk together through parts of north Paris we began to exchange thoughts on life and violence in France and elsewhere. A few weeks later, in the summer of 2017, Habrih wrote a paper for the year-long seminar, which he was taking for academic credit. This reflective essay narrated aspects of that conversation-in-movement and its conceptual implications. He then forwarded a copy to Desjarlais in New York. (A trace record of this seminar paper, translated into English, can be found at the start of chapter 7). Finding that Habrih's ongoing research and thought opened up significant realms of generative perspectives of pressing relevance to his own efforts, Desjarlais invited him to join the writing of the book-in-progress. In the months that

followed we began to work together on the manuscript, with Habrih adding texts of his own and Desjarlais writing further on the themes in question. From the preface and counter-preface on, the book's composition reflects the contrapuntal movement of this dialogic process.

The book thus entails an uncommon writing strategy, in which the two authors draw from their distinct but interrelated research inquiries in Paris—as well as their respective intellectual heritages and subject positions—in writing on life and violence in the metropole. The writing proceeds in interwoven ways, with distinct texts essayed by Habrih and Desjarlais working in dialogue with one another—and with some passages serving as “interruptions” to the main texts found in each chapter. What emerges from this joint effort is an intensive inquiry into processes and reverberations of violence, phenomena of importance to so many in today's world.

2. *A critical phenomenology of traces.* Central to the inquiry of this work is a critical phenomenology of traces, in which traces of violence are situated within complex vectors of time, space, history, and cultural and political formations. We also consider ways in which certain violent events are not preserved in lasting traces of such events. We write of inscriptions in Paris, a city engrained within a long, complicated history of inscriptions, be they the *graff* marks of graffiti, monuments and memorials, historical events and acts of violence sited in particular urban spaces, or, more viscerally, and metaphorically, wounds and scars of violence, from colonial times on to the contemporary moment. We do not take traces as being natural phenomena in the world, but rather the product of complex processes of materiality, inscription, semiosis, and perception. In consideration here are the ways in which fear and vigilance become inscribed in people's lives and fissures of the city; the archival, commemorative work of the French state; scriptive acts of police and military soldiers; acts of counterinscription; and the tracework of violence, cruelty, disaster, and creativity that runs through it all. Through this urban ichnology we write, in effect, of the politics of traces.

This focus on traces helps to explain the methods and motives of Desjarlais's research in Paris. From the start of his inquiry into the aftereffects of the violent attacks in November 2015, he was interested in tracking and retracing “traces” of violence perceived or grasped. In relation to this, and for complex reasons, he did not undertake any formal interviews with residents of Paris in regard to any violence perceived or experienced. Instead, he attended primarily to what he encountered through quiet, low-key engagements while residing in Paris—conversations overhead, incidental encounters, perspectives

voiced in everyday conversations, newspaper entries, films and photographs, remnant marks of graffiti and street art, the eerie presence of armed soldiers in Parisian streets, and myriad other trace effects. In many respects, this ethnographic method is inspired by Walter Benjamin's writings on European cities (Paris and Berlin, most notably), in which Benjamin drew from numerous forms of historical artifacts and sensate perceptions to convey a sense of the cultural and political forms of life in these cities. Benjamin's archival impulse and historical materialist method was one of "ragpicking," as with the *chiffonnier* (ragpicker) that Charles Baudelaire wrote of in his portraits of figures of nineteenth-century Paris.

Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day's rubbish in the capital. He collects and catalogues everything that the great city has cast off, everything it has lost, and discarded, and broken. He goes through the archives of debauchery, and the jumbled array of refuse. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice; like a miser hoarding treasure, he collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial magic.<sup>6</sup>

The ragpicker is like an urban archaeologist, concerned with "excavation and memory" and the "phantasmagoria" of modern life, gathering up so many shards of urban detritus, the ruins of modernity, recycling that which holds the potential for further use.<sup>7</sup> Benjamin invoked such themes in his description of German writer Siegfried Kracauer: "A ragpicker at daybreak, lancing with his stick scraps of language and tatters of speech in order to throw them into his cart, grumblingly, stubbornly, somewhat the worse for drink, and not without now and again letting one or other of these fading calicoes—'humanity,' 'inner nature,' 'enrichment'—flutter ironically in the dawn breeze."<sup>8</sup> Such inclinations could readily apply when refashioned to Desjarlais's method of perusing the streets of Paris, looking for scraps of speech, remnant images and affective intensities, discarded fliers—"liberty," "security," "vigilance"—and specters of death and life.

We realize this is an unorthodox method of anthropological research, in which formal interviews play no part. But once Desjarlais got going with this practice he wanted to stay with it, to see how far it could go as a mode of ethnographic comprehension. He therefore relied on the same ragpicker's method during stays in Paris from 2017 through 2020. An objection might be raised that the style Desjarlais adopts as an ethnographer in the early chapters of this book—the shifting perceptions of a "spectral anthropologist," of sorts—leads to a focus on his processes of thinking through the afterlives of

violence as opposed to the experiences of those who live in the city or experienced the violence firsthand. Yet our sense is that Desjarlais's observations, which work in relation to Habrih's research, are consistent with how many have experienced the aftermath of the violence of November 2015. In contrast, Habrih's ethnographic research in the Goutte d'Or (uninterrupted from 2015 to 2017, and again more sporadically in 2018 and 2019) draws from a number of formal and informal interviews, participant observation and less collective methods of observations such as "urban drifting" (*dérive urbaine*), as well as other forms of autoethnographic writing that describe his relationship to policed and surveilled urban space. This form of ethnography relies on living *in situ* and is largely drawn from the work of reflexive sociology and organic ethnology undertaken by French-Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad. Through dialogue, extensive interviews often cited at length without interpretive interruptions, Sayad centered the experiences and universes of meaning of Algerian (post)colonial immigrants to France. In so doing, he worked to *make sense* of the sociopolitical and affective reverberations of categories of (non)citizenship, from the *sensibility* of the stigmatized, rather than the sense-making of state discourses.<sup>9</sup> Habrih's engagement with field research was in that sense committed to participants' testimonies and analyses and to formulating a critique of French Republican institutions. The authors' differing methods and their underlying normative commitments are part of the collaborative work and dialogue involved.

3. *Emergence of understanding.* The book reflects a process of research and writing in which there is an emergence of understanding of the conditions and histories of violence in contemporary Paris. This emergence, at once epistemic, affective, ethical, political, and intersubjective in scope, relates in part to changes in perspective that Desjarlais underwent through his research and writing efforts, in large part through his engagements with Habrih. In effect, there is a narrative structure implicit in Desjarlais's writings in this book, in which his initial encounters with traces of violence associated with November 2015 lead to a greater understanding of the complexities of violence, particularly the ways in which histories of state-supported violence in the contemporary world relate to violent events so often deemed acts of "terrorism." Habrih, meanwhile, progressively incorporated Desjarlais's phenomenological approach and vocabulary into his sociological method. Habrih began by systematically exploring concepts, such as immigrant centrality, spatialities, urban rhythms, collective memory, historicities of displacement, race-making, and the like. The constant "rubbing of shoulders" with phe-