

# Another Life. Democracy, Suicide, Ipseity, Autoimmunity

Ronald Mendoza-de-Jesús

University of Southern California

ronaldme@usc.edu



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## Abstract

This paper elaborates some of the conceptual implications of Derrida's call for "another thinking of life" in *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison*. The paper first argues that Derrida's deconstruction of the opposition between metaphorical and literal uses of the discourse of life in *La vie la mort* is radicalized in *Voyous* when he argues that democracy's "auto-immunitary suicide" should be the point of departure for rethinking life in general. To understand further these autoimmune-suicidal tendencies, the paper turns to Derrida's engagement with Aristotle's conceptual figure of the prime mover in *Voyous*. The paper argues that Derrida turns to Aristotle because the prime mover illustrates the ways in which the concept of life remains historically and structurally informed by the philosophical value of *ipseitocratic* sovereignty, which is allergic to the disseminatory, proliferating, and improper qualities that the philosophical tradition has always ascribed to democracy. Autoimmunity thus provides a way for thinking of a democratic life that is not entirely determined by the teleological power of any divinely good life.

**Keywords:** Derrida; Aristotle; autoimmunity; sovereignty; democracy; onto-theology; prime mover; ipseity; life; death

## Resum. *Una altra vida. Democràcia, suïcidi, ipseïtat, autoimmunitat*

Aquest article elabora algunes de les implicacions conceptuals de l'exigència de Derrida d'un «altre pensament de la vida» a *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison*. L'article sosté en primer lloc que la desconstrucció de Derrida de l'oposició entre els usos metafòrics i literaris del discurs de la vida a *La vie la mort* es radicalitza a *Voyous* quan s'afirma que el «suïcidi autoimmunitari» de la democràcia hauria de ser el punt de partida per repensar la vida en general. Per comprendre millor aquestes tendències autoimmuno-suïcides, l'article valora el compromís de Derrida amb la figura conceptual del primer motor d'Aristòtil a *Voyous*. L'article sosté que Derrida torna a Aristòtil perquè el primer motor il·lustra la manera en què el concepte de vida roman històricament i estructuralment informat pel valor filosòfic de la sobirania ipseitocràtica, que és al·lèrgica a les qualitats disseminants, proliferants i impròpies que la tradició sempre ha atribuït a la democràcia. Així, l'autoimmunitat ofereix una manera de pensar la vida democràtica que no està del tot determinada pel poder teleològic de cap vida divinament bona.

**Paraules clau:** Derrida; Aristòtil; autoimmunitat; sobirania; democràcia; ontoteologia; primer motor; ipseïtat; vida; mort

### Summary

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Further, if there were not other things besides perceptible ones, there would be no source, no order, no generation, and no heavenly orbits, but a source would always have a source, just as with all the writers on the gods and on nature. But if there are forms or numbers, they will be responsible for nothing, or if so, certainly not for motion [...], and therefore there could be no everlasting beings. *But there are*. Therefore, something in the argument must be annulled. [...] But those who say that mathematical number is primary, and in that way there is always another successive kind of thinghood, with different sources for each kind, make the thinghood of the sum of things arbitrarily episodic [...] and make there be many sources; *but beings do not present the aspect of being badly governed*. "A divided sovereignty is not good; let there be one lord."

ARISTOTLE

Es ist für mich heute eine entscheidende Frage, wie dem technischen Zeitalter überhaupt ein—und welches—politisches System zugeordnet werden kann. Auf diese Frage weiß ich keine Antwort. Ich bin nicht überzeugt, daß es die Demokratie ist.

HEIDEGGER

## 0. The Deaths of Democracy or Another Concept of Life

Judging by the amount of ink that has been spilled since 2016 on the topic of the possible "death of democracy," it is safe to say that fewer systemic problems (the notable exceptions being climate change and structural racism) have captivated more the imagination of social scientists, humanists, and public intellectuals across the world in the last years than the chance that modern liberal democracy might finally die.<sup>1</sup> Joining the ever-growing chorus of voices

1. The recent bibliography on democracy's impending death is so enormous that it would be impossible to provide even a highly representative summary of the literature. For key contributions to this discussion that interface academic and political discussions, see Snyder (2017), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), and Gessen (2020). It should be noted that the predominance of English sources in these debates about democracy's finitude is not just a

sounding the alarm, British political theorist and Hobbes scholar David Runciman has recently added a doomsday scenario that diverges from the usual apocalyptic endings that are often evoked in discussions about democracy's finitude, which most often take a page from the recent history of European fascism as a way of imagining what the impending death of democracy might look like.<sup>2</sup> According to Runciman, rather than unfolding as a full-scale repetition of the totalitarian regimes that spelled a certain death of democracy across Europe during the first three decades of the previous century, the global death of democracy that might be in store for us in the near future could well pass below our radars—until it is too late:

The question for the twenty-first century is how long we can persist with institutional arrangements we have grown so used to trusting, that we no longer notice when they have ceased to work. These arrangements include regular elections, which remain the bedrock of democratic politics. But they also encompass democratic legislatures, independent law courts and a free press. All can continue to function as they ought while failing to deliver what they should. A hollowed-out version of democracy risks lulling us into a false sense of security. We might continue to trust in it and to look to it for rescue, even as we seethe with irritation at its inability to answer the call. Democracy could fail while remaining intact. (Runciman, 2018: 3-4)

The end of democracy that Runciman imagines looks less like the effect of a sudden and violent downfall than the almost *natural* outcome of what we might call, borrowing a concept from Laurent Berlant, democracy's "slow death" (Berlant, 2015: 95). Although, in the passage quoted above, Runciman does not rely on the lexicon of life, his characterization of democracy's demise seems to be informed by a physiognomic imaginary that posits something like a democratic *body politic* that has been progressively deteriorating beyond any possibility of repair. In fact, Runciman's characterization of democracy's "slow death" could be described even more precisely in terms of a regressive movement from living organism to machine—these two understood in their traditional sense, that is, as opposites, such as we find them, for instance, in §65 of Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der Urteilschaft* (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*), where Kant distinguishes between a living being and a machine in the following way:

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symptom of the recent political history of both the U.S. and U.K., marked by the election of Trump and the victory of Brexit. I see that as an effect of what I would not hesitate to describe as the Anglo-American global hegemony on determining what counts as a true democracy across the world. This Anglo-American hegemonic hold on democracy is exerted not only through the geopolitical strategies of the American and British states, but also through the equally hegemonic hold that Anglo-American academics and academics have on the discussion of global matters. These hegemonies, in turn, are not divorced from the global dominance that English still exerts as the global *lingua franca*.

2. For a recent example of this argument, see Lepore (2020).

Ein organisiertes Wesen ist also nicht bloß Maschine: denn die hat lediglich *bewegende* Kraft; sondern *sie* besitzt in sich *bildende* Kraft, und zwar eine solche, die *sie* den Materien mitteilt, welche sie nicht haben (sie organisiert): also eine sich fortpflanzende bildende Kraft, welche durch das Bewegungsvermögen allein (den Mechanismus) nicht erklärt werden kann. (Kant, 1974: 322)

An organized being is therefore not merely a machine: for a machine only has *moving* power; rather *it* possesses in itself a *formative* power, and indeed such that it imparts it [i.e., *formative* power] on matters that do not have it (it organizes): thus it is a self-propagating formative power, which cannot be explained through the capacity for movement alone (mechanism).<sup>3</sup>

Democracy's "slow death," per Runciman, might take the form of the progressive becoming-machine of democratic institutions across the globe in the manner outlined by Kant in the passage above. Democratic institutions have not ceased to "move," and thus to "function," and it is possible that they will not have ceased to function in the future (Runciman, 2018: 2); what is increasingly likely, however, is that they will operate as Kantian machines and not as living beings since they will have lost their *own formative* power, that is, their capacities to *form* and *reform themselves*, and, more crucially, to *impart* upon non-democratic matters the organizational form of democracy, thereby losing the power to propagate themselves by self-replication. In other words, the "slow death" of democracy suggests that democratic institutions no longer exist as forms of life in Kantian terms, that is, as organized, living, *self-reproducing* political beings.<sup>4</sup>

Probably unbeknownst to Runciman, the last sentence in the passage that I quoted above in which he outlines the kind of death he fears is in store for democracy also resembles, in more than wording alone, the lapidary sentence that opens Maurice Blanchot's *L'écriture du désastre* (*The Writing of Disaster*): "Le désastre ruine tout en laissant tout à l'état" ("Disaster ruins everything while leaving everything intact.") (Blanchot, 1980: 7). Although a dialogue between these two texts seems highly improbable given their enormous discrepancies, I insist on bringing Blanchot's meditations on the motif of *disaster* to bear on Runciman's diagnoses of the "slow death" of democracy in order to highlight one dimension that remains implicit in the latter, namely, the role that the foreclosure of futurity—and thus of temporality—plays in his analyses of democracy's progressive demise. Commenting on disaster's temporality, Blanchot writes: "Nous sommes au bord du désastre sans que nous puissions le situer dans *l'avenir*: il est plutôt toujours déjà passé, et pourtant nous sommes au bord ou sous la menace, toutes formulations qu'impliqueraient *l'avenir* si le désastre n'était ce qui ne vient pas, ce qui a arrêté toute venue."

3. Texts will be cited in the original language, following by English translations after the bibliographical parenthetical entry. All translations into English are mine unless otherwise noted.
4. For a recent essay that shows how the work of Jacques Derrida deconstructs the classic machine/animal opposition, see Senatore (2020).

(“We are at the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the *to-come*: it is rather always already past, and nevertheless we are at the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the *to-come* if disaster was not that which does not come, that which stops all coming.”) (Blanchot, 1980: 7, emphases mine). What makes disaster disastrous for Blanchot is not its destructive power. Rather than being a principle of ontic decay, disaster for Blanchot ruins ontology by targeting what Martin Heidegger calls the temporalization of time: disaster deprives life of meaningful ex-istence, corroding the form of *Dasein* by disrupting its *proper* temporal unfolding—which, for Heidegger, necessitates the postulation of “*die Zukunft*” (“the future” or, more literally, the “to-come”) as the temporal ecstasy and horizon from out of which *Dasein* can *become itself by appropriating its own time*, by temporalizing itself in such a way that it “in seinem eigensten Seinkönnen auf sich zukommt.” (“comes to its most proper possibility-to-be”) (Heidegger, 1977: 430–431). Reading Runciman through Blanchot’s tacit engagement with Heidegger, we might describe democracy’s progressive descent into mechanized “slow death” in terms of disaster, rather than death, understood both biologically, i.e., as the cessation of life, and phenomenologically, i.e., as the ontological *end of Dasein* that grounds its existential constitution as a finite, mortal being. Blanchot’s disaster thus provides a better category than death to account for the way in which, according to Runciman, democratic institutions and norms across the globe appear to remain “intact,” in spite of the fact that they are losing any *vital force* and therefore any life and any death *worthy of the name*. In other words, the disaster that is befalling democracies across the world is not so much condemning democracies to death, as it is depriving democracies of the possibility of both life and death, understood not simply in biological terms, but also in the phenomenological terms whose deactivation Blanchot’s disaster names and enacts. In stopping all coming, in interrupting the very *opening* of temporality that is the hallmark of *proper* existence and thus of a *proper life*, disaster would be preventing democracy from *coming again to its own*, thus depriving democracy of any future life, and depriving our lives of any democratic future.

Now, some readers might object to the analogy that I have made in the previous paragraphs between Runciman’s prognoses about the disastrous becoming-machine of democracy and Berlant’s notion of “slow death” on the grounds that, for Berlant, “slow death refers to the *physical* wearing out of a population in a way that points to its *deterioration* as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence” (Berlant, 2015: 95, emphases mine). In other words, whereas Berlant’s concept registers how the health of *real* populations, composed of *actually* living human beings, has been gradually consumed “by the activity of *reproducing life*” under neoliberal regimes of governmentality (Berlant, 2015: 100, emphases mine), any reference to democracy as something that pertains to *phusis* or to *life*, as something that is *alive* or that might count as a *living being*, would be simply *metaphorical*—more precisely, catachrestic or abusive. To this objection, I would respond with

a counter-hypothesis: what if this so-called metaphorical use of the lexicon of life—a term whose polyvalence and structural instability is such that no single discourse, whether biology, medicine, phenomenology, or theology, can claim to have determined once and for all its semantic core—pointed instead to the necessity of thinking life *otherwise*, that is, other than according to the *bio-centric* (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015: 16) or metaphysical determinations that allow us to supposedly know that this or that use of the term *life* is metaphorical or literal, improper or proper? To put it differently: what if the ongoing preoccupation with the death of democracy exposed the metaphysical limits of current naturalistic, scientific, phenomenological, and spiritualistic conceptions of life? If this is so, then to think about democracy as something that is alive and that might die could not be simply characterized as a metaphorical, and thus epistemically and ontologically suspicious transfer of biological terminology into political discourse. On the contrary, the fact that democracy is the kind of entity whose temporality and historicity can only be explained by relying on the lexicon of life not only intimates that democracy might be a living being (though perhaps not an organism); most importantly, it also suggests that thinking the life of democracy beyond the metaphorical schema that presupposes a *proper* conception of the life and death of the living might provide a way to arrive at *another conception of life in general*.

My goal in this paper is to elaborate these two hypotheses, namely, that the phrase “the life-death of democracy” is more than a simple metaphor, and that thinking through its non- or more-than-metaphorical status both engages and requires a concept of life different from traditional bio- or theo-centric conceptions. I elaborate on these hypotheses by turning to several key moments in Jacques Derrida’s *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (*Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*), a text that is well-suited to this task since, as Derrida himself makes clear from the very beginning of *Voyous*, the thinking of democracy’s life and death that he articulates throughout this text is oriented by the task of developing “l’incalculable d’une autre pensée de la vie, du vivant de la vie” (“the incalculable of another thinking of life, of life’s living”) (Derrida, 2003: 24). Indeed, my working hypothesis throughout this essay is that Derrida’s lifelong preoccupation with the category of life undergoes a subtle, though crucial, rearticulation in this late text, once Derrida begins to articulate the aporias of democracy’s life-death in terms of autoimmunity. Accounting for the autoimmunity of democratic life provides the catalyst for a rethinking of life in general, rather than the other way around.

Accordingly, the first section of this paper turns briefly to Derrida’s recently published 1975-76 seminar, *La vie la mort*. In this section I focus on Derrida’s interrogation of the metaphoricity of life in *La vie la mort* as a way of recalibrating the pertinence of so-called biological terminology—most notably of the lexicon of autoimmunity—in Derrida’s interrogation of the life and death of democracy in *Voyous*. The second section then turns to the main focus of this paper, namely, Derrida’s reelaboration of the biological concept of *autoimmunity* in *Voyous* as a paradigm for thinking not only about democracy’s

life-death, but also about life-death in general. More specifically, I am interested in exploring further an aspect of democracy's precarious life that Derrida explicitly links to its acute autoimmune status throughout *Voyous*, namely, the *suicidal* nature of democracy (Derrida, 2003: 57).<sup>5</sup> That said, rather than continue the innovative line of inquiry opened up by Francesco Vitale and explore Derrida's thinking of the aporias of democracy's survival by unpacking the role that cellular suicide plays in biological discussions regarding autoimmunity (Vitale, 2018: 175-184), this essay takes as its point of departure a moment in *Voyous* that has yet to be *thoroughly* explicated, namely, Derrida's references to the Aristotelian conceptual figure of the prime mover (Aristotle, 1999: 1072b).<sup>6</sup> The main goal of this paper is to pose and sketch out a

5. This suicidal aspect of Derrida's thinking of democracy in relation to autoimmunity has been recently explored by Dimitris Vardoulakis (2018: 41). I agree with Vardoulakis's claim that Derrida's insistence on democracy's autoimmunity as compromising the very ontological position of ipseity is the most crucial aspect of his thinking of the democracy-to-come within the horizon of thinking life in general. That said, I don't think Vardoulakis goes far enough in his exposition of the implications of this insight, partly because his thinking continues to operate under the assumptions that inform his earlier work on sovereignty and democracy, namely, that democracy is "the other of sovereignty." (Vardoulakis, 2013: ix). Vardoulakis's enduring commitment to a more simplified understanding of the aporetic entanglement of democracy and sovereignty, or of unconditionality and sovereignty, leads him to see in the most radical form of autoimmunity that threatens suicide itself or the *sui* of *suicide* a "chance or a promise" (Vardoulakis, 2018: 40). Again, although I agree with this reading, I remain skeptical of any analytics that doesn't tarry with the ways in which this "chance" or "promise" is also a threat to the very possibility of a democratic life.
6. I emphasize the words *thoroughly* above because some commentators have already remarked on the importance of this figure in Derrida's argument in *Voyous*, though the questions that they have asked about this passage do not take up the problem that I explore in this paper. Although my paper expands on Sam Weber's reading of *Voyous* and his argument about the life of the prime mover as a form of selfhood (Weber, 2008: 115), I disagree with Weber's claim that "Aristotle also seems to retain the notion of an originating singularity at the very core of life. At the origin of life would be not just 'life' as such, life in general, life that can be lived constantly, but 'a life,' life in the singular, life that is finite: once and for all" (Weber, 2008: 115). In my opinion, Weber places too much emphasis here on Derrida's remarks about both the prime mover and the first heaven's status as finite (Derrida, 2003: 36), without distinguishing the notion of finitude at stake in this Aristotelian context from the conception of finitude linked to natality/mortality as source of singularization. What is finite because of its perfect circularity—i.e., the first heaven of the Aristotelian *kosmos*—cannot die and is therefore everlasting, and the prime mover, being the unmoved source of the first heaven, is even more everlasting than this spherical body. As a result, calling these eternal finite beings "singularities" in a Derridian sense is, at best, misleading, since Derrida's thinking of singularity is, to my mind, inextricable from the aporias of *mortal natal* in-finitude (not to mention the problem of idiomaticity and the untranslatable.) Moreover, Weber's desire to retrieve Aristotle's supposed opposition to the postulation of a general category of life—life as such or in general—at the origin of life seems even more misguided. This supposed singularity of the prime mover is in keeping with a standard feature of Aristotelian thought, which denies the *productive* agency or the effective causality of both Platonic forms and Pythagorean numbers. In the passage that I quoted as my first epigraph (Aristotle, 1999: 1275b 30), Aristotle himself makes that argument loud and clear: at the origin of the living cosmos there cannot be a Platonic form, say, *life itself*, since such a form could not *cause* anything to move and thus live. As Enrico Berti has argued, although

response to the following question: why does Derrida explicitly refer back to his brief engagement with Aristotle's characterization of the prime mover as a form of life in *Metaphysics* Lambda (Aristotle, 1999; 1072b) in the context of his call for *another* concept of life that might both register the structural nature of democracy's *suicidability* and militate in favor of democracy's *survival*? In other words: what does the prime mover have to do with Derrida's diagnosis of democracy's suicidal tendencies? And how would attending to the prime mover's status as a living being contribute to the task of elaborating a concept of life that might help us to *resist* democracy's suicidal tendencies in the name of *la démocratie à venir* (Derrida, 2003: 11)—to avert the *disaster* so that something might yet *come* to democracy, and so that there might yet be democracy *to come*?

The response to this question that I sketch out in the third, and final, section of this essay engages at once the *historical* and the *formal* sides of Derrida's deconstructive reading of the history of Western political philosophy, as exemplified in *Voyous*. As Sam Weber suggests, Derrida turns to Aristotle's prime mover because, given its everlasting *energeia* or activity, "the life of the Prime Mover would [...] constitute the life of the self, life as *self-same*" (Weber, 2008: 115, emphases mine). Developing Weber's remark, this paper shows that the prime mover is crucial for Derrida's *genealogy* of the entanglement of life and sovereignty in Western ontology because it discloses the historical and structural solidarity between the ideas of the *self* or the *same* (*autos/ipse*) and of *life* (*zōē/bios*). In the prime mover's ex-carnated, immaterial lifeform crystalizes the *eidos* of what Derrida calls *ipséité* or ipseity, which designates the formal-politico-ontological structure of sovereign power prior to the birth of any political sovereign formation, such as the state (Derrida, 2003: 31).<sup>7</sup> *Metaphysics* Lambda not only articulates a powerful (if not even inaugural) zoo-theo-cosmogony according to which the *life* of the *kosmos* is *caused* by the divine life of the prime mover, which, moreover, teleologically commands everything that *lives* to move and act *imitatio primi moventis* in order to attain its highest degree possible of perfection, beauty, truth, good-

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Platonic forms—and even the good itself (which is beyond being)—might be pure *actualities* for Aristotle, they are still not *activities* (that is, non-kinetic *energeiai*) and thus cannot be responsible for the eternal activity of cosmic motion (Berti, 2014: 618-620). Weber's problematic interpretation, however, is productive insofar as it takes us straight to the core of the matter that, I would argue, animates Derrida's interest in the prime mover in *Voyous*, namely, the fact that Aristotle's conception of life *in general*, of the force of all living beings—irrespective of the supposed distinction between *zōē* and *bios* proposed most famously by Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 1995: 3), but already anticipated by Martin Heidegger more than seven decades before (Heidegger, 2002: 74)—is teleologically and hierarchically determined by the position of the prime mover as a finite, yet *immortal*, form of ex-carnated, absolutely motionless life. I take the liberty of referring the reader to previous work in which I engage with *Metaphysics* XII by rereading the relation between the Prime Mover and the first heaven as an allegory of Derrida's aporetic entanglement and dissociation of unconditionality and sovereignty (Mendoza-de Jesús, 2015).

7. For an excellent take on the implications for political theory of Derrida's thinking of ipseity, see Mercier (2016).



ness, being, and life.<sup>8</sup> For, on Derrida's reading, *Metaphysics* Lambda *also* posits ipseity as the very essence of life, installing sovereignty's *sine qua non* at the heart of the living. We can therefore understand why Derrida insists on bringing up the life of the prime mover precisely at the moment in which he reinstates the need to rethink the concept of life in order to both acknowledge and resist democracy's suicidal tendencies. For the prime mover provides a privileged example of the way in which the concept of life remains historically and structurally informed, from within, by the form of *ipseitocratic* sovereignty, which is allergic to the disseminatory, proliferating, and improper qualities that the philosophical tradition has always ascribed to democracy. The tacit postulation of ipseity as the *telos* of all life condemns democracy to the pursuit of a phantasmatic version of itself that amounts to its *end*, that is, to the neutralization of the chance of its coming.<sup>9</sup>

From this preliminary foray into the problem of democracy's suicidal tendencies, its autoimmunity, and its complicated relation to ipseity, we can already intimate why arguments in favor of democracy's life such as Runciman's are bound to fail to even begin to address the crises of democracy that we are currently facing. For the liberal-democratic imaginary that fears the impending end of democracy is itself informed by the phantasm of a democratic ipseity, of a *proper* democratic life that will be more immune (if not even totally immune) to the diseases that currently afflict the democratic body politic. Against any such phantasmatic desire for a *proper* democracy, Derrida invites us to affirm democratic life as a force that is structurally divested of the power of self-appropriation and whose condition of survival lies precisely in its autoimmune resistance to its own immunity.

## 1. Metaphor and Reproduction: *La vie la mort*

*La vie la mort*—Derrida's recently published 1975-76 seminar at the École normale supérieure (ENS)—is concerned with the question of the so-called metaphorical uses of the concept and the terminology of life from its very opening session, where Derrida, taking stock of the fact that his seminar was held in tandem with the philosophy *agrégation* exam,<sup>10</sup> raises the issue of the relationship between institutional and biological reproduction:

8. It is worth noting that this explicitly *teleological* and *mimetic* reading of the Aristotelian figure of the prime mover, though warranted by the Aristotelian text, is primarily the result of the long historical uptake of *Metaphysics* Lambda, beginning with the commentaries of Theophrastus and Alexander through its medieval islamo-christianization in Ibn Rush and St. Thomas Aquinas, all the way to its modern afterlife in the philosophy of Hegel. For a remarkable analysis of the history of commentaries on *Metaphysics* Lambda, see Berti (2014: 626-640).
9. My way of rephrasing this structure in the context of Derrida's work on democracy is deeply indebted to the powerful formalization articulated by Geoffrey Bennington, which crystallizes in the elegant formula: "*The end is the end.*" See Bennington (2016: 246-247).
10. On the importance of the *agrégation* program for Derrida's seminar, see McCance (2019: 33-50).

Comment expliquer que [...] les métaphores biologiques ou organicistes servent si souvent à décrire l'institution, l'institution universitaire en particulier, aussi bien du côté de ceux qui la défendent que de ceux qui l'attaquent? [...] Pour les uns, la nécessité du programme et de la reproduction est une condition de vie, une condition de développement et de production ; pour les autres, le programme et la reproduction sont porteurs de mort ; et aujourd'hui, comme vous savez, la critique politique de l'institution, la lutte contre l'institution puise l'essentiel de son argumentation et de sa motivation dans cette valeur de re-production. L'université est un système visant par ses *programmes*, ses contrôles, ses contraintes, à assurer la *re-production* de son *organisation*, ce qui équivaut non seulement à maintenir le système des forces mais à figer le vivant dans la mort. Et c'est cela qu'il faudrait empêcher. Comment expliquer que la re-production et le programme soient à la fois des conditions de vie et de mort? Et cette métaphoricité est-elle fortuite ? Est-elle une structure métaphorique parmi d'autres? (Derrida, 2019: 26-27, emphases mine)

How to explain that [...] the biological or the organicist metaphors serve so often to describe the institution, the institution of the university in particular, just as well from the side of those who defend it as from those who attack it? [...] For some, the necessity of the program and of reproduction is a condition of life, a condition of development and production; for others, the program and reproduction are carriers of death; and today, as you know, the political critique of the institution, the struggle against the institution draws what is essential for its argumentation and motivation out of this value of re-production. The university is a system aiming to assure the *re-production* of its *organization* through its *programs*, its controls, its constraints, which amounts not only to maintaining the system of forces but also to fixing the living in death. And that is what should be avoided. How to explain that re-production and the program are at once conditions of life and death? And is this metaphoricity fortuitous? Is it a metaphorical structure among others?

This passage is enormously rich both in its theoretical consequences and its historical context, so I will limit myself to point out three aspects of it that are crucial for my argument in what follows.

1. It should be noted, be it in passing, that Derrida's insistence on marking the moment and the place in which the problem of this metaphorical co-implication of biological life and institutional life is being enunciated is not fortuitous. Indeed, Derrida is delivering this seminar not only in the aftermath of 1968, but, more specifically, in an intellectual and political milieu that was massively preoccupied with the status of scholarly institutions as vectors of the reproduction of hegemonic ideologies. I will limit myself to mentioning only three historical indices of this moment that pertain specifically to the motif of reproduction or to Derrida's career. A. The constitution of a working group of *ex-normaliens* (with the notable participation of Étienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey) at the ENS around the figure of Louis Althusser devoted to exploring the ideological role that schools play in assuring "La reproduction des rapports de production" ("The Reproduction of the Relations of Production"),

the title of the unpublished manuscript from which Louis Althusser extracted his famous essay on the ideological apparatuses, published in 1970.<sup>11</sup> This group also included Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, who published *L'École capitaliste en France* in 1971. B. The publication in 1970 of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's *La reproduction. Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*, which proposes, among others, the thesis that "toute **action pédagogique** (AP) est objectivement une violence symbolique en tant qu'imposition, par un pouvoir arbitraire, d'un arbitraire culturel" ("all **pedagogical action** (PA) is objectively a symbolic violence in so far as it is the imposition, by an arbitrary power, of a cultural arbitrary") (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970: 19). C. Derrida's own activism against la loi Giscard-Haby of 1975, which Derrida, among many, saw as an attempt to submit the entire French school ecosystem to "l'état actuel du marché capitaliste" ("the current state of the capitalist market") and, above all, to demands of the "patronale" ("employers") (Derrida, 1990: 240). As it is well known, Derrida's activism crystallized in the foundation of the Groupe de recherches sur l'enseignement philosophique (Grep) and the Centre de recherches sur l'enseignement philosophique (Creph), and led to the foundation in 1981 of the Collège international de philosophie (Ciph).<sup>12</sup> Derrida's insistence on problematizing the so-called metaphorical use of the lexicon of reproduction could be seen as a contribution (and perhaps also as a deconstruction) of the ongoing concern of French left intellectuals in the wake of 1968 with the ideological role of schools and universities in the reproduction of social life in France and elsewhere.

2. Notice how, in this passage, Derrida begins to *interrogate* the concept of metaphor. Although he does not yet provide a full-fledged deconstruction of the metaphors of life, said deconstruction is already hinted at by the fact that Derrida is primarily concerned with asking a *how* question, that is, with interrogating the *modes* of metaphorical relation that enable reproduction to be used both in biology and in discussions about the life of teaching institutions, for instance, as well as their *conditions of possibility*. Derrida's rhetorical question as to whether the "metaphors" of reproduction and of life and death are just metaphors among other metaphors already points in the direction of his radical rethinking of the metaphoricality of life-death, which will take place later in the seminar through an engagement with Friedrich Nietzsche that crystallizes in the following argument: "La métaphore ne transporte pas la sélection d'un lieu à un autre, la métaphore est un effet de reproduction/sélection, elle est soumise elle-même à la loi génético-institutionnelle de la reproduction/sélection." ("Metaphor does not transport selection from a place to another,

11. For a helpful discussion of this moment in the still recent history of French leftist thought, see the preface by Étienne Balibar and the introduction and editorial notes of Jacques Bidet to Louis Althusser (2011: 7-32).

12. The texts and contexts of Derrida's engagement with the French state attempts to reform higher education in the wake of 1968 can be found in Derrida (1990). For a good overview of this aspect of Derrida's work, see Orchard (2011).

metaphor is an effect of reproduction/selection, it is itself submitted to the genetical-institutional law of reproduction/selection.”) (Derrida, 2019: 87). Reproduction does not become a metaphor when it is taken from the discursive context of biology, of phenomenology, or of theology, for that matter, and applied to institutions; rather, metaphors themselves are structurally submitted to the *rules* of reproduction and selection, which, in turn, are not the proper attribute of biological systems alone. As a result, we cannot say that they are only *analogically* applied to non-biological systems on the basis of *similitudes* between these two systems, since the very identification of the markers of similitude that enable an analogy to be made are themselves the effect of operations of reproduction/selection.

3. Notice how Derrida in this passage cuts through the usual line that distinguishes between life and death, entangling the two in an insoluble bond. Moreover, the insolubility of life and death affects all “metaphorical” deployments of the lexicon of reproduction and selection. As a result, the very things that are said to ensure the *life* of the institution, that is, to ensure the steady function of its reproduction through selection, are in fact also the conditions of its *death*. Derrida’s efforts to reopen the philosophy of life beyond its logocentric and metaphysical closures are largely an attempt to account rigorously for this irresolvable contamination, that is, to account for the fact that the very activities and mechanisms that ensure life’s reproduction carry the germs of its death.

## 2. Democratic Suicides: Autoimmunity in *Voyous*

Although Derrida does not yet rely on the language of autoimmunity in *La vie la mort*, it is possible to recognize in the passage examined above inklings of the main insight regarding democracy’s life-death that he articulates throughout *Voyous*. Indeed, this main insight could be recast by paraphrasing one of the questions that Derrida poses in the passage from *La vie la mort* that I quoted above: “How to explain that the re-production of democracy and democratic programs are at once conditions of democracy’s life and death?” In *Voyous*, Derrida pursues this question by making the case that there is something *suicidal* about democracy, and that these suicidal tendencies require that we rethink the life of democracy in terms of autoimmunity (Derrida 2003: 57), therefore displacing any other biological or phenomenological conceptions of life that would not grant as predominant a role to the complex dynamics of exposure, contagion, and immunitary interactions that produce anything like a *living self*.

To pursue further Derrida’s call for another thinking of life that might track the complexity of democracy’s autoimmunitary living, I want to turn to a passage from the third session of *Voyous* where Derrida provides the first sustained articulation of the logic of suicidal autoimmunity vis-à-vis democracy’s life-death:

[D]e quelque côté qu'on l'examine, la suspension du processus électoral en Algérie serait un évènement typique de toutes les atteintes à la démocratie au nom de la démocratie. Le gouvernement algérien et une partie importante, quoique non majoritaire, du peuple algérien (voire de peuples étrangers à l'Algérie) ont considéré que le processus électoral engagé conduirait démocratiquement à la fin de la démocratie. Ils ont donc préféré y mettre fin eux-mêmes. Ils ont souverainement décidé de suspendre du moins provisoirement la démocratie *pour son bien* et pour en prendre soin, pour l'immuniser contre la pire et plus probable agression. [...] *La démocratie a toujours été suicidaire* et s'il y a un à-venir pour elle, c'est à la condition de penser autrement la vie, et la force de vie. C'est pourquoi j'ai insisté tout à l'heure sur le fait que l'Acte pur est déterminé par Aristote comme une vie. (Derrida, 2003: 57, emphases mine)

From whichever angle you examine it, the suspension of the electoral process in Algeria would be a typical event of all the attacks on democracy in the name of democracy. The Algerian government and an important, though non-majoritarian, part of the Algerian people (indeed of peoples foreign to Algeria) considered that the electoral process in course would lead democratically to the end of democracy. They thus preferred to put an end to it themselves. They have sovereignly decided to suspend democracy at least provisionally for its own good and to take care of it, to immunize it against the worst and most probable aggression. [...] Democracy has always been suicidal and if there is a "to-come" for it, it is on the condition of thinking life otherwise, and the force of life. That is why I insisted just now on the fact that the pure act is determined by Aristotle as a life.

In the sentence that immediately follows this paragraph, Derrida mobilizes the phrase "suicide auto-immunitaire" ("auto-immunitary suicide") (Derrida, 2003: 57) to capture the type of suicide that is always a condition of democracy—be it "potentially." The decision of the Algerian government to suspend the 1992 elections in order to prevent the arrival into power of an Islamist party typifies the autoimmune suicide to which any democracy, for Derrida, is irremediably exposed, since no democracy is absolutely immune to the chance of being attacked in its own name, of having to attack itself in order to defend itself (from itself), or even of being forced by some (internal or external) actors to destroy its life in order to "save" its life. Indeed, the example of the Algerian elections as Derrida elaborates it could be considered a case not just of autoimmunity in general, but more precisely of what French immunologist Thomas Pradeu characterizes as an "autoimmune disease," which he distinguishes from autoimmunity *tout court* by the fact that, in the case of autoimmune diseases, "an organism's immune system triggers a *destructive response* against its own organs or tissues" (Pradeu, 2012: 88, emphases mine).<sup>13</sup> The irreversible decision to suspend an election on the basis of a probabilistic calculus that suggests that the election results would endanger

13. For an interesting take on Derrida's thinking of autoimmunity in relation to Thomas Pradeu's theorization of immunology, see Timár (2017).

democracy through the election of an anti-democratic political party is not simply a case of the “non-pathological” functioning of democracy’s autoimmunity (Pradeu, 2019: 17-18); it amounts to an act of self-destruction enacted in the name of self-preservation, something closer to a pathological autoimmune sacrifice, calculated in such a way that its immanent logic must decree self-destruction in order to achieve self-redemption. It is this *sacrificability* of democracy that prompts Derrida to insist that life—and, especially its force—needs to be rethought, thought *otherwise*, in order to resist the irreducible possibility of a democratic autoimmunitary pathology that threatens the chance of any *démocratie à venir*.

Furthermore, notice that it is in this precise context that Derrida refers the reader back to his prior analyses of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Lambda, where Aristotle famously argues for the necessary existence of the Prime Mover as the imperceptible, ungenerated, eternal, and unmoved being whose activity constitutes the efficient cause that is responsible for the cosmos’s motion. Now, if the relation between the autoimmune suicide of democracy that the suspension of the Algerian elections exemplifies and the necessity of rethinking the life of democracy otherwise is not that difficult to discern, the same cannot be said for the relationship between these two motifs and Derrida’s reading of the Prime Mover in the first chapter of *Voyous*. This tension intensifies as soon as we take stock of the fact that Derrida even relies on the language of grounding—“C’est *pourquoi*” (“This is *why*”) (Derrida 2003: 57, emphasis mine)—to characterize the relation between his call for another concept of life, the chance that democracy might have a “to-come,” and his insistence on the fact that, for Aristotle, the prime mover is a living being. For the remainder of this article, I want to explore precisely why Derrida makes this offhand reference to his previous engagement with Aristotle at this precise point in his argument. What might we learn if we follow Derrida’s own indications and read his admittedly brief engagement with *Metaphysics* Lambda as offering a clue as to the possible content of this *other* thinking of life?

### 3. Aristotle’s Prime Mover, Ipseity, and Another Concept of Life

To pursue this question, we would do well to begin by recalling that Derrida turns to Aristotle’s prime mover in the context of his discussion of Alexis de Tocqueville’s description of the American people as a sort of *democratic god* (Derrida, 2003: 34-35), citing the following passage from Tocqueville: “Le peuple règne sur le monde politique américain comme Dieu sur l’univers. Il est la cause et la fin de toutes choses; tout en sort et tout s’y absorbe” (“The people reign over the American political world as god over the universe. It is the cause and the end of all things; everything comes out of it and everything is absorbed in it.”) (Tocqueville, 1981: 120). Although he does not rely at this point on the language of autoimmunity, Derrida’s reference to Tocqueville is crucial since it allows him to reformulate, in a more onto-theological register, the self-contradictory and aporetic life of autoimmune democracy. For, accord-

ing to Derrida, Tocqueville's theological "metaphor" is not simply a metaphor but in fact amounts to a rearticulation of a conflict that is internal to democratic life, which has been split since its very beginnings by the fact that it is answerable to two mutually exclusive truths: on the one hand, democracy relies on the axiom of *henological ipseity*—"l'ipséité de l'Un, l'*autos* de l'autonomie" ("the ipseity of the One, the *autos* of autonomy") (Derrida, 2003: 35)—since no democratic regime worthy of the name has ever existed without positing the people, in *singular* terms, as the source of legitimate power. On the other hand, democracy wouldn't be democratic without also being under the injunction of what Derrida calls "la vérité de l'autre" ("the truth of the other") (Derrida, 2003: 35), which means that democracy is also the political regime most open to dissent, to minorities, and even to its enemies.

It is in this context that Derrida then begins to *think* of the prime mover. I cite the passage *in extenso*:

Car le Dieu démocratique dont parle Tocqueville, ce souverain cause de soi et fin pour soi, il ressemblerait aussi, et cette ressemblance *n'a pas fini de nous provoquer à penser*, à l'Acte pur, à l'*energeia* du Premier Moteur (*to proton kinoun*) d'Aristote. Sans se mouvoir ni être mu, l'acte de cette énergie pure met tout en mouvement, un mouvement de retour à soi, un mouvement circulaire, précise Aristote, car le premier mouvement est toujours cyclique. Et ce qui l'aspire où l'inspire, c'est un désir. Dieu, l'acte pur du Premier Moteur, il est à la fois érogène et pensable. Il est, si on peut dire, désirable (*eromenon*), le premier désirable (*to proton orekton*) en tant que premier intelligible (*to proton noēton*) qui se pense lui-même, pensée de la pensée (*ē noēsis noēseos noēsis*). Ce premier principe, Aristote le définit aussi, et cela comptera pour nous, comme une vie (*diagōgē* – Alexandre dit dans le commentaire de ce passage *zōē* et *zēn* pour la vie et le vivre),<sup>14</sup> un genre de vie, une conduite de la vie, comparable à ce que

14. It is worth pausing here to make two observations—one philological, the other more philosophical—about Derrida's interpolation of the commentary of Alexander of Aphrodisias to the *Metaphysics*, and about his remark on Alexander's usage of the terms *zēn* and *zōē* to talk about the life of the prime mover. First, it should be noted that Derrida himself does not provide any explicit reference to Alexander's commentary, so it is difficult to ascertain what he's exactly referring to here. The likeliest candidate is the text of Alexander's commentary to the *Metaphysics*, edited in the late nineteenth century by Michael Hayduck for the collection *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*. As a matter of fact, in the commentary to *Metaphysics* Lambda 1072b14 reproduced in this edition—the Aristotelian passage in question reads: "*diagōgē de estin oia ē aristē mikron kronon ēmin*" ("And the course of its life is of such a kind as the best we have for a short time") (Aristotle, 1999: 1072b14)—we find several references to the life of the prime mover described as "*euzōia*" and as *zōiōn* and *zēn* (Hayduck, ed., 1891, 696-98). That said, readers should keep in mind that the consensus among classicists since the work of Jacob Freudenthal (1885) is that only the commentaries to the first five books of the *Metaphysics* could be attributed to Alexander and the rest—including the commentary to *Metaphysics* Lambda—should be attributed to medieval Byzantine Neo-Platonist commentator, Michael of Ephesus (for a more recent account of the scholarly consensus on this matter, see Luna, 2001: 53-71). On the other hand, it is possible, though less likely, that Derrida could have consulted Ibn Rushd's commentary to the *Metaphysics* Lambda, since Ibn Rushd is the last of the classic Aristotelian commentators who had access to a partial version of Alexander's commentary via

nous pouvons vivre de meilleur pendant tel bref moment (*mikron khronon*) de notre vie. (Derrida, 2003: 35, emphases mine)

For the democratic god of which Tocqueville speaks, this sovereign cause of itself and end for itself, would also resemble, and this resemblance has not ceased to provoke us to think, the pure act, the *energeia* of Aristotle's Prime Mover (*to proton kinoun*). Without moving or being moved, the act of this pure energy sets everything in motion, a motion of return to itself, a circular motion, as Aristotle clarifies, for the first motion is always cyclical. And what it aspires to or what inspires it is a desire. God, the pure act of the prime mover, is at once erogenous and thinkable. It is, if one can say so, desirable (*eromenon*), the first desirable, (*to proton orekton*) insofar as the first intelligible (*to proton noēton*) which thinks itself, the thinking of thinking (*ē noēsis noēseos noēsis*). Aristotle also defines this first principle, and this matters to us, as a life (*diagōgē*—Alexander uses in the commentary of this passage

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Syriac translation that included up to Book 7 in *Metaphysics* Lambda, which is where the passage in question—i.e., 1072b—is located. Secondly, regardless of the philological soundness of Derrida's remark concerning Alexander's commentary, of actual philosophical relevance is the fact that Derrida turns to Alexander here in order to lay the foundations of a polemic with Agamben, which only takes place explicitly and briefly in the following section of *Voyous* (Derrida, 2003: 46). Contra Agamben's thesis regarding the supposed distinction between bare life (*zōē*) and qualified life (*bios*) (Agamben, 1995: 3), the tradition of Aristotelian commentary leaves no doubt as to the fact that the prime mover is characterized as a *zōē*, rather than *bios*. Now, Agamben himself is aware of this (Agamben, 1995: 3); but he doesn't seem to think that this moment in Aristotle and in the tradition of his commentators poses a challenge to his thesis regarding the existence of a conceptual distinction between *bios* and *zōē* in the Greek context. Although Derrida never developed this philological refutation into a full-fledged critique of Agamben's biopolitical understanding of the history of Western ontology, it is possible to see why taking Derrida's insistence on the prime mover as *zōē* to its utmost consequences would have devastating effects for Agamben's entire philosophical project in *Homo sacer*. In arguing that the highest *form of life*—the *ground* and *telos* of both *zōē* and *bios* according to Agamben's classification—is not just a species of *zōē*, but also determined in its essence by the ontological form of *ipseity*, Derrida is not simply upending the linguistico-conceptual bases of Agamben's genealogy of modern politics. He is also providing the foundations for a radical critique of Agamben's attempt to theorize *forma-di-vita* or "form-of life" (see Agamben, 2014: 350-351) as the only possibility of interrupting the operations of sovereign power. Symptomatic of the limits of Agamben's project is his choice of the following formula from Spinoza's *Ethics*: "Acquiescentia in se ipso est laetitia orta ex eo, quod homo se ipsum suamque agenda potentiam contemplatur." ("Satisfaction in oneself is a joy borne out of the fact that man contemplates itself as well as its own potency to act.") (Spinoza, 2020: 328) to describe the mode of being of *forma-di-vita* (Agamben, 2014: 351). The fact that what Agamben calls *forma-di-vita*—that is, a life that consists in *self-enjoyment*, *self-contemplation*, and *self-empowerment*—could well be applied to the Aristotelian prime mover reveals the extent to which Agamben's signature concept of a life beyond sovereign power remains determined *from within* by the value of *ipseity*; its self-acquiescence, therefore, must be seen as isomorphic to the very sovereignty that this form of life was meant to interrupt. On the concept of *acquiescentia* in Spinoza as a form of *ipseity* or self-relation, see Carlisle (2017). In forthcoming work, I provide a more sustained critical engagement with Agamben's thinking of life from a perspective informed by Derrida's insistence on the bond between life and sovereignty via *ipseity*.



*zōē* and *zēn* for life and living), a genre of life, a conduct of life comparable to the best life that we might be able to live during a brief moment (*mikron khronon*) in our life.

I emphasized the verb “think” in the sentence introducing this long passage because it is Derrida himself who insists on the role that thinking plays in his own gesture of bringing Aristotle’s god to bear on Tocqueville’s democratic god. This choice of verb is not fortuitous; in fact, Derrida’s characterization of the *thoughtful* nature of the relation between these two gods already performs a powerful interpretation of *Metaphysics* Lambda. The Tocquevillean god of American democracy cannot stop making Derrida think of the Aristotelian god not simply because the former *resembles* the latter. It is true that both gods are causes of, and ends for, themselves, and it is also the case that it is through their respective en-actments of the form of *henological ipseity* that these two gods make everything else move and act in a manner that is analogous to their own absolute form of self-relation and self-possession. That said, the analogies that would bind these two gods to each other as well as these gods to everything that falls under their jurisdiction are not simply the result of a formal analogy. On the contrary, the very fact that Derrida can’t stop thinking about the prime mover already attests to the fact that the resemblance between these two gods is itself grounded in, if not even an effect of, the activity of Aristotle’s god. In this respect, the very *thought* that *thinks* this resemblance—that is, Derrida’s own thinking process—has already been set in motion by this unmoved mover.

Moreover, as the pure activity of thought thinking *itself*, i.e., ipseity as *ex-carnated intelligibility* and motion-less *agency*, Aristotle’s prime mover not only moves Derrida to think of it as the onto-epistemic model that re-produces itself in the latent theological figures that inform the concept of sovereignty in modern, i.e., secular democratic regimes. For this model also determines and guides teleologically the images of the democratic *good* life, and many conceptions of the force of the living even within biology, perhaps best exemplified in recent theories of biological *autopoiesis*.<sup>15</sup> This is why Derrida emphasizes that the prime mover is not just a concept or a Platonic form, but a *form of life*. And not just any form of life, but *ipseity* as the *form* that informs the highest form of life—a perfected life that can only be understood philosophically in terms of the constant *power* to position itself as

15. By *autopoiesis*, I am referring to the influential theorization of the structure of living systems in terms of *auto-poiesis*, as formulated by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. It is telling that, in spite of their own relationship to cybernetics, semiotics, systems theory, and other recent developments in epistemology and ontology, Maturana and Varela remain incapable of problematizing, within the axiomatics of their discourse about the essence of living systems, their own reliance on the position of the *autos* and, above all, on the reproduction of this *self-same* position, as the very ground and form of biological identity. See Maturana and Varela (1994: 45-47).

*self-same*, and, from this position, rule all living beings by forcing them, via inspiration, to aspire to imitate as best as they can the *ipseitocratic* life of the prime mover, which thus stands as the *arkhē* and *telos* of cosmic intelligibility, activity, and feeling.

We are now in a better position to understand why Derrida evokes his earlier engagement with Aristotle's prime mover when, two chapters later, he is analyzing the autoimmune suicidal tendencies of democracy through the example of the suspension of the Algerian elections in 1992. The fact that Derrida emphasizes that democracy in Algeria was suspended *pour son bien* (Derrida, 2003: 57) ("for its own sake," or, more literally, "for its own good") reveals the extent to which the *life* of democracy remains informed onto-epistemically by a teleological structure for which the prime mover provides a powerful formal articulation and historical precedent. In the name of its good, that is, in the name of becoming itself *properly*, of truly achieving ipseity, democracy can always be killed, that is, sacrificed in a quasi-suicidal manner so that it can preserve its own self-hood, its own vital identity. Hence Derrida's acknowledgement that a conception of life radically different than that which informs contemporary discussions about democracy's impending death is required if we are both to grapple with democracy's actual suicidal tendencies and militate for its survival (Derrida, 2003: 24). Derrida's rearticulation of democracy's life-death in terms of autoimmunity exposes the metaphysical bases and the ideological nature of any such calculation, and of any such sacrifice of democracy. But, more crucially still, autoimmunity, as Derrida elaborates it, promises to *displace* the im-position of ipseity or the thesis of the absolute onto-epistemic primacy of the *self-itself*, from the privileged place that it continues to enjoy within the open field of the living, across any and all disciplinary or discursive formations. *Sub specie autoimmunitatis*, the force of the living appears not in the form of a circular process in and through which the living entity is both produced in the autonomy of its living and reproduces itself—any such *autos* is not the ground, but an effect of processes of *self-relation* that are not entirely ruled by the *telos* of an immune ipseity, of a self absolutely ensured of the imperviousness of the membrane that separates it from any other.

Remarks about the fragility of democracy in political or philosophical discussions are a cliché, but Derrida's work on the autoimmune life-death of democracy stands out from current discussions about democracy's precarious life precisely because of the way in which he relentlessly pursues this insight to its ultimate conclusion, leading us to an aporia that most intellectuals who defend liberal democracy today are seldom equipped to think through, let alone respond to theoretically or politically. This aporia could be expressed in the following way: the autoimmunity of democracy or the contamination of life and death that marks democratic existence is not an accident due to the faulty implementation of the idea of democracy in reality—it is a structural feature of democracy. This feature is so intrinsic that it renders any belief in an *ultimate normative criterion* that would distinguish between a democracy that is alive, dying, or dead counterproductive to any militancy in favor of

democracy's *to-come*. A democracy that would have been purged of its autoimmune suicidability would cease to be a democracy. Any mode of attending to democracy's autoimmune suicidal tendencies without trying to eliminate these tendencies must unfold under a rather minimal injunction, namely, to remain vigilant about any attempt to foreclose democracy's in-finite *transformability*. Rather than adopt as criteria for the vitality of a democracy a notion of life that is explicitly or implicitly informed by the phantasm of an impervious, totally immune life, it is life itself which needs to be thought *otherwise* on the basis of the necessity of affirming democracy's autoimmunity for the sake of its survival—and ours.

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**Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús** is Assistant Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California. He is currently working on a manuscript titled *Reading Danger: Literary History After Historicism*. The book seeks to both diagnose the persistence of historicism in the contemporary literary-theoretical landscape and rethink literary history as a paradoxical form of dangerous "knowledge" whose truth can only be measured through a confrontation with the perils of illegibility and immemoriality. His essays have appeared in several edited volumes published internationally and in peer-reviewed journals such as *Diacritics*, *Mosaic*, *Discourse*, *Oxford Literary Review*, *CENTRO Journal*, *New Centennial Review*, and *Transmodernity*, among others.

**Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús** és professor assistent d'espanyol i literatura comparada a la Universitat de Califòrnia Meridional. Actualment està treballant en el seu primer llibre, *Reading Danger: A Literary History After Historicism*. Intervenint en els debats teòrics sobre la història, *Reading Danger* replanteja l'estructura de la comprensió històrica mitjançant la reelaboració del concepte d'historicitat per designar l'exposició a l'alteritat radical del temps històric. Els seus articles han aparegut en nombroses col·leccions i en revistes indexades, com ara *Diacritics*, *Mosaic*, *Discourse*, *Oxford Literary Review*, *CENTRO Journal*, *New Centennial Review* i *Transmodernity*, entre d'altres.

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