

# Queer Transcultural Memory

Contemporary US Culture and the Global Context

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*This thesis is dedicated to Gail Leadingham who had the conviction and foresight to keep believing in me when no-one else would.*

# ABSTRACT

This thesis expands the definition of queerness through exploring its oppositionality to norms of heteronormativity tied to race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. Reading an interdisciplinary range of cultural texts, I consider the extent to which they can be deployed to provide a counternarrative to concepts of transcultural memory, nationalism, and citizenry following recent historical events, stemming from September 11, 2001. I begin by examining the impact of domestic responses to 9/11 through “vernacular” photography, demonstrating how nationalistic responses marginalize queer identities. Expanding out to explore the transnational effects of the “War on Terror”, my second chapter reads contemporary Iraq War fiction, revealing the queer rendering of bodies that finds a foothold through military occupations abroad. Third, I look to the extra-national sites of Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib to show the insidious extension of national borders, and norms, creating sites that are simultaneously intra- and extra-national. I argue that these sites operate as palimpsests of memory, crossing frontiers of the transnational, transcultural, and transhistorical. Finally, I look at the movement of queer bodies into the United States through migration narratives, returning to the ubiquitous sites of normativity within the country’s borders. My conclusion ties these strands together to understand how memorialization and cultural representations of historical events impact queer bodies and the cultural conditions of the US. I establish how these bodies affect, and are affected by, literal, figurative, and imaginative movements, and the implications for state discourse. Ultimately, I demonstrate the “Americanization” of globalization dictates how such bodies are conceptualized and is subsequently treated in other nations.

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# INTRODUCTION

This thesis stands at the crossroads of memory studies, transnational US studies, and queer theory. Current debates in the field of transcultural memory studies centre upon the way in which culture and memory are expressed when subject to movement across borders that had been previously considered static. Moreover, certain forms of remembrance create normative identities that exclude various groups, reflecting a distorted cultural reality. This exclusion creates circumstances in which those in isolated social categories are subjugated, their bodies exposed to forms of violence that replicate histories of hegemonic state power such as heteronormativity and imperialism. Queer theory works to counteract this reality and allow for exploratory spaces that imagine a less marginalized future through work in the present that allows excluded groups to engage in culture through modes of alignment or resistance. However, the politics of inclusion can lead to queered others reinscribing normative values at the expense of other non-normative identities. Queer theorist Jasbir Puar identifies this trend of *homonationalism* through the progress made toward equal rights for LGBTQIA\* people in the United States as a way to consolidate opposition to the perceived threat of Muslims toward the nation. As a result, a mode of queer anti-politics has reinforced resistance to societal norms and inclusion. These themes of sameness and opposition can be explored via cultural texts as reflections of societal hierarchies and structures and, in particular, as forms of cultural remembrance. Beyond national modes of remembrance, the United States as a nation-state is embroiled with international politics and the process of globalization. Therefore, the use of “American” literature to explore how these constructions are made allows an investigation of the transnational and transcultural phenomena that make up the national culture. The importance and relevance of this work has never been more so following Donald Trump’s election to office in November 2016 on the strength of an exclusionary and isolationist political campaign seeking to marginalize groups based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion,

disability, and class. Using a lens that transcends both the outward and inward-looking lenses of a nationalist dichotomy, this thesis will explore how such international dynamics both stem from, and affect, the domestic terrain of the United States.

Literary representations of transcultural memory have continued to uncover viewpoints from groups that are less visible, and therefore occluded from mainstream remembrance of events, such as texts that position Muslims or those from the Middle East as protagonists in narratives that (in/directly) deal with 9/11. Through such a narrative repositioning, these texts demonstrate how the trans-national/cultural elements of these histories can remain undistorted by normative and singular conceptions centred around a US heteronormativity. My use of an expanded definition of queerness across identity groups establishes a shared space occupied by those marginalized by mainstream society. Whilst the term “mainstream” is a misnomer due to the insidious prioritisation of certain groups over others, its deployment remains pervasive in culture. As evidenced by the recent political rallying in the US, white supremacist culture has sought to shore up its hegemonic power and privilege, contained within a populist and exceptionalist rhetoric about restoring “American values”, in order “to make America great again.” Such regulatory discourse resides in the construction of a blurred public/private identity which creates “good” citizens who replicate normative state values, such as the traditional family. Queer politics seeks out a reimagining of normative spaces that are often controlled by the state to acknowledge and render visible marginalized identities, and to identify cultural work that expresses voices situated within those ostracized spheres. This reimagining results in the blurring of the borders of mainstream culture, which allows for a more diverse and inclusionary imagining of society and trans-national/cultural frameworks.

My research is closest to that of critics such as Puar and José Esteban Muñoz, who use queer theory to expand frameworks of commonality between non-normative groups, and to create an imaginary of queerness that negates occlusion of those outside the body politic such as queer groups of colour. The resultant blurring of boundaries between normativity and

queerness creates an expansive and exploratory space that allows for the potential of more inclusive cultural forms to be identified. In memory work, such montaging opens frameworks of transcultural memory and transnationalism. The building of inclusive, queer assemblages posited by Puar and Muñoz also aligns with Daniel O’Gorman’s account of “post-9/11” fiction in exploring how texts written after, and in response to, such events allow for an examination of the state discourse that centres around issues of race, citizenship, otherness and nationality. However, my work marks a departure from O’Gorman’s, which reinscribes normative values by exploring texts predominantly written by heteronormative, white authors, and gives primary consideration to the novel form. Rather, my research works to include artists from outside of this sphere, and to include other forms of cultural work—photography, film and memoir—in conversation with novels. The aim of this broad scope is to resist binaries of “us” and “them” which are re-inscribed by the analysis of texts largely created by white Americans or heteronormative writers that deny the space for other voices to be heard.

Such a method aligns with Lucy Bond’s *Frames of Memory after 9/11*, which seeks to establish forms of memory that resist the overriding narratives of state discourse. Whilst Bond strives for a “montaged culture of memory” (12) in which memory is diversified to open up dialogue about past events, my thesis inverts her formulation to create a *culture of montaged memory* that emphasizes shared experience and localized histories across borders above, or in opposition to, singular predications of memory based on a US-centric point of view. That is, I emphasize an on-going process of montage, rather than a singular culture of static memory, and thus many of the texts that I study resist the use of a first-person singular narrative. Memory as a montaged process allows for an empathetic identification with, and understanding of, shared cultural modes of remembrance that acknowledges, rather than eradicates, difference.

My chosen texts highlight slippages between supposedly static categorizations of normative and queer, national and extra-national, and citizen and non-citizen through

representations of cultural memory. I focus on queer voices and identities as means of exploring the memory of events like 9/11 and the problematically named “War on Terror”. By examining accounts that deviate from more mainstream cultural understandings of recent events in the US, I establish forms of queer resistance to hegemonic state narratives, arguing for the importance of reorienting existing forms of critical investigation to establish a more diverse form of understanding. Further, such an expansion establishes theoretical space that allows for events that disproportionately affect, and marginalize, queer bodies to be memorialized. I therefore allow for more inclusive frames of remembrance of events that are currently subject to over-examination through a heteronormative framing in order to redress the systematic imbalance that favours certain memories over others. In this thesis, queer takes in a variety of identities, all of which are bound together by the common idea of state belonging. For example, racialized bodies and groups, imagined as oppositional to the norms and values of a citizenry obedient to the state are subject to the correctional violence of state sovereignty. This is evidenced in citizens and migrants of colour imagined as deviant, as well as those detained by the state or subject to military operations abroad. Further, citizens who would normally belong to the social centre of the nation can be queered through inhabiting extra-national spaces such as conflict zones and military black sites. This is not to say that queer has become so all-encompassing as to contain all multitudes, but that I expand the definition here to draw attention to the commonalities between queered and Other-ed bodies by locating a shared subject position in their specific treatment by the state. Moreover, my use of queerness allows for the multiple ways that a subject can be rendered queer, for instance, in a non-white and disabled body. My thesis, then, isn’t specifically interested in texts that feature characters who are simply homosexual, rather it considers the non-normative aspects of a queer identity and subject position.

By deploying an intra- and extra-national approach to textual analysis, my thesis highlights the importance of such queering to develop further dynamics of transcultural

memory and its effects on our theorisation of globalization. By opening a cultural archive that furthers Muñoz's concept of a futurity that insists on the potentiality of a utopian future for the queer, my research destabilizes problematic framings of public and private that reinforce normative—and therefore in opposition to queer—cultural identifications. In addition, I highlight the ways in which culture, and its representations, can both include and isolate certain groups through a replication of, or resistance to, the marginalization and subjugation of queer bodies. I build upon Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) in which she uses the productive space of trauma and sexuality to create counterspaces for recent “gay and lesbian histories, which are constantly being erased by resistance and neglect,” and “making the history of the present more strange [to] produce a new sense of how to approach the history of the past” (10). I argue that events remembered in my chosen texts present the reader with viewpoints currently erased by the resistance and neglect of hegemonic discourse to those viewpoints. My hope, however, is to not only uncover a queer past that will estrange the present but create the space for a future that recognizes and encapsulates the negotiations of queerness, as something that comprises part of its own internal structure. My thesis creates an assemblage of cultural texts that work to open normative framings of remembrance and create more inclusive modes of the trans-national/cultural.

Using 9/11 as a starting point, the thesis expands to examine its global effects through national and extra-national responses, and the impact of movement and migration embedded within the United States. Through an exploration of recurrent themes such as the banal and the vernacular, I discuss the ways that queerness and memory operate together. I explore how depictions of everyday sites following 9/11 can work to shore up a form of white-centric national remembrance whilst also demonstrating how sites that share those banal qualities can operate subversively to create productive spaces of inclusion embodied by the perspective of the migrant, the illegal detainee of the US state, and intra- and trans-national

people of colour. In doing so, I uncover cultural representations that undermine normative conceptions based on state ideologies that shore up conservative values in addition to those that seem to critique received cultural narratives but ultimately end up reinforcing them. I thus theorise the need for, and establish, a more inclusive archive that studies texts that follow 9/11, ranging from fiction and poetry to photography, art, witness testimony and film through a framework that draws together transcultural memory studies and queer theory.

## REMEMBERING 9/11

Following the events in New York of September 11, 2001, responses came quickly from a range of sources: from journalism and politics, to media and beyond. Initial reaction was of shock, followed by swift and decisive countermeasures prescribed by the Bush administration. Addressing the nation following the attacks, Bush stated that he had “directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and bring them to justice,” and that the United States made “no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them” (“CNN.Com – Text of Bush’s Address – September 11, 2001”). David Simpson, in *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (2006), describes this after-period as “skewed by a prolonged period of ideological shoring up and military hitting out” (4), whereby “rhetorically declared oppositions, them and us, create a climate for the blatant political manipulation of binaries” (7). As a result, an attitude to war was fostered that focused on destroying the “barbaric” enemy that Osama Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda organization represented—one that established the United States as the heroes of democracy in a reified form of contemporary US exceptionalism that Anna Hartnell argues “articulate[s] a narrative of American specialness that often segues into a narrative of supremacy” (“New Orleans, 2005” 50). In the months and years that followed, political rhetoric that sought to generate a unified state discourse gave way to mainstream norms that often conflated Muslims and Arabs, portraying them as dangerous people, usually men, who sought



to destroy the “homeland.” These types of cultural representations became rife, replacing the Soviet threat that had dominated such fear-based discourse during the Cold War. Russian spies were replaced in the popular imaginary by “Islamic fundamentalists”, exemplified by shows such as the Fox Network’s *24* (2001 – 2014), which consequently, and perversely, fed back into state discourse, becoming a training manual for “enhanced interrogation procedures” carried out by US military operatives.<sup>1</sup> In this way, examples of cultural representation became more than simply fictional depictions, and as life began to imitate art, they had a direct effect on the formation of procedure and policy. Films such as Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), which correlated violent interrogation with the eventual assassination of Bin Laden, further legitimized the effects of torture by showing torture to be an effective route to uncovering intelligence. A brutalising treatment of brown bodies became equated with protecting both the domestic space and global spheres of influence of the United States. Increased security, designed to protect citizens, operated on a basis that only protected certain individuals. Consequently, this process redefined who was counted as a citizen.

The result of this persistent othering of the “Islamist” male body was that popular cultural responses to 9/11 became about those victims and heroes who were portrayed as media-friendly, often male, always white and heterosexual: that is, heteronormative. Conservative norms based on initial definitions of race and sexuality soon became embroiled with norms of gender, class and disability, and were reinforced at the expense of subjugating other groups. This normative representation forms the basis of *Beyond Ground Zero*, Jonathan Hyman’s examination of domestic responses to 9/11. Through the capture of images of murals painted on buildings, and in some cases, on bodies in the form of tattoos and in describing his collection as “vernacular,” Hyman exemplifies over the course of 30,000 photographs (a number that is still growing) that such a response is marked by signifiers that

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<sup>1</sup> David Danzig in discusses how “Diane Beaver, the highest-ranking uniformed military lawyer at Guantánamo” told a journalist “that the second season of *24* directly influenced the way that interrogations were conducted at the facility” (23).

are coded to adhere to these norms. The photographs also encode the perceived patriotic duty of those citizens within symbols of superheroes and violent retribution. The borders “protecting” the US from other cultures and nations were thus shored up both literally through increased border scrutiny and control and ideologically through the reinforcement of particular white, heteronormative versions of Americanness.

And yet, events like 9/11 can also be used in a way that considers the fluid dimensions of remembrance; my thesis therefore works to establish links across sites of memory,<sup>2</sup> rather than suggesting that all forms stem from one singular event, or that one event can stand in as a universal model/paradigm. Drawing on Judith Butler’s extension of queerness as “the social regulation of race [that] emerges not simply as another, fully separable, domain of power from sexual difference . . . [but] subverts the monolithic workings of the heterosexual imperative” (*Bodies That Matter* 18), I read cultural texts through a queer framework that includes non-normative race, class, gender, sexuality and (dis)-ability. The ways that bodies are penetrated, violated, and have their sovereignty challenged share uncomfortable similarities to the ways that national borders are also infringed, particularly following 9/11. The rupturing of national borders, tied to the idea of a traumatic rupturing experienced by the nation itself, wrought a shift in the ways in which certain bodies were considered. As a result, bodies rendered as queer(ed) become subjugated through discourses of “us” and “them”. Certain identities became further marginalized in new ways, even as acceptance of queer bodies was growing

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<sup>2</sup> A *lieux de mémoire* is understood by Pierre Nora as a place “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself [and] has occurred at a particular historical moment” (7). Whilst texts were considered by Nora to be sites of memory as they “cohere” remembrance for the community, it has been argued that texts are rendered unstable by readerly difference and thus cannot be sites of memory: for further discussion see Rigney, “Portable Monuments”, 2004. Texts, however, can communicate cultural memory through forms of representation and ultimately replace memory that stems from eyewitness accounts of historical events. I would, however, argue that texts can function as sites of memory when they are read, shaped, and/or mediated as such, particularly those positioned as functioning as cohering remembrance (such as 9/11 novels). Texts, therefore, are always a representation of memory, its subsequent forms of mediation, and thus the texts I have chosen “cohere” remembrance on behalf of respective communities. I examine the issue of which communities (queer/non-queer) are able to do so, in addition to the ways that they come to enact that remembrance through various, and repeated, motifs and devices.

in other forms of popular and artistic culture. The movement toward marriage equality within the United States and the mainstream popularity of such “homonormative” shows as NBC’s *Will and Grace* (1998–2006; 2017-present) or *Modern Family* (2009-present). The implications of those movements have ramifications for how events such as 9/11 are perceived, and how modes of remembrance around them can be enacted. The wider effects internationally are controlled by the US state and expand constraints on queer lives and bodies, becoming enshrined in cultural discourse. The liberal-democratic ideal of a dialogic process between different nations and cultures has been overridden in favour of one prescribed by the effects of the initial political reaction and the state discourse that followed the attacks. Those allowed to grieve were clearly demarcated, as evidenced in headlines including the French newspaper *Le Monde*’s headline of September 12, 2001: “Nous sommes tous Américains”. Those critiquing nationalistic responses to 9/11, such as Susan Sontag, were subject to torrents of abuse from media outlets who branded her a “traitor” and an “America-hater” (Talbot).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, those perceived as outside of those categories were deemed to be dangerous, anti-democratic, and “un-American”—to be *queer*.

While non-normative responses to 9/11 existed from the outset, it was only towards the end of the first decade following the attacks that they became more publicly perceivable. They deserve further attention in order to destabilize the structural imbalances that remain in cultural discourse and public discussion.

## MEMORY AND THE TRANSCULTURAL

Recent theoretical work in memory studies argues for a move away from static understandings of memory and culture, and instead seeks to explore the capability of memory to traverse borders. As Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen suggest in *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies* (2016), “memories travel along and cross the

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<sup>3</sup> See also the ACLA report “Freedom Under Fire: Dissent in Post-9/11 America” (2003).

migratory paths of world citizens . . . they are forwarded from cameras over smartphones to computers and back in unpredictable loops . . . they redefine the relations between different generations, as geographical and medial transfers affect the uptake of memories” (1). This mobility has led to what is termed as the transcultural turn in memory studies. Astrid Erll, in *Memory in Culture* (2011), defines this as research on “the translocal, transnational, and global circulation of mnemonic contents, media, and practices” (61). In other words, she suggests that memory is ever “on the move” through people, places and texts.

Erll posits the Holocaust as a “paradigm of a global object of remembrance.” Noting the multitude of nationalities and ethnicities caught up in the event, and the commemorative practices that still take place around the world, she demonstrates the centrality of the Holocaust to a “transnational establishment, legitimation and adherence to a set of normative rules concerning democracy, tolerance and humanism” (Erll, *Memory* 62), seen today in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In “Travelling Memory” (2011), Erll highlights the issue of container culture, describing how cultures can “remain relatively clear-cut social formations, usually coinciding with the contours of regions, kingdoms and nation-states” and as such “even sophisticated approaches, which allow for difference and exchange between mnemonic communities, therefore, tend to operate with distinct ‘containers’” (7). Whilst transcultural memory foregrounds the interconnected nature of memories across borders, Erll draws our attention to the ways that remembrance tends to occur within particular locations. My thesis unpacks the resultant tension between the local (container) form of much cultural memory and the theoretical scope of the transcultural model. Richard Crownshaw discusses this tension in his introduction to the same special issue of *Parallax*, stating that “the circulation of cultural memory does not just describe fixed orbits or trajectories” (1) and memory is propelled by “historical events and restructurings of society . . . that carry memories across the globe” (“Introduction” 2). Bond and Jessica Rapson in *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders* (2014) add to this conceptualization of memory and movement

when they highlight that “the late twentieth-century transcultural turn is manifest in a rejection of the formerly pervasive model of container culture” (9) and as such there has been a contemporary movement “towards a dialogic understanding of the past able to account for both local and global interests” (18). As such, events like 9/11 and its proceeding effects, namely transnational military intervention and occupation, exemplify the circulation of memory that such theorists have posited. The texts that I explore through my thesis establish the ways that memories are always implicated in both local and global contexts.

In considering these kinds of movements, theorists such as Craps in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2012) have highlighted the failure of memory studies to consider “traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures” and arguing that theoretical frameworks “generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas” (2). He cites Sindiwe Magona’s novel *Mother to Mother* (1999) as an example that works to uncover the racial structures of violence that are inflicted through apartheid on black South Africans. Aligning my own work with Craps’, I consider the connections between metropolitan and minority experiences of historical events to examine the way that queer bodies become casualties of a foreclosure of mourning, failure of representation, and the valorisation of particular modes of masculinity and femininity that have been shored up since the turn of the twenty-first century. Using 9/11 as a springboard I consider queer identities and broaden the scope of pre-existing scholarly discourse that largely considers particular forms of memory, in a way that centres the experience of a Western (read: heteronormative) population.

My thesis works to avoid an either/or distinction between what might be termed as “mainstream” or “postcolonial”. Rather, I want to suggest an outward-looking assemblage of theory that works to create inclusive frameworks when deliberating cultural remembrance. Michael Rothberg points to the interconnected nature of global memory in “From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory” (2011) by suggesting that “a radically democratic

politics of memory needs to include a differentiated empirical history, moral solidarity with victims of diverse injustices, and an ethics of comparison that coordinates the asymmetrical claims of those victims” (526). Whilst I agree with Rothberg’s opinion here as a counter to more tradition histories that sought “objectivity”, I also reiterate that certain forms of memory remain centred in the field as “limit events”: what Kristiaan Versluys describes as “an event that is so traumatic that it shatters the symbolic resources of the individual and escapes the normal processes of meaning making” (*Out of the Blue* 49). Dominic LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2014) discusses how when constructing historical representation, the understanding of events becomes “a closed window so stained by one set of projective factors or another that, at least on the structural level, it reflects back only the historian’s own distorted image” (8). Events like the Holocaust and 9/11 that are often central to transcultural/transnational memory studies (even while the theoretical turn purports to destabilise such centring) thus provide limited forms of remembrance that consequently project the inherent biases of representation that are centred around particular groups. Thus, 9/11 remembrance often focuses upon particular groups that can be read as white working-to-middle class US citizens, thereby privileging their experience. This thesis moves away from the centring of national depictions of 9/11 to consider the transcultural consequences of this and subsequent events as they migrate across and between borders, how those borders remain fluid despite a political and ideological hardening, and the impact of 9/11 discourse on migration into the US over the last two decades. The result is a queer archive that responds to the hegemonic discourse of 9/11 that prioritises heteronormative (and nationalistic) bodies and framings over others.

Terri Tomsy’s 2011 article, “From Sarajevo to 9/11: Travelling Memory and the Trauma Economy”, discusses this problematic centring by exploring the Bosnian conflict in terms of the associative links made with 9/11. Reading the Joe Sacco comic book, *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2003), she suggests how panels depicting twin burning buildings mirror

those of the Twin Towers, calling into question the singularity of historical events through the doubling effect that the artist creates. This approach subverts the privileges that certain forms of cultural memory such as 9/11 possess over others, despite the reinscription of a theoretical (and political) association with 9/11 of a historical event that would have been previously considered unrelated. Rather than simply provide ways that other historical events subvert the dominance of 9/11, I refocus the framing of the event itself to include previously overlooked perspectives in addition to the consideration of events tangential to the attacks. I subvert the absorption of other forms of memory through singular conceptions of events such as 9/11 that become masked as transcultural and consequently erase opposing or differing forms, sites, and processes of remembrance.

In his 2009 book, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Rothberg terms this primacy of memory as a “zero-sum struggle over scarce resources” that frames remembrance as “competitive memory” (3); a concept exemplified in the apparent contest in the 1980s and 1990s between the memorialization of slavery and the Holocaust in which the epigraph to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) – “For the sixty million and more” – became a salvo. Morrison intended to expand cultural understanding of slavery to include the genocide of slaves forcibly brought to the United States but as Amy E. Schwartz notes in her article “‘Beloved’: It’s not a Question of who Suffered More”, the statement produced hostile reactions. One reviewer went as far as to suggest that the book “was written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest, a contest usually won by . . . Jews at the hands of Nazis”. Whilst the article argues that the hierarchy of suffering that pits different groups at odds is highly unproductive, it does so whilst suggesting that comparisons of the Holocaust any other experiences should be rejected, recognizing the “uniqueness of that horror that functions as a moral touchstone”. What the article highlights is

the way that limit events become unique and incomparable, and as such, produce a primacy and untouchability that centres the experiences of those impacted.<sup>4</sup>

Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider (*The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* 2001) argue that the Holocaust functions as a site of “de-territorialized, transnational, and globalizing memory,” which they see as exemplary of “cosmopolitan memory cultures” (2). Created by a “dual process of particularization and universalization,” the Holocaust becomes a universal (or “transnational”) symbol of human rights violations. For them, cosmopolitan memory effects an embedding of global concerns in local contexts (Levy and Sznaider 2). However, describing events like the Holocaust as “universal” or as paradigmatic of global memory, retains the problematic centring of forms of remembrance through which other events are located. This generalizing excavates difference and particularities from sites of memory, replacing them with an ahistorical flattening of circumstance across time, space, and place. Rothberg critiques the position articulated by Levy and Sznaider as “the too-easy collapse of the transnational, the global, and the comparative into the universal” (*Multidirectional* 264). Levy and Sznaider’s argument forwards a collective memory of the Holocaust, and “occlude[s] the active role that other histories and memories have played” (265) around the world. Moreover, the universalizing (and Eurocentric) tendencies of their argument create binaries of “good and evil” which are replicated, with violent consequences, in discourse around 9/11. My textual analysis establishes a plurality of remembrance that counters the potential erasure of histories that stems from universalizing forms of memorialization. These tendencies can be seen in both the domestic and international media representation that followed the attacks, such as the aforementioned September 12, 2001 headline of *Le Monde* or the headline in *The Sun* that proclaimed 9/11 as “The Day that Changed the World”.<sup>5</sup> The solidarity created was

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<sup>4</sup> It is notable that in a similar way to how memorialization of 9/11 largely focuses on heterosexual white US citizens, remembrance of the Holocaust often erases the targeting of queer people by the Nazis. See, for example, “Why We’ve Suppressed the Queer History of the Holocaust” (2018) and “Holocaust and the History of Gender and Sexuality” (2018).

<sup>5</sup> A 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary gallery of *The Telegraph* online featured *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*’s September 12<sup>th</sup> editions featured the headlines of “War on America” and “A declaration of war”



therefore amongst people of a white and European heritage: a trope signalled more recently in the use of “Je Suis Charlie” following the attacks on the headquarters of the Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris.

Bond suggests that this centring of memory creates “a standardisation of many of the narratives in the public sphere” (8) and that “frames of memory . . . often function as vehicles of normative preconceptions and conventions that shade, and to some extent, determine the shape of memory” (11). Using 9/11 as her basis, Bond posits these frames as “templates [that] manifest recurring representational paradigms that have been used to structure memories of diverse events and experiences by drawing them into familiar narrative patterns” (xiii). Through an analysis of responses to 9/11, Bond highlights the three frameworks that shaped representations of the attacks. These are: the rhetoric of trauma, which creates a de-critical approach to remembrance; what she terms “the American jeremiad” which elevates the positioning of the United States in global memorial culture; and the analogical use of Holocaust memory, which creates an apolitical and atemporal understanding of events. Each of these rhetorical devices was utilized by the Bush administration following the attacks, shoring up a nationalist and neo-conservative response, masked as “American values”. Using texts such as photographs that respond to the memorialization of 9/11, in addition to works about the aftermath of the attacks, I demonstrate how they frame memory in ways that situate particular bodies outside of the national imaginary.

By establishing a queer archive of remembrance around events like 9/11, my thesis demonstrates the way cultural representations destabilize the over-riding effects of the normative prescriptions on framing memory that Bond describes. In addition, I complicate understandings of events like 9/11 that are inscribed with reductive sets of meanings and

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respectively. *The Daily Mail* featured the single world “Apocalypse” while *The Sun* featured an image of the second hijacked plane hitting the complex, described as “the ultimate crime of terrorism” accompanied by the headline “Day That Changed the World”. See “9/11: Newspaper front pages the day after September 11”. In the US, the *Orlando Sentinel* quoted President Bush’s statement that “Today, our nation saw evil” while the *Detroit Free Press* proclaimed the nation’s loss of innocence in “America’s Darkest Day”. See *Parade* “Looking Back: Newspaper Front Pages Covering 9/11”.

opens routes for reflective/reflexive engagement that widen the inclusionary scope of remembrance and representation. However, it is important to recognize, as James E. Young claims in *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meanings* (1993), that “even though groups share socially constructed assumptions and values that organize memory into roughly similar patterns, individuals cannot share another’s memory” (xi). It becomes equally significant, then, not to homogenize groups, and to recognize the differences that are embedded within shared frameworks of memory. Bond suggests that memories instead “remain the property of the individual, albeit mediated by, and subject to, the customs, beliefs, and traditions of the collective” (2). It is equally important not to over-identify groups, thus creating a flattening effect that erases difference. LaCapra posits, “empathy should not be conflated with unchecked identification” (40) and instead should be fostered, as Kaja Silverman in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996) suggests, with “respect [to] the otherness of the newly illuminated bodies” (2). In highlighting bodies that are othered through discourses of memory, either through underrepresentation or through their absorption into a dominant narrative or framework, the thesis broadens the scope of current theoretical structures through an exploration of cultural representations that engage with bodies and memories rendered queer, either through a process of marginalization or as an act of textual resistance to hegemonic socio-political conditions that enact those processes. Paying close attention to such narratives uncovers the ways that those processes operate, and thus how they can be undermined and destabilized to provide routes through which dialogue can be established with the ways that historical events are memorialized.

In arguing for more inclusive engagement with forms of remembrance, it remains imperative not to flatten out the myriad differences that occur across the boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, ablebodiedness and any other marker of difference. However, it also remains important to navigate the points of assemblage whereby further understandings of memory can be developed. In most mainstream US representations of 9/11 and its aftermath

there is a tendency to portray one-sided viewpoints of events like the 2003 Iraq War.<sup>6</sup> This can be seen in recent fiction such as Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012) and Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014), which focus on the experiences of veterans and almost completely elide Iraqi perspectives. Even when such texts feature Iraqis, their depictions are filtered through, or ventriloquized by, the US-centric narrator, often a military veteran who shores up patriotic links to the US nation-state. This thesis will examine the problematic nature of this myopia and uncover texts that both work toward and obfuscate (sometimes at the same time) an empathetic dialogue with, or portrayal of, the queered body. Specifically, my central argument is that queer bodies are necessary to uphold certain framings of memory and, furthermore, that such framings cannot be interrogated without attention to the ways queer bodies are made to function and operate. By establishing a queer archive of memory, I demonstrate the ways that queer bodies are positioned outside normative conceptualizations of remembrance. My thesis not only considers the ways that events like 9/11 valorize particular modes of heteronormativity but also what queerness does to such events, and hence how the US state manifests control over not just its own citizens, but those of other nations.

## THE US STATE AND 9/11

In "9/11: When Was 'American Studies After the New Americanists'?" (2006), Donald Pease argues that following 9/11 the Bush administration created "a state fantasy that was communicated to the US people by soliciting their pleasurable identification with . . . spectacular shows of force" (75) exemplified by the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their subsequent regime changes. Avery Gordon (2008) also suggests that "the growing reach of the United States military . . . and the expansion of its corollary carceral

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<sup>6</sup> This is a continuous trend in US history, particularly around discourse and depictions of war, which I discuss further in Chapter Two. Forming part of a wider nationalist discourse that operate in this way, 9/11 representations create and sustain an audience by appealing to a commonality between people, and therefore, a larger commercial audience.

complex is an extremely important and dangerous phenomenon” (165). The imprisonment of various bodies of colour by the state highlights an issue within the US, through the prison-industrial complex that disproportionately affects African-American men, and outside of the country’s borders with the expansion of the military-industrial complex and subsequent repressing and detaining of brown bodies. Gordon posits that the understandings of “conditions at Abu-Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay as exceptional or isolated instances of the abuse of state power has obscured the relationship between United States military prisons abroad and territorial United States civilian prisons” (165). As I explore in chapter three, military prisons “queer” detainee bodies through their ability to control mortality and define life, targeting them for segregation and disposal as a way for the US to manifest an expression of sovereign power.

The implications of US state interventions abroad are also discussed by Anna Hartnell who argues that claims of US exceptionalism are undermined by texts that “eclips[e] the myth of US benevolence abroad” and that citizens “far from being protected as a result of hypocritical wars waged abroad, are often themselves the victims of US security strategy” (“New Orleans, 2005” 49). In domestic terms, Hartnell cites the incarceration of African-Americans, and the War on Drugs, while mentioning Guantánamo Bay as “referencing a larger system of black Atlantic oppression” (“New Orleans, 2005” 49). As I demonstrate using representations of US black sites, both soldiers and detainees experience forms of queer subjugation (albeit it to widely differing extents) stemming from US policy. In the introduction to *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings* (2005) Eithne Luibhéid focuses on how “the production of national sovereignty and citizenship through controlling the entry of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants has resulted in the proliferation of border zones” (xviii).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, national borders have been heavily demarcated and monitored and

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<sup>7</sup> This discussion can be explored further through texts such as Wendy Brown’s *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010).

those crossing them are subject to an increased vigilance. The manner in which domestic US policy is enacted in spaces that are barely or not even within national borders highlights the transnational, or even extranational, element to state interventions, and the inherent complexities of the ways in which private bodies are being regulated by the US government. I explore that regulation and its violent manifestations using the portrayal of detainees at black sites depicted from the perspective of US military personnel and the personal account of a former detainee of Guantánamo.

Naomi A. Palik discusses bodily regulation by the US state in her book, *Rightlessness: Testimony and Redress in U.S. Prison Camps since World War II* (2016), when she suggests that the “deepening limits and contradictions of rights” (2) that occur through “imprisonment and extralegal detention have become central to U.S. governance” (3). Consequently, she argues, “people are rendered rightless . . . as a necessary condition for rights to have meaning in the first place” (Palik 4). Whilst extreme forms of violence are committed against those detained by the US state, those who carry out acts of torture believe it to be a patriotic duty (as I discuss in Chapters Two and Three in particular). Dora Apel builds on this idea when she suggests that state actors who carry out the violent work of detention, exclusion, and subjugation believe that “they are committing deeds for the good of the nation,” and that “this belief illuminates the fact that the exercise of such sadism and humiliation [in acts of torture] is a fundamentally political act” (89). She goes on, “‘democracy’ became code for America, and defending democracy meant arresting and imprisoning thousands of Middle Easterners” (Apel 90). This obfuscation coded through the fight for democracy extends Benedict Anderson’s 1983 conceptualization of the nation as “imagined community,” which, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, . . . is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). Anderson critiques the idea of a horizontal citizenship that functions to mask inequality shoring up exceptionalist rhetoric. His formulation is therefore applicable to the bombast that followed particularly after 9/11, seeking to create a unified

nation (albeit within confined categories of acceptable identification) against the nebulous threat of outside evil contained in the abstraction of the Middle East.

These strands come together in Lauren Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997) in which she argues that for the "restoration of the imagined nation, the American ex-icon [such as heterosexual white men who have "lost" the respect of their culture] denigrates the political present tense and incites nostalgia for the national world of its iconicity, setting up that lost world as a utopian horizon of political aspiration" (2). It therefore becomes imperative for those seeking that restoration to pursue an unattainable and exceptionalist nostalgia that is embedded within a nation that has supposedly become increasingly fractured and "traumatized". Berlant goes on to suggest that "national culture demands a continuous pedagogical project for making people into 'private citizens' who understand their privacy to be a mirror and a source for nationality" and that "new technologies of patriotism . . . keep the nation at the center of the public's identification while shrinking the field of what can be expected from the state" (Berlant, *Queen* 56). The good and obedient citizen is one that identifies with the nation and its nostalgic project, and whose private life are actively monitored and policed in the public realm by the state. Berlant's analysis highlights the function of the state in controlling bodies as part of its foundational and regulatory frameworks. In order to strengthen this ideology, the state must create actors who it deems are a threat to the "normalcy" of society, and often these are bodies that are marked as queer, as exemplified by "the Reaganite tendency to fetishize both the offensive example and the patriotic norm" (Berlant, *Queen* 7). In this way, queer moves away from a category solely dependent on "deviant" sexuality and becomes a broader concept encompassing a belonging to patriotic citizenry. Analyzing the representations of queer people in cultural texts becomes an important and necessary intervention, then, to assess the ways in which the ways processes of queering occur, and are experienced, and the manner in which such dichotomies between the "offensive" example of the queer and the "patriotic norm" of the non-queer might

be subverted. I consider depictions and responses to 9/11 and the Global War on Terror from those perspectives, such as Iraqi citizens, migrant populations, and brown-bodied US citizens.

Some of this work has already been done through the critical investigation of responses to the political landscape of 9/11 and the resultant wars in the Middle East. Versluys' previously mentioned book *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, Arin Keeble's *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity* (2014), and Terrence McSweeney's *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (2014) all evidence the preoccupation of contemporary US literary studies with 9/11 and its aftermath. O'Gorman in particular, focuses "on the role of literature in both shaping and critiquing issues of difference in the construction of a post 9/11 identity" and its role in "disrupting and rethinking the processes by which the division between the self and the other are conceptualized" (5). However, the texts concentrated on in his book often present a one-sided response on the part of the United States that inadvertently reproduces those from the Middle East as terrorists who threaten the safety of the homeland. Such one-sided cultural representations risk reiterating the binary of difference that O'Gorman sets out to critique, casting a distinct "American" populace that is set apart from other identities and bodies. In addition, by using texts like Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* (2009), O'Gorman reinforces the problematic ventriloquizing of marginalized voices through Eggers' own privileged position as a white, male author from the United States. In "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis" (2008), Richard Gray argues that "in a postcolonial world, it equally well may be that the imagination has now been colonized by the US" (128) and that "texts that try to bear witness vacillate . . . between large rhetorical gestures acknowledging trauma and retreat into domestic detail" (134). Thus, it becomes important to seek out texts that do not conform to these normative standards or replicate US-centric ideologies in order to build an archive of texts that allows for the resistance of queer bodies against hegemonic marginalization. Further, O'Gorman's position can be critiqued using Wai Chee Dimock's introductory chapter

to *Shades of the Planet* (2007), where she argues that the “premise of exceptionalism translates into a methodology that privileges the nation above all else” (2). For Dimock, such texts “would have to rest on a platform broader and more robustly empirical than the relatively arbitrary and demonstrably ephemeral borders of the nation. They require alternate geographies, alternate histories” (“Introduction: Planet and America” 5). This thesis works to explore these negotiations between and from a non-US-centred view, analyzing representations of historical and cultural remembrance that do not simply reinscribe the automatic dominance of the United States.

Berlant highlights this issue when she suggests “the public rhetoric of citizen trauma has become so pervasive and competitive in the United States that it obscures basic differences among modes of identity, hierarchy, and violence. Mass national pain threatens to turn into banality, a crumbling archive of dead signs and tired plots” (*Queen* 2). The banality of trauma fails to fully interrogate the conditions of citizenry in the US and instead is used as a kind of umbrella term that eradicates meaning and complexity. Ruth Leys critiques one of the main proponents of trauma theory, Cathy Caruth, by suggesting that in her reading of Freud, Caruth puts forward a suggestion of trauma that “stands outside representation altogether”, positing the “contagious effects of trauma” embodied in the transmission of psychic suffering across individuals, and even generations (17). Such a non-specific application of the term enacts a flattening out of individuality, causing the “unlocatability of any particular traumatic experience” (Caruth, 134) “in any particular individual” (Leys, 17). The universalizing of traumatic experience is similar to LaCapra’s “empathetic overidentification”, whereby one takes on the trauma of another as if directly experienced by them, in that Caruth suggests that following an event like the Holocaust, “each of us . . . is always already a split or dissociated subject, simultaneously victim and witness, and hence always marked by the difference and the division that characterizes the traumatized subject” (297). These differences of understanding amongst trauma theorists means that closer consideration needs



to be paid to the way “trauma” is used to signify ideas, becomes represented in culture, and how it functions in political communities.

In terms of 9/11 discourse, an exemplary flattening out of individuals, and erasure of critical discourse can be found in psychoanalyst Dori Laub’s essay “September 11, 2001 – An Event without a Voice” (2003). Describing the “experience of a collective massive trauma”, Laub suggests a traumatic impact “to all of us in America, no matter how distant from the scene of the attacks” (204). Further, he suggests “the obvious connection” to the Holocaust and how “Western society nearly lost its balance” (Laub 205).<sup>8</sup> The significance of trauma theory in defining what is traumatic and who gets to experience it that way is demonstrated by Laub’s response to 9/11, which explicitly called upon the Holocaust to render the event as an “unimaginable” and “incomprehensible” tragedy, using exceptionalist motifs such as “September 11 stands alone in its starkness”, and overtly racist generalizations such as “If America . . . doesn’t use every ounce of energy to halt this madness and call it by its real name, then it will spread. The Devil is dancing in the Middle East, and he’s dancing our way” (214). The dearth of informed and critical responses is clearly evident when terms such as trauma are applied universally to events, and how this allows both state rhetoric, through nationalism and exceptionalism, and transnational rhetoric that yokes the US to Arab-Israeli conflicts, to insidiously slip into the cultural remembrance around harrowing events. The memorialization of events is therefore linked to trauma in a way that is already transnational, even as trauma is represented as an exceptional, singular, and national experience.

## QUEER THEORY AND IDENTITY

Queer Theory emerged in the late twentieth century in light of the critical work on bodies and sexuality by Michel Foucault and Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” (1984). In recent years, queer

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<sup>8</sup> Laub’s universalizing tendency works to solidify the wider conception of a unified history between the Holocaust and 9/11, providing exceptionalist status to both events. I explore the perverse exceptionalism of 9/11 specifically in Chapter One.

theory has also helped to theorise a range of non-normative bodies in the contemporary world. Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* (2004) suggests that “the public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality” (xx). In this way certain groups are marginalized and are rendered invisible because of their non-normative identifications. In *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Puar suggests that such invisibility is linked to “sexual deviancy [and] the process of discerning, othering, and quarantining terrorist bodies” (38). Puar posits the term *homonationalism* (following Lisa Duggan) to suggest that the agenda of gay and lesbian rights in the United States has been furthered by a neo-liberal trade-off with the subjugation of racialized bodies. This trade-off entails the conflation of the terrorist and deviant homosexual imaginary. Puar goes on to going state that “these racially and sexually perverse figures also labor in the service of disciplining and normalizing subjects worthy of rehabilitation *away from* these bodies . . . signalling and enforcing the mandatory terms of patriotism” (*Terrorist* 38). The queering of bodies, in this formulation, results in a shoring up of normative values and identities, associated with an expansion of bodies that are labelled as queer.

Expanding from Achille Mbembe’s definition of necropolitics as “the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (40), Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco (*Queer Necropolitics* 2014) define *queer necropolitics* as the study of “disavowed subjectivities, socialites, kinning, intimacy and desire . . . with the production, segregation and mining of pathological bodies, spaces and populations within shifting regimes of racism, colonialism and (neo-)liberalism” (5). This formulation reflects Puar’s formulation of brown bodies that are demarcated from the normativity of US culture, subsequently pathologized as “terrorists” and used as justification from military intervention abroad to protect the nation. Furthermore, as she and Amit Rai articulate, “discourses that would mobilize monstrosity as a screen for otherness are always [and] are always involved in

circuits of normalizing power ... questions of race and sexuality have always haunted its figuration” (119). This is evidenced in posters seen in Manhattan following the attacks that featured Bin Laden being anally penetrated by the Empire State Building or being forced to undergo a sex change as punishment (Puar and Rai 126). This logic reaffirms the imperialist agenda of the state in protecting white bodies from racial others, who in the process, are marked as sexually deviant queers, and in opposition to normative “American values”, such as the “homeland” and the family.

Muñoz (2009) posits that “queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” and the “queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity” (3). The queering of the heteronormative concept of futurity, bound to legacies of reproduction by Lee Edelman, thus undermines the notion of innocent bodies in opposition to queer ones. Moreover, the requirement to persecute those queer bodies to uphold the innocence of the nation is subject to a destabilization through a reimagining of the cultural, and therefore public, sphere. As a consequence, cultural dynamics become more inclusive and allow for the viewpoint of the queer Other, that when allowed a voice by mainstream culture, works to undermine the problematic distinctions of “us” and “them” that centres itself around the threat of non-white bodies.

The conceptualization of those designated as non-threatening, adhering to prescribed “American” values, and those in opposition to that framing, is discussed further by Berlant. She argues that “the intimate public sphere of the U.S. present tense renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values” (Berlant, *Queen* 5) and that “subalterns develop tactics for survival within capitalist culture” (Berlant, *Queen* 9). The term subaltern is utilized through postcolonial theory, especially in the light of the wide influence of Gayatri Spivak who followed the work of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, to define those who operate outside of hegemonic discourse, rendered without agency through

their status. Therefore, in Berlant's reading, subjugated queer bodies should seek out the appropriation of culturally normative values and practices such as marriage and family, as part of a tactic of adherence. However, other queer theorists reject this notion, such as Jack J. Halberstam (*In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* 2005) who states that "queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction ... an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices" (1).

As such, an inherent tension lies within queer theory about movements away from, or towards, normativity, and how those who are labelled as queer should respond.<sup>9</sup> Theorists like Lee Edelman expand on antinormative practices in texts such as *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), in which he argues that the cultural logic of heteronormativity "impose[s] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of queer resistance" (2), thus making queer studies an imperative discourse, and that "rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it" (4). In addition, Michael Warner (1993) has suggested that queerness "rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (xxvi). This thesis explores such tensions through the analysis of cultural texts to uncover how boundaries of normativity and queerness are demarcated, and/or subject to a destabilization.

Following Foucault, Halberstam (1993) defines such a destabilization as a kind of reverse discourse, one "in excess of the category it purports to articulate. The excess is the disruption of identity and the violence of power and the power of representation; it is *dis-*

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion around the trajectories of queer theory and normativity, see Sharon Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012) and Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson's "Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions" (2015).

*integrational; the excess is QUEER*” (193). Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, Muñoz, and Trish Rosen (1997) argue for an intersectional approach, which, “by considering interrelations of sexuality, race, and gender in a transnational context, attempts to bring the projects of queer, postcolonial, and critical race theories together with each other” (1). As David Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz (2005) state “some of the most innovative and risky work on globalization, neoliberalism, cultural politics, subjectivity, identity, family, and kinship is happening in the realm of queer studies” (2). In excavating sites of both queer theory and memory studies, my thesis establishes the intersections of discourse through which contemporary texts are operating and how the application of queer memory studies can undermine hegemonic narratives of normativity. Whilst very few of my chosen texts might be considered queer at first glance, my formulation demonstrates the queerness of bodies that are rendered through opposition to the nation’s core heteronormativity, whether that be as a brown-bodied US citizen, a resident of Iraqi resident, a detained prisoner at a US black site, or as an outsider migrant. Further, I argue how these bodies are violently targeted by the state and mainstream culture as a way to uphold the fallacies of national strength and unity.

## THE GLOBAL STATE

In considering the theoretical intersections of the contemporary United States, it is important to consider the ramifications on, and resultant from, a national cultural apparatus within a global network. Jacqueline Rose argues in her pre-9/11 book *States of Fantasy* (1996) that US patriotism allows for a reinforcement of a singularly inclusive political rhetoric that creates a sense of community at the expense of another group. She argues this creates a fantasy centred around the state that “can be grounds for license and pleasure . . . [but] can just as well surface as fierce blockading protectiveness” (Rose 4). Michelle R. Martin-Baron, following discussions of queer necropolitics, suggests in “(Hyper/in)visibility and the military corps(e)” (2014) that such a “political formation is deeply marked by racial and sexual norms, the ghostly

remnants of an ongoing imperial identity, which demarcates which bodies are queered and marked for death” (51). In interpreting marginalized narratives as queer, this thesis explores the movements that underlie them. These include geographical migrations and the impact on global discourse, and theoretical migrations that affect conceptualizations of memory. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (*Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* 2010) argue that “memory and the global have to be studied together, as it has become impossible to understand the trajectories of memory outside a global frame of reference” (2). How the United States, and particularly its cultural output, is understood in terms of globalization has important ramifications for the ways in which the texts examined in this thesis are received. The specific events given memorialization—responses to 9/11 and the Global War on Terror, illegal rendition and torture, and migrant experiences following 9/11—and their textual representation have global consequence, and therefore have consequence on how those events come to be perceived both from a national and a transnational lens.

The connection between globalization and Americanism has been commented on by many prominent scholars. Paul Giles in *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (2011) suggests that “the interrelation between American literature and geography, far from being something that can be taken as natural, involves contested terrain” (1). As his numerous critical works attest, understanding US literature involves reading it in relation to numerous other spaces and places, whether these are transatlantic, hemispheric, transpacific, or global. Alikei Varvogli (*Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction* 2011) adds that “the meanings of nation and national literature are changing rapidly as globalization spreads and technology abolishes geographical demarcations” (xiv). In addition, he goes on to state that “globalization means to a large extent the Americanization of the world” and “a process of moving freely across borders that are no longer tied to geographical demarcations” (xv). Caren Irr (*Toward the Geopolitical Novel* 2013) develops this by suggesting that US fiction is marked

by “the use and revision of historically American narratives for making sense of the rest of the world” and is not defined “on the basis of the author’s birthplace, citizenship, current residence, or workplace” (15). Additionally, Paul Jay has suggested in *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (2010) that “the relationship of literary production to globalization is complex and multifaceted, irreducible by definition to literature produced in a particular language or constellation of nations” (5): rather, texts act in “foregrounding forms of disruption, displacement, migration, and mobility” (9). Jay achieves this through examination of texts such as Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (1999), in relation to multicultural identities that operate across supposedly rigid borders, and the tension between globalization and nationalism as discussed in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006).

A huge array of texts may thus be considered simultaneously global and “American”. Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller argue that the collision of these two designations uncovers a decentring of empire that “is called into being and functions in the name of the global right [and reiterates] American exceptionalism” (7). The expansion of borders appears to be a mode of resistance to the limitation of the nation-state highlighted by Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. This movement is exemplified by theorists such as Tara Stubbs and Doug Haynes who, in *Navigating the Transnational in Modern American Literature and Culture: Axes of Influence* (2017), argue for “a more absorptive category of Americanness, accepting and remodeling the transnational as part of its innate rhetoric” (2). Dimock suggests a more balanced approach however, arguing that events like the Iraq War demonstrate “a form of ‘globalization’ . . . [that is] not benign, [and] is at the same time not predicated on the primacy of any nation” (“Introduction: Planet and America” 2). The impact of events like Katrina show how imaginaries of “third-world countries” came to be conceptualized within the borders of the nation.

Despite Dimock’s claims toward a lack of national primacy, McClintock insists that we see “the violence that the imperial state attempts to render invisible, while also seeing the

ordinary people afflicted by that violence” (90). It is this focus on the ordinary (of people and spaces) that my thesis explores through the use of the banal and the vernacular as well as commonly elided perspectives of queer citizenry. Furthermore, Cyrus R. K. Patell (2014) forwards the exploration of such a populace and the effects on them through what he terms as *emergent literature*, that is, “the literary expression of a cultural group that defines itself either as an alternative to or in direct opposition to a dominant mainstream” (5). It is the negotiation, and tension of such national primacies, and the subsequent impact on those positioned outside of those borders, that the thesis examines through the cultural texts that have been chosen.

## CHAPTERS

In Chapter One, I discuss recent attempts to represent the so-called “vernacular” approach to 9/11 in domestic terms. By analyzing Nina Berman’s photography collection *Homeland* (2008) and Hasan M. Elahi’s series of installations derived from his *Tracking Transience* (2002-) project, I critique so-called “everyday” exemplifications of the response to 9/11 in the United States. I argue the need for more encompassing approaches to depictions of domestic responses to 9/11 by citing the problematic flattening out of “American” identity that centres on a nationalist patriotism and singular imaginary of the United States and favours white Americans over racial Others, particularly Muslims. It is imperative to examine bodies of work that adhere to, and act as divergent responses from, normative approaches of remembrance. Using Berman and Elahi’s work as explorations of heteronormative framings of 9/11 memory, framed as banal, I posit that new modes of representation are beginning to proliferate and that seek to articulate the problematic conditions of nationalism that coalesce around discourses of 9/11.

In my second chapter, I investigate the transnational effects of the “War on Terror.” Using Roy Scranton’s *War Porn* (2016) and Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* (2013), this



chapter examines the way US war fiction strengthens problematic binaries of “us” and “them” that vilify and subjugate the sexually and racially queer body through the concept of a lost innocence. Unlike most examples of recent examples of popular and award-winning veteran fiction such as Phil Klay and Kevin Powers, Scranton seeks (imperfectly) to consider the perspective of enemy combatants alongside US servicemen. I argue that Scranton’s novel therefore attempts to demarcate its narrative from conventional expectations of the genre, highlighting the dangers of only remembering extra-national conflicts from the one-sided view of US soldiers. Further, as I go on to discuss, the understanding of conflicts abroad can benefit from an empathetic approach to the Muslim Other. Relatedly, the protagonist of Antoon’s text is a citizen of Baghdad who becomes deeply affected by the military intervention of the United States. Working as a *mghassilchi*,<sup>10</sup> or religious corpse washer, the character and his family are swept up into the legacies of violence that are further propagated by the United States’ military. The queer vantage of the character is further complicated by the character’s inability to form relationships with women and the increased pressure of heteronormative culture on an already marginalized—through the US military’s intervention into the country and the character’s “unconventional” artistic tendencies—Iraqi identity. My comparison between texts allows for representations of the conflict to be considered from a variety of—or multivoiced—perspectives, considering remembrance that is situated inside, and in opposition to, the state rhetoric of the US and its military operations abroad.

In Chapter Three, I expand on the transnational and transcultural frame of the previous two chapters through an examination of the extra-national sites of detainment operated by the US. Analyzing Luke Moran’s 2014 film, *Boys of Abu Ghraib* and the testimony of Guantánamo detainee Mohamedou Ould Slahi, *Guantánamo Diary* (2015), I explore further how queer bodies are conceptualized alongside the banality of violence that stems from the national

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<sup>10</sup> Further instances of the word *mghassilchi* and other terms without a direct translation into English will not be italicized. This is due to the way that it inherently puts non-English terms at a linguistic distance, implicitly creating a division between the language (and therefore culture) of the specific word and that of a reader assumed to be unfamiliar with non-English language.

imaginary around those who are considered a threat to the US nation. I also contend that the way in which the sites of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay function—as spaces where the violent repercussions of bodily limitations can be acted out—not only have transnational and transcultural implications, but have transhistorical consequences, through the way that the spaces themselves function as sites of memory. The very limits of time, space and bodies are tested in the specific locations of the black sites as well as through the activities of torture, thereby queering detainees further. Using the testimony of a Guantánamo detainee, I contrast the memorialisation generated by testimonial narratives with cinematic depictions like Moran's, which are intended for a mainstream US audience. I thus establish the ways in which subjugated bodies can enact resistance against state and cultural hegemony through empathetic forms of memory that include queer bodies and perspectives to destabilize the dominance of singular conceptions, and heteronormative native constructions, of remembrance.

Following the movement of queer bodies into the United States, my final chapter considers how migrant memory work seeks to disrupt narratives of US citizenry and traditional norms of the family. Studying Akhil Sharma's *Family Life* (2014) and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), this chapter suggests that migrant cultural responses to state construction and belonging upset traditional narratives both conceptually and formalistically. Both use familial and geographical memory to consider the complexities of global migration embedded within the United States. As I demonstrate, this movement is not unilateral, and works simultaneously in numerous directions. Analyzing texts that feature Dominican-American and Indian-American characters side-by-side works to establish shared commonalities, as well as distinct areas of departure, across ethnic groups. By creating spaces that breach frames of space and time (queering them), these texts suggest a fluidity to such borders that undermines the idea of a static notion of "America" and "American-ness". This undermining also draws into question the idea of the "good citizen"—explored through

the previous chapters—who adheres to normative values perpetuated by a hetero- and homo-normative society. The space of the migrant allows for a queering of time and place that opens the potential for inhabiting queerness and imaging a futurity in which the queer subject can be realized.

Ultimately, I examine the subversive techniques uncovered through each of the texts in order to imagine a queer archive of transcultural memory. Referring to other contemporary texts that also begin this work, such as Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), the conclusion builds an assemblage of cultural devices and techniques that destabilize normative framings and constrictive regulatory practices. Its reimagining of dominant narratives of recent US remembrance through a queer lens not only works to break down exclusionary borders but open the potential for previously marginalized voices to be included within cultural and theoretical frameworks. Finally, I contend that queer practices have already begun to penetrate normative spheres and consider what this means for distinctions of queerness and the potential of a queer archive and futurity.

# CHAPTER ONE: AMERICAN AVENGERS

Queer Art, Domestic Vernacularity, and the Homeland

*“we are all of one mind  
... insisting that the sin  
of homosexuality  
and other deviations  
are kept from our midst”*  
- Nina Berman, *Homeland*

In “The Public Face of 9/11”, photographer Jonathan Hyman optimistically describes witnessing a “new memorial vocabulary of 9/11 that allowed Americans to speak to each other freely”, capturing images that presented “a unique chronicle and portrait of post-9/11 society as seen through the American vernacular” (184). Taking the idea of the “American vernacular”, my thesis begins by examining photographic responses to 9/11 and its subsequent effects on the domestic landscape of the US to argue that they highlight the way that socio-political categories intersect with categories of citizenship. Those classifications demarcate who is able to speak freely, thereby limiting how US society can be portrayed in culture, disrupting the notion of an “American” vernacular. Analyzing the work of Nina Berman and Hasan Elahi, this chapter interrogates the nationalist discourse underpinning their collections to illuminate the construction, representation, and perception of “American-ness”. Using the images within *Homeland* (2008) and *Tracking Transience* (2002-), I examine the processes that distinguish between those included within framings of the “general population” and those oppositionally situated as queer. Further, in interrogating the frame, who or what poses a threat to the status quo of the nation becomes visible, highlighting a cyclical relationship between categories of self and other that is deeply embedded within the country.

I focus particularly on the ways in which each collection works to frame memory, and how these framings subvert or perpetuate dynamics of nationalist and exceptionalist discourse. I pay close attention to how cultural forms like Berman and Elahi’s operate to

elevate certain types of memory over others and examine their subsequent impact on wider cultural discourses following September 11. Discussing the attendant topographics of the collections, I explore the relationship between the aesthetic and journalistic contained within the images, establishing the ways in which contemporary photography can validate and mobilize certain forms of memorialization over others. Further, an examination of the vernacular embedded throughout Berman and Elahi's images will be useful to provide an analysis of how *domestic vernacularity* operates, and the attendant ways that it becomes attached to the historical categorizations of 9/11. Vernacular culture offers "an array of specialized interests that are grounded in parts of the whole" (Bodnar, *Remaking America* 14) when thinking about how cultural memory operates. The vernacularity of memorialization merges with official expression—such as the Bush administration's response following the attacks—to create forms of wider public (or cultural) memory. As well as forming part of that larger concept of memory, the vernacular offers us a way to understand "what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like" (Bodnar 14). Expanding on this notion, I suggest that vernacular memory feeds back into official statements through the mediation of patriotism, thus creating "loyalties" between the localized spaces of the vernacular and the national imaginaries of the "official" state memory. What results from this merging of the two is a tension between the upholding, and the subversion of, national discourse around events such as 9/11.

## FRAMINGS

Following September 11, a wide variety of commemorative responses proliferated in US culture, re-orienting the socio-political terrain of the country toward neoconservatism and a shoring up of the nation's borders. The predominantly nationalistic reaction was configured as a jingoistic patriotism, evidenced by comments from then President George W. Bush, who declared on September 20: "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" (CNN).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Anthems—particularly in country music—such as Alan Jackson's "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" emphasize the attempt at a collective nationalistic response. The song was

Consequently, people that attempted to question circumstances around the attacks and the subsequent response were often seen as un-American, fostering conditions that created, in Bond's words, "the cultural memory of 9/11 [that] generally appeared to exhibit an exemplary form of 'narrative coherence'" (12). Similarly, within 9/11 scholarship initial responses were often myopic and inward-looking.<sup>12</sup> As time has passed, dissenting voices have been given more of a platform through fictional texts such as Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008), and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), which interrogate the racial implications of nationalistic framings of memory. Indeed, texts that navigate the terrain of what Richard Crownshaw (2011) terms "perpetrator fiction", notably John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) have also arisen, to debatable critical success.<sup>13</sup>

However, a predominant number of cultural works representing public responses to September 11 propagated nationalist rhetoric in the later interests of shoring up support for war, projecting a western-centric idealism that was encapsulated in the idea of "an all-American wholeness of spirit and a national state of health and happiness" (Simpson 46). Subsequently, bodies marked by difference found themselves further occluded by US culture, queered at the margins to uphold claims to a normative interior that is centred around heterochronic ideals, that is, the desire to "turn a longing gaze back over the ruins of what has been destroyed" (Casarino 61). The US sought to move toward a desired nostalgia that was contained within normative representations of US culture; a pre-existing imaginary bound up

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described by *Rolling Stone* as encapsulating "the American collective consciousness perfectly" (Kreps et al). Bruce Springsteen, an artist one critic called "the songwriter best qualified to speak to and for his country", went so far as to release an entire 9/11 album titled *The Rising* in 2002 (see Metacritic, "The Rising"). Comic books and other media utilized the attacks as an opportunity to unite the nation with Marvel's "The Black Issue" depicting the tragedy of the event bringing the comic's heroes and villains together in mourning. The subsequent intervention into Iraq, supported by 72% of US citizens in a 2003 Gallup poll boosted President Bush's approval ratings based on the "rally affect" of US involvement in conflict activity where "Americans are in harm's way on foreign shores" (see Newport, "Seventy-Two Percent").

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Greenberg et al.

<sup>13</sup> Questions were raised about how successful and appropriately the narrative, written by a white, male author, represented the perspective of a terrorist-of-colour. For instance, the conflation between faith and violence was one instance deemed problematic. See Morton "Introduction" (2010) and Scanlan "Migrating from Terror" (2010).

with notions of heteronormative archetypes that shore up the strength of the nation. Consequently, national culture operates through the nexus of heteronormative and queer culture to, in Hiram Pérez's words, "reinforce and secure racial boundaries at home" whilst locating "the primitive, sexual other abroad" (16).

Discussing the Shoah, Andreas Huyssen posits that "in the transnational movement of memory discourses, the Holocaust [...] begins to function as a metaphor for other traumatic histories and memories" (14). Consequently, events like the Holocaust and 9/11 become blurred as spheres of traumatic history: the attacks become charged in similar ways, such as a "constitutive inability to live in peace with difference and otherness", resulting in an "insidious relationship among enlightened modernity, racial oppression, and organized violence" (Huyssen 13). In depicting cultural responses to September 11, practitioners like Berman and Elahi traverse the ethical territory between relations of "racial oppression, and organized violence" that Huyssen posits. Subsequent mediation of cultural representations of the attacks can operate as a form of screen memory that elides critical intervention into 9/11, creating forms of memory defined by, "the psychoanalytic rhetoric of trauma, the triumphalist tropes of the jeremiad, and the analogical templates of Americanised Holocaust memory" (Bond 128). As a result, cultural responses risk a failure of critical intervention that upholds national imaginaries of events through a reduction to the unspeakability of trauma, the lamenting and/or celebration of a national dream, and the flattening out of historical specificity that occurs when events are grouped together as analogy. Shaping how September 11 is absorbed into, and travels across, social imaginaries, these methods of remembrance expand and overwrite global connections across a multitude of temporal and geographical axes.

Capturing images that can be read as vernacular responses to the attacks—or concerned with public reaction and/or those based in the everyday—practitioners like Elahi and Berman, in divergent ways, present viewpoints that undermine singular conceptions of "American-ness", disrupting hegemonic notions of those who are permitted to publicly respond

to 9/11. Reacting against what Dora Apel describes as the enforcement of “a particular reality while actively excluding any alternative views” (152), Berman utilizes constrained formulations of the militarized and domestic homeland, while Elahi demonstrates the effects of such constraints on marginalized individuals, identifiable as queer through their non-normativity. In doing so, both artists attend to the dynamics that stem from memorialization and the use of the vernacular in presenting cultural responses, pointing toward the infantilization of the public through a nationalist discourse in *Homeland* that subsequently precludes the kinds of queer experience portrayed in *Tracking Transience*. Due to the rapid expansion of photographic technology, Apel posits that the contemporary era in which the attacks are situated has seen a marked shift occur “between categories of media and artistic images” (154), blurring the boundaries between images demonstrative of aesthetic and journalistic qualities. As a result, “an upsurge of interest” in digital forms of photography has resulted in a “photo-based engagement with social and political reality” (Apel 155), exemplified by the turn towards everyday presentations of the United States, especially following September 11.<sup>14</sup>

Both Elahi and Berman’s photographs have been exhibited in galleries, are obtainable online, and in the case of *Homeland*, collected as a pictorial monograph. The images constitute extended pieces of work that embody the aesthetic qualities of images designed to be exhibited and seen, in a form that recalls qualities associated with photojournalism (such as claims toward vernacularity and documentarianism). The ongoing or prolific nature of the collections give the work an authoritative dimension, through their sheer volume. Elahi presents a first-hand account of his experiences of living in the United States in the years following 9/11, while Berman catalogues a public response from the view of an observer. She

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<sup>14</sup> This is evidenced in the amount of testimony that was seen following the attacks, and the particular ways that public spaces were used and appropriated in attempting to locate loved ones. See Haskins and DeRose, “Memory, Visibility, and Public Space” (2003) for a discussion of makeshift shrines and posters as well as street memorials. Grann’s “The Heartbreaking Stories” (2011) provides a journalistic account of those searching for loved ones and the methods used. Saltz’s “Missing-Persons Posters” (2011) also provides images of makeshift posters and photographs used to locate individuals missing following the attacks.



remains attuned to the dynamics of her work, however, through the variety of photographic techniques she deploys, and via her use of a subversive narrator in the book.

## HOMELAND

Through a series of interjections, an unidentified first-person narrator guides the viewer through each of the three sections of *Homeland*. “Prepare” captures moments of domestic training and role-play, framed through impending threats such as a nuclear attack; “Believe” contrasts the impact of religion and super-churches with the effects of militarization; “Defend” examines military mobilization through domestic spaces. Each of these sections feature images that can be considered as vernacular: the shots are not posed and feature subjects who are members of the public in a range of settings that would normally be considered everyday. What Berman’s collection highlights is the way that such spaces have been co-opted through militarization and the subsequent impact on the population. The use of the vernacular lends *Homeland* a personability that is also reflected in the essays that accompany each section, written in the first-person. The use of that perspective suggests the artist is addressing the reader directly, declaring “if we want our police to go head-to-head with Al Qaeda operatives, I want to be sure they have all they need to get the guys dead, and to do it now” and “I saw a man sitting on a park bench. He had a long dark beard. He wasn’t wearing a shirt. I didn’t know if he was homeless or an extremist” (Berman). However, the collection ends with an essay that is clearly attributed to Berman, destabilizing the assumptions that artist and narrator share identities. Titled “Homeland”, Berman states that the narrator is “a fictional creation drawn from real life conversations I’ve had with people I photographed or spoke with, details of scenes I witnessed, news reports and on a few occasions, my own musings” (Berman). Therefore, Berman provides a final contextualization that invites an exploration of divergent and conflicting understandings of the images and their cultural context.

However, she does admit that the narration may comprise some of her individual and contradictory beliefs, admitting that whilst she “abhor[s] the idea of racial profiling”, she “once found myself looking suspiciously at an Arab man . . . on a park bench near my home” (Berman). By showing that her “feelings and fears could take me in any direction”, Berman highlights the process through which “buy[ing] into something” can create “a certainty that can be quite consuming” (Berman). Through her own experience, Berman creates empathy for how individuals can be caught up in nationalist discourse, and that whilst “the narrator will seem over the top and not to be believed”, she “urge[s] the reader to consider a different interpretation” (Berman). Thus, Berman highlights how such discourse can play on the fears of the public and how nationalist rhetoric can in fact, consume the public of the viewer and those her images capture. Drawing attention to how feelings and fears can be harnessed by political ideology, Berman indicates how fluid subject positions can actually be, including her own. Consequently, Berman contextualizes her collection through the conflict of perceptions underpinning cultural conceptions of historical events. Moreover, the shifting nature of the narrator allows readers to bear witness to the fluid ways that socio-political and cultural conditions manifested following 9/11.

Throughout the process of viewing the collection and reading the essays, the viewer, through experiencing their insistent ambiguity, is left to question the framing of the images. Individual images are stripped of wider context, explained only by short, factual captions. When read alongside the introductory essays for each section, however, it might appear that Berman is satirizing the right-wing neo-conservative point of view or inviting readers to engage with the ways that such discourse has led to the infantilization of the public. This point is explored throughout the chapter and underscored through repeated imagery of children, as well as the act of play and spaces that incorporate national spectacle. Destabilizing the narrator’s perspective reminds the viewer that the subjects of the images are real people, encouraging the viewer to reconsider how they interpret and engage with the photographs

and accompanying essays. Acknowledging such narrative consequence, therefore, through a final explanatory essay at the end of the monograph, invites a more nuanced critical engagement and asks for repeated viewing. Moreover, the slippages function as a vernacular discourse of difference that operates in opposition to the potentially singularizing, and therefore, homogenizing impact of vernacular imagery.

*Homeland* catalogues a range of imagery to chart the effects of 9/11 across the US, detailing the militarization of the domestic landscape. This militarization is represented as inextricable from notions of commodified religion, play and spectacle and from the ways in which bodies become inscribed in culture. As a result, the images recall insular populism, particularly since 9/11; ideology that has intensified following the inauguration of Donald Trump. The images feature heavily nationalist iconography such as US flags that are embedded in the everyday of the photographs. In the monograph's first section, "Prepare", Berman highlights how the insular populism of the United States is manifest, through the claim to a danger external to the nation that threatens to penetrate its borders. The call to prepare of the section's heading—along with the book's proceeding sections, "Believe" and "Defend"—borders on an imperative, one that interpellates the viewer through its command. Therefore, the reader is being asked to prepare themselves for the images that follow, whilst documenting the ways that the public are physically preparing themselves for potential attacks against the nation. The need to protect one's self and one's community is documented through the book's section, alongside an essay where the narrator describes owning a "white pail just like the one used by 9-11 rescue heroes during those dark days" (Berman). The narrator's statement highlights, through a process of analogical memory, the sense of shared community and identity that has supposedly been fostered since 9/11. Moreover, the significance ascribed to the white pail illustrates how assemblages of meaning can be attached to specific objects or things. The pail works to exemplify both the epitome of the everyday, and its banality, in addition to how those qualities become heavily loaded with meaning. Berman uses her images

as a way to excavate that meaning and subvert the wider meaning that her photographs might engender.

The narrator goes on to discuss “learning how to be safe” through activities such as ordering anti-radiation meds, as seen in accompanying images such as “Potassium iodine distribution” (2002) [Figure 1]. The photograph features a family as they leave a pick-up site used for dispensing free Potassium iodine pills in case of a nuclear attack. The site looks particularly mundane—highlighting the vernacularity of the scene—with a simple black and white sign that is reminiscent of voting stations, and thus the safety of a US democracy, marking out the area. Lush greens and blues of the shrubbery, trees, and sky again create a contrast between background and foreground, the steps and walls of the building made up of pale concrete. The rich saturation of the image and the stereotypically suburban landscape are juxtaposed with the insidious context of the photograph, therefore rendering the image as remarkable because of its unremarkability. In the background, a building can be seen that appears to be a large residential dwelling, although a sign hidden behind the bushes suggests the site has some other commercial purpose. That the space has been reconfigured as a dispensary of anti-radiation medication shows the way that the home, a symbol of the domestic sphere, has been penetrated by the notion that the nation is under threat.<sup>15</sup> The placement of the image, landscape over a double page, lends the scene a sense of pervasiveness as the shot feels panoramic. The wall that is framed at the bottom right of the image lines up almost perfectly with the stairs that the family walks down, giving the impression of the wall being cut away to reveal what is behind. The suburban landscape that the photograph captures, then, is what lies behind the nation’s walls. That the family descend the stairs toward the wall suggests a literal movement away from the core of the nation and towards its periphery, thus

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<sup>15</sup> Berman’s imagery recalls the history of utilizing the home front as a way to mobilize against outside threats, thereby highlighting how the motif appears cyclically through US history. Propaganda posters were used in the US during World War II to create unity as a means to not only mobilize but to warn “citizens about the dangers on the home front”. See James Rodger Alexander, “The Art of Making War” (1992). See also Gregory, *Posters of World War II* (1993) and Bredhoff, *Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II* (1994).

away from the normativity encapsulated by the nation, and suggesting that the bodies of the photograph's focus become queered through the fear of a nuclear attack.

Whilst the adults in the image appear serious, or even bored by the banality of the scene, the children look particularly playful. One of the boys uses the sloping grass rather than the stairs, while both of them are occupied by something off-camera. One of them points out toward the edge of the frame, appearing to indicate something remarkable yet unseen to the camera. The image sets up a tension between the sombre concern of the adults and the curiosity of the children, creating an unsettling distinction between the two. The sinister context of what is contained by the image suggests that what cannot be seen is therefore threatening. Berman, as such, plays with perception and visibility, to create a sense of threat, thereby replicating the conditions of the nation's imaginary. Those that cannot be seen, or quantified, are deemed to be threatening to the security of the nation. However, the family, are shown to be moving away from the domestic space of the image's centre, suggesting that the danger to the country may actually be coming from within its borders.

The normality of the image indicates a public complacency towards the ways that the nation is being reconfigured in response to 9/11. Berman's photograph demonstrates, through the scene's setting and the responses of the subjects, how the act of picking up anti-radiation meds is normalized, occupying the space of the everyday. The scene would be almost indistinguishable from a family who were picking up a regular prescription, in fact the woman carries the bag almost as if it were. However, Berman's framing demonstrates the insidious nature of the way that threats against the nation are conceptualized, and how that manifests within the country's borders. The adults appear to be oblivious to what is happening around them, whilst the children are both gesturing outward, highlighting how the figure of the child is able to inhabit an alternative viewpoint, undermining the complacency that the adults are depicted as having in the image. Moreover, as threats to the nation are often perceived as

threats to the future, that is, “our children’s future”, it becomes an ironic strategy that Berman features young boys in the image who are able to perceive occurrences around them.

The notion of play as a way to uncover the ways that militarization has impacted on the domestic space of the US is something that recurs throughout Berman’s collection. “Prepare” also features simulations where local communities and veterans engage in the act of role-play, mimicking people that are caught up, or perpetrating, terrorist attacks. Such events are branded as “Islamic” terrorist attacks, highlighting how the conceptualization of terrorism is conflated with Islam. As part of the simulations, mock towns are created, described as “fabricated Iraq” and featuring buildings such as “freedom schools”. The definition of such sites as Iraqi spaces further equates the country with a terrorist state, whilst the use of “freedom schools” implies that terrorist activities form part of Iraqi children’s education, under the guise of freedom. Furthermore, the use of the word freedom subverts the recognizable idiom of the United States, reconfiguring it into a notion that is oppositional to the civilized values of the country. With terrorism purportedly being taught as part of school lessons in Iraq, the photograph articulates how the country supposedly militarizes its children.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, under the guise of the reappropriated tenets of a US nationalism, these depictions articulate an opposition to the “true” qualities of freedom that the United States is seen to engender. The training scenarios work to cast the terrorist enemy as the “perversely racialized other”, in instances whereby US citizens take on that role. Consequently, those taking part in the simulations exemplify how non-queer bodies, as Puar’s posits, operate in the process of “disciplining and normalizing subjects away from these [queer] bodies” in order to “signal and enforce mandatory terms of patriotism” (“Mapping US Homonormativities” 67-8). As the volunteers play both roles of victim and (Arab) terrorist, the role-play demonstrates the link between “the terrorist and the person to be corrected and domesticated”, occupying

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<sup>16</sup> For an examination of the bias that portrays non-Western militarized children as threat see Lorraine Macmillan “The Child Soldier in North-South Relations” (2009). For discussion of the way that militarization of Western children remains unproblematized despite the “culture of protection” that exists around them simultaneously, see MacMillan “Militarized Children and Sovereign Power” (2011).

the body of those who incorporate the domestic space and are correcting those in opposition to that space and are subject to a process of correction (“Mapping US Homonormativities” 67-8).

While Puar is not thinking directly about nationalistic photographic topographies, her work is useful in understanding the ways that queer bodies are conceptualized to strengthen hegemonic narratives. The image of “Taking cover” (2008) [Figure 2] exemplifies the process by which queer bodies are absorbed into the hegemonic majority during times of crises (in other words, the previously discussed state of exceptionalism). The image features a person of colour—a subject that becomes queered through the disavowal of its racially “perverse” body—playing the role of soldier, as he crouches down and waits with an automatic weapon. An ID badge shows the actor dressed in clothing associated with Islamic religious worship, whilst his uniform has an Iraqi badge sewn onto it. The costume that the man wears shows the way that both Iraq and Muslims are folded into a singular imaginary of what comprises a terrorist. Furthermore, the photograph exemplifies how individuals (both queer and non-queer) act to uphold nationalist rhetoric through an identification with its sites and spaces. The link between nationalism and terrorist imaginaries is illustrated by Representative John Cooksey, who is quoted as saying “If I see someone come in and he's got a diaper on his head and a fan belt around that diaper on his head, that guy needs to be pulled over and checked” (Clark Kent Ervin). As Cooksey’s quote demonstrates, the folding of terrorist imaginaries creates a homogeneity that eradicates cultural difference. Furthermore, the description of “that diaper” infantilizes the terrorist subject in a similar way to those seen in Berman’s image. Through roleplay as an act of “make believe”, its relationship to infantile citizenship negates the ability for “reflexive operation of agency and criticism” to instead form a wider identification with, or membership of, the nation-state (Berlant, “Theory of Infantile Citizenship” 398).

Berman’s images continuously highlight the slippage that occurs between US citizens that portray military personnel and those who play the role of terrorist, a concept that is

explored further in images such as “Explosion” (2008) [Figure 3], which depicts a row of men performing the role of Arab/Muslim/Terrorist as they stand yelling next to a burnt-out truck. Plumes of smoke fill the air, making the image’s background invisible, whilst the viewer is unable to see who the “terrorists” are yelling and gesturing toward. One of the men, however, holds a white rag indicating surrender. The ambiguity of the image withholds information as to who is victim or perpetrator, however the accompanying caption states the actors are “hired at \$12.87 an hour”, thereby reminding the viewer that the two are interchangeable. Consequently, participation in the events is rendered as a productively capitalist, as well as a patriotic endeavour; the activity therefore indicates those taking on the roles perform an obedient form of citizenship that upholds nationalist rhetoric. Through their participation the actors are helping maintain the security of their country and communities. By impersonating Iraqis in both civilian clothing and military gear, the actors suggest that the threat to the US is attached to every Iraqi citizen.

In capturing the impersonation and roleplay of Iraqi citizen-terrorists by mostly white men, Berman highlights how queerness is projected onto non-white bodies through the hegemony of US citizenry and state belonging. The racial imbalance of those participating in the activities, and portrayed by Berman’s images, demonstrates how power operates within the nation’s borders, as well as its consequent effects on those outside of them. Furthermore, the scenes depicted through the photographs further demonstrate the insular fear that pervades the domestic United States. Highlighting the physical and symbolic displacements that occur, the images exemplify the ways that non-queer bodies override/overwrite queer bodies. A pervasive fear and division is thereby projected from one group (US citizens) onto another (Iraqi citizens, conceptualized as “terrorist”); a process, that through Berman’s images, present the viewer with an interrogation of such divisions by demonstrating their contradictory proximity. As the viewer witnesses the participants taking on the role of military/terrorist, they are able to see how interchangeable the two positions are. Furthermore,



images such as “Taking cover” also demonstrate how bodies that are normally rendered as queer are reinscribed as part of the national imaginary during the state of exception that followed 9/11. By taking on the performance of the queer, therefore, the US citizen is given space to act out a patriotism that is simultaneously perverse and exceptional, reinforcing political rhetoric that shores up the power of white communities against those deemed as monstrous terrorists. Whilst Berman’s images could be accused of reinforcing divisions through their remediation of the simulations, Berman presents the reader with an opportunity to reconsider the contexts of the photographs, and as a result, the nationalist ideology that underpins them.

## RELIGION

What these images also work toward is a way of imagining the queer body within spaces that are deemed as non-queer, a concept that *Homeland* goes on to consider through the concept of the religiosity of the nation. Berman drives religion to the foreground in the collection’s second part, “Believe”, which features its titular opening essay accompanied by the first of two images that appear in this section titled “Woman in burqa serves peanuts” (2005) [Figure 4]. The first paragraph of the essay opens with “I live in a country uniquely blessed. I feel this when I enter my church and see our Christian flag next to our American flag” (Berman), which immediately aligns US national identity with Christianity, and is juxtaposed with the accompanying image of a solitary Muslim woman. A sense of isolation is further conveyed in the photograph by the contrast between the darkened background and the foreground that brightly lights the woman. An exterior of mountainous landscape and blue sky can be seen through some windows, further drawing out the dark space between the woman and the background. Few other people are visible in the image, lost in the shadowed middle-ground, drawing the viewer’s eye towards the woman’s body, and thereby marking it as extraordinary. Standing near the entrance of the building, the obscured signage and doors are eerily

reminiscent of the airport—a space of outsidership—a parallel compounded by the seemingly high altitude of the building. Framing the woman in such a way transposes the sense of outsidership onto her body, replicating the nationalist tension around Muslim bodies.

The placement of the image beside the opening essay, however, undermines the notion of the US as solely a Christian nation that the narrator describes: “we are all of one mind ... insisting that the sin of homosexuality and other deviations are kept from our midst” (Berman). Consequently, the binary between the two religions—and therefore, the adherence to a heteronormative imaginary over an inclusive queer one—is blurred by the inclusion of a Muslim body within the supposedly Christian space of the nation. Moreover, the Christian fundamentalism that is alluded to through the narration is also undermined by the presence of the Muslim woman. In appearing side-by-side, Berman demonstrates that Muslims can occupy spaces within the nation, forcing the viewer to reflect on both the narration and the image in conjunction.

By embedding the queer in the supposedly heteronormative framework of the US nation, Berman’s image complicates the notion that queer bodies cannot inhabit its landscape. Furthermore, the photograph highlights the political phenomenon that Judith Butler outlines, whereby “the politically induced condition of maximized precariousness” of those bodies—through state violence—means that they “often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection” (*Frames* 26). Though Butler’s argument deals specifically with populations facing war, her argument is useful to demonstrate the way that Muslims in the US are subjected to violence from within the state whilst, through inhabiting its space, simultaneously seek protection from that same nation-state. As she goes on, “to rely on the nation-state for protection *from* violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another” (Butler, *Frames* 26, original emphasis). The inherent contradiction of the queer body that appears within the domestic (heteronormative) sphere is highlighted by the Muslim woman materializing out of place within the context of the images and the wider collection.

The experience of seeing the queer body in such a space replicates how being queer in certain spaces can feel, creating the potential for a moment of empathetic identification, whilst simultaneously undermining notions of what bodies are permitted to appear in which spaces.

The second image of “Woman in burqa . . .” [Figure 5] also features a woman’s burqa-clad body dominating the foreground of the image. In the background of the megachurch’s open space, men in formal or religious clothing can be seen hugging and talking, while others walk around. The image highlights the processes of visibility that are connected with the occupation of spaces associated with the mainstream of Judeo-Christian society, through the woman’s simultaneous visibility and invisibility. Marked by her clothing and therefore her religion, a tension is created between the woman’s body and the blurred masses of the Christian super church behind her. Berman centres the Muslim woman to explore the complexity of being more visible precisely because of one’s *unviewability*, engaging with what Butler calls “the epistemological capacity to apprehend a life” that “is partially dependent on . . . being produced according to norms that qualify it as a life or, indeed, as part of life” (*Frames* 3). In other words, before the viewer can perceive the woman, they must first qualify her as apprehendable. The photograph’s placement in a section predominantly featuring images of Christian locales—indeed, the woman is photographed inside—questions how life and religion are viewed, and whether such viewability is only in relation, or opposition to, the externalized queer body. Such dissonance exemplifies the queer space of the collection, and how it challenges the viewer to fully explore the intricacies underpinning her images. Furthermore, the scene is described in the caption as a “missionary day”, recalling the imperialist histories of the country, and the legacies of subjugated queer body as part of that empire. The Muslim woman’s presence, then, acts a reminder to that history but also to the ways that empire is in a constant negotiation with its’ subjects. Dialogue between the two, then, can begin the subversive work of destabilizing the hegemony of US empire.

Elsewhere in the image, two men in close proximity have their arms around each other, one a white man in a suit, the other an Arab man dressed in a thawb. The image centres neither subject, and although the foreground is in sharper focus, the background is clear enough that the viewer is challenged to garner the picture's wider meaning and context. The woman offers peanuts to a young girl, suggestive of either servitude or a kind of cultural reaching-out, a moment that is perceivable through the queer perspective of the child, a juxtaposition that is gendered, thus inviting the viewer to examine their own cultural associations between markers such as race, religion, and gender. How the image can be read—against Islamophobic claims of misogyny, or as indicative of a childhood “innocence” allowing for a reconceptualization of boundaries between self and other—is left firmly with the viewer.<sup>17</sup> The use of the queer perspective of the child, however, presents the viewer with a destabilizing entry-point to the nation's heteronormative construction. Furthermore, it also illuminates the way that queerness is not always in opposition to that heteronormativity but is inextricably linked with it. Both the images and accompanying passages in *Homeland* utilize complex techniques, encouraged by Berman's ambiguous and contradictory aesthetic choices, that give way to a myriad of competing cultural associations that the viewer must navigate, replicating the cultural conditions the photographs represent. Whilst the collection highlights the ways that ideologies can compete with one another, Berman also demonstrates the impact of the dominant beliefs of the nation,

The hegemonic impact of Judeo-Christian religion, particularly through the lens of evangelicalism, is highlighted by the aptly-titled “Evangelism screen” (2003), which depicts shadowed figures in front of a large screen featuring the words, “Evangelism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. Through the image, Berman highlights the developments of televised evangelism as a kind of transactional commodity, suggesting its use as an ideological force in US culture.

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<sup>17</sup> The concept of “innocence” is an abstract and nebulous association which should always be treated with a level of scepticism. Given the tension of ambiguity inherent within Berman's images, the invocation of such a slippery concept should not be surprising.

The shadowed individuals are underexposed to the observer, viewable only as silhouettes. Literally over-shadowed by the spectre of Christianity, and consequently the foundational structures of the nation, the figures are reduced to the corner of the frame by the screen's magnitude and message. One subject has something raised to the air, similar to a placard, however it cannot be read. The central component of the image, then, becomes the screen and how it renders bodies as reduced and barely visible. Moreover, the idea of scale and its impact is integral, an idea that is reflected further in the images that follow of super-churches ("Congregation" [Figure 6]; "Baptism pool in pink"; "Church lobby", [2005]), that resemble sports stadiums, foreshadowing the recurring use of stadiums that appear in later sections.

The idea of the religious community is integral to how the nation is conceptualized, constructing ideals of the pure and innocent nation-state. The congregations featured are comprised of thousands of people, creating a mass of indistinguishable faces that renders the individual obsolete. The inability to view faces is another motif that is repeated throughout "Believe", disrupting the potential for an ethical identification to be formed, inviting "the temptation of total negation" of the viewer to take place in "the presence of the face" creating the conditions whereby one can "be in relation with the other face to face ... [which is] the situation of discourse" (Levinas 9). Berman uses a variety of techniques to obscure faces and make bodies indistinguishable from one another; images are underexposed ("Choir", 2005), blurred ("Worship aerobics", 2005), and captured at moments where subjects' faces have been concealed ("Boys praying in blue light" [2005]). Other images, like "Bible School Hallway" (2005) have been subjected to techniques such as overexposure and blurring that render the image ethereal, as simultaneously in and outside of time. Moreover, the images tend to be captured from an oblique perspective, further demonstrating an inability to photograph, and as such, perceive the subjects directly.

## CHILDREN

When the collection zooms in to operate on a less macro scale, the section features images of children attending religious classes, being baptized, or even explicitly “recruited”. In “Bible study” (2005) [Figure 7], Berman captures a “bible studies teacher dressed as an Army soldier in classroom” (Berman). Children are sat in rows, the room decorated with projections of camouflage and signage emblazoned with slogans such as “Basic Training”, “Who is Jesus?” and “What Do We Believe?” Their faces are pointed away from the camera, leaving only the teacher’s face visible. The reactions of the children—another faceless mass—are withheld from the viewer. The instructor, however, acts as a force through which the domestic space of the nation becomes militarized, therefore is able to look outward and over the children in a position of dominant surveillance. The majority of the children face forward, except for the bowed head of a young boy toward the back. He appears to be looking down into his lap, while next to him another boy has his hands behind his neck in a relaxed gesture or stretch. What occurs at the edge of the frame, then, is a counterpoint between a gesture of relaxation and the bowed head of the child’s peer. In this queer space, away from the image’s centre that contains the simultaneously dominant and instructive presence of the teacher, the tension of *Homeland*—the differing responses to the landscape’s militarization—is played out.

What Berman’s image suggest, then, is that an engagement with the ideas that underpin the photograph does not take place at the centre, rather it is in the periphery. Moreover, the childhood audience replicates the notion of the infantilized citizen that adheres to the codes of US national belonging and patriotism (in this case, a militarized religion) at the cost of “the meditated dispersal of critical national identifications” (Berlant, “Theory of Infantile Citizenship” 398). By denying the viewer the ability to see the children’s faces, Berman disrupts the potential for an identificatory discourse, thus creating a detachment that creates space for a critical engagement. The image therefore acknowledges the instrumentalization of children as new recruits whilst simultaneously interrupting the link between the audience and the militarized landscape that risks become naturalized. Moreover, the ambiguity of the

image highlights the contradiction of a Christian “army” that recruits children and the ideological standpoint that demonizes Islam as militarizing children (Hyndman). The use of children to articulate the infantilization of the public as well as pointing towards notions of a national innocence is further explored in *Homeland's* third and final section.

The essay that accompanies the section, “Defend”, provides a potential justification for the extreme lengths needed to protect the country, stating that “my President says that somewhere in the world, at this very minute, a terrorist is planning an attack on me”. Bringing together temporality and geography, the threat presented and fostered by US administrations (“my President says”) is ever-present and inescapable. Moreover, the potential for a contradictory critique against the narrator’s viewpoint is undermined through an implication of ignorance: “how is it my friends that so many people *still* don’t understand what we’re up against?” [my emphasis]. Consequently, to refute the idea of an over-arching and unseen threat, and contest the narrator’s implications, is to demonstrate a wilful ignorance. The images that “Defend” depicts often use the imagery of children to relate back to the essentialist qualities of understanding terrorism that the narrator conveys, pointing toward the need for a protective force. As the narrator tells the reader, “I thank God for all the boys and girls who sign up each day to fight the GWOT [Global War on Terror]” (Berman). What is tied together through this statement is how children, related to the notion of the country’s future, become part of how the nation is protected, and in addition, are part of the very essence that is being protected. The idea of the child that needs protecting not only lays claim to the nation’s future but also to the nostalgia for the innocence of the past. Consequently, the assertion of innocence projected through the child subsequently results, Kathryn Bond Stockton argues, in the queering of that child “by sideways movements that attend all children” so that such a figure leads us “to cloudiness and ghostliness surrounding children” (*The Queer Child* 3, 2). Put another way, it is those qualities of queerness that exemplify forms of national violence, an area where Berman’s collection is situated.

The ghostly quality of the child is invoked through the black and white image that accompanies the section's introductory essay. "Army strong poster" (2008) [Figure 8] features a child with a weapon, in full military apparel. The photograph acts to disorient the viewer as the dark, solid lines of the poster contrast with the surrounding bright greens and blues of the shrubbery and cloudless sky. The effect of this juxtaposition is that the horizontal poster appears aslant to the viewer, forcing the viewer to contemplate its queerness. Berman's photograph straddles an un/naturalized stance through its shock value, based in the everyday moment that reverses assumed positions of landscape and power, with the child "invading" the pastoral landscape. The arranging of the poster amongst its natural surroundings mirrors the strategic positioning of soldiers on military operations, thereby highlighting the insidious way that children are being groomed into young soldiers. Moreover, the image of the child soldier alongside the slogan "Army Strong" suggests that it is necessary to have children who are prepared to become soldiers to uphold the strength of the nation. Therefore, to function as an obedient citizen, one must align themselves with such values and be prepared to act in a patriotic manner by serving their country. The subsequent outcome of the image being bound to such values is that questioning the image of a child soldier is to oppose that patriotism, and therefore behave in a way that is considered as unpatriotic.

Consequently, the image presupposes a break from how children are normatively conceptualized, whilst expanding on the notion of young boys who play at being soldiers. As a result, the idea of play becomes bound to the notion of being a productive citizen, rendering the relatively harmless notion of childhood play obsolete in favour of a more constructive form of nationalist labour. By challenging the viewer with the sight of the US army targeting children within the country's borders, Berman ostensibly blurs the boundaries that are conjured culturally between "us" and "them". Daniel O'Gorman suggests that these divisions that are designed to "pit those who share civilizational values that the United States perceives itself to uphold—'progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom'—against those who wish to see



these values destroyed” (3). Furthermore, by blurring the distinction between different notions of Christianity as civilized and Islam as barbaric, Berman’s image questions the stability of that binary through the repeated use of images of children being militarized. Such images often feature organized community activities designed to be leisure activities for families.

Images like “Human target practice” (2006) [Figure 9], feature events such as an “All-America day with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne” in North Carolina, and show activities that are designed specifically for, or include, children. The photograph shows a soldier as he helps a young boy take aim at an indistinct figure in the background of the shot. The title suggests an activity where members of the public, including children, can take part in a demonstration that includes the opportunity to aim guns at “terrorists”. Despite the blurred appearance of the target, it appears that the figure (assumedly a dummy) is wearing a head scarf, in opposition to the shooter, a child that wears bright shorts and a t-shirt. Helped by a smiling soldier, a distinction is made between the two figures who are in the centre of the image and the blurred target that is relegated to the far-right of the shot. The framing of the two groups creates a closer proximity between the viewer and the soldier and child, thereby configuring the head-scarfed figure as a distant other and as a fantasy version of an enemy combatant. Barely able to hold the weight of the gun, the young boy is almost bent backwards as he and the soldier try to steady it so that he can take aim at the “human” target. Being given a weapon that he cannot hold highlights the surreal qualities of a young boy being taught to aim a weapon at what is intended to replicate the body of another human being. Given the way that the image draws the viewer’s eye towards the child, whose colourful clothing contrasts with the sparse woodland and camouflage around him, the subject of the image becomes the child rather than the figure in the background. Consequently, the human target is not only the “terrorist” but equally is the child himself.

Children are repeatedly seen as both participants and spectators of these events in images such as “Face Painting” (2006), “Children in riot gear”, and “Marine weapons display”

(2007). The latter features a young African-American child with his face painted in camouflage holding a gun alongside an adult with a large assault rifle. The child seems both curious and unsure, appearing to look to the older man for encouragement. "Helicopter fly by" (2006) shows a small girl on a picnic blanket as she watches military aircraft in the sky. The signs of militarization, and their close proximity to children, are deeply embedded throughout Berman's images. The relation between the two is exemplified around half-way through the collection, where two images, "Girl" and "Boy" (2008) [Figure 10] are presented side by side. Captured outside of the San Antonio Alamodome, another "Army Strong Zone" has been set up where the children have been in attendance and have received goodie bags from the event, emblazoned with the army logo, recruitment numbers, and website. Whilst the contents of the bag are not visible, the young boy looks pleased as he walks past Berman's lens. The girl seems more indifferent, looking into the distance while creating a barrier with her arm and the bag. The girl's more unreadable expression suggests a gendered difference between the overt pleasure of the boy and the more restrained response of the girl.<sup>18</sup> Equally, her off-distance stare and sombre expression could be indicative of a more stoic approach to the seemingly necessary alterations to the US landscape that require the recruitment of young children at a local community event. Again, the ambiguity of the images leaves the viewer to decide the significance of these two images presented side-by-side, a technique that isn't replicated elsewhere in Berman's book.

When considered alongside one another, the girl and boy head toward opposite ends of the frame, placed together in the book so that they diverge from one another. It is possible that the placement of Berman's images is indicative of a gendered response that acts as an antithesis to the overtly masculine and dominant strands of a militarized topography. Moreover, the centring of these two images in the middle of the collection adds a particular

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that whilst I would like to avoid reaffirming gender binaries and norms, the photograph is more indicative of the socio-cultural conditions and expectations that operate around the children.

emphasis, designed to reinforce both the all-encompassing impact of domestic militarization and its relationship to childhood and infantilization, as well as the potential for a resistance that is embodied within the feminized, or queer perspective. The repeated use of children makes a powerful point, whilst highlighting the problematic use of the “child-figure”, that is, as Lee Edelman argues, a figure that “serves to regulate political discourse—to prescribe what will *count* as political discourse—by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address” (11, original emphasis). As a result, the continued use of the child-figure creates the circumstance whereby critical judgement becomes overly reliant on the ambiguous social imaginary that is tied to “our” children’s future. Therefore, the consequence of this alignment means an attachment is created to a futurity where the production of children is necessary and is oppositional to those who do not or cannot bear children.

Consequently, Berman’s imagery seeks to undermine nationalist discourse that positions the child as necessary as part of a defensive response whilst simultaneously clings to a notion that is inherently heteronormative—that children are the future. The very use of children to ironize the US nation-state’s claims to civilization excludes a version of the country that does not conform to such an imaginary, that is, a queer one. However, there is a slippage that exists between that heteronormative imaginary that centres the child and the context of Berman’s images. By attempting to recruit children to be soldiers, the nation is no longer working to protect them. Instead, they are being reconfigured in the queer space of the soldier, whereby their futurity is terminated in service of the nation, a circumstance that I explore further in chapter two. What this slippage serves to demonstrate, however, is the manner through which queerness is continuously in flux, and positions that are presumed to be solidly heteronormative can in fact be subject to a queering. What *Homeland* highlights, then, is the occurrence of that slippage and that the oppositionality of queerness projected in wider culture may not be as distant as originally thought. That Berman’s images continuously highlight

queer spaces and invite viewers to explore what is happening to the side-of-centre shows how queerness is very much included within national discourse. The claim to “think of the children!” may point toward a supposedly universal future but given the close proximity to queerness that Berman’s photographs foster, suggests a more ironic approach to a nationalist heteronormative imaginary.

*Homeland’s* repeated focus on children highlights the ways that the heteronormative imaginary and “reproductive futurity” of the US is subject to a vulnerability, one that is encapsulated within the child-figure. The nation of Berman’s collection is repeatedly aligned with children, and therefore the concept of innocence, an ideal that is subject to an intense vulnerability. As a result, the images point towards the ways that those who are attached to a “reproductive futurism” are subject to peril. Furthermore, Berman’s collection works to satirize and undermine this notion, by pointing toward the figure of the non-normative queer, one that is either considered to not be under threat or be completely expendable because they have no future to begin with. The images therefore require extended viewing to perceive the moments of queerness that often operate at the edges of the frame. Furthermore, the militarized children operate as a stand-in for the wider population, underscoring what Berlant calls “a special form of tyranny that makes citizens like children, infantilized, passive, and overdependent on the ‘immense and tutelary power’ of the state” (*Queen* 27). Patriotism, therefore, becomes a vehicle through which people become infantile citizens, a process that Berman’s collection demonstrates begins at the very point of childhood. Her invitation, then, to “think of the children” may not be as inherently heteronormative as it first appears. Her collection starts from the point of the nation’s specifically heteronormative imaginary and captures and creates queer spaces that can begin to undermine it.

## SPACES

The transformational qualities of spaces are an idea that Berman also explores through the section “Defend”. The photograph “U.S. Army All-American Bowl” (2008) [Figure 11] depicts a San Antonio stadium that has been commandeered for a large-scale military event.<sup>19</sup> Thousands of soldiers fill the stadium seats while others march across the field. Meanwhile, in the higher parts of the stadium, members of the public—identifiable by their civilian clothing—can be seen. Digital signage surrounds the stadium, emblazoned with slogans such as “Army Strong” and “goarmy.com”. The stadium’s location, and the phrasing of the signage, geographically and linguistically situates the army with a depiction of forward-moving strength. Through the image, Berman signals the collision (and collusion) between two forces of US iconography—the military and the sports team, two culturally symbolic figures of (masculinized) patriotism. The photograph functions to blur the lines between the two, as well as the soldiers and the citizens who watch over them. Moreover, the soldiers who are seated occupy the space normally used for leisure purposes by members of the public who are in attendance of a sports game. As a result, the space of leisure becomes a site whereby the nationalism of the country can be acted out. In addition, in occupying this space, the army becomes aligned with the sports team, and its attendant celebrity status that is garnered through public engagement and fandom. The sports stadium is viewed as a kind of sacred space in US culture, that Scholes suggests “brings religion and sport together . . . which may be endowed with ethereal qualities” (360). Therefore, the military’s occupation of the stadium can be seen as a way of associating the military with the religious qualities of a sports team.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interesting parallels could be made here between this depiction of the stadium as being co-opted by the state as a symbol of unity and protection, and the way in which the New Orleans Superdome was used to contain those fleeing the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In that instance, the stadium became overcrowded; people were left without food, water, and sanitation; and untrue stories about rape and other acts of violence were perpetuated by the media. See Žižek (2009) pp.79-85. Berman is tapping into a twenty-first century visual imaginary whereby the stadium, as a US symbol (primarily of sport), is transformed into a site of national fantasy.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that whilst Scholes uses the term “ethereal” here, the religious connotations of the stadium may be better described as “numinous”.

Furthermore, by supplanting those teams with military personnel, the event—and therefore the image—creates a direct attachment between leisure enjoyment and civic duty, one that acts as a kind of state fantasy, one that Rose argues is “grounds for license and pleasure . . . [but] can just as well surface as fierce blockading protectiveness” (4).<sup>21</sup> This fantasy is tied to the previously discussed notion of play that in this sense involves a distortion of the idea of healthy play, that is, in a Winnicottian sense, a healthy engagement with one’s physical and mental environments. In this instance, through the act of role-play, the army becomes a team, and its operations a form of sporting activity, one that is designed to be both viewed and enjoyed by the public. Given how a strong community focus is driven behind football teams, the Army subsequently takes on the role of the ultimate team, uniting on a local and national scale to bolster its protection from outside threats. The notion of play is again being incorporated into the national imaginary through the ways that public spaces are utilized.

The impact and power that resides in such sites is explored further in “Marine Day” (2007) [Figure 12], an image that depicts crowds as they gather around a weapons display in Times Square. The area resonates with a diverse, cosmopolitan population, and is imbued with the cultural memory of a landscape that has directly suffered from the effects of terrorism. As a central landmark for tourists, the display of strength and firepower that is engendered by the military is designed to impress upon visitors as well as residents who gather in the locale. At the image’s forefront, a group of young children and adults are visible, positioned in the frame so that a large automatic weapon points out at them and toward the surrounding landscape. Numerous screens and billboards are visible above, however the most striking visual is an individual wearing a burqa that overlooks the scene. Framed in such a way by Berman, it appears that this masked—and clearly racially/religiously marked—individual ominously watches over Times Square, turning the space into a form of battleground. The

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<sup>21</sup> The conflation of soldier and sports team is also mirrored in other images such as “Soldiers on red carpet” (2001) which exchanges the sports team and stadium with movie stars and red carpet, resonating further with the enjoyment of leisure and patriotism.

upward-pointing gun is directed toward the billboard face through passers-by who are coded as racially indeterminate, juxtaposing the white woman behind the gun. The framing therefore creates a distinction between those who are protected by the gun and those who become the focus of it. Furthermore, by pointing toward the explicit image of the burqa, a dichotomy is created between the symbols of military firepower and Islam, as well as a symbiosis whereby the presence of weapons relies on the existence of either racially indeterminate people, or the burqa that is coded as threat.

The image is tightly framed yet densely populated: groups of people can be seen interacting with soldiers in the background, whilst a tour bus drives beneath the screens. As a result, multiple gazes and faces are visible, working to produce a diverse moment that still implicates the Islamophobic rhetoric that underpins US culture. The setting of Times Square pushes this relationship further, by suggesting that the extent of Islamophobia is able to infiltrate even the most liberal (through its multiculturalism) of spaces. In invoking a multicultural space Berman highlights the contrasting identities that comprise it, but simultaneously demonstrates the contradictory and opposing values that underpin it. Consequently, the shifting focus of the photograph thrusts the viewer into a space without one singular viewpoint whilst demonstrating the ways that hegemonic ideals can override supposedly diverse spaces. These slippages are exacerbated through the iconic status of Times Square, representative of both the heart of New York (a city that is both cosmopolitan and directly related to 9/11), and as an identificatory site of the United States.

The masculine imagery of the far left of the image marks out a division between the large number of people who crowd around the soldiers. They are mostly young or female and are clearly marked as civilians against the uniform of the soldiers. The contrast between the two suggest that the public, particularly women and children, require protection from the masculine figures of the soldiers. The screens above them show the overshadowing threat constituted by the burqa, but also another screen that shows a man in military uniform saluting.

His shadowed figure can be seen wearing a Stetson hat, reminiscent of another figure of masculinity—the cowboy. The scene exemplifies what Pérez describes as “the particular propagation of the United States as empire . . . that necessitates the margin” comprised of queer bodies, but also “the enterprises of the cowboy, ‘rogue’ soldier, and merchant marine . . . [that] may be recuperated as icons of national masculinity” (12). Moreover, the conflation between soldier and cowboy recalls portrayals of the cowboy that Jane Tompkins argues is “not one ideal among many, [but] *the* ideal” (17). The screens operate to frame the opposing spheres of the public space, the patriotic salute of the soldier against the threat of Islam that is coded through the burqa. The notion of protection is solidified further through the far-left of the image, as the lines of male soldiers create a wall or barrier, forming an internalized space that appears separate from racially marked bodies at the image’s forefront.

This separation highlights another slippage, however, as the individuals who are passing through the frame of the image are also within the nation’s borders and must also be protected from external threats. Whilst remaining marked by their difference, these individuals may be tourists or US citizens. Therefore, they are coded as a potential threat whilst simultaneously being under threat from the overarching presence of the burqa. Positioned between the two screens, this group highlights how groups that are contained within the nation’s borders can simultaneously be marginalized; a movement that renders them as queer. Being situated at the edge of the frame shows their liminality, whilst their movement through and away from the centre demonstrates their transience—a notion explored further through Elahi’s work. Moreover, the defensive capabilities of the military are shown in close proximity and in constant preparation, ready to protect the nation’s borders: a notion exemplified by the positioning of the guns at the border of the image and pointed inwards.

Berman’s image, then, clearly highlights the proximity between the military and everyday life, demonstrating its pervasiveness whilst reframing military personnel as akin to celebrities due to the spectacle of their appearance. Embedded within a central tourist



location, the soldiers become a type of attraction, similar to the surrounding skyscrapers and billboards, and as a result become viewable as an intrinsic part of the US landscape. What images like “Marine Day” and “US Army All American Bowl” demonstrate is the way that sites of leisure become reframed through the militarization of the US. Consequently, the need for a domestically invasive military presence is substantiated as necessary to protect the public from outside threats, either from the margins of the nation or externally to it. Moreover, the presence of military forces is recast through the physical spaces they inhabit so that soldiers are viewed as celebrities, the support of which is directly linked to a national patriotism.

How bodies are conceptualized within domestic spaces is integral to *Homeland*, and in particular, the presence of queer bodies in spaces attached to national imaginaries. The subsequent dissonance it creates is an idea that Elahi’s work focuses on. Locating the queer in non-queer spaces, whether that be a Muslim or a child’s body, undermines the heteronormative. However, projects such as *Tracking Transience* provide the opportunity for a sustained queering of ordinary spaces, creating the potential for establishing a queer imaginary that is either in opposition to, or imbricated with, heteronormative culture.

## TRANSCIENCE

Returning into the United States in 2002, Hasan Elahi was detained and interrogated at Detroit airport under suspicion of being involved with the attacks on the Twin Tower the previous September. Due to his prolific record-keeping, Elahi was able to leave without charge. Following his original encounter, Elahi was contacted again several times by both the FBI and Justice Departments. To avoid further complications, Elahi decided to start actively reporting his whereabouts to the FBI; eventually, in 2003, he wrote code that enabled him to use his phone and effectively transform it “into a tracking device” with the aim of gathering information with “a level of detail that [the FBI] will never have” (Elahi, “You Want”). Uploading the information online, Elahi created an archive of his continued whereabouts, adding each flight

he has been on since birth, alongside a comprehensive list of financial and communication data, and transport logs. The host website allows visitors to cross-reference the data that he has compiled with third parties, designed to emulate the experience of FBI surveillance (Elahi deliberately chose not to make the site user-friendly). In making his daily life completely transparent, and devaluing the data hoarded by intelligence agencies, Elahi suggests that he has discovered the best way to maintain privacy: to give it up.

Elahi's project represents a folding in of sites of vernacular photography and other media. Firstly, the digital archive that is created through the website is coupled with installations which cross the boundaries of documenting encounters and creating an aesthetic experience. Further, the installations themselves are often embedded into everyday spaces, such as airports, which creates an unexpected meeting of the supposedly separate spheres of banal, daily life and the creation of an artistic encounter, similar to images such as Berman's "Potassium iodine distribution". The use of digital technology (the images are usually taken by phone and embedded with other forms of data such as geographical co-ordinates) allows creation to be instantaneous, a process that is expedited further through Elahi's use of code that automatically indexes and compiles the information online. Moreover, the work highlights the ways that individual information becomes monitored and tracked by agencies, including those attached to the state. By demonstrating his trackability, Elahi's work shows the ways, as Zara Dinnen argues, that "media makes us unaware of the ways that we are co-constituted as subjects with media" (1).

Furthermore, the aesthetic qualities of the work provide the viewer with high levels of detail whilst effectively rendering Elahi as anonymous, demonstrating what Kathleen Stewart calls an "ordinary affect", or a tentative narrative and identity made "through forceful compositions of disparate and moving elements" in which "forms of power and meaning become circuits lodged in singularities" (6). *Tracking Transience* represents a form of artwork that has expanded in the digital age, capable of further reformulating categories between the

aesthetic and the journalistic, and between vernacular and formalized art. The resistance to rigid categories coupled with the project's inherent design—to expose and delegitimize hegemonic state power—demonstrates the possibility for forms of art that are queer aesthetically and politically. Furthermore, the qualities in Elahi's work exemplify his status as a queer individual, operating in opposition to the idea of both a literal and Sedgwickian closet, or the “endemic crisis” of division between queer and heteronormative cultures (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 1).

The relationship between the banal and the aesthetic is illustrated by public installations such as “Sweepback” (2009-2016) [Figure 13], which formed part of a wider piece of fifty-six videos that were displayed across monitors from Gates 1 to 28 at San Jose Mineta International Airport. Similar to Berman's image of “Muslim Woman” in *Homeland*, the work acts as a digital extension of Hasan as individual, albeit anonymised in a way that renders his visibility invisible and brings the banality of digital media into view. Two airport screens, normally reserved for gate information, display the images. The photograph of the installation featured on Hasan's website shows that the images are fragmented, and only partial objects can be seen. Each screen is comprised of seven vertical strips with a horizontal strip underneath. The images show sections of aeroplanes, airports (including the food Hasan has consumed in them), and shots captured mid-flight. The fragmentation of the installation presents an identificatory barrier between viewer and artwork, and what the artist displays must be pieced together. The viewer must play detective and assemble and interpret what is being shown.

At times, what each strip represents can be almost impossible to ascertain. One strip is just an off-white colour with light and shadow reflecting on it. Given the wider context of the screens, it can be assumed that the section is a roof or wall from inside the airport, a proposition that cannot be confirmed. The ability to track Hasan rests on guesswork and using assumptions based on the geographical context and content of his images, placing the viewer

in the position of agents of the state who conceptualize his brown body as negated queer threat. In other words, the impact of negation becomes “the loss of an abstraction [that] borrows its certainty as a loss by being imagined as a displacement” (Ahmed, *The Promise* 140, original emphasis). Consequently, the affective cultural response triggered by the artwork—of negation, of loss, of incomprehensibility—demonstrates the processes by which marginalized groups come to be recognized, and as such, become marked by those affects.

The placement of the installation at an airport gate also resonates with the imaginary of the queer terrorist, “a racialized and sexualized other” that opposes “Western norms of the civilized subject . . . becom[ing] [a] subject to be corrected” (Puar and Rai 117). Hasan’s work, in a similar way to Berman’s “Muslim woman . . .” locates the spectre of the monstrous terrorist and the attached deployment of power that seeks to control that figure, through areas of border control, where the boundaries of the nation can be penetrated by the threat of outside forces. Travellers are also able to see the work on screens that would normally display departure information, situated behind the desk of airport departure staff. Notably, however, the work was only displayed whilst gates were non-operational so were only viewable from adjacent gates, or in its entirety when all gates were closed, usually in the middle of the night when few people would be present. Access to the piece was thus controlled by the operational constraints of the airport, reinforcing the ways that hegemonic structures maintain power over how and when queerness is viewable. Rather than being able to freely access information, the viewer of the piece is instead forced to observe from an aslant position—outside of normal working hours, or from parallel gates. When seen, the artwork presents the viewer with data that is both disruptive and incoherent, reinforcing markers of queerness.

Hasan’s work thus operates as an unsettling element at the literal and symbolic borders of the country, at a point of transit. However, the disruption becomes subversive as it undermines preconceptions of how the queer body (labelled as terrorist) is culturally imagined. This subversion is furthered through the viewer’s lack of awareness of who the artist, and what

the artwork, is. By responding to the installation, the viewer interacts with images of another traveller, a shared identification that disrupts the binary between individuals who inhabit normative culture and those who are positioned outside of it. The layers of “Sweepback” actively play with the identificatory standpoints of artist and viewer, and ultimately, the investigatory nature of the work operates in an insidious manner that has the viewer carry out the labour of the state without their knowledge.

Hasan’s project takes his movements and places them into a stylized exhibit, as he makes artistic decisions about how and where the work is displayed. Its layers are in flux between Hasan capturing his everyday movements and travel, breaching the categories of documentarian and aesthetic practitioner. Further, the content of the images is exemplary of the vernacular, showing banal scenes such as waiting in departure lounges or planes taxiing along runways. The extreme ordinariness of the images seems to resist classical arrangements and aesthetics, presenting the banal everyday as high culture, located outside of normal social spaces. The airport exists as what Foucault calls a heterotopia, functioning as an umbilical cord between “here” and “there”, linked to “a sort of absolute break with traditional time” (“Of Other Spaces” 48). Those passing through do so in a space in-between, both outside of and reflecting society, submitting themselves to set rites of passage and custom (check-in, border control and customs, security and so on). The departure gate, then, exists on the threshold of this heterotopic space, demonstrating a site that operates at the limits of a society. However, the placement of Hasan’s work within this space usurps the banality normally associated with waiting for departure. “Sweepback” is comprised of coloured strips juxtaposed with the monochromatic colours of the airport, presenting the opportunity to reflect inwards to the nation through the apparatus of a screen, reorienting the outward trajectory normally associated with the physical locale. Of course, these processes may or may not occur on a conscious level, however the viewer’s awareness is not necessary for the process to take place. In fact, the stealthy nature of the installation means a subversive

queering occurs that may not ultimately be visible, a signal that the art embodies the *unremarkable* of the queer: to be unable to remark, or to have subjective agency in a heteronormative culture, and to remain unacknowledged.

## TRACES

The idea of what is unremarkable or unacknowledged is portrayed through images such as “Stay v3” (2016) [Figure 14] which shows an empty bed that has recently been slept in. Through the positions in which the duvet and pillows have been left, the viewer can bear witness to the vicissitudes of the unidentified former occupant of the bed. The bed has clearly only been used by one person, given the arrangement of the discarded items, which have been taken from each side of the bed into the middle. The four pillows have been piled onto one another where the person has slept, and a single towel has been discarded on the top of the duvet. The camera overlooks the scene, giving the viewer a vantage over the bed; the viewer observes from an elevated, and therefore more secure, position. The bed takes up the entire frame of the image, meaning that the rest of the room is not visible, and the viewer is directed to the centrality of the spectre-like presence, or trace, of the bed’s former occupant. However, a telephone and notepad are just visible to the right-hand side of the photograph, indicating the image’s location is a hotel room. The single occupant suggests isolation, while the hotel room indicates transience. Coming to the scene after-the-fact, the viewer is able to share the position of the photograph’s non/subject.

The marking of the past as present in the image is described by Barthes as “*the thing* [that] *has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of past” (76, original emphasis). Whilst the identity of the person is withheld, the smallest of details around their former presence can be apprehended. The title, “Stay v3”, is suggestive of a longing to remain, and to resist the forced transience of the photograph’s subject. Given that Hasan has captured this image, he is participating in an aesthetic act of resistance which attempts to reorient

subjectivity, albeit through the outlines of the person's body that have marked the bed with a fleeting presence. Fitting into Hasan's larger project of memorialization, these traces mark where the subject has been, revealing the absence and presence of the body. In so doing, they evoke the remembering and forgetting of the queer subject in everyday spaces. Further, that the body is a temporary resident also indicates how queers are prevented from solidly occupying spaces of home, and indeed, the homeland nation.

How the queer subject is able (or unable) to interact within the framework of the nation, and the national imaginary, is visible in other images such as "Fifth Horseman" (2016) [Figure 15]. Forming part of an installation work, the pigment print features numerous figures that are seen from a distance; the perspective again giving the viewer a higher vantage and outlook. The shadowed figures appear small, and look almost child-like, again suggesting the dual function of the nation that infantilizes its citizens, while categorizing certain groups to be threatening. Some of the figures seem to be walking together, while others are solitary. Despite these signifiers of difference, the framing of the image indicates a process of homogenization that deems each figure unidentifiable. It is through that inability to see, and therefore acknowledge, the figures that the tension of the image is constructed. Further, the landscape, washed out through the monochromatic scene, appears to be desert-like and barren. Superimposed over the photograph are seven red bars that reference the US flag: each of the bars lies over the image, invoking the sense of imprisonment. Kept behind bars, each of the subjects in the picture are trapped, defined by the way that the photograph portrays them as a threatening homogenous mass. The elevated position of the camera allows the viewer to oversee the individuals, which creates a sense of ubiquity while also invoking notions of surveillance through the print's similarity to CCTV imagery.

The artwork highlights the close link that exists between the nation and surveillance that insidiously watches over its citizens, described by Foucault as the panopticon: an increasingly institutionalized discourse of knowledge that "arranges things in such a way that

the exercise of power is not added from the outside ... but is so subtly present in them as to increase their efficiency" (*Discipline and Punish* 206). The implicit surveillance of mass culture creates categorizations that subjugate citizenries, through a process of queering that demarcates groups as dangerous, or through an overarching infantilization of the general population. The link between surveillance and queering is reflected through their attendant discourses: the former relates to objects of power and knowledge, while the latter imagines "changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, sex" (Berlant and Warner 548). Thus, a relationality intersects at what Berlant calls the deployment of "information and scientific technologies to link the abstract national to the situated local, underinformed, abjected, and idealistic citizen" ("Infantile Citizenship" 409). "Fifth Horseman" demonstrates the cyclical relationship between power structures and queerness, highlighting their related processes through a cultural form that embodies a responsive resistance. The work is situated at a position of excess and destruction spanning from the intricacies of surveillance and control and is highlighted by the title's connotations: it is simultaneously apocalyptic and demonstrative of a surplus. Further, through the creation of the work, Hasan draws attention to the operation of power relations, a function that Foucault tells us is shored up through the very production of that functionality.

The visual motif of bars is evidenced by another of Hasan's installations, titled "Prism" (2015) [Figure 16], where an entire wall is taken up by the pigment print on vinyl. In contrast to "Fifth Horseman", reminiscent of the US flag, the bars are thicker and made up of seven different colours. Rather than having a transparent quality, the borders are solid, and are made up of thousands of smaller images. Observed from a distance, as demonstrated by the artist's photograph, the individual pictures are almost indistinguishable from one another, yet the larger aerial scene that the installation depicts becomes decipherable. The grainy black and white image appears to be of an industrial complex, however the proximity of the camera makes it difficult to ascertain. The immediate contrast to which the viewer is exposed,



however, is the difference in colour between the two images, as the borders interrupt the washed-out photograph. As with “Fifth Horseman”, the presence of the bars suggests a form of containment, yet their width is also indicative of borders. The installation also appears as if two images have been spliced together, cementing the interruptive quality of the bars; however, closer inspection reveals that the original image is continuous. What the installation does exhibit is a process by which the first image becomes background reasserting the importance of the photograph’s different elements. The tension between foreground/background alerts the viewer to how levels of dominance can be reoriented, as the initial predominance of the industrial scene gives way to the installation’s borders.

The aerial vantage allows the viewer to oversee the building from the perspective of a satellite, giving them the power of ultimate surveillance. Coupled with the imposing scale of the artwork, which stretches from floor to ceiling across an entire gallery wall, this perspective invites them to reflect upon the magnitude of detail contained within the artwork. The motif of surveillance is also bolstered by the analogical relation between the title, “Prism”, and the National Security Agency (NSA) intelligence program, codenamed PRISM. Implemented in 2007, the NSA targeted encrypted internet communications, with the intention to intercept the private communications of citizens from across the United States, and the nation’s allies. Companies that were implicated in providing “back door” access included some of the world’s largest companies, such as Microsoft and Google. In this way, the viewer is able to participate in surveillance rendered at large, spying on an industrial building that is linked by long nodes of piping and communication devices. Moreover, in a reversal of roles, the viewer is invited to similarly intercept private data that has been reconfigured for public consumption. Therefore, the artwork functions to position the viewer as penetrating the state through the use of a “back door”, creating an empathetic queer experience. The installation makes the inference that the expanse of industrialization and surveillance are inextricably linked and gives the viewer the

ability to oversee this process. The artwork alludes to the power of modern-day technology, an idea bolstered by the images comprised of bars that are transposed into the installation.

The colours, which from left to right are grey, gold, aqua, magenta, orange, and purple, are particularly vivid, offering the viewer a range of colours that contrast with one another in addition to the washed-out black and white background. The coloured bars also bear a striking similarity to Pride flags, establishing a quality of queerness that is further seen through the interruptive dimension of the seven bars. That they are made up of thousands of smaller images in a mosaic also forces the reader to continuously reorient their perspective. To be able to comprehend fully the smaller images, the viewer would need to move closer to further scrutinize the image, moving from macro- to micro-detail. The photographs utilize imagery that makes up a large portion of Hasan's overarching project, including meals, toilets, and other daily activities from the artist's life.

The initial visual intensity that is established by the vivid use of colour is undermined by the banal setting of each of the shots. The inherent tension between the striking use of colour and the everyday photographic context destabilizes the initial assumption that the images hold some important purpose that qualifies their extensive surveillance, a concept that is established through the scale of the overall installation and the sheer number of smaller images that make up its borders. The purpose of day-to-day monitoring of subjects is shown to lack purpose by the installation, questioning the appropriateness of those who are monitored by the state. That Hasan chooses to use vinyl also plays with notions of the importance of record, both in the sense of surveillance by governmental organizations, and the material historically used to store data. Therefore, remembrance becomes a responsive archive, creating a site of memory within digital networks. Andrew Hoskins argues that digital memory "is embedded in and distributed through our sociotechnical practices ... which mesh the private and the public into an immediate and intensely visual and auditory present past" (92). Highlighting this movement, Hasan contrasts storage materials from a recent past with

the digital technologies that have allowed the proliferation of such monitoring into a dynamic and queer form of the everyday.

## DATA

Elsewhere in the collection, Hasan explores further the role of data in his queer vernacular. The pigment-print on canvas “Conelrad v09” (2016) [Figure 17] appears to be a singular image that has been vertically stretched and distorted. However, the lines of the photograph are comprised of thin slices of individual images that make up the whole. The appearance forces the viewer to attempt to comprehend what they are seeing by adjusting positions, moving backward and forward, so that a complete whole becomes visible. The viewer is unable to distinguish what the individual strands depict whilst being refused comprehension of the artwork as a whole. The resistance to knowledge and understanding places the viewer in a space of refused definition and in opposition to singular, or binary, categorizations. Therefore, their physical position becomes one that invites empathetic identification with the queer, outside of normative identificatory spheres. The forced operation of resistance over the viewer also replicates modes of violence that are inextricably linked to queering. This creates a shared experience for the viewer of control that is exerted over a body and is simultaneously destabilizing of subjectivity. The discomfort that the viewer inevitably feels demonstrates the affective experience that bodies kept outside or in the margins of normative frameworks encounter, and how the operations of hegemonic power and surveillance maintain their exclusionary status. Furthermore, Hasan’s piece, through its proliferation of colour and indistinguishable imagery, resists singular conceptualizations of queerness.

The lack of a clear and discernible focus in the image signifies how the queer subject is prevented from inhabiting full subjectivity, instead occupying spaces of liminality. By aligning the viewer with that experience, the work creates a productive space which attempts to (re)establish subjectivity and resists the marginalizing processes of queering. In doing so, the

piece also acknowledges that the form of subjecthood that is created will continue to be marked by queerness and cannot inhabit the fully-formed space of normativity. Further, the lines of pictorial “data” that are visible demonstrate the ways that surveillance distorts one’s viewability, highlighting the ways in which “the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (losable or injurable) are politically saturated” (Butler, *Frames* 1). These lines accumulate to present an image that is unreadable by a refusal to provide a clear-cut image. The barcode-like quality of the image also invokes the dehumanizing processes behind the collection of data that is often focused on queer bodies by the nation-state. Moreover, the serialization and cataloguing of information is also a process of queering. Despite the piece being made up of parallel lines, the resultant affective response works to highlight the circular and interlinked assemblages that connect the queer body and the processes of queering that become manifest on those bodies. By linking back to government-sanctioned operations, the artwork highlights the relationship between state control of data and the consequence for bodies that the nation seeks to regulate.

The need to organize and regulate queer bodies is addressed more directly through the deployment of what I term a *banal aesthetic of excretion*. This is evidenced through collaged prints such as “Security and Comfort” (2007) [Figure 18]. Featuring three-hundred-and-eighty-four individual images tiled across sixteen lines and twenty-four columns, the piece depicts various shots of toilets. Many feature urinals or cubicles, while some document the restroom space or exterior. Signs demonstrate how to correctly use facilities, or state “Do Not Pee on the Floor”, while others capture vandalized structures. Presenting the photographs together, the collage establishes the images as banal. The viewer initially might ask what aesthetic value could be ascribed to various scenes of pre- and/or post-excretion. That so many of the images in Hasan’s collection feature toilets highlights the lack of control the queer subject experiences, whilst demonstrating the analogical relationship between waste and loss, and the queer subject.

Building on Freud's concept of melancholia, where each "of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected" (245), the lost other is revitalized through a process of remembrance. Following Freud, Melanie Klein goes on to argue that the subject can "express his feelings and thus eases tension" (162), through the process of excretion. To establish the queer body's innocence, each individual moment must be accounted for, because any gaps in alibi can be understood as grounds for suspicion. Such absences can be filled with the prescription of monstrosity and deviance, a presumption that holds even with contrary evidence; an idea I explore further in chapter three. Moreover, the image raises questions about the artist's need to document each toilet visit, again indicating the perverse extent of surveillance. As the viewer spends more time reflecting on the artwork, the initial banality is undercut, as the difference between each tile becomes noticeable on closer inspection, revealing the opportunity to revitalize forms of remembrance.

Each of the smaller images portrays continuous variations on the overall artwork's subject matter. By viewing the variances between tiles, the observer is able to comprehend and understand each of the artist's visits to restrooms and can see how Hasan's location is constantly changing. These minor shifts undermine the conception of a singular imaginary of the queer subject whilst also drawing the viewer into the universal experience of excretion and expulsion. Recalling specific traits of postmodernism, Hasan's art and its destabilizing effects works to demonstrate how the image, and therefore the portrayal of the subject, is exposed to a sustained mediation that alters and shifts perception. This occurs, as Scott Lash puts it, until representations that "previously were integral to subjectivity come to enter into the wholly unreflexive realm of the object itself" (24). That no person is viewable in any of the image, which is made up of hundreds of smaller images, suggests that the original subject is inaccessible. The viewer can only construct an imagined interloper or stand-in to provide contextualization. The subject created by the viewer is subsequently well-travelled, and the viewer shares the experience of transience through becoming witness to the journey that has

been documented by the artwork. With no “real” subject to consider, the observer is left to reflect on the limits of bodies exposed through the traces of their absence, and the sustained documentation that charts them, demonstrating forms of social control. Transformed into data that is kept without consent, and used against the original subject’s will, “Security and Comfort” demonstrates how queer bodies are transformed into entities that can be harvested by the state for its own interests.

Again, traces of the eradicated queer subject are visible in the residual data in the images. The binary information comprising the photographs comes to represent the invisible subject, while the content of the images represents the physical trail that is left behind via excretion. The artwork’s title raises the question of who is left feeling secure by this erasure and transformation, and at whose expense. The print operates at the intersection of these tensions, enacting a form of artistic resistance that draws attention towards “implicit” processes of invisibility. Therefore, the images reflect to the viewer the operation of these movements, whilst articulating the question of who they are (in)visible to. Through documenting experiences considered extremely private, Hasan relinquishes his own comfort whilst simultaneously undermining the viewer’s. The images are captured either prior to, or proceeding, a moment that is considered transgressive: the act of excretion, which is attached to queerness through its association with what Dominique Laporte calls “the necessary outcome of socially profitable production ... the inevitable by-product of cleanliness, order, and beauty” (14). The images therefore betray the “fantasy of an elimination so complete it leaves no trace” (Laporte 13), serving as a reappropriation of what is made hidden culturally, resisting what is rendered invisible. Further, the expulsion of bodily matter draws attention towards limits that are presented in a form that is simultaneously artistic and journalistic, resisting conventions of either form. Consequently, the artwork exemplifies how queer cultural work undercuts hegemonic norms through its composition and subject-matter, providing an instance of the banal aesthetic of excretion.

Hasan's digital form demonstrates how contemporary artistic works—in particular since the explosion of digital media—create cultural modes that ascribe aesthetic value to seemingly “accessible” vernacular objects. Combining the instant vernacularism of digital forms that portray everyday objects deemed non-aesthetic or low-culture, such as bodily excretion, Hasan's work focuses on the playfulness and exploration of queer culture. Each urinal and toilet are featured so that the basin is clearly visible, either with the toilet lid raised or framed so that the urinal is captured from a front-facing angle. Although unable to directly witness the act of expulsion, “Security and Comfort” positions the viewer at the moment Hasan is either about to expel bodily fluids or has recently finished. The temporal positioning of the artwork places the observer in a risqué location, forcing them to confront the loss experienced. The image, then, places the viewer into an act of remembrance that creates an imaginative link with the lost object(s) of bodily waste and body-as-waste. Further, the experience of abjection is summoned, whereby “the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2). The abject image is reinforced by comprehending loss that belongs to another, removing the potential for a form of control over one's own subjectivity and satiating the discomfort felt by the viewer towards their own abject loss.

## IMAGINARIES

The relationship of queerness to loss is expanded in “Thousand Little Brothers” (2014) [Figure 19], another pigment print on canvas, which corresponds to “Prism” through the repeated motif of coloured bars, repurposing them on a larger scale to create one overarching piece. Much like “Security and Comfort”, the print is made up of smaller images, although this time featuring thousands that include travel locations and food, as well as toilet areas. Placing together the vernacular imagery of expulsion, travel, and sustenance, Hasan expands the banal aesthetic of excretion, incorporating ideas of transience encountered previously in images such as

“Sweepback”. Further, images of food again draw attention to activities of sustenance that indicate the existence of the queer subject. That the viewer is continuously reminded of Elahi’s need to eat, and therefore access to sustenance, renders him as a desiring subject and therefore destabilizes the loss of subjectivity that is experienced through queering. The work’s title, “Thousand Little Brothers”, exemplifies how queer experiences can be shared, yet also differ from one another. Rather than destabilize one homogenous ideal to replace it with another, Hasan’s work reveals the assemblage of difference that makes up queerness. Each image in the collection can be assigned to Hasan, yet the title indicates that the experience of the artist could just as easily be ascribed to any other citizens that are queered on the basis of characteristics such as skin colour, religion, able-bodiedness, and sexuality.

Creating a shared community through the lens of queerness, “Thousand Little Brothers” establishes the way that the queer is demarcated through a communal identification with waste, or life that is not (reproductively) labouring. Whilst the queer subject can, in some instances, reproduce it is worth noting that this form of reproduction is often aligned with notions of increased threat; in the case of the queer-categorized-as-terrorist, procreation establishes a greater number of bodies that are conceptualized as deadly to the (US) nation. As Berman’s images of mock-towns in “Iraq” demonstrate, queer children are imagined as the next generation of terrorists, whose education is built around the notion of the destruction of the United States. Simultaneously, however, the artwork compares the wasteful life with images of food, therefore creating associative links with sustenance and subjectivity. Moreover, the artwork destabilizes the symbolic attachments that relegate the queer body to matter at the limits of phenomenological experience. Through visualizing objects of sustainability, both the form and content of the artwork suspend the eradication of the queer, allowing queer subjectivity to continue. However, as evidenced by the imminent expulsion indicated by the work, that location remains firmly rooted at the limits of the social. Further, the tiles of travel-in-motion, of airports, in-flight, and of other liminal spaces, remind the viewer



of the bare essence of queer existence, only visible through the perceivable traces and vicissitudes.

The overarching motif of Hasan's work is the ability to perceive and acknowledge the flickers of queerness that are manifest on the edge of cultural consciousness. This process is exemplified through the seven-channel media installation, "Tracking Transience: The Orwell Project", which shares its name with Hasan's overall body of work. Viewers walk around a darkened room with walls comprising multiple tiled screens of different sizes. Each screen displays images of locations that Hasan has visited alongside shots of toilets and food. The photographs constantly shift and change, providing the viewer with ever-changing and random glimpses into the artist's daily life, serving as a constant remediation of Hasan's digital memory. Much like the website that hosts the entirety of the images, the viewer is unable to view images in a sequential order, refusing a coherent and singular narrative. Both the artwork and website resist the notion of linear temporality.

As with all the artworks in the project, the viewer is provided with detailed sets of information that they must piece together to try and understand. Again, the impact of the installation rests in both the space it inhabits as well as its scale. The darkened room forces the viewer to focus on the constantly shifting images, providing the only light source and manner of navigation through the artwork. Creating a room-inside-a-room, the walls enclose the viewer (almost ironically given the expansive nature of the work), creating a space that sits outside of conventional time and place. Therefore, the viewer inhabits what Halberstam calls queer space and time designated by the random and inconsequential order of the images, that operate "according to other logics of location, movement, and identification" (*In A Queer Time* 1). The surrounding darkness disables the viewer's orientation, forcing them to consider only the images in isolation from normative space and time.

In much the same way, the website hosts massive amounts of data from Hasan's daily life, creating a space of existence online, a non-physical space where one's life is visible to

any person with an unfiltered internet connection. Moreover, the data memorializes a bodily experience in a digital space outside of the sphere of normative socio-cultural considerations. Hasan's work, then, becomes a sequence of binary code stored in various nodes—taken from the outside world and converted into information that is stored on data servers and archived online. "Tracking Transience" becomes an exemplary queer form of the network; a complex of experiential figures that are "accessible only at the edge of our sensibilities", and which work in "proliferating multiplicity that at once enables and challenges our capacity to think" (Jagoda 3). Consequently, the viewer is able to participate in and engage with Hasan's digital archive, establishing a queer network that links spaces of normative culture and queer outsiders who reside at society's edges. By drawing associative links, empathetic identification can take place through a series of aesthetic interactions, situating the viewer in a constructed space mirroring experiences of isolation, disorientation, and exclusion that the queer body is orientated towards. The artwork also resists structures that minimize and potentially eradicate queer subjectivities, whilst highlighting those processes through the impact of erasure they have on certain groups, such as queers configured as terrorist.

Consequently, Hasan's work illuminates the impact following 9/11 on the homeland, whilst reorienting the viewer away from normative conceptions of what the nation is, and who occupies it. Forcing the viewer into an act of witnessing creates affective responses that are similar to the queer experience, whilst generating a space that empowers viewers to reflect on their own complicity through the way that data is mined and used against other human beings. While Berman's collection depicts scenarios that might undercut the nationalist and neo-conservative drives behind responses to 9/11, Hasan provides an opportunity to experience those effects on the queer body. That such a range of information resides in the archive about Hasan's daily activities, it may be surprising that the viewer is unable to fully garner much about *who* the artist actually is. In documenting his life extensively in response to governmental surveillance, Hasan is able to rearticulate his agency whilst maintaining

control over just how much those who view the project can actually know. Despite such open transparency, it is Hasan who ultimately remains in control of his subjectivity, reasserting queer power that resists overarching bodies of control that would seek to subjugate him.

## CONCLUSION

Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney suggest that media “play[s] an active role in shaping our understanding of the past, in ‘mediating’ between us ... and past experiences” (3). They argue that this kind of (re)mediation of memory is subject to an “oscillation between immediacy and hypermediacy, transparency and opacity” (Erll and Rigney 3): shifting dynamics that are clearly apparent in both Hasan and Berman’s work. Despite how both Berman and Hasan abstain from portraying their work as “vernacular”, the collections both document the ways that dominant cultural responses to 9/11 operate on the nation and the bodies of those who reside there. Berman’s use of religion, community, and the military highlights the inherent tensions of how nationalist imaginaries intersect with the daily experiences of certain groups in the United States. Interjecting through the use of an unreliable composite narrator, Berman challenges the viewer to simultaneously accept and doubt the veracity of claims about the nation. Therefore, a dilemma is posed to the spectator, and a dialogue is opened up around the images of *Homeland*. Rather than explicitly stating her artistic intention, or how the photographs should function, Berman presents them with little accompanying information. However, the collection does contain a narrative drive that undermines the militarization of the landscape and subsequent infantilization of the nation, charted through its three sections.

*Tracking Transience* contains even less artistic or narrative intervention, instead providing the viewer with a series of images that must be decoded. Whilst not entirely possible, the collection highlights the ways that data operates, and can be used, against individuals that are deemed to be a threat to the nation. Creating a series of images and installations that confound yet inform the viewer, Hasan’s work playfully queers the idea of screen memory that

Huyssen argues “block[s] insight into local histories” (61), by presenting an archive of information that transparently charts the artist’s day-to-day activities whilst revealing little about his personality. Moreover, Hasan is able to maintain his privacy by opening up other aspects of it. By creating a space where the viewer can interact and potentially empathize with the queer, *Tracking Transience* undermines the “attempt to rehome the national symbolic that was destabilised in the aftermath of the attacks” (Bond 84). By incorporating the experience of those who are situated outside of normative social-cultural frameworks, Hasan’s work blurs the boundaries between self and other. Leading the viewer to question the processes of marginalization, the project remediates the ahistorical bent of nationalist discourse that disallows critical understandings of 9/11 and its associated cultural conditions and acts of remembrance.

When considered as collections, *Tracking Transience* and *Homeland* provide ways to consider the cultural movement toward a queer conceptualization of domestic responses to 9/11. *Homeland*, despite an apparent lack of influence on the part of the photographer, maintains a guiding narrative through which the viewer is able to examine the diametric links between seemingly differing factors in US responses to terrorism. The collection highlights the contrasting and often hypocritical ways in which such discourses function, particularly through the glamourizing of the military and its use of children, alongside the ways that religion can function as a form of commodity. Consequently, the collection highlights xenophobic attitudes of difference that are often constructed upon critiques of Islam, the use of child soldiers and the blurring between public and military. *Tracking Transience* utilizes forceful imagery that again, whilst not directly associated with a vernacular response, uses found visuals based in the everyday to provide a resistant queer aesthetic.

The collections are simultaneously micro and macro in scale, with the images presenting a localized narrative of domestic responses to terrorism, stemming outward to interrogate the transnational links of 9/11. *Homeland* suggests a working through of potentially

problematic ideology perpetuated through the nation's dominant discourse, offering an outward gaze to overcome their limiting consequences. *Tracking Transience*, meanwhile, highlights the impact of state power on the individual, charting the erasures that occur to uphold the dominance of certain sociocultural conditions and groups. Therefore, both collections work in different ways to open dialogues around the domestic consequences of 9/11, instead of presenting a singular viewpoint that refutes critical interventions. These two responses encapsulate how September 11 highlights the function of identity—whether as individuals understood to be “American”, the ways that self comes to be imagined, or the impact of certain frames of memory. All of these can be used to understand the constructions which manifest and work to strengthen nationalist framings of the United States.

My next chapter explores identities that are often conceptualized from the side-lines (or excluded entirely) through recent war fiction, to develop a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a non/citizen of the US. Moreover, I will use these marginalized identities to investigate ways that certain texts can subvert mainstream understandings of what constitutes “America” and “American-ness”. Expanding out through a transnational lens, it is worth very briefly considering Hasan's “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad 1798-2006”. Featuring clear polycarbonate etched with a global map, Hasan uses bullets to geographically mark each occurrence of US military deployment abroad. Moreover, the installation offers an insight into the traces of transnational violence that stem from interventions by the nation over a period of time spanning two hundred years. The marks left by the bullets present a vivid indication of the extent of the country's violent history that is largely eradicated in contemporary cultural discourse and memory. Resisting such forgetting, Hasan's piece shares a similar space to the fictional texts that follow in chapter two, providing an opportunity to uncover queer narratives that resist and undermine hegemonic framings of memory that are read as heteronormative.

# CHAPTER TWO: WE COULD BE HEROES

Queering Perspectives in Contemporary Fictions of War

*"I went to the mosque  
Where the motherfuckers pray  
I kicked in the door  
And threw in a grenade"*  
- US Military Cadence

According to Donald Pease, prior to the events of 9/11, U.S. citizens lacked "the imagined presence of an internal enemy who could reinstate the dynamic structure of American exceptionalism as a collectively shared fantasy" (Pease, *New American Exceptionalism* 154). Bond posits that following the attacks, discourse and remembrance were framed in such a way that "demonstrated how the tropes of heroism, patriotism, and exceptionalism" mirrored the "political rhetoric emanating from the White House" thereby reinforcing US fantasies of state exceptionalism (14). Moving outward from the previous chapter's consideration of how such tropes became manifest in the vernacular of the domestic landscape, this chapter examines in more detail representations of the transnational impact of US imaginaries around the attacks through the military action that followed 9/11, known as the "War on Terror".<sup>22</sup> Focusing on the occupation of Iraq, I examine recent cultural remembrance of US military operations abroad, represented in war fiction written from both within and beyond the United States. By reading Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016) alongside Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) I expand on chapter one's discussion of the ways that state and citizen are conceptualized in dominant national discourse, and how such formulations become extended beyond the country's borders through military action.

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<sup>22</sup> The terms "War on Terror" and "Global War on Terror" and their abbreviations ("WoT" and "GWOt") are used interchangeably, which this chapter and the wider thesis reflects.

Considering Michael Rothberg's formulation that, following 9/11, "we need a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship" ("A Failure" 153), I argue that Scranton and Antoon's texts move away from singular and one-sided representations of US conflict creating (to varying degrees), narratives that emphasize queer lives that have remained largely unseen in war fiction and have thereby been understood as disposable. Consequently, I examine the inherent tension associated with establishing an empathetic identification with the other. I posit that exploration of these lives works to undermine the dominant narratives of queer violence that reinscribe the heteronormative framings of transcultural memory. In this chapter, my definition of queerness continues its expansive work, incorporating identifiers that include race, class, gender, sexuality and (dis)-ability. I read *War Porn* and *The Corpse Washer* via Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and Halberstam's discussion of queer failure to offer a reading of war fiction that reinstates the figure of the enemy combatant not as an inimical figure but as one worthy of empathetic identification. Further, I discuss the deployment of the multivoiced or multi-layered novel to provide what Rothberg considers to be the productive and intercultural dynamic of transcultural memory.

## STATE OF NARRATIVES

The lack of previous multivoiced war fiction about the Global War on Terror has enforced the dominant narrative of a heroic US force conquering terrorist and anti-democratic states. Early cultural representation following 9/11 tended to "sublimate contemporary anxieties about state activity . . . in stories about the failures of family members to protect one another" (Holloway 108). The inward reflection of early fiction about 9/11 subsequently gave way to consideration of the transnational impact of the attacks, and more specifically, the War on Terror. A recent cultural resurgence in fictionalized accounts of, in particular, the Iraq conflict since 2003, has sought to redress the previous erasure of human experiences of military operations conducted by the United States. By seeking to present a first-hand account of events in areas like Iraq,

texts such as Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012) and Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2015) ostensibly suggest a desire to destabilize the correlation between the ideologies of nation-state and the experience of individual soldiers.

However, by addressing only the perspective of the personal, such texts fail to fully interrogate the relationship between state, individual, and consequently, the wider extent of US imperialism manifest in contemporary conflicts overseas. Furthermore, Powers and Klay risk reaffirming the problem of texts which "try to bear witness to contemporary events" that through the dominance of US-centric narratives subsequently "vacillate . . . between large rhetorical gestures acknowledging trauma and retreat into domestic detail" (Gray 134). Additionally, for Derek Gregory, the Iraq conflict is considered to be "one of the central modalities through which the colonial present is articulated" (13), thereby replicating the conditions of US empire. As a result, narratives that focus on the perspective of individuals linked to the nation, often considering characters' relationships to US domesticity, work to substantiate the underlying imperial violence of military operations abroad. By predominantly upholding the normative values of state discourse and obedient citizenry, as explored in chapter one, texts such as Powers' and Klay's novels erase queer identity and relationalities. Critical attention to these texts has therefore tended to focus on seeking truth amongst the inexplicability (often linked to trauma) of war.<sup>23</sup> My inclusion of *War Porn* and *The Corpse Washer* deepens this archive by examining those overridden perspectives that provide a direct viewability—and thus knowability—to Iraqi people. In doing so, I establish the ways that the

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<sup>23</sup> Rodger Luckhurst (2012) suggests in his discussion of texts dealing with Iraq that the "muted" reaction may be linked to the "strikingly easy" way that 9/11 and the War on Terror were linked to "the paradigm of trauma" (721). Whilst Luckhurst suggests that "no defining literary texts" have emerged, Grace Howard (2017) responds by suggesting that Klay's text may well be "a defining text regarding the war in Iraq" (4) as it broaches "truth and storytelling" from "varied perspectives and opinions" (17). However, as I shortly discuss, Klay's collections of short stories, whilst featuring Iraqi characters, are always narrated *by and from* the view of US soldiers, as a way of "understanding the war" through a perspective that is US-centric. Further, the veteran status of writers such as Klay and Powers lends them "a special visual authority" (Anderson 1) to uncover "the actuality and consequences of battle" (3). Ty Hawkins (2014) links the notion of a traumatically lost innocence to texts such as Powers' and how they are analogous to writings of the First World War (96), indicating the cyclical nature of responses that are not only traumatic, but insular also.



dominant narrative of lost innocence and finding truth actually obfuscates representations of conflict that require an inclusivity of narrative.

Whilst Iraqi characters feature in texts like *The Yellow Birds* and *Redeployment*, they are often portrayed through the perspective of the US soldier, reinforcing a long-standing cultural attitude that only US narratives can be legitimate. Moreover, the centring of those narratives upholds cultural conditions whereby “political questions take second place to identification and maintenance of the collective” (Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America* 26). In addition, the use of representational strategies that render war as something unspeakable, or unintelligible, akin to traumatic experience, further reinforce hegemonic norms of the traumatic loss of innocence and the threat to heteronormativity, often depicted through a precarious masculinity.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, as Berlant proposes, “the public has entered a historical situation whose contours it does not know. It impresses itself upon mass consciousness as an epochal crisis, unfolding like a disaster film made up of human-interest stories and stories about institutions that have lost their way” (*Cruel Optimism*, 225). Reorienting the veteran back toward the homeland through narrative becomes a way to recover fallen soldiers whilst reinforcing state rhetoric, positioning them as exemplars of Puar’s homonational, a “dual movement in which certain homosexual constituencies have embraced U.S. nationalist agendas and have also been embraced by nationalist agendas” (*Terrorist Assemblages*, xii). Inhabiting a socially marginalized, or queered, position, the soldier is further utilized by the state to strengthen its rhetorical dominance. The veteran’s desire to be accepted back into society mirrors what Berlant terms “*cruel optimism*”, that is, “despite an awareness that the normative political sphere appears as a shrunken, broken, or distant place of activity among elites, members of the body politic return periodically to its recommitment ceremonies and scenes” (*Cruel Optimism* 227). Therefore, US war narratives often function as a mode through which those political and cultural actors recommit to normative public spheres,

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<sup>24</sup> See Peebles (2011).

evidenced through tropes such as civilization defending itself from prehistoric and barbaric cultures.

On the other hand, a growing body of fictional treatments of the conflict in Iraq, written by Iraqi writers, have emerged. However, these have been met with little to no critical or cultural attention in comparison with those by US authors.<sup>25</sup> *The Corpse Washer* is but one example of cultural memory that seeks to remediate the war from what I would call a queer perspective, drawing attention particularly to those bodies rendered marginal, terrorist, or dead by US dominance (violence and ideology). Such perspectives are integral to a transcultural understanding of the 2003 Iraq War and therefore must be considered alongside the proliferation of narratives written from, or about, US perspectives. Antoon's *The Baghdad Eucharist* (2017), for example, documents the experiences of Iraqi Christians, thus undoing normative conceptions of the country as inherently Muslim. More explicitly, texts such as Muhsin Al-Ramli's *The President's Gardens* (2017),<sup>26</sup> Hassan Blasim's short story collection *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014),<sup>27</sup> and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018),<sup>28</sup> have emphasized the body as a site of violent inscriptions, transformations and memories. Therefore, to identify cultural memories of the 2003 Iraq conflict involves a consideration of texts that embody transcultural movements across and within nations.

As US war narratives have attempted to shore up the normative nation, so too has political rhetoric and broader cultural discourse, conceptualizing the nation as renewed and "illuminated by a heavenly light, to be at the western end of the rainbow that arched over the civilized world" (Ernest Lee Tuveson 12). During the State of the Union address in 2002, discussing North Korea, Iran, and Iraq, President Bush remarked "states like these, and their

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<sup>25</sup> See Banita (2010) and Birkenstein et al (2010) for the ways that critics have focused on a US-centric perspective, even whilst purporting to represent the interests of Arabic characters.

<sup>26</sup> Originally published in the Arabic as *Had-a'iq ar-ra'ays* in 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Originally published in the collections *The Madman of Freedom Square* and *The Iraqi Christ* (2009, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Originally published in Arabic in 2013. Saadawi's text is possibly the first to gain more "mainstream" literary recognition, being shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize (for the English translation) in 2018.

terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world” (“State of the Union,” online). Following the 9/11 attacks, he suggested that this was “a new kind of evil. And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while” (Bush, “Remarks” online). Further, Barack Obama pronounced, during his Independence Day Speech of 2013, that the United States would “secure liberty and opportunity for our own children, and for future generations” (“Obama Independence Day,” online), thus aligning the crusade against evil with efforts to secure liberty and opportunity. The political rhetoric of the United States, then, becomes visible through its cultural representations, exemplifying the heroic qualities of the nation that inhabits the role of global protector.

The well-worn trope of “Western civilisation” under threat received new life in the period following 9/11.<sup>29</sup> In particular, films such as *Monsters: Dark Continent* (2014), *The Objective* (2008), and *Alien Outpost* (2014) can be read as allegories of the Iraq conflict.<sup>30</sup> Each film either replaces the threat from Iraqi citizens with an extra-terrestrial menace (*The Objective*, *Alien Outpost*), or has them occupy the same space as parallel dangers (*Monsters: Dark Continent*). The films thus draw comparisons between the two geographies as alien to the domestic (and civilized) United States. The titles’ othering language—“alien”, “monsters”, and perhaps the most racist, “dark continent”, become synonyms for Iraq and its citizens. *Alien Outpost* also evokes the on-going quality to the conflict, establishing its plot in the year 2021. Within the US imagination, genre films like this have often been screens for (cultural memories

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<sup>29</sup> Gary Hess describes in the late twentieth-century that to “avert a larger” war, the US staged conflicts in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq. This idea morphed into the concept of the “preventive war” that spawned the 2003 Iraq War with the idea of bringing in political change and thus wider global security (*Presidential Decisions* 4).

<sup>30</sup> The overtly apparent references were not missed by critics of the film. Katie Rife called *Monsters: Dark Continent* “a half-baked metaphor for the war in Iraq, where America goes to war with a (literal) alien threat” (see “The *Monsters* Sequel”). See also Leslie Felperin’s 2014 review in *The Hollywood Reporter*. Jeannette Catsoulis in *The New York Times* stated that *Alien Outpost* “jabs its finger at the Iraq War with repetitive obviousness while Frank Sheck noted the film’s “faux-documentary style reminiscent of any number of recent nonfiction films about American military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan”.

of) contemporary conflicts. For example, *Alien* (1979) and its sequels, have been considered by Michael Bibby (1999) and others as invoking the Vietnam war and its attendant cultural anxieties, especially around the effects of US imperialism.<sup>31</sup> As such, the threat from a monstrous “dark continent” is perpetually visible and presents a continuous, never-ending jeopardy. These cyclical qualities are explored through the texts I focus on in this chapter.

The reimagining of countries like Iraq and the conflicts therein are deeply tied to an exceptionalist and nationalist fantasy that is consequently heteronormative, a notion that “is, as it has always been, indispensable to . . . nationalism” (Puar, *Terrorist* 40). This leads to the Iraq war functioning, according to Alan Nadel, as “a fetish, that is, a concrete object—in this case, a concrete place—that attempts to replace the violence elsewhere [the ‘emasculating’ effect of the Twin Towers’ destruction], thereby re-masculinizing its consequences” (119). It is through this fetishization of war that Roy Scranton’s *War Porn* (2016) positions itself in order to explore the transcultural impact of the Iraq conflict. *War Porn* thus stages itself against the kind of reinforcement of masculine ties that are juxtaposed with a feminized antagonist, which can also be seen in other representations such as *The Hurt Locker* (2009). This film offers what can be understood as “a meditation on fathers on sons” (Combe and Boyle 234). Additionally, movies like Sam Mendes’ *Jarhead* (2005) provide a bridge between the two Iraq conflicts, re-orienting traditional masculinity and the intertwined relations of father and sons.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Gregory A Waller (1990) links the Vietnam-era heroic figure through figures such as *Alien* protagonist Ripley (see “Getting to Win This Time” 119). The design of the alien ship that the crew discovers is centred around “a control chair, from which juts a huge penile shaft” (Greenberg, “Reimagining the Gargoyle” 93) which points toward an overt masculinity. The film’s antagonist—the xenomorph—is what Barbara Creed notes as a “phallic” presence (see *The Monstrous Feminine* 1993). The threat of death in the film, she argues, represents a danger to masculinity, that is embodied by the figure of the “archaic mother” (Creed 28) and its monstrous obliteration of the self. Roz Kaveney (2005) notes that the second film in the series, *Aliens*, “is, in part, a film about Vietnam” (158) and contains more direct analogues to conflict through the depiction of soldiers. She also notes how films such as *Starship Troopers* (1997) demonstrate “society in which citizenship is only earned by military service” and serves to critique “American militarism and authoritarianism” (10).

<sup>32</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Eylem Atakav (2010) suggest that *The Hurt Locker* is “a film about men and masculinity” in addition to being about war. They suggest the two are interlinked and present “a crucial site for the articulation of ideas about masculinity” (Tasker and Atakav 58). The focus on men as “the figure of the traumatized, institutionalized soldier” draws on frameworks of the Vietnam War and the film depicts characters as figures that are “cinematically archetypal masculine” (Bennett and Diken, “*The Hurt Locker*” 171, 173). As previously noted Peebles (2011) discusses *Jarhead* and

The external situation demonstrates a withdrawal of heterosexual masculinity, bound up with normative conceptualizations of the domestic United States. Thus, my discussion of *War Porn* begins by untangling the ways in which the text invokes both previous conflicts and representations of them, as well as a broader investigation of the role of culture in producing, shaping, and mediating memories of war.

### “A DISTANT BRUISE, THICKENING ACROSS THE SKY”

The sleeve of Scranton’s text defines “war porn” as “videos, images, and narratives featuring graphic violence, often brought back from combat zones, viewed voyeuristically or for emotional gratification. Such media are often presented and circulated without context, though they may be used as evidence of war crimes” (Scranton). The readerly appetite to bear witness is often driven by emotional gratification, evidenced in the litany of praise that is directed at other contemporary war fiction.<sup>33</sup> Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* features quotes from reviewers who proclaim the book to “bleed [with] hard-fought truths”, “unforgiving in its depiction of the human cost of war” and “fiction that seems more real than the ‘real’ thing” (Scranton) These descriptions prescribe the “truth” and the human cost of the Iraqi conflict as what affects the book’s protagonist, Bartle, and thus US soldiers more broadly. That it seems more “real”

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masculinity, while Godfrey et al. (2012) discuss *Jarhead’s* depiction of the masculine military body. The generational quality of masculine military labour is explored across post-Cold-War representations by Godfrey in “Military, masculinity and mediated” (2009). Finally, Jenna Pitchford (2012) yokes these concepts together to discuss how these factors have impacted on the trajectory of masculinity through twentieth-century conflict using texts such as *Jarhead’s* source material.

<sup>33</sup> This idea links back to Marcus Wood’s notion of “plantation pornography” and the way that mainstream representation has the ability of “absorbing and then reconstituting the memory of slavery in damaging ways” (89). Similarly, the desire for depictions of conflict lead to stereotypes (such as the sexually overt and masculine soldier) which distort the remembrance of events. The gratification of readerly experience can turn into a form of self-congratulation that stems from the ability to acknowledge and “feel” the pain of others, whether it be soldiers or those impacted by conflict. Karen Halttunen posits a “redemptive opportunity” to view pain—based on Orthodox Christianity—that spawned a “humanitarian sensibility”, and in modern times, the “pornography of pain” as an integral part of that sensibility (303, 304). A more contemporary version of this might be the “disaster tourism” that Anna Hartnell describes when tourists visited “the storm-devastated neighborhoods” of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to experience the devastation “firsthand. . . whilst being almost entirely insulated from the human beings still suffering the ongoing economic and racial fallout” (“Katrina Tourism” 723).

ascribes deeper cultural meaning to the text, suggesting that the rhetoric that it contains serves a wider understanding of war.

Phil Klay's *Redeployment* is similarly praised as a text that "will simultaneously break your heart and give you reasons to hope" as well as being "full of the magic and wonder and terror of life" (Scranton). As a result, the narrative serves as an uplifting experience for the reader, reaffirming preconceptions of the war's centrality with the United States and war fiction's purpose as a means of entertainment. Exemplifying this position is author Nathan Englander who remarks that "as we try to understand the human cost of yet another foreign conflict, Phil Klay brings us the stories of the American combatants" (Scranton). In the praise of such novels is the implicit suggestion that the only stories necessary are those from a US perspective. Scranton's movement away from such normativity to include the viewpoints of fully-realized Iraqi characters that take up large sections of the wider narrative indicates a resistance to the reductionist logic that positions Iraqis as outside the frame of "human." The contrasting and interweaved narratives allow the reader to experience the competing viewpoints between the domestic United States and the occupied land of Iraq as envisaged by US soldiers deployed there.

Consequently, *War Porn* forms part of a recent move toward of what Jennifer Haytock calls "multivoiced novels" of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; novels that move away from US-centric narratives in order to "link soldiers' voices to those of the other and open up who matters in war to include civilians, refugees, and other noncombatants" (337). These texts work against the proliferation of traumatic narratives orientated around the "white male soldier [who] goes off to war only to come home having learned bitter lessons that he cannot share" (Haytock 336). Moreover, I would argue that the narrative multiplicity of the text is itself queer. Using the characters of Dahlia, Wilson, and Qasim, *War Porn* works to highlight the inherent tensions within representations of state violence and analyze the often-problematic constructions of US exceptionalism and its imperialist legacies. Therefore, the novel works to

highlight, if not undermine, tropes of normativity that war fiction repeatedly contains. Moreover, fitting into a larger network of queer writing that Tyler Bradway identifies as “experimental”, the novel asks that we “attend to the aesthetic object’s affective relations” that result from the text’s interwoven structure and the competing viewpoints therein (xxxi).

The character of Wilson provides a narrative that more closely adheres to common accounts of war fiction that centralize the US soldier. Positioned alongside Iraqi characters such as Othman, Wilson’s narrative undercuts the dominant viewpoint of the soldier within the contested space of Iraq, whilst simultaneously satisfying readerly curiosity for the voyeurism of war porn.

When it happened, I thought, I’d speed up to make it quicker. I wouldn’t look into the rearview at the stain of blood on the road. I’d keep my eyes straight ahead and not even from the corner would I look at the boy I’d killed. Of course I’d look. No. I’d watch the taillights of the truck in front. I wouldn’t look. Of course I’d look. I’d speed up—but would I even feel the body under the humvee’s tons? (Scranton 47)

The description provided in Wilson’s narration diminishes the commonly used trope of the traumatized hero embodied by the US soldier, instead pointing toward his complicity by seemingly running over a young Iraqi boy. However, its first-person perspective contrasts with the other characters’ perspectives in the novel, told in the third-person, thereby reaffirming the central importance of the soldier who is deployed in conflict. Moreover, the graphic nature of the description is embedded within wider, more typical, descriptions of the Iraqi landscape commonly found in war fiction. Thus, the book simultaneously upholds and disrupts readerly expectations through the use of stereotypical tropes and devices, whilst creating a narrative slippage within the description of the boy’s corpse lying in the street. The narrator cycles through variations of possibilities: slowing down, speeding up, looking, not looking, thereby denying the reader an objective narrator and highlighting the unreliability of Wilson’s description. In this short passage, then, the narration morphs between subjective realities, highlighting how accounts of war are ultimately that—subjective. As a result, Scranton’s text

subverts the emphasis placed on war fiction's representation of conflict, often written by veterans, as "more real than real".

Wilson's narrative does not remove itself from the portrayal of Iraqi citizens as dangerous, however. In the previous scene, the soldier is ordered to run over the boy who is deemed to be a threat. From his perspective, Iraqis are described in this manner, or as symbolic of destruction:

Night fell. Against the bruised and blackening sky, flames shot up from distant towers. Armored ruins lined the road in squads, charred corpses scattered in among the blasted metal. A dead Iraqi grinned where fire had burned away his face, leaving yellowed teeth in a black ring, eye sockets smears of shadowed flesh. (Scranton 48)

Through Wilson's description, the reader is able to comprehend that the physical space of Iraq is understood through violence, its "bruised and blackening sky" with road-side ruins and "charred corpses." The grotesque imagery of the deceased Iraqi suggests the horror of war; however, it is contained within the body of the other. The sinister grin that results from his skin burning away suggests a revelation of his true nature, his "yellow teeth" and "shadowed flesh" reinforcing the connotation that the Iraqi body, and subsequently the city, is one of decay and darkness.

Wilson describes Baghdad as a pre-modern city with "no running water. No electricity. No AC. No grass, no carpet, no windows, no fans", a microcosm in which everyone "wears camouflage—the others talk gobbledygook and stare" (Scranton 58). This kind of primitivist description is typical from US war fiction; however, its lack of nuance and complexity reinforces cultural discourse positioning the Middle East as the barbaric other. When read alongside the other narratives that *War Porn* provides, a less stereotypical depiction of Iraq and the wider conflict can be seen.

Day night, bombs crashed into Baghdad. You watched it on TV, you heard it on the radio, you saw it from the roof when you ventured out into the street: soldiers



and civilians, arms and legs roasting, broken by falling stone, intestines spilling into concrete; homes and barracks, walls ripped open: Baathists and Islamists, Communists and Social Democrats, grocers, tailors, construction workers, nurses, teachers all scurrying to hide in dim burrows, where they would wait to die, as many died, some slowly from disease and infection, others quick in bursts of light, thickets of tumbling steel, halos of dust, crushed by the world's greatest army. (Scranton 214)

Giving the reader an Iraqi perspective of the war, the third-person narrator in this quotation establishes a range of identities that undermine the homogenized and singular identity that Wilson transposes onto the people of Baghdad through his dehumanized and grotesque imagery. The violence is presented as all-encompassing and inescapable, and the people bear witness to its consequences around the clock and in every imaginable location. It is both physical and technological, visible through one's eyes in person and through the media. The range of people impacted is made clear through the list of individuals of various careers, religions, and political leanings. Some die instantly, while others pass more slowly from disease, all are "crushed by the world's greatest army." The exceptionalist rhetoric of the US army hinted at the end of the passage is combined with the shock and awe of the violence, a deliberate marker of the military campaigns led by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the consequences of this war are made clearer: the impact residing with civilians caught up amongst the chaos, not just soldiers. The soldiers are described in this passage without a qualifier, allowing the reader to create an empathetic identification with both Iraqi and US soldiers. This complexity is further mediated throughout *War Porn*, questioning the culpability of one's acts of violence.

## ANIMAL KINGDOMS

Scranton's text explores this idea further, alongside the dehumanization of the characters, through the use of animals and animal imagery. The use of animality alongside US state logics of war demonstrates how the soldier's experience of conflict can undermine nationalist rhetoric often seen in depictions of war. As the soldiers are often told, "Men, we're here to make

America safe, and to make the world safe for America” (Scranton 57). However, the boredom of conflict and the underlying encounter leads toward an association between humans and non-human animals. Wilson describes how, to counteract the tedium felt, his squad collect animals to fight against one another:

the scorpions were viciously territorial and fought both each other and the camel spiders, but the spiders for all their fierce appearance were comparatively irenic. . . . When we got a scorpion we fought him against camel spider after camel spider until he died in captivity or was killed by another scorpion. The winner we named Saddam. (Scranton 62)

This scene illuminates the soldiers’ desire for violence and how they create scenarios to function as outlets for that desire when it is not being fulfilled by deployment in a war zone. Additionally, the scorpions and camel spiders become metonymic for the position of the United States and Iraq. Initially understood as threatening predator, the camel spiders instead are peaceful creatures that do not seek out violence. The scorpions, however, are violent against both the spiders and other scorpions, hinting at the intrinsic violence of the United States.<sup>34</sup> The soldiers function as the US state, seeking scorpions to fight “against camel spider after camel spider” until death by captivity or by another scorpion, thus reflecting the nature of the US soldier who suffers either a social or physical death through their deployment. Ironically, the soldiers call the winner Saddam, drawing parallels with how the US occupation of Iraq replicates the dictatorship of Hussain, whilst categorizing Iraqis as irredeemably violent, highlighting how the invasion precludes a new form of oppression that subjugates the Iraqi people.

Animals are used in a similar way amongst the scenes of invasion, for example when Qasim witnesses “two dogs fighting over a pile of trash”; and that “one was smaller than the other, and sicklier too, but appeared that much more vicious” (Scranton 158). Much like the

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<sup>34</sup> Whilst it is not the scope of this chapter to explore the idea further, numerous histories of the United States, such as Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973) point to the dominant myth of US progress hinging upon violent means (5).

camel spider, the smaller and weaker dog is portrayed as the more vicious animal, aligned with the construction of Iraq as a barbaric threat to Western civilization. Watching the dogs, Qasim describes how

the dogs came apart again, the little one jumping back limping. . . . The big one leapt, going for the kill. The little one dodged left, but the big one was faster, clamping down on his neck and shaking him by the throat. Qasim picked up a rock and threw it, hitting the big dog on the flank. (Scranton 159)

Identifying with the smaller dog, who becomes a stand-in for Iraq, Qasim is impelled to intervene. Surrounded by the crumbling city, the dog fight becomes a microcosm for the wider politics that frame the conflict. Scranton demonstrates the complexities of attempting to define a dichotomy of good and evil, shown through Qasim being attacked by the smaller dog he attempts to comfort. After shaking loose from the dog's bite, Qasim "cursed wildly [as] the dog growled and barked" (Scranton 160). Through his intervention, Qasim is hurt by the dog despite giving his assistance, suggesting an unreliability of static categorizations of good/evil that are deployed in discourse around the conflict. Furthermore, the dog-configured-as-Iraq turning on Qasim indicates the way that the compromised state becomes unsustainable to its own citizens. The opacity surrounding the positions of individual actors caught up in the war is not only highlighted by Scranton but is subject to a constant repositioning. When veteran Aaron turns up at Dahlia's dinner party, he wears a shirt that has ENEMY COMBATANT printed on it, and holds "himself apart, like he wasn't sure how he'd be greeted" (Scranton 17).

Later on, Aaron becomes embroiled in an argument with one of the party-goers, Mel, who tells him that "this shit's fucked up. This shit's real. Don't you see that? Killing people for money? And then you wear that fucking t-shirt like it's all a joke. That's just *wrong*. I mean, if that's not evil, I don't know what is" (Scranton 31). The conversation quickly escalates into violence after Aaron calls Mel a "bitch" and she calls him a "Nazi":

he shouted, grabbing her wrist, “this shit” —then Xena—Mel yanking her hand away and whacking Aaron’s arm, Aaron shouting in Mel’s face and Matt leaning up going *whoa* and Xena—Xena barked, leaping snapping at Aaron who turned smooth and kicked the dog hard in the side, sending the animal rolling yelping and Mel surged, hitting Aaron in the neck. (Scranton 32)

As such, redirected anger becomes central in this scene. The dog, Xena, becomes the outlet for Aaron’s violence, a literal bitch that stands in for Mel, who represents the political anger that is redirected onto veterans. Mel’s girlfriend, Rachel, reminds her that “you might as well have just called him a baby killer. We don’t *do* that anymore. You know how messed up your dad is” (Scranton 34). As a result, an implication is made that Mel’s father is also a veteran, thereby linking back through histories of conflict, such as Vietnam. The relationality between veterans and citizens is flagged through Scranton’s text, suggesting that despite angry conceptualizations of veterans as “baby killers”, non-military individuals remain closely linked to military personnel, whilst the cyclical histories of US violence linger in the background. Consequently, characters’ perceptions are shown to be influenced, and undermined, by their own perspectives. Destabilizing the notion of solid boundaries between right and wrong, and the ways in which remembrance is formed and circulated, creates an inability to lay witness. The reader is also subjected to the failure to render a “true” account of war through the novel’s shifting logic, undermining the purpose of war fiction that is presented through its critical reception.

## STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

After being introduced through his initial act of aggression at the dinner party, Aaron goes on to exemplify the titular war porn. After dinner, Aaron offers to show Matt pictures he took during his rotation. Matt is hesitant at first, before deciding “it’s awful, but I think I should see it. So I know what it’s like. I should know what it’s like” (Scranton 310), exemplifying the wider and complex reactions when bearing witness to the atrocities of war. By allowing himself to see Aaron’s images, Matt believes he can feel better about implications of US violence abroad, or

at least, be relieved from a feeling of personal liability. His declaration that he “should” know indicates a moral obligation to bear witness; this exemplifies the process that Pease describes, where US citizens are obliged “to consider themselves dislocated” from the nation by 9/11 so “they might experience their return from exile in the displaced form of the spectacular unsettling of homelands in Afghanistan and Iraq” (“After 9/11” 423).<sup>35</sup> As the two men look over the images, the true impact begins to dawn on Matt: “Wait. I just . . . So . . . you *tortured* people?” (ellipses in original) to which Aaron responds, “Enhanced interrogation, technically. Whatever you want to call it, I told you, I fucking held the camera” (Scranton 312). Highlighting the supposed detachment prescribed to military personnel, Aaron disowns personal responsibility for his actions, believing himself to have not directly participated.

This sense of detachment becomes increasingly overwhelming as the breadth of violent scenes continue: “Matt clicked forward. Another dead man. He clicked forward. Another man in a stress position, head hooded, passed out and dangling. He clicked forward. Two American soldiers punching a man in the hood. He clicked forward.” (Scranton 318) The monotony of the clicking renders the continued violence of the images as almost banal, while Aaron remarks “a lot of shit we did ‘cause we were bored” (Scranton 318). As Matt becomes increasingly alarmed as he clicks from image to image, Aaron describes the use of procedures from “one of our OGA dudes from Abu G . . . . Naked Dog-Pile, Electric Wire Box, Fake Menstrual Wipe, shit like that”, highlighting the pervasiveness of US violence against brown bodies through the extent of the techniques described and the amount of images Matt and Aaron flick through. The use of techniques that are imported from Abu Ghraib undermines wider military rhetoric that torture and violence carried out at the prison were isolated incidents. Linking back to this kind of rationale, Aaron tells Matt that “a whole bunch of good soldiers who did their jobs, who were doing *what they were told*, were now getting totally fucked by the

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<sup>35</sup> Such spectacularism around the 2003 Iraq War has also been described as “the ultimate in reality television” by Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* (March 25, 2003).

system” (Scranton 314). The wider implication is that individuals were scapegoated whilst the wider administration that authorised the procedures remain unpunished, suggesting the hypocrisy of US political administrations and military when dealing with the events at Abu Ghraib, a concept that the next chapter of this thesis will go on to explore through the treatment of film and testimony from US black sites. The violence committed abroad is shown to have a lasting impact on the characters in *War Porn* as the atrocities committed overseas have particular consequences at home.

The underlying violence of US soldiers is shown to be masked in the text by predominant cultural narratives that portray them as heroes, exemplified when Aaron recounts to Matt and Dahlia how,

“one time we had this VBIED attack on the ECP, and there was this bus full of kids coming in that got caught in the blast. It was bad.”

“It must have been so hard,” said Dahlia.

“It’s just—these kids, their lives are basically fucked. They’re never gonna get out of Iraq. Their schools are shit. Their hospitals are shit. And they were coming in for medical stuff, right, like basic vaccines, and when the truck blew . . . it just . . . We lost seven. I spent the whole day in the aid station, helping the medics with triage.” (Scranton 323-324; 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> ellipses in original)

Aaron demonstrates the complicated nature of soldiers who are simultaneously demonized and held up as heroic through their actions. Furthermore, Aaron’s account invites Dahlia, Matt, and the reader to “think of the children” who are at risk, mirroring the claim to futurity explored through Berman’s vernacular photography of the domestic US in chapter one. The text suggests that reality is more ambiguous and that singular characterizations cannot be helpful. This sense of ambiguity is developed when, at the end of the novel, Aaron rapes Dahlia. The violence against Dahlia, within the domestic space of the homeland, indicates that the consequences of US violence is not just relegated to overseas, configured through the perpetration by the veteran figure of Aaron, who has carried out specific acts of violence on behalf of the state. Further, the reader is forced through an act of fictional and narrative violence, to empathise with the violence that is imposed on subjugated bodies. Dahlia, unable

to cope, is forced into her own sense of detachment, “Feeling herself rattle loose from herself, thinking: who’s this happening to—the room going out of focus, the gray fabric blurring. Thinking: who decides things. Thinking: where’s Matt, and what happened, and who is this? How? Who? What’s happening and who to, yes, no. Whose body? No. Who makes choices? No. It’s not me. Not mine. No. No.” (Scranton 333). By having control over her body revoked through a rape that is perpetrated by the veteran Aaron, Dahlia becomes aligned with the bodies of Iraqis who are subjected to violence by the US military. These are also often women of colour who are victims of sexual violence that accompanies state violence and warfare, through no fault of their own.

After leaving, Aaron takes his motorbike out onto the road, in a scene reminiscent of the frontier:

Bleeding over the bedrock, dawn spilled the land. Monument Valley was out there somewhere, where they’d shot all those old cowboy flicks, and in the south an isolate line of mountains massed white-capped and gray. To the north, the valley narrowed to a chasm, rust-colored cliffs closing in over the Colorado, then the highway climbed out of the gorge, past the turnoff to Dead Horse Point and up onto the plateau, opening to flat land. Silent where he’d left her, cut loose and curled in a wounded ball, Dahlia opened her eyes. (Scranton 334)

In Scranton’s description, the landscape represents a new day that is stained with blood, imbued with the violence of the United States’ past. The freedom of the West is invoked and the harsh geographical markers “isolate” in “a chasm” through “rust-colored cliffs” and “gorge”. As he makes his way through the landscape, moving away from the violence behind it, Aaron leaves the body of Dahlia “cut loose and curled in a wounded ball”. This sequence of events exemplifies is the metonymic quality of Dahlia’s rape, linked to the literal and symbolic rape of Iraqis, followed by Aaron’s retreat into mythic US identity and territory through his escape into a symbolically-charged Western landscape. Furthermore, the territory Aaron travels through has ultimately been a site of mass violence against other brown bodies, particularly Native Americans, meaning that the war has finally come full circle, or come home to be

domesticated. Moreover, the return of violence to the homeland mirrors the backlash against those thought to be Muslims in the United States following 9/11, further replicating what Marr Maira calls “evolving forms of U.S. expansionism that continued to use territorialized forms of domination, globally and domestically” through the confinement, enslavement, or importing for labour of brown bodies (49). Thus, contra Gray and Rothberg,<sup>36</sup> while transnational fictions (after 9/11) are needed, often the violence projected outward needs to be recontextualized and understood as part of a long US genealogy of violence. Where other texts, such as *Redeployment* make that domesticity knowable and understandable through a charting of the veteran’s return, Scranton points to the embedded US violence that permeates outwards, inwards, and across populations. The rape and its aftermath function as a form of cultural memory that invokes other memories of violence, one that undermines remembrance that adheres to a nationalist, and thereby, heteronormative framing that upholds norms of masculinity and national belonging.

## THE “REALITIES” OF WAR

In presenting a “multivoiced” view of the conflict, *War Porn* features characters who are Iraqi citizens, thereby undermining predominant representations in war fiction of Iraqi people as either enemy combatants or working for the US military. However, in exploring those characters’ perspectives, the text upholds tropes of US nationalism and masculinity. Baghdad resident Othman is shown trying to imagine the US soldiers who are bombing the city. He describes the

American pilots flying those enormous silver machines . . . like insectoid machine-men, but inside they’d be pale and blonde and say things like “Rodger” and “I need a vector on that approach.” . . . They’d walk out to their planes and high-five each

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<sup>36</sup> As previously mentioned, Gray and Rothberg respectively suggest that texts should avoid retreating into domestic detail while positing the need for international relations and extraterritorial citizenship within fiction.



other, saying “Get one fer Saddam!” and “Kiss my grits!” Then they’d put on their helmets and masks and fly over the English Channel. (Scranton 205-206)

In his formulation, Othman understands the US soldiers as technologically advanced and therefore more powerful; they take on hypermasculine qualities—heterosexual (through references to their girlfriends), patriotic, and affluent. The pale skin and blonde hair marks their difference from Othman, and in the context of the description, suggests a superiority based on racial markers. The pilots “high-five each other” and boldly declare their intention to wipe out Saddam. Moreover, their remarks to “kiss my grits”, or in other words kiss their asses, demonstrates both their disregard for the site of the bombings, Iraq, and an invitation to submit to their dominant strength and masculinity. Their exclamations, then, are driven by US socio-political rhetoric clearly demarcating Saddam Hussein as the site of threat to that patriotic nationalism.

The impact of technology is highlighted through the detachment of the soldiers, who are able to “push buttons on their control panels” so that “hundreds of bombs would fall from their machines”, indicating the increased mechanization of military combat. The pilots remain largely unseen once in their planes, flying long distances to deposit weapons before returning home without having to deal with the human consequences of their actions. They “drive to fancy restaurants in sports cars” whilst wearing “tuxedos, and eat[ing] steak and drink[ing] Johnny Walker Black” taking on the suave and masculine identity akin to Western representations of super spies such as James Bond (Scranton 205-206). Othman’s description, then, appears to go to extremes, taking on the quality of satire, and thereby forcing the reader to admit how cultural representations of US soldiers can become heightened to the point of ridicule. In doing so, the text highlights how the descriptions of combatants within war are subject to a mediation, and through Othman’s lack of critical intervention, the complicity of those who leave this hyperbole undisputed. By drawing attention to the artificiality of Othman’s

description, the text highlights the need to question and interrogate cultural representations of soldiers and conflict.

Scranton's text further demonstrates how adherence to normative values of the US is propagated, through the ways in which lines between fact and fiction—or socio-political constructions of reality and myth—can become blurred. Moreover, the text demonstrates how this slippage operates within the complex discourse of armed conflict and its attendant cultural remembrance. This blurring is exemplified when Wilson recalls one of his captains watching the notoriously racist *Black Hawk Down* “for pointers. This is tactical review” (Scranton 98). In this way, the captain exemplifies how life comes to imitate art that is imitating life. Similarly, when Othman describes the memory of kids throwing rocks at passing military, he questions the legitimacy of the recollection: “Was it in black and white, this memory, or color? Was it even a memory, something he saw on Al Jazeera or *Saving Private Ryan*, or was it something he just made up?” (Scranton 209). Furthermore, Othman uses movies to simultaneously distract from, and track the progress of, the bombings that take place around him

Five and a half hours. He had to put on a movie. He couldn't keep watching the news. . . . five and a half hours would be two, maybe three movies. Something the kids would like, maybe *Shrek*? We could watch *Shrek* again. Or, what's this, *Air Force One*? Han Solo. Very good. Han Solo and his big silver jet. (Scranton 210-211)

Film acts a way for Othman to find escapism from US violence that is ironically tied to US movies—mirroring Butler's claim previously mentioned in chapter one of the precarious body that seeks protection from the state that also enacts the threat of violence onto that same body. Moreover, Othman thinks about the range of heroic roles that Harrison Ford has played, as the president in *Air Force One* and Han Solo in *Star Wars*. That heroism, and the “big silver jet” become synonymous, then, with the United States, elucidated further through the specific choice of movie that Othman chooses to watch. By upholding the rhetoric of the United States as hero, whilst the same country bombs the city around him, Othman inadvertently enacts

homonationalist behaviours that uphold the state whilst it simultaneously renders those individuals as queer. Othman is clearly shown to be sympathetic to the invasion, describing the benefits of getting “rid of Saddam and his goatcunt sons. . . . just a few weeks of war, then the Americans will give us peace and democracy” (Scranton 209). In a striking evocation of an “ends justifying the means” mentality, Othman describes how Baghdad will eventually flourish “like flowers after the rain” (Scranton 210). Othman, then, becomes a way that Scranton demonstrates how US rhetoric comes to distort reality through the implementation of the myths of heroism and humanitarian values.

Those myths are propagated through the competing forces of media, imagination, and technology, demonstrated through Othman’s use of “the blue void of the screen” (Scranton 212). Unable to engage with the reality of the conflict around him, Othman uses the television as a literal screen that both shields him from the violence and upholds the normative rhetoric of the United States. The television’s “blue void” allows Othman to become figuratively lost, whilst reframing his ability to remember events, demonstrated by the narration’s shifting aesthetic between his attempts to remember and deciding which movie to watch. As “he fumbled with the DVD” (Scranton 212), Othman’s memory becomes more concrete, allowing him to engage more fully with his recollection;

the kids were Palestinian, and the tank was Israeli. It had been on the news. He thought of other pictures, pictures of Israeli soldiers storming Palestinian neighborhoods with M16s, Israeli-owned American attack helicopters launching rockets at Palestinian cars, Israeli-owned American fighter jets bombing Palestinian houses. (Scranton 212)

Through enacting remembrance, Othman’s experience demonstrates to the reader the blurring effects that also takes place between conflicts, as the aggressive occupation of Palestine by Israeli military forces is paralleled with the US occupation of Iraq. Moreover, the helicopters and fighter jets bought and used are sold to Israel by the United States. Consequently, Scranton uses the lens of inter-related conflict to highlight the violent impact of

US foreign policy, thereby exemplifying transcultural memory, defined by Crownshaw as travelling “across cultural boundaries or cultures” that “may correspond or dialogue over matters of memory” (“Introduction” 3). Through Othman’s memory—somewhat problematically due to his status as an Iraqi—the reader is able to see the transcultural links between Middle Eastern clashes and the points of interconnectedness with the US, which becomes its own form of multidirectional memory: the “interaction of different historical memories” which are a “productive, intercultural dynamic” (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 3). In other words, the violence is not solely located in Iraq, but is shown to be part of a wider assemblage of conflict, one that is centred around the United States.

These links are further explored through Wilson, who often describes the surroundings of Baghdad that are mixed with the influence of the US: “Men rose up behind the kids, grinning under mustaches and dragging coolers. ‘You buy, Ameriki,’ they sang out. ‘You buy Pipsi.’ They held up cans of red, white, and blue, wet with condensation, dripping ice. I could taste the sand in my throat” (Scranton 46). The impact of US intervention is conjured through the availability of products like Pepsi. The song of “You buy, Ameriki” indicates the double-play of meaning between the ability to buy a product from the United States, and as an imperative to purchase made to a US citizenry, highlighting the capitalist essentialism of the nation. The description of the cool, dripping can evokes marketing imagery used by companies like Pepsi, as well as a clear solicitation of the colours of the US flag. Wilson is unable to enjoy the refreshment, however, through the interruption of “sand in my throat”, an impact of the literal and political occupation of the Iraqi landscape. The displacement suffered by Wilson is indicated by the ability to see markers of the homeland and the subsequent disruption that is felt through the environment of Baghdad. Furthermore, the locale of the city indicates the slippages that exist between binary sites of “here” and “there”—of Iraq and the United States—suggesting an awareness that results from inhabiting the landscape, and the subsequent experience of liminality felt by the characters.

The instability of geographical characterisations is indicated further by Wilson when his convoy becomes lost. He describes how

Iraqis ambled along like it was Unter den Linden . . . it seemed we'd fallen through a rabbit hole into some alternate Baghdad, an oasis of brotherhood and peace. Then we came up on a bridge and into the burning sky. Refinery fires licked the horizon. (Scranton 84)

In his description, Walter depicts the cognitive dissonance between his actual experience of Baghdad versus the culturally perceived war zone. He labels the area as being like Unter den Linden, translated as under the linden trees, a scenic area of Berlin that saw its topography drastically altered during World War II. Again, linking between histories embodies multidirectional memory, aligning the ways that both conflicts were built around notions of global protection. Consequently, Scranton draws attention to the ways in which the memories of events often cross-reference one another and overlap. The trees in Berlin were cut down for firewood, providing an analogy to the destruction of modern-day Baghdad. This portrayal is far from universal, however, as Wilson's fall "through the rabbit hole" demonstrates. The locale, described as an "oasis of brotherhood and peace", diverges from the "burning sky" and "refinery fires" that "licked the horizon" and imagery commonly associated with Baghdad.

The rabbit hole, then, functions as a window to an Iraq that existed prior to its erosion through conflict, now encapsulated by the burning oil refineries that creates a stain on the horizon. Moreover, the contrasting image of the refineries and oasis draws attention to the underlying reasons for the conflict—to save civilization/pillage Iraq's resources—and how they compete with one another. This scene highlights the transcultural implications of US interventions in Iraq through what Tomsy calls the "international travel, perception, and valuation of traumatic memory" (49). Furthermore, the fragmented narrative of "Babylon" pushes the exploration of historical links between conflicts. Voiced by an unknown narrator, the passages frequently interrupt the intertwined stories of the domestic homeland (Dahlia), occupied Iraq (Othman), and deployed soldier (Wilson). One section notes that

Nothing is over: This is the story of a long-haired half-crazed Vietnam vet. . . . Back in the war, he was . . . hand-picked for a suicide mission to kill Hitler. Good and evil. He's a downed fighter pilot. He's red and white and blue. (Scranton 229)

Functioning to demonstrate the cyclical nature of US military operations, "Babylon" draws further parallels between the Gulf Wars, World War II, and Vietnam. The title of the narrative highlights the rhetoric and myth that operates within the state discourse of the United States, as well as the historical capital of Mesopotamia, and the metaphor for dissolution and anti-Christianity. Collapsing different historical periods, the narrator describes the "mission of vengeance" and the battle between "good and evil" to qualify (male) US soldiers: "*he's red and white and blue*" (my emphasis). The colours of the flag or again invoked by Scranton's text to reinforce the primacy of US patriotism and nationalism that operate as driving forces behind the country's political policies.

The fragmented narration of various battles and military personnel suggests that the narrator is comprised of different individuals from each of those time periods. However, each fragment offers the reader another memory and a perspective that cannot be fully accessed or comprehended. Moreover, each narrative fragment is from a US perspective, consolidating the primacy of the nation in each of these conflicts. Rather than simply suggesting the fragmented quality of the narrative is the effect of experiences of trauma that are transposed onto stories of war, I argue that Babylon indicates how numerous opposing accounts of conflict work to create opaque forms of remembrance, in a similar manner to the myth of Babylon. The fragmentation of language, and subsequent loss of concrete experience, in each of these sections recalls the ways that in the biblical story those revolting against divine authority were separated by language. The interruptive quality of the narrative clearly demarcates "Babylon" from *War Porn's* other narration. Furthermore, the loss of language experienced replicates the ways, discussed earlier in the chapter, that cultural representations following 9/11 also draw attention to the limits of language. What the form of the novel does allow the reader, though,

is the opportunity to draw comparisons between the state rhetoric that is quoted at length throughout the text, and the characters' varying experiences of the Iraq war. As a result of drawing parallels between the locales of conflict, the mediation of memory in *War Porn* works to undercut the geographical and temporal dichotomies that separate East and West.

In contrast, however, Iraqi writers often remark that the country is entangled with long histories of violence, of which the US occupation is only one dimension, an idea explored further through Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*. As novels by Iraqi authors, such as Al-Ramli's *The President's Gardens*, show, the beautiful landscapes of Iraq are commonly associated with unseen violence and insidious forms of subjugation that lies symbolically, and literally, beneath the surface. The suggestion that the US is directly and wholly responsible for the destruction of Iraq, then, reinforces a type of perverse American Exceptionalism, replicated in war fiction from a US perspective, that recasts US agency over Iraq. So, whilst it is important to uncover the transcultural implications of US operations abroad, it also remains equally important to consider the specific historical contexts that are attached to locations such as Iraq. In largely considering conflict from a US perspective, novels such as *War Porn* subsequently risk upholding exceptionalist notions of the nation as they attempt to uncover the ways that the memory of events travels between cultures, and their attendant histories. Destabilizing hegemonic narratives that sustain the oppositional structures that render the queer body violently erased suggest the need to rethink the ways that the transcultural impact of the United States and its operations abroad are considered. Furthermore, such a reconsideration needs to take place alongside narratives that highlight the queer voices of those previously subjugated. In doing so, new and productive routes can be fostered that establish queer archives of representation and resistance.

## INTERSECTIONS

Works such as Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* take the often-clichéd ways that texts from US perspectives, such as those by Scranton, Klay and Powers, interweave landscapes, history, and violence, instead reframing those intersections through the queer experience of Iraqis. Queerness in Antoon's text, I argue, manifests through the conflict that dominates the lives and bodies of the characters. Additionally, I discuss the attendant feelings of fracture and failure that manifest in both social and political ways, which I draw from Halberstam's concept of queer failure. Moreover, such texts provide a more dialogical approach that uncovers the assemblages of memory that underpin historical events such as the Iraq War, rather than portraying Iraqis simply as individuals whose perceptions have been overridden by US state discourse and heteronormative imaginaries. Following the life of Baghdad resident, Jawad, Antoon's novel charts a large portion of the protagonist's life and the impact and legacy of violence he experiences and is experienced by those close to him. Rather than reinscribe problematic tropes that reduce Iraq to a barren landscape where civilization has been eradicated, the novel explores the complex histories and relationships that centre on a country that has long been impacted by violence and death. In so doing, the work also circumvents the notion that the US is the sole perpetrator of violence against Iraq, demonstrating that history is more complicated. Therefore, the people of Iraq are afforded a sense of agency and struggle by this text that is removed by the more perverse consequences of American exceptionalism (as indicated earlier in Scranton's text) that we see in broader politics and culture. In complicating the violence experienced by the country and its people, Antoon offers readers the opportunity to explore not just the impact of US imperialism but the conditions that have fostered its contemporary manifestation. By rehumanizing Iraqis, the subtleties of violence and history are explored in a way that blurs arbitrary binaries of victim and perpetrator, as well as negotiating productive routes of literary and cultural exploration of memorialization of not just the 2003 Iraq war, but parallel and intersecting histories. These traversals between categories of queer/non-queer point towards the unreliability of such rigid



binary divisions, and uncover narratives that have previously been erased by the hegemony of cultural representation. As a result, this next section will examine Antoon's text as a way to consider Iraqi narratives that exemplify the ways in which their bodies are rendered queer through violence and the impacts and legacy of conflict.

## “THEY”

The novel frames these points of intersection through Jawad's encounters of both conflict and death. His relationship with these ideas are also related to his family, particularly the association with his father, who at the novel's beginning, is the eponymous corpse washer.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the text, Jawad battles with the wishes of his father, who intends for him to take over the family business, and his own desire to become an artist. He struggles to reconcile the acts of creation associated with art, and the acts of destruction that he witnesses around him, focused in the space of the *mghaysil*: the warehouse where his father works. As Jawad describes early in the novel, “Death's traces—its scents and memories—were present in every inch of that place. As if death were the real owner and Father merely an employee working for it and not for God, as he liked to think” (Antoon, *Corpse* 11). The role carried out by his father is inaccessible to Jawad throughout his life. Early on, he describes himself as a young boy: “I didn't know much about my father's work. All I knew was that he was a *mghassilchi*, a body-washer, but this word was obscure to me” (Antoon, *Corpse* 6). The Arabic word for body-washer appearing in italics emphasizes the estrangement felt by Jawad and establishes early on his experience as an outsider. After his father's death, Jawad becomes “sad and overwhelmed by the realization that I didn't really know my father very well” (Antoon, *Corpse* 63) and this drive for knowledge focuses the text. Often experienced through the lens of obscurity Jawad feels, the text ultimately charts how he and the other characters cope with a

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<sup>37</sup> A corpse washer, or *mghassilchi*, is responsible for conducting the religious death rites of martyrs, cleansing and shrouding the body following practiced methods.

lack of knowledge, particularly around conflict, and how they adjust to being rendered obscure by the conflict of others.

The text therefore complicates the distinction between those who are actively part of the conflict, and those who are caught up in it, whilst resisting the overarching narrative that texts from US perspectives possess; often, Iraqi characters are placed in roles such as translators (when viewed sympathetically), or terrorists (when antagonistically). Undermining the experience of war as the sole experience for Iraqis, *The Corpse Washer* portrays the impact of war in a way that is not all-encompassing, alongside the impact of the personal relationships between the characters. The violence in the novel is complex, however, and continually organizes characters around their experiences of it. As a result, the focus around death continuously preoccupies Jawad's waking and dreaming life, as the repeated dream sequences that interrupt the novel's narrative demonstrate. Very early on in the text, Jawad narrates a dream that establishes the novel's complex relationship to violence, and shifts representations of all Iraqis as perpetrators of violence:

Masked men wearing khaki uniforms and carrying machine guns rush toward us. I try to shield Reem with my right hand, but one of the men has already reached me. He hits me in the face with the stock of his machine gun . . . . I am screaming and cursing at them, but I can't hear myself. Two men force me to get down on my knees and tie wrists with a wire behind my back. One of them puts a knife to my neck; the other blindfolds me . . . . I hear only Reem's shrieks, the laughter and grunts of the men, the sound of the rain. (Antoon, *Corpse 2*)

The soldiers physically drag Jawad away from the washing bench, the site of the identity that has been chosen for him by this family, and that ties him to the city of Baghdad. Told from Jawad's perspective, who is unable to know what is happening, the reader is placed in an empathetic position with the character, immediately reorienting the perspective of fiction set in Iraq. Unable to speak, and bound by the men, Jawad cannot see what is happening, only hear the screams of his female companion, Reem, while the soldiers can be heard laughing and grunting. The implication of sexual violence is also mirrored by the position of submissive

restraint that Jawad is forced into. The inability to speak, see, or move, also indicates the ways that violence works to strip the subject of agency, dominated by individuals acting on behalf of the state. Moreover, the ties to sexual violence becomes clear, a motif that is explored repeatedly in this text, as well as in *Boys of Abu Ghraib* and *Guantánamo Diary*, which my next chapter goes on to explore. That the soldiers' affiliation remains unclear also suggests that the US is not the only nation-state responsible for subjugating Iraqi citizens, and as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the violence within Iraq stems from multiple sources. Consequently, the novel decentres the primacy of the US, and its violence, within Iraq. The sudden and visceral eruption of such violence, early on in the text, demonstrates to the reader how quickly such outbursts can take place. Furthermore, showing Iraqi citizens caught up in such violence, demonstrates the myriad of subject positions that those Iraqi citizens possess, resisting the conceptualization of Iraqis as homogenous perpetrators.

Jawad's dream is mirrored later on in *The Corpse Washer* by a "real-life" encounter, where Jawad and his assistant Hammoudy attempt to transport a body to the city of Najaf. Seeing their vehicle, a nearby platoon stops "except for one Humvee that kept approaching" (Antoon, *Corpse* 66). As the soldier on top of the vehicle points a gun at them, the men are forced onto their knees and their car is examined. Eventually, "the last vehicle in the convoy drove by ... leaving a storm of dust behind" (Antoon, *Corpse* 68). The presence of the US military is likened to a storm, alluding to the destructive disruption that they cause to Iraq. Moreover, despite travelling in a small car with a body, Jawad and Hammoudy are the ones who are deemed to be a threat, one worthy of a Humvee with a gun pointing from it. The irony of the situation is further remarked upon by Hammoudy, who suggests that it "looks like these liberators want to humiliate us" (Antoon, *Corpse* 68). Such depictions of the US contrast with the humanitarian status that is used to describe the occupation. Furthermore, the treatment of Jawad and Hammoudy demonstrates the way that power operates, as citizens are moulded into subjects of the US state through its occupation, rendered subservient to its dominance.

The role of power is further alluded to by Jawad, who describes how “the Americans made no effort to protect public institutions since even occupiers were required to do so by international conventions” (Antoon, *Corpse* 71). Consequently, the US are reframed as an occupying force who have no interest in preventing Baghdad’s destruction. Moreover, their presence further contributes towards the country’s devastation through their ambiguous attitudes toward protecting the nation. As a result, the war is shown to be threaded through the sphere of public life through the subsequent destruction of public buildings.

The violence of the US military against the public is further visible in the destruction of the arts academy where Jawad studied prior to the war. Following a US airstrike, Jawad goes down to the building and talks to Abu Samir, the building’s doorman:

“Al-Sahhaf [the former Iraqi information minister under Saddam Hussain’s regime] came here to broadcast a live speech . . . An hour later the building was bombed”  
“And nothing happened to the other buildings?”  
“No, but they torched the library and all the air conditioners were stolen”  
“Who stole them, who torched the library?”  
“I really don’t know, son. No one does.” (Antoon, *Corpse* 72-73)

The destruction of the building is not simply attributed to the United States in the text but is viewed in tandem with other forms of violence that stem from their military interventions. The targeting of buildings by the US is shown to be ruthless, constructing educational institutions as legitimate military targets. However, in the looting and arson that follow, it becomes more ambiguous as to who is responsible. Instead, Abu Samir resorts to using “they” as a way to describe a group of “others” that subsequently wreak havoc amongst the ruins of Baghdad. The indeterminate quality of “they” is thematized throughout the text and appears to be in a continuous state of flux. In another scene, Hammoudy’s father, Sayyid al-Fartusi, describes how “they are booby-trapping of corpses now”, catching Jawad’s attention, leading him to wonder “who ‘they’ were for him.” Remembering that Sayyid buried “everyone irrespective of their sect or religion,” Jawad decides that “Instead of asking him about ‘they,’ I wanted instead to know how any why” (Antoon, *Corpse* 116). Rather than simply look at the problem of

sectarian violence, then, Jawad attempts to find out about individual characters' motivations. By gaining information, Jawad attempts to navigate the complexity of the issues of violence and focus on the microcosms of the impact of sectarianism. Therefore, information becomes a way for Jawad to handle obscurity. The text also highlights the way that representations of Iraq differ from the daily interactions of its inhabitants, as the characters are not defined by, or reduced to, violence. Therefore, the representation of Iraq as violent becomes linked to, but not solely because of, its occupation by the United States.

The impact of competing forces to control Baghdad following the intervention of the US can be seen when Jawad watches the formation of a governing council on TV. He describes seeing "a hodgepodge of names supposedly representing the spectrum of Iraqi society, but we never heard of most of them. . . . each name was preceded by its sect: Sunni, Shia, Christian . . . We were not accustomed to such a thing" (Antoon, *Corpse* 91-92; 2<sup>nd</sup> ellipsis in original). Jawad indicates how those that are chosen by the US to govern the country are completely unknown figures to the inhabitants of Iraq, given power by an occupying nation without democratic process. Countering the US narrative of installing democracy following the removal of Saddam Hussein, Jawad's account demonstrates how positions of power are given to unknown figures who do not represent his experience or that of his acquaintances. The influence of the United States under the watch of diplomat Paul Bremer purports a new empowerment for the Iraqi nation, however the text implies another form of occupation by the United States that removes power from the ordinary public. The name of each person being "preceded by its sect" also indicates how the presence of the US maintains and fuels the fragmentation their presence caused in the first place.

The increase in sectarianism and its associated violence is frequently reflected through Jawad's attempts to navigate, and at times, circumvent it. In describing the ongoing clashes to his uncle, Jawad describes them as "an earthquake which had changed everything". Going further, he says "In the past there were streams between Sunnis and Shiites . . . . Now, after

the earthquake, the earth had all these fissures, and the streams had become rivers. The rivers became torrents filled with blood, and whoever tried to cross, drowned” (Antoon, *Corpse* 149). The peaceful description of streams that ran parallel turns into “torrents filled with blood” that eradicate those that try to bridge the gap. The epic quality of Jawad’s description shows the irrevocable damage that has been caused to Iraq and how the country’s past has been effectively rewritten by the conflict: “Old myths returned to cover the sun with their darkness and crush it into pieces. Each sect or group had a sun, moon, and world of its own” (Antoon, *Corpse* 149). The apocalyptic quality of Jawad’s description is clear from the destruction of the sun and its accompanying light, replaced by different versions of the same thing that counter and contradict one another. The division between each standpoint is solidified by the concrete walls that “rose to seal the tragedy” (Antoon, *Corpse* 149). Even Jawad’s attempts to break down those walls ends in failure.

## ENCOUNTERING FAILURE

Jawad encounters a man, a taxi driver, who brings a corpse to the mghaysil. He tells Jawad how he picked up another man, a Shiite, who is killed after a US military helicopter destroys the cab with his passenger still inside. Pulling the charred body from the taxi, the man is taken to hospital while the corpse is left in the street. As he recounts to Jawad, “I called the police and told them a man’s corpse was out there on the street, that they had to pick it up before the dogs ate it” (Antoon, *Corpse* 146). The man’s description highlights how citizens become caught up in the conflict and are left without support from the state. The police, lacking personnel, are unable to send someone to pick up the body. As a consequence of the US occupation, the ability of the country’s infrastructure to operate becomes impossible, resulting in its occupants becoming inoperable, resulting in the dehumanization of its occupants. As the man remarks, “If we, the living, are worthless, then what are the dead worth?” The political situation reduces citizens to non-political actors who are unable to enjoy the privileges of being

members of a state. That the regulatory bodies of the country have ceased to function indicates that Iraq as a state has also become functionless.

Returning to the scene, the man discovers the body still out on the street and decides to move it himself:

I just couldn't stand it, so we put him in the trunk and took him to the morgue. . . . This man was in the morgue for two months and no one asked about him. Isn't it a sin not to bury him? (Antoon, *Corpse* 146).

Despite the differences between the two men, Jawad's visitor establishes how Iraqi people are able to interact without difference being an issue. Furthermore, the civic duty that the man feels results in him taking over the role of the state, looking after fellow citizens, thereby responding to the inoperability of the Iraqi state following US intervention. The impact of the occupation, and its violence, becomes centred around the man and his taxi, further evidenced through the literal rupture that occurs when the US military attack him unprovoked. Furthermore, the use of missiles against him demonstrates the disproportionate violence utilised by the US against Iraqi citizens. Reporting the incident, the man tells Jawad that "no one explained why the Americans had fired at the car" (Antoon, *Corpse* 146). Iraqis attempt to articulate their agency; however, the occupying force prevents them from doing this successfully. As a result, the structures of power that render the state inconsequential and impotent subsequently remove the protections that would normally be afforded to its citizens. That acts of violence by the US military remain unexplained shows that those who actively participate in the conflict are unwilling to justify their actions. Furthermore, the gratuitous violence of the US military highlighted in the text also results in a splitting of Baghdad society, leading to sectarian violence filling the vacuum that remains. The navigation across those divisions is another way that Jawad attempts to reorient himself through the conflict.

Jawad's attempts to recount the story to his mother and Um Ghayda' "in the hopes of changing their opinions and judgements about 'them,' the Sunnis" as a way to resist the

fragmentation of Iraqi society. However, his attempts to do so are often rendered as “useless” (Antoon, *Corpse* 146). The apparent futility of his actions coupled with the intensity of aggravation between sects almost becomes too much for Jawad as he describes “a point where I hated everyone equally . . . . Shiite, Sunni, Christian, Jew, Mandaean, Yazidi, infidel” (Antoon, *Corpse* 133). However, the impact of “these words [that] were suffocating me” uncovers his desire to “erase them all or plants mines in language itself and detonate them” (Antoon, *Corpse* 133). The violent imagery of destruction that Jawad initially feels shows the power of language, and how it can be used to both create and destroy. The overwhelming threat of destruction is clearly apparent to him, as he remarks at his ability to slip into “the very same language of bombing and slaughter” (Antoon, *Corpse* 133). Rather than succumb to this violence, Jawad actively resists, and the text demonstrates Jawad’s ability to lay witness and oppose dominant modes of cultural discourse that have taken hold in the country. The space of the *mghaysil*, then, mirrors Jawad (or becomes an extension of him) as a site that operates outside of sectarian difference. Furthermore, the space highlights the true extent of the conflict’s violence, rendering it hypervisibly through the image of corpses. Jawad’s description in one of his dreams exemplifies their sustained presence and how they imbue the landscape with the consequences of violence:

dozens of corpses [that] start coming from every direction. Some come through the main door, others from the side door . . . . Their numbers multiply and they fill the entire *mghaysil*, leaving no place for me. I go out in the street but throngs of living corpses are surrounding the place, filling the streets and sidewalks. I start to suffocate, then bolt awake (Antoon, *Corpse* 138).

The number of corpses, both literal and “living,” that surround Jawad begin to penetrate into his dreams from his waking life, taking up the entire space of both the *mghaysil* and the streets of Baghdad. Inhabiting the *mghaysil* allows Jawad to bear witness to the extent of the violence within Iraq, as well as see the potential for productive routes through it. However, the nightmarish qualities that become attributed to his existence, and that are linked to his



experience throughout the text, simultaneously cast Jawad as an outsider who possesses a strong desire to escape. The overwhelming and complex nature of the conflict means that his attempts to navigate his environment end in repeated failure, an experience that renders Jawad increasingly queer. His resistance to—in Halberstam’s terminology—that queer failure, however, highlights the social tensions that operate around Jawad: to normatively adhere by being a re(productive) citizen through “forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation”, or to actively resist them, “to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior . . . [of] orderly and predictable adulthoods” (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 2-3).

From a young age, Jawad resists the career path that is set out for him by his father, instead seeing the value in a productive form of labour, through an artistic kind of creation, which for him is in opposition to his father’s work. As his father asks Jawad, “you think painting or making statues is better than my honorable and rewarding profession?” (Antoon, *Corpse* 103). Jawad reflects back on this after his father’s death, telling him, “They are stealing statues these days . . . . Those who don’t steal statues pull them down because they want to rewrite history. Ironically, they are imitating their sworn enemy, who himself tried to rewrite history from a Ba’thist perspective, destroying many statues and putting up new ones in their place” (Antoon, *Corpse* 103). For Jawad, the creation and sculpting of statues is intrinsically related to its purpose of memorialization. The statues become a way to document the country’s history; as Lisa Saltzman suggests, “to give the past a place in the present, the aesthetic inheritances that are mobilized to make memory *matter*” (7). However, the statues, as a form of remembrance, become precarious through the threat of violence and conflict, mirroring the wider precarity of subjects in Iraq. Directly referring to Saddam Hussein’s legacy of removing historical monuments, Jawad laments the eradication of sites of remembrance. As a result, memory becomes remediated through a subjugating state control that is exemplified by Hussein. Jawad sees the preservation of artefacts of remembrance as a form of resistance—

to erasure and control—that must remain protected. This justification drives his desire to create art rather than washing corpses, a role which he sees as tied to a transient form of remembrance, one that is subject to obliteration and obscurity through the process of decomposition and “private” mourning. Unable to create art, and tied to his role as the corpse washer, Jawad ultimately transposes the creation of remembrance onto the obscurity of death in Iraq.

Counteracting what he sees as the failings of society that render its dead as faceless and nameless corpses, Jawad uses his notebook to “write down the names of the dead that I was going to wash” (Antoon, *Corpse* 130). Again, recounting the experience of tracking all the corpses, Jawad describes how the bodies that pile up:

Thursday was the day al-Fartusi’s refrigerated truck arrived with the weekly harvest of death . . . . Most of them had no papers or IDs and no one knew their names. Instead of names, I wrote down the causes of death in my notebook: a bullet in the forehead, strangulation marks around the neck, knife stabs in the back, mutilation by electric drill, headless body, fragmentation caused by a suicide bomb. Nothing could erase the facts. My memory became a notebook for the faces of the dead (Antoon, *Corpse* 131).

Jawad’s creation resists the oppressive circumstances of Iraq, through the historical documentation of the dead. Consequently, the process and site of corpse washing becomes a “political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed” (Butler, “Antigone’s Claim” 2). The naming of the corpses rehumanizes them and defies the processes of power and violence that have rendered them obscure and invisible. Jawad honours the (literal) dead through washing their bodies, while the act of naming and listing becomes a way to compensate for their obliteration through a social death, and to resist their negation. The act of “private” mourning becomes an act of political resistance, and therefore becomes public, repositioning which bodies are subject to and available for mourning. Similar to the cab driver who insists on taking the corpse to the morgue, Jawad returns the corpses to their particularity, avoiding the “crime” of not burying bodies, and

redeeming each person's status as an individual and in resistance to the nameless and faceless categorization that often becomes equated with "terrorist".<sup>38</sup>

Despite his initial hesitation in the role, Jawad comes to realize the importance of his work, referring to the washing bench as "my desk . . . the bench of death" (Antoon, *Corpse* 131). As the bodies become harder to name and identify, Jawad instead notes down the causes of death. In doing so, Jawad finds a way to tie back to the subject's erased identity. However, the process subsequently renders an associative link between the subject and acts of violence, creating an identification that is directly tied to the violence experienced. Without names, or faces, the reader cannot fully encounter the corpses, and instead are reliant on Jawad's descriptions of mutilation, torture, and destruction. As he tells the reader directly, it is his memory that becomes the "notebook for the faces of the dead." Jawad experiences an obstacle to relating to the corpses, and this experience is further magnified by the reader, who must rely on the narration and description provided. Rather than being able to provide a clearer subjectivity, Jawad's narration highlights the process by which violence is tied to identity.

Therefore, Jawad's position actually (re)enacts a form of agency over the bodies that in turn situates him in a position of control on behalf of the corpses. Consequently, his acts of resistance actually reorient power to Jawad. Where violence has eradicated bodily subjectivity, he has reinscribed it through his notebooks. Jawad's power, then, comes from that ability to track and log the corpses, holding power over the limited forms of subjectivity that he has created with the bodies. Moreover, the process of naming mirrors how power functions in making categorizations of remembrance, paralleled by the framing of "post-9/11" memory, which was framed, Simpson argues, to create "structure and a context to events that may otherwise be without discursive, memorable, or bearable meaning, incorporating them into a more lasting narrative than the mere moment itself affords" (87). Whilst Jawad attempts

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<sup>38</sup> Which again ties back to the literary history of Antigone, whereby civil war lead to the "crime" of bodies not being buried.

to recast subjects away from the “terrorist” categorization that becomes placed on Iraqi bodies, US framing following 9/11 was used “to place blame and the punishment” onto countries such as Iraq. The naming of bodies becomes an act of queer resistance to those structures of power for Jawad, evidenced through the way he is able to use an act of creation amongst the death and destruction of his fellow citizens.

The way that art and creation are conceptualized by other characters in the text further signals the novel’s queer function. When Jawad dreams of being captured by Iraqi soldiers, he describes a vivid scene of torture, where the men intimidate him and question his sexuality. They ask him: “How could you desecrate the bodies of martyrs when you are a dirty apostate? Why are you meddling in this profession anyway if you are an artist?” (Antoon, *Corpse* 135). The soldiers question Jawad’s legitimacy to be a mghassilchi, referring to him as an artist “sarcastically” before going on to tell him it would be better “to scribble away and play with your mud or shit. Go get drunk and fuck around with your faggot friends, but don’t touch the bodies of honorable men, you piece of shit. I’ll tear your ass apart” (Antoon, *Corpse* 135). Jawad’s queerness is rendered visible through the outsider status prescribed by his secularism and artistry. The soldiers’ sardonic tone makes clear Jawad’s lesser significance, questioning his legitimacy as a man. Designating him as queer, the soldiers tell Jawad to “fuck around with your faggot friends”. Moreover, they threaten to “tear [his] ass apart” further signalling the use of sexual violence by soldiers as a form of control. The threat of anal rape works to subjugate Jawad further, reinforcing his queerness (as receptacle of masculine dominance) and subservience to their dominant masculinity (enabled by their ability to rape him through anal penetration). The threat to tear Jawad’s ass apart becomes an evocation of the notion, outlined by Leo Bersani, of “the self which the sexual shatters” at the site that is perceived as holding dominance over the queer: the anus (“Is the Rectum a Grave?” 218). To tear Jawad apart by the ass, then, is to queer and destroy him through a heteronormative dominance.

Moreover, Jawad's subject position is further queered through the soldiers' demand to go "play with your mud or shit". As a result, Jawad's creativity is rendered as non-serious and non-productive, equitable with children's activity. As discussed in relation to Berman's *Homeland*, the child is inherently queer, much like the mention of shit. The soldier's statement aligns Jawad with human waste, that is, to be unproductive, whilst also alluding to his status as a "piece of shit". The declaration designates Jawad as wasteful through its imperative to both go play, and to the object of play (again mirrored in the demand to "go fuck around" with his "faggot friends"). The queer is always depicted as adjacent to, or being, waste—seen through the shit that explodes on to Farmer in *Boys of Abu Ghraib* in the next chapter, and the insistent replication of waste through Elahi's photographic documentation of toilets in chapter one. Furthermore, the soldiers call Jawad a "dirty apostate" by the soldiers, demanding that he "don't touch the bodies of honorable men". Questioning his validity (and ability) to perform the acts of the mghassilchi, Jawad's secularism directly opposes the role of corpse washer, a ritualistic and non-secular process. As a result, the soldiers further create a distinction between Jawad and the honorable role of the mghaysil, and the corpses that are tended to. In this formulation, then, Jawad is relegated to a status below that of a dead body, demonstrating how his queerness consigns him to less than: less than the subjects of Iraq, less than the corpses that have ceased to possess living agency.

That Jawad experiences this through a dream not only demonstrates the socio-cultural conditions that oppose him—the normative values and expectations of his family and the wider community—but also the internalized self-loathing and frustration that he feels. Told early on by his father that he should take over his role, Jawad feels a sense of failure in not desiring to do this. Jawad's dishonour is focused through his queerness, demonstrated by the soldiers' warning that "I'll tear your ass apart." This queerness becomes a direct threat to his existence in that the site of a male penetration turns into the space of extreme obliteration. Not only will they forcefully penetrate Jawad, but the soldiers' rape will become a source of violent

retribution for his failure to adhere to expectations of the state: to be a citizen whose productivity is directly associated with a heterosexual reproduction. The declaration to “fuck around with your faggot friends” also charts Jawad’s queerness back to an earlier moment in the text, where he first discovers his passion for art at school. His teacher, Mr. Ismael takes a shine to Jawad and his talent, encouraging his enthusiasm and telling him “you can be a fabulous Iraqi artist one day” (Antoon, *Corpse* 34). The two characters build a particular relationship and Jawad notices his frequent praise and attention. It is this “special attention” that is noticed by Jawad’s fellow students who begin to mock and insult him:

Hadi used to tease me and said once in front of all the students: “Mr. Ismael is a homo and he wants to fuck you!” I was very angry and told him that he was an idiot and he was jealous, but he said: “Why, then, does he always talk to you after class?” He kept repeating: “Jawad is a faggot. Jawad is a faggot. Jawad is a faggot.” (Antoon, *Corpse* 33)

Jawad’s is rendered as queer early in the text through his association with artistry and his teacher. The cultural inappropriateness of this queerness is further exacerbated by the association made by Hadi of a paedophilic relationship between Mr. Ismael and the young Jawad. The forced link between queerness and paedophilia is commonly used in homophobic discourse to render the queer body as both deviant outsider and threat.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, Jawad’s artistry threatens the stability of societal expectations of the behaviours young (heterosexual) boys should exhibit. Interestingly the closeness felt between the men is also perceived by Jawad, who “felt that he praised me more often”; however, his response counterpoints with the associative links made by his peers, who deem the relationship to be perverse and unacceptable through its queerness. Ending this chapter of the text, Jawad narrates how upon returning to school after one summer, Mr. Ismael had been called up for military service and arts class is cancelled after no replacement is found. Given a free period in its place, Jawad finds it “impossible to fill that void with anything. I never studied art with

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<sup>39</sup> See Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence* (1998).

another teacher after that” (Antoon, *Corpse* 35). Noticing the loss that is felt, Jawad tries to find out what happened to Mr. Ismael but “no one knew anything”. Mr Ismael’s departure eradicates and renders invisible the attributes that made Jawad’s ambivalent queerness possible.

## DANGEROUS BORDERS

Despite his attempts to adhere to normative societal expectations—from both other Iraqis and the US occupying force—Jawad finds himself repeatedly queered, even within his heterosexual relationships and desires, which are subject to failure. One of the women that Jawad becomes infatuated with is Ghayda’, who moves in with her mother after they are threatened with violence following the bombing of the family store and the killing of the patriarch of the family, Abu Ghayda’. Jawad regularly fantasises about Ghayda’ without acting on his feelings. As he tells the reader, “My desire . . . increased every day. I felt that she was drawn to me, too, but I never mustered up enough courage to make a move. I didn’t want to complicate my life and stir up family problems” (Antoon, *Corpse* 150). Jawad is paralyzed by his feelings and the additional complications presented by family when embarking on a relationship. As a result, the family which frequently designates how Jawad should act is again shown to be a controlling force over his actions. Often attempting to constrain him with the social and cultural norms of heterosexuality, Jawad is prevented from acting on his feelings for Ghayda’ by the fear of repercussions. Rather than being a way for him to adhere to heteronormative expectations, the prospect of a heterosexual relationship instead becomes a complication, reaffirming Jawad’s queer status.

The two eventually give in to their desire for one another and embark on an illicit affair, described by Jawad as “our own secret world . . . fleeing from our nightmares to each other’s bodies. It was a world bordered by danger and the fear of scandal” (Antoon, *Corpse* 151). The coupling between Jawad and Ghayda’ becomes a relationship that mirrors the space of

Baghdad, in that it is “bordered by danger.” Even in the space of their heterosexual encounter, violence and retribution circles the pair. Her instruction to Jawad to “Do whatever you want with my body, but not from the front” (Antoon, *Corpse* 151) also prevents the sexual acts between the two from reaching a fully penetrative, and therefore “conclusive”, relation, recognized by Jawad when he notes that “We did everything but fully unite our bodies. I played with the taboo zone with my finger and gave my offerings with my tongue” (Antoon, *Corpse* 152).<sup>40</sup> The invitation to Ghayda’s body provides Jawad with a sense of excitement that leads to him testing the permissibility of borders. The “taboo zone” of the anus operates a site whereby the couple can enact their “illegitimate” sexual encounters, through an area that has been delegitimized for sexual purposes. Therefore, the preservation of female virginity, and therefore purity, is maintained. Moreover, Jawad is permitted to engage in sexual acts in a way that straddles the borders between a hetero and a queer sexuality, involving the anus whilst disavowing the potential for a lost heterosexuality. As a result, the couple uphold the norm of a national heterosexuality, that according to Berlant and Warner, might be “a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behaviour, a space of pure citizenship” (549).

The couple’s encounter, then, at the site of a queer sexuality—the anus—becomes a space where the couple’s sexuality can be explored whilst upholding a nostalgic cultural heteronormativity. Jawad explores the limits of cultural normativity, coming close to but never fully breaching them. His playful teasing indicates his ability to both sense and push those borders, but his stopping short of vaginal penetration, in fact doing “everything but”, indicates actions of a queer resistance alongside his desire to conform. The site of Ghayda’s body, then, becomes a “queer zone . . . estranged from heterosexual culture” (Berlant and Warner 547), a terrain that is mapped with cultural significance. As Aaron’s violation of Dahlia’s body demonstrates the return of US violence abroad back home, Ghayda’s body replicates the

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<sup>40</sup> This, of course, upholds a heterosexist, masculine understanding of sex, whereby penile penetration is required for a successful sexual encounter.



potential for a queer rupture, however Jawad stops himself from fully transgressing, repositioning their encounter as perversely heteronormative. However, when Jawad is given the opportunity to consolidate that heteronormativity, he again succumbs to failure.

Ghayda' eventually offers up her body but Jawad is unable to initiate full penetrative sexual intercourse, instead "pretending not to know what she meant" (Antoon, *Corpse* 152). Even though Jawad demonstrates his knowledge of heterosexuality, he refuses to embrace it. Even when his mother notices the fondness between them, Jawad responds with "Who told you I wanted to get married?" (Antoon, *Corpse* 152). Therefore, in his conversations with his mother, Jawad refrains from subscribing to the cultural norm of marriage, even against the wishes of Um Jawad, who he tells "You have a long life ahead of you [to see Jawad married]" (Antoon, *Corpse* 152). In doing so, Jawad still lays claim to a reproductive futurity that is bound to marriage and children by dangling the possibility, whilst refuting his adherence to it. These encounters outline Jawad's resistance, demonstrating his queerness through his rejection of interwoven heterosexual and social norms.

The disruptions and intrusions on Jawad's romantic life lead to the destruction of his potential marriage with Ghayda' who begins to express her love for him. Noting that his "heart was full of death", Jawad is unable to respond to Ghayda's declarations, leading her to think he is still in love with Reem (his first "love" who he meets earlier in the novel at the arts academy), despite Jawad's statements to the contrary, telling her that "I don't have a heart anymore" (Antoon, *Corpse* 152). The impact of death on Jawad leads him to reject Ghayda' completely, who asks him directly if he loves her shortly before seeking asylum in Sweden. Responding that he cannot get married, she calls him a coward. When they speak a few months later via Skype, she again asks him a question that Jawad feels that he cannot answer: "Why did you let me go?" (Antoon, *Corpse* 154). The inability to answer those questions shows the limitations of Jawad's agency that are directly linked to his daily associations with death. Put in Mbembe's terms, Jawad exemplifies the concept of the "death world", that is, a

“social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring on them the status of *living dead*” (40; original emphasis). Occupying the site and spaces of queer death therefore renders Jawad queer, unable to fulfil his own heterosexual desires, to engage with the reproductive, heterosexual processes of life. Even when presented with the opportunity to commit to a union with Ghayda’, Jawad is unable to, instead remaining alone and within the realm of death, one that has symbolically rendered him without a heart, or in other words, the capacity to form heterosexual bonds.

The inability to adhere successfully to heterosexuality and the direct relationship of this failed adherence to death is explored further in the text through the treatment of other characters and their bodies. Prior to his experience with Ghayda’, Jawad meets a fellow student at the academy, Reem. Initially married to another man, the two strike up a friendship, before Reem disappears when her husband pulls her out of school. Some years later, after her husband’s death, Reem returns and she and Jawad embark on a relationship together, eventually becoming engaged. Three months later, however, Reem once again disappears. Jawad then receives a couriered letter that turns out to be from her, informing him that she has breast cancer and that “I must sever myself from your life. I don’t want you to live with a woman who has a ticking bomb in her body” (Antoon, *Corpse* 114). The implication of Reem’s cancer means that her body is equated with instruments of violence and destruction that have inhabited the landscape of Iraq. The link between the two is made clear by the declaration that “The doctor back in Baghdad said that cancer rates have quadrupled in recent years and it might be the depleted uranium used in the ordnance in 1991” (Antoon, *Corpse* 114). As a result, the legacies of violence have not only embedded themselves on the physical landscape, but the biological one, enacting forms of “slow violence”, one that “occurs gradually and out of sight . . . dispersed across space and time” (Nixon 2). The effects of having her left breast removed means that Reem feels unwanted, and her failure to adhere to expectations of the female body, that themselves are wrapped up with notions of femininity, results in the

end of their relationship. Moreover, Reem herself becomes rendered as queer, through the disability of her mastectomy, the site of which is linked closely to “concepts of femininity and women’s gender role which is perceived to be production of children” (Doh and Pompper 598). As a result, women who have experienced a mastectomy are often conceptualized as being forced to “negotiate a new gender identity” (Doh and Pepper 600).

The significance of their failed relationship haunts Jawad, who is “left [with] a scar I would touch from time to time” (Antoon, *Corpse* 115). His inability to be with Reem is again tied to his experiences of the war, which have left him unable to form heterosexual bonds. The landscape of conflict, then, has conferred damage on both characters from the violence around them; Jawad carries an emotional scar whilst Reem is physically altered. The impact of the failure of Jawad’s relationship with Reem entangles itself throughout the text, and the destruction of Reem’s body becomes a repeated symbol through the narration:

I see Reem standing in an orchard full of blossoming pomegranate trees. . . . Reem smiles without saying anything. I am much closer and I see two pomegranates on her chest instead of her breasts. . . . Her fingernails and lips are painted pomegranate red. I rush toward her, and when I reach her and hug her, the left pomegranate falls to the ground. When I bend down to pick it up, I see red stains bathing my arm. I turn back and see Reem crying as she tries to stop the fountain of blood gushing from the wound. (Antoon, *Corpse* 123)

In the dream, Reem’s body becomes conflated with the pomegranate tree; her body occupies the space of the orchard while her fingernails and lips are “painted pomegranate red.” Her breasts themselves are pomegranates, suggesting that her body does not just resemble the fruit, but parts of it are in the process of becoming one. The imagery of the dream suggests a transformation to which Jawad bears witness, as the pomegranates then fall away from Reem, becoming “red stains” that mark Jawad’s body, while a “fountain of blood” streams from Reem’s scarred body. The wound stunts her femininity, moves away from reproductive norms of femininity. Further, the blood that gushes from her wound is reminiscent of the abjection of the maternal body that Julia Kristeva so powerfully argued is signified through “urine, blood,

sperm, excrement” expelled from the body (54). The fluids that expand out also signify the potential for abortion and miscarriage, short-circuiting “the hope for rebirth . . . by the very splitting” that takes place in a woman’s body (Kristeva 54). Reem’s body becomes the space of a (literally) ruptured femininity; a centrepoint for the violent consequence of the personal and geographical coordinates of Reem and Jawad’s life that have become implicated with one another.

In failing to “save” Reem, Jawad is prevented from being able to fully interact with her: she simply “smiles without saying anything” and when the pomegranate falls, Jawad is only able to “turn back and see” that Reem is crying, not hear her. That Jawad is unable to fully perceive what is happening to Reem indicates his inability to relate to her and therefore understand the complexities of his situation, to fully understand the impact on her body. Rushing to pick up the fallen pomegranate, Jawad indicates his desire to save her breast, and to reinstate her normative femininity. Reem becomes simultaneously fantastical and gothic in Jawad’s description, demonstrating the function of her body as a site of loaded violence stemming from the intersection of the physical and the cultural. Her queered body becomes signified by the symbol of her lost breast; a figure of the inability to nurture and the inaccessibility of a heterosexual femininity that labours as (re)productive citizen. Furthermore, conceptualized through individual body parts results in a literal and metaphorical deconstruction of her character, representing the dehumanizing removal of subjectivity that the conflict has on Iraqis. Reem’s spilt blood become a signifier for the anger and violence felt against the visceral imagery of bodily and subjective destruction of Iraqi citizens.

## DRINKING THE WATERS OF DEATH

The vivid red ties Reem’s blood to the figure of the pomegranate, a figure that is used in as a stand-in for her breast and recurs throughout the text. The pomegranate tree’s association with death is marked early on in the text, as Jawad notes its significance in his initial

description of the mghaysil: “Directly beneath the window was a door leading to a tiny garden where the pomegranate tree my father loved so much stood” (Antoon, *Corpse* 15). Moreover, the novel’s original Arabic title was *وحدها شجرة الرمان*, translated as *The Pomegranate Alone*. The tree stands alone, inhabiting a space just outside of the mghaysil, where “relatives would wait and watch their beloved dead be washed and shrouded” (Antoon, *Corpse* 15) and the “branches of lotus or pomegranate” are used as part of the shrouding process “to lessen the torture of the grave” (Antoon, *Corpse* 21). The tree’s importance rests in its use in the corpse washing process, as an instrument of refuge for the dead. However, the tree’s constant presence becomes a backdrop for the relationship between Jawad and his father, who shores up the link after he washes the body of his father’s corpse:

The washhouse was dark, like a huge grave . . . . I went out to the garden and squatted in front of my father’s beloved pomegranate tree. It had drunk the water of death for decades, and now it was about to drink the water flowing off his body . . . . The deep red pomegranate blossoms were beginning to breathe” (Antoon, *Corpse* 64).

The properties of the tree are established by the revelation of the tree’s significance to Jawad after washing his father’s corpse. As Jawad watches the water flow from the mghaysil to the tree, he remembers how “When I was young, I ate the fruit of this tree . . . . But I stopped eating it when I realized that it had drunk the waters of death” (Antoon, *Corpse* 65). The tree, and the eating of the pomegranates, recalls the myth of Persephone who ate the seven pomegranate seeds offered to her in the underworld by Hades. Consequently, the link of childhood innocence, and a loss of that innocence that is connected to death, is directly paralleled through Jawad’s recollection. Jawad’s own innocence becomes disturbed through the rupture of death and of those that follow, marking his deviation from the normative expectations of him, and toward queerness. The tree also becomes a site of perverse beauty through its ability to flourish in the face of death, yet its abject quality derives from that same condition. The cyclical nature of the tree, used to shroud the dead who in turn nourish the

growing tree, provides a tension that Jawad sees as perverse, unlike his father who perceives its power.

However, as he becomes older and more involved with corpse washing, Jawad begins to see the tree as “my only companion in the world” (Antoon, *Corpse* 183). Both marked by death, Jawad is able to recognize their shared qualities, spending time sitting and talking with the tree. Moreover, Jawad creates a link back to his father, who told him “that the Prophet Muhammad said there was a seed from paradise in every pomegranate fruit” (Antoon, *Corpse* 183). His father, then, sees the tree as not only a symbol of survival in the face of death, but as a reprieve from it, recognizing its paradisiacal qualities. Jawad, seeing the tree differently from his father, states that,

paradise is always somewhere else. And hell, all of it, is here and grows bigger every day. Like me, this pomegranate’s roots were in the depths of hell. . . . I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries. But now I know they are conjoined, sculpting one another. My father knew that, and the pomegranate tree knows it as well (Antoon, *Corpse* 183-184).

The pomegranate tree becomes an emblem for a blurring—one that is constantly in flux—that draws attention to the fallacy of the idea of boundaries. As the “depths of hell” around it grow, the tree grows in a symbiotic fashion. Jawad is able to recognise that he, also, is tied to Baghdad, and is unable to leave. Instead, he is left to fashion an existence for himself in the circumstances that he is given, acknowledging the intersection of life and death that operates around him. That position, on the periphery of the socio-cultural sphere, marks Jawad as ultimately queer, despite his underlying desires for normativity.

He ultimately comes to accept the similarities between the two, and their association with death. Remarking on the link between them, Jawad states that, unlike the tree, his “branches have been cut, broken, and buried with the dead. My heart has become a shriveled pomegranate beating with death” (Antoon, *Corpse* 183). Rather than being able to flourish, Jawad is left unable to forge connections, and instead remains in the realm of the anti-social,

“buried with the dead” in a sphere that through its deathly association is notably queer. The tree also becomes a site of knowledge, where Jawad comes to recognise his status, a knowledge that “The pomegranate alone knows” (Antoon, *Corpse* 183). For Jawad, the fruit becomes a symbol for the attribution of knowledge, one that renders him on par with death and in opposition to sociality. That the worlds of life and death are “conjoined” and are continually in the process of “sculpting one another” circles back to Jawad’s status as outsider, through his artistry. The tree becomes a focal point for the dimensions of queerness that operate in, and around, Baghdad that are rendered on the bodies of its citizens and through the experiences of Jawad that he narrates to the reader.

That the narrative begins from the perspective of Jawad as a young boy allows the reader the opportunity to encounter a more developed narrative of a contemporary Baghdad resident, charting their experiences from childhood to maturity. One of the novel’s early chapters dispels the notion that Iraqi citizens are intrinsically bound to (a particularly violent) death. Rather, the experiences of violence and conflict are introduced to citizens—an idea that is further suggested by Jawad’s recollection of eating fruit from the pomegranate tree. Recalling a visit to the mghaysil for the first time, Jawad describes seeing the corpse of an old man: “the pale face and hollow eyes of a man in his late fifties appeared. I was afraid and felt a tightness in my chest. This was the first time I’d seen a dead man up close. His hair and moustache were grizzled” (Antoon, *Corpse* 18). Jawad’s encounter with the man relays to the reader an experience of death that is not directly tied to conflict. Moreover, Jawad is not used to death and the emotional experience of seeing a corpse for the first time renders death universal. His fear and tight chest inspire empathy, and also works to undermine the relationship between male Iraqis and violent death that is often seen in representations of the region. The description of the body also neutralises the depictions of death that are often framed from a US perspective as gory retribution or in a manner that figures Iraqi bodies as human waste. The “grizzled” hair and moustache that Jawad notices on the dead body

reconceptualizes bodies that are often rendered as “hajjis”, or in servitude to military occupations. That the first corpse that Jawad sees is also the first that the reader encounters in the novel further destabilize the inherent associations that are made between Iraqi bodies and violence. After the arrival of foreign militaries, the link between conflict and those bodies becomes articulated. Through Jawad’s experience, the book’s structure serves to constantly remind the reader. The dreams of mounting corpses and military violence that frequently interrupt Jawad’s narrative demonstrate not only how pervasive his circumstances of violent death have become, but also the way in which the novel, as cultural memory, operates in what Antoon himself recognises as “a liminal space between the real and the imaginary” (*Corpse* vii).

The in-between state of the novel, then, reflects Jawad as a character, who can perceive and operate at the intersection of those borders. Much like the pomegranate tree, the novel is brought to life through the experiences of death, allowing the reader to perceive the structural dynamics of Iraqi culture that are constantly in flux. These are then replicated in the switch between dream-world and narrative-world, and between past and present. The collapsing of these supposedly distinct spaces between each of the book’s chapters (and at times, during them) renders Jawad’s narration as fluid as the circumstances that are being recounted to the reader. Subjected to the shifting of multiple realities, the reader experiences queerness and perhaps empathises with those individuals who are impacted upon by state assemblages. That the novel is written by an Iraqi author, and is also translated by them, allows the reader to access an experience that – whilst mediated – has closer ties to the often-overlooked historical experience of the Iraqi citizen. Unlike similar texts where translations are made by US academics,<sup>41</sup> there is a closer relationship between author and translator. However, this may lead to “unique privileges that are otherwise denied or frowned upon,”

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<sup>41</sup> As seen in recent translations of contemporary Iraqi fiction by Jonathan Wright and Maia Tabet who have translated Blasim and Saadawi, and Antoon respectively.



which suggests an authorial liberty that may further mediate the reader's textual encounter (Antoon, *Corpse* vii). The ability (or inability) to translate cultural nuances from Arabic to English results in some meaning becoming lost to an English audience, leading to the alteration of character's speech, or as Antoon notes, words that are left unsaid. Whilst the main plot of the text might remain unchanged, what the process of translation further reminds the reader is that there are experiences that will remain inaccessible to them; translation is a reminder of the dangers of an empathetic overidentification that inadvertently erases the individual experience of the queer body.

## CONCLUSION

Whilst *The Corpse Washer* recognises the implications of conflict on the wider landscape, the novel's plot is more related to the individual experiences of the characters, who have been written by Antoon as complex and nuanced. The reduction of neighbourhoods to "garbage, dust, barbed wires, and tanks" (Antoon, *Corpse* 96) is part of the novel, but rather than US representations of Iraq, it is a secondary consequence to the human encounters of Jawad and his fellow Iraqis. The book shifts this focus, from war-ravaged landscapes that are reduced to ahistorical or precivilization backdrops, to further illuminate the way that representations of Iraq that are written from an Iraqi perspective undermine the hegemonic narratives that circle around the most recent conflict with the United States. In contrast, texts such as Scranton's *War Porn*, despite its attempts to move away from recycled tropes of dehumanized Iraqis without agency, still allows the resurgence of nationalist and hegemonic ideas through centring the experience of US veterans and citizens. Providing a "balanced" approach through the presentation of multiple intersecting viewpoints still fails to address the imbalance in power that operates around the transcultural dynamics of power, representation, and memorialization that circles around the Iraq war. While the novel highlights the complex ways that Iraqis, and to some extent soldiers, are rendered as queer, it fails, however, to take into account the

element of choice that allows a soldier to choose to join the invading force of the US military. By always linking Iraqis to the war, *War Porn* re-establishes the relationship made between citizens and queerness that can be read as a deathly association.

Alternatively, *Corpse Washer* acknowledges the continued presence of violence in the country, however it explores the way that violence can penetrate the everyday lives and relationships of Iraqi people, while considering the social, cultural, and political dynamics within the country, either prior to US invasion, or because of it. The next chapter continues to examine these contradictory forces through an analysis of US military black sites situated between the domestic and non-domestic spaces of the previous chapters. Through the lens of both fictional and non-fiction responses to camps such as Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, an examination of the queer space and time of these sites will uncover a deeper understanding of transcultural memory and subsequent responses to violence enacted on queer bodies with an extra-national framing.

# CHAPTER THREE: BLACK SITES

Restraining and sustaining the queer subject

*The here and now  
is a prison house*

- José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

The previous two chapters have examined the ways that violent oppressions of the queer body manifest across national and extra-national borders, resulting from a transnational expansion of the nationalist and neo-conservative rhetoric of the US. Cultural representations of these intra- and transnational landscapes provide routes into the examination of the internal tensions of the US nation, whilst also highlighting the attendant slippages that occur when its citizens are relocated to sites of conflict, marking them as extensions of the homeland yet simultaneously outside of its socio-political sphere. Therefore, the domestic landscape frames remembrance of 9/11 and the Global War on Terror so as to shore up the conditions of nationalist ideologies that render the queer as outsider, or as enemy, whilst the resultant 2003 Iraq War demonstrates the vicissitudes of citizenship that become apparent through the queer(ed) space of the battlefield.

This chapter moves on to explore how the extranational sites of Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib function to extend further the reach of the United States beyond its physical borders, blurring how those borders are conceptualized. The chapter discusses how the state rhetoric that led to the violent invasion and occupation of lands during the 2003 Iraq War is further exemplified by the imprisonment of queer subjects in sites that operate outside of the US nation, and are justified through a network of political, legal, and cultural rationale. That rationale demonstrates how the US renders queer bodies disposable, or as Mbembe's posits, as "the ultimate expression of sovereignty", which is expressed through the "control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (11-12). Moreover,

the queer subject is made identifiable “through a parallel process of demarcation from populations targeted for segregation, disposal, or death” that include categorizations made through a range of queer markers that include race (Puar, *Terrorist* xii). The subsequent removal of human rights through acts of rendition and torture form part of a condition of what I term *statefulness*, that is, the subjective quality of being associated with, belonging to, and enjoying the privileges of, state citizenship. Focusing on the violent and extreme repercussion of rendition and torture experienced by the queer body creates an empathetic route through which to explore both the socio-cultural processes that establish state and citizenship, and how these are violently removed from queer subjects as an expression of US supremacy.

Exploring the transnational and transcultural conditions of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, I examine how the illegitimate conceptualizations of Arabs and Muslims leads to their apprehension and detainment and how these sites operate as a site of queer memory. Using as a springboard José Esteban Muñoz’s hypothesis—that the heteronormative present acts like a prison house for the queer subject (*Cruising Utopia* 1)—I examine the Hollywood film *Boys of Abu Ghraib* (2014, directed by Luke Moran), and the published diary of (now former) Guantánamo detainee Mohamedou Ould Slahi, *Guantánamo Diary* (2015).<sup>42</sup> In doing so, I analyze the varying levels of success cultural representations have in their critiques of detainment and the depictions of subjects that are queered by the experiences of detainment and torture. The use of torture demonstrates how prisoners’ bodies are further queered through acts of extreme violence designed to subjugate and dominate, justified by what Giorgio Agamben calls the state of exception, that is, exceptional measures that “are the result of periods of political crisis” (*State of Exception* 1). The link between the political and the juridico-constitutional results in a contradictory space or the “paradoxical position of being juridical measures that cannot be understood in legal terms” (Agamben, *State of Exception* 1). Consequently, the contradiction of the state of exception finds itself rendered on the queer

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<sup>42</sup> For brevity, I will use the shorthand of *Boys*.

body through the act of torture, where detainees are designated criminals subject to punishment due not to an identifiable crime, but to the socio-political conditions of the United States. Confined outside of normative time and space, the detainee is kept indefinitely in spaces that operate through cyclical modes of oppression. Furthermore, I also explore whether cultural representations of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay undermine the queering of detainees' bodies, and the removal of their statefulness, and whether such representations can provide a means through which a queer futurity can be imagined.

## QUEER SUBJECTIVITY AND THE PRESENT

Bond argues that following 9/11, memory “coalesced around discourses of patriotism and freedom”, leading to a “politicalised appropriation” of the events, with sites like Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo adding to the suggestion that “the memory of 9/11 remains an interruptive force in American culture” (8-9, 10). Given Muñoz’s suggestion that the unfinished business of the past marks out the potential for hope in the future of the queer subject, it is important to excavate this recent history to investigate the ways such bodies have been rendered queer, and what these cultural representations might tell us. Moreover, given how subjects are imagined as queer on particularities that include race (as explored throughout the thesis), sites that function to isolate and detain those particular bodies can highlight the specific processes of subjugation. In doing so, the dominance of a sovereign United States over queer subjectivities is explored to examine the barriers of the queer present, building inclusive representations that resist the erasure of such subjects and their bodies. Creating spaces for queer representation subsequently lays claim to a future that includes the queer subject within its remit.

Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo exemplify how US political administrations have developed a form of sovereignty through subjugation that is comparable to bare life or homo sacer. Agamben argues that “the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet*

*not sacrificed*. . . . the key by which not only the sacred texts of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries” (*Homo Sacer* 8). Thus, the sites of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo become arenas whereby “rituals of dehumanization have acted out homegrown, homoerotic traumas that cannot be resolved or satisfactory cathexed” (Comaroff 200). Increasingly, however, theorists such as Naomi A. Palik have begun to question the proposition of detainees equalling bare life, suggesting that “Agamben’s construction of bare life is too limiting for the modes of resistance enacted by detainees” (3).<sup>43</sup> Regardless, the queer body and prisons have become culturally symbolic synonyms for one another, whereby the queer body becomes contained, and represented, by the prison.

Refocusing previous examinations of the detainee, I use what Sedgwick calls the “influence of the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy on broader perceptions of public and private” spheres (*Epistemology* 72) from the closet to the prison. In doing so, I reconfigure how “modern forms of association and of power” are culturally read through the black site, imbuing the importance of analysis “from the vantage of antihomophobic inquiry” (Warner xiv). The importance of such inquiry, perhaps rethought of as queer or antinormative, is reflected through the tensions of the nation explored in chapter one, whereby US culture, particularly since 9/11, has produced a recategorization of Arab-Americans as terrorists: individuals who are interchangeable with those detained at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo. The potential of a link between US citizens and detained individuals thus risks creating a conflation between the two. To negate such a risk, the ubiquitous labelling of certain groups as “terrorist” is deployed, leading to the justification of violence on bodies that are understood as antisocial, or queer.

Following the 2016 presidential election, the divisions posited between the “us and them” (O’Gorman 3)—of Western nations like the US on the one hand, and the Middle East

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<sup>43</sup> For an expansion of this discussion to include migrant detainees in Australia, for example, see Bailey (2009). He suggests that detainees reject the notion of bare life, making active decisions on their personal and political subjectivities. Bartrop (2000) presents an historical account of social systems in Nazi concentration camps that was designed to counter the violence imposed on them. These can be understood as other forms of political resistance that counter the detainees’ status as bare life.

on the other—have become even more pronounced. In particular, rhetoric designed to ban individuals from “Muslim-majority countries” entering the US has been reflected inside the nation’s borders, evidenced through clashes between white supremacists and political groups like Black Lives Matter (Trump). These examples are symbiotic; conditions that demonstrate “the legitimation and expansion of techniques of racial profiling ... [have been] perfected on black bodies” (Puar and Rai 140). As I discussed in chapter one, the characterization of Muslims-as-terrorists turns inward toward the domestic population, resulting in a universal categorization. Demonizing the queer body further highlights Foucault’s assertion: “the absolute power that produces and quarantines ... [that] finds its dispersal in techniques of normalization and discipline” (*Discipline and Punish* 119). These techniques were successfully mobilized through state discourse that followed 9/11, allowing for a range of legislative proposals that have proven dangerous for queer individuals. The removal of the conditions of statefulness risks being transposed onto anyone suspected of terrorism, due in large part to the political and legislative changes—such as the recent “Travel Ban”—that have been enacted to profile individuals based on factors such as religion and skin colour. Moreover, the Department of Homeland Security employed the suggestion that male terrorists may disguise themselves as women to avoid detection, leading to increased border security and the targeting of trans populations (Beauchamp 356). Therefore, as I highlighted in the first chapter, deception that requires surveillance and the enforcement of normative behaviours brings about the queering of Muslim bodies.

Despite the public outrage following the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs, which led to the CIA disowning the legitimacy of torture, and despite repeated claims from politicians such as former President Barack Obama that the facilities would be closed, sites like Guantánamo remain open. Following Donald Trump’s election, it seems apparent it will not only remain open, but will be subject to an extension of its current use. Trump has repeatedly claimed he would increase capacity at sites like Guantánamo and would “bring back a hell of

a lot worse than waterboarding” (McCarthy). Thus, a shift in US policy may be imminent, meaning there are more individuals like Slahi who are forcibly removed from countries and kept without charge or subsequent cause at extra-national black sites (Savage). The expansion of criteria for detainment also marks an increasingly widening remit of those who can be apprehended at sites like Guantánamo.

## THE BEST OF THE BEST, AND THE WORST OF THE WORST

In recent years, cultural responses to the detainment and abuse of prisoners has begun to appear, including scenes of torture, such as Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) which received criticism for its apparently “sympathetic” portrayal of torture alongside the suggestion that those interrogations led to credible intelligence and the assassination of Osama bin Laden (Mayer). More recently, films such as Luke Moran’s *Boys*, which he wrote, directed and starred in, have sought to portray life inside the secret black sites, centred around the relationships between guards and detainees. Also known as *Prisoner of War*, the film charts the daily life of US soldier Jack Farmer (played by Moran). Farmer’s motivation for joining the Army Reserves is to become a better version of himself—his voiceover stating in the cold open that “in 2003, I was a 22-year old boy in post-9/11 America. The boy who didn’t want to sit it out. The boy who wanted to make a difference” (Moran). The shot pans down a prison hallway while muffled yells can be heard [Figure 20]. A figure walks slowly from the shadows toward the screen and the blurred metal door of a cell. Farmer’s narration describes “the stranger” who inhabits the skin of the soldier, revealed to be his character.

From this short sequence, it is already evident that the film deals with Abu Ghraib, told from the specific viewpoint of a US soldier. The muffled yells, supposedly directed at a detainee, are off-camera. The person(s) remain unseen and only their fearful murmurs are audible under the prominence given to Farmer’s narration. Rather than witnessing the direct effects of the violence on the victims, the narration frames the film through the lens of the



soldier's motivations, and the prison's effects on him. As the viewer steps through the door with the character, the scene marks out the narrative's focalization from the viewpoint of Farmer while the prisoners are relegated to one part of the constellation of experience that impacts the soldiers. Behind the metal door, the body of the unseen detainee is rendered secondary to the camera's gaze and the viewer, therefore marking out the narrative relevance of stories about Abu Ghraib. In one short scene, the detainee's body has already been marked as queer, that is, adjacent and aslant.

However, in bearing witness to acts of cultural remembrance, the viewer becomes integral in mapping what Kilby and Rowland call "the affective, biographical, experiential and psychic forces at work" in witnessing (3), therefore acknowledging the complexities of history and testimony. Consequently, it becomes important when we view such artefacts "to grapple with the question of which testimony, whose lives and what suffering should command our attention" (Kilby and Rowland 4). Through its introduction, Moran's film marks a distinction between the central importance of the US, as imagined through the perspective of the soldier, and the queered detainee. The orientation towards certain bodies over others is juxtaposed with the movie's title card, and the obligatory "inspired by true events". The viewer is reminded that the film provides a representation of events, mediated through the filmmaker's framing. However, as demonstrated through the reception of vernacular photography and the depictions of war fiction, the representation of events in the film can come to be seen as "more real than real". As such, the disclaimer of "inspired by" does little to subvert hegemonic ideals that the film has already begun to perpetuate in its short opening scene. Rather, the disclaimer, and its relation to a reality that is more real, or hyperreal, bolsters the ways that certain bodies are being orientated as legitimate ones.

Following the establishing shots and title card, the screen changes to show the date "July 4, 2003", marking out an exemplary scene of exceptionalist film-making. Days before his deployment to Iraq, Farmer enjoys an Independence Day barbeque with friends and family. A

young child is seen playing with sparklers recalling the associative link between the nation and Edelman's figure of the Child (established through the domestic and transnational responses in the previous two chapters), symbolic of what Farmer must protect (3) and Berlant's notion of the infantilization of the US citizen ("Theory of Infantile Citizenship" 398). Soft rock plays over a sequence of shots featuring red, white, and blue (ketchup on hamburgers, a "Good Luck Jack" cake, table coverings) as Jack's father gives an emotional speech, thanking everyone on this "special" night, equally due to the fourth of July celebrations and as Jack's farewell. The montage of stars-and-stripes and heteronormative party-goers drinking and dancing, enjoys a moment of poignant and celebratory US exceptionalism. The scene is centred around Jack, dressed in red-and-blue check, who is positioned as the physical embodiment of the celebratory motifs that the scene depicts. As well as the dominance of heterosexual and reproductive couples, Farmer is seen sharing an intimate moment with his girlfriend who tells Jack to "come back to me" while fireworks explode in the sky, foreshadowing the literal and symbolic movement away from one another that the characters experience. Moreover, the controlled explosion of the fireworks juxtaposes the threat of terrorist action, particularly centred on the homeland. Through the sequence, Moran cements a distinct identity for Jack—one that is all-American, straight, white, cis-gendered, and male—which will become jeopardized by entering the queer space of conflict.

Fireworks are replaced by helicopters and Hummers, as Farmer joins "my squad ... my brothers", whom he introduces through the narration. They are all male and mostly white, apart from two black soldiers, one of whom has a name that "the boys can't pronounce so we just call him Tunde". Bodily difference is marked out by the film early on, even within groups that are perceived to be socially equal, such as the army squad who are fighting the same enemy. Tunde's difference highlights the complexity of race and how it can operate within assemblages of the US state. Despite being a person of colour, individuals like Tunde function in a similar manner to the actors in Berman's photography, who come to be accepted through

their obedience to the state, or what Puar terms as homonationalism. Moreover, the process of infantilizing the US citizen can be rectified through a “faith in the nation ... [that] vitalizes a patriotic and practical attachment to the nation and other citizens” (Berlant, *Queen* 28), as I argued earlier in the thesis.

Therefore, the potentially bad citizen who is marked by their queerness can demonstrate their faith and practical attachment to the nation through an exemplary act of obedience—to defend it. Despite this, Tunde can never fully be recognized by his “brothers” who refuse to use his real name. The character is killed on the first night the soldiers spend at base camp, affirming his position as queer, that is, “outside the consensus which . . . confirms the value of reproductive futurism” (Edelman 3). Unable to satisfy the demands of (re)productive labour, Tunde’s subjectivity becomes noticeable for its configuration toward death. He is disposable in a way that is closely attached to his identity—his name and his skin colour—and is only identifiable through a designation that is given to him by the other white soldiers in lieu of a fuller identity. The film establishes itself, then, not only by clearly marking out the boundaries between what constitutes the space of the homeland and its citizenry, but also by playing out how bodies are able to potentially navigate those borders or become rendered queer by them.

This demarcation is further highlighted as the soldiers arrive and are briefed by Captain Hayes. During the briefing, Hayes informs them the soldiers that Abu Ghraib is “the largest United States enemy detainee facility in the world, bigger than Guantánamo Bay”, and that it houses “some of the world’s most dangerous terrorists, the worst of the worst”. As a result, the newly arrived soldiers are immediately categorized in opposition to the detainees, the necessary “best of the best, soldiers of the free world”. Multiple tropes of exceptionalist and nationalist discourse are presented to the viewer in the prison’s introduction—particularly, the dichotomy of the soldiers as the best of the best against the monstrous and uncivilized detainees and the comparison with Guantánamo, making Abu Ghraib’s size and stature

perversely superior. The predominant theme of the “good” United States in opposition to the “bad” terrorists is a theme that Moran’s film reinforces through its representation of the prison site. The sense of importance given to Abu Ghraib is repeatedly elevated by Hayes, as he remarks that they are “twenty miles outside of Baghdad”, making the space synonymous with the danger of Iraq, invoked through its capital city, alluded to as the epicentre of the terrorist threat. Hayes goes on to inform them that Abu Ghraib is “what historians will regard as the front line of the war” where “families will be made safe” and “the war on terror will be won”. The heavy-handed rhetoric provides a useful pep talk for the soldiers, however the hyperbolic overtones normalized amongst the many nationalistic and exceptionalist tropes that have been encountered thus far.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF WAR

The film’s insistence of centring the discomfort and anguish of the soldiers’ experience, elevating the importance of US narratives at the expense of the detainees’ prevents further opportunity for the explicit and nuanced critique that the film repeatedly attempts. Unable to camp in tents outside because of mortar attacks, the soldiers are literally made to reside in former prison cells, whilst the detainees are kept outside. Reversing the spaces of habitation means that the soldiers become recast as the prisoners, which, when coupled with the film’s originally ambiguous title, suggests they are equally, if not the only, Prisoners of War with whom the film is concerned. Furthermore, the soldiers immediately become imprisoned by the actions of the (still unseen) queer threat. Whilst moving into the cells [Figure 21], one of the squad members explains how Abu Ghraib was formerly used by Saddam Hussain, where he “purged 40,000 people. . . . [and that] apparently there’s bones and graves everywhere”. As a result, ash lies on every surface of the prison, coating the soldiers overnight, who wake up

each morning with their skin being covered. Through this imagery, the film establishes a correlation back to other sites of memory, such as 9/11.<sup>44</sup>

The film makes clear the physical implications of occupying the space early on, showing the soldiers appearing darker-skinned and layered in dirt. That the dust is made up of bodily remains transplanted onto the soldiers threatens their bodily integrity with what Mary Douglas calls “matter out of place” (44). Thus, the soldiers demonstrate the inherent contradiction that lies within the concept of a social purity: that dirt and the risk of its pollution does not become removed through its negation. Rather, the displacement of the pathogenic dirt, one that is associated here with the queer body of the detainee, surrounding the soldiers becomes transplanted onto their bodies. As a result, the characters, who are figures of the supposed purity of the United States, become tarnished by the effects of their presence in Iraq. The film creates a sense of disorientation as the soldiers converse in the dark of their cell. These scenes avoid the usual use of blue light, instead favouring darkness or limited lighting to withhold visual orientation from the viewer. The voices of the men are the only thing that the viewer can experience, reinforcing the centrality of the social bonds experienced by the soldiers, whilst simultaneously forcing an identification between the men and the viewer. The complete darkness alludes to the experience of disembodiment *felt*—in contrast to the detainees whose bodies are actually subject to control by the soldiers—whilst also demonstrating the ways that they are consumed by the prison’s darkness.

As the soldiers attempt to bond with one another, a montage sequence intermixes scenes that depict the supposedly mundane experience of daily life at Abu Ghraib. The repetition of the montage technique is used throughout the film, often depicting similar scenes, serving to reinforce the monotony that the soldiers encounter. The tedium of events is only

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<sup>44</sup> Images of firefighters covered in ash during 9/11 rescue operations were taken by photographers; see Anthony Correia’s “Attack on New York City” (2001) and Mario Tama’s “September 11 Retrospective” (2001). Further, the conflation between soldiers and firefighters can be seen in murals that replicated the Thomas Franklin image “Firefighters Raising Flag” (2001), which re-enacts Joe Rosenthal’s 1945 photograph of US marines raising a flag on Iwo Jima. See Joseph Darda, “The Exceptionalist Optics of 9/11 Photography” (2014).

disrupted by infrequent explosions, often at night, making the darkened soldiers visible against a backdrop of violence. The visual and narrative techniques that Moran utilizes attaches the identities of the soldiers to the immediate experience of the site, replicated for the viewer to share the experience. After the first sequence of shots depicting the men acclimating to their roles and new environment ends, it is revealed that the time passed has been only one day. The distortion of time, through the banal experiences of the soldiers, quickly muddles the viewer's perceptions, designed to create an empathetic alignment with the film's characters, thus connecting empathy to the heteronormativity of the nation-state. Moreover, rather than satisfying the expectations of an action-packed conflict zone, both the experiences of the soldiers and the viewer, are subverted and reoriented toward a mundane experience of war.

As Farmer goes on to explain to the viewer, "we soon realized that other than the mortar threat, Captain Hayes' pump up-speech was just that – a speech. We are not soldiers on the frontline of a war, we are over-trained yard hands". Becoming "stuck in a never-ending routine", the repeated use of the montage technique demonstrates the singular experience of Abu Ghraib, one of boredom and one that revolves around the soldiers. Throughout this introduction, detainees are only mentioned in passing and remain unseen. Instead, and similar to sections of *War Porn* that are set during the Iraq conflict, the characters in *Boys* are seen eating together, working-out, and enjoying violent pastimes that include scorpion fighting and boxing [Figure 22]. Bound up with these modes of leisure, or play (also recalling similar activities by deployed soldiers in Scranton's *War Porn*), is the constant need to reinforce the masculine and heterosexual identities of the men. The motif of masturbation is used repeatedly in the film, first when Farmer walks in on another soldier in a portable toilet, and later when he experiences an unsuccessful attempt to climax (during masturbation, and later, sex), highlighting a particular moment where his heterosexuality begins to falter. Occupying the space of Iraq, Farmer suffers a masculine impotence caused by the loss of social mirrors that reflect norms of masculinity back onto the designated body. Without these symbolic cues,

the men are forced to contrive ways to reassert that heterosexual masculinity. The display of an uncertain masculinity contrasts sharply with the earlier moments that feature Farmer with family and friends, continuously reminding the viewer, through their close narrative proximity, of the literal and symbolic prison that the soldiers find themselves in. As Farmer tells the viewer, “We don’t fight terrorists. We fight boredom”, and in doing so sets up the potential for a narrative of disruption in the film.

The lack of “global implications” for their actions removes the soldiers from the imperialist consequences of US military action, instead suggesting that Abu Ghraib represents a microcosm of campaigns abroad. As a result, military campaigns are shown to contradict the “shock and awe” of violent retribution that is portrayed in socio-political and cultural discourse. The dissonance between how the US state portrayed the conflict, and the soldiers’ experience, is reflected in the depiction of boredom, tension, and an uncertain enemy that feeds back to other cultural representations such as the Vietnam War. As the previous chapter demonstrated through the depictions of war fiction, the temporal association between conflicts highlights the incongruous viewpoints of combat and their cyclical nature. The only moment of explicit violence in *Boys* depicts the characters as bystanders as the prison is attacked by unseen assailants with mortars, resulting in the death of one of the men as the others scramble in the dark.

Consequently, the characters, unable to face their “enemy” cannot enact redemption for their country and fulfil their patriotic potential. The presence of the US in Iraq is shown as necessary to confront the perpetual risk of a global danger; however, this is a risk that almost never materializes. Therefore, the film may actually undercut the nationalist discourse that suggests a need for a military presence in Iraq; yet the continuous threat that is portrayed as still lurking in the background reinforces rather than invalidates the nation’s purpose. In standing their ground, the soldiers exemplify the US epitomizing how other nations should operate to protect global security. Moran’s film ultimately upholds the discourse it could

potentially subvert because of the soldiers' sacrifice, rather than in spite of it. Moreover, all of these moments are depicted through a negation of those who are actually incarcerated in the prison. Unlike Farmer, who counts down the remaining days of his deployment with chalk on the walls, the detainees have no idea if, or when, they will be released; a notion of timelessness that will be explored further through Slahi's account of detainment. The experience of the soldiers in *Boys of Abu Ghraib* only manages to subvert expectations of war narratives as action-packed, rather than more fully engaging with the rhetoric of patriotic nationalism and heteronormativity that underpin it.

## WELCOME TO THE DARK SIDE

Feeling that he "could be better utilized", Farmer volunteers to pick up shifts working in the prison's black site. Reluctant, he asks Hayes about the lack of training, who responds nonchalantly "you'll do fine". The film returns to its initial establishing shot as Farmer enters the black site, this time accompanied by heavy industrial music (gradually identifiable as "More Human than Human" by heavy metal group White Zombie). The song title and lyrics reference the film *Blade Runner* (1982), which tells the story of bounty hunter Deckard, who is tasked with tracking down fugitive androids in a future 2019. Pairing the entrance of Farmer with the song draws parallels between the protagonists of the two films, suggesting that the detainees are violent non-humans that are able to disguise themselves as human. However, equating Farmer with Deckard also points toward the question of identity that is raised in *Blade Runner* by its conclusion in which Deckard's own humanity is called into question. Farmer's identity is subjected further to the destabilizing forces of the prison when upon his arrival, Staff Sargent Tanner immediately tells him to remove his military jacket, telling Farmer that if "they learn your name, they'll send a packet of Anthrax to your family". By removing his clothing, Farmer enacts the stripping away of his identity: not only any markers of his name—the signifier of his subjectivity and humanity—but also as a member of the military and thereby symbolically



locating him outside the site of the nation-state. In doing so, he is reduced to an indistinguishable part of the system of incarceration that as part of its promise to protect the good life and citizenship of the US, requires the eradication of the humanity of its soldiers.

Here too, the detainees are given nicknames in lieu of their “unpronounceable” names, mirroring the earlier scene where Farmer introduces Tunde. These two scenes draw out how the humanity of both soldier and detainee is removed and how the characters are identifiable through their nonhuman/inhumane identities. This relocation of subjectivity highlights how, as Butler posits, “recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject” (“Critically Queer” 17-18). Consequently, the restrictions placed on their subjectivity, and their subsequent dehumanization, becomes the marker of those subjects. Moreover, the renaming of the detainees and Farmer’s lack of name problematically indicates their shared queerness—without differentiating the victimhood of soldiers and detainees—through their failed recognition “as distinct subjects, instead subsuming them into an indistinguishable mass, a population of nameless, rightless inmates” (Palik 174). The characters become inscribed by the power of the United States, articulating the dominance of its sovereignty over their queer bodies. The movie introduces this process at the moment when the black site is entered, demonstrating the intrinsic link to the physical space of the torture site, the objectives of which are to break down the identity of individuals to make them malleable to the will of the state (Neroni 19). The need for the dissolution of identity is directly attached to the threat from the detainees, understood as a threat to Farmer’s family, and by extension, the nation. This danger is weaved throughout the scenes that introduce both Farmer and the viewer to the black site, a site that is defined by its status outside to the nation.

The framing of the shots through Farmer’s perspective results in the contradiction of the aforementioned erasure of identity, demonstrating how US soldiers, whilst queered to some extent through their experiences, remain in relative positions of power compared to the detainees. Moreover, whilst the soldiers have chosen to enlist, the prisoners have forcibly

been removed from their own countries. As a result, the technique of perspective used here to create an empathetic identification between character and viewer, coupled with the prominence given to Farmer's perspective throughout the movie, reinforces the disparate dynamics of control (and sovereignty) between soldier and detainee. As the camera moves from cell to cell, the detainees are presented in gradually more disturbing situations, making the newly initiated Farmer clearly uneasy. Continuing the tour, Tanner informs Farmer of the various techniques used to isolate and humiliate the detainees: they are not allowed to cover themselves, even when using the toilet, and are prevented from talking to each other. The scene culminates with various shots of hooded figures in stress positions, including one strapped to electrodes, evoking one of the most infamous photographs from Abu Ghraib [Figure 23].

Tanner's voice becomes disembodied as the camera's gaze focuses in on the figure, spliced with shots of Farmer looking on in horror. Through recreating this image, the film allows the viewer the opportunity to focus in on each of the electrodes that are strapped to the prisoner's body, creating a viscerally striking moment. Through the camera's proximity, the viewer becomes closer to the pain and discomfort that the detainee is forced to endure, whilst residing safely behind the relative comfort of a screen. Moreover, the bars of the cell are clearly visible, demonstrating the clear division between the suffering of the prisoner and those outside. Despite a lack of interrogation being featured in the scene, the moment is pivotal to the film, satisfying the perverse desire of the viewer to lay witness to a "real-life" moment (again laying claim to representations being more "real"), whilst still retaining their safety, thereby elevating Moran's film in a similar war to the previously discussed representations of the Iraq War, to a position of "more real than real". Tanner snaps Farmer out of his disbelief, reminding him, and the viewer, that "you gotta remember why they're in here ... no fucking compassion". His solemn advice reinforces the idea that the detainees should not be thought of as human subjects that enjoy the advantages of state protection, rather they represent a

monstrous threat to those benefits and are therefore in opposition to those values and should be treated as such.

Troubled by the treatment of the detainees, Farmer re-joins the other soldiers that evening by the campfire, asking them whether as military personnel, they should “lead by example”. Members of the group articulate several viewpoints:

These are the fucking guys who capture American journalists, decapitate them . . . slowly, videotape that shit, send it all over the world and you’re seriously sitting here concerned about a little panty in their face. That sounds like a regular Saturday night to me!

I don’t know, fellas. They got a lot of people in here, they didn’t even do anything.

Farmer’s in the hard site, man. He’s in the shit . . . It’s where MI keeps all the most valuable inmates.

They just throw you guys in there with a bunch of fucking psychos, and you’ll just figure it out

Enough of this depression talk. I’m going to slit my wrists . . . It’s a freaking fire, let’s have a fucking kumbaya moment.

The setting of the fireplace establishes a clichéd trope that conjures imagery of US wilderness aligned with the “natural”, read here as heterosexual masculinity. Furthermore, the “boyishness” of the soldiers—that is articulated in the film’s title—also points towards their inexperience and ignorance of the situation. The scene’s ultimate rejection of the discussion in favor of “a fucking kumbaya moment” reinforces that the suffering of the detainees is something that is secondary to the soldiers’ ability to have a good time around the fire. Ultimately, the group choose to sing songs with each other that include lines such as “fighting in war that we never see . . . that’s OK cos I got my boys”, thereby reinforcing their own sociality and centrality of experience over those of the detainees. Furthermore, the complexities of the situation are only ever considered from one perspective, that of the soldiers. This scene is a microcosm of the wider film, demonstrating that the only viewpoint worth considering is from the United States. The comments that the detainees should effectively enjoy “a little panty in

their face” mirrors rhetoric from politicians such as Donald Rumsfeld, who responded with “I stand for 8-10 hours a day” to requests for detainees to be given breaks from stress positions, some involving extended periods of standing (Slahi 240). Whenever a moment of critique arises the viewer is reminded that the site houses “valuable inmates” who are “fucking psychos.” The humanity of the detainees is further undermined with such designations, which imply another form of deviancy, this time a mental one.

Ironically, statements such as these highlight the discrepancy between the detainees as “the most valuable inmates” due to their use to the state as intelligence sources, and their perceived inadequacy through myriad forms of abnormality. This discrepancy highlights the ways that the queer body becomes central to the task of legitimizing heteronormativity, whereby, as Butler argues, “heterosexuality is produced . . . by enforcing the prohibition on homosexuality” (*Psychic Life* 135). In the same way, the norms of a heteronormative society are naturalized through the insistence of the radical otherness of anything that lies outside of those norms, thereby harnessing the repudiation of queerness as a process through which to uphold normative values. That the detainees are simultaneously valuable yet not valuable articulates the ways that an “incoherence of identity” masks, as Butler writes, the “arbitrarily closed domain” of the heteronormative subject, and that anything that “cannot be avowed . . . runs the risk not only of becoming externalized in a degraded form, but repeatedly repudiated and subject to a policy of disavowal” (*Psychic Life* 149). The continued degradation and disavowal of the queer subject, then, is essential to establishing the power and dominance of the heteronormative subject of the soldier and the US citizen. This rhetorical slippage is reinforced through the paradox of the detainees who are often unable to fulfil the requirement of providing intelligence, thereby condemning them, as Palik suggests, “to indefinite detention not by evidence proving their crimes, but by absence of evidence that would refute the [US] government’s (unprovable) allegations” (163). The narrative of the film therefore replicates the ways that the detainees’ subjectivities are subject to a continuous disavowal. The legality of

torture is never actually broached, and the only explicit discussion of the morality of the situation is the fireplace scene. Even the experiences of torture are relegated off-screen, covered only through brief discussion between characters. Moreover, the ways that torture is eventually made justifiable through the narrative reduces the suffering of the detainees to an inconsequential concern of the film's representation of events.

## ACROSS THE DIVIDE

The representation of the detainees is focused largely through the violent treatment of them by guards such as Tanner, and the prospect of pathogen and disease that is attached to the prisoners. However, Moran does attempt to explore the relationship between soldiers and detainees through the character of Ghazi Hammoud, played by Omid Abtahi. The character is introduced when Farmer discovers an unconscious prisoner who he attempts to resuscitate, much to Tanner's disgust, who suggests Farmer will contract a disease such as tuberculosis. This scene demonstrates the ways that the terrorist is linked to the idea of "a personal pathology" (Butler, "Explanation" 58). Moreover, as Mel Chen argues, the concept of a toxic body is "particularly (if sometimes stealthily) raced and queered", a process that "participate[s] vividly in the racial mattering of locations, human and nonhuman bodies, living and inert entities, and events such as disease threats" (10). The different responses between Farmer and Tanner highlight how the latter, already integrated into the guard program, views the detainee as queer through its polluting and diseased qualities.

In the opposite cell, Ghazi informs Farmer the prisoner is faking and has a concealed weapon. Initially, Farmer is unable to find anything when he searches the cell and removes Ghazi's blanket as punishment. However, the prisoner eventually ends up trying to attack Farmer and as a result, trust is established between the two. The characters begin to form a relationship with one another, which Farmer keeps secret from the other military personnel, moving away from the disavowal of the queer subject through beginning to accept Ghazi.

Therefore, Farmer relegates himself from the other guards to a position of oppositionality, inhabiting a similar subject position to Ghazi. Through engaging with him socially, Farmer allows Ghazi's subjectivity to appear, reaffirming his humanity. As a result of these interactions, Ghazi's subject position is reliant on Farmer, and consequently reaffirms the dominance of the US over the queer subjects of the detainees, signified by the bars of the cell that continues to separate them, and incarcerate Ghazi [Figure 24].

As the days pass, the two converse and share food, learning about each other's lives outside of the prison. They talk about their families back home, their pasts, and even their potential futures as Farmer invites Ghazi for a drink "when we get out of here". Within the wider film's context, these scenes reinforce the central morality of the narrative, that both detainee and guard are people that are thrown together by circumstance. However, the developing friendship between the two is continuously interrupted as Ghazi is dragged away for (unseen) interrogation. Both characters become increasingly distressed by the environment, and Farmer eventually discovers Ghazi attempt to hang himself using his blanket. This scene marks a pivotal shift in the two characters' relationship, as Farmer removes the blanket to prevent Ghazi harming himself, in a reversal of the earlier scene, where the action of removal is a punitive one. Through his empathetic encounters with Ghazi, Farmer begins to experience an emotional and mental destabilization, similar to that of the queer subject instilled in Ghazi, which becomes the narrative drive of the film's second half.

The increasingly unhinged behaviour of Farmer is directly linked to his experiences of being in Abu Ghraib, again refocusing away from the consequences of the brutal torture to which Ghazi is subjected. Following his attempted suicide, the emotional toll felt by Farmer frames the film's narrative. During a scene revealed to be a dream sequence, Farmer is unable to save the similarly named Ferrell—a play on the word feral—from shooting himself as an escape from the torment of Abu Ghraib. Stuck behind a locked cell door, Farmer can only witness Ferrell's screams: "I'm stuck in here, I can't get out!" The scene parallels the two

through name and circumstance as Farmer increasingly feels the pressure of being in the prison and seeks escape. Eliciting more empathy from the viewer, his character is cast somewhere between tortured hero and anti-hero, forced by his environment to be complicit in acts of torture, a suggestion made explicit through scenes that show the hostile experiences that Farmer faces. This suggestion is exemplified by a scene in which the character is caught in an explosion whilst in a portable toilet. Still inside, Farmer becomes literally covered in shit, the image acting as a heavy-handed cue to the viewer.<sup>45</sup> The toilet appears to be the same as, or at least indistinguishable from, that in the earlier scenes of masturbation. This particular scene coincides with the news that the soldiers' deployment is being extended, demonstrating that the metaphorical shit that the soldiers have endured has come to physically coat their bodies. The moment recalls the soldiers' arrival when the ash from the prison coated their skin. However, in this instance the inescapability of Abu Ghraib has come rushing forward (or above) in an explosive rupture. Moreover, the shit is the accumulative waste of the soldiers, and stands in symbolically for the wasted patriotism they feel in their constant boredom and lack of "global implications" whilst carrying out acts of war for the US. The wider discourse of war become symbolized by the explosion, whilst the toilet occupied by Farmer becomes the wasteland of the prison site, occupied by bodies that have been categorized as comparable forms of human waste: the detainees and the soldiers.

Unable to cope, Farmer ends up breaking down, fully clothed in the shower; the shots are interspersed with images of his girlfriend back home, acting as a reminder of the sacrifices Farmer has made: the homeland that holds his heterosexual masculinity. As the movie progresses, the viewer bears witness to his actions as they steadily remove him from the safety and comfort of that US heteronormativity. Whilst the movie works to align Farmer's queer subject position with that of the detainee, it fails to consider the ways that soldiers still

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<sup>45</sup> A moment that is foreshadowed by one of the soldiers who states that "Farmer's in the hard site, man. He's in the shit" in the previously discussed campfire scene.

operate on behalf of the dominant state power of the US, and fully contemplate the complexities and slippages inherent within queerness. The destruction of his identity becomes even more visceral as Farmer takes part in increasingly violent activities, including lying about his weight to box against a much heavier and more muscular soldier [Figure 25]. Consequently, Farmer now inhabits the space of a queer body and has simultaneously taken on the role of disavowing that body, through acts of regulation and punishment. What is problematic about the film's rendering of Farmer's queerness is that it slides into his victimhood but does not differentiate the types of victim constituted by soldiers and detainees. As the film demonstrates, Farmer, in spite of his queerness, is able to retain a semblance of subjectivity, whilst characters such as Ghazi have theirs all but removed.

The hard bodies of the soldiers display the armour of masculinity that surrounds them, as they fight physically—and symbolically—to maintain their heterosexual attachments. As a result, such activities demonstrate a desire to reinvigorate the lost aspects of that masculinity that is intertwined with a form of punishment for Farmer as the (non-)events of Abu Ghraib take their toll. The psychic and emotional become embodied in the physical as the viewer watches a self-inflicted act of violence. Visually, the fast-paced scene sets up a match between the whiteness of Farmer's body and the black body of Holt (played by Jermaine Washington), which is rendered as the hypermasculine other through its extreme muscularity. Therefore, by inciting Holt to physically punish Farmer, the film designates Holt as an avenging queer body of colour that stands-in for the detainees' potential retribution as another group of queer bodies subjugated by the US state. Furthermore, this scene reiterates the way that queer bodies can occupy the space of the soldier but still be located oppositionally to the central figure of Farmer's white, male soldier.

During this sequence, however, the viewer becomes hard-pressed to remember that Ghazi is being subjected to actual torture off-screen, with only brief moments showing his removal and subsequent return to his cell. Consequently, the film depicts to varying extremes



the two forms of violence that are being exerted simultaneously: one that forms a spectacle of the self-imposed violence on Farmer, who is literally a punching block for Holt's queer body, and the oblique torture that Ghazi experiences as the recipient of the violence that is enacted on the queer. Farmer retains the ability to control how violence is enacted on his body, thereby preserving power over its very treatment, where Ghazi does not. As a US soldier, Farmer is able to maintain the relative privilege of punishing himself physically as a way of avoiding the consequences of actions taken over Ghazi's body with which Farmer remains complicit. Moreover, the primary concern of the movie's narrative becomes the impact on his own body as the repeated blows render him bruised and bloody, eventually collapsed on the floor. His concern and helplessness and subsequent physical punishment acts a way to orient the viewer back to the tortured experience of the US soldiers. Rather than witnessing the effects of torture on Ghazi, which remain only alluded to, the viewer is forcefully reminded of Farmer's suffering.

### “YOU DON'T GET TO SAY THAT TO ME”

The film's problematic US-centric focus clearly recalls representations of the Vietnam War that are closely tied to ideas of heteronormative masculinity. *First Blood* (1982) exemplifies these motifs, dealing with former commando John Rambo, who travels to the small town of Hope, Washington, where local law enforcement officers arrest him. Escaping from jail, Rambo navigates rural terrain as he tries to evade capture, demonstrating the various skills he has attained during his military service. In the second film, *First Blood II* (1985), Rambo is deployed back to Vietnam to recover possible prisoners of war that have been left behind. These films demonstrate the way that soldiers end up being cast as savages (thus, Rambo's social rejection in Hope), that are hostile to their surroundings (evidenced through the action scenes in the surrounding woodland). Rambo's supposed savagery is tied directly to his status as a Vietnam veteran and is linked back to the systems and beliefs of the US nation-state, his

physique exemplifying a body that “the country’s military was more than capable of producing” (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 33). The film explores the ways that soldiers and veterans are inevitably cast by the state as violent and antisocial savages. The character of Rambo is considered to be a bastion of the heterosexual masculinity that the state ironically requires, evidenced through his subsequent deployment in *First Blood II*.<sup>46</sup> Thus, war films are thus shown to construct and valorize heterosexual masculinity as savage yet necessary.

In *Boys*, the soldiers’ experience within the camp points toward a similar narrative of how the men have fallen “victim” to the systems and beliefs of the United States. As Farmer states at the film’s beginning, he signed up to make a difference and instead found himself caught up in circumstances beyond his control. The seemingly innocent intentions of the characters reaffirm their status as *boys* of Abu Ghraib, and the loss of that innocence subsequently becomes equated with the experiences of the nation following 9/11. The lost innocence felt by the nation became manifest, W.J. Crotty argues, through “the sense of personal security that most citizens took for granted [that] gave way to a sombre reality that terrorism had become an integral part” of their existence (37). Unlike the detainees, the soldiers are able to fit this prescription because of how their bodies are viewed—not only as actors of the state but, as the opening scenes suggest, (mostly) white, heterosexual, and “all-American”. However, these qualities are also subject to sacrifice, through the loss of innocence felt, in the very ways that rationalise the violent practices that take place at Abu Ghraib. That is, to occupy the space of the prison and carry out acts of torture, one has to venture over to what Dick Cheney called “the dark side” (“Interview”). In its final act, the film moves toward this justification, whilst also upholding the narrative that queer bodies are always equatable with the monstrous figure of the terrorist.

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<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the socio-political conditions, and thereby the cultural representations, of the Vietnam War are similar to the 2003 Iraq War, whereby both were underscored by a threat to civilization. This creates a cyclical link between the two, establishing the repetitious quality of discourse around US conflicts based upon protecting the nation’s interior against an outside threat. The cultural legacy of the Vietnam War on the War on Terror is further discussed by Ross (2013).

Angered by his resistance to follow orders, and despite their constant reminders that “You’re a soldier, it’s not your job to think”, the MPs eventually inform Farmer of the reason for Ghazi’s detainment, that he “made a bomb that killed innocent people”. A sobbing Farmer questions Ghazi: “He’s lying right? Tell me he’s lying. Did you kill eighteen innocent people?” to which he responds that “they weren’t innocent”. This moment marks a pivotal shift in the character, as Ghazi’s betrayal reveals him to be the duplicitous and monstrous terrorist that is exemplified in US state discourse. Moreover, the film suggests that in conflict nobody is innocent, despite an ideological innocence—also deployed by Berman’s narrator and soldiers in Scranton and Antoon’s texts—that condemns the vicious actions of outsiders whilst justifying US brutality as a way to protect the nation’s innocence.<sup>47</sup> Farmer collapses to the floor, screaming “you don’t get to say that to me, you fuck”. The abrupt shattering of their friendship removes the illusion of Ghazi as being “just a normal guy”. Farmer’s heroic qualities, defiantly questioning Ghazi’s torture, and by extension the norms and practices of the military, are shown to be misguided. Therefore, the actions of the soldiers in the face of duplicity from the prisoners become justifiable, despite the initial resistance felt by characters such as Farmer. Ultimately revealed to be a “true” terrorist, the treatment of Ghazi and the detainees he represents is warranted.

Following the revelation, Farmer begins to fully inhabit life in the prison, becoming more aggressive in his treatment of the detainees. In lieu of the earlier compassion and empathy, Farmer plays loud music and yells out that there is a “new show in town” and that “every hajji will remain awake!” In a scene mirroring his initial encounter with Tanner, Farmer shows around a new recruit. During the tour, he finds Ghazi sleeping in his cell. Dragging him out, Farmer screams at him, “why am I stuck here? Because of you, motherfucker! You piece of fucking shit!” before shoving his head inside a bucket of excrement from his cell [Figure 26].

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<sup>47</sup> Which recalls how a national innocence can be deployed as justificatory for the severe and brutal measures discussed previously in Chapter One.

The scene is a culmination of both men's journeys, as Farmer inhabits the position of exemplary guard, while Ghazi and the rest of the detainees are the equivalent of human waste. His head forced into the bucket, Ghazi corresponds to the shit surrounding Farmer, both symbolically and physically through the detainee cells that enclose him. The scene recalls and builds on the earlier mortar explosion that left Farmer covered in waste, whereby following the acceptance of his role, he now forces Ghazi's head into the shit. As terrorist other, as queer, Ghazi is forced into becoming the literal embodiment of waste/shit by Farmer's violent actions, effectively closing the loop between state rhetoric of the queer body and his individual actions. By embracing this role, Farmer notes that "things seemed to move a lot faster". Ceasing to resist, his suffering lessens, in direct correlation to the increase of the detainees' torment. In other words, Farmer's casting out of Ghazi upholds the norms of the site and allows him to integrate back into the role of non-queer through the violent disavowal of the queer.

As the soldiers sit around the campfire one final time, flares drift over the skyline; the group describe the scene as "awesome", framed in contrast to the previous scene as a quiet moment of sublimity. Able to retreat back to the safety of the campfire, and the solidarity of his fellow soldiers, Farmer's actions and their consequences can soon be forgotten. The scene recalls the early moment between Farmer and his girlfriend, as the flare gun mirrors the fourth of July fireworks. The echoes of her request to "come back to me, Jack" reinforces that the disavowal of the queer is the route back home for Farmer. Furthermore, the visual cue of the flares suggests that following the light of heterosexuality will lead back home, and to the safety of the nation, of masculinity, and kinship. Accompanied by the fireplace, the viewer is reminded that the characters will remain tethered to the nation by the relationships that they have built with one another, and through their association with the concept of innocence. Despite any previous deviance from socio-cultural norms, maintaining the figure of heterosexuality will ultimately prevent the soldiers from being enveloped by Abu Ghraib, unlike Ghazi who again fades into the background of the prison. Rendered invisible following Farmer's act of violence,

the queer body is in stark opposition to the visibility of the soldiers and their status of belonging to the United States.

## A WAY BACK HOME

The spectre and threat of the disavowed queer always remains in close proximity, however. Despite managing to safely return to the nation, pictured through images of blue sky and US flags, Farmer remains troubled by his experiences and the repercussions felt are never far away. Clearly traumatised, Farmer is seen in multiple scenes staring into the distance whilst his family try to converse with him. Unable to relate emotionally following his return, Farmer is also unable to have sex with his girlfriend and perform the function of a heterosexual masculinity. Emotionally and heterosexually damaged, these scenes are marked by their contrast to the film's opening scenes of celebration and kinship. Unable to fully adjust back to his domestic life and landscape, Farmer is left changed by his experiences in Abu Ghraib. In search of a reprieve, his girlfriend decides to take him to the mall, hoping to take his mind off of things. The scene uses tropes of commerce as a way to suggest capitalism will guide the veteran back to the nation. The protagonist of the first short story in Phil Klay's *Redeployment* knowingly mocks this idea, stating that "we took my combat pat and did a lot of shopping. Which is how America fights back against the terrorists" (11).

As the couple visit an electronics store, the shape of Farmer's body is seen in front of a wall of televisions as they suddenly start to show the breaking reports of the Abu Ghraib photographs [Figure 27]. Various images are shown and among them is Farmer's final confrontation with Ghazi. Farmer stands in shock at being faced with the image while his girlfriend looks on in horror behind him. The shot is framed to mirror the opening scene that pans towards the door of Abu Ghraib, moving away from Farmer as he is surrounded by the photo of him and Ghazi. The US flag above positions his body between the pictures of Abu Ghraib and the symbol of the nation, cementing the literal and symbolic positioning as outlier,

caught between a return to the nation and his actions on behalf of the state, the reaction of which will have certain consequences for him. The newsreader can be heard asking “what kind of person could do this?” alongside the infamous description of “bad apples”. As the screen cuts to black, the newscaster states that “the damage to the US international image will be devastating ... As for the soldiers [the repercussions] will surely be significant”, reinforcing the overall narrative arc of the movie.

The apparently ambiguous ending leaves the viewer aligned with the media response to the photographs, itself focused on the repercussions of the soldiers and the international reputation of the United States. However, when considered alongside the empathy that the film has instilled towards Farmer throughout, the uncertainty of the ending is designed to remind the viewer of the soldier’s humanity and what they might lose. Moreover, despite their visibility in the images, the film still fails to link back to the detainees who remain a secondary consideration. The viewer, now informed by the narrative of Farmer’s experience, and the circumstances that led him to his actions, is left to decide whether the subsequent implications for him, and soldiers like him, is fair. *Boys*, then, shows that the soldier is positioned between the US nation-state and the detainees, a relationality exemplified by Farmer’s positioning in the scene. However, by drawing empathy to the figure of the soldier, the viewer is aligning an empathetic attachment to the nation-state that Farmer is deployed from and returns to.

Alluding to the “bad apple” response, the film demonstrates how the events of Abu Ghraib are subject to repeated mediation yet are framed in such a way as to replicate identification with Farmer and the US. Rather than direct the audience to considering the systematic patterns of abuse that took place, the film instead chooses to contextualise the “boys” of Abu Ghraib as patriots simply doing their job, perhaps acting out of boredom and frustration. The film attempts to open up the debate around the use of torture, but in doing so, rejects the complicity of those who participated first-hand. Instead, *Boys of Abu Ghraib* suggests that given the right set of personal circumstances, actions of violent torture could be

understandably justified (as seen in Scranton's *War Porn*). The closing dedication, "for all the victims of war" firmly places the soldiers as the forgotten victims, reinforcing the film's viewpoint. Given the unbalanced representation of characters, and the one-sided perspective offered to viewers, the film fails to live up to its intention to bring a fuller understanding to the events of Abu Ghraib, and its wider relations to the theatre of war. Given this failure, the transcultural potential of the film becomes lost and it instead reinscribes a nationalist, and gendered, perspective.

The film's representation of a largely male perspective (a female guard is once seen briefly) ignores the presence of female military and interrogative personnel at Abu Ghraib, evidenced by accounts of the prison and the leaked photographs from the site.<sup>48</sup> As the title tells us, seen at both the film's beginning and end, this narrative only intends to consider the *boys* of Abu Ghraib, centred on the impact of Farmer's exemplary infantile citizen. In this formulation, female characters function as a reminder of US heterosexuality and masculinity, under threat by the spectre of terrorism. Abu Ghraib, as a site of illegal detention, becomes an invaluable and necessary protection—recalling the words of Captain Hayes—against dangers that threaten the nation. The soldier-centric narrative of the film barely features detainees and is considered solely through the impact on Farmer's character. Initially shown to be a "normal guy" who he wants to share a beer with, Ghazi is ultimately revealed as a killer of numerous "innocent" people. This formulation categorically rejects any contextualization of the circumstances of Ghazi's crime, and the moral ambiguity that Moran's film seeks to explore through Farmer's questioning and apprehension instead invests itself in upholding rhetoric that requires detainment and torture of the queer body to be a necessary evil. Farmer's questioning is ultimately shown to be futile because there will *always* be terrorists and, and as such, the ends justify the means. Therefore, Farmer's journey to the dark side is part of his

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<sup>48</sup> The use of women torturers such as Lynndie England was designed, as Adriana Cavarero suggests, as a "supplementary humiliation" that used "the caricature of female perversion" as a way to enact sadistic forms of sexual humiliation against the detainees (110).

sacrifice to protect his country. By the film's ending, the narrative suggests that rather than attempt to critique the actions of those at Abu Ghraib, and thereby demonizing them, the viewer should understand the complexities of the situation and understand soldiers like Farmer are simply doing their jobs (an understanding it will not grant to Ghazi). Moreover, the soldier becomes subjugated as the heterosexual body is queered to serve the needs of the nation-state and its attendant heterosexuality. As the plot unfolds, the film goes so far as to tell us that there are no nice guys at Abu Ghraib.

At one point during the film, Tanner asks Farmer: "you want to hear a funny story?", telling him that "this one hajji was innocent, but when we sense-dep'd [sensory deprivation] him, he admitted to it anyway". Despite such a brief admission to the failure of torture—that this chapter explores further through the testimony of Slahi—the film's narrative works to erase points of ambiguity or resistance, firmly pointing towards justificatory explanations for Abu Ghraib by its conclusion. Those working at the site are cast as protectors of the crucial rights and freedoms of the US, a nation that is self-portrayed as the guardian of global security. The removal of others' rights and freedoms becomes characterised as necessary by the film's rhetoric and overall message, linking back to similar justifications that came out during the Vietnam War, such as the anonymous quote publicised by Peter Arnett of the Associated Press: "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it" ("Major Describes Move"). Therefore, queer lives are shown to be strategically more valuable than others as it becomes necessary to remove basic human rights to protect the rights of other, non-queer bodies. Continually reminded of the values of nationalist patriotism and heteronormativity, the viewer is intended to empathize with Farmer and his sacrifice. The ending deliberately leaves the viewer to fill in the gaps and use real-life accounts of the Abu Ghraib photographs to finish Farmer's story. Functioning in a similar manner to earlier war stories, the film depicts who can be constructed as human, and why. Rehumanizing the soldiers through the film's narrative comes at the expense of those who are disavowed, like Ghazi—a single character that erases



the thousands of people who are detained mostly without charge or evidence. *Boys of Abu Ghraib* recasts who the victims of the camp are, whilst shoring up the foreign policies of the US and its interventions abroad.

The film exemplifies the proliferation of cultural forms focused on one-sided accounts of the US, that resists the potential for humanizing the detainees. In the case of *Boys*, a partial humanizing does take place that ultimately removes that humanity to cast detainees as even more monstrous. By rejecting a fuller account of illegal detainment, or a narrative that deviates from US nationalist discourse, the film highlights an unwillingness to account for the viewpoint of queer bodies, and to solidify the need for their disavowal. Consequently, the film eradicates the potential for destabilizing accounts of detainee testimony in favour of shoring up the predominant political discourse around Abu Ghraib, and other sites such as Guantánamo. That the perspective of detainees can undercut the hegemony of these narratives is an idea that this chapter now goes on to explore further.

## TALES FROM THE OTHER SIDE

After years of legal battles with the US military, editor Larry Siems and his team successfully managed to release the testimony of Guantánamo Bay detainee Mohamedou Ould Slahi in 2014. Edited by Siems, *Guantánamo Diary* charts the events that led up to Slahi's detention for over fourteen years, and the violent methods of torture carried out on him. At the time of the book's initial publication in 2015, Slahi was still detained with no possibility of release, with numerous habeas corpus requests failing to be considered by the US military. As such, the book represents one of the first, and most extensive, testimonies of Guantánamo. The original handwritten manuscripts totalled 466 pages and were disguised by Slahi as letters to his lawyers to prevent their destruction ("Off the Radar"). The book covers the subject of his illegal detention and torture, as well as the physical and emotional consequences of indefinite detainment. As I will go on to discuss, the pages are heavily redacted in the initial version and

Slahi's account is subjected to repeated forms of mediation (and remediation) through the process of his remembrance and the editing process by Siems. Whilst a "restored" edition was released in October 2017, my emphasis here is on the initial redacted version. I then go on to discuss briefly the implications of a restored, rather than an unredacted, manuscript and the impact that this has on Slahi's account.

Upon, its release the book was well-received, receiving a nomination for the prestigious Samuel Johnson Prize in 2015. Shami Chakrabarti—then director of human rights organization Liberty—described the book in *The Observer* as "striking" in its "resilience and grace" whilst also remarking on the "second, shadowy voice" of the US government within the text ("Guantánamo Diary"). *The New York Review of Books*, meanwhile, said that "*Guantánamo Diary* is certainly the most important and engaging example of prison literature to have emerged so far from the misconceived Global War on Terrorism" (Coll, "An Eloquent Voice from Guantánamo"). Exploring Slahi's account of his detainment, this chapter examines the repercussions in the morally and ethically dubious use of so-called "enhanced interrogation techniques", as well as a troubling expansion of the borders of the US nation-state. Moreover, I explore the *queer present* by including the perspectives of those whose bodies have become queered through processes of violent torture as a means to enact US state sovereignty, further relegating them to the periphery of society. In doing so, the forms of transcultural memory that retain a heteronormative framing can be undermined and destabilized to include acts of queer remembrance. Slahi's diary thus contrasts with *Boys* by presenting the reader with a form of remembrance from Guantánamo centred on the experience of the queer body. Furthermore, through the relationships that he begins to establish with the guards, Slahi begins to bridge the empathetic gap that exists between the two. It is this kind of empathetic engagement, coupled with a perspective oriented toward the queer body, that establishes a productive dialogue for representation and remembrance in response to the erasure of subjectivity detainees experience at the hands of the US state.

In writing his diary, Slahi begins to resist the ways in which his bodily identity has come to be understood through banal yet opaque political and legal descriptions perpetuated by the US. Former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld's words exemplify these kinds of descriptors, as when he termed detainees at Guantánamo as "the worst of the worst" (Seeyle, "Threats"). This prosaic yet obscure categorisation homogenises detainees, removing their agency, and inscribes them with the identity of terrorist; a classification that effectively gave the US unparalleled abilities to build responsive legal frameworks to detain individuals without the usual standard of evidence, or due process, required in domestic legal cases.<sup>49</sup> Supported by individuals such as John Yoo of the Office of Legal Counsel, the United States created extraordinary legal justifications for the capturing and torture of those individuals now termed as "enemy combatants" (Slahi 215). The creation of a new legal category, spawned from the previously discussed socio-political classifications of the queer body such as Puar and Rai, allowed the US to increase the control it already wielded over these bodies, in a way that allowed this expansion to take place beyond the country's borders. This expansion of control came at a time when the rights of queer people within the nation were also being expanded, through marriage equality and increased cultural representation. As Puar has argued, such integrative actions create a state of homonationalism where domestic queers are increasingly absorbed into the mainstream with the effect of justifying the domination of other queer bodies abroad. The paradoxical nature of the queer body is therefore exemplified in both the discourse of homonationalism, and the classification and treatment of detainees such as Slahi.

In one of his first descriptions of interrogation, Slahi describes the paradox of being kept imprisoned without charge or legitimate evidence using the example of a Mauritanian folk tale:

"The rooster thinks I'm corn."

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<sup>49</sup> For an account of the construction of these legal frameworks see Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth* (2004). For a critique of this under International Law, see Ryan Goodman, "The Power to Kill or Capture Enemy Combatants" (2013).

“You’re not corn. You are a very big man. Nobody can mistake you for a tiny ear of corn,” the psychiatrist said.

“I know that, Doctor. But the rooster doesn’t. Your job is to go to him and convince him that I am not corn.”

The man was never healed, since talking with a rooster is impossible. End of story. For years, I’ve been trying to convince the U.S. government that I am not corn. (Slahi 71)

The analogy of rooster (US) and corn (detainee) exemplifies the bind faced by those incarcerated by the nation-state. Removed from their countries and stripped of rights, the detainees’ location mirrors the in-between-ness that their bodies come to represent. Already labelled as terrorist, bodies like Slahi’s become increasingly marginalized by the US state: branded symbolically as enemy combatant and marked physically by torture. These statuses position detainees outside of legal, social, and political frameworks, whilst the physical location of GTMO—an extension of the United States yet within Cuba’s geographical borders—reinforces this indeterminacy, leaving the prisoners in a space between nation-states, thereby removing the statefulness of the detainees. As McClintock argues, the purpose of Guantánamo is “the United States’ absolute dominion over the enemy” as “the prisoners are conjured into legal ghosts” (104). She goes on to call the site “a historical experiment in supralegal violence, an attempt to bypass the Constitution and ransack the ancient rights of habeas corpus, inventing new rules of domination, exclusion, and obliteration” (McClintock 104-105). Through the definition of “terrorist”, the subject finds themselves physically and symbolically removed from any nation-state (of their home nation and the US), cementing their outsider position. The inability of Slahi to convince the US of he *is not* thus presents a bind that opposes the declaration of agency encountered through his utterance of “I am”. This lack of declarable subjectivity frames the detainee’s body as queer through its disavowal and segregation, producing its pathological status. Further, the detainee’s body becomes a kind of blank slate onto which the US can inscribe meanings of its own: queer, threat, terrorist, mining the queer body for the purpose of the state.

Throughout his account, Slahi describes interrogations of detainees from numerous countries that are facilitated by multiple nation-states working in conjunction. Shortly after their arrival, Slahi and his fellow detainees call out the myriad national identities contained on site: “I am from Mauritania . . . Palestine . . . Syria . . . Saudi Arabia . . . !” (Slahi 40). The ability of the US to control and subjugate bodies across multiple borders highlights the transnational implications of queering, one that functions in opposition to the negatively perceived transnational impact of the terrorist. Additionally, Slahi describes how during the repeated interrogations he experienced, states such as “Mauritania and the U.S. started to interpret the information as they pleased”, thereby adapting intelligence to suit their requirements (Slahi 97). Portrayed by interrogators as the main recruiter of the pilots that flew the planes into the Twin Towers in 2001, Slahi describes how

[t]he guys he mentioned were reportedly trained in 1998, and joined al Qaeda and were assigned to the attack then. How could I possibly have sent them in October 1999 to join al Qaeda, when they not only already were al Qaeda, but had already been assigned to the attack for more than a year? (Slahi 204)

Despite the presence of contradictory evidence, the interrogators determine that Slahi was directly responsible for the attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Moreover, Slahi is known to have been tied to Al-Qaeda in the early 1990s, when the organization worked alongside the US government to carry out the shared objective of toppling the Afghani Communist government. Although they shared similar political aims in the past, the interrogators impose a narrative onto Slahi, exerting subjective dominance and control over his body and identity, thus enforcing US political sovereignty.

The premise behind the repeated interrogations performed on Slahi was that “U.S. interrogators magically stuck with two words for more than four years: Tea and Sugar” (Slahi 95). Perceived as code words for terrorist activity, US intelligence organizations build up their case around the use of those two words. Despite clear knowledge of the lack of evidence against him, Slahi’s initial house arrest in Mauritania and subsequent rendition to Cuba were

not prevented, for—in his words—“no reason besides injustice and misuse of power” (Slahi 120). As a result, the queering of Slahi’s body is facilitated by a transnational network through a situation that is predicated on the political supremacy of the United States. His body and its subsequent treatment, therefore, becomes a locus for those processes of control and subjugation; conditions of his subjectivity that are often made clear to Slahi throughout his experiences at Guantánamo.

Demonstrating the intersection of racial bias and lack of evidence in Slahi’s treatment, one of his interrogators tells him, “In the eyes of the Americans, you’re doomed. Just looking at you in an orange suit, chains, and being Muslim and Arabic is enough to convict you” (Slahi 220). Consequently, the identities of being Muslim *and* Arabic are aligned with a form of deviance and, therefore, criminality. Moreover, those identities are reified through the comparison between them and the orange jumpsuit and changes on Slahi’s body. This description highlights that Slahi is immediately identifiable through the characteristics “Muslim” and “Arabic”; furthermore, the two are inextricably linked to one another. To be seen as Arabic is to be seen as Muslim, which thereby links an individual with the deviance associated with those identities and the categorization of criminal.<sup>50</sup> That Slahi is dressed in an orange jumpsuit is not inconsequential, changing how he is physically identified as a result of how he is symbolically labelled by the United States.<sup>51</sup> Slahi contrasts that racial positioning with the free speech enjoyed within the nation’s borders: “Nazis and White Supremacists have the freedom to express themselves. . . . But as a Muslim, if you sympathize with the political views of an Islamic organization you’re in big trouble. Even attending the same mosque as a suspect is big trouble” (Slahi 261). What Slahi demonstrates is how the deviance of being a Muslim

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<sup>50</sup> Ahmed’s discussion of discourses of asylum and migration is useful here in thinking about how this process takes place. She describes how hate circulates through “affective economies” that stick “‘figures of hate’ together, transforming them into a common threat” (*Cultural Politics* 15).

<sup>51</sup> The jumpsuits’ distinctive design is not solely to avoid the escape of prisoners; the suits remove the individuality of those wearing them, as well as assigning an association of guilt and “non-compliance”. See BBC News Magazine, “Why do prisoners wear lurid jumpsuits?” and Adam Brookes, “Inside Guantánamo’s secret trials” (2005).

becomes compounded through association with certain political organizations or state suspects.

As a result, the qualities of contagion and pollution are again articulated in a way that dangerously homogenizes Muslims. To actively associate oneself with Islam through a political organization is to articulate a kind of political agency in opposition to the values of the US, and therefore one must be constrained. Puar and Rai (2002) suggest that racial markers are tools used by the state to subjugate queer bodies. Those who are white can safely express themselves with First Amendment protection; however, people of colour are always suspects. The bodies of Slahi and the detainees, then, become signifiers that reinforce the legitimacy of normalizing discourse that cast queer bodies outside of the national imaginary. Exposed to such subjective dominance across transnational borders, detainees are initially powerless to resist the (white) supremacy of US nationalist power.

This intranational and transcultural division becomes clearly marked out at sites like Guantánamo, through the race of the guards and personnel, who are predominately white. This reduces the queer detainee to the space of rightless individual, stripped back by the overarching power of the United States. When he first arrives at the site, Slahi is informed that he has arrived on “Christian . . . sovereign American soil” (Slahi 247). GTMO, therefore, acts as an extension of US ideologies, based on race and religion. The withholding of due process becomes perversely bound up with this type of nationalism, exemplified by interrogators who “always like[d] to quote the U.S. president”, telling Slahi that “we will not send you guys to court and let you use our justice system, since you’re planning to destroy it” (Slahi 340). The separation of Slahi from due process mirrors the site’s extra-national location in Cuba. Guantánamo functions as a space outside of the nation designed to physically contain threats to the country—subjugating them through violent methods situated externally to normative legal frameworks—as a way to neutralize them. Thus, the extra-national functions as a way

to protect the national, while the inhuman practices of torture are used as a way to defend the human.

Again, such spaces are entangled with how the non/human is defined and conceptualized, through the state power of the US.<sup>52</sup> The externality (or extra-nationality) of the site is combined with the construction of the “enemy combatant”, a newly defined category designed to relocate the detainee’s queer body physically, symbolically, and legally outside of the space of the nation. In doing so, the treatment of the detainees becomes legitimate despite those same processes being regarded as “unlawful were these Enemy Prisoners of War (EPW)” (Slahi 210). Moreover, the site functions as a place that operates outside of the boundaries of normative space and time. Ahmed argues that to be “‘out of time’ as well as ‘out of place’ with others” becomes the source of social conflict and therefore the constitutive identity of the detained body (*Queer Phenomenology* 13). Exemplified through the confines of Guantánamo and the subsequent removal of his statefulness, bodies like Slahi’s are forced to be out of place, while his indefinite, and therefore timeless, incarceration renders him out of time. The US therefore creates an environment whereby Slahi’s body is simultaneously removed from sociality and demonstrated as the terrorist queer that poses a threat to the nation.

## METHODS OF CONTROL

However, the process of queering experienced by the detainees is not only limited to a broad cultural oppositionality. During his internment, the “enhanced interrogation techniques” used against Slahi were of an extremely violent and sexualized nature. Authorized by Secretary of

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<sup>52</sup> Noreen Giffney and Myra J Hird offer a discussion of the “simultaneous between and in-between” of the non/human, raising the issue of borders and boundaries but also a queer “instability, fluidity, resistance, and vulnerability”. Thus, “explorations of literal, figural, metaphorical and material relationships, transmigrations and hybridisations” between the two are made possible, whilst marking out “the impossibility of applying a hermetic seal” to the distinction between them, “however temporary and shifting” (Giffney and Hird 3).



State Donald Rumsfeld and President George W. Bush, these procedures would often be “carried out by female military interrogators” (Slahi 216), designed to heighten distress for the detainees. As Slahi describes,

[a]s soon as I stood up, the two [REDACTED] took off their blouses, and started to talk all kind of dirty stuff you can imagine, which I minded less. What hurt me the most was forcing me take part in a sexual threesome in the most degrading manner. (Slahi 230)

The use of sexual violence mirrors acts carried out at other sites such as Abu Ghraib, and perhaps most notably, were deployed by personnel that were drafted into Guantánamo from domestic US prisons. Moreover, the design of Standard Operation Procedure (S.O.P) for interrogations was created in consultation with the Federal Bureau of Prisons (Palik 192). That these abuses can be linked to the domestic space of the nation, highlights, as Avery Gordon writes, the full “relationship between United States military prisons abroad and territorial United States civilian prisons” (165). Furthermore, that link is made across transnational sites, indicating the wilful inaccuracy of definitions that categorize torture as the actions of “a few bad apples” functioning outside the scope of the nation. Rather, such procedures are shown to be an extensive part of both domestic and international policy. Whilst the classification of “bad apples” was rejected by an investigation undertaken by the Senate Armed Services Committee in December 2008, the report is no longer available on the network of US government websites.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, as Michelle Alexander and many other theorists argue, the racial disparity of domestic US prison populations suggests that “mass incarceration . . . [has] emerged as a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social

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<sup>53</sup> Whilst this was discovered in October 2017, it has not been possible to determine when the report was actually removed. It does, however, come at a time when the political policy and agenda of the Obama administration has been subject to mass rollback following the inauguration of Donald Trump as President, and other sites have either been altered or removed. For instance, references to “climate change” have been erased from the Environmental Protection Agency’s official policy documents and online presence.

control” (4). Due to the link between domestic and extranational prisons, the detainment of individuals at sites like Guantánamo can also be tied to factors that include race, incorporating a key component of US policy across both spheres (“Bureau of Justice Statistics”). As Butler argues, the use of sexual violence as a method of torture “seeks to expose the status of the tortured as the permanent, abased, and aberrant outside to subject-formation” thereby compounding the dominance of sovereignty over the detainee body. Additionally, as those detained are placed “outside the civilizational trajectory that secures the human” the state is given legitimacy to use such force. This consequently allows “the defenders of civilization the ‘right’ to exclude them more violently”, thereby permitting extreme violence that includes the use of sexual assault (“Sexual Politics” 18). Thus, the identity of the US as the defender of civilization and human rights perversely gives them the justification to carry out violent acts including rape, principally by moving outside and away from the normative centre of the nation.

The violence enacted by the US on the queer body is used as an extreme form of control to exert its sovereignty over those bodies. Explicitly linked to certain identities, such as Arab and/or Muslim (which are often conflated) the violence experienced by Slahi and others also included a disruption of their religious practices, dominating further their subjectivities. Slahi gives the example of when he refuses “to stop speaking [his] prayers” when ordered by the guards, he is “forbidden to perform [any] ritual prayers for about one year to come” (Slahi 213). Furthermore, during the holy month of Ramadan, he is “forbidden to fast” and is “fed by force” (Slahi 213), describing this as “one of the most barbaric acts” to which he is subjected during his imprisonment (Slahi 241). The weaponization of religion is used by the military to forcefully enact state power over the detainees, violating any form of “embodied acts of agency” (Palik 190). Furthermore, through the “violent invasion of the body” the prisoners are forcibly kept alive to continue the cycle of violence against them (Palik 190). Thus, the detainees are presented with a symbolic bind through the use of force-feeding, a practice that

is painful and violent in its equivalence to torture, practiced by a nation-state that purports to be sustaining of the individual.

This is an idea that is reflected through statements made to Slahi, who was told that “because we’re Americans we treat you guys according to our high standards. Look at [REDACTED], we’re offering him the latest medical technology” (Slahi 65). Given the rationalization of saving detainee lives, the use of force-feeding is lent moral and ethical legitimacy, as Palik notes, through the exceptionalist ideals of “freedom, justice, and the sanctity of life” (203). Consequently, military personnel at Guantánamo are “allowed to give [Slahi] medication and first aid”, putting them in the role of both prisoner and “life-saver” (Slahi 252). Thus, the guards at the camp are able to serve the political and symbolic function of the United States; they are charged to function as the guardians of civilization, equipped to carry out acts of torture to sustain that security. As Chaudhuri puts it, they are “the forces of good facing an utterly evil enemy and obliged to go over to the ‘dark side’” (25). Simultaneously, however, the US adheres to its humanitarian values through a willingness to keep detainees like Slahi alive, attempts that are often considered undeserved. As one of his interrogators tells him, “if you killed five thousand people by your association with al Qaeda, we should kill you five thousand times. But no, because we are Americans we feed you and are ready to give you money if you give us information” (Slahi 329). Thus, the United States remains categorized by its heightened moral compass, relegating torture to a necessary evil, and suggesting that the treatment of detainees is beyond anything that they desire to be given. However, detainee narratives like Slahi’s challenge this imaginary, effectively destabilizing the myths of salvation that surround sites like Guantánamo.

The violence enacted against Slahi demonstrates how the United States repeatedly attempts to dominate his bodily subjectivity. He describes how the impact of torture leaves him “shaking like a Parkinson’s patient”, and how “[the interrogator] was literally executing me but in a slow way” (Slahi 244); the torture further queering his body as disabled. Rendering his

body as disabled places Slahi in opposition to able-bodiedness, that which, Robert McRuer writes, “masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order of things” (“As Good as It Gets” 79). Furthermore, by imposing a state of disability on Slahi’s body, the interrogators are upholding the pathology of his queer subjectivity. Understood as queer, Slahi is thus made to inhabit a state of corporeality that matches his symbolic status, in opposition to the norms of the productive US society. Thus, his body and subjectivity can also be understood as a counterpoint to “neoliberalism’s heightened demands for bodily capacity” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 1), exemplifying the concept of slow death. Slahi directly acknowledges this conception, which Berlant describes as “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” (*Cruel Optimism* 95). In other words, to be segregated from the “natural order” of a productive society, Slahi’s body is again marked pathologically against the normative core of the United States. The proximity to a deterioration of existence that Berlant posits also reaffirms the queer link between Slahi’s body and non-productive waste and death. Cultivated in an environment of structural inequality and suffering, Slahi is made to experience the consequences of the United States’ expanding neoliberal project; a body that must continuously suffer to uphold the norms of that development.

Slahi understands that his treatment forms part of the wider “holy war against the so-called terrorism”, publicly portrayed as the battle between the civilization of the US and its allies against the Arab world (Slahi 241). Thus, the hegemonic power of the United States bleeds into the everyday experience of those detained at Guantánamo, whilst those who act on behalf of the US are in a position of retaining that dominance and control. The space of the prison, then, becomes a microcosm of the wider structural inequalities that exist between the West, and its attendant norms, and those considered to operate outside of those norms. The military personnel become the embodiment of the “powerful sovereign entitlements” of the US, whilst at the same time are able to claim what Puar calls “tremendous vulnerability” on behalf

of the nation (*The Right to Maim* x). The actions of torture, then, become part of “the sovereign right to kill or its covert attendant, the right to maim . . . key elements in the racializing biopolitical logic of security” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* x). Therefore, the bodies of the detainees, and their related health statuses, exemplify the site and space of that logic, expanding on the “subjugation of life to the power of death” that is experienced through necropolitics, and establishing a new symbolic space that also incorporates the right to maim (Mbembe 73). The readerly encounter with Slahi’s writing, then, is the space where resistant modes of cultural representation are created through an engagement with the assemblages of queer affect.

## PALIMPSESTS

Slahi is eventually relocated to a more isolated area of Guantánamo “reserved by then for the worst detainees in the camp; if one got transferred [REDACTED] many signatures must have been provided, maybe even the president of the U.S.” (Slahi 217). The increased intensity of the torture is also coupled with a more overt nationalism. Rooms used for interrogations are patriotic in a way that is designed to function as another method of torture. Slahi describes how they were “full of pictures showing the glories of the U.S.: weapons arsenals, planes, and pictures of George Bush” (Slahi 245). The political oversight of the President, authorizing detainee treatment, is symbolised in the portraits of Bush. The images remind the detainees who is responsible for their treatment—whether as individuals or as representatives of the United States. Equally, the images of weapons and planes serve to reinforce the sovereign strength of the nation over those being kept at Guantánamo. In addition, the torturers are reminded of their patriotic function in carrying out their roles. As part of his torture, Slahi recounts how he is often made to “listen to the National Anthem over and over” (Slahi 366), intended to function as a reminder of the national power of the United States, whilst further aggravating those being interrogated. The use of the anthem also counterpoints the more

common use of heavy metal music (as seen in *Boys of Abu Ghraib*) that is used to disorient the listener, highlighting the use of propaganda as a weapon against the detainees. Songs of “hatred and madness” are utilized, such as Drowning Pool’s “Bodies”, that feature provocative lines such as “let the bodies hit the floor” (Slahi 367). Slahi’s narrative demonstrates the operations of power that lie behind techniques used against him, but also the ways that they are founded on simplistic understandings of those who are being detained.

Slahi reflects further on the inherent contradictions of detainment, particularly in trying to understand the viewpoint of his captors. Drawing comparisons between his experience of detainment and slavery, Slahi remarks that

Slaves were taken forcibly from Africa, and so was I. Slaves were sold a couple of times on their way to their final destination, and so was I. Slaves suddenly were assigned to somebody that didn’t choose, and so was I. And when I looked at the history of slaves, I noticed that slaves sometimes ended up an integral part of the master’s house. (Slahi 314)

In doing so, he draws attention not only to the biopolitical nationalism of the site, but also the transnational and transhistorical threads that circulate through Guantánamo. Highlighting the parallels of racial prejudice between the two historical phenomena, Slahi points towards the way that race, as a facet of queerness, is integral to them. Given the intrinsic link to racial markers, coupled with how sites like Guantánamo function as storage facilities for people of colour, it becomes perversely ironic that such spaces are designated as “black sites”. The term therefore acknowledges the racial implications, as well as the association with darkness, either by “going over to the dark side” or by hiding the activities away from the public.<sup>54</sup>

Slahi’s text also mirrors nineteenth-century slave narratives through its editorial process: in those earlier texts, black voices would always be mediated and framed by white

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<sup>54</sup> A parallel is drawn here to Toni Morrison’s argument in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) which discusses how the origins of the US can be tied back to the notion of a “blank darkness” that is used to bind and silence black bodies as part of the hierarchy of race on which the nation is built (38). Morrison also states that this blackness is a construction that enables whiteness, rendering whiteness invisible and everything that blackness is not.

ones. In order for the black narrative to be “legitimate” to white audiences (and thus have political and/or emotional power), a white editor usually was used. Siems’ role in Slahi’s book cannot but recall this context. This reading offers what Yogita Goyal calls “richly suggestive paths to explore connections” from past to postcolonial present, whilst avoiding (in similar ways to what memory scholars such as Rothberg posit) the danger in obscuring the specificity of sites like Guantánamo, reinscribing “hidden assumptions about the power of analogy” to “shape modes of temporal and spatial connection” (71). By drawing attention to the apprehension and treatment of prisoners as modern slaves,<sup>55</sup> Slahi highlights the ways that prejudice informs the practices of US global policy and warfare. His text thus offers connections between memories of empire’s past and present. The shifting generic quality of his writing (from prison to slave narrative to personal testimony), however, reminds readers of the dynamic relationality between the two.<sup>56</sup>

Recounting his experiences, Slahi becomes increasingly aware of how “in the secret camps, the war against the Islamic religion was more than obvious” (Slahi 265), and how the sites operate within wider transcultural and transhistorical dynamics. His body, and therefore his narrative, opposes the notion of alignment, that is to “face the direction that is already faced by others ... allow[ing] bodies to extend into spaces” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 15). Being oppositional, Slahi’s body cannot extend into shared spaces and instead becomes constrained by the US state. His subsequent torture becomes the physical manifestation of the stripping away of his statefulness, reorienting his subjectivity and agency toward the will of the United States. He is told that to restore his freedom, that he must capitulate to his interrogator’s demands, to “provide Intels”. The refusal to comply, or satisfy his captors, results in an even harsher regime of torture (and thereby increased control). Consequently, the black site of Guantánamo enables, what Ahmed describes as the ability of “some bodies to inhabit

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<sup>55</sup> For more see Kim Gilmore, “Slavery and Prison—Understanding the Connections” (2000).

<sup>56</sup> Goyal’s article provides further examination of the generic qualities of Slahi’s text and how these travel across histories of imperialism and canonical Western texts.

and move in public space” through the restriction of other bodies “that are enclosed or contained” (*Cultural Politics* 70).<sup>57</sup>

The containment and enclosure of queer bodies is a condition of such black sites that is not exclusive to the contemporary moment, and has in fact, been repeated throughout history. During the early 1990s, Guantánamo was used to house Haitian refugees, and when an outbreak of HIV was discovered, those suspected of being infected were categorized as “risk groups”. Isolated and detained in specially set-up camps, those infected were moved away from the “general population”. Therefore, sites like Guantánamo foster what McClintock calls an “imperial déjà vu”, with its repeated images of those “reduced to zombies, unpeopled bodies, dead men walking, bodies as imperial property” (104). As a result, Hartnell argues, the site actually “point[s] to a genealogy of US empire that undermines American exceptionalist claims” (“The ‘Katrina Effect’” 50). Functioning as a palimpsest of memory, the site—and the narratives of those contained within it—uncover the biopolitical implications for queer bodies subjugated by the sovereignty and control of the United States.

Whilst the site has been subject to intense political scrutiny and debate, it has yet to be closed. During his presidency, Barack Obama repeatedly promised to close down Guantánamo and release those still imprisoned, signing his first executive order in this respect two days into office. Despite this, the site remains open due to pressure from primarily Republican politicians (Bruck). Obama’s failure has led to the Trump administration’s subsequent inheritance of the site, and Trump’s previously mentioned suggestion that its remit would be expanded dramatically. This has not yet been put into policy, however those still detained at Guantánamo look increasingly unlikely to be granted any kind of release. It becomes important, then, to see Guantánamo as a space that exemplifies the wider global implications of the US and to identify the layering of memories that exist within the space to

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<sup>57</sup> Whilst not talking directly about torture, Ahmed’s formulation can be used to envisage how bodies are permitted or denied movement in the black sites, and at the expense of others.



uproot the queer testimonies of subjugated bodies that haunt the site. Guantánamo Bay's function as a site of continued subjugation demonstrates its operation as a space of queer transcultural memory that requires cultural attention. Texts such as Slahi's provide an opportunity to identify queer bodies that have been restrained and marginalized, from slaves to refugees and HIV/AIDS, and to those now labelled as "enemy combatants". Allowing their voices to be heard is imperative to establishing a queer, antiimperialist, archive which enables empathetic understanding and identification with the queer; in turn, this project diversifies the scope of transcultural memory. Through their encounter with Slahi's testimony and experience, the reader is able to participate in an empathetic engagement that can create spaces for the experience of queer affect (through the work's ties to non-normativity and rendered deviance that is linked to pathological violence and sexuality) in a similar way to the engagement invited by Antoon's novel and Elahi's artwork.

## QUEER EMPATHY AND RESISTANCE

This empathetic encounter is modelled by Slahi throughout his text, as he slowly begins to build relationships with his captors. Initially resisting the dominance of the interrogators, Slahi eventually relents and "[i]n order to stop torture" attempts "to please [my] assailant, even with untruthful, and sometimes misleading, Intels" (Slahi 255). Despite being openly dishonest, Slahi's treatment improves once he becomes compliant. This demonstrates that the processes of torture at Guantánamo are designed to control the queer subject. Slahi slowly builds relationships with guards and interrogators over the period of his detainment, as some leave behind gifts and notes for Slahi: "[REDACTED] wrote, 'Pill [a nickname given to Slahi], over the past 10 months I have gotten to know you and we have become friends. I wish you good luck, and I am sure that I will think of you often. Take good care of yourself. [REDACTED]'" (Slahi 368). Despite prohibitive regulations, the guards allow Slahi to watch movies and converse with them. Slahi uses these relationships as an attempt to understand the processes

of violence that are enacted against him. As he comes to know his captors, he even meditates on the wider circumstances that led to his detainment, stating that “human beings make use of torture when they get chaotic and confused. And Americans certainly got chaotic, vengeful, and confused, after the September 11, 2001 attacks” (Slahi 370). Beginning to engage empathetically, despite the “evidently unjust” way he is treated, Slahi comes to see the guards and intelligence operatives as people who carry out a job (Slahi 337). Whilst this kind of framing is often used to vindicate personnel that Slahi encounters on the ground, he does not negate them of responsibility. He does, however, use it as a way in to understand his captors without eradicating the violence committed against him. Given the treatment of Slahi, his assertion that Westerners view Arabs as “savage, violent, insensitive, and cold-hearted” becomes perversely ironic (Slahi 359), as the guards become the ones to inhabit such behaviours. In response, Slahi attempts to form relationships and to empathise with his captors. Consequently, such forms of representation complicate the reductive binaries of good/bad and us/them that are fostered around socio-political discourse that followed 9/11.

When his testimony is compared with the limited representations of Muslims from US perspectives, Slahi’s account illuminates the importance of inclusive queer viewpoints that can function as routes into an empathetic engagement around the “War on Terror” and its transcultural effects. The importance of this kind of engagement is reflected in the ways that Slahi’s interrogators respond to him:

“Is it not the same, Bosnian and Arabic?” asked [REDACTED] ... [REDACTED] is supposedly armed with basic knowledge about Arabs and Islam. But [REDACTED] and the other interrogators always addressed me, “You guys from the middle east...,” which is so completely wrong. (Slahi 338)

As this encounter demonstrates, and as seen in texts such as *Boys of Abu Ghraib* and those discussed in the previous chapters, those who are viewed as queer become blurred into nebulous abstraction, as the individual becomes subsumed to a broader identity

categorization. These groupings are subjected further to their own forms of generalization, as the interrogator refers to Slahi as one of those “guys from the middle east”, thereby creating a singularly identifiable classification that is both broad and homogenizing. Furthermore, the distinction between separate languages like Bosnian and Arabic is removed, eradicating any markers of difference. In place of these disparate identities is a singular representation that is more easily identifiable and, therefore, malleable. The broad grouping allows for the conditions that identifies those same groups as “terrorist”; in opposition to the norms of the civilized West. What these categorizations all share is that they are imposed by western countries such as the United States and are imposed arbitrarily by the consequences of political landscapes, with the intention of dehumanizing and deindividualizing those like Slahi. His testimony, then, becomes a mode through which his subjectivity can be rearticulated, creating an empathetic engagement that can be characterized as a queer method of resistance. As a result, queer texts like this draw connections between the interior and exteriority of the nation and its attendant subject positions, facing toward those subject positions that are located at the periphery of society.

Describing one of his most intense periods of torture, Slahi depicts the host of actions that are carried out against him:

I was deprived of my comfort items, except for a thin iso-mat and a very thin, small, worn-out blanket. I was deprived of my books, which I owned. I was deprived of my Koran. I was deprived of my soap. I was deprived of my toothpaste and of the roll of toilet paper I had. The cell—better, the box—was cooled down to the point that I was shaking most of the time. I was forbidden from seeing the light of day; every once in a while they gave me a rec-time at night to keep me from seeing or interacting with any detainees. I was literally living in terror. For the next seventy days I wouldn't know the sweetness of sleeping: interrogation 24 hours a day, three and sometimes four shifts a day. (Slahi 218)

Despite the continuous use of torture over sustained periods, Slahi's writing exemplifies, through the repeated use of “I”, how he is able to enact a form of resistant subjectivity to the process of subjugation carried out against his body. Recounting the deprivation, Slahi

describes the removal of his possessions, the imposition of isolation, being denied access to sunlight, and being kept awake for almost three months. Therefore, this section highlights torture's dynamics of power and how the dominant state seeks to maintain sovereignty over the queer body. Despite the myriad techniques deployed against his body aimed at the eradication of his selfhood, Slahi reasserts his sense of agency and self through the continued process of writing, documenting the acts carried out against him.

The act of writing and remembrance, then, becomes a way that Slahi actively resists the biopolitical consequence of torture, configured through what Butler calls the sustained use of "the linguistic assertion of the connection" to the act, thereby rehumanizing representations of torture (*Antigone's Claim* 7). Slahi positions his subjectivity against the numerous acts of violence carried out against his body, thereby resisting the design of torture to reduce the individual down to a body that can be wielded as "an information procurement tool" minable for information (Neroni 10). Consequently, the instilling of a sense of subjectivity through the (re)creation of a "subject of desire", works to "dismantle contemporary torture's edifice and . . . brings back discussions of political rights" (Neroni 11). Consequently, by listing the manner of ways that he is deprived of those rights, through a repeated articulation of his agency, Slahi's testimony attempts to disrupt and dismantle the structure and ideology of torture. Slahi's account, moreover, refutes the other attendant categorizations used to define his body, as "Muslim terrorist" and of occupying the status of "bare life".

Slahi's narrative also functions to renegotiate the connection between the camps and "the indeterminate time of indefinite detention" (Palik 218). Throughout the manuscript, Slahi not only documents his experiences through narrative testimony, but also repeatedly invokes the notion of time, using the word on over two hundred separate occasions. Slahi therefore harnesses the idea of temporality within narrative, as a way of producing a sense of time that resists the indeterminacy of detention. However, the narrative is not presented in a linear manner: instead events are relayed to the reader through a polychronic organization of events

moving around time and space. Therefore, the structure points towards a deeper network of biopolitical and cultural conditions at Guantánamo that operate through history and memory. In creating such a temporality, Slahi's narrative creates the possibility of an empathetic experience for the reader, whilst resisting the narrative of "the 'ticking time bomb' situation . . . used as a limiting case that justifies torture of prisoners who have knowledge of an imminent attack" (Sontag). That Slahi's testimony is unable to be relayed to the reader in a linear manner points toward the experience of time felt in Guantánamo that mirrors the reduction of the subject into a queer body. The experience of time, and its subsequent mediation, is a form of queer time that operates outside of normative temporal structures. Furthermore, that that temporality reaches out "far beyond the time and space of imprisonment, and far beyond the imprisoned" demonstrates how detainees are irrevocably changed (Palik 81). This marks queer time as intrinsic to the experience of torture, underscoring how the implications of that change have an extended impact across borders of time, space, and place. However, the reader's empathetic experience of that queer time, then, becomes a mode through which queer resistance can also be established, rendering the fractured subjectivity of the detainee whilst acknowledging their potential for resistant forms and articulations of subjecthood.

In encountering these queer perspectives, however, it remains important to recognise the numerous forms of mediation that alter and potentially distort testimony and remembrance. Any given page in *Guantánamo Diary* reveals copious redactions by the US military: the original manuscript containing almost two and a half thousand. Considered alongside the subjugation of Slahi's body, the redactions inevitably function as yet another form of violence enacted against him.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, the US military argues that the redactions protect national security, thereby reaffirming justifications for harm against queer bodies. Furthermore, Siems often observes in footnotes that the redactions serve an arbitrary purpose, such as hiding

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<sup>58</sup> Erin Trapp posits that the redactions function as a site of "depiction of the relationship between prisoner and interrogator" that present the conscience of the democratic US state, and by extension, the population it legitimizes, particularly a "white liberal conscience" (57).

(only) the female gender of operatives. Some redacted passages last for several pages—the most heavily redacted section lasts seven—thereby eliminating the reader’s ability to fully bear witness to Slahi’s account. The original manuscripts are subject to further mediation through the editorial processes, thus implicating Siems’ editorial judgement in how the testimony is ultimately received by the book’s readership. Moreover, the eventual publication of *Guantánamo Diary* was only able to occur due to the intervention of Siems and his legal team. Consequently, before ever encountering Slahi’s voice, the text has been mediated and remediated multiple times by forces external to him. In this, Slahi is indeed conceptualized as an individual “without a voice”, who was “given a voice by various surrogates”, thereby reinforcing the detained body as exemplary of bare life, removing individual agency and selfhood from the detainee (“Off the Radar”). Although its publication provides a wider voice to those detained at Guantánamo, those voices only come to be heard once given the opportunity by, and following the resistance of, those more privileged: (often white) US citizens. Consequently, modes of remembrance of, by, and for Guantánamo detainees remain embroiled within the spectre of the power of the US nation-state, its citizens, and the hegemony of its global discourse.

Following Slahi’s eventual release in October 2016 after fourteen years, he and Siems worked together to republish the text in a “fully restored” version that removed the text’s redactions. The newer edition, released in late 2017, is marketed as uncovering the truth of Slahi’s experience at Guantánamo. However, the narrative has been reassembled from his remembrance of events. The restored version has subsequently been miscategorized in media interviews with Slahi and Siems, as a literal “unredacted version” of the original manuscripts, rather than comprised from Slahi’s retroactive remembrance (“Off the Radar”). The slippage created by the suggestion of an unredacted manuscript results in erasing the violence of the text’s original redactions, intimating that the effects of them are fully reversible. Therefore, even in its fully imagined form, the book remains subject to a network of mediations

that impact on the limited remembrance of events at the prison. Despite such limitations, texts like *Guantánamo Diary* begin to do the cultural work of uncovering queer remembrance that is formed in the fractured peripheries, allowing for the powerful rhetoric of the US military to be destabilized whilst uncovering the biopolitical implications underpinning it. Consequently, more powerful counter-narratives can begin to emerge, providing a fuller understanding of sites such as Guantánamo.

## CONCLUSION

By encountering empathetic narratives such as Slahi's, readers can engage with forms of queer resistance that reject singular (and heteronormative) modes of transcultural memory. These empathetic strands flesh out understanding of how we can engage with the network of transnational, transhistorical, and transcultural assemblages that are encountered through sites such as Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. Texts such as *Guantánamo Diary* highlight the urgent need for non-normative narratives to be included within the transcultural turn in memory studies and cultural studies. However, we should still attend to the ways that texts such as Slahi's remain constrained by the shaping role of more powerful voices, such as Siems and his team. When considered alongside texts such as *Boys of Abu Ghraib*, we can see how a fuller understanding of the queer present is integral to how it can be possible to envisage a queer future. The current limitations of cultural representations of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo risk further confining the queer body through the reinscription of sociocultural norms. To counteract this, attention must be paid to the dominant normative discourse of the United States, its policy of incarceration, deployment of black sites, and how these function in a global framework. Moreover, there must be consideration of how nationalist ideals of "American-ness" are conceptualized and challenged. The next chapter of this thesis goes on to examine how "migrant narratives" might question, and therefore undermine, such terms. As

a result, migrant narratives can advance a queer understanding of contemporary US nationalism and nationhood.



# CHAPTER FOUR: EMERGENT QUEERS

The “American Immigrant” and the US State

*“in . . . hypermaleness  
there might be an answer”  
Junot Díaz, Oscar Wao*

Having charted the effects of the heteronormative imaginaries of the US state following 9/11 through the domestic homeland, transnational spaces of the War on Terror, and extranational sites of Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, I now turn inwards toward the US nation to examine literary representations of migrancy in the twenty-first century. Using two texts from the wider genre known as “immigrant fiction”, Akhil Sharma’s *Family Life* (2014) and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) [referred to as *Oscar Wao* throughout], I interrogate the unstable boundaries that are uncovered when individuals move from another country into the United States. By exploring the range of identities that inhabit the geographical and socio-political borders of the nation, I demonstrate the ways in which the very notion of a rigid border is a myth of nationhood and national belonging that relies on the figure of the migrant for its construction. Moreover, the devices deployed by these texts to represent the migrant experience in the contemporary US demonstrate how dynamics of queerness operate, and the ways that those dynamics are subject to a fluidity that ultimately upholds the heteronormative discourse of the nation-state. Therefore, such narratives highlight the contradiction inherent in rigid conceptualizations of the state and its borders that are solidified by the fluid movements of those who are positioned as outsiders to it. These texts explore the transcultural experience of the migrant through race, family, and heterosexuality, using a range of tropes that include the impact on the migrant subject of books and culture as well as the effects of the supernatural, magical, and otherworldly.

Whilst I want to undercut the category of “immigrant fiction”, I first want to explore what primarily defines cultural work that is described in this way. Often, cross-national texts reconceptualize familiar tropes of what constitutes “American-ness” to subvert understandings of identity as singular and explore how individuals come to belong to certain identity groups. Each of the novels that I examine share features with literature that might be considered as belonging to the (white) canon of the US or western hemisphere. Sharma makes repeated references to Hemingway, and the character of Oscar Wao uses a litany of cultural references that range from *Star Trek* to Tolkien. This redeployment of widely circulated images or techniques associated with the normative United States works to generate pride and motivation within marginalized communities through suggesting a sense of belonging. Stories about the nation and migrant communities are therefore retold through migrant perspectives in ways designed to be more accessible to white US readers.<sup>59</sup> However, the growing corpus of literature that is written by, or deals with, communities that are bound in some way to the legacies of migration has resulted in a singular understanding of these text and their creators.<sup>60</sup> Labelling work as “immigrant” reinforces the boundary between the author and the United States, and upholds narratives of what constitutes the nation and what does not. As a result, the perspective of those writing migrant narratives is decentred and portrayed as comprising experiences that do not directly reflect the nation. Marked by its difference, migrant literature

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<sup>59</sup> This idea might be understood a kind of cultural bilingualism that mirrors the shifting use of language in texts such as Díaz’s. In the same way Lourdes Torres suggests that by “choosing English as their literary language”, Latinx writers reflect “their intellectual education” (77), the use of bi-cultural codes creates a dialogue between the interiority and exteriority of the United States that can be applied to a breadth of transcultural texts, particularly migrant narratives. The use of cultural references, particularly through their deployment by characters in *Oscar Wao*, could be seen as another layer of linguistic plurality. Maria Lauret posits that the translingualism of Díaz’s text, and the subsequent decoding of its multiple reference and idioms “blows all the cherished myths of American identity—from dream to self-invention to bootstrap mobility—to smithereens” through a connective form of textual practice (507).

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, David Cowart *Trailing Clouds* (2006). For considerations of “immigrant fiction” following 9/11 see Richard Gray “Open Doors, Closed Minds” (2009) and Catherine Guisan “Of September 11, Mourning and Cosmopolitan Politics” (2009).

is attached to the nation to the extent that the characters arrive in the country and are expected to adapt to the new cultural conditions therein.

However, such characters, and the texts that they belong to, are relegated to the periphery of the nation from the very point of their categorization as “immigrant”, a strategic grouping that is applied from the interiority of the nation to position those from outside at the periphery. Whilst such stories may share similar qualities, my approach does not seek to reduce them to a singular category but examines, as Jeffrey Di Leo notes, the “constellations of literary texts” that are not only “delimited by language, nation, form or theme” but also entail “world-literary dimensions” (9).<sup>61</sup> As part of this strategy, I use the term migrant rather than “immigrant” to discuss legacies of transcultural migration and resist the distinction between “citizen” and “immigrant” that is established through such descriptions. The deployment of the term “immigrant” also shores up a sense of legitimacy and belonging that is attached by political actors such as the US government to certain groups and not others, often for political reasons.<sup>62</sup> Rather than reduce works to simply being of, or about, the “immigrant” experience, it is vitally important to understand the ways that texts engage with, and across, culture; in other words, as *transcultural*.

Understanding how texts such as *Family Life* and *Oscar Wao* work within, and at the periphery of, US culture is vital to understanding the ways that queerness is manifest in the nation’s contemporary moment. Building on Wai Chee Dimock’s notion that “the United States and the world are neither separate nor antithetical”, rather they are “part of the same analytic fabric” (“Introduction” 1), I consider texts that embody dimensions of US literature as world literature. The tracking of migration toward the United States allows writers to consider the relationship between the US and the global, replicated through the novels’ formal movements—back, forth, and across geographical and temporal axes—demonstrating a

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<sup>61</sup> Di Leo posits the idea of world-literary dimensions as, apropos Dimock, texts that operate in a network and are tangential to one another whilst still having impact on the existing corpus.

<sup>62</sup> For discussions on the politics of category definition and the implications for queer migrants, see Luibhéid and Cantú (2005).

multiplicity of activity. The deployment of multiplicities enables a consideration of what lies beyond the nation-state, to reflect on the fluidity of the global and its dis(continuities). Attached to the destabilization of static borders is an undermining of rigid identities of national belonging. This results in an opposition to reductive categorizations of “immigrant” that uphold the heteronormative dominance of the US nation-state, thereby resulting in a form of queer textual resistance. The queer consequences of those positioned as outsider to the nation mirrors the perception of the global that lies beyond the borders of the nation-state. The texts’ ability to perceive and give voice to such a resistance is additionally manifest through the perspective of childhood that both protagonists share. Further, the inherent failures of the characters mark what Halberstam calls a queer “escape from the punishing norms that discipline behavior . . . with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods” (*Queer Art of Failure* 3). As I argue, each text tracks a different trajectory between these points, offering markedly different outcomes from each character’s failure. Both *Family Life* and *Oscar Wao* explore these queer notions through proximity to the heteronormative—and the themes of family and kinship, the physical markers of queerness, and through alternative renderings of time, space, and reality.

## THE MOTIVES OF MOVEMENT

Set in the 1970s, Akhil’s novel spans India and the United States, moving back and forth through the memories of protagonist Ajay. Despite *Family Life* narrating events across two countries, Toral Gajjarawala notes the “charming irony” of the book’s smallness, both in length at 224 pages and through its focus on the “tiny, nucleated walled-off world” of the family (12). The use of narrative voice in the novel also fosters a kind of minimalism through the use of sentences that are “pruned of adjectival flair” (Gajjarawala 12). The book’s restraint mirrors the loneliness and despair of *Family Life*’s plot, one that counters the kind of “retreat into domestic

detail” that Gray suggests signals a text’s unifying strategy.<sup>63</sup> Initially, Ajay grapples with the family’s decision to migrate, and the unexpected consequences for them: a pattern that initially adheres to “the clear trajectory, as with so many other stories of emigration, from the strange to the familiar” (Gunn).

Exemplifying the desire for economic prosperity as a driver for migrating to the US, Ajay describes how his father’s desire to relocate was “born out of self-loathing” (Sharma 5). Moreover, he suggests that India was “indifferent” to him because “he mattered so little” (Sharma 5). Ajay describes his father’s belief that “if he were somewhere else, especially somewhere where he earned dollars and so was rich, he would be a different person and not feel the way he did” (Sharma 5). Ajay’s father demonstrates the migrant desire to attain success in the nation through the accumulation of wealth. The US, then, becomes defined by “the pursuit of a specific and well-understood lifestyle characterized by material success” that emphasizes the individual as “the primary value and sovereign focus of all human life” (Zamoshkin 129-30). Whilst his initial reaction is somewhat hesitant, Ajay also notices the benefits, claiming that “everyone becomes your friend when you’re going to America” (Sharma 9). The excitement he feels is also bound with a sense of grandiosity as he notices the jealous reactions of other boys that “thrilled” him. He speaks to the other boys in a formal register, deciding that “being proper would make me even more special; not only was I going to America, but I was polite and humble” (Sharma 13). Ajay’s sudden change in behaviour, therefore, becomes marked by his perceived exceptionalism. By migrating to the US, he and his family already become “special”, associated with the superior qualities of that country. That

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<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the spectre of what Sue Brennan (2011) calls the “racial logics” that followed 9/11 is evident throughout *Family Life* (and *Oscar Wao*). In a similar manner to other texts such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003), texts that deal with the South Asian diasporic experience are inflected with what Brennan calls the “intense nation gaze” that conflated “Arab or Middle Eastern-looking people” with terrorists. For her, a sense of national belonging is bound up with “a type of apolitical, ahistorical, and racially ambiguous citizenship” (“Time, Space, and National Belonging”). It is the tension of belonging that both Ajay and Oscar initially perceive and navigate. Whilst it is not my suggestion that these motifs are new in transcultural literature, especially those featuring migration, it does have an increased relevance given the contemporary context in which the novels were published.

Ajay feels that superiority whilst claiming to be “polite and humble” also indicates the irony of a country that projects its moral superiority on to the rest of the world whilst espousing notions of extravagance and wealth that stems from individualism.

However, as Ajay embarks on the process of migrating to the US, he begins to notice his intrinsic attachment to Indian culture. Noticing a local billboard, Ajay remarks that he remembers “feeling grief” at its removal, and that “it was like somebody had died” (Sharma 8). The poster, for the incredibly popular 1975 movie *Sholay* evokes a significant cultural moment to Ajay, one that is tied to his feelings of leaving India. As he goes to visit his grandparents for the last time, he realizes that “when I was in America, I wouldn’t be able to see my grandparents every Sunday. Till then, I had not fully understood that going to America meant leaving India” (Sharma 16). The geographical space of India is directly linked to Ajay’s heritage, a notion drawn through his relationship with his grandparents. The loss Ajay feels begins to contrast with the idealistic notions that he held of the US, that he “would get to have the jet packs and chewing gum that people in America had and also be able to show these things off to my friends” (Sharma 16). The excitement of consumerism and technology undermines the closeness of familial kinship, destabilizing the importance of those ideals. Ajay describes friends and relatives slipping into English, remarking that “to wander out of Hindi was to suggest that something indecent was being referred to” (Sharma 10). The movement away from the community, then, is reflected in the use of a non-native language, creating a clear distinction between the space of the family and the use of Hindi. Consequently, the migration to the US results not only in a physical movement away from the family, but a symbolic one as well, made visible in the use of English. The “superior” United States, made visible through jetpacks and chewing gum, becomes further destabilized through the idea that not using Hindi is “indecent”.

The complex and contradictory feelings that Ajay attaches to both communities suggests his complicated and fluid relationship with the world that is external to him. Whilst

the US offers the possibility of wealth, it is marked by the troubling nature of being “somewhere else”, peripheral to the community in India. Ajay notices that where his grandparents lived “was pleasingly miniature” and that “their lane was so narrow that I could reach out and touch the houses on both sides” (Sharma 14). The close proximity of the houses is symbolic of the closeness of relationships and kinship that he experiences in India, and his sense that as his family prepares to migrate, they are already subject to an irrevocable alteration. Ajay’s notion of family contrasts with his father, who “had grown up feeling that no matter what he did, people would look down on him” (Sharma 23). Directly attributed to his relationship with his father (Ajay’s grandfather), Ajay describes his father as caring “less about convincing people of his merits and more about owning things” (Sharma 23). The drive to accumulate wealth and possessions becomes the overriding factor of the family’s decision to move, then, and contrasts with Ajay’s feelings on leaving India. As the family arrives in the US, Ajay again feels the separation as he imagines “everyone home for the new year”, coming to the conclusion that “no matter how rich America was, how wonderful it was to have cartoons on TV, only life in India mattered” (Sharma 27). As a result, Ajay centralizes the importance of family throughout the text, and views the consequences of migration through the impact it has on them. Whilst Ajay’s viewpoint is intrinsically associated with the space of familial kinship, one that is bound to an exclusive heteronormativity, his actions begin to undermine his position as entirely upholding heterosexual norms. Moreover, as the novel progresses, his queer qualities become even more apparent. Migration, then, might be understood as a process that queers through the experience of orienting characters in the novel away from the security and stability that is ascribed to the family. It is that queer positionality that allows Ajay to begin to undermine the mythic qualities attached to the United States.

Ajay demonstrates the non-normative qualities of the queer subject through his position as a child and through his belonging to a younger generation. This position gives him the ability to view events less conventionally—from an aslant perspective that is tied to the

queerness of childhood in addition to the unconventional identity fostered through the children of migrants, such as Ajay and Oscar specifically, who are seen to break away from the norms of the multiple cultures they inhabit, and in opposition to the stricter adherence of their parents. Ajay's role in *Family Life*, then, is one whereby he opposes the desire to accumulate wealth, objects, and status that his father possess, demarcating the difference between the migrant parent and child. The differing viewpoint between the two relegates the previous generation's desire to attain the "American Dream" and is instead relegated to a form of misdirection. Whilst his father is portrayed as migrating to becoming something better, Ajay positions his decision as a response to his father's feelings of failure. Ajay's position as outsider gives him the ability to perceive the instability of US mythologies, remarking at the "sense of being in a fairy tale" (Sharma 23). This sense of unreality comes to structure the book's narrative.

## THE UNREAL

Ajay's experience of the United States fluctuates between states of un/reality, often due to the collapsing of demarcations between cultures. Frequent references to the newness of the cultural environment are shown to confuse Ajay, often through their surreal qualities. During winter, Ajay describes how seeing snow fall for the first time feels like "I was in a book or TV show" (Sharma 29). Moreover, his father becomes "captivated by the romance of standing outside in the snow in the backyard" (Sharma 176). The experience of entering a new culture shows how Ajay is able to perceive how he and his father are unable to encounter nature other than on terms that are already mediated by a particular version of a (US) winter wonderland. Likened to a book or TV show demonstrates how the nation is "produced", or constructed, indicating the way that myth underpins how the country is perceived culturally. Moreover, his father's fascination with the romantic notion of the landscape means that he frequently stands outside alone, becoming increasingly detached from his family. He tells Ajay about "how far he had come. In India he had never seen snow and neither had his father or grandfather"



(Sharma 176). The desire to become “better” results in his father becoming increasingly lost in the romanticized ideals of the nation that is represented by the falling snow in the family’s backyard. His father sees himself as a pioneer, becoming the first in his family to see snow, recalling the legacy of Manifest Destiny. The image of the snow and the sense of being in a TV show demonstrate the ways that Ajay feels he and his father have both become progressively more lost in what he perceives as unreality. Both characters show the different ways that the movement away from India can be conceptualized, perceived as a form of magic. That sense of mysticism or unreality increasingly permeates the novel, directly linked to Ajay’s feeling of confliction about his identity.

Sensing his increasingly fragmented identity, Ajay begins to create stories to tell other characters, harnessing the power of artifice for his own advantage. Ajay uses fiction as a way to cope with the increasing sense of tragedy that he feels as the novel progresses. The narrative, told from Ajay’s first-person perspective, becomes more influenced by the effects of magical realism. When the family are about to leave India, Ajay notices “red ants carrying our television up a wall” (Sharma 17) and his brother Birju tells him that he is possessed by a ghost. Ajay acknowledges the increasing appearance of surreal or magical elements to his narration, admitting that he hopes migration will imbue him with powers “like flying or maybe seeing into the future” (Sharma 19). Here, Ajay also foreshadows a key turning point in the novel: Birju telling him that the ghost had foretold Birju’s own death (Sharma 19). Whilst the premonitions that Ajay describes only become true to a certain extent, Ajay’s narration gives him the power to predict the future. Whilst Birju doesn’t physically die, he experiences a form of social death through a life-altering accident, in which he hits his head on the side of a swimming pool, becoming brain damaged. The event is mourned throughout the novel, becoming integral to its development as an analogy for the ways that the characters experience their migration.

The events which trigger Birju's accident lead Ajay to believe he is special, in contrast with his father's belief that migration makes them exceptional. As his narrative progresses, the magical elements of the novel are more frequent and pronounced as his parents are engrossed in their responses to the accident. Both become distant with Ajay. His mother tends to Birju and attempts to find a cure for his condition, whilst his father becomes less engaged with the family and starts drinking. As a result, Ajay begins to compare himself to mythical figures and superheroes, even communicating with them. His engagement with myth, then, operates as a form of emergent culture that not only opposes "but depends on the existence of a dominant culture" (Patell 5). By taking a collection of old mythical figures from across cultures and blending them together, Ajay constructs a "new" form of practice and belief, one that is expressed and identified through a complex form of cultural identity that is not tied to "here" or "there" but multiple points simultaneously.<sup>64</sup>

Drawing direct comparisons between himself and the heroes, Ajay remarks that "the beginnings of all heroes contained misfortune. Both God Krishna and Superman had been separated from their parents at birth. Batman, too, had been orphaned" (Sharma 52). Ajay, feeling progressively detached from his parents, likens himself further to the mythological figures through a shared sense of isolation. Now isolated from his family, Ajay aligns more strongly with his queerness, harnessing the power of his queer narrative as a form of resistant escapism. As he tells the reader: "God Ram had spent fourteen years in the forest, and it was only then that he did things that made him famous" (Sharma 52). Ajay recognizes the loneliness he feels due to his parents' rejection, becoming symbolically lost in the woods, and using his narration as a route out of that feeling. The power of the narration will lead to Ajay's fame through the novel's readership. Further, the mixing of cross-cultural references draws a further association of heroism that stems from his migrant position, thus he is able to see

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<sup>64</sup> The blending of cultural figures here functions similarly to *Sanjay's Super Team* (2015) which is inspired by the migrant childhood of writer and director Sanjay Patel, and his experiences of conflict between the US and his Hindu heritage (see Visswanathan, "Pixar's Hindu Short").

through the multifarious lens of being situated between two cultures. The strife that he feels does not just stem from the additional burden from Birju's accident, rather the accident itself becomes analogous for the consequences of migration. The in-between status that Birju experiences—comatose and as such dead but not quite living—reflects the experience of Ajay who is no longer Indian but not quite American.<sup>65</sup>

The fluidity that Ajay experiences is also reflected in the way that the figures that he sees are subject to a blurring. When Ajay converses with God, he remarks that he “looked like Clark Kent” and that after the accident, “God had looked like Krishna” (Sharma 51). The shifting appearance of the figures exemplifies how Ajay encounters his own cultural experience. Through his migration to the US and away from India, Krishna begins to appear more like the God of Christianity, before resembling Clark Kent. Therefore, Ajay and the shifting figure both enact a move between Indian and US dominant religions, then away from that religiosity and toward heroic superheroes that are attached to the national imaginary of the United States. Ajay begins to question the legitimacy of the religious figure of Krishna, remarking that “it had felt foolish to discuss brain damage with someone who was blue and was holding a flute and had a peacock feather in his hair” (Sharma 51). Ajay, then, begins to adhere to normative US values, questioning the legitimacy of other (non-Christian) religions until he becomes increasingly more secular. In this way, Ajay re-enacts the movement toward a more “American” cultural experience. The figure of Clark Kent, the alter-ego of Superman, symbolizes a strength and heroism that is attached to the US, whilst reflecting the in-between status that Ajay feels as he increasingly tries to fit into his new culture. Superman appears to Ajay in his human form, thereby retaining his secret identity, which reflects Ajay whose migrant identity marks him as queer, as well as his desire to “pass” in US society. Whilst these moments in the narrative are indicative of Ajay's increasingly unreliable narration, they also

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<sup>65</sup> This motif of the novel also recalls the figure of the “tragic mulatto”, a mixed-race individual that is unable to fit into a racially divided society. See Lydia Maria Child's short story “The Quadroon” (1842) and “Slavery's Pleasant Homes” (1843). For more on the history of the “tragic mulatto” see David Pilgrim, “The Tragic Mulatto Myth” (2000).

demonstrate the tension he feels due to his experience as a migrant. Conversations with figures of strength and mysticism become a form of escapism for Ajay, whilst channelling the feelings caused by his migrancy into increasingly more recognizable forms for a US audience. His escape into the magical thus becomes a form of personal myth-making used to cope with the increasingly tragic extent of his life. Moreover, these mythical departures mirror the mythical quality of a United States understood as a land of opportunity.

Following the accident, the local Indian community rally around the family, appearing in such high numbers that rooms become “jammed with guests” and Ajay “could only see stomachs and waists” (Sharma 71). His status as a child is reinforced through his size as he moves through the room. His ability to see only “stomachs and waists” highlights the altered perspective he possesses, one that is attached to his inherent queerness as a child discussed in my first chapter.<sup>66</sup> Ajay describes moving through the crowd of people, feeling “that the men and women around me were not living real lives, that my family, because it was suffering so intensely, was living a life that was more real than these people’s, whose lives were silly like a TV show” (Sharma 71). From Ajay’s queer perspective, Birju’s accident is a site of spectacle for the local community, one that provides an exceptionalist form of existence rendering the family’s experience as “more real” than other peoples’. The narrative replicates the queer functionality of the other texts explored in this thesis, as well as reproducing claims of

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<sup>66</sup> Bond Stockton updates her original notion of queer childhood to include “money, gender, sexuality, race, ghostly gayness, and imagined innocence” (“The Queer Child Now” 505). Neil Cocks argues the queer child is often tied to the questioning of innocence and “notions of child as universal, simple, unmarked and undivided” (120). Therefore, to be in opposition to, or refusal of, that identity (Edelman 2004)—through the complexity of migration and transculturalism—is to be queered. Kevin Ohi notes the child’s queerness as not “that all children feel same-sex desire . . . Rather, it is to suggest that childhood marks a similar locus of impossibility, of murderous disidentifications” that provide productivity in queer impossibility (82). As I explore through *Family Life* and *Oscar Wao*, there are moments where the legitimacy of heterosexual desire becomes questioned. Elspeth Probyn remarks that that queer childhood is “a tangled discursive skein, a multi-level production” (440) that we can see as useful when considering the multi-layered migrant narrative centred around children. The idea of the queer child as a threat to heterosexual ideology is also discussed by Sedgwick in “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” (1993). Further, the “technologies of discipline” exerted onto the child expose how they are “central to the formation of sexual subjectivity” (Gill-Peterson et al. 497), one that upholds heteronormativity. Prior to this, the child has not yet achieved the attainment of those fantasies and desires and therefore is oppositional to the successful heterosexual self.

legitimacy made through representations shaped as supplanting pre-existing notions of reality. The family, through their increased recognition, attains a perverse celebrity status. Moreover, the rest of the community, due to the supposed lack of significant impact their migrations have had, has been more successfully absorbed into the mythic and dream-like quality of the US. Consequently, the goal of migration, to adapt to the norms of the destination country, is shown to be a way that other Indian families are rendered as taking part in a “silly TV show”, a fictional creation that points toward their infantilization. As a result, Ajay demonstrates to the reader (in a similar way to, for instance, Berman’s photography) that to integrate into US culture, or to become an obedient inhabitant, is to occupy the space of the infantile citizen. Ajay’s queer perspective creates a space that both enacts a form of escapism, through his interactions with mythical figures, and as a means to undercut the categorizations of “good” migrants. The link to myth and dream building is shown to be a way that migrants can move toward an inhabitation of the space of the nation, but also take on the qualities of its infantilized citizenry.

Ajay increasingly involvement with books and literary culture, recognizing them as a means to further escape his life. Moving to the US, his father takes him to a library for the first time. Noting that he “had never read a book just to read it”, Ajay also remarks on the artifice of fiction, remarking that “whatever I read seemed obviously a lie” (Sharma 30). Despite this recognition, Ajay becomes absorbed in reading. He notes that he had not been able to read when living in India and that libraries were “used primarily by people for searching employment ads” (Sharma 25). He makes a distinction, then, between the relative poverty of his homeland where reading serves a more practical purpose, and the space of the United States where he can read for pleasure and escapism. The distinction between the two countries is further solidified through books, as Ajay tells the reader that books in India “were kept locked behind glass-fronted cabinets” (Sharma 25). Through his description, Ajay portrays the inaccessibility of information and knowledge that is felt in India in comparison to the US. Consequently, the US provides the freedom to gain knowledge that mirrors the freedom of movement

experienced by his family through their migration. The bustling and noisy spaces of Indian libraries are directly contrasted with the sites of quiet reflection in the United States. Further, Ajay demonstrates the desire for language in India, and thus the increased possibility to articulate one's subjectivity through notions of utterance explored previously through Antoon's novel.

Despite his awareness of literature's artifice, Ajay's daily life becomes increasingly influenced by it: "If a book said a boy walked into a room, I was aware that there was no boy and there was no room. Still, I read so much that often I imagined myself in the book" (Sharma 30). Reading, then, is a way that Ajay can turn toward his queerness, suspending the norm of reality through its refusal and creating an oppositional space, thus exemplifying the non-existent boy (whose non-existence is another queer mark) that occupies the book. Transporting himself into the space of the book gives Ajay a way to escape his daily life whilst still having to physically inhabit it. As a result, he is tied to an in-between status, existing between reality and the worlds of "science fiction and fantasy" through books that "were not as complicated or unsatisfying as real life" (Sharma 142). Due to his status as queer outsider, Ajay is able to comprehend the constant myth-making and distortions of reality, eventually harnessing them to either escape reality or constructing new forms of it. That he exists as an outsider whilst belonging to a migrant community marks Ajay even further by his queer status. As he inhabits more liminal spaces, Ajay is able to break through the boundaries of myth and reality. That the novel is narrated by Ajay also demonstrates this traversal. In a passage that he addresses to the reader he compares himself to Hemingway, who values "suffering in silence", realizing "my family's pain as belonging in a story" (Sharma 149). The pain that exemplifies them as remarkable to Ajay and hypervisible to the local Indian community is also the same pain that he feels is unrecognized, particularly through his perspective. Ignored by his parents, and unseen by the waists and stomachs, Ajay's masking of pain becomes a way that he identifies with Hemingway's characters. As a result, Ajay makes a roundabout journey

to adhere to US culture: he recognizes its falsity and admonishes other people for their reckless adherence yet becomes lost in canonical authors and identifies with their characters. Ajay's wish to immortalize his family and their experience in fiction highlights the novel's self-referentiality, blurring its fictional qualities with supposedly real-life events. Ajay challenges the reader, then, to understand the conventions of "traditional" fiction whilst undermining its certainty. Therefore, Ajay's queerness expands into the form of the novel itself as it explores the nature of myth-making and the destabilization of "objective" reality.

The shifting dimension of Ajay as a character, and *Family Life* as a novel, creates a space through which the contemporary US can also be examined. Through their original positions as migrant and migrant novel, the two are marked by their distinction from "American-ness". That difference is further exacerbated by Birju's accident, and the intrinsic link between Ajay, the novel, and Birju is felt throughout the narrative. Often these connections appear in moments of banality, reflecting the queerness of other work I have explored, such as *Tracking Transience* which communicates the inherent queerness through everyday moments such as eating, sleeping, and defecating. Whilst sitting in class—another site of knowledge attainment similar to the library—Ajay notices "above the blackboard was a banner with capital and lower-case letters side-by-side: AaBbCc. Big brother, little brother" (Sharma 92). The image represents the closeness felt between Ajay and Birju, indicated by the proximity of the letters and the upper and lower-case letters that represent them. Masked in the experience of the everyday, this moment of insight for Ajay is made clear through the appearance of letters and writing, similar to those on the pages of the novel. Their appearance on the banner allow knowledge to be gained by Ajay in a similar way to the reader through Ajay's narration. The novel thus demonstrates how claims to knowledge act as an authentic measure of one's subjectivity, similar to the ways that, in *The Corpse Washer*, Jawad strives for understanding. In a comparable way, Ajay's power lies in the knowledge that he is able to perceive his surroundings differently to others through his queer perspective.

In creating a narrative, Ajay demarcates the qualities of difference both inside and outside of the nation contained within the novel, and in the experience of living in the US. He notes that whilst he “had in the past written stories for English classes”, they had “all been about white people, because white people’s stories seemed to matter more” (Sharma 150). As a migrant, Ajay is unable to translate the experience of being an Indian, evidenced through the differences “between an uncle who is a father’s brother and an uncle who is a mother’s brother” (Sharma 150). Rather than explain these distinctions, Ajay “having read Hemingway” knew that he “should just push all the exotic things to the side as if they didn’t matter” (Sharma 150). As a result, India’s complex kinship relations are again shown to be untranslatable into a US context, demonstrating Ajay’s inability to adhere to norms whilst he occupies the in-between space of both “Indian” and “American”.<sup>67</sup> Stories about Indians are not part of his education, thus pushing Ajay to the periphery of US experience. His decision to mirror Hemingway, and “push all exotic things to the side” demonstrates how inhabitants of the country who are of colour remain largely unrepresented by the white-centred canon. Ajay decides to write “after four of five months of reading Hemingway”, making his narration a form of queer resistance that tells the stories of the nation’s inhabitants who are of colour. The novel thus acknowledges the conditions of Ajay’s cultural hybridity and its inherent tension, that is, as Homi Bhabha posits, the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications . . . that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). That Ajay chooses to start writing at Birju’s bedside also places his relationship to his brother, and the accident, as

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<sup>67</sup> Such a concept aligns with the notion of “double consciousness”: the idea that black people consider themselves through perspectives of other racial groups, originally conceived by W.E.B Du Bois in 1903. Later expanded by Frantz Fanon in 1952, the idea was then applied by Paul Gilroy in 1995, who discussed the concept in terms of those who occupied spaces between apparently disparate and exclusive political identities, thus demonstrating the actual continuities between them. Describing such an act, Gilroy posits that disrupting the cleaving of identity is “viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination” (1). Originally applied to blackness and African diaspora, the internal struggle of double consciousness has been applied to and across other forms of diasporic identity such as Afro-Latinx culture (Juan Flores, 2009). Moving the idea away from a state-centric notion of belonging, Samir Dayal (1996) cultivates the need for a diasporic double consciousness that is inflected with “a critical perspective on the very visible thematic of cultural migrancy and on debates about transnationalism and postcoloniality” (46).



central to that queer resistance. As he imagines Birju dying, “as this had to be what would eventually happen” (Sharma 151), Ajay marks the site of his brother’s bedside as a space of death. Whilst not physically dead, Birju’s accident produces a form of social death for each of the novel’s main characters, particularly Ajay, who becomes increasingly isolated. Knowing that he must mark out a narrative space for himself, Ajay recognizes the way that his identity is constructed and represented in US culture. His rejection of “bothering to explain” the differences between canonical literature and his narrative indicates his resistance to this, through an undermining of readerly expectations.

## RACE

His opposition to explanation also demonstrates the way that race not only factors into how he is identified, by the way that this process is enacted through the lens of others. The importance of race in *Family Life* works to demonstrate how precarious the markers of identity are, and the role it plays telling stories (or making myths) about the United States. Through his migration, Ajay already finds himself having to traverse the spaces between Indian and US culture, embodying the in-between status of the migrant.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the division between the two is made clear by the experience of whiteness, an encounter that proves both perplexing and an opportunity for subversion. Ajay satirizes those racial distinctions, describing how “strange” it was “to be among so many whites” that “looked alike” (Sharma 26). Reversing the racial stereotype that Indians all look alike, the novel undermines the notion that people of the same race look the same as one another. Furthermore, the difference felt by Ajay implies that

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<sup>68</sup> Ajay (and Oscar) remain distinct from other migrants in the texts, thus separating them from the commonly held idea of the cultural hybrid. Sten Pultz Moslund argues against “suppositions that a hybrid and migratory mode of representation transcends all centralisations of meaning”, positing the need for a third space which creates a dialogue (10). He further suggests celebratory fiction that centres the “hero-figure” of the migrant “as a new kind of fluid, complex, multiple, open, inclusive identity . . . belonging with the uncertainty of a liminal position in-between two or several cultures” (Moslund 6). This expands on Søren Frank’s definition, apropos Deleuze and Guattari, of in-betweenness as “the destabilization of each position as well as a movement into a completely new dimension” (19), which is seen through the break from “conventional” reality that the protagonists in the novels demonstrate.

his heritage has not been demarcated prior to arriving in the US, thus demonstrating the ways in which racial identity is contingent on particular cultural conditions. Through his immersion into the predominantly white culture of the nation, Ajay is able to perceive his skin colour and racial heritage through its distinction from whiteness. Due to the country's expansiveness, those markers of racial difference are highlighted from place to place, as Ajay notes their "exotic" feel because "the television networks were on different channels" (Sharma 34). Ajay satirizes the notion of exoticism and the vast differences that are felt from place to place through his description of networks. Rather than actually being different, the places are shown through Ajay's analogy to be comprised of the same elements (the networks) that have been slightly rearranged (the different channels).

More important, however, is the way that Ajay suggests that the space of the nation is, at its core, comprised by difference. Despite acknowledging the racial disparity in the nation's composition, Ajay's experience of queerness is often framed through his mistreatment due to his race. He describes how he "was often bullied. Sometimes a little boy would come up to me and tell me that I smelled bad. Then, if I said anything, a bigger boy would appear so suddenly that I couldn't tell where he had come from" (Sharma 27). Consequently, the subjugation that Ajay experiences is shown to be systematic. By enacting resistance to the racial aggression to which he is subject, Ajay is attacked further by "bigger" boys. Colourism is shown to be actively entrenched in US society by the way that individuals collectively discriminate against Ajay. His anxieties recall the history of policed bodies stemming from what Siobhan B. Somerville calls "the epistemological uncertainties surrounding them" (3). These were shaped, she argues, by the binary classification of homosexual/heterosexual that emerged in the United States at that same time that boundaries were being "aggressively" constructed between black/white bodies. Thus, "the simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality . . . were deeply intertwined" (Somerville 3). The tension of

being queer is demonstrated through his experience, and the precarity that he experiences when enacting forms of resistance.

The intolerance that Ajay suffers is so acute that when Birju's accident occurs, Ajay's first concern is that the presence of his family will be perceived as a threat by white people who "made me nervous" and "would be angry with us for causing trouble" (Sharma 41). Despite the accident not being Birju's fault, Ajay automatically feels the potential for blame to be shifted on them because of their race. The prospect of a threatening whiteness is consolidated by the large amount of men that surround Ajay. As a result, Ajay worries about the danger to his body that is created by white masculinity, rather than the immediate danger to his brother through the accident. This scene, then, stands in for a wider threat that is felt by bodies of colour that are queered through the hegemonic discourses of (a gendered) whiteness. Ajay's sense that the white people would be "angry with us" demonstrates the absolute power that is located within whiteness and how it quarantines oppositional queer bodies. This moment of threat exemplifies the danger of a "contamination" that must be vigilantly policed to protect the cultural "ideals of purity and preservation" (Appiah). That Ajay feels that he has transgressed some moral code or boundary illustrates how that hazardous opposition is produced through processes of discipline, and that one should behave in certain ways controlled by the dominant power.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Within critical race theory, Darieck Scott considers the "pervasive abjection" experienced by those from the African diaspora. Whilst I am not suggesting that all diasporic experience is the same, the notion Scott uses, that "blackness functions in Western cultures as a repository for fears about . . . the difficulty of maintaining the boundaries of the (white male) ego" is useful here (4). It is this fear of maintaining/transgressing boundaries that Ajay experiences as white men crowd him. The field of communication studies offers a discussion of queer oppositionality and structures of power that can also usefully be applied here. Shinsuke Eguchi and Godfried Asante, considering Muñoz's theory of disidentification, argue that "sexuality, sex, gender, and body function as significant facets of our overall identity" and thus "underline multiple intersectional borders to construct a sense of belonging" between "the self and the social, cultural, political, and historical" (172). The multiplicity of fluid identity construction stands in opposition to heteronormativity that serves to "systemically erase the legitimacy—and thus has been thoroughly discriminatory—of other relational forms" (Yep et al. 6). Within migration studies, Martin F. Manalansan IV (2006) suggests the organization of social and institutional practices disciplines deviance from the norms (and implicit assumptions) of marriage, family, and biological reproduction, thus disavowing the presence and potential of the migrant's queer (dis)identification (see "Queer Intersections").

The experience of marginalization is not solely limited to those communities. Ajay also becomes isolated from other members of migrant communities because his actions and behaviours stand out. Realising this, Ajay becomes deliberately provocative. When asked by another boy what he was eating, Ajay tells him “I was eating snake” (Sharma 126). The boy, becoming alarmed, starts shouting “snake” out of fear. Ajay is shown to use the inherent xenophobia that he experiences to his advantage, turning the fear of others back on to them. Consequently, the more recent immigrants begin to find Ajay “as a troublemaker for responding to insults. To them, I was a show-off for not keeping quiet” (Sharma 126). Ajay’s queer resistance becomes another mode through which he is made distinct from other groups, even those who he might be assumed to easily identify with through shared experience of migrancy. This subtle notion unravels the idea that all migrants, particularly immigrants, can easily be categorized together. As a result, Ajay not only resists the imposition of whiteness upon him, but also the category of “immigrant”. Rather than adhere to arbitrary definitions, Ajay refuses to “keep quiet”, marking himself out as a “troublemaker”, wishing to “be different” from the other migrants who he sees as conforming to the norms of society (Sharma 126). Despite already being queered through the markers of race and migrancy, Ajay is determined to resist normative categorizations, and thus to risk further queering.

Those opposing categories and definitions mean that Ajay can explore his queer identity through the lens of the “multicultural” US. Noticing that his class is comprised of “mostly Jews, a few Chinese, and one or two Indians” (Sharma 129), Ajay ironically comments on the lack of diversity in his social groups, even amongst other Indians. He remarks that the other Indians “were not Indian in the way I was. They didn’t even have accents. They were invited to birthday parties by white children” (Sharma 129). As a result, *Family Life* resists the homogenization of nationalities, showing the range of difference that can be encompassed by singular categories such as “Indian”. Moreover, the other children are able to integrate more successfully into US culture due to their lack of accent, a significant marker of their Indian

heritage. Invited to the birthday parties of “white children”, the other newly arrived migrants demonstrate how successful integration results from the eradication of cultural differences. Noticing this difference, Ajay senses the way that migration in the US is subject to the erasure of an outsider cultural identity.

This idea reflects Puar’s concept of homonationalism, whereby previously marginalized groups forfeit elements of their identity in order to be accepted into the larger whole of a mainstream, white society. This notion is further explored when Ajay remarks that he “preferred talking to the Jews” as they “were white, and so seemed more valuable than the others” (Sharma 130). Ajay notices the potentiality of aligning himself with a group of white people, albeit another marginalized group, which offers him the opportunity to “pass” more successfully through his association with them.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, he senses the suspicion the other migrants hold toward him, and the idea “that immigrants are desperate and willing to do almost anything” (Sharma 130). This hostility exemplifies the relation between queer identity and the homonational. Ajay hints at a prospective erasure that offers the opportunity to fit in. Through an association with a group that registers as part of a Judeo-Christian whiteness, Ajay can create a space of conformity and erasure, enacting the role of the “desperate” individual who sets themselves apart from other migrants.

However, this erasure breeds anger and resentment. Angrily responding to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting that his father attends, Ajay recounts how he kept thinking, “*Why do you have problems? You’re white. Even more terrible things should happen to you. You should suffer like Indians, like black people. That’ll teach you*” (Sharma 189; original emphasis). Whilst bound up in the anger that Ajay expresses about his father’s alcoholism, Ajay’s rage-filled monologue also illustrates the way that bodies of colour have been

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<sup>70</sup> Additionally, Jewish people were subject to their own form of shifting racial identification following the Second World War, whereby Jewish people were recategorized as “white” people from “non-white”. See Karen Brodtkin’s *How Jews Became White Folks* (1999). However, the association of “Jewishness” with “whiteness” is problematically erasing for people of colour of the Jewish faith, which points toward the ways that racial markers are (re)interpreted and moulded over time.

subjugated throughout the history of the US. Highlighting this duality, the term “Indians” applies both to the treatment of Ajay and his family, but also points toward the foundational violence that was exacted on Native American bodies. As Puar and Rai argue, the “techniques of racial profiling . . . perfected on black bodies” also function to subjugate queer bodies in the contemporary moment (140). Ajay’s anger alludes to the cyclical nature of the subjugation of brown and black bodies. His claim that “*you should suffer like Indians, like black people*” exhibits the ignorance of the white people in the room, suggesting the invisibility of white power structures and privilege that often manifests through an ignorance of the experience of bodies of colour. Ajay forcefully makes a distinction between his father and the rest of the group, hoping he would “say he was nothing like the people in the meeting” (Sharma 189). This desire works in two directions: he both does not want his father to be defined as an alcoholic but also does not want him to be categorized with a group of white US citizens whom he views as oblivious to the structures of state power.

Ajay views his father’s transgressions as moving away from an Indian identity, one that is centred around the close kinship he feels through family. As a result, he is left feeling isolated from his family. His mother exhibits similar behaviour, although in contrast to his father’s retreat into alcoholism, Ajay is isolated by her focus on Birju. She becomes increasingly concerned with finding a remedy for Birju’s incurable coma, recruiting “miracle workers who said they could wake Birju” (Sharma 113). Whilst his mother becomes increasingly rooted by Birju’s body, Ajay is progressively more frustrated by it. After the first visit of Mr. Mehta, Ajay’s irritations start to become visible, as it dawns on him that his mother “was taking Mr. Mehta seriously” (Sharma 113). As she tries to feed Birju, he takes “some of the food into his mouth and spat the rest onto his chest. I had seen this many times before, but on the evening of Mr. Mehta’s first visit, I turned my head away” (Sharma 115). Unable to accept, and therefore witness, his mother’s beliefs, Ajay physically embodies their increasing isolation from one another through his turning away. Her belief makes him “feel that she didn’t

love us” and “she valued believing something ridiculous over taking care of us” (Sharma 116). His mother’s behaviour, then, is rooted in something “noble” and “very Indian”—her maternal instincts in looking after Birju—distinguishes her from Ajay, who feels that her focus on Birju diminishes her relationship with him and his father. As a result, Ajay becomes located between the two: the unwavering instinct of his mother that he attaches to a sense of being Indian and his father who has gravitated towards markers of “American-ness”. The two responses to Birju’s accident position Ajay as occupying an in-between status, but moreover, trace the effects of leaving India at the site of Birju’s body. His accident, then, and the lost promise vested on him signify the dreams that are tied to migration to the US. When the reality of Birju’s accident destabilizes that fantasy, Ajay and his family subsequently become dislocated from one another, and to the reality of the situation. The upheaval of migration, manifest through Birju and the accident, mark a breaking away from the elements of a close-knit kinship that is described at the novel’s beginning. As a result, the novel portrays the queering of time and space (or, the co-ordinates of migration from “here” to “there” and “now” and then”), and the ways that it erupts into everyday experiences.

## HETERO/FAMILY

The movement away from familial kinship is also mirrored by Ajay’s relationship to the norms of heterosexual masculinity, which intersect with the queerness that he experiences due to his body’s racial markers. These experiences of racial othering result in Ajay’s strict adherence to normative roles and expectations of gender and sexuality. Such observance is reflected by his reaction to Birju’s first girlfriend, who was Korean: “a part of me thought that to be with a different race was unnatural, disgusting” (Sharma 40). In contrast to how he deliberately transgresses norms when he is actively subjugated by his classmates due to race, Ajay adheres to those conventions when he sees Birju dating someone from another ethnicity. As a result, Ajay projects onto Birju the techniques of control that are previously exerted onto him,

exemplifying a form of homonationalism. By disavowing the “unnatural” relationship between Birju and his girlfriend, Ajay actively aligns himself with the values of a heteronormative culture. However, experiencing such restrictions from the position of the outsider means that Ajay perceives distinctions between and projects those on to his brother’s relationship. The drive to be understood and accepted, then, is portrayed in the text through a complex multitude of identifiers that include gender, race, sexuality, and class. Continuously traversing these boundaries, Ajay migrates between subject positions to alter how he is perceived, creating “*a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha 222, original emphasis). He either embodies the site of the exemplary queer, playing with transgressive behaviours—such as when he tells people “the horrible truth” about Birju’s bodily functions and spying on a naked comatose girl at the hospital (Sharma 102)—or situates himself as upholding the conditions of heteronormative culture.

Ajay increasingly recognizes the ways that he can be positively perceived, noting that his family, because of their migration, belong to a higher class than those left behind in Delhi. As a result, Ajay feels “important because of my class rank” (Sharma 155), a concept that he had not previously considered. Moreover, in order to more successfully “pass” in US culture Ajay attempts other ways to adhere to the normative expectations that are placed upon him. Eventually, he tries to consolidate the markers of his societal acceptance, and “soon after tenth grade started” he tries “getting a girlfriend” (Sharma 155). Ajay’s movements, both transgressive and integral, are intrinsically linked to the “right” kind of associations. His increased desire to be a successful member of society becomes pivotal to the narrative, focused through his heterosexual desire. Coupling his previous homonational tendencies with the concept of the good and obedient citizen—notions that he previously critiqued his father for embodying—Ajay peruses strict norms of successful identification. His quest for heterosexual love is coupled with his continued academic success, perceptions that had previously been attached to Birju. As part of his attempts at increasing success and recognition



by others, Ajay constructs a mask to hide the inner turmoil he and his family experience from the outside world.

After initially failing to woo Rita, to whom he immediately declares his love over the phone to embarrassing rejection, Ajay moves on, knowing “enough about myself to realize that I had to immediately try again with another girl” (Sharma 157) before becoming too shy. That shyness shows the tension that Ajay feels between having to perform in a certain and prescribed way and his embracing of his queerness. To not succeed would be to fully embody the queerness resulting from the failure of a lost heterosexual masculinity. Trying “not to be too ambitious” Ajay begins to date Minakshi. He describes to the reader how

I found myself falling in love. Minakshi seemed kind and wonderful. Her small body, how I could gather it up in my arms like a bouquet, seemed the most extraordinary thing in the world. Loving her, I was scared. There were certain things I didn't tell her because they were humiliating—my father's drinking, my mother's irrationality and meanness (Sharma 164).

Ajay becomes passive in his heterosexual desire, describing love as something that he “found” himself in, suggesting the yielding of one's self to fall in love, thereby performing an expected heterosexuality. Ajay describes Minakshi in romanticized and hyperbolic terms, describing her as a “bouquet” and the “most extraordinary thing in the world”, despite his initial, contradictory attempts to find a girlfriend as quickly and easily as possible. Ajay's extremity of emotion leaves him feeling “scared” and thus destabilized. His fear appears to be of a loss of control, but I would argue it is also resultant from his forced adherence to heterosexuality. His feelings function as a means of distraction, a space of escape where he can hide “certain things” that reveal the hidden and humiliating queer truth of his family and himself. Invoking “my father's drinking” and “my mother's irrationality”, Ajay fails to recognize the “humiliating” aspects of himself that he hides and the ways he uses Minakshi and his “love” for her as a mask of those circumstances.

The significance of Ajay's performative heterosexuality is further evidenced by his increasing intimacy with Minakshi, as the two "would lie on my bed fully clothed. We would kiss and rub against each other" (Sharma 166). Describing the moment in a clinical manner, Ajay portrays the performative aspect of his sexuality, as well as its childlike nature that invokes the inherent "queerness of children" that is broken through "by fictional forms" (Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child 2*). Thus, what texts such as *Family Life* offer is a way to give voice to the silence that surrounds the queerness of childhood. Ajay highlights the performativity of heteronormativity and the way that it is configured as a way into a heterosexual adulthood. Rather than being able to fully embrace the encounter, Ajay dry humps Minakshi instead. As a result, he enacts a kind of roleplay of sex, thereby avoiding the penetrative act (a similar strategy deployed by Jawad in *The Corpse Washer*). The significance of the moment does not necessarily come from the lack of intercourse, but more the impact that the narrative places on it.

The relationship between Ajay and Minakshi results from Ajay's desire to adhere to heterosexual masculinity, performed through the requisite intensity of "love" coupled with his fear of being exposed. In the culmination of their relationship, then, the two advance to a version of a sexual encounter, one that is rooted in its childlike queerness, and its simulation of heterosexuality. As Ajay suggests, he "felt that I was taking advantage of Minakshi", that "she was trying to sooth me" and that "she felt no desire of her own" (Sharma 162). What becomes important for Ajay, then, is that "Minakshi seemed the embodiment of a future", one that is attached to heteronormativity and reproduction, bearing the qualities of an obedient citizen. The escape and futurity that Minakshi embodies represents Edelman's notion of the future that is signified by heterosexual reproduction, as well as Muñoz's suggestion that queerness, in its oppositionality, cannot be contained there. For Ajay then, the possibility of a future bound to heterosexuality negates the possibility of a queer one. Through his relationship with Minakshi, he can envisage a movement away from the markers of queerness that he

experiences, and thus more successfully integrate with US culture. The “possibility of escape” that Ajay feels through his relationship also makes him “more impatient with my mother”, indicating his traversal between the centrality of the heteronormative nation and the queer outsider. Moreover, that such a movement away from queerness is one tied to the site of his family becomes ironic, as at the novel’s beginning, heterosexual normalcy was more closely associated with the supposed normality of the family’s kinship.

That Ajay “couldn’t believe that I was getting to do something so wonderful” (Sharma 166) as to kiss and dry-hump Minakshi further demonstrates his position as queer in addition to his inherent desire to experience the “pleasure” of his adherence to the normative qualities of the nation. For him, societal belonging is tied to acceptance, and is expressed through his obedience to socio-political norms. His disbelief also recalls the shifting perspective he inhabits throughout the novel, as he observes the un-reality of his experiences. Ajay, by his own description, should not be able to participate in heteronormativity, the enacting of which highlights its inherently performative nature, particularly during the queerness embodied through childhood. Still capable of perceiving such fallacy, Ajay finds himself yet again in-between; amongst the un-reality of the everyday and the prescription to those myths by himself and others. As he tells other boys back in India, “everybody in America has their own speedboat” (Sharma 13). From the point of finding out that he is migrating to the US, Ajay begins this journey, speaking the first of many mistruths he utters, both to reader and other characters. As he goes on to tell the reader “nobody had told me any such thing. As I said this, though, it felt true” (Sharma 13). Ajay highlights in this short sentence the process by which myth-making takes place through the nation and the spaces of its cultural performance. That nobody needs to be told these falsehoods, and that they are accepted uncritically, shows the insidious manner of their operation.

Despite acknowledging their falsity, Ajay shows that through the performative act of utterance, myths can be replicated and positioned as truth. In a similar way to Slahi’s

articulation of his agency through his utterances of “I am” in *Guantánamo Diary*, Ajay does so through declarative statements that, whilst false, become “truth” through his ability to assert them. The power to articulate one’s agency, then, is bound to the notion that subjectivity is created through a lens of (a particular US) myth-making. The notion of how the human is created and perceived is again linked to the stories that we tell about ourselves, and about others. As a result, Ajay enacts the process of fiction(s) that become “more real than real” in a similar way to the make-believe of those captured in Berman’s imagery of reconstructions of Iraqi towns, or depictions of war and mediations of torture. *Family Life* thus importantly demonstrates the tension between individual awareness of myth and the desire to still actively engage with them. Due to his subject position as migrant, Ajay is continuously aware of the artificial constructions and socio-cultural performances that take place around him. Despite his awareness, and his initial willingness to play with transgressing them, Ajay carries a constant and increasing desire to work within myths about the nation, positioning himself as the obedient citizen. His journey toward that heteronormative core results from his family’s reversed position from heteronormative to queer, a condition directly related to the consequences of their migration. The novel thus uncovers the complex web of identification and relationality which reflects the operation of the national and transnational imaginaries that uphold a singular vision of the United States.

## TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS

The complexities of queer migrancy and the transnational are also explored in Junot Díaz’s exemplary text: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Unlike *Family Life*, Díaz’s text moves back and forth geographically between the spaces of the United States and the Dominican Republic, as well as moving through the generational experience of the de Leon family, and the violent history of the Trujillo dictatorship. Rather than being centred around a specific moment, such as Birju’s accident, *Oscar Wao* uses the idea of a curse that traverses across

historical and geographic locales as its forward momentum. The narrator, Yunior, describes it as “*fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú* . . . specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World”. Charting its trajectory across time and space, Yunior tells the reader that it

came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles (Díaz 1).

Yunior’s description evokes the long history of black and Native bodies that have been subjugated as part of the creation of the United States. The nation’s contemporary imperialism is linked back to the twentieth-century occupations of the Dominican Republic, as Yunior states “you didn’t know we were occupied . . . don’t worry, when you have kids they won’t know the U.S. occupied Iraq either” (Díaz 17). The novel, then, concerns itself with the violence of the “global implications” of US politics that texts like Moran’s *Boys of Abu Ghraib* attempt to erase.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the opening paragraphs of the novel establishes the transcultural network of memory that the *fukú* comprises: one that travels across borders. Eventually landing in the US, Yunior describes its more contemporary manifestations, asking “where in *coñazo* do you think the so-called Curse of the Kennedys comes from? How about Vietnam?” (Díaz 4). The memory of the Vietnam War, as described in the previous two chapters, is tied to a history and memory associated with national failure and loss of innocence (further evoked by Yunior’s allusion to the Kennedy family). Moreover, that era holds significance due to the consequences of an increasingly aggressive US imperialism abroad, manifest in the cyclical violence of conflict. Yunior explicitly cites cycle of violence when he blames the “arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola” (Díaz 1). The transcultural relationship between spaces such as the Dominican Republic and the United States is clearly established from the novel’s outset. Consequently, the construction of US identity and citizenship is immediately challenged by

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<sup>71</sup> For a specific discussion of the impact of US imperialism on Latin America see Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop* (2006).

Yunior's narrative and is explored throughout the novel through the characters' transculturalism.

In the same way that Ajay uses literature as a means of escapism, Yunior uses narrative to both escape and understand the long histories of violence that are associated with his racial identity and homelands. Freely admitting to his intended purpose for the narrative, Yunior wonders "if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" (Díaz 7). In hoping to counteract the legacies of violent history, *Oscar Wao* becomes a space for exploring the traumatic histories of migration, but unlike *Family Life*, is intended as a way to move past that trauma. Described as "the Ground Zero of the New World", Santo Domingo is tied to the explicit notions of trauma yoked to cultural conceptions of 9/11. When Oscar visits his family's home country, he describes what life is like in "La Capital":

the guaguas, the cops, the mind-boggling poverty, the Dunkin' Donuts, the beggars . . . the mind-boggling poverty, the asshole tourists hogging up all the beaches . . . the afternoon walks on the Conde, the mind-boggling poverty, the snarl of streets and rusting zinc shacks (Díaz 277).

Bound up with the "mind-boggling poverty" of Santa Domingo are elements of the wider global influence of the United States such as the "Dunkin' Donuts" and "asshole tourists". Consequently, the space demonstrates how the influence of the US feeds outwards, exemplifying Rothberg's multidirectional aspect of memory, one that is "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing" (*Multidirectional* 3). Despite the transnational influence of the US, the city is framed by the insistent repetition of "mind-boggling poverty", serving to remind the viewer—similarly to Ajay's father in *Family Life*—why the de Leon family chose to migrate to the US. Further, a contrast is clearly drawn between those who decide to leave the Dominican Republic in search of wealth, and those who are financially able to come to the country as tourists.

As a result, the city becomes a focal point for the transnational movements around the country, whereby its residents are replaced by "the asshole tourists hogging up the beaches".

The bustling and noisy city, then, is a contradiction: a space that is attractive as a tourist spot yet “the snarl of streets” suggests an underlying aggression that sits amongst the “rusting zinc shacks” and an increasing state of decay. The markers of globalization, particularly a US one, are visible, creating a proximity between the Dominican Republic and the US. Whilst the reader is made aware that Santo Domingo is being described, there are elements that could easily be interchanged for other cities, including those in the United States. Consequently, *Oscar Wao* demonstrates some of the ways that boundaries can become blurred, bridging gaps across transcultural axes. Moreover, the potential misidentification of Santo Domingo as a US city disrupts the idea that places are uniquely identifiable through distinct cultural markers. The blurring that takes place in the novel is not only enacted through transnationalism and place, but also through the characters the novel focuses on, such as the titular Oscar.

## QUEER

As Ajay looks toward heterosexual identification as a way to adhere to US cultural norms, Oscar is also framed through his interactions with heteronormativity. Initially, the young Oscar is introduced to the reader as exemplary of the kind of machismo that is typically associated with Dominican men. Yuniors recounts that how “in those blessed days of his youth, Oscar was something of a Casanova . . . who was always trying to kiss the girls” (Díaz 11). Established through a stringent heterosexuality, Oscar demonstrates the cultural expectations placed upon him by the local community, who is “encouraged by blood and friends alike” to give girls “the pelvic pump” and “learn the perrito. . . . Because in those days he was (still) a ‘normal’ Dominican boy” (Díaz 11). The heterosexual masculinity that Oscar embodies is celebrated through its normalcy, a “nascent pimplyness” that ties him to a flourishing reproductive futurism. Yuniors goes as far as to describe the period as the “blessed days of [Oscar’s] youth” (Díaz 11) marking the success of the young Oscar as he adheres to societal expectations of

him. Moreover, the triumph of this period clearly demarcates it from the subsequent narrative, where Oscar's masculine heterosexuality begins to falter and becomes a source of torment for him. Despite his youth, Oscar is encouraged to learn the "perrito", a highly sexualized dance, and thrust against young girls at every opportunity. The overt sexuality that Oscar embodies as a Dominican man shows the repressive manner in which heterosexist and masculine cultural codes operate on him. As a young child, he is already expected to perform an overt sexuality for the delight of his friends and family.

More insidious, though, is the way that such behaviour is coded as childhood play, resulting in the obfuscation of the sinister operation of sexual and gender norms. Oscar's "Casanova" period reaches its height in the "fall of the seventh year, when he had two little girlfriends at the same time" (Díaz 13). Described by Yuniór as "his first and only ménage à trois" (Díaz 13), the sense of heterosexuality demonstrated through Oscar's heightened virility marks the pinnacle of Oscar's socio-cultural success. Yuniór's lament at Oscar's subsequent failures mark this stage of Oscar's life as a tragic turning point, one that is defined by its success but also at the impending misfortune that Yuniór foreshadows. As the novel's main narrator, and through his later behaviour, Yuniór becomes the gatekeeper of Dominican masculinity, ensuring that it remains bound to a heightened form of heterosexuality. Further, that he remarks that this will be Oscar's "first and only" three-way relationship also points toward the expectation that men such as Oscar and Yuniór are likely to repeat the pattern of having multiple partners at once. As his heterosexuality becomes disrupted through its increased failure, however, Oscar diverges from the socio-cultural norms that operate around him. Girls begin to refer to him as a "gordo asqueroso", or creep, as he forgets "the perrito [and] the pride he felt when the women in the family called him hombre" (Díaz 17). As a result, Oscar's sense of masculinity (of himself and from others) becomes lost as his failure to adhere to Dominican heterosexuality manifests. No longer identifiable as the "Casanova" or "hombre", Oscar struggles to make sense of his new fragmented identity, becoming increasingly isolated.



Responding to his migration away from normativity, Oscar spends the remainder of the novel attempting to regain his heterosexual masculinity through a range of mishaps and failures. Rather than realize the potential to subvert the norms that are expected of him, Oscar instead envies other Dominican men, suspecting that “in their Latin hypermaleness there might be an answer” (Díaz 30). The novel demonstrates that whilst there is an element of truth to that statement, the answer is not what Oscar initially suspects: it is through his migration in and out of queerness that Oscar is able to come to that final conclusion.

Rather than successfully embracing his outsider status, Oscar instead tries to regain his former “pimpliness”, embodying the obedient and homonational citizen. Much like Ajay, Oscar tries to develop heterosexual relationships. In contrast, however, Oscar does so in ways that clearly demonstrate his queer status to those around him. Meeting Jenni, whom Yuniór describes as “the first hardcore goth I’d ever met” (Díaz 182), Oscar aligns himself with another form of outsider. The shock registered by Yuniór is evident as he describes to the reader how “a Puerto Rican goth . . . was as strange to us as a black Nazi” (Díaz 182). Consequently, the strange figure of Jenni confuses the cultural standards to which Yuniór and his friends adhere. Her attractiveness competes with her queerness, taking “every standard” they have and creating what Yuniór describes as a kind of short-circuit. Increasing his level of confusion is her decision to date Oscar. He finds the notion incomprehensible, suggesting that “Jenni must have had brain damage or been really into fat loser nerdboys” (Díaz 183). Through his rationalization, Jenni is queered further by the suggestion that she can only be attracted to Oscar either through a disability (a link I discussed previously in chapter three) or the fetishization of his fatness, associated with a queer non-future conceptualized by Berlant as “less of a future when one eats without an orientation toward it” (*Cruel Optimism* 117). To be fat is to lack a forward orientation toward the future and thus, Jenni’s desire for Oscar relates

to cruel optimism, as “an obstacle to [her] flourishing” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism 2*).<sup>72</sup> As he has not flourished, she therefore cannot be with Oscar. Yuniór therefore relocates Jenni into an in-between status, one of the queer outsider who is simultaneously understood as being attractive to him.

As a result, Jenni is identifiable through her queerness and through her relationship with Oscar further heightens his status as queer. Despite their flourishing relationship, Oscar is unable to have sex with her, recollecting the performative aspect of heterosexuality seen in *Family Life*. Oscar’s failure leads Jenni to sleep with another man, prompting Oscar to attempt suicide, deciding that death is preferable to being a virgin. In this way, Oscar epitomizes the association between death and the queer—explored through the depictions of race, war and torture across this thesis—and that any divergence from the norm of heterosexuality results in a social death. Oscar’s suicide attempt literalizes that social death in the form of a physical one. Yuniór’s response to Oscar’s suicide attempt is to enforce the importance of adhering to heterosexuality, even in the face of queer death. He reminds Oscar: “No-pussy is bad. But dead is like no-pussy times ten” (Díaz 193). His statement, then, serves to inscribe the structures of normative society over Oscar’s body, whilst asserting himself as the gatekeeper of Oscar’s sexuality. Moreover, Yuniór exemplifies the alignment of queerness with death through his declaration that “dead is like no-pussy times ten”, thereby equating an extreme form of queerness—the queer “times ten”—with the potential for death. Oscar’s continued queer existence, then, is marked by its forms of slow death (which links back to the discussion of Slahi’s body in the previous chapter), one that is tied to the physicality of his body.

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<sup>72</sup> That fatness and queerness have been linked is relevant for this chapter (see also Moon and Sedgwick, 2001). However, the problematic assertion that Berlant makes here (amongst others) has been challenged by theorists such as Anna Mollow, who argue that Berlant is in fact enacting her own form of cruel optimism constituted by “the hope that fat people could become thin” (204), reinforcing fat stigma through the “slender-normative” fantasy-work of being thin (see Crawford, “Slender Trouble”). Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel also question the ideology around corpulence, recognizing its constructed nature, “thereby problematizing the notion of *obesity* as inherently ‘abnormal’ or pathological” (2).

## FAT NERD MAGIC

Yunior sees Oscar's first set of breakups as precipitating his "life . . . going down the tubes" as Oscar becomes "fatter and fatter" (Díaz 16). His narration makes repeated references to Oscar's weight and his inability to enact heterosexual norms. As a result, Oscar's failed heterosexuality marks his inability to adhere to the disciplining norms of heteronormativity that are policed by those around him, especially Yunior, who draws parallels between disability and sexual deviancy, comparing him to "handicapped kids" and "Joe Locorotundo, who was famous for masturbating in public" (Díaz 16).<sup>73</sup> Yunior's narrative description of Oscar, then, reinforces Oscar's queerness by its constant insistence on heteronormativity. Moreover, Oscar's physical appearance is shown to be antinormative, and therefore is portrayed as the reason for his queer failure. Oscar's bodily appearance comes to reflect the subject-position with which he, like Ajay, has been forcibly categorized.

Oscar's extreme liminality can be seen through the markers of race but, unlike a character such as Ajay, are not directly connected to his role as migrant. Rather, it is again Oscar's appearance that marks him out as queer, even to those with whom he might normally identify. Highlighting the learned qualities of such behaviour, Yunior describes Oscar's experience of attending school:

The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy (Díaz 49).

Unable to be clearly identified, Oscar is not recognized as belonging to any social group and is therefore cast out as an anomaly. Despite his insistence of "soy dominicano", Oscar is

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<sup>73</sup> The link between disability and socially unacceptable sexual behaviours that Yunior makes reifies Oscar's queerness. A discussion of sexual behaviours and the "impairment of social awareness" has been explored by theorists such as Realmuto and Ruble (1999). For more on the intersection of disability and queerness see Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006).

rejected and his ability to articulate an identity is removed by the control of a normative culture. His appearance, then, further demonstrates his queerness, compounded by his bodily movements and behaviour of “inhuman cheeriness” that fails to adhere to social expectations, ironically casting him away from what is normatively conceptualized as the “human”. As a result of this treatment, Oscar is able to identify with other queer kids who have been marginalized by social groups. Thus, he engages empathetically with the queer, as demonstrated previously through texts such as *Tracking Transience*, *The Corpse Washer* and *Guantánamo Diary*. He watches how the “cool” kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminino, the gay” (Díaz 264). In amongst these myriad queers, united through the intersections of their violent oppression and the domination of their bodies that renders them marginal from, or outside of, heteronormativity, Oscar sees aspects of himself. Moreover, the extensive list highlights how limited the site of normativity is. The description of the “cool” kids also illustrates how definitions are often arbitrarily imposed. Oscar, through his queer viewpoint, perceives these divisions and how they violently operate over bodies that are rendered outside of normative spheres.

Rather than continuing to eschew his identity, however, Oscar begins to actively revel in it, wearing “his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber”. As Yuniór acknowledges, he “couldn’t have passed for Normal if he’d wanted to” (Díaz 21). The capitalization of “Normal” again suggests the construction that underpins such categorizations whilst illustrating their cultural primacy and significance. Accepting his inability to “pass” in society, Oscar begins to reject Yuniór’s offers to “help” through attempts to re-masculinize him, such as exercise regimes and opportunities for male bonding. In a similar manner to Ajay in *Family Life* who converses with mythical figures, Oscar performs his queerness through a litany of devices, including the use of magic, sci-fi, and fantasy. Often these mechanisms are utilized at times of extreme violence. The Golden Mongoose, who recurs throughout the text, is one such

mechanism. Described as “one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers. . . . the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. . . . Many watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived to our world from another” (Díaz 151). The mongoose is a figure for the resilience of the de Leon family and their own migration; a figure of resistance and escape from political hegemony and persecution. As a result, the mongoose becomes a stand-in for the characters, acting as a source of protection from the instances of violence that they each face.

After attempting to seduce the wife of the Santa Domingo’s police chief, Oscar is dragged into the cane fields where the chief and his officers attack him. As he encounters the violent rupture of another failed attempt at heterosexuality, the mongoose like “something straight out of Ursula Le Guin” appears by Oscar’s side (Díaz 190). The figure of the mongoose, then, becomes a physical manifestation of Oscar’s modes of escapism through science-fiction and fantasy, marked through the reference to Le Guin’s science-fiction writing. Much like Ajay’s conversations with superheroes, the realms between reality and the imagined increasingly distort to mask the violence of events happening around the characters. Indeed, the mongoose offers Oscar the opportunity to sacrifice himself to shield his family from further trauma,

What will it be, muchacho? it demanded. More or less? And for a moment he said less. So tired, and so much pain—Less! Less! Less!—but then in the back of his head he remembered his family. . . . More, he croaked (Díaz 301).

Thus, Oscar embodies the hero, taking on the legacies of pain of his family and becoming the focalization point of the transnational forms of trauma that are attached to them. Through Yunior’s narration, however, Oscar succumbs to the fukú, taking on the violence of its curse to protect his family and break away from the narratives of trauma by which they are bound. The persistent tension within migrant narratives is played out through the competing storylines of Oscar and Yunior, again presenting the reader with a choice. Either Oscar falls victim to the

long-standing course of migrants from the Dominican Republic, one that has followed them across the diaspora in a migrant narrative of its own, or Oscar is able to become the heroic protector his family and the novel inherits the qualities of the science-fiction and fantasy genres. The novel presents the reader with the potential of a queer destabilization of the migrant narrative, a tension that is embodied by the competing narrative standpoints of the characters.

In accepting his queerness, Oscar begins to resist the narratives that are expressed by Yuniór, through both their socio-cultural interaction with one another as characters, but also as conflicting narrators of the text. In contrast to Yuniór's description of the fukú, and his construction of the novel as a *zafa*, Oscar increasingly relies on the tropes of science fiction, using its lexicon as a way to navigate what he believes "was the kind of story we were all living in" (Díaz 6). Comparing the long history of violence stemming outward from the Dominican Republic, Oscar asks "what more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?" (Díaz 6). As a result, Oscar begins to provide an alternative storyline to Yuniór's fukú, highlighting his operation as a queer protagonist, but also his function in providing productively queer counter-narratives.<sup>74</sup>

Oscar increasingly channels his energies into science fiction and fantasy writing as a way to cope with the violent histories and consequences of the Dominican Republic and his family's migration to the US. However, in contrast to Ajay, Oscar is never given full control of the narrative and is instead portrayed for the majority of the text through Yuniór's narrative. Given that the narrative travels between both countries and the generational history of the de

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<sup>74</sup> Joy Sanchez-Taylor posits that the use of multiple genres, particularly the use of science fiction is deployed by writers "to circumvent the cultural expectations of Latina/o literary traditions" (94). Melissa M. Gonzalez argues the text focuses on "structures that govern human experience and advocates a critical self-analysis" to provide an "ideological critique of how gender, race, and sexuality function" (280). Elena Machado Sáez argues that it is Oscar's "virginity and sentimentality" that mark his queerness, points that Yuniór ultimately silences (524). This censorship, she adds, speaks to the "function of foundational fictions" in forming diasporic and national identities (Sáez 524). Sáez pushes the queerness of the novel further by suggesting that Yuniór embodies qualities that can be considered queer, and that his narrative suppression of Oscar (which I go on to discuss) is a form of suppressing their "homosocial romance" that is in opposition to a Dominican diaspora (524).

Leon family, Yunior, through his control of the narrative, begins to mirror the historic legacies of violent control perpetuated over the Dominican Republic by the dictator, Trujillo.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, whilst Ajay uses his writing as a way to recount his family's strife through the narrative of *Family Life*, Oscar's writing resists using the form as a way to remediate the familial and generational forms of memory that are associated with migration and trauma. His narratives include young heroes who are "fighting mutants at the end of the world" (Díaz 32), alluding to a recasting of himself as a superhero. Yunior, again enacting the dominance of his narrative over the novel, critiques what he sees as Oscar's ignorance of history, remarking that despite hearing about "the family curse for the thousandth time" that Oscar "strangely didn't think it worth incorporating into his fiction" (Díaz 32). As a result, Yunior marks out the difference between himself and Oscar, and how Oscar "strangely" omits mention of the fukú.

Even though Yunior is himself laying claim to superstition, he renders Oscar's storytelling as queer. Directly tying the fukú to the legacy of the Dominican Republic, Yunior asks "what Latino family doesn't think it's cursed?" directly calling out Oscar's credentials, and his ability to positively honour what he sees as legitimate forms of remembrance. The tension between the two, then, expands into how stories of migration are represented, and whether they are all bound up with tales of trauma. Whilst Yunior seeks to enact those forms of remembrance and adhere to the normative expectations of a migrant narration, Oscar acts as a counterpoint to this, using fiction as a means of working through trauma by recasting himself as the hero figure, rather than another victim. *Oscar Wao* hints at the other possibilities that exist for migrant stories, then, ones that are not solely bound up with legacies of violence and offer alternative productive routes for storytelling which utilize hybrid forms. Oscar's narrative functions as another form of emergent literature in its direct opposition to the dominant modes

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<sup>75</sup> Whilst Jennifer Harford Vargas suggests that the decentring of Trujillo in favour of Oscar's offers a "critique of dictatorial power and the dictates of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy" (18), Oscar's eventual death and Yunior's rejection of Oscar's queerness throughout displays tendencies that reflect a refusal of the queer relationality between the two characters despite the strategies Yunior deploys as narrator (see footnote 67).

of expression. Therefore, he contrasts with a figure like Ajay, whose hybrid myth-making demonstrates the interdependency of mainstream expression and its oppositional discourse. What both characters do, however, is demonstrate the tension that exists between the “two incompatible identities” of the minority and majority (Patell 14), as well as produce routes through that anxiety. That Oscar’s narrative potential is continuously overshadowed by Yunior throughout *Oscar Wao* demonstrates how those forms of resistance are continuously subjected to suppression by the expectations of normativity.

By the novel’s end, there are glimmers of potential acceptance by Yunior of Oscar’s version of events. Describing living under the Trujillo regime, Yunior compares it to “being in that famous *Twilight Zone* episode that Oscar loved so much, the one where the monstrous white kid with godlike powers rules over a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the world” (Díaz 222). In comparing Trujillo to the *Twilight Zone*, however, Yunior draws attention to the narrative dominance that his heteronormativity allows him. Whenever characters are portrayed in Santo Domingo it is solely through Yunior’s narration. As a result, Yunior’s narrative decisions embody the “godlike powers” of representation that allow him to control the limited representation of migrant narratives from the Dominican Republic, stories that might be considered as “isolated from the rest of the world”. Furthermore, Yunior and Trujillo are mirrored through the archetypes of masculinity that they represent, and this masculinity is enacted through violent forms of control that uphold the oppressive dynamics of heteronormative state control. Oscar, then, through his subversion of masculine ideals and resistance of Yunior, parallels those that resisted Trujillo’s dictatorship, a concept that is drawn even closer by the intertwining of these narratives with one another.

What ultimately renders Oscar’s acts of resistance successful, however, is the heteronormative lens that is imposed on them by Yunior. The competing narrative of Oscar and Yunior is also signalled through the collapsing boundaries of the novel’s “fiction” and the experience of “reality” within the book’s narrative, a slippage that Yunior acknowledges when



he tells the reader that “I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix” (Díaz 285). Yunior suggests that by embedding references to science-fiction and fantasy he is narrating “a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (Díaz 285). However, Yunior offers the reader the opportunity to question the reality of the narrative, ironically given through another science-fiction reference. Quoting *The Matrix*, Yunior asks the reader whether they wish to accept the reality of the novel through the choice of the blue pill to “continue” or the red pill to “return to the Matrix” (Díaz 285). Somewhat telling is the fact that within the decision that Yunior offers are the wrong choices; the red pill frees those kept in *The Matrix* while the blue pill returns them to it. The choice to question the overarching narrative that is imposed by Yunior, then, is undercut by a false premise of choice, solidifying the legitimacy and primacy of his narration.

Moreover, the question of narrative legitimacy is only raised in moments where Oscar is attempting to assert his heterosexuality, such as his relationship with the police chief’s wife, Ybón. Prior to the encounters between the two characters, the appearance of fantastical creatures is not directly questioned by Yunior. The questions of legitimacy that the novel raises thus become attached to Oscar, resulting in the reinforcement of his queer status through the undermining of a “reality” attached to his heterosexual experiences. As a result, Oscar’s failed heterosexuality, and his subsequent disavowal, is continuously reinforced through Yunior’s narration, a disavowal that ultimately leads to Oscar’s demise.

## THE FALL

Attempting to reunite with Ybón following their first encounter, Oscar returns to Santo Domingo, enacting a reverse migration in an attempt to undo the queer effects the process has had on him. Despite his previous encounter with the police chief’s men, referred to as the Elvises, Oscar finds Ybón and embarks on an affair with her which leads to his demise. Following his death, Yunior receives a letter from Oscar that describes his time with Ybón,

which shifts the narrative focus from Yunior and gives way to Oscar's voice. The letter reveals that rather than succeeding in his pilgrimage back to heterosexuality, Oscar is able to find meaning elsewhere in his time with Ybón, describing "the little intimacies that he'd never in his whole life anticipated" (Díaz 335). Rather than engaging in sex as a route back to his "rightful" masculinity, Oscar discovers that he can find solace in the acts of intimacy he finds with Ybón, "like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap and put her face into his neck" (Díaz 335). As a result, the more violent hypermasculinity that Oscar believed held answers to his existence become replaced with a montage of small and intimate moments that relegate the importance of promiscuity and sex, proclaiming in the book's final words: "If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!" (Díaz 335). Through Oscar's final declaration, the book ends, appearing to subvert the ideals of a heterosexual masculinity given dominance throughout the novel by Yunior's narration. Indeed, through Oscar's queerness, Yunior questions the oppressive nature of his own masculinity, recognizing "what I should have done was check myself into Bootie-Rehab" (Díaz 175). However, he also realises his inability to resist the dominance of cultural norms, telling the reader that "if you thought I was going to do that, then you don't know Dominican men" (Díaz 175). As a result, Yunior further separates Oscar from the category of "Dominican men", whilst recognizing his own inability to focus "on something hard and useful like, say my own shit", eventually succumbing to masculine norms.

Consequently, the divergence between Oscar's queerness and Yunior's heterosexual masculinity is solidified by the novel's end, despite Yunior's repeated recognition of the damage it causes in his life. Yunior's descent into hedonism leads him to a breaking point until finally he is visited by Oscar in his dreams, acknowledging that he "was lost for a good while . . . until finally I woke up next to somebody I didn't give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood and I said, OK, Wao, OK. You win" (Díaz 325). Yunior endeavours to change his life in a form of tribute to Oscar, refusing the stringent norms of Dominican

masculinity, and instead seeking monogamy and marriage, declaring that “I’m a new man” (Díaz 326). By the novel’s end, its queerness finally gives way to the heteronormative norms of monogamy, marriage, and its related happiness. Oscar’s queer migration, then, leads both him and Yunior to the relative safety of their respective forms of heterosexuality with Ybón and Yunior’s wife. However, through his deviation from the societal norms that operate around him, Oscar suffers the effects of a social and literal death.

Yunior, on the other hand, embodies the regulation of a virulent form of masculinity and, following his rampant hedonism, is able to eventually marry and have children. Consequently, his adherence to norms allows him to participate in a heteronormative futurity from which Oscar has been barred. Ironically, it is through his recounting and disavowal of Oscar’s queerness that Yunior is able to eventually seek this happiness, upholding the sovereignty of the heteronormative nation. Moreover, the final letter from Oscar that hints at his successful return to heterosexuality follows passages where Yunior directly invites the reader to question the legitimacy and reality of the narrative. As a result, a lingering question remains over whether Oscar’s letter really existed, or whether it is another way that Yunior imposes the norms of heterosexual masculinity over Oscar. Either way, Oscar enacts a form of queerness that operates by upholding the norms of an oppositional heteronormativity. That queerness ultimately leads to Oscar’s demise through the repeated failures of his heterosexuality, one that is subject to an insistent undermining throughout the novel.

## CONCLUSION

Both *Family Life* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* lay claim to a traditional heteronormativity, despite simultaneously moving toward the oppositionality of queerness. The novels’ complex characterization allows queer voices to be heard and perceived through their relation to the norms of heterosexuality. By *Oscar Wao*’s conclusion, Oscar is sacrificed to allow Yunior’s heteronormativity to flourish, while in *Family Life*, Ajay enacts the operations

of the good and obedient citizen, finding financial success through a well-paid job and various heterosexual relationships. Each novel, then demonstrates the way that an emergent queer culture upholds heteronormativity through its oppositionality and ultimate disavowal. However, the texts also highlight how the relationship between the two is a constant state of flux, and how the characters can move between the space of outsider/insider, a motion that is exemplified in the figure of the migrant. Whilst both protagonists end up disavowing queerness despite their experiences in the novels—Oscar ends up dead whilst Ajay becomes a (re)productive citizen—the queer identificatory tropes of disavowed sexualities, ruptures in time and space, and modes of empathy point toward a network of resistance that can be modelled and built upon to destabilize how state and citizen are conceptualized. These tropes can be used as productive nodes that convey queerness, through what Caroline Levine calls “sprawling, overlapping, and indefinitely expanding processes of interconnectedness” (129) that become especially visible in the transcultural narratives of these novels. In the representation of such a network, we can see how “the text must refuse totality” (Levine 129) and how the shifting nature of (dis)identification is caught up in the “constantly unfolding and expanding and overlapping” systems of interconnection (Levine 130). Moreover, the transcultural migration in the novels points towards the way that understandings of outsider and insider can further be undermined and questioned. Whilst both texts are largely concerned with the notion of the family and the impact of migration on them, the novels also work in complex ways that move beyond simplistic and reductive definitions such as “immigrant fiction”. Both *Family Life* and *Oscar Wao* respond to larger questions of identity that are not exclusively bound to the concept of the migrant and migration, but rather can unlock structures of power and identification that operate around, and beyond, the nation-state.

Both texts also complicate conceptualizations of normativity and unravel the complex labels of queerness that are applied by society and culture. Moreover, those definitions interact with myriad markers that include deviance, disability, fantasy, disruption, alternative

kinship, and homonationalism. Aside from the texts' preoccupation with restoring conventional families and finding a successful way to migrate back to them, both *Family Life* and *Oscar Wao* portray several forms of queer digression that are both useful and important to explore. Tied up with racial identity and history, norms of heterosexuality and masculinity, and violent oppression and escape, the novels provide a way into considering how more successful forms of queer resistance might work. They provide a link to an imagined future that includes the queer. Whilst these stories ultimately might suggest that there is no way out for the queer in the present, and that the process is doomed to its own abject failure, it is through those threads that a new network of queerness can be tied together, and that resistant modes of queerness can be built. It is that network that I move on to explore in the conclusion, as I tie the threads that have been uncovered and analysed throughout this thesis, to indicate how we might move toward an imaginary of queer futurity through the constraints and resistances of the present.

# CONCLUSION

## Feeling Toward the Queer Archive

*“We must strive,  
in the face of the here and now’s  
totalising rendering of reality,  
to think and feel a then and there”*  
– José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

The preceding four chapters have explored the ways that the nationalist and heteronormative discourse of the United States has travelled across cultures and back to the nation through the effects of increased globalization. By examining texts that are queer(ed) alongside those that uphold problematic narratives of state belonging, citizenship, and exclusion, I have constructed an archive of queer remembrance that works to undermine the hegemony of US state discourse. Moreover, I have expanded the current limitations of transcultural memory and its inadvertent replication of hegemonic norms encountered through the United States such as the sovereign dominance of the nation-state and which sites of memory are duly legitimized. My thesis thus destabilizes the heteronormativity of transcultural memory that nevertheless continues to adhere to the nation as its frame.

Such critical work is necessary due to the lack of queer accounts of memorialization even in recent reflections on the field. Despite both the recognition of “the discourse of crisis” that memory studies invokes and a reframing of discourse away from “certain privileged texts and artefacts”, focus remains on the processes by which memory travels transnationally and the affective qualities of memorial practices and scholarship (Vermeulen et al. 223-224). Consequently, scholars have largely failed to redress the omission of how queerness intersects with forms of remembrance. Although they engage with productive routes for the future of memory studies, such discussions still fail to consider the structural implications of the field, and wider discourse at large, which relegates queerness to the periphery. If memory

is to now be considered in a “globalized age”, where “memories travel along and cross migratory paths of world citizens” (Bond et al. 1), then as scholars of memory studies we must ask who is included in the category of “world citizens”, and why. This thesis has developed this aspect of the field of transcultural memory through its inclusive approach to the cultural forms that it explores and its exploration of the queerness of transnational cultural work in the contemporary moment.

The thesis began by using the work of Nina Berman and Hasan Elahi to examine sites of leisure, notions of innocence, and moments of banality. In doing so, I uncovered the ways that the domestic vernacular of the United States embodies the divisions between the heteronormative core of the nation-state and those who are rendered as queer outsiders and conceptualized as threats to the nation. Moving outward, I discussed the ways that the transnational space of Iraq created an expansion of those concerns, exemplifying a site where such constructions are subject to a destabilization. Discussing Roy Scranton and Sinan Antoon’s novels, I investigated the queer time and space of conflict and how groups can embrace or disavow that queerness. Building on that queer locationality, I considered the extra-national black sites of Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib using Luke Moran’s film *Boys* and Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s genre-shifting book to demonstrate how such spaces enact a problematic expanding of the nation’s borders. Further, I argued that the spaces function as sites where the tensions of the nation, explored across the thesis, can be violently played out. I further explored and developed the notion of an empathetic engagement with the queer that is missing from US-centric perspectives. My fourth chapter charts the interaction between queer outsider and the heteronormative interior of the nation, and how this has moved back into the nation. Both Akhil Sharma’s and Junot Díaz’s text use portrayals of migrancy and childhood to explore the productive space of the queer in deterritorializing culture.

By reflecting on the conditions of the queer in the contemporary moment, I have uncovered representations that strive toward a reworking of a cultural futurity and transcultural

forms of remembrance—centred around the dominance of the heteronormative and globally (re)productive citizen—and which undermine the limited conceptualization of queerness within the frames of remembrance. Through a consideration of the way that queerness appears and interacts with ideals of normalcy in the cultural present, I have identified moments of representation that establish a contemporary archive that creates links both backwards to the queer past and forwards the potential of its future. Consequently, the threads of queerness that appear across cultural spheres in the thesis build more resilient links between temporalities of the queer and its attendant archives.

The concept of the archive is simply defined as a way of collecting and preserving information through a range of sites that include cultural objects and artefacts. Building on the project of considering “the ephemeral evidence of gay and lesbian life” (Cvetkovich 243) establishes the foundational qualities of what can be considered a queer form of archive. These spaces function as destabilizing forces through the implicit blurring of distinctions: between the heterosexist site of the historical and the oppositional queer, and the blurring of public and private created through the construction of a queer archive. Moreover, the placement of queerness within that historicizing archival space creates a resistant conditionality to the forms of repression previously experienced by those communities. I have developed Cvetkovich’s model by expanding what is defined as queer throughout this thesis and exploring this within transcultural frames of remembrance,

The foundational destabilization of boundaries and enacting of resistant forms appears in my thesis from the personal imagery and testimony of Elahi’s *Tracking Transience* and Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* that intersect with hegemonic political structures, to the familial relationships and kinship explored in *The Corpse Washer*, *Family Life*, and *Boys of Abu Ghraib*. Further, the queer archive undermines the notion of a textual certainty within that archive, as seen through the narrative tension between Yunior and Oscar in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the myriad personalities that populate Berman’s *Homeland*



and Scranton's *War Porn*. Each of the texts considered by this thesis exemplifies, in some way, the dimensions of a queer archive; one that operates from, beyond, and back to the United States across transcultural spheres. The more successful elements of that archive are the texts that work dialogically whilst presenting borders that are repeatedly straddled, destabilized, or breached, recasting imaginaries of the present through the resistant modes of queerness.

## EXIT, WEST

Having established my queer archive, I turn in conclusion toward an example of a very recently published text that takes up the elements I have identified in order to work toward a more expansive imaginary of queerness: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017).<sup>76</sup> *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Hamid's second novel, has previously been studied by critics for the way that its narrative develops a deterritorialized response to the transcultural implications of the War on Terror, one that resists "the dominant which excludes difference" in novels that followed 9/11 (Gamal 598).<sup>77</sup> Like the texts considered in chapter four of my thesis Hamid's novel is "post-migratory" and, as Gamal argues, thus "problematizes the condition of migrancy by deconstructing the binarism of home and the world and linking the global to the postcolonial" (Gamal 598). The novel, then, creates its stance through a resistance to the

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<sup>76</sup> Jia Tolentino—somewhat ironically—called the novel "immediately canonical" for its understanding of the contemporary moment and the need for an empathetic and inclusive approach to global concerns, particularly those of mass migration ("A Novel About Refugees"). Sukhdev Sandhu notes the novels' genre-blurring qualities, simultaneously "a fable about deterritorialization, a newsreel about civil society . . . and a speculative fiction that fashions new maps of hell" ("Exit West"). Viet Thanh Nguyen notes the "cautious recognition of a mutual humanity . . . to forge a new society" as the novel presents the idea of an inclusive futurity ("March's Book Club Pick").

<sup>77</sup> Scanlon (2010) discusses how texts like Hamid's tease apart identities made oppositional following 9/11. Lisa Lau posits that the novel forces readers into "confronting processes of othering within Western identity constructions which underscore difference" (80), whilst Peter Morey suggests it "destabilizes the dominant categories of the post-9/11 novel, undercutting the impulse to national normalization" (136). Anna Hartnell points toward the conflicted nature of the book's protagonist, Changez, suggesting that he is "alienated but also simultaneously drawn to the isolationist and exceptionalist currents of the American national narrative", thus drawing out the complexities of state power ("Moving through America" 336).

utopic return to the homeland, instead constructing it as “only one element of the diasporic imaginary . . . [to] be understood as a temporal and cultural process rather than a place” (Gamal 599). Building on a more nuanced representations of transculturalism and diaspora, Hamid’s fourth and most recent novel—*Exit West*—charts the border crossing of Saeed and Nadia, who flee civil war and traverse the globe through a series of doors. The couple’s journey takes them from an unnamed city to a refugee camp in the Greek island of Mykonos to a ghetto in London before arriving in California. Consequently, the novel portrays how the refugee experience of Saeed and Nadia journeys across multiple locations, linked through a transcultural network across the Western hemisphere to its final destination, the most Western point of the United States.

Hamid’s novel makes clear the link between globalization and technology, and the ways in which increased reliance on digital networks transforms us all into “migrants through time” (*Exit West* 209). The implication of technology in globalization is reflected through the narrative which links across geographical spaces and temporalities, recalling Levine’s notion of the productive network that I explored my reading of *Oscar Wao* (and *Family Life*). The book’s early pages describe a “networked” moment: “as Saeed’s email was being downloaded from a server and read by his client, far away in Australia a pale-skinned woman was sleeping alone in the Sydney neighbourhood of Surry Hills” (Hamid, *Exit West* 5). The novel moves between the time and space of Saeed, redirecting the narrative through the experience of the sleeping woman in Australia and back again, demonstrating how this digitization creates networks that indirectly connects strangers. Nadia and Saeed are “always in possession of their phones” (Hamid, *Exit West* 35) even after their displacement, using them as a way to connect to the world, one that is simultaneously based in reality and the virtual world. Consequently, the phones that Nadia and Saeed are so reliant on become, following their migration, a way to re-establish links to their home and the wider world, establishing a form of

queer network that regenerates aspects of their subjectivities lost to the hegemony of static borders and nation-states.

As a result, the vital processes of establishing digital forms of kinship are subject to the same forms of state control that queer bodies experience in “the real world”. Despite the government’s success in quelling violent attacks on Nadia and Saeed’s unnamed home city, the state enforces an indefinite suspension of mobile phone signal and internet connectivity as “a temporary anti-terrorism measure” (Hamid, *Exit West* 55). The “temporary” measures portrayed as a form of public protection mask the underlying control of the state that is expanded without limitation, forming part of a “state of exception”, similar to the measures deployed by the US government following 9/11—explored in the first chapter through the work of Berman and Elahi—as part of its own apparent protection of the nation’s citizenry. The hostility of state reactions follows the two as they move from city to city through a series of doors—also comprising a queer network of migration—eventually arriving in an area called “dark London”. Cordoned off into migrant holding camps, Nadia and Saeed are surrounded by “soldiers and armoured vehicles . . . [and] drones and helicopters” (Hamid, *Exit West* 135). Despite having “run from war already”, the displaced protagonists are subjected to further isolation from the state, reaffirming their lack of statefulness and, much like the detainees in chapter three, have their rights rendered obsolete by the dominance of state power.

Resisting the subjugation that they experience, Nadia and Saeed find electricity sources so that they can turn on their phones, establishing a reconnection with other migrants and, through news updates, their home. Nadia, “sat on the steps of a building” scrolls through reports on her phone, until she “thought she saw online a photograph of herself sitting on the steps of a building reading the news on her phone” (Hamid, *Exit West* 154). As a result, she experiences the “the bizarre feeling of time bending all around her, as though she was from the past reading about the future, or from the future reading about the past” (Hamid, *Exit West* 154). Through her interaction with the queer network, an action that embodies its own form of

queer resistance, Nadia experiences the rupturing of a normative temporality that places her in a space of kinship with other migrants with whom she identifies. Moreover, it replicates the non-linear temporality of the migrant, one seen in other narratives like *Family Life* and *Oscar Wao*, that bends around texts and characters.

The creation of another world, one that is embraced by the characters through the “magic” of the digital, generates the ability to transport them (and the readers) to “places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be” (Hamid, *Exit West* 35). The characters, then, are shown to have the capacity to access spaces that exist at the periphery of the “normal world”, constructing and forming queer spaces of kinship that provide means of escapism and resistance. That Nadia and Saeed escape through a series of doors replicates the “magic” conditionality of those networks, providing access to a kind of transcultural bridge, one that exists as a way to cross borders that would normally limit those who are relegated to outside of normative socio-political structures. After spending time in London, the pair decide to leave “the drone-crossed sky” and “the invisible network of surveillance” that effectively render their phones as spying devices. By occupying the spaces of intrusive state control, they find the potential for their queer network to become compromised through the consequence of surveillance and monitoring of the queer body. The doors, then, become a way to escape the intrusion that they experience over their subjectivities, as the narrative follows them through. The reader experiences how state power is manifest over the queer subject, creating an empathetic experience that mirrors the cultural texts throughout this thesis, from *Tracking Transience* to *Guantánamo Diary*.

Moreover, the queer experience of war is explored through *Exit West*. Described as “an intimate experience”, it is portrayed to the reader through the personal relationships that are implicated in and understood through “front lines defined at the level of the street one took to work, the school one’s sister attended, the house of one’s aunt’s best friend, the shop where one bought cigarettes” (Hamid, *Exit West* 65). Similarly to Jawad in *The Corpse Washer*, the

distinct lines between public and private become blurred, and demonstrate how the markers of queerness are in a perpetual flux. Moreover, the distinct sides that are prescribed across conflict are subject to a destabilization, presenting the complex and myriad responses that operate around war explored in texts such as Scranton's. The ultimate consequence of the conflict, and Nadia and Saeed's subsequent displacement, is the realization that Nadia herself encompasses a range of different identities that resist normative prescriptions.

Eventually reaching their final destination of the city of Marin in the US, Nadia becomes increasingly estranged from Saeed, as if he "were becoming her brother" (Hamid, *Exit West* 199). Nadia's desires become more fluid, as "she found herself aroused readily, by a beautiful man as she walked to work . . . by thoughts of the girl from Mykonos" (Hamid, *Exit West* 199). Moving beyond the normative scope of heterosexuality, Nadia thinks "increasingly of that girl" while she "pleasured herself", becoming accustomed to "the strength of her response" that "no longer surprised her" (Hamid, *Exit West* 199). Consequently, the migration that the characters experience not only occupies queer spaces at the periphery of state power and conflict but the sites of individual subjecthood. The narrative breaches through the boundaries of public and private, providing a series of "doors" through which the reader can traverse those divisions. *Exit West*, then, demonstrates the kind of cultural form that embraces the various dimensions of what a queer archive might look like. That the sites of queerness in the text become the most productive also subverts the various disavowals experienced by the queer subject. The journey of the novel ends in the US, providing a suitable homecoming to the nation's interior, through a series of routes that markedly deviate from the prescriptions of normativity, concepts that operate to shore up the nation's core.

The final chapter of the novel, acting as a kind of coda, jumps forward fifty years as Nadia returns to her former home. Meeting Saeed in a café, the two characters become inconsequential to those around them. The "bright satellites" that "transited in the darkening sky" (Hamid, *Exit West* 228) above them reflect the fluidity of queer networks, and of those

incorporated into, and by, them. Moreover, the image of the satellites undermines the static conceptualization of queerness, showing how individuals or groups can act as nodes that orbit or interact with one another, objects in a perpetual state of transit. The novel's end thus suggests the potential for open possibility, a notion that incorporates the prospect of fluidity and fluctuation. Therefore, through a consideration of the present, and its nearby past, an archive is created that incorporates the corporeal and psychic legacies of queer experience. As a result, a site is generated that allows one to look, or "feel backward", by considering the "significant points in a tradition of queer experience and representation" (Love 4). Such forms of representation allow for the space whereby "a world where queer lives, politics, and possibilities are representable in their complexity" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 1). The creation of that world, of a queer archive, creates the conditions whereby such a present extends outward toward the potentiality for queer futurity. What *Exit West*—and the texts throughout this thesis—demonstrates, then, is how cultural forms unravel notions of a present that is inherently heteronormative, blurring geographical and socio-political borders between insider and outsider, laying claim toward the queerness in the past, present, and as a result, the future.

If the future of memory relies on the migration between borders, and "the dynamics of cultural memory [that] cannot be studied within the bounds of one culture or society" (Vermeulen et al. 224), it becomes imperative that the development of new models of study closely consider their intersection with queer identifications. Connecting across global and multidirectional frames of memory must reflect the diverse and inclusive practice that queer theory offers the field. Memory studies, then, must enact its own form of looking, or feeling, backward to return to the importance of the field, to consider what facets of crisis are considered through its lens. Moreover, if attention is given to the ways that memory migrates transculturally, we must also consider what travels across those borders, and the ways that forms of remembrance might be limited in who they speak for. Through reflection on the past

and the present that includes the queer, the future becomes a site whereby all are included in its purview. The texts that have been studied across my thesis have begun the work of establishing forms that resist the “totalizing rendering of reality” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1) that deems the present heteronormative, creating spaces whereby one can think and feel toward a queer future that migrates across borders. This thesis has considered the implication of the United States in creating restrictive imaginaries of the present and their transcultural movements. The next step is to now uncover queer archives of other nation-states, and their interactions across cultural spheres.

# APPENDIX 1: ILLUSTRATIONS

## CHAPTER ONE

*Figure 1: Potassium iodine distribution, residents arrive to collect free KI pills, part of a national preparedness initiative, Charlotte, North Carolina, 2002*

*Figure 2: Taking cover, role players in "The Box," Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Ft. Polk, Louisiana, 2008*



*Figure 3: Explosion, hired at \$12.87 an hour, locals play Iraqis in simulation drills, "The Box," JRTC, Ft. Polk, Louisiana, 2008*

*Figure 4: Woman in burqa serves peanuts, Missionary Day, New Life Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2005*

*Figure 5: Woman in burqa serves peanuts, Missionary Day, New Life Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2005*

*Figure 6: Congregation, Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2005*

*Figure 7: Bible Study, Bible studies teacher dressed as an Army soldier in classroom, Southeast Christian Church, Louisville, Kentucky, 2005*

*Figure 8: Army Strong poster, Army Strong Zone, San Antonio, Texas, 2008*

*Figure 9: Human target practice, All-America day with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, 2006*

*Figure 10: Girl, Army Strong Zone, outside the Alamodome, San Antonio, Texas, 2008 / Boy, Army Strong Zone,  
outside the Alamodome, San Antonio, Texas, 2008*

*Figure 11: U.S. Army All-American Bowl, Alamodome, San Antonio, Texas, 2008*

*Figure 12: Marine Day, Times Square, New York City, 2007*

*Figure 13: Sweepback (part of a 56-channel public art installation), 2009-2016*

*Figure 14: stay v3 (pigment print), 56cm x 72cm, 2016*

*Figure 15: Fifth Horseman (pigment print), 289cm x 152cm, 2016*

*Figure 16: Prism (pigment on vinyl), 300cm x 1100cm, 2015*

*Figure 17: Conelrad v09 (pigment printed on canvas), 183cm x 100cm, 2016*

*Figure 18: Security & Comfort v3 (c-print), 150cm x 300cm, 2007*

*Figure 19: Thousand Little Brothers (pigment print on canvas), 838cm x 487cm, 2014*



## CHAPTER THREE

*Figure 20: Hallway, Boys of Abu Ghraib, 2014*

*Figure 21: Barracks, Boys of Abu Ghraib, 2014*

*Figure 22: Scorpion Fighting, Boys of Abu Ghraib, 2014*

*Figure 23: Prisoner with electrodes, Boys of Abu Ghraib, 2014*

*Figure 24: Ghazi and Farmer, Boys of Abu Ghraib, 2014*

*Figure 25: Soldier boxing match, Boys of Abu Ghraib, 2014*

*Figure 26: Bucket of shit, Boys of Abu Ghraib, 2014*

*Figure 27: Breaking news, Boys of Abu Ghraib, 2014*

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