Between Man and Machine:

Masculinity, Technology and Spaces of Empire in American Narratives of the "Global War on Terror"

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I, Sarah Helen Collier, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This thesis reads military masculinity as an expression of empire to examine how selected American representations of the "Global War on Terror" contend with intersecting discourses of crisis surrounding American masculinity and military power at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Looking across literary, cinematic and popular narratives, I consider how emerging visual technologies—specifically unmanned aerial vehicles and handheld cameras—are articulated alongside embodied masculinities, and how these configurations mediate American domestic and military space. I argue that such configurations of military masculinity help to give narrative shape to the notoriously disparate series of interventions known as the long war on terror. Read together, these texts speak back to historic war stories and mythic culture, and especially the potent and resilient mythology of the frontier that undergirds the American war imaginary. While looking back, these narratives also cast an anxious glance towards the future, intimating uncertainty over the role of the man, the soldier, and the broader apparatus of US imperial power as we move further into the twenty-first century.

This thesis fills a critical gap in scholarship by attending to how masculinity is represented via the relationship of mythology to modern visual military technologies. While much critical attention has been paid to the representation of military masculinity during the war on terror in areas including trauma, embodiment, technology and the western genre, these areas have yet to be bridged in a way which generates a picture of empire through such intersecting articulations of masculinity. This thesis thus brings these various elements of scholarship together: firstly, to question how American mythology is reimagined in an age of technologised war, and secondly to present a framework for interpreting contemporary imaginaries of empire by way of their representation through masculinity.

Impact Statement

An interdisciplinary project combining popular and literary narratives across fiction, film, drama and television, my methodology contributes to contemporary scholarship highlighting the value of reading so-called high and low cultural forms together to fully appreciate the ways in which culture makes sense of the key questions shaping our experience of the present. Further, in its attention to technology, my thesis seeks to remedy the gap between discourses of war and discourses of the home. In doing so, I hope that it will encourage greater mobility for "war narratives" on the curriculum, and will create greater space for scholarly discussions on such narratives within disciplines that are not directly related to conflict, for example: women's studies, eco-criticism and medical humanities.

We live in exceptionally militarised times, and as such my analysis of war representation and technologies of seeing will be applicable beyond the immediate confines of American war. In February 2024 an ITV documentary was released titled *Ukraine's War: The Other Side,* in which the journalist Sean Langan embedded with the Russian military, in the first piece of British war reporting from "the other side" of the Ukraine conflict. The documentary was highly controversial: critics opposed the notion that the film offered a platform to a belligerent military force, whereas the film's creators insisted on its journalistic value for documentation of a side of the war that Western viewers rarely see. The issue with *The Other Side* was not the reporting in itself, but the embedding—Langan's life was very much dependent on the Russian forces throughout the film, and at several moments he expresses relief that the loud noises he hears are not incoming Ukrainian missiles, but Russian missiles being fired towards the Ukrainian front. Given Langan's compromised journalistic position, the public conversation turned to the possibility of neutral reportage in war. These questions are developed in Alex Garland's latest film *Civil War*, released in April 2024—a film which is highly critical of the aestheticisation of war through the culture of thrill-seeking photojournalism. I hope that this thesis, which discusses the ethics of embedded reporting and questions how even raw footage can be viewed as objective documentation, will help to provide accessible language and conceptual tools to discuss these questions in the public domain, at a time when technology is calling into question the purpose and power of images.

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Introduction:
Back to the Future

In 2016, at the peak of the so-called "culture wars" that would precipitate the election of Donald Trump, the political commentator Ben Shapiro published his first and to-date only novel, *True Allegiance*. Imagining a dystopian future in which the United States' borders are compromised and violated by a range of foreign and domestic political adversaries including Muslims, Mexicans, and liberals, the novel was exemplary of right-wing discourse of the time that identified emasculated American men as symptomatic of waning American military power. In the novel, Shapiro diagnoses the impotence of the United States in a changing world by invoking the pathetic figure of a silenced and aggrieved white male. The protagonist, Brett Hawthorne, is a veteran of Afghanistan and exemplary of the fantasy of masculine rugged individualism: "a bear of a man" with "a face carved of granite" whose disdain for government only complements his ardent patriotism (Shapiro 7). Following a rather prescient sequence narrating the withdrawal of US troops from Kabul, the novel sees Hawthorne return to a liberal United States mired in social crisis. After a series of events leading him to be accused of treason, Hawthorne is imprisoned by the liberal president Prescott, during which time the US is subject to a large-scale terror attack. The suppression of American masculinity, the novel suggests, is synonymous with the suppression of American military power, and the perceived persecution of American masculine "heroes" renders the nation feminised and vulnerable. The story ends on the image of Hawthorne, who "fell to his knees and buried his head in his hands, screaming silently," a melodramatic symbol of wounded, pained masculinity rendered silent and invisible (Shapiro 256).

Conflating what he perceives as a crisis in American hegemony and a crisis in masculinity, Shapiro's image of the neutralised white soldier is emblematic of contemporary right-wing anxieties over the weakening of American power. Such

anxieties are not new, however: the supposed "crisis" in masculinity has emerged at regular junctures alongside moments of military tension since the 1960s. As Susan Jeffords argues, the culture industries of the 1980s projected a "remasculinization of America," atoning for the losses at Vietnam through depictions of hyper-masculine, muscular men, exemplified by Sylvester Stallone in the Rambo film franchise (12). George H.W. Bush punctuated this remasculinisation through his declaration of having "kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all" on the success of his bombardment of Iraq in the first Gulf war in 1990 (Dionne Jr.). Following the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the so-called "end of history," the 1990s ushered in another period of crisis for American masculinity, as American military endeavours transitioned from wars of aggression to peacekeeping. The turn towards imagery of "a presumed masculine sensitivity" in the figures of, for example, Bill Clinton, Hugh Grant and Tom Hanks was countered by several popular narratives such as *Falling Down* (1993)*, Fight Club* (1999) *and American Psycho* (2000) which sought to interrogate white masculinity's alleged loss of power (Malin 611). In popular music, figures such as Kurt Cobain and Eminem gave voice to a sense of anger and despondency among a generation of young men. The 1990s also saw the rise of men's rights movements, as groups such as the Promise Keepers and the Million Man March rallied to restore a sense of dignity against a prevailing sense of masculine disenfranchisement. While there is of course no causal link between American military action and the experience of masculinity, it is notable that—alongside the increasing visibility and progress of women's rights—the successes and failures of the US military abroad find their expression in masculine crisis and resolution in the media and in popular culture, at an intensity which feels fraught and visceral.

The ongoing nature of this supposed crisis has led some scholars to question its suitability as a framework for analysing contemporary masculinity. Identifying crises as moments of rupture and change, Kathleen Starck and Russell Luyt suggest

that the masculinity crisis occurs cyclically, and as such we must question whether it is justified to refer to a "crisis" of masculinity that seemingly spans entire decades (433). Taking a Marxist approach, James Heartfield rejects the notion of masculinity crisis entirely, arguing instead that economic disenfranchisement is at the root of contemporary feelings of powerlessness that connects men and women. Brenton J. Malin invokes the masculinity crisis as a useful conceptual term to interpret broader socio-cultural change, but acknowledges that the "so-called 'crisis of masculinity' has very little basis in reality if we think of it in terms of economic and political power, as Western men continue to hold such power in abundance" (617).

Crisis is a useful conceptual tool through which to interpret not the loss but the consolidation of male hegemony. Tanya Modleski warns that in patriarchy "we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crises and resolution" (7). While Modleski, like Starck and Luyt, identifies a cyclical pattern to such crisis, Claire Sisco-King understands "hegemonic masculinity as always in composition...always unstable and multiplicitous" ("It Cuts Both Ways" 371). The effect of such a perennial sense of crisis is to maintain hegemony via its constant reassertion and renewal; Sally Robinson notes that "the texts produced out of that crisis use a vocabulary of pain and urgency to dwell on, manage, and/or heal the threats to a normativity continuously under siege" (5). Writing in 2000, Robinson's *Marked Men* focused on the fluctuations of the masculinity crisis from the 1960s through to the 1990s, and the re-emergence of crisis discourse during the Clinton years. Robinson connects the language of the embattled male into broader discussions about the American nation itself, tracing the "embodiment" of America in imagery of the wounded white male body, thus translating the crisis of masculinity to a "crisis of embodiment" (26).

A year after *Marked Men* was published, crisis discourse emerged yet again, as commentators attempted to make sense of the tragedy of 9/11 by couching the

events in embodied, gendered allegories. Vaheed Ramazani, for example, identifies "phallic iconicity" in the World Trade Center as it was defined by the political and media class following the attacks (118). Moreover, Bonnie Mann argues that the imaginary constructed via this discourse,

> ...reads the attack on the twin towers as a simultaneous act of penetration (the images of the towers being penetrated by the planes plays over and over again) and castration (the towers collapse), when we attend to the subsequent images of missiles poised to anally penetrate Saddam Hussein (or think of the slogan "USA: Up Saddam's Ass"). (186)

Sisco-King elaborates upon the notion of national trauma of 9/11, arguing that this sense of vulnerability was seen to replace "the dominant masculinist fiction of American 'impregnability or invincibility' with the metaphorical castration of purported symbols of American superiority and phallic mastery" (*Washed in Blood* 122). Such rhetoric, Sisco-King argues, "figuratively [translates] the 1990s-era 'masculinity crisis' from the (white middle-class) men of the United States to the nation itself" (*Washed in Blood* 122). At such moments of national crisis, then, masculinity emerges as an expression of the nation, the nation's power and, equally, its perceived vulnerabilities.

Taking as its point of departure this close relationship between masculinity and nation in popular and academic discourse, this thesis looks to narratives of the "war on terror," the series of military actions initiated as a response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. I read military masculinity as an expression of empire to explore how narratives of the war on terror contend with the questions surrounding American and masculine hegemony in the years following 9/11. Looking particularly at how embodied military masculinity is articulated with and against emerging visual technologies, I consider how masculine and imperial imaginaries are shaped by modes of seeing that were new to the period between 2002 and 2016. Further, I consider how such masculine-technological configurations mediate military and domestic space. In so doing, I explore how military masculinity is

conceptualised in ways which imagine, anticipate, support and challenge the future shape and direction of American empire as we move further into the twenty-first century.

It is worth offering some context to this potent and contentious term—empire—in relation to the United States. The definition of the modern US as an empire has been the subject of rigorous interdisciplinary debate for decades, and wars from the Second World War to Vietnam have acted as flashpoints for renewed discussion on the topic. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri are careful to disentangle what they call "Empire" from imperialism and imperialist actions. Writing in the 1990s, they argue that while the US (and other nation states) are imperialist in their military engagements, they do so under a broader, de-territorialised project of "Empire," an expansive globalised network of capital. Empire, for Hardt and Negri, "can only be conceived as a universal republic, a network of powers and counterpowers structured in a boundless and inclusive architecture" which "extends and consolidates the model of network power" against territorial imperialisms (166-7). The Empire theorised by Hardt and Negri is the product of twentieth-century late capitalism and is very different from the colonial conquest enacted by Europe centuries before.

In contrast, Amy Kaplan identifies modern American empire as a juncture on a long and constantly shifting timeline of violent conquest. She explains that Empire and imperialism

> ...are not as distinct as Hardt and Negri contend, but that both are at work in varied configurations throughout the history of US imperialism. The American Empire has long followed a double impetus to construct boundaries and patrol all movement across them and to break down those borders through the desire for unfettered expansion. To separate Empire from imperialism is to foreclose the history of American imperialism and breathe new life into the belief in American exceptionalism. (*Anarchy of Empire* 15–6)

During this thesis, I refer to American "empire" to designate the military, economic and cultural hegemony of the United States, particularly in the incarnations it has taken since the beginning of the Cold War up to the present day. I also prefer to dwell in its conceptual indeterminacy rather than getting caught up in staking out a definition. While acknowledging Hardt and Negri's concept of "network power" in the contemporary age of militarisation and surveillance capitalism, I also align with Kaplan's work on the contradictions of borders inherent in American empire. Similarly, I understand contemporary American empire to be constantly shifting, but not separate to the wars of expansion of the 1800s and the original settler colonial, territorial conflicts from which America was born.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq ushered in a new configuration of American empire. George W. Bush's administration responded to 9/11 by invading Afghanistan in October 2001, and Iraq in March 2003. The Iraq invasion was particularly controversial and was predicated on falsified claims of weapons of mass destruction stockpiled by Saddam Hussein. Government and media justifications for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq shifted: they ranged from protecting American citizens from terrorism at home; bringing democracy to the Middle East; and rescuing the nations' women from what were deemed backwards traditions. While the US failed in all these aims, it was highly successful in installing deregulated, neoliberal financial regimes and opening the countries out to unfettered new markets, particularly in oil and security (Klein 319). The military interventions were met with hostility from local populations, with factionalism and guerrilla warfare breaking out, intensifying the American response and leading to the loss of millions of lives. What were intended to be quick "shock and awe" interventions turned into years-long occupations: American troops left Iraq in 2011 under Obama after several false endings and a notoriously premature claim of "mission accomplished" by his predecessor, Bush, in 2003 (Sanger). The US left Afghanistan even later, after four presidents, in

2021—making it the longest war in American history. While these wars are the focal conflicts of the period, what I refer to as the "war on terror" during this thesis is more expansive: US interventions in territories such as Somalia, Pakistan and Yemen can also be considered part of the long war on terror. The spatial and temporal indeterminacy of the term "war on terror" is part of what enables its geographic reach and prolongment.

Indeed, the war on terror also includes American actions at home. In response to 9/11, the Bush administration passed the Patriot Act: an expansive set of laws which tightened border control and immigration and aggressively expanded the state's surveillance powers, resulting in widespread criticism that these enhanced powers contravened civil liberties (Dempsey 8). In tandem with military interventions abroad, the domestic sphere thus also became militarised during the war on terror. Giorgio Agamben notes this as the establishment of a "state of exception," or the permanent suspension of law (2). He explains that via the Patriot Act, and by establishing himself as the Commander in Chief of the Army, Bush laid "presidential claim to sovereign powers" and in doing so produced "a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible" (Agamben 22). The ideological re-alignment of war and home spaces during the war on terror is explored by Kathy Ferguson, who refers to Slavoj Žižek's work on ideology to tease apart the ways in which war is maintained at a level of remove in the collective consciousness. Highlighting the vast chasm in the popular imagination between what she names the "over there" and the "over here," Ferguson argues that structures of contemporary militarism sustained a largely deeply unpopular war by presenting it as happening far away from America's borders, at the same time as militarising and securitising American life in the wake of 9/11 (478). The collapse of borders during the war on terror—between war and peace, military and domestic—is central to this thesis and speaks to Kaplan's conceptualisation of

American empire as a project in which borders are simultaneously constructed and broken down; a project of which the potency and longevity relies on designating an "outside" that is continually targeted and enfolded within the nation's borders (*Anarchy of Empire* 50).

The onset of the war on terror thus provided another juncture at which the imperial status of the United States was debated in academia and in the media. A *New York Times* article published shortly after the "mission accomplished" speech suggested that the word "empire" had been featured over 1000 times in the media over a period of six months (Daalder and Lindsay). Social scientists sought to define the nature of US military actions abroad, returning to the debate over whether "imperial" actions translated to a position as an empire (Steinmetz 340; Saull 310; Lake 284). These debates were perhaps too preoccupied with definitional accuracy, over taking a "bigger picture" view on America's capability and historically contingent power. Historian Geir Lundestad argues:

> The Bush administration had ambitions worthy of an empire. Just as Ronald Reagan had allegedly liberated Eastern and Central Europe and the Soviet Union, thereby ending the Cold War, Bush would liberate Afghanistan and Iraq and later, presumably Iran and North Korea. This would reorder not only the Middle East, but much of the world. America had the strength and the means necessary to carry out such a hugely ambitious mission. This was indeed empire, without inverted commas. (97)

However, as the war on terror continued, costing trillions of dollars and taking with it countless lives, the conversation turned to the failure of this imperial project. With successive administrations failing to bring stability, Lundestad notes, the "days of empire, in almost any form, were virtually gone" (98).

The ongoing state of exception, bolstered by rapidly proliferating military technologies, is what has led some critics to diagnose the beginning of the end of American empire. Nathan Hensley locates this shift in the United States' expansion of drone warfare. Drawing upon Hannah Arendt's argument that "proliferating

death is a sign not of hegemony but of its waning," Hensley understands empire as "a monopoly on putatively legitimate violence—the stretching of the state's power to kill even beyond its 'own' citizenry" (229). As such, "the power of sovereign decision crystallized in remote assassination machines is the very essence of empire: its telos, or end" (Hensley 229). The United States' expansion of its technological capability is another central concern of this thesis, and I am particularly interested in how narrative articulates this technology alongside embodied masculinities at a time when, as Hensley intimates, such technological advancement is provoking ruptures and realignments in our conception of American empire.

Thus at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the perennial debate over a crisis of American masculinity dovetails with similar discussions around a crisis of American empire. As I have suggested, it is possible to read representations of American masculinity, and especially military masculinity, as an expression of empire—and it is from the distillation of imperial imaginaries into the embodied soldier that we can unpack prevailing cultural anxieties. Joseph Darda links the supposed crisis of white American masculinity to the military, arguing that the "ethnicization of veteran America" after the Vietnam war has produced a cultural stereotype of white masculinity which is repressed at the same time as maintaining hegemony in politics, media and culture (*Culture Wars* 125). The event that "formed white racial identities and secured white racial interests," Darda posits, was war (*Culture Wars* 150). Darda's analysis speaks back to his earlier work on the "empire of defense" in which he traces the transition of the word "war" to "defense" in American political rhetoric (*Empire of Defense* 3). "Defense is not the end of war" Darda argues, "it is the transformation of war from an event to a norm" (*Empire of Defense* 6). In this way, the rhetorical prolongment of war into ongoing defense resonates with the rhetorical prolongment of masculine angst into ongoing crisis, and both can reveal much about the workings and maintenance of hegemony.

Darda's argument aligns with Susan Jeffords' analysis of the culture industries' "remasculinization" of America after the Vietnam war. Looking to cultural outputs such as the Rambo franchise, Jeffords suggests that the projection of an imperilled but ultimately triumphalist American masculinity should be understood "not in relation to its all too apparent military promotions, but in context of changing roles, definitions, and relations of masculine and feminine and of male and female in contemporary American culture" (53). While Jeffords suggests that this process worked to secure and promote patriarchal interests at home, I am interested in the "all too apparent military promotions" that Jeffords sets aside, reading representations of military masculinity as reflective of contemporary imaginaries of empire. The Vietnam war is widely regarded as one of the biggest challenges to the integrity of American empire in history, and similarly the United States' failures in Iraq and Afghanistan have caused much debate on the future of American imperial power. Notably, whereas Jeffords traces triumphalist attitudes and "remasculinization," I find that depictions of masculinity in war on terror narratives are ambivalent. Shapiro's *True Allegiance* is a good example of nationalistic and militaristic popular fiction which projects pessimism about America's military capability. But even in liberal, left and critical circles, senses of uncertainty and anxiety are discernible for altogether different reasons, as the military-technological power of the US expands in unforeseen directions.

Jeffords highlights the assimilation of technology and embodied masculinity in Rambo "through the display of his body as technology" (13). Tracing the camera's attention to Rambo's isolated body parts, Jeffords argues that "[t]hrough him, as him, this technology is unchallengeable and its structure of operations seemingly undefeatable. As the camera's intimate examination of Rambo's body declares, this ideology is seamless" (13). Focalising Rambo's body as "machinery" draws together ideologies of embodied masculine supremacy and imperial power through a technological register. In the texts that I take up during

this thesis, a technological register comes into focus that largely *contends with* embodied masculinities. The articulation of these technologies against the embodied masculine soldier offers a frame through which we can read contemporary conceptualisations of American empire. I find a pre-occupation in war on terror representation with technologies of seeing: particularly unmanned weapons, or drones, and the handheld digital camera which became widely accessible at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Both these technologies represent modes of seeing that construct, filter and mediate our relation to war in unprecedented ways. Returning to Hensley, "to identify the way of seeing proper to the drone era…might in turn help us to comprehend our place in the cycle of American empire that observers like Giovanni Arrighi (*The Long Twentieth Century*) already in 1994 saw shifting toward decline" (228). While wary of the term "decline," I nevertheless discern in contemporary war narratives an apprehension over the future shape and direction of American empire, distilled into the relation between masculinity and technology and framed through the perspectives offered through these radically new ways of enacting, documenting, and responding to war.

This thesis thus builds upon the theoretical foundations laid by Paul Virilio when he stated in 1984 that "the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception," and that "the air arm's violent disruption of the space continuum, together with the lightning advances of military technology…literally exploded the old homogeneity of vision and replaced it with the heterogeneity of perceptual fields" (*War and Cinema* 10, 26). In his prescient account of war's entanglement with technologies of seeing, Virilio anticipated both the rise of drone warfare and the rise of embedded reporting which, as I explore later, occurred alongside the embedding of the digital camera to produce limited, deeply political perspectives on the war on terror (*War and Cinema* 15, 26). Such technologies represent new ways of waging war that expand the contours of the

battlefield into daily subjective existence. James Der Derian re-conceptualises Dwight Eisenhower's "military-industrial-complex" for the contemporary era, theorising a "military-industrial-media-entertainment network" which maps the flows of information between the fields of killing, intelligence, surveillance, media, Hollywood and gaming (xxxvi). Writing of a "fidelity between the representation and reality of war," Der Derian anticipates that "[i]f Vietnam was a war waged in the living rooms of America, the first and most likely the last battle of the counter/terror war are going to be waged on global networks that reach much more widely and deeply into our everyday lives" (241). As the war on terror became a prolonged war of information occurring within the state of exception, the spaces traditionally demarcated as military and domestic, war and peace, public and private became contingent and interlinked in new and often unimaginable ways.

While a full analysis falls outside the scope of this thesis, it is important to note the role of social media in expanding the war on terror information-front. Beginning with very rudimentary blogs at the onset of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (known colloquially as "milblogs"), social media enabled military personnel to communicate their experiences in intimate online forums, permitting a window into the war on terror that circumvented the mediative and sanitising effects of mainstream media networks (Wall 865). Seeking to monitor and limit the sort of information that could be shared by military personnel on social media, the Pentagon implemented a ban of social media platforms including MySpace and YouTube in 2007 (Stewart). However, the ban was then lifted in 2010 to allow access to such Web 2.0 sites as Facebook and Twitter, which enabled servicemembers to share their lives in a way which, as with other modes of social media, promoted a certain sense of a military brand (Stewart). Nowadays, servicemembers are free to promote their military identity online, and a whole subgenre of military TikTok has emerged, known as "MilTok," where American soldiers offer recruitment tips, narrate "slice of life" military anecdotes, and

participate in military-oriented TikTok dance trends, even despite the Pentagon's concerns over TikTok's Chinese parent company (S. Walsh). The development of the military image on social media is indicative of the increasingly visible enmeshment of militarism into technologies of neoliberalism. A full analysis of the development of social media during the long war on terror warrants extensive attention and falls outside the scope of this thesis, but it suffices to say that social media has definitively shaped how we engage with war and will continue to do so, not least because the instantaneous and multi-directional exchange of information enabled through these networks re-calibrates the distance we feel between the war and the home.

Of particular interest to me is the way in which narrative represents the relation of masculinity and technology against the re-configuration of military and domestic space. The war and home spaces, traditionally understood as separate gendered spheres, become realigned in representations of contemporary technologised war. As Kaplan demonstrates, the home space, in both its national and domestic sense, is integral to empire-building as a locus of imperial control. In its creation and policing of borders, the home identifies what is foreign and thus what is available for conquest by constantly identifying and repulsing that which it designates as Other (*Anarchy of Empire* 26). The "ideology of separate spheres" designates war as happening "over there," far away from the "over here," thus concealing the violence embedded in constructing the home as such (*Anarchy of Empire* 50). New military and communications technologies disrupt this ideology. Digital camera imagery enabled the quick proliferation of images via an expansive media and nascent internet, resulting in a flood of images into the home space even more striking than the entry of the Vietnam war into American living rooms via the television set. Drones, whose pilots do not fly but rather control missiles from cubicles in the Nevada desert, bring foreign war and killing within the borders of the domestic US. Kevin Howley remarks that "weaponized drones embody a long-

standing paradox of American culture: the impulse to collapse the geographical distance between the United States and other parts of the globe, while simultaneously magnifying the cultural differences between Americans and other peoples and societies" (45). Like Kaplan's identification of the US' "double impetus" to simultaneously construct and break down borders, Howley identifies the contradictions inherent to American empire and anticipates how such contradictions, long concealed by ideology and national myth, risk revealing themselves through the shifting vectors of sight and power brought about by new military technologies.

Similarly, Ian Shaw conceptualises the US' imperial future under drones as the "Predator Empire." The dual powers of killing and surveillance enabled and expanded by drones, he argues, portend an imperial future in which the militarisation of the "over there" is brought violently into the folds of the home:

> Sovereignty is founded upon a fundamental fracture in society that breeds a deep sense of dissatisfaction and alienation among individuals. This complicates the idea that the war on terror protects a perfect communion: it does not. It defends a deeply scarred and unequal constellation of human beings enclosed in conditions deleterious to their physical and mental health. The homeland is, in other words, a deeply scarred place, and the noose of the Predator Empire is tightening around the most intimate spaces of everyday life. (Shaw 242–243)

The militarisation of life at home and abroad under the state of exception create what I interpret as "spaces of empire" operating under a permanent state of war. If war and home are traditionally separate, gendered spaces, then gender becomes untethered and reimagined in narratives where war and home come into violent collision. As Shaw touches upon, the ideology of the "homeland" brought about in the years after 9/11 drew attention to the security state within the US' domestic borders. By taking seriously narratives of the war on terror set at home as much as

those set abroad, I seek to discern how military masculinity is positioned among and embodies this precarious, uncertain imperial landscape.

My thesis builds upon a significant, emerging body of scholarship attending to the representation of the war on terror in American fiction and film. In film, Stacy Takacs and Terence McSweeney's work on military masculinity and genre is crucial to my understanding of the influence of American western mythology in films of the war on terror. I draw upon work by Stacey Peebles, Rachel Fox and Guy Westwell who discuss the role of the digital handheld camera in providing frames of reference through which to interpret the war, from large-scale political narration to smaller and more intimate narratives. There is already an expansive, interdisciplinary body of work examining drone warfare and its representation in culture. The work of Grégoire Chamayou, J.D. Schnepf, Nathan Hensley, Roger Stahl and Inderpal Grewal have informed my thinking around the drone's mediation of war and home as imperial spaces. I am also indebted to the conference "The Aesthetics of Drone Warfare" led by Beryl Pong and held at Sheffield University in February 2020, for deepening my understanding of the myriad cultural, ethical and aesthetic implications of remote, technologised war.

One of the main attributes of military masculinity, and a key convention of war storytelling, is the navigation of trauma. The fictional and critical works of Roy Scranton are vital to my understanding of trauma as a narrative device, particularly his theory of the "trauma hero" which I discuss in chapter one. Similarly, Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* has influenced my understanding of the tensions inherent to representing and interpreting the question of trauma in ethically complex situations. This work has provided a robust framework from which to acknowledge and simultaneously read around trauma to unpack further affective modes informing military masculinity in contemporary war fiction. Arin Keeble's body of work assessing literary responses to the successive American crises of 9/11, the fallout of neoliberalism and Hurricane Katrina has informed how I understand the

war on terror as existing as integral to, and not separate from, the crises undergirding contemporary domestic American society.

My understanding of the normative figure of the soldier is influenced by Roger Stahl's work on the rhetorical construction of "the troops." If American military masculinity traditionally incorporates heroism, sacrifice, technical prowess, strength, athleticism, and the balance of submission to the collective with rugged individualism, then in a contemporary setting, these characteristics are distilled into the image of the troops. "Support the troops" dogma was (and continues to be) familiar on pins, badges and bumper stickers during the war on terror. The troops are always a collective body, but implied within this are individual embodiments of the normative soldier; together, this has the rhetorical effect of encouraging identification at the register of the individual and the nation. Stahl tracks the methods of "deflection" and "dissociation" which work to simultaneously deflect the rationale for war from policy objectives towards protection of soldiers themselves, and to dissociate the civilian from the soldier—effectively coding any dissent to war as an affront to the soldier body in both the collective and individual sense ("Why We 'Support the Troops'" 557).

Moreover, Stahl's discussion of "militainment" to describe the militarisation of the entertainment industries during the war on terror—including boot camp TV shows, gaming and embedded reporting—informs my understanding of contemporary war culture, which I designate as the militarised cultural landscape which promotes and naturalises stories of empire. In addition to Stahl, I refer to war culture alongside Patrick Deer as "a [banal] holding operation designed to habituate citizens and consumers to war waged at a distance from the majority of Americans by a volunteer military" (Deer 49). War culture normalises America's interventions abroad at the same time as affording exceptional status to the soldier/veteran. It incorporates the imperative to "support the troops"; the unprecedented 24-hour news coverage of the invasion of Iraq; the integration of the military into popular

sports such as the NFL; the enduring co-operation between the military and Hollywood; and what Elliott Colla calls the "military-literary complex," or the literary industry which has emerged around veteran writing programs. Relatedly, I also refer to the "war imaginary"—the historically contingent but ever-present mythic space occupied by the American soldier in collective conceptions of national identity. The war imaginary is evoked through war culture, and it is also entangled in successive stories and mythologies of American identity rooted all the way back in US settler-colonial history. That is, American war stories are embedded in the mythology of the frontier, and the affinity of the American soldier and the cowboy emerges regularly throughout this thesis. Military masculinity is sculpted from the original figure of the cowboy; by teasing out the mythology of the frontier in representations of the war on terror, I underscore the imperial foundations of modern meditations on empire.

The mythology of the frontier undergirds much of this thesis, informed by the work of Amy Kaplan, Richard Slotkin, and critics such as Terence McSweeney, Stacy Takacs and Yvonne Tasker who have examined the prevalence of western and frontier iconography in war on terror cinema. Of Richard Slotkin's influential trilogy on frontier mythology in American history and culture, I draw from the third title, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992)*,* which explores the significance of the frontier in political and cultural discourse in the twentieth century. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," written in 1893, lays the groundwork for this study: in this address, Turner argued that the settlement of the frontier had been integral to the development of American democratic society, as "the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines" (3). The end of westward expansion marked a "crisis" for American progress whereby new "frontiers" would need to be sought (Slotkin 30). The thesis incorporated the founding ideology of Manifest Destiny— the idea that the original settlers had been chosen by God to colonise and expand

the American land (Slotkin 30). Slotkin addresses the Frontier Thesis to explain how the frontier has been mythologised and woven into the fabric of American history, culture and politics, in different incarnations, up to the end of the twentieth century.

The workings of myth are operative here: Slotkin defines myth as narrative expressions of ideology, "formulated as ways of explaining problems that arise in the course of historical experience" (6). In particular, Slotkin argues, the frontier myth gives meaning to the history of violence from which the United States was founded and achieved its hegemony:

> What is distinctively "American" is not necessarily the amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced, the forms of symbolic violence we imagine or invent, and the political uses to which we put that symbolism. (13)

The frontier myth consists of multiple borders, the most distinctive being that between "civilisation" and "savagery." The frontier divides these spaces, and the "symbolic violence" ascribed to the frontier urges a moral imperative to claim and tame the wilderness, along with those who inhabit it. Incorporated within the many boundaries of frontier mythology is Kaplan's theory of the ideological separation of spheres, and the contingency of the war (wilderness) and home (civilised) spaces.

Daniel O'Gorman's study of literary responses to the war on terror explores how literature can blur the rigid "us and them" binary transmitted in post-9/11 political rhetoric (2). In doing so, he points to literary imaginings of the wilderness as a space which bridges the US and Iraq. The invocation of this lawless space, he argues, uses "the trope of the wilderness to encourage empathic connections while at the same time demonstrating how, like any metaphor, it is equally susceptible to exploitation in the service of a colonial imaginary that is overly rigid in its delineation of the categories of self and other" (O'Gorman 85). While O'Gorman

suggests here that the blurring of self and other in some imaginaries of the wilderness happens in parallel with the reification of such borders in other such imaginaries, I press further to argue that the construction and deconstruction of borders—between self and other, civilised and savage, frontier and wilderness, war and home—occurs simultaneously as a fundamental contradiction upon which contemporary American empire is founded. Working not in opposition to but rather in dialogue with O'Gorman, who looks to fiction that challenges the reductive notions of difference that proliferated during the war on terror, I look specifically to representations of the military to trace how such a sense of difference becomes reified and embedded in the collective consciousness. The questions of borders, empire and national identity are what bring me to the frontier: while O'Gorman briefly mentions the relevance of the Wild West in literature of the war on terror, during this thesis I explore in further detail just how pervasive Wild West mythology is in literary and popular responses to the war on terror, as a way of ascribing meaning to the palimpsestic violence that has shaped American identity through history. Through the construction and collapse of physical and ideological borders in the present, then, we can locate the frontier at the root of successive incarnations and imaginaries of American empire.

It is through the mythology of the frontier that the western and the lore of "cowboys and Indians" has claimed such a hold on the collective imagination, generating a sense of national identity deeply tied to the figure of the cowboy who embodies "rugged individualism." The cowboy is emblematic of American masculinity, reflected especially in John Wayne and the films of John Ford, both of which occur consistently in commentaries on American masculinity. Harvey Mansfield, writing in 2006, claims "John Wayne is still every American's idea of manliness"; the journalist Peggy Noonan is fixated on Wayne as a figure of masculinity, calling to resuscitate the values embodied by John Wayne after 9/11, and stating "I love cops because I love John Wayne" after the 2022 Uvalde school

shooting (Mansfield; Faludi; Noonan "Let Not Our Hearts Grow Numb"). Symbolic of both masculinity and empire, frontier mythology is also recurrent in representations of American war. In this thesis, I am not seeking to follow the likes of John White, whose timely study of the resurgence of the western genre after 9/11 demonstrates the genre's resilience as a vehicle for so-called American values. Rather, in unpicking imaginative and sometimes oblique western tropes from military narratives of the war on terror, I align more closely with Yvonne Tasker, who has emphasised the close relationship between the western and war genres. Analysing the relationship between the two genres, Tasker writes:

> In the broadest terms the western deals with the formation of America, its articulation of masculine identity bound up with the establishment of white male authority over territory and peoples that seemingly require subjection. National discourses of masculinity are central to the war film too of course, even those which adopt a less than patriotic stance towards a particular conflict. (111)

Developing Tasker's point that we can discern traces of the western in even those war films which are less jingoistic, I unpick frontier themes and iconography from the cinematic and literary texts studied throughout this thesis. Read together, these texts re-imagine the frontier for a contemporary, technologised age of war. Tropes such as the rugged individual cowboy, the damsel in distress and the "savage" Indian are re-addressed and re-purposed for a war of dubious ethics, in which new technologies re-orient the traditional gendered positions of war and home.

With its attention to mythology and settler colonial history, this thesis is structured so as to trace the palimpsestic way in which the war imaginary is produced. Opening with novels that narrate the return of the veteran from the combat zone, it begins by establishing the deep entrenchment of war and home in the years after 9/11 and Homeland Security policy. Moving on to discuss the US drone wars before its final section on the use of handheld cameras during the initial invasion of Iraq, the thesis may initially seem counterintuitive in presenting its

discussion of technologies of the later phase of the war before its discussion of technologies that were more familiar to the war's onset. However, in structuring the thesis in this way, I intend to peel back the narrative and ideological layers that structure our contemporary way of imagining and remembering war. The thesis begins in the domestic US, firstly with its attention to veterans and then to drone pilots. It then shifts its perspective "in country" towards the end of Part Two and into Part Three, before ending on a novel set back in the domestic US. Framed as such, this thesis invites a reader to consider the constantly-evolving and contingent relationality between the war and home spaces in war storytelling; while it takes new forms in the age of technologised war, it is a relationality that can be traced back through the United States' military and colonial history.

The thesis is divided into three parts, each containing three chapters focalising one primary text, ranging from literary fiction to popular cinema narratives. The publication dates of my primary texts range from 2008 to 2021, and they narrate events that happened between 2001 and roughly 2010. Coming at a slight delay from the events they represent, the publication dates of these texts indicate time to reflect upon the events that immediately followed 9/11, at the same time as gesturing towards these narratives as situated within a project that extends beyond the immediate shock of the onset of the war on terror. With a diverse range of texts covering over a decade, I hope to generate a survey of narrative responses to the war on terror that reflects the varied construction of the contemporary war imaginary, identifying the axes along which masculinity and empire intersect. Reading military masculinity against a rapidly evolving military-technological landscape is key to understanding how these texts situate themselves in the American war tradition. Read together, these narratives speak back to historic war stories and mythic culture, and especially the potent and resilient mythology of the frontier that undergirds the American war imaginary. While looking back, these texts also cast an anxious glance towards the future, intimating uncertainty over the

role of the man, the soldier, and the broader apparatus of US imperial power as we move further into the twenty-first century.

In Part One, I look to representations of veteranhood to consider how literary narratives conceptualise military masculinity through the veteran's relationship to home. Conceptions of the shifting and fragmenting borders of home and nation are particularly important to veteran narratives of the war on terror as they resonate with the Homeland Security Act, established in 2002 in reaction to the 9/11 attacks. Part One discusses three literary texts: Nico Walker's *Cherry* (2019), T. Geronimo Johnson's *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* (2012) and Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* (2014). Each narrative transplants its veteran figure from war to successive American crises: the opioid crisis, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2008 financial crash. In so doing, these narratives complicate the role of military masculinity in the war imaginary by contesting the integrity of the homeland that the military space supposedly protects and defends. David Eisler argues that the emphasis on the act of homecoming is what differentiates war on terror narratives from representations of preceding wars: rather than being "afterthoughts to a story of action and survival, the psychological and moral dimensions of life after combat have *become* the story" (114). While I agree that war on terror narratives place a marked emphasis on the homecoming of the veteran, I disagree with his assessment that this process highlights the veteran's trauma, which is provoked by an increased sense of alienation between the civilian and military population (Eisler 110). Instead, I argue that in these homecoming novels, the trauma that we might read into the veteran figure is complicated by the fragmentation and corruption of the American domestic space. Trauma in these texts is ambiguous, malleable, and generates readings resonant with the alienation produced by the precarity of the social, racial and economic contours of the contemporary United States. Part One thus reads around trauma, looking to a range of affective formations which speak

to the complexity of the configuration of American military and domestic space in the twenty-first century.

The first chapter of Part One discusses Nico Walker's *Cherry* (2019), a semi-autobiographical account of a combat medic who returns from Iraq to Ohio at the height of the opioid crisis. During the novel the unnamed veteran quickly becomes addicted to heroin and starts robbing banks to fund his addiction. Mapping the war and the opioid crisis at the site of the marked male body, the novel brings the war into dialogue with the crises affecting the domestic United States through the "prolonged tension" of a configuration of a white masculinity mired in crisis (Robinson 11). The novel's circular plot structure and dissociated affect deter us from reading too heavily into the protagonist's trauma, instead generating a sense of perma-crisis from the war's imbrication with the sickness of the domestic sphere. Like the opioid crisis, the war is rendered "whatever" (Huehls 13); it simply happens and thus portends no foreseeable end, much like the contemporary coinage of the "forever war." Central to the novel's apathetic vision of the war and opioid crisis alike is the figure of the physically marked white male buffeted along this circular, ceaseless timeline—a figure both precarious and enduring.

Cherry's conceptualisation of domestic American crisis centres a white veteran's interaction with what is largely understood as (albeit not entirely accurately) a "white" opioid crisis. In contrast, T. Geronimo Johnson's *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* (2012), the subject of chapter two, takes up the story of a black veteran navigating the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, an overwhelmingly "black" crisis. *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* places Hurricane Katrina and the war on terror in dialogue as overlapping settings to a narrative about race, trauma, identity and belonging. The novel's protagonist, Achilles, returns from Afghanistan to the US to find his brother has gone missing; the rest of the narrative dramatises Achilles' search for his brother, taking him across New Orleans before and after the storm. *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* places "brotherhood" at the heart of its narrative, and traces the term's shift

in meaning between military, family and community settings. I argue in this chapter that the novel's conception of brotherhood can be understood through Lauren Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" (2). Reading the novel through this lens reveals the complex racial, cultural and social vectors which bind the war and home spaces in black America, and suggests alternate ways to consider concepts like "solidarity" and "survival" in this always already fragmented, militarised space.

Chapter three turns to the 2008 financial crash as a final contemporary crisis shaping the domestic United States in the twenty-first century. While it does not address the crash directly, Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* (2014) is a novel which holds the crash firmly in its narrative imagination through its attention to precarity and the fallout of capitalist excess. *Preparation* follows the meeting and falling in love of two characters living on New York's margins in Flushing, Queens: a traumatised veteran of Iraq named Skinner and an undocumented Uighur migrant, Zou Lei. In this chapter, I discuss the narrative opposition between Skinner and Zou Lei as they navigate the precarity and militarisation of the domestic sphere specific to America's "underclass." Similar to chapters one and two, I read against the grain of PTSD to seek alternate affective modes undergirding the collapse of the war and home spaces. I suggest that *Preparation*'s particular temporal and geographical setting (and, indeed, its title) lends itself to be read through the interpretative frame of anxiety. If trauma is rooted in events of the past, anxiety speaks to the fear for the future driven by the almost apocalyptic sentiment borne through successive twenty-first century crises.

Following Part One's discussion of American homeland, Part Two considers how the optical technology of "unmanned aerial vehicles" further complicates the opposition of military and domestic space through the contraction of space and time. In his influential *Drone Theory* (2015), Grégoire Chamayou explains the phenomenon whereby reciprocity is eliminated between the drone pilot and the target. By observing targets for long periods of time from thousands of miles

away, drones can "be both close and distant, according to dimensions that are unequal and that combine a pragmatic co-presence" (Chamayou 116). In Part Two, I ask what this means for how we conceptualise military masculinity: if the soldier's masculinity emanates from his commitment to risk his life protecting a domestic sphere from which he himself is alienated, then what happens when the soldier does war from a position of absolute physical safety from home? In Part Two, I look to George Brant's play *Grounded* (2013), Andrew Niccol's film *Good Kill* (2014), and Kathryn Bigelow's film *The Hurt Locker* (2008), discussing how these texts contend with the precarious masculinity of the soldier in the face of rapidly evolving remote warfare.

Chapter four discusses George Brant's one-woman play *Grounded*, which complicates the relation between soldier and technology by centring a female pilot who transfers from planes to drones after becoming a mother. Through an uninterrupted, one-hour monologue, the Pilot narrates her struggles to manage life as a mom and a wife, the ethical dilemmas of the job, and the long hours of mundane shift work. I argue that in *Grounded*, masculinity operates not only as embodied experience but as an abstracted process of authority, hegemony and expansion detached from fleshy bodies. Referring to Robin Truth Goodman's work on the role of women in war narratives, I explore how *Grounded* manipulates gendered positions under drone logics in a way which subsumes the labour of caring and killing under contemporary structures of surveillance capitalism (26). Through its critique of drone warfare, the play narrates the erasure of human agency under the conditions of networked surveillance portended by the drone.

Andrew Niccol's film *Good Kill* addresses the anxieties of masculine identity that accompany the advancement of drone warfare. In chapter five I explore how *Good Kill* expresses this anxiety through the masculine body's relation to drone technology. I argue that this relationship is measured through the extent of the soldier's control over space and time, specifically domestic space and

reproductive time. The narrative centres Major Thomas Egan, an ex-Air Force fighter pilot now piloting drones from the Creech Airbase in Nevada. The film emphasises Egan's feelings of alienation and emasculation by the drone technology, which accelerates when the CIA takes over control of the command from the Air Force. Known only as "Langley," a disembodied voice emanating from the control panel orders Egan to engage in increasingly unethical attacks in countries against which the US is not officially at war. The diminishment of personal agency effected by Langley takes its toll on Egan, as he loses control of his body, subjectivity, family and career. Looking specifically at the drone's mediation of American and Afghan domestic space, I argue that the film's overarching message is one of control: of the masculine imperative to claim control not only over one's own body and self, but over the spatial and temporal terrains in one's occupation.

Whereas *Grounded* and *Good Kill* explore the masculine anxieties of obsolescence that accompany advancing drone technology, Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar-winning film *The Hurt Locker* invokes drone technology to rearticulate masculine competence and control. While a large amount of scholarship has attended to *The Hurt Locker*'s depiction of trauma (Pheasant-Kelly), and much debate has centred the film's articulation of masculinity (Westwell; McSweeney), less attention has been paid to the relationship of masculinity and drone technology in the film. In contrast to chapters four and five, the drone in *The Hurt Locker* is terrestrial, rather than aerial, and is used to aid the focal bomb-disposal squad in their highly dangerous work. I contend that the choice to include this remotely-piloted vehicle in the narrative establishes the relationship between man and technology as akin to that between a hero and his sidekick, bringing the technology back within the control of the soldier. With this relationship in mind, in chapter six I explore *The Hurt Locker*'s play with genre to centre its protagonist as a timeless storybook hero. In contrast to *Grounded* and *Good Kill*, *The Hurt Locker*'s play with the motifs of the western and space opera maintains an ideological separation

of war and home spaces, with the effect of re-masculinising the American soldier in the age of remote warfare.

If drone technology complicates how we think about military masculinity by positioning soldiers thousands of miles away from the action, what about technologies that enable us to see war up close? Part Three turns to the handheld digital camera, another mode of visual technology which proliferated at the beginning of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The increasing affordability and mobility of these technologies at the turn of the twenty-first century meant that they became popular among soldiers intent on documenting their experiences. The digital camera, and digital camera images, are now well-established among the iconography of the war on terror. Narratives of the war on terror often employ digital cameras to represent soldiers' individual perspectives and create a sense of authenticity or revelation by revealing, ostensibly, what war is "really like." The perspective of the handheld camera offers a sense of the individual soldier's experience, suggesting the pressures and traumas of the war experience which may be elided or obscured by the mainstream media narrative (Peebles 135).

Nevertheless, the perspectives generated by American soldiers through the handheld digital camera tend to be narrow, deeply personal and often myopic. Not only does this limit commentary on the political and historical context of the war on terror, but in their immediate visuality these images also obscure the broader networks of information exchange in which such images are composed, distributed and shown (or denied) to audiences and in the military and civilian worlds. To explore this notion in further detail, Part Three looks to texts that feature the handheld digital camera, but which look beyond the singular images that they produce to examine the technological, journalistic and narratological systems through which such images come into being. I discuss the exemplary use of the handheld camera as a framing device in David Simon and Ed Burns' mini-series, *Generation Kill* (2008)*, before turning to two literary depictions of the handheld

camera: in Brian Van Reet's *Spoils* (2017) and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016). Reading them together, I consider how these texts reveal and problematise the ideological currents contained within handheld camera imagery of the war on terror. The attention paid to the digital camera—both for the images it produces and as a political object in and of itself—enables the texts in Part Three to pull apart the stories that weld together masculinity and mythic culture in the American war imaginary.

Generation Kill dramatises the invasion of Iraq through the collective perspective of the US Marine Corps' 1st Reconnaissance Battalion as they enter Baghdad. Chapter seven opens Part Three with a discussion of this series, which blurs the boundaries of representation, reportage and reality through its use of both real Marines and actors, its script based on Evan Wright's original embedded reporting, and the insertion of a diegetically-embedded handheld camera to provide alternate perspectives. *Generation Kill*'s blurring of formal boundaries generates a sense of ambiguity towards "truth" by intertwining testimony, documentation, storytelling and myth. Visual and discursive technologies—specifically the handheld camera and Evan Wright, the embedded reporter—are encased in the series and suggest the workings of multiple narratives within the series' main plot. In this chapter I discuss how such multiple narratives operate within the main visual frame of the series to reveal, conceal, challenge and sustain the war's dominant narrative, highlighting the contradictions inherent to contemporary modes of documenting and responding to war.

Following this initial discussion, Part Three then turns to two literary representations of digital handheld cameras in Brian Van Reet's *Spoils* and Roy Scranton's *War Porn*. Continuing some of the themes explored in my discussion of *Generation Kill*, I look to how these texts speak back to the stories and myths informing the war imaginary through their representations of digital cameras. These

novels are just as interested in the handheld camera as an object as they are in the images they produce.

Spoils, the focus of chapter eight, imagines a female American soldier who is captured by insurgents, in echoes of the capture and staged rescue of Jessica Lynch in 2003. The novel, which is well aware of itself as a war story, reveals and unravels the successive, palimpsestic myths upon which its narrative is built. This is made legible through the contradiction of the captive female soldier: she must be masculine enough to embody the strength of the American military, but feminine enough to appeal as a damsel in distress. The threat of the camera fixes the soldier between competing ideologies: of the jihadist fantasy of beheading, in echoes of the execution of Nick Berg in 2004, and the fantasy of rescue, exemplified by the spectacle surrounding Jessica Lynch in 2003, and immortalised in John Ford's film *The Searchers* (1956). By dramatising the soldier's relationship to the camera and all the narrative possibility embedded therein, *Spoils* teases apart the mechanisms of storytelling involved in reporting and remembering war, and challenges the authority of the masculine voice that gives these stories shape in the war imaginary.

Finally, Roy Scranton's *War Porn* brings the mythologisation of war into full relief by communicating its story of torture and veteranhood through the language of the frontier. This polyphonic novel imagines the disruption of a social gathering in Utah by a troubled veteran, who shares photos of torture taken during his time in Iraq. The novel assimilates the soldier and the cowboy, ending in violence as he rapes one of the barbeque guests and rides off into the sunrise. My discussion of *War Porn* unpicks the iconography of the frontier which is woven through the narrative. I argue that the novel articulates the digital-visual space—the space of handheld cameras, thumb drives and the nascent Internet—through the language of the Wild West, and in doing so it traces the affinity of military masculinity and the cowboy figure in the war imaginary. As *Spoils* elucidates the mythic quality of American war reporting and memory by drawing upon the events

of Jessica Lynch's capture and rescue, *War Porn* speaks to the revelation of images of torture at Abu Ghraib prison. I argue that by couching this cultural memory in the language of the frontier, *War Porn* contests the ideological separation of the "war" and "home" spheres by enfolding the Iraq war back within the settler-colonial foundations of American national identity.

"Where's the Great Novel About the War on Terror?" asked veteran and writer Matt Gallagher in an article published in 2011. He echoes the sentiment of many critics, who have debated why no war on terror narrative has gained the cultural currency of works from previous wars (Luckhurst, "In War Times" 713). Gallagher roots the problem in the disparity of soldiers' experiences between, for example, the beginning of the Iraq war and the end of the Afghanistan war. In response to Gallagher, however, Joseph Darda argues that the problem lies in narrative's fixation on the experiences of individual soldiers, over thinking critically about the politics and the ethics of this temporally disparate war. Soldiers' personal stories make up for an inability to find a form to give expression to "permanent war":

> Writers have struggled to find a form with which they can tell…a story of permanent war, which isn't a story that most people want to hear. Instead, stories of soldiers and veterans have piled up, allowing readers to treat the soldier's harrowing twelve-month tour and the vet's alienating homecoming as stand-ins for a war that never ends. (*Empire of Defense* 23)

For Darda, Harry Truman's National Security Act of 1947 caused a shift in language from "war" to "defense" which enabled the US to wage permanent war under the guise of "something else—a police action, a humanitarian intervention, a counterinsurgency campaign" (*Empire of Defense* 3). The contradictions inherent to this process are, similar to those identified by Hardt and Negri, Kaplan and Howley, constitutive of the long reach of American empire. Developing these observations, one of the key contentions of this thesis is that many contemporary narratives grapple with the permanence and contradictions inherent to, in Darda's

words, the "empire of defense" by speaking back to the settler colonial mythologies that form the historical and ideological roots of the American imperial project.

Indeed while the frontier myth is prevalent throughout the American war tradition, one of the key arguments of my thesis is that war on terror narratives invoke frontier mythology in particularly striking and imaginative ways. The mythology of the frontier is more notable in war on terror narratives because it gives these texts a familiar conceptual language through which to address the questions of empire that re-emerged in the years following 9/11. The war on terror is spatially and temporally disparate, infiltrating the lives of the citizens of the US and those living under its foreign imperial reach, in a timeline that spans nearly a quarter of a century. By re-evaluating and re-purposing the frontier myth, many narratives of the war on terror attempt to make sense of the so-called forever war by bringing the present into dialogue with the past. As I discuss later on, this echoes Luckhurst's concept of the "polytemporality" of war on terror fiction. Building upon Luckhurst's observation that narratives approach contemporary war by "[displacing] or [filtering] it through the iconography of prior wars," I argue that we can trace such iconography back further, to America's settler colonial origins and founding mythology ("In War Times" 722). During my thesis, in unearthing this gendered mythology from a collection of American representations of the war on terror, I hope to offer a new frame through which to interpret how military masculinity and technology are articulated together, in a way that echoes the rupture and uncertainty informing American empire in the twenty-first century.

Part One

Homeland Precarity: Veteranhood and the Domestic Sphere

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks carried out by Al Qaeda on the World Trade Center, a new word entered the American lexicon. "The need for homeland security," explained President George Bush, "is tied to our enduring vulnerability" (US Office of Homeland Security iii). Bush established the Office of Homeland Security in October 2001 immediately after the attacks, and the July 2002 *National Strategy for Homeland Security* laid out the intention to consolidate the Office's powers into a full Department of Homeland Security, which came into effect in November of that year. Talk of the "homeland" emerged, seemingly out of nowhere, into American political discourse (Kaplan, "Homeland Insecurities" 85). Shortly after the release of Bush's National Strategy, *The New York Times* published an article examining the "prickly," "un-American" roots of the term (Becker). Despite the Bush administration's apparent attempt to foster a sense of security and community, many Americans struggled with the word. For many and especially Jewish Americans, the word recalled the Nazi usage of the term "heimat" (Becker). For others, the word implied foreignness: it was "refugees, immigrants, and the displaced who worried about their homelands" (Bump). Despite being forced into American discourse after 9/11, "homeland" always seemed uneasy—something not lost upon screenwriter Alex Gansa, who chose the term to capture a sense of something "sinister" and "un-American" in *Homeland,* the title of his television series about a US soldier turned by Al-Qaeda (Traub).

Given that Homeland Security policy sought largely to target borders and immigration, it is ironic that the word "homeland" continues to feel so un-naturalised in the American imagination. Yet Bush's claim in 2002 of America's "enduring vulnerability" suggests that the choice of word was not unintentional, or was at least convenient for Homeland Security's broader political aims. By asserting America as in need of "enduring" protection, Bush rhetorically projected

the domestic United States into an uncertain, unending and unsafe future. No wonder, then, that for much of the American population the word "homeland," rather than instilling a sense of comfort and protection, "unleashes deep undercurrents of anxiety" (Traub). Couching the domestic sphere in an anxious future tense, Homeland Security discourse transforms domestic soil into alien terrain, warning American citizens to be constantly alert and wary of each other, for fear of what might be around the corner. This anxious affect resonates with the stated aims and impacts of the law and policy-making which emerged from, and dovetailed with, the Department of Homeland Security. Its broad aims were to: tighten border and transportation security; increase emergency preparedness and response; defend against domestic terrorism; strengthen information analysis and protect critical infrastructure (US Department of Homeland Security 2). These seemingly vague and innocuous terms translated into much stricter regulation of daily American life. The Department of Homeland Security took on many of the powers granted by the "Patriot Act," passed hastily in response to 9/11 in October 2001. Such powers included: the heavier militarisation of borders; indefinite detention of non-citizens without trial; and hugely expanded surveillance powers allowing agencies to conduct searches without warrant, wiretap citizens to provide evidence of a crime without provable cause, and gain access to personal records by requiring anybody (doctors, libraries, universities, Internet service providers) to hand over personal data (Longo 3; Seigler 22; K. Wong 17). The emphasis on surveillance speaks to the currents of fear sown among Americans following 9/11, effectively recruiting civilians as agents of the surveillance state.

If 9/11 was an attack—the first on mainland American soil since the British invasion of 1812—then "Homeland Security" initiated a war into American domestic civic life. The permanent suspension of law in times of political crisis is what Giorgio Agamben calls the "state of exception," and its imposition by the Homeland Security and Patriot Acts had the effect of restructuring the democratic

parameters of the nation-as-home to render the state at permanent war with its citizens (2). Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling name the home a "spatial imaginary" and a "complex and multi-layered geographical concept" which extends far beyond the domestic dwelling to represent a space which "has been mobilised and contested in ways that shape and reproduce the discourses, everyday practices, and material cultures of nation and empire" (9, 191). Amy Kaplan argues that "the notion of the nation as a home, as a domestic space, relies structurally on its intimate opposition to the notion of the foreign" ("Homeland Insecurities" 86). Kaplan goes on to assert that the usage of the word "homeland" provokes unease by design, as it generates "a profound sense of insecurity, not only because of the threat of terrorism, but because the homeland, too, proves a fundamentally uncanny place, haunted by prior and future losses, invasions, abandonment" ("Homeland Insecurities" 89). Far from promoting peace and comfort, then, the state of exception brought about by Homeland Security discourse and policy worked to generate a war imaginary suffused with paranoia. This further confused a rigid gendered binary separating war and home. War had traditionally been the domain of the masculine, waged out of sight and out of mind "over there," in the service of the "over here" (Ferguson 478). The home space had been feminine, rendered rhetorically through the doubling of "domestic" to mean both familial dwelling space and nation (Kaplan, "Homeland Insecurities" 86). But under the state of exception there is no certainty, and after 9/11 the legal, rhetorical and military mechanisms keeping war at arm's length from the home no longer applied. What resulted was a home space that felt uncomfortable and fragmented, in which citizens were isolated and suspect.

Anxious and uneasy conceptions of home coalesce in literary responses to 9/11. Early scholarship has identified the inward impulse of 9/11 novels, many of which seem pre-occupied with the fragmentation of the home and family in the wake of the attacks. Richard Gray names such novels as Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006), Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006) and Don

DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) as novels of "reified domesticity," arguing that these texts are conservative in their perception of a crisis of the home and family provoked by 9/11; they vacillate "between large rhetorical gestures acknowledging trauma and retreat into domestic detail" (*After the Fall* 32; "Open Doors" 134). In response to Gray's diagnosis of a "centripetal" force pulling the post-9/11 literary imagination inwards, Michael Rothberg urged the political need for a "centrifugal," outwards cultural analysis, arguing that "most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multiculture, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds" (153). The question of the reach of American empire is central to this thesis. In addition to the work of Gray and Rothberg, I also attend to works by Arin Keeble, who suggests that literary responses to 9/11 portray internal conflicts that "pull in opposite directions" and "gesture toward both the public and private, the political and the domestic, toward historical contexts and traumatic rupture" (*The 9/11 Novel* 273).

The chapters that make up Part One triangulate and expand the discussion between these critics. They tousle between the inward and the outward, revealing the tension between how embodied military masculinity is articulated on an individual level at the same time as it represents, responds to, or resists the broader reach of empire. While the novels I attend to in Part One address the war on terror more directly than they do 9/11, they nevertheless hold 9/11 in their narrative imaginations, and as such we might understand these texts as "post-9/11" fiction. Part One discusses three literary texts: Nico Walker's *Cherry* (2019); T. Geronimo Johnson's *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* (2012) and Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* (2014). Each narrative transplants its veteran figure from war to successive American crises—the opioid crisis, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2008 financial crash—and nested in these settings are quieter, more personal crises: of romantic love, of the family, of the self. In constructing their narratives around post-9/11 domestic crisis, these novels complicate the role of military masculinity in the war

imaginary by contesting the integrity of the homeland that the military space supposedly protects and defends. Bringing the war on terror together with domestic crisis, the texts studied in Part One seem to operate under the absent shadows of the Twin Towers, attending as they do to such themes as "romantic relationships, parents and children, trauma and recovery" (Keeble, *The 9/11 Novel* 284).

Trauma has been consistently invoked as an interpretative lens to think through the effect of the 9/11 attacks on the American "contemporary structure of feeling" and its associated conceptions of home, family, time, subjectivity, community, memory and history (Gray, "Open Doors" 129; Keeble, *The 9/11 Novel* 273). We might consider trauma conceptually in parallel with the collapse of the war and home spaces, since it encapsulates the collective and national grief of a nation following 9/11, at the same time as speaking to the personal traumas brought back by soldiers fighting the 9/11 retaliatory wars. However, the malleability of trauma as a concept, and its liberal usage to understand wide-ranging experiences— from combat, to genocide, to national catastrophe, to individual abuse—suggests that trauma is insufficient to fully capture the affective impulses undergirding both the post-9/11 national psyche, and the experiences of soldiering and veteranhood during the war on terror.

Recent scholarship has attended to the shortcomings of trauma as an interpretative lens. In his critique of contemporary American trauma narratives, Alan Gibbs notes the similarities and differences between studies of PTSD and the cultural trauma theory popularised by critics such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman in the 1990s. Both conceptualisations of trauma insist on its inherent unknowability, and consequent unrepresentability. Theorists working in the Caruthian line of cultural trauma studies urge that since traumatic memory brings about "the literal return of the event," the closest we can get to representing trauma is through experimental artistic forms (Gibbs 15). Gibbs joins critics like Roger Luckhurst in arguing that such Modernist and Freudian-rooted conceptions of

trauma have produced a formulaic and narrow "trauma aesthetic" which represents neither the heterogeneity of traumatic experience nor the reach that trauma has seen into other cultural forms (Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* 15). Critical of both PTSD and Caruthian trauma studies, Gibbs suggests that an alternative mode of representing trauma through realist forms can better address questions that are evaded in PTSD and Caruthian trauma studies. Key to this is acknowledging perpetrator trauma: trauma experienced by those who are agents or complicit in traumas inflicted upon others. Dominick LaCapra argues that perpetrator trauma "must itself be acknowledged and in some sense worked through if perpetrators are to distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices" (79). Combat trauma falls clearly into this bracket, and Gibbs' analysis of Gulf war memoirs stresses the importance of acknowledging that trauma can be suffered by perpetrators, concluding that "if trauma is deliberately and exclusively associated with victimhood, then this dangerously excludes the possibility that if one suffers trauma one can be a perpetrator" (199). If we do not acknowledge perpetrator trauma, sufferers of PTSD are cast unambiguously as victims, effectively removing accountability for violent acts committed at war, and absolving combatants of wrongdoing.

Writer and veteran Roy Scranton identifies in a lineage of American war narratives a set of conventions which weaponise PTSD to construct the "myth of the trauma hero" which shapes American political, cultural and historical discourse (*We're Doomed* 221). The trauma hero is a mythologised veteran hero who harbours an unspeakable truth of war and whose "redemptive arc of trauma to recovery" functions as a scapegoat mechanism, absolving a civilian reader of guilt for American political violence committed abroad (Scranton, *We're Doomed* 237). Scranton traces the history of trauma hero representation from Wilfred Owen through Hemingway and Tim O'Brien, to contemporary writers such as Kevin Powers, Phil Klay and Brian Turner. These writers, Scranton argues, play to a tune

set by liberal media institutions and publishing circles which cater to an eager civilian readership. These narratives practice a dangerous "politics of forgetting that actively elides the question of what the US soldiers were fighting for and the bigger problem of whom they were killing, in favour of a narrower and more manageable question: 'what was it like?'" (Scranton, *We're Doomed* 234). Conventions of traumatic revelation are thus reified to the extent that they lose all meaning as representations and instead mythologise the war and those who fight them. Scranton's argument aligns closely with Gibbs' understanding of perpetrator trauma and, further, James Campbell's notion of "combat gnosticism": the idea that direct personal experience of war endows a veteran with elite moral authority on war's representation (Campbell 204). Supported by combat gnosticism, the trauma hero is lodged firmly at the heart of the American war imaginary as synecdoche for American moral authority.

More than anything, though, trauma as an interpretative lens does not fully account for the complicated ways in which American military masculinity is experienced and articulated in the twenty-first century. PTSD is of course not unique to the war on terror. Neither is the notion of perpetrator trauma, into which there has been considerable research focusing on atrocities throughout modern history, from the Holocaust, to South African apartheid, to the Vietnam War (LaCapra; Mohamed; Eyerman). Like Gibbs and LaCapra, Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* points to several limitations to the "trauma paradigm" (209). In addition to its reliance on Western ethnocentric notions of the self, and the critical tendency to ignore the parallel concept of resilience, Luckhurst notes the neoliberal political and economic conditions of late modernity from which PTSD arose. He explains:

> The appeal of the language of trauma might be because it is a specialized sub-set of the discourse that dominates this intensive capitalist environment: risk. In the risk society, the process of modernization itself becomes the source of difficulty rather than the solution. (213)

Trauma, Luckhurst argues, is a "cusp term, both a product of modernity and a description of what occurs when modern systems fail" (214). In this vein, Part One asks if trauma as a product of modernity is necessarily sufficient to critique the heterogeneity of experience addressed in narratives that deal with war's collision with twenty-first century modernity. This is not to deny the effects of evidently traumatic experiences suffered on all sides of the war on terror; rather, I seek to question how attending to subjective experience beyond trauma can produce different configurations of military masculinity in the period after 9/11.

The three literary texts taken up in Part One concern veterans whose war trauma features pointedly as a narrative device, driving and problematising their relationships with the people and spaces around them. Nevertheless, the veterans' complicated relations to home suggest that something is lost when we read these stories entirely through the lens of trauma, and trauma feels insufficient to fully capture the way that military masculinity sits in the twenty-first century imagination. The trauma that we might read into the veteran figure is complicated by the fragmentation and corruption of the American domestic space, to the extent that trauma in these texts is ambiguous and malleable; more legible, perhaps, through the alienation produced by the precarity of the social, racial and economic contours of the contemporary United States. My analysis thus follows the work of Lauren Berlant, whose *Cruel Optimism* presents a theoretical, affect-driven framework for reading beyond trauma. Noting that terms such as "trauma" or "crisis" tend to imply singular catastrophic events, Berlant suggests that most "traumatic" happenings "that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness' and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated" (10). In referring to overlapping domestic crises during this thesis, I intend to move away from an understanding of such crises as singular, traumatic events. Instead, I consider their temporal prolongment, speaking to Berlant's notion of the gradual,

exhausting, "attrition of the subject" that occurs under neoliberal modernity (98). Part One thus reads around trauma, looking to a range of affective formations which speak to the complexity of the configuration of American military and domestic space in the twenty-first century.

The first chapter of Part One discusses Nico Walker's 2019 novel, *Cherry,* which narrates the return of a combat medic from Iraq to Cleveland at the height of the opioid crisis. The unnamed veteran quickly becomes addicted to heroin and starts robbing banks to fund his addiction. Mapping the war and the opioid epidemic at the site of the white male body, the novel brings the war into dialogue with the crises affecting the domestic United States through the "prolonged tension" of a white embodied masculinity that situates itself as mired in crisis (Robinson 11). In this chapter I extend Mitchum Huehls' ontological reading of the novel, which resists finding causality to the protagonist's opioid use (13). We can read the novel's dissociated affect as responsive to what Huehls refers to as "whatever"-ness which, together with the circular plot structure, deters us from reading too heavily into the narrator's trauma. Like the opioid crisis, the war is rendered "whatever"; it simply happens and thus portends no foreseeable end. Central to the novel's vision of the war and opioid crisis alike is the figure of the physically marked white male buffeted along this circular, ceaseless timeline—both precarious and enduring.

In chapter two, I take up T. Geronimo Johnson's *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* (2012), which places Hurricane Katrina and the war on terror in dialogue as overlapping settings to a narrative about race, trauma, identity and belonging. By bringing these events together as scenes of trauma and militarism, the novel asks what it means to be a black man and a veteran in the contemporary United States. Tracing the shifting meaning of ideals of fraternalism and solidarity between the war and home spaces, I argue that the novel constructs an image of black masculine subjecthood that exists beyond the conditions of racialisation and militarisation that bind black America in the present.

The 2008 financial crash underpins the plot of Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* (2014), the subject of chapter three. Attending to poverty and precarity, the novel turns its gaze away from Wall Street's capitalist excess and explores how economic crisis is lived by those on the margins of society, through the lens of a love story between a veteran of Iraq and an undocumented Uighur migrant. In this chapter, I look beyond trauma to identify affects that bind these central characters in ways that are specific to the twenty-first century precariat, suggesting that the novel's anxious affect speaks to the fear for the future driven by the almost apocalyptic sentiment borne through successive twenty-first century crises.

Embedded within the notion of domestic crisis in the contemporary US is the crisis of masculinity that was widely theorised in the wake of 9/11, and which also appeared in imaginations of the consequent war on terror. Following the attacks, media commentators decried the loss of strong, identifiably masculine identity in public life, and surmised that the emasculation of American society is what had allowed the attacks to happen.[1] Peggy Noonan, writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, lamented the loss of "John Wayne" figures in public life prior to the attacks. "[W]hen we killed John Wayne," she wrote,

> ...you know who we were left with. We were left with John Wayne's friendly-antagonist sidekick in the old John Ford movies, Barry Fitzgerald. The small, nervous, gossiping neighborhood commentator Barry Fitzgerald, who wanted to talk about everything and do nothing. ("Welcome Back, Duke")

America's supposed emasculation was remedied, then, through the government and the media's praise of the emergency service workers. Firefighters,

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[1] As Naomi Klein explains in *The Shock Doctrine*, the extent of the destruction of 9/11 can be more reliably linked to government cuts to public services and infrastructure: on the day of the attacks, the police and firefighters' radio communications systems failed; the privatised and downsized air traffic control system didn't notice the planes going off-course in time; and the similarly privatised airport security checks had been done by overworked and underpaid contractors (295-6).

in particular, became a symbol of a renewal of American working-class masculine heroism, a discursive act that operated much like Jeffords' theory of the "remasculinization" of America after the Vietnam War (Faludi 65; Jeffords 168). As James Berger notes, the public narrative quickly turned to one of "victory" and "triumph," and in popular culture emerged representations of heroic and triumphalist masculinity, such as Tony Stark/Iron Man in *The Invincible Iron Man* comic book and Marvel film franchise; Bruce Wayne/Batman in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy; and even Walter White in the AMC television series *Breaking Bad* (Berger 55; Smith and Goodrum 490-1; McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film* 119; Kraynak 137). It is notable that these three characters lead dual lives, breaking from their quieter, quotidian masculine identities into spectacular displays of power, suggesting a post-9/11 commercial appetite for representations of (anti)heroic masculine figures who are awakened from their regular lives and empowered following personal tragedy.

If popular representations of masculinity responded to the perceived crisis in masculinity through jingoism, then literary fiction also identified a crisis of masculinity, albeit conceptualised differently. Nell Sullivan notes the masculine "sentimentality" of Cormac McCarthy's post-9/11 novels, arguing that *The Road*'s "fictional apocalypse is a crisis point, allowing McCarthy to imagine a manhood unconstrained by domesticity, capitalism, and nation" (84). The apocalyptic crisis in *The Road* encapsulates these concepts, troubled by modernity, and frees the masculine body from such constraints. Similarly, David R. Jarraway notes that in McCarthy's later novels it is the "crisis surrounding masculinity itself which…becomes the 'truth' that must be signally reimagined" (52).

Examining the novels of Ken Kalfus, Don DeLillo and Mohsin Hamid, Thomas Ærvold Bjerre argues that literary responses to 9/11 have contested the hypermasculinist, triumphalist narrative put forward in popular culture. Bjerre asserts that through their attention to traumatised men, these literary narratives

"debunk the idealized male hero by presenting male protagonists who constantly fail to live up to the impossible standards expected by a wounded society that has retreated into the safety of a nostalgic past" ("Post 9/11 Literary Masculinities" 263). However, in the novels that Bjerre discusses, men feature predominantly and they all speak to 9/11 as a crisis point for American masculinity, even if this is focalised through trauma instead of jingoist masculinity. This is not confined to the novels of Bjerre's analysis: Jonathan Safran-Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, for example, addresses a perceived fragmentation of the middle-class domestic space after 9/11, and laments the loss of paternalistic guidance through the figure of the deceased father.

As Claire Sisco-King argues, masculine hegemony is maintained by constantly re-inventing itself, and so we might read the literary retreat to more sensitive and traumatised masculinities, alongside the hypermasculinist popular narratives, as nodes within the same network structuring masculine hegemony at times of crisis ("It Cuts Both Ways" 370). Sally Robinson notes that masculinity has long been perceived as crisis-ridden, and such positioning as continually and cyclically in crisis functions as a mechanism to "dwell in the space of crisis and thus to reimagine the dominant meanings of white masculinity" (11). Looking to the successive "waves" of masculinity crisis to understand the crisis of her contemporary position, writing in 2000, she argues that while "it is true that 'crisis' might signify a trembling of the edifice of white and male power, it is also true that there is much symbolic power to be reaped from occupying the social and discursive position of subject-in-crisis" (9). Robinson continues to emphasise that "the rhetoric of crisis *gets used* by white men to negotiate shifts in understandings of white masculinity" (10). The question addressed in this thesis, then, is not whether we can discern a crisis of masculinity in narratives of the war on terror, but rather what shape such a crisis takes. The novels that I take up in this chapter were published slightly later than those addressed by Bjerre, Keeble, Rothberg and Gray—2019,

2012 and 2014 respectively—allowing these texts more time to digest the sense of perpetual crisis, in addition to the long effect of 9/11 and the war on terror.

The novels discussed in this chapter conceptualise contemporary masculine crisis by enfolding the war into the crisis-ridden home space; the violence meted out abroad in the name of the home is figured as another crisis alongside the opioid epidemic, Hurricane Katrina and the financial crash. Through the veteran figure, we can read how the war and home spaces are bridged via masculinity in crisis, as the veteran shifts from war to a broken home. Instead of reading trauma as the presiding affect of this shift, this chapter suggests that the masculinities of these later post-9/11/war on terror novels can be better conceptualised through the interpretative frame of precarity and its associated affects. Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen's timely *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture* unpacks how contemporary works have sought to address an age underpinned by a sense of precarity, including but not exclusively in labour, public services, infrastructure and health (6). These social issues are rooted in the neoliberal economic structures through which the liberalisation and deregulation of markets resulted in an overarching sense that nothing is certain or permanent—resonating with the notion of "enduring vulnerability" that Bush evoked to justify his sweeping reforms to security policy through the Homeland Security and Patriot Acts.

In the 2000s, while cuts to jobs, public services and infrastructure caused a heightened sense of precarity within the United States, the war on terror opened new markets abroad, creating staggering growth especially in the security and arms industries (Zubair and Wizarat 116). With wars being waged abroad and with the introduction of increasingly tight domestic security and surveillance mechanisms— much of which being outsourced from the government to private security contractors—the future felt uncertain and foreboding. Indeed the feeling associated with precarity means that we can understand it in affective terms. Ben Anderson argues for precarity's affective nature by asserting that in precarity, "it is not only

that the present is saturated with a sort of restlessness, but also that the future is made uncertain and becomes difficult or impossible to predict" (129). This sense of uncertainty provokes the associated affects of what Guy Standing lists as "anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation," and to this I would add the atomisation caused by neoliberalism's fragmentation of the social contract (33). Such affects, emergent from the burgeoning state of precarity that undergirds twenty-first century America, are all affects that I take seriously in this thesis alongside the trauma which dominates much of the scholarship around military masculinity.

For Emily Hogg, precarity is an interesting object of study for its ambivalence; "the extent to which precarity is associated with deep insecurity and fear at the same time as it may hold the potential to reshape social structures in more equitable ways" (11). While I believe this assessment to be overly optimistic, I agree that precarity generates a sense of anticipation towards an as-of-yet unknown eventuality. For the purposes of this thesis, the sense of an uncertain future is useful to think through the future shape of American military masculinity and, with that, the future shape of American empire. In the novels discussed in this chapter, precarity comes in the form of health crisis, precarious labour, environmental disaster, racial tensions and community fragmentation. The insertion of military masculinity into these spaces generates textured readings, allowing us to consider how these literary texts conceptualise military masculinity in ways consistent with the social contours of the twenty-first century. If we read military masculinity as an expression of empire, these representations of precarious masculinity and precarious home provoke further questions as to how, why and for whom American empire operates in the years defined by the war on terror.

This thesis begins at the end, so to speak, with its opening three chapters interrogating the military masculinity of veterans returning to the United States. In doing so, these chapters establish how intimately military masculinity is related to the home. Rather than positioning the war and home spaces at a distance from each

other, I attend to the close approximation of war and home during the war on terror. As Amy Kaplan writes and upon which I elaborate in later chapters, American empire is concentrated and defended within the confines of the home, and this concept has its roots in the history of the frontier, a time of "heightened imperial expansion" when the annexation of new territories revealed the domestic as an "ambiguous liminal realm between the national and the foreign, as it placed the foreign inside the geographic boundaries of the nation" (*Anarchy of Empire* 28, 27). While it plays a greater role as this thesis progresses, frontier mythology features briefly at the end of Part One, it being necessary to consider how imperial imaginaries of the past inform the imperial imagination in the present and into the future. My attention to the entanglements of empire, masculinity, domesticity and precarity in Part One lays the groundwork to explore how these configurations are further complicated by visual technologies in Parts Two and Three.

I. "Making sad faces": White masculinity in crisis in *Cherry*

During Nico Walker's trial for bank robbery, for which he would end up serving 11 years in prison, his assigned forensic psychiatrist testified that Walker had suffered from "one of the worst cases of PTSD [he'd] ever seen" (S. Johnson). Walker's story is certainly colourful: a college dropout who enlisted in the US Army, he was posted to Iraq as a combat medic in 2005. After 11 months and 250 combat missions he returned to Cleveland, Ohio, as the opioid epidemic was beginning to take hold in post-industrial America. What had been an occasional drug habit before the war quickly transformed into an all-consuming heroin addiction, with Walker eventually turning to bank robbery to fund it. He robbed ten banks in four months before being arrested and sentenced to 11 years in prison in 2012. Scott Johnson's original *Buzzfeed* article, detailing Walker's life from Iraq to a Kentucky prison, places marked emphasis on Walker's traumatic experiences, making regular reference to the severity of his PTSD and its unusual manifestations in his behaviour. The language used to describe Walker's PTSD frames him as a victim of nebulous forces:

> Walker's brain was still developing during the time he experienced the worst of the war. And Walker had felt that dissociation over and over again until, one day, the chemical and brain changes it engendered were stripped away and Walker was left naked, alone and without a clue as to how to make sense of the world. (S. Johnson)

The article is emphatic in its denial of Walker's agency, positioning him as vulnerable and childlike in the face of forces outside of his, or our own, comprehension. Johnson frames war not as something that Walker participated in, but something that happened *to* him. Walker is depicted as a victim of societal forces acting upon him, leaving no room to question, however uncomfortable it may be, the extent to which his military service translates to complicity in American imperial actions.

Eventually, from his prison cell, Walker wrote a novel based on his experiences. Narrated in the first person, it begins and ends in Cleveland, Ohio, on the dope-fuelled stupor of its unnamed protagonist-narrator, whom I refer to in this chapter simply as "Cherry." The narrative also contains sections which take place in Iraq, where Cherry is a combat medic at the very forefront of the American war as it becomes increasingly violent and disordered. Given the clear echoes of Walker's experiences in the novel, titled *Cherry*, the narrative often lends itself to be read as a near-autobiographical trauma narrative, recounting the experiences that drove him to spiral into heroin addiction and bank robbery. However, Walker places distance between himself and his narrator, and *Cherry* urges a reader to recognise the distinction between the story and its author's personal experience. Walker's manipulation of fictive and autobiographical forms generates a much more ambivalent attitude to trauma than *Buzzfeed*—or various reviews of the book itself—would suggest (Newman; Alter). An "author's note" at the beginning of the novel reads:

> This book is a work of fiction.
> These things didn't happen.
> These people didn't ever exist.

While it generates distance between the author and the narrative voice, this note is complicated by our knowledge that the novel is based, to a certain extent, on Walker's experiences. Through this tension, the author revels in the interstitial, urging us to understand the novel as both a true story and a piece of fiction. In the same way, as I explore throughout this chapter, we can read the text as a conventional trauma narrative, and simultaneously as unconcerned by trauma. The affirmation of fiction at the beginning of the novel invites a reader to engage with this narrative as a story, not as a testimony, and as such it invites us to question the purpose of stories in the war imaginary. By framing his story as a story, the author

asks us to consider trauma as a narrative device, speaking to how trauma is evoked in war fiction to provoke a certain response in the reader.

Mitchum Huehls considers *Cherry* within a subgenre of fiction he deems the "new opioid novel" (2). For Huehls, *Cherry*'s approach to opioids is ontological: it rejects an epistemological search for causality of addiction "in favor of circular or iterative plot structures that reinforce ontological stasis. Even as things happen in these novels, nothing ever changes" (5). As I explore during this chapter, the novel's circular structure similarly works to reject a trauma-oriented reading since is severs the arc from conflict to resolution characteristic of trauma narratives. The dissociated narrative voice operates within this circular logic, inviting a reader to consider such dissociation separately to the protagonist's trauma and to locate it more broadly within the crisis-ridden domestic conditions of the United States. Dissociation is narrated as an affective impulse and narrative device which gestures to the contradictions embedded in the lived experience of addiction, and which distils a sense of ongoing crisis through the embodied self.

While *Cherry* certainly depicts traumatising events, then, the narrative simultaneously deters a reader from interpreting its narrator as traumatised. By connecting the war on terror with the domestic opioid epidemic, the novel draws together the war and home spaces via imbricated contemporary American crises. I examine how these crises are drawn inwards and played out upon the marked male body, arguing that the novel condenses both war and domestic crisis through the figure of the wounded male, and thus imagines both events through the paradigm of a crisis of white masculinity. Representing what Sally Robinson calls the "prolonged tension" of masculinity-in-crisis, the wounded white male exists in a state of stasis within an ongoing present tense, and representations of white masculinity as such act to re-instate hegemony by foregrounding its imagined precarity (11). This continuous present temporality is echoed in the circular plot structure of the novel, which moves in a continuous loop of scoring and shooting

dope. As Huehls describes, the narrative's circular structure complements the ontological process of "happening," that is, "the absence of causality, agency, motivation, and explanation" (12). While, as Huehls argues, this may invite a different set of questions around opioid use, I question what this means for *Cherry*'s perspective on war. We might infer through Huehls' ontological argument that the war also "happened" to Cherry, echoing Scott Johnson's review in its manner of absolving the author-narrator of his complicity in American imperial violence. Embodied in the marked white male, the war and opioid crisis are envisioned along a continuous timeline, thus presenting the contradiction of a crisis which constantly asserts its own limits; being at once precarious and enduring.

Cherry opens in a disorienting and chaotic present: "Emily's gone to take a shower. The room's half-dark and I'm getting dressed, looking for a shirt with no blood on it, not having any luck. The pants are fucked too—cigarette burns in the crotches. All heroin chic, like I were famous already" (Walker 3). The continuous present tense of these first lines immerses the reader into the scene and precludes any sense of a beginning. The immediacy is interrupted, however, by a future voice inserting itself into the present moment with a metafictional nod to the writer's notoriety, immediately blurring the boundary between the writer and the narrative "I." This temporal compression also takes a spatial dimension when it emerges that the narrator is about to inject a hit of heroin. Cherry's sensations are concentrated through his body: "[i]t hurts a little extra when the needle's dull like this. It can make it hard to hit a vein" (Walker 5).

Drew Leder describes pain as exerting "a phenomenologically 'centripetal' force, gathering space and time inward to the center. We are ceaselessly reminded of the here-and-now body" (76). Similarly, the narrator's experience of pain echoes through *Cherry* as a spatio-temporal contraction, which manifests in his preoccupation with his body. "I'm on the floor and my balls are cold," he announces, coming to after overdosing and rousing the reader along with himself

to his immediate, uncomfortable environment (Walker 5). Revealed to his consciousness on a cold kitchen floor, the narrator concentrates our attention on his embodiment; his body is the "thematic object" of his, and the reader's, experience (Leder 76). The white, male body is made visible in *Cherry* as physically marked and temporally rooted in a state of suspension. Opening *in media res*, *Cherry*'s prologue anticipates a sense of fraught, wired crisis, bringing the reader to narrative consciousness through the perspective of the bloodied white male. Echoing Emily Hogg's observation that temporality is "impossible to disentangle from affect and embodiment," the narrative voice suspends the protagonist in a precarious present at the same time as intimating his future notoriety through the past subjunctive (15). The temporal disjuncture of the novel's opening thus anticipates a tension through which the action feels at once immediate and ongoing.

Following the prologue, *Cherry* is narrated in the past tense in clipped and disjointed prose which remains fragmented by changes in pace and direction, and by temporal shifts. Suggesting a set of memories told from the present day— appealing again to a reader's knowledge of the author's prison sentence—the narrator recounts his life episodically from dropping out of college, enlisting in the Army, being posted to Iraq and then returning to Cleveland. While it depicts certainly traumatic events, the narration of Cherry's time in Iraq differs from other war narratives in its blunt tone and honesty. Gibbs identifies a "new realism" in certain contemporary trauma narratives, which he suggests "now represents a more effective technique for jolting the reader than over-familiar postmodernist effects. Its tendency to adopt a deadpan or jaded narrating tone, for example, convincingly mimics the disconnected voice of the traumatised protagonist" (36). Like the texts featured in Gibbs' critique, *Cherry* conforms to a "new realist" mode of trauma representation, in which trauma is articulated in a deadpan and detached voice.

Walker employs a clipped and paratactic style, combining short sentences and understatement to describe graphic scenes and complex emotions: "Grace and

Carranza hit an IED. Carranza was wounded. He was in the driver's hatch and his face was fucked and he was blind and the Bradley was on fire" (163). This simple, horrifying image creates a troubling tension between a sense of urgency and distance. The gradual reveal of the full traumatic image delays its impact, and the repetition of "and" sketches the image in a flat, detached tone. Characteristic of Walker's style, this language of detachment creates dissonance between the horrific reality of the traumatic event and its representation, yet his choice of language is simultaneously understated and highly evocative. In his 1975 study of First World War narratives, Paul Fussell opposes the notion of the "unspeakability" of trauma that had been commonly evoked both before and after his study by proponents of cultural trauma theory. He argues that the problem of representation "was less one of 'language' than of gentility and optimism…We have made unspeakable mean indescribable: it really means *nasty*" (184). Walker's style speaks to this nastiness precisely in its colloquial honesty, which carries all the horror of the scene without attempting to articulate the image in the poetic or experimental style of paradigmatic war trauma writers.

In contrast to the popular conception of war as "unspeakable," Walker doesn't shy away from depicting the graphic horrors of his experience. Describing a particularly traumatic IED attack, he writes:

> He was burned away, scraps of IBAS clung to his torso, legs folded up, femurs and tibias and fibulas with black tissue, arms melted, body eviscerated and lying on its guts, face gone, head a skull. The smell is something you already know. It's coded in your blood. The smoke gets into every pore and into every gland, your mouth full of it to where you may as well be eating it. (Walker 137)

This visceral articulation of traumatic memory rejects the conventions of trauma hero narratives scrutinised by Roy Scranton. Scranton argues that if veteran writers of the Vietnam war negate language in their articulation of trauma, then many texts emerging from Iraq evoke hyperbolic, poetic language to the extent that "the

conventional tropes of war lit are not a means of conveying truth, but the truth of war itself" (*We're Doomed* 231). Scranton's figure of the "Trauma Hero" follows an arc from trauma to recovery which sees the troubled veteran hero absolved of the emotional and moral burden he brings home from war; this translates to the assuaging of the readers' collective guilt for the acts of violence committed in their name (237). Scranton isolates Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* as a key example, suggesting that Powers' writing is geared towards acceptance within a literary economy and so conforms to "conventions of traumatic revelation [which] have become purely formal expectations of an audience more interested in war as myth than war as reality or even as literature" (231–2). This arises through Powers' stated dissociation from his embodied memory in his writing, which reads as an evacuation in which concrete facts "become not only interchangeable but also alienated, pure signs operating in a closed economy of literary signification in which Powers (or [his protagonist]) is an interloper" (Scranton 231). Powers' embrace of the abstract sustains the trauma hero myth by insisting on the ultimate impossibility of "real" war representation and maintaining the mythologised soldier-civilian divide.

In contrast to such conventional trauma narratives' dismissal of what is universally knowable, *Cherry* re-engages with embodied memory. In a second-person address, the narrator tells the reader that the smell of death is "something you already know. It's coded in your blood" (Walker 137). Not only is this memory crucially embodied, it also describes trauma as a universal experience. Walker dismantles the soldier-civilian divide by rejecting the notion of traumatic combat experience as fundamentally unknowable, with the effect of humanising trauma and the oft-mythologised soldier/veteran. Whereas many war narratives assert the unknowability of war—in Vietnam war literature by totally negating language, and in certain Iraq texts by evoking war as, in Scranton's words, "the font of poetic

transcendence"—*Cherry* asserts war trauma as inherently knowable by virtue of its embodiment (*We're Doomed* 229).

It is commonly noted that traumatic memory can cause a distortion of one's sense of time (Herman; Caruth; Shay). Temporal shifts and ambiguities are a common feature of trauma narratives, and as Luckhurst notes this can produce a contradiction insofar as cultural trauma theory insists upon its specificity at the same time as positing widely identifiable traits of trauma (*The Trauma Question* 89). To remedy this impasse, Luckhurst urges the importance of acknowledging "narrative possibility" by opening trauma fiction up from a narrow canon of high literary works to include middle and low-brow fiction (*The Trauma Question* 89). We can locate *Cherry* within this expansive body of work for the way in which it both embraces and distances itself from traumatic conventions. In the novel, a temporal shift occurs immediately after the memory of the IED attack until the end of the chapter, suggesting that the embodied sensations of the smell and taste of death cause a Proustian moment of intense remembering, immersing the narrator into the immediacy of the event:

> I've got my helmet off and I'm going back and forth with it from the water to the fire, carrying water in it, and it's not registering with me that this is idiotic, but we are all obsessed with getting the fire out even though everybody's fucking dead and there's really no reason to hurry. (Walker 137)

The continuous present tense narration of this scene conveys the urgency of the moment, but this is warped by the winding sentence, contrasting Walker's usual clipped and paratactic style and rendering the scene drawn-out and farcical. This is further emphasised by the interjection of the narrator's future voice commenting on the futility of the soldiers' actions; as in the novel's prologue, *Cherry*'s soldiers come across here as pathetic figures stuck in a farcical atemporal loop. Such traumatic revelation seems to deny the soldiers' agency much in the same way as other Iraq memoirs, as the soldiers appear put in motion by forces outside their

control. Yet, as in the prologue, this sense of presence is destabilised by the commentary offered by the future voice. Stating "there's really no reason to hurry," the narrator becomes a sardonic interloper in this memory, demystifying the trauma and turning this harrowing scene into a comedic farce.

Thus while it describes evidently shocking events, and while it incorporates the temporal dislocation and cognitive dissociation that is conventional of trauma narration, the narrative voice seems to simultaneously discourage a reader from engaging uniquely with the story as trauma representation. As it shifts from Iraq back to Cleveland at the height of the opioid crisis, *Cherry* continues to focalise the interplay of temporality, dissociation and embodiment—but the novel does so in a way which marginalises traumatic experience and resonates instead with the precarious social conditions of the domestic United States.

In 2017 the US suffered over 70,000 drug-related deaths—greater than the total number of American soldiers killed during the Vietnam war (Case and Deaton 113). The US' well-documented opioid epidemic has its roots in the mid-1990s, when Purdue Pharma introduced the prescription painkiller OxyContin. Purdue embarked on an aggressive marketing campaign to convince Congress and the medical industry that OxyContin was less addictive and less subject to abuse than other opioids. The pharmaceutical company lobbied heavily alongside the American Pain Society to have "pain" recognised as the fifth vital sign, and this was quickly taken up by the Veterans Health Administration as part of their national pain management strategy (Hirsch). As it became clear that OxyContin was in fact extremely addictive, it was too late. Thousands of Americans were dependent on the opioid, and doctors found themselves caught in a double bind: if they continued to prescribe the drug, they sustained the opioid addiction rate. If they ceased prescribing it, desperate patients turned instead to heroin.

The opioid epidemic is by no means the first drug crisis in American history; before it came successive waves of drug abuse, including heroin during the

beginning of the twentieth century, and crack in the 1980s (Schneider 6). However, the current crisis is a distinctly twenty-first century one. Anne Case and Angus Deaton identify the crisis as a key contributor to what they call "deaths of despair" emerging from the problems inherent to late capitalism: deregulation of the advertising and the pharmaceutical industries, stagnant wages, and outsourced industries in rural areas causing increased unemployment and fragmenting the heart of traditionally industrial communities (161). Crucially, whereas the crack epidemic was interpreted by the media as a crisis facing the urban black community, the current opioid epidemic is perceived as largely white and rural. This is in part down to OxyContin having initially been marketed to rural white communities such as in Appalachia and the Midwest, although it has of course impacted a cross-section of America including black and Hispanic communities (Hansen et al. 132–3). The tendency of doctors to diminish the pain of non-white patients, and comparatively looser drug law enforcement in white areas, have also been cited as reasons for the whiteness of the opioid epidemic (Hansen et al. 127; Dolphin-Krute 32). The use of opioids among veterans is also well documented: studies suggest that veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from combat trauma face a greater risk of being prescribed opioids and high-risk opioid use (Vladivelu et al. 16). Due to the post-industrial, military and blue-collar imagery associated with the opioid epidemic, it is also interpreted as wedded to a modern crisis of white masculinity (Case and Deaton 161). The inability to live up to traditional gender roles as providers for the family, and feelings of irrelevance in a globalised society, are among the reasons cited for opioid and opiate abuse among white working-class men (Weir).

Walker alludes to the growing opioid crisis throughout *Cherry*. In its Iraq chapters, Cherry smuggles drugs like OxyContin and Percocet onto his base, having ordered them from a seemingly unrestricted supply at home. The narrator explains, "what you did was you'd have it sent in from the World…you could get a little weed in. You could get a little powder. Prescription drugs were wide open (within

reason)" (Walker 155). Later, he contacts his friend at home: "more Percs, Oxys would be fine" (Walker 171). The emergence at various junctures of prescription drugs from "the World" echoes the ongoing crisis developing in the domestic sphere. The "World," capitalised, generates distance from the US and suggests isolation from domestic events, gesturing to such domestic events as running along a separate timeline. However, the stated mobility of prescription drugs between the war and home spheres suggests the slow infiltration of the home space into the war. The low hum of domestic crisis within the military space thus subtly suggests the concurrent loss of stability and cohesion in United States domestic sphere.

When Cherry returns to Cleveland, the opioid epidemic is weighing larger and heavier upon the social fabric. Ohio was particularly badly hit by the opioid crisis: the health policy research body KFF reports that in 2005, when Walker left Cleveland for Iraq, Ohio recorded 560 deaths from opioid overdose. By 2012, when he was sentenced, that number had risen to 1355, and by 2021, that number had risen again to 4456 (KFF). Reminiscent of many typical stories from the opioid crisis, Cherry uses OxyContin and other drugs before eventually getting hooked on heroin. Cherry's immersion in crisis, represented by his shift from war to home, and then from prescription to harder drugs, is marked on his body:

> You could see the marks all over from where the sand fleas had been at me the summer before, when I'd been out in the marshes and the shit canals and that. I hadn't been eating much of late either, and I had the cocaine physique. And there were the cigarette burns too, as the tendency in those days was to burn myself with cigarettes whenever I got down in the dumps. (Walker 200)

Converging the visual traces of war and the opioid crisis, Cherry's body bears the marks of a place's gradual inscription of itself upon his skin. While these marks track his movement from the war to home spaces, they simultaneously confer a sense of stagnation in the abject "marshes and the shit canals." We might thus read Cherry's body as expressing the "prolonged tension" noted by Sally Robinson as

characteristic of discourses of masculinity in crisis (11). Reflecting on the tendency in culture to render white masculinity invisible by ascribing to it neutrality, Robinson argues that white masculinity participates in its own identity politics by invoking itself as continually in crisis. Such crisis, she argues, is a mechanism of re-centring white masculinity by maintaining an "identity politics of the dominant" (Robinson 21). Warning against interpreting a crisis of masculinity in terms of a linear drive from problem to resolution, Robinson explains that the rhetorical conventions of discourses of masculinity in crisis depend on a tension through which "the announcements of crisis are inseparable from the crisis itself, as the rhetoric of crisis performs the cultural work of centering attention on dominant masculinity" (11). Dwelling in a space of crisis are masochistic narratives that take pleasure in depictions of the white male body in pain to serve as evidence of disempowerment (11).

Consistent with Robinson, *Cherry* displays in corporeal terms a white masculinity dwelling in crisis. The passage cited above materialises Robinson's argument of a "prolonged tension" or a crisis that dwells upon itself by drawing attention to the white male body as marked, and this is especially striking given the feminine-coded behaviours of calorie restriction, cocaine and self-harm which foreground a sense of emasculation. From Iraq's flea bites, to cocaine's emaciating effect, to his combat trauma's cigarette burns, these marks converge seemingly disparate places at the site of the body. From Cleveland to Iraq and back to Cleveland again, Cherry feels alienated, and his embodied tension can represent a variety of crises drawn inwards, combining disparate spaces and affects. This tension is suspended in the present tense; the sense of stagnation and immovability it confers also speaks to the precarity underpinning Cherry's addiction, his psychological wellbeing and, more broadly, the impoverished Cleveland neighbourhoods he inhabits. Guy Standing argues that to be precarious is to be limited to the present tense (28). Time is unequally distributed in a precaritised

society so that those who occupy the precariat are denied a sense of a shared past as well as a future—all that matters is staking oneself out in present moment (Standing 16). As I discuss during the rest of this chapter, Cherry's depiction of crisis depends on the contradiction brought about by this sense of fraught immediacy, in conjunction with a continuous timeline upon which white masculinity, war and addiction exist with sight of neither beginning nor end.

Marked by intersecting crises, Cherry embodies what Sisco-King calls the "abject male body," which contributes to the maintenance of masculine "abject hegemony" ("It Cuts Both Ways" 366). Julia Kristeva's writing on abjection theorises the continual process through which we define the borders of our subjectivity by repulsing that which is Other (2). The abject emphasises the permeability of the self, manifesting in entities that threaten the divide between subject and object, self and other: corpses, blood, vomit (Kristeva 2). The movement of drugs smuggled onto base in Iraq, and the gradual marking of Cherry's body by war and addiction, trace the seeping together of war and domestic opioid crisis in a way which parallels this notion of permeability. Cherry's body is rendered abject in response; an artefact of the imbrication of these crises.

Sisco-King draws attention to the Kristevan distinction between the state of being abject—"to transgress boundaries and be 'subversive' of the stability of representational systems"—and the process of abjection itself: the rejection of the abject to maintain the stability of our subjectivity and society ("It Cuts Both Ways" 369). In her analysis of David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), Sisco-King rejects this dichotomy, arguing that subjects and societies never achieve the rejection of the abject:

> While subjectivity is typically imagined as whole, fully formed, and coherent, I understand subjects as de/composed by ambiguity, uncertainty, impossibility: the abject is not outside Other but the subject's 'alter ego.' The abject is the 'foreigner' within. ("It Cuts Both Ways" 370)

Arguing that hegemony is marked and maintained by ruptures which allow for its constant growth and reassemblage, Sisco-King suggests that "neither subjects nor cultures ever fully rid themselves of the abject, or even want to, for that matter" ("It Cuts Both Ways" 370). Cherry's abject body exemplifies the public's fascination with the abject white male. In the same way that *Fight Club*'s portrayal of fluid male bodies and subjectivities reflects "hegemonic masculinity's impulse to create multiple, even mutually exclusive, versions of itself," so does Cherry embody the perennial hold of abject white masculinity, in its various forms, on the cultural imagination—something which is reflected in the cult success of the novel and its author, including the original *Buzzfeed* article, the Russo brothers' 2021 film adaptation, and Walker's acceptance into the alternative media circuit known as the "dirtbag left." *Cherry* fixes white military masculinity, an agent of imperial expansion, as an aberration within the borders of the nation. In addition to affirming the hegemony of such configurations of masculinity, the novel's abjection of the white male signals a turning-inwards of the popular imagination at a time of domestic crisis, pulling the narrative perspective narrowly through Cherry's singular experience of his abject body-as-home.

Cherry's subjective and embodied experience is steeped in negative space. "When I was gonna kill myself I went to the VA hospital" he mentions, deferring his suicide attempt into the subordinate clause (Walker 201). This type of textual chiaroscuro reinforces a sense of subjective detachment from the society around him and is repeated in his negotiation of his embodiment within this shadowy space. Drew Leder's notion of the "present-absent" body is useful to understand the way in which Cherry negotiates his precarious, evasive and often contradictory embodiment. Leder notes that the body in its "normal" state is "dis-appearing": it recedes from the consciousness as it denies being the "thematic object" of our experience (27). On the other hand, the body in pain is "dys-appearing": it affirms its presence to the consciousness by the semblance of being, paradoxically,

"something foreign to the self" (Leder 76). Cherry's addicted body is constantly articulated as something foreign. He repeats a fixation on facial imagery, recurrent via understatement through the refrain "making sad faces" (Walker 250). Withdrawal leaves him "making sad faces"; his dealer is "making sad faces" when he loses his stash; even his untrained dog is left "making sad faces" when forced to exist in a soiled diaper (Walker 250, 233, 261). With sad faces all around, the bleak conditions of *Cherry*'s Cleveland come into jarring and disjointed view, as Cherry as his peers alike exist in insular and fragmented subjective states. The consistent use of the continuous present tense in "making" positions them upon the immediate yet unending timeline through which the novel evokes imbricated personal and collective crises. In the dual act of making and perceiving "sad faces," Cherry manipulates his face as an object and experiences it as an alien presence, implying a severing of the intersubjective ties that connect him to others and the reader, and rooting himself-as-Other firmly within the borders of his "centripetal" embodied self (Leder 76).

Far from completing the redemptive arc of the "trauma hero," Cherry ends abruptly and, like its temporally ambiguous beginning, precludes any sense of an ending to Cherry's cyclical, interior existence. The novel's concluding lines read: "I put the needle in my arm. The needle was dull so it pushed the vein away when it was going in. But the vein couldn't run forever. I felt a little pop and my blood flashed in the rig. I sent it home" (Walker 313). Cherry's conceptualisation of his body in these final lines reaffirms his alien and abject embodiment. True to King's notion of the abject as the "foreigner" within, he witnesses a conflict of self and otherness, as both an integral part of the embodied self's experience of addiction ("I put the needle in my arm") while also taking on agency of its own that must be overpowered (it "couldn't run forever"). We might trace, in the contradictory foreignness of Cherry's body, echoes of the foreignness ascribed to the home space by Homeland Security discourse in the years following 9/11 and the ensuing war

on terror. As such discourse enfolds American empire into imaginaries of the domestic, so are the imbricated crises of war and addiction enfolded within the borders of the embodied self. Such inwardness is not only diagnostic of addiction; it also suggests, much like the act of making sad faces, the protagonist's fixation within the continuous present tense, and an imaginative foreclosure as to how the present sense of crisis takes shape outside the perpetual angst of white masculinity.

In his analysis of the poetry of Brian Turner (another veteran-turned-writer), Jeff Sychterz suggests that the role of the traumatised veteran is to exist outwardly:

> Turner's poetry asks us to open ourselves to the consequences of war, to recognize that war is not bound by geographic, temporal or even experiential boundaries. The Iraqis or America's soldiers are not the only ones who have lived through war; we all have, and we harm ourselves by not opening ourselves to war's victims—inviting them into our homes, physically and imaginatively. (9)

By figuratively opening out war's boundaries, Sychterz highlights the imbrication of the war and home spaces, particularly during the war on terror, and seeks to remedy the perceived chasm of experience between soldier and civilian. However in this instance, this works not to de-sanctify the veteran but to reinforce his exceptionalism, with almost biblical implications underpinning the appeal to invite him into our homes. The soldier/veteran is positioned here as a conduit through which a civilian populace can accept war and be absolved of the need to challenge the violence committed in their name. Removing the "temporal" boundaries of war locates it along an unending timeline, rendering war a nebulous and all-encompassing event over which we cannot exert any control, but through which we can open ourselves to new connections with each other.

Sychterz thus suggests that the significance of "homecoming" in trauma narratives is as a spiritual and emotional rehabilitation within society (13). Yet *Cherry* suggests that the precarity of the present moment precludes this from

happening in a meaningful way. Cherry's conceptualisation of his precarious body as "home" does away with the notion of home as a wholesome, spiritual reawakening and instead doubles down on his interiority, which plays out in these repetitive and cyclical episodes of addiction. The last lines mirror the novel's prologue: "[i]t hurts a little extra when the needle's dull like this. It can make it hard to hit a vein" (Walker 5). Echoing again Leder's "here-and-now body," these two scenes reproduce the cyclical, "here-and-now" nature of addiction by bookending the text with scoring and shooting dope. Huehls notes that the novel's structural circularity operates in tandem with the repetition of the words "whatever" and "happened" throughout the novel:

> To be sure, being "whatever" in a world of pure happening causes the narrator a lot of nihilistic despair, but his opioid use isn't exactly a response to that despair. Opioids in *Cherry* aren't a coping mechanism or an escape; they aren't a response to or symptom of some other truth. They are whatever. They are just another thing to do in a world where it doesn't matter what you do. (13)

Huehls thus suggests an ontological approach to opioids that doesn't seek causality, or require explanation or justification—they are simply things that, like the narrator, exist in the world.

Together with the novel's attention to the body and the narration's dissociative affect, Huehls' reading of *Cherry* offers a generative way to "ask a different set of questions" about opioids (22). By extension, such a reading enables us to ask a different set of questions about war that moves beyond trauma. Certainly, beginning and ending in Cherry's body, the novel's circular logic abandons the will to causality and does away with the notion that we must access the presumably traumatic root of the narrator's destructive behaviour. In this way, *Cherry* severs Scranton's arc of "trauma and recovery" characteristic of trauma hero narratives. In doing so, it invites us to read around trauma to consider how affects such as dissociation, malaise and apathy contribute to the construction of twenty-first

century military masculinity. Such affects, in their negation of feeling, differ significantly from conventional archetypes of righteous and noble, albeit conflicted, veteran figures.

Nevertheless, the notion that addiction "happened" to Cherry suggests that the same is the case for war. This approach implies that *Cherry*'s implication in the war in Iraq is coincidental, and aligns with such reviews as that of Scott Johnson, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, which positions Walker as the victim of forces outside his control. Indeed, *Cherry* doesn't mention the root of the protagonist's decision to go to war; the section narrating his registration with the military, titled "Adventure," begins, like the prologue, *in media res*: "Staff Sergeant Kelly had a face like Death and the every other word out of his mouth was joker" (Walker 51). As such, the structure of "Adventure" ignores the trajectory of events which lead to Cherry's decisions to make the journey to the military office, complete the series of tasks requisite of signing up, and state his desire to enlist "ASAP" (Walker 51). Suggesting that the protagonist is buffeted along by the winds of fate, the novel draws its protagonist through a circular and ceaseless timeline, thus bringing forward a multiple and pernicious sense of crisis at war and at home in which the figure of the wounded white male is at once effacing and ever-present.

Cherry received mixed reviews from the veteran community. Some balked at the representation of veterans amongst "a litany of selfishness, sexism, casual racism, cruelty, pointless graphic violence, squalor, perversion, self-abuse, nihilism"; others deemed the novel "wonderfully direct" for its depiction of a young man's experience of war and addiction (Van Reet "A New Kind of Desert"; Ackerman). What unites veteran reviews of the novel, in contrast to many civilian reviews, is their recognition of *Cherry*'s refusal to conform to a straightforward trauma narrative. Alexandra Alter's review in the *New York Times*, for example, appears eager to fit the novel into the "canon" of war trauma representation, framing the novel as one which "fits into a growing body of literature by American veterans

of Iraq and Afghanistan who have turned to fiction to explore the trauma of war and its aftermath." But as this chapter has explored, Walker seems to discourage a reader from interpreting the novel in these terms. Reading around trauma in *Cherry* enables us to look to alternate affects that influence contemporary military masculinity. Redirecting the reader around traumatic memory, the novel asks us instead to dwell upon the fragmentation and crisis of the home sphere, thus demystifying the supposed sanctity of the home. The novel's shift in focus from war to home further asks us to consider the point at which military masculinity gives way to civilian identity. As a veteran, does one's military experience define you for the rest of your life?

The military masculinity put forward in *Cherry* is dissociative, apathetic, self-centred and narrow; it is simultaneously a product of, and complicit in, American imperial violence abroad. The sickness of the home sphere is refracted through the marked male body, which symbolises the home space as fraught, embattled, and mired in crisis. Like this formation of white masculinity, which sustains itself through the appearance of crisis, the domestic sphere during the war on terror straddles an uncertain and precarious future. Located in a bleak and chaotic present, *Cherry* puts forward a sense of crisis in which the figure of the marked white male is buffeted along a continuous present tense; a "whatever" timeline, at once precarious and enduring. This suggests a perverse abject hegemony; not only for white masculinity, but also for American power—wedded as it is to the malignant "forever war."

II. Brotherhood and survival in *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*

Published in 2012, the same year in which Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman, a member of a local neighbourhood watch, T. Geronimo Johnson's *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* feels heavily weighted by the long history of the deaths of black men by American state and vigilante violence. Speaking to this layered history, Johnson's ambitious first novel addresses the complex intersections of race, trauma and identity across axes of militarism and ecological crisis. If *Cherry*'s positioning of the veteran figure between foreign war and domestic crisis can help us think about how military masculinity interacts with whiteness, then *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* offers a similar conceptual framework for thinking through black military masculinity.

Johnson's 2012 novel locates its protagonist, a black veteran of the war in Afghanistan, between the war and Hurricane Katrina. Whereas, like 9/11, the opioid epidemic is largely painted as a white crisis in the collective imagination, Hurricane Katrina has been referred to as "the black community's 9/11" (Ralph 355). While Arin Keeble rightly points out that this coinage is problematic as it elides the stark differences between the two events and appeals to "competitive memory discourse," it nevertheless speaks to the striking figure that 9/11 cuts in the national imagination, against which all other events are seen to come into being (*Narratives* 15). Sweeping across America's Gulf Coast on the week of 29th August 2005, Hurricane Katrina took almost 2000 lives, displaced more than a million people across the US, and inflicted more than $80 billion in damage (Dickel and Kindinger 11; Levitt and Whitaker 3). The hurricane and its aftermath took its greatest toll on mainly poor and black communities, most notably the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans (Dickel and Kindinger 13; Klein 8). Even before the hurricane, New Orleans was a deeply segregated city—the result of historic practices such as redlining and the failures of the GI Bill, introduced after the Second World War, to provide the same level of housing and education support for black veterans that it

did for white veterans (Levitt and Whitaker 8). Once Katrina hit, despite over 400,000 people evacuating New Orleans, many people chose to stay for a variety of practical reasons, although many more were nevertheless forced to stay due to poor socio-economic conditions (Cutter et al. 10; Thiede and Brown 813). Further, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was notoriously slow to respond, leading to the eventual resignation of its head, Michael Brown. The destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina not only revealed the extent of New Orleans' rife inequality but exacerbated it, as the city's poorest and most vulnerable citizens, predominantly black communities, found themselves all but forgotten both before and after the storm (Cutter et al. 16).

While avoiding the competitive memory discourse that Keeble warns against, placing 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina in dialogue with each other enables us to consider some of the ideologies that render some crises more memorable or "grievable" than others in the cultural consciousness (Butler 15). The media responses to the respective crises contribute to this paradigm significantly: Diane Negra notes that whereas after 9/11 the media emphasised heroic tales of proactive rescue workers, the citizens of New Orleans in the wake of Katrina were depicted either as feckless or as dangerous and opportunistic criminals (11). News coverage of the hurricane's aftermath fixated on extremely dubious rumours of widespread looting, suggesting a far greater national concern for the protection of capital and property than for the lives of those affected by the storm (Negra 11).

While the citizens of New Orleans were left desperate and without sufficient government aid, the United States was in the fourth year of its ultimately multi-trillion dollar war on terror. The effects of this reached further than the initial questions of government priorities, capabilities and resource allocation. At the same time that the war on terror exported military violence abroad, New Orleans became increasingly militarised in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; it is not insignificant that after federal re-structuring, FEMA was put under control of the Department for

Homeland Security in 2003. Almost 10,000 National Guard troops were deployed to deliver relief efforts (Berthelot). Infamously, the private military contractor Blackwater was also recruited, although these mercenaries were better known for patrolling for looters, guarding the homes of the wealthy, and for racial profiling and intimidation (Scahill 394; J. Wilson). New Orleans became a window to the modern effects of neoliberal ideology as relief efforts were outsourced, streets were militarised and heavily surveilled by private contractors, and racialised poverty was illuminated (Adams 25, 37).

Hold It 'Til It Hurts begins as a family drama, aligning the text with those taken up by Arin Keeble in *Narratives of Hurricane Katrina in Context* (2019). Keeble argues that many Katrina narratives respond to 9/11 by undermining the idea of impotence and fragmentation within white, middle-class, patriarchal families—a common conceit of 9/11 narratives. Keeble goes on to suggest that by mirroring and subverting the "domestic architecture" of 9/11 narratives, Katrina narratives engage a broader discussion of inequality and domesticity in contemporary America (10). Similarly, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* begins with the death of the white father of two African American, separately adopted brothers, suggesting the dissolution of paternal and blood-related family bonds, and rejecting narrative memorialisation through formations of white masculinity. *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* follows Achilles, a black veteran of the war in Afghanistan, who, along with his adoptive brother Troy, also a veteran, returns to their hometown outside Washington DC to learn that their white adoptive father has died. At the funeral, their mother gives them both envelopes containing the details of their biological parents. The next day, Troy disappears. The rest of the narrative traces Achilles' pursuit of Troy through the South, an endeavour which is ultimately unsuccessful as Troy is found in a morgue in Atlanta towards the end of the novel. Achilles' journey brings him to New Orleans just before Hurricane Katrina, where the majority of the narrative takes place. When the storm hits, Achilles must work

through personal, collective and cultural traumas that emerge through his complex positionality both as a black man with white parents, and as a veteran who is no longer at war, but who has no stable place to call home.

Hold It 'Til It Hurts approaches contemporary America by placing Hurricane Katrina and the war on terror in dialogue as overlapping settings to a narrative about race, trauma, identity and belonging. The text avoids deferring to 9/11 as a contemporary ur-text, and instead locates Katrina alongside the war on terror as co-ordinates on a network of imbricated imperial histories combining Indigenous decimation, creolity, slavery and American military operations abroad. By bringing Katrina into dialogue with the war on terror, moreover, Johnson highlights the many ways in which military masculinity responds to the ties binding the war and the home spaces. The overlapping and interacting spaces of Afghanistan and New Orleans provide a generative backdrop for Johnson to explore black masculinity as it is shaped by both militarisation and racialisation. In this way, the novel avoids presenting Katrina as a singular catastrophe: instead, the hurricane is one event along a timeline of racialised imperialism that brings the events of twenty-first century America into dialogue with the past. Moreover, the social, economic and military consequences of Katrina draw attention to the intricate vectors connecting America's foreign wars and domestic contemporary crises.

This chapter explores *Hold It 'Til It Hurts'* interrogation of social and affective formations of "brotherhood," emblematised most overtly in the spectre of the missing brother, the object of Achilles' quest. There are obvious Homeric allegorical references in *Hold It 'Til It Hurts'* odyssey through the deep South, but I set these aside to focus on how the text addresses the modern meanings of brotherhood, particularly as a concept that is central to, but shifts in meaning between, black communities and the military. I argue that *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* constructs masculinity along axes of an idealised sense of brotherhood in both military and domestic American contexts, which Johnson asserts as fantasy rather

than a robust and realistic tool of solidarity. We can read Johnson's portrayal of brotherhood as an example of Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism": "when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving" (2). As discussed in Part One's introduction, *Cruel Optimism* seeks to move beyond discourses of trauma, of which the onset feels sudden and shocking, to conceptualise what she calls "crisis ordinariness": the sense of weighted, layered crises bearing down continuously on the subject in the present (10). In the neoliberal present, the institutional structures that encourage aspiration towards the "good life" break down, and the revelation of such aspiration as fantasy renders visible the gradual "attrition" of the subject, what Berlant refers to as "slow death" (Berlant 2, 7).

In bridging the concept of "brotherhood" between military and fraternal settings, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* conceptualises brotherhood as a relation of cruel optimism; a loose and malleable sensation that is only legible in the present when mediated by unreliable memory or the fantasy of future togetherness. In emphasising the unreliability of brotherhood as an affective structure, Johnson asks us to look beyond the immediate traumatic impact of war, family death and Hurricane Katrina, and to consider the "crisis ordinariness" of the deaths of black men under the conditions of racialised poverty, militarism and imperialism in the United States. The novel thus invites us to consider how closely black masculinity is bound up in notions of survival, and furthermore gestures to how one might be liberated from the "slow death" imposed by the precarious state of constantly simply surviving.

Black soldiers have served in the American armed forces since the Revolutionary War of Independence in 1776, even despite the full or partial limitations placed on their citizenship by slavery and segregation (J.T. Wilson 22). The question of citizenship reveals the complex and contentious nature of military

service for some black servicemembers: to fight for one's country is an act of national identification, but at the cost of participating in imperial and often white supremacist structures of violence. For example, the so-called Buffalo soldiers, who fought on the American frontier during the Indian wars of the 1800s, were implicated within American imperial expansion at the same time as they were subject to and targeted by its motivations of white supremacy and settler colonialism (Miles 419–20). Into the twentieth century, this contradiction was challenged by opponents of the Vietnam war, during which more than 300,000 African Americans served, many of them drafted (Elsbury; Jeffreys-Jones 100). The Vietnam war proved extremely divisive among the African American population: many young black men initially enlisted to prove their claim to their newly-won civil rights (Lucks 198). On the other hand, there was also sizeable and vocal opposition to the war; it was denounced by prominent black figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Muhammad Ali on the grounds of opposing racism at home and imperialism abroad, and many African Americans contested the number of black soldiers drafted as purposefully disproportionate (Jeffreys-Jones 94, 100).

The anti-war sentiment that had emerged among the black community by the end of Vietnam resonated in the post-9/11 era. The Oakland-based US Representative from California, Barbara Lee, cast the only vote opposing military intervention in Afghanistan; her vote was met with an overwhelming display of support from her majority African American constituents imploring "no more Vietnams" (Nieves). When the invasion of Iraq happened just over a year later, it was opposed by African Americans more than any other group in the United States (Lucks 198). While African Americans were overrepresented in the Army, black Army members expressed the greatest dissent to the Iraq war (Rohall and Ender 106). Black enlistment, which had been in decline since the first Gulf war, continued to fall following the invasion of Iraq (Rohall and Ender 102; Armor and Gilroy 224). During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, studies have shown that black

enlistees were more likely than their white counterparts to serve for economic reasons (known as the "economic draft") than out of a desire to serve in combat (Gifford 207).

In *Hold It 'Til It Hurts,* the conflicted history of black soldiers in the US military provides an opening to examine the positionality of black military masculinity at the historical nexus of imperialism and militarism. The novel rejects what Xine Yao calls "sentimental nationalism and its imperial corollary" in its pursuit of a means to conceptualise black American experience (9). Yao asserts "disaffection" and "unfeeling" as "the constitutive outside to the totalizing system" of sentimentality, which she understands to be a racialised affective structure universalising the category of "Man" under bourgeois whiteness (5, 4). Crucially, for Yao, unfeeling does not mean "negative feelings or the absence of feelings, but…that which cannot be recognized as feeling—the negation of feeling itself" (5–6). In *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*, the figure of the black veteran enables Johnson to unravel the histories of imperialism, militarism and white supremacy that inform the "crisis ordinariness" underpinning the contradiction of black citizenship in contemporary America (Berlant 117). In response, Johnson rebuts the terms of simply surviving under such conditions; articulating black American masculinity through disaffection, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* ends by tentatively re-imagining black American masculinity outside the limitations posed by collective, institutional and historical violence.

Hold It 'Til It Hurts firstly identifies crossings between the military and the family by unpacking the terms of "duty," understood as an affective drive which fosters collectivism, cohesion and a sense of brotherhood-in-arms. In the novel, Achilles is driven by a sense of duty towards his brother, but this duty is depicted not as an innate or individual motivation but rather an obligation, conditioned and enforced through paternally mediated memory. During the novel, the Afghanistan war exists only in fragments of memory, so Achilles' reluctant fraternalism is

revealed to a reader gradually, and non-chronologically, throughout the text. The first we learn of his military experience involves his obligation towards Troy:

> Two days after Baraki, Troy volunteered for Faizabad and Achilles followed, against his better judgment, his father's voice echoing in his ears …"Don't come back without him," his father had told Achilles, and then louder, "Don't one of you come back alone" (Johnson 33).

When Troy volunteers for dangerous missions in Afghanistan, it is the echoing voice of his father, contained in Achilles' memory, that compels him to join his brother. Many of Achilles' motivations are projected towards a desired image of duty and bravery, rather than the desire to save his life: "[t]he first weeks, possessed by cavalier notions of bravery and sacrifice, transfixed by the image of a cinematic slow-motion dive as he caught a nonlethal bullet to protect Troy, Achilles believed it would be better to die than to go home without his younger brother" (Johnson 33). Achilles is immobilised by the expectations set upon him by his father, and by the desire to attain an image of bravery promoted by cliché Hollywood action sequences. Johnson's play with movement here, employing static and "slow-motion," contrasts Achilles' forward pursuit of Troy in the present tense of the novel with a sense of stagnation on Achilles' subjectivity. The contradiction of taking a "nonlethal" bullet at the same time as feeling "it would be better to die" than return to the US without Troy demonstrates Achilles' difficulty in untangling his feelings from the expectations of those around him. Achilles' agency is problematised here as he both enacts and submits to self-effacement in the shadow of his brother.

It is significant, too, that these episodes occur in Achilles' memory as opposed to happening in the present, further suggesting Achilles' inability to escape the loss of his brother though his reliance on fixed images from the past, which surface throughout the text in non-linear order. In his memories, Achilles becomes a mirror image of his brother until any sense of his autonomy is erased:

By the time they were in high-school, Achilles was a wind-up doll. Troy wanted to learn guitar. Achilles signed up without being asked…Troy wanted to join the military, go Airborne, jump out of perfectly good airplanes. Next thing Achilles knew, he was dodging bullets and shitting sand and there was Troy, always smiling, always with the sun and the wind to his back. (Johnson 109)

Achilles' motivation to join the military is rooted not in a sense of duty to his country, but to his brother. In this way, the text sidesteps the figure of 9/11 that dominated narratives of twenty-first century war and crisis; 9/11 is not the defining moment that engenders a sense of duty in Achilles to protect his fellow citizens. But Achilles equally does not seem to feel any strong sense of brotherly commitment to Troy—rather, his recruitment to the Army is suggested to be a reactive gesture, conditioned by paternal pressure. Achilles' conditioned sense of duty feminises him: he becomes a "wind-up doll," an object programmed and devoid of autonomy. Rather than painting duty in heroic terms, then, Johnson unpacks the term to turn attention away from the collective to the individual. When Troy leaves home unexpectedly at the beginning of the novel, Achilles' quest to find him makes sense as driven by a reluctant but conditioned sense of duty. The memory of his brother in the past, and the empty promise of Troy in an unfulfilled future, feel like a heavy weight around Achilles determining his every move.

Johnson unpicks the seemingly intuitive bonds that tie duty and familial brotherhood, creating memories of a childhood defined by a sense of inadequacy and precarious belonging. In contrast, Achilles' memories of war appear fond, and the sense of closeness to his squad in Afghanistan is raw, fulfilling, painful and nourishing. Achilles' complicated memories of military fraternalism are tainted with nostalgia, which suggests his military experience as a site of both trauma and pleasure. Traumatic memories are seared with violence: "Jackson caught shrapnel that sheared off the back of his helmet and head clean-like, easy as scooping ice cream, and his brains looked like, well, a pickled walnut" (Johnson 176). The

violent body-horror of this scene is dressed up with kitsch references to food, with the soft-scoop ice-cream and pickled walnuts offering almost childlike allusions to vacations and picnics, which transports this traumatic experience shared between Achilles and his friend to a happier setting. The narration slows down by pausing on "well"—a strange pause during an otherwise fast-paced traumatic memory. This interruption of present voice into past memory draws a close dialogue between Achilles' present and past selves, suggesting that these images are familiar; regularly returned to and well-sketched in his memory.

This pause also shows more play with slow and static movement in Achilles' memories, reinforced later in the scene when Jackson

> ...asked Achilles if he was going to make it, and Achilles was so transfixed by the sight of the open skull, so certain he was cursed to see this side of a friend, he couldn't answer. He tried nodding. Everyone was talking and yelling and screaming, but they couldn't hear shit, and neither could Achilles. Jackson was mouthing the words. (Johnson 176)

Again, Achilles is "transfixed," this time not by a projected image of himself but by the real image of his friends' pain. The scene slows down; slow-motion is implied through the erasure of sound, which offers the scene a fluidity, as if underwater. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Johnson connects trauma across time and cultural context—from memories of war to the present day—using imagery of water and drowning. Johnson's construction of traumatic memory thus interweaves raw and violent images with slow motion and nostalgic elements, suffusing Achilles' memories of war with an almost fantastical or dreamlike quality.

Hold It 'Til It Hurts' depictions of war are striking due to these dreamlike and nostalgic qualities which surface throughout Achilles' memories of Afghanistan. The nostalgia attached to his memories of war suggest fonder feeling towards his military brothers at war than to his childhood and his familial brother

at home. In one otherworldly scene, the men observe the beauty of a rural Afghan landscape:

> Wages and Troy softly hummed "Mamas don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys." Merri muttered the Psalms. Wexler said, "It looks like someone ripped a pillow open." From where Achilles lay, he couldn't Wexler's face, but knew that Wexler was referring to the puff of clouds scattered across the horizon, white wisps sweeping westward, occasionally revealing the low, full moon. (Johnson 203)

As the men lie together, the low hums of a popular country song and prayer bring an air of comfort and familiarity to an alien place. Through these eyes, Johnson depicts the landscape as intoxicatingly beautiful; the image of the clouds as a feathery burst of a pillow extends through the consonance in "white wisps sweeping westward" to create a soporific and trancelike scene. Lying together cloud-watching, the men are framed here in an infantile state, connecting them by a sense of innocence and vulnerability but also unity and friendship.

While Achilles' memories of war are imbued with far stronger and fonder feelings than those of his childhood, it is noteworthy that Troy exists in both settings. Troy's presence as a familial brother and as a military brother suggests that the troubles Achilles encounters with fraternalism are socially and culturally inflected. Achilles' sense of brotherhood at war seems strong and this part of the novel appeals heavily to cultural stereotypes of war and racial identity. Achilles remembers a sense of belonging in the military that he perhaps did not feel at home, which appeals to common conceptions of a military fraternity which erases internal racial difference in the identification and pursuit of a common enemy (Jeffords 57). Achilles' squad is made up of majority black soldiers, and their closeness is memorialised in a photo that Achilles holds dear in the novel's present: "it's a favourite photo because Wages is sober; Merriweather is happy, eager to see his first beach; Wexler—with his long, slim neck—does look like Prince; and Achilles and Troy finally look like brothers" (Johnson 181).

Each subject in this photo is remembered endearingly; their individual personalities are animated in Achilles' eyes, forming a picture of togetherness. Nevertheless, the memories encased in the photo suggest a doctored reality. The image reifies a short moment in time to present an alternate past in which Wages' sobriety, Merriweather's happiness and Achilles and Troy's brotherhood all seem tangible and real. By marking this photo as his favourite, Achilles seems conscious of how the photograph, an artefact of cultural memory production, can retroactively shape his feelings of belonging and his sense of self. The brotherhood memorialised in this photo is idealised and embellished, and Achilles falls back on these reconstructed memories of the past to support his sense of identity. While we are led to perceive pleasure in Achilles' memories of military brotherhood, then, we also sense that these memories are unreliable. As a mediator of the past, the photograph offers a fixed image on a past-continuous timeline of a military brotherhood which feels comfortable, but nonetheless fragile.

In constructing fallible and uneasy images of the past, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* reads against the grain to question the integrity of formations of brotherhood in familial and military settings. We might read this as a commentary on the liberal use of "brotherhood" in popular and academic discourse: there is no shortage of scholarly writings which use the term to conflate military fraternalism and black intra-solidarity, often superficially with little real discussion of what "brotherhood" should mean in each context (Maxwell; Westheider; Graham). Johnson also exports this scepticism about brotherhood to a broader societal context in the novel's present tense, as the narrative examines the meaning of a term like brotherhood under the conditions of perpetual crisis—social, racial, economic, ecological— imposed by twenty-first century modernity.

Understood in the context of the domestic United States, "brotherhood" is a term largely associated with Blackness and African American masculinity. Throughout the twentieth century, the term evolved from the black church outwards

into other aspects of black culture including political organising and hip-hop, and during the civil rights struggle it was a politically loaded word. As abolitionists' postbellum dreams of a universal brotherhood failed to become a reality, black liberation groups began to organise for other means of self-determination. Brotherhood, named as such in, for example, the militant African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) of the Harlem Renaissance, stood for solidarity and, in the case of the ABB, a Marxist collectivist politics among African Americans (Bergin 48). In the 1960s the Black Panther movement urged a shift in the meaning of "brotherhood" from inter-racial unity towards solidarity among "people united by the experience of facing slavery, racial violence, and racial segregation in America" (Ownby 138). Into the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, the word then began to be co-opted into white spaces with the evolution of "bro" culture (Kusz and Hodler 96). Johnson appears conscious of the contemporary de-politicisation of the term; in *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*, Achilles compares the political solidarity implied in its usage at war to its liberal usage by white Americans:

> "Brother! Brother!" an Afghan would shout, but they knew it was solidarity by circumstance. The white Americans were different, saying "brother" like they believed it, earnestly claiming kinship with all humanity. (Johnson 89)

Just as it shifts socially and institutionally, the meaning of brotherhood also shifts as it becomes shaped by relations of race and imperial conquest. A gesture of solidarity between an Afghan civilian and a black soldier holds, momentarily, under the conditions of an imperial war waged by a state built on white supremacy and settler colonialism. Shared between them, "brother" reveals the processes of colonisation and racialisation that bring the Afghan civilian and black soldier together in this war. Conversely, the word conceals the same processes when spoken between the white soldier and the Afghan civilian; underlying histories of imperial conquest and racial subjugation render the gesture impotent, notwithstanding good intentions.

Johnson seems to address a liberal readership to explore the ironies of the white gaze upon the racialised spaces through which Achilles travels in search of his brother. Raised by lower-middle class white parents in Washington DC, he does not feel the sense of belonging we might assume among the black community of New Orleans. The reader adopts Achilles' perspective as he observes Southern black culture:

> Who was a zigga? Was he the bobble-headed, loose-lipped brother posted up on the corner eating fried rice from a paper cup? The lifer who converted to Islam, finding in prison a newfound sense of security? Was it reserved for the servile and chimp-lipped? Or could white people really be ziggas, as Achilles had so often heard? (Johnson 75)

In this provocative passage, Achilles ponders black slang and registers caricatures of black people around him. He distances himself from the black community in New Orleans and treats its members with pity and disdain. These racial dimensions are exaggerated by class lines as the suburbanite Achilles surveys the notoriously impoverished Lower Ninth Ward. In addition to his class and geographical distancing, Achilles is also excluded from the domain of language as he considers the application of a word he finds uncomfortable. In the above passage, Johnson's choice not to reproduce the "n-word" but to turn the first letter on its side— "zigga"—forces the reader into an uncomfortable position where the word echoes through the unambiguous space left by the first letter's reshaping. The shape and cadence of the word remain the same, so the word reverberates through the text despite being consciously altered by the writer. The reader is goaded into recognition of the word, and Johnson revels in this when he reproduces it exactly 100 times consecutively to form a striking block of columnated reiterations of the word (77). In echoes of Percival Everett's way of foisting a long piece of "ghetto" satire into his literary novel *Erasure*, Johnson's exaggerated play with the word "zigga" forces the reader into participation in the gaze which constitutes poor black masculinity in the liberal American imagination. Further, by asking "could white

people really be ziggas," Johnson brings this African American slang word into the same orbit as "brother," drawing attention to the depoliticisation of black language in contemporary white America.

As with "zigga," *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* renders "brotherhood" as emptied of meaning. The depoliticisation of the term becomes all the more significant when contending with the generations-long racialised poverty and neglect that *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* marks with Hurricane Katrina; the novel suggests that empty language is insufficient to address the gravity of this crisis. Rather than standing out as a singular traumatic event, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* traces Hurricane Katrina as an example of the "crisis ordinariness" that Lauren Berlant describes in *Cruel Optimism* (117). Berlant argues that in trying to make sense of the present moment, the emergence of crisis as an interpretative framework can occlude structural and continuous decline which occurs during the ordinary. The turn to crisis as a sudden, shocking and transformational event ignores the ongoing attrition of the subject under modernity. Berlant refers to such attrition as "slow death," a process that "prospers not in traumatic events, as discrete time-framed phenomena like military encounters and genocides can appear to do, but in temporally labile environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself" (100). Read through the lens of slow death, Hurricane Katrina reads in *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* not as a singular catastrophe but as a juncture along a timeline; a confluence of racialised inequalities in America.

Johnson suggests slow death through water imagery which gradually drips through the narrative until the hurricane hits, around two thirds of the way through. This water imagery is often associated with trauma or violence; during a fight scene Achilles "felt like a river was bearing his body downstream to a raging waterfall"; he feels "overinflated, his head heavy, filled with water"; when Achilles visits a morgue to find his brother, the sight of the cadavers leaves him feeling "lethargic, as if breathing underwater" (Johnson 69, 72, 216). In this particular episode in the

morgue, water imagery converges with the morgues that house scores of dead bodies, most of them belonging to black men.

If water imagery represents the slow drip of the storm, this is mirrored by a slow yet constant stream of dead black men that Achilles encounters in the search for his brother. During his search, he is continually advised to look in the morgues, and he finds that there are "too many guys" fitting Troy's description (Johnson 94). Johnson offers detailed, morbid descriptions of the cadavers that Achilles encounters:

> The white plastic sheet used for burn victims was folded back to the waist, revealing second and third degree burns over much of D-794's torso. The skin was mottled black and pink, except for his raw, gnarled fingertips and ragged throat, which Achilles recognised as a sign the man had burned to death in an enclosed space while trying to claw his way out. One unburned patch of skin on the chest was the same shade as Troy. The scorched cheekbones were high, like Troy's. But the eyes were too close together, *Aren't they?* Troy had wide-set eyes. *The eye sockets are too close, right?* (Johnson 97).

This body, D-794, is the second body Achilles sees after D-782; the reader is thus confronted by the space between these numbers and the unidentified lives that it represents, as well as those who had come before and those implied to follow. Through the devastation of the body and its sterile anonymisation, we glimpse fragments of identity; he has high cheekbones and a particular skin colour—we even gain a snapshot of the way he died and the personal, individualised terror he suffered as he tried to escape. At the same time, he could have been anybody: his features look like Troy, but not enough to be Troy. He is simultaneously someone, and no-one.

The stream of simultaneously individuated and anonymised cadavers that Johnson proffers throughout *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* embodies and subverts the contradictions embedded in liberal anti-racist discourse. The cadavers literalise the

"black bodies" that have become a familiar feature of media coverage of police violence (S.Williams; Tillet; A. Richardson 606). However, the lamentation of "black bodies" in anti-racist discourse risks depersonalising and dehumanising victims, and this is worsened by the filming and distribution of shootings which creates a spectacle out of the deaths of black Americans. The descriptions of dead black men in *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* speak back to this spectacle. By framing them in various morgues in the South, Johnson shifts the lens from public media sensationalism to America's quiet, unseen but endemic black fatalities. When Hurricane Katrina hits, we see a confluence of the slow drips of water imagery and black death: "[p]eople, mostly black and brown, remained stranded on rooftops and highways…Bodies, again mostly black and brown, floated down the street" (Johnson 277).

Hold It 'Til It Hurts' scenes of Katrina's aftermath become increasingly spectacular. Johnson paints the novel's steady stream of dead bodies in increasingly farcical, fantastical terms:

> Alligators gnawed bodies, dogs floated at the end of their leashes like buoys, and the occasional corpse cruised by, hair fanning behind…A man in a wheelchair rolled right off his roof trying to get their attention. Everyone stood at the edge of the boat and watched the murky water bubble. (Johnson 278)

The inclusion of animals and especially alligators in this scene, which were subject to rumours in the wake of Katrina but which were never proven, creates an absurdist tableau in which the boundaries of fantasy and reality are blurred (Doward and Townsend). The added detail of a corpse's "hair fanning" behind it is reminiscent of Millais' *Ophelia* and attributes a certain ethereal beauty to the dead. The drowning of the wheelchair-bound man, in contrast to the incapacitated, motionless reaction of his spectators, is cartoon-like and surreal. The surrealist space that Johnson constructs to convey the atmosphere of New Orleans in the wake of the flood likens New Orleans to Afghanistan in Achilles' memories.

However, while Achilles' surrealist memories of war help him construct a sense of belonging in the military, the alien setting of post-Katrina New Orleans serves to highlight his exclusion from society. Achilles joins a group of National Guard soldiers employed to patrol the city, "which meant driving and talking shit and looking for looters, which meant stopping anyone who wasn't white or accompanied by someone white" (Johnson 307). Achilles finds himself subject to this racial profiling; he is stopped by another group of soldiers "unconvinced of Achilles's status even after seeing his badge and military ID...He'd been mistaken for a looter six times that week alone" (Johnson 310). Against the surrealist dreamscape of post-Katrina New Orleans, Johnson juxtaposes the very real plot of racial othering, surveillance and militarisation of New Orleans which occurred after the hurricane (Giroux 176). Johnson thus creates intricate vectors between Afghanistan and New Orleans, war and home, by approximating them aesthetically as surrealist dreamscapes, and politically as sites of trauma, racialisation and militarism.

Hold It 'Til It Hurts therefore demonstrates Daniel HoSang's claim in *A Wider Type of Freedom* that war-making and race-making are mutually dependent. HoSang writes:

> If militarism requires perpetual enemies, then racism provides the political vocabulary of differentiation and diminishment necessary to transform populations into such enemies. Race performs crucial political labor by marking those persons who are antithetical to civilization itself, whose devalued and inferior status designates them for sacrifice and elimination. (80)

HoSang identifies the tight processes of racial identification and othering that work in tandem with and bolster hegemonic structures of militarism and militarisation. *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* brings these processes to light by locating Achilles in a political positionality in-between the war and home, and by highlighting the precarity of his claim to citizenship as a black American man. The ideological currents that give

Achilles a sense of belonging at war—as an American soldier fighting an Afghan Other—are the same currents that disperse this belonging at home. They are the same currents that simultaneously separate him from the black community in New Orleans—as a suburban man raised by white parents—and, at the same time, fix him under the white gaze as a looter even despite his military ID. Johnson draws these seemingly disparate settings into dialogue with each other, and into a broader network of imperial histories and geographies that connects the war on terror with the racial violence undergirding the founding identity of the United States. Still reeling after being frisked by fellow soldiers, Achilles chats for a while with a local postman "under Robert E. Lee's statue until its shadow passed them," putting forward a shadow of racism and militarism that marks and dominates black American lives into the present day (Johnson 310).

The crisis that Johnson calls attention to, then, neither begins nor ends with Hurricane Katrina—although the hurricane, in tandem with the war on terror, acts as the spotlight under which the entangled systems of racial and imperial domination gain definition in a contemporary context. Furthermore, by employing as his protagonist a black veteran, and as his settings Afghanistan and New Orleans, Johnson emphasises an ongoing crisis of citizenship and belonging for black men in the United States. These imbricated crises and events are so endemic and of such great proportions that platitudes for peace, and calls for brotherhood, become trite and inadequate to address their gravity. We can read this literally in Achilles' failed pursuit of his brother, which eventually ends in loss; Troy's body is found in a morgue in Atlanta.

But this failed odyssey ends in a moment of catharsis. Achilles informs his girlfriend of his brother's death by showing her the favourite photo of the squad in Afghanistan, discussed earlier in this chapter. Achilles points to each of the men individually and announces, "[m]y brothers…These are my brothers. All of them" (Johnson 287). As he mentions Troy, Achilles becomes undone: "[h]e couldn't lie

anymore, but the truth choked him. Unable to finish, his body slipped out of his control, all snot and tears. *What a fag. Don't be a sissy, Connie. How can you think under fire all pussy-lipped?* Is that all snot, that slimy skein stretching across his fingers, that salty, bitter assault on his tongue?" (Johnson 287). Unravelling, Achilles experiences a deluge: a breakdown of his subjective processes and intrusion of traumatic memory of his childhood into his present, challenging his intertwined identities as a soldier and a man. We can read this as a cathartic "letting go" of the relation of cruel optimism motivated by fallible brotherhood that drove Achilles to find Troy. We can also read this as a letting go of the faith poured into notions of brotherhood to maintain a sense of belonging, perseverance and resistance in the face of the "slow death" represented by (but not ending with) Hurricane Katrina. The fixed image of brotherhood presented in this photograph echoes the fixity of Achilles' memories of the war; they exist as objects of an immovable past, weighing down on Achilles' personhood in the present. Catharsis emerges from Achilles' confrontation with the chasm that this photograph represents, between an idealised past and a painful, cloaked reality. The conception of brotherhood idealised in the photo, the novel suggests, is comfortable and safe; but it is also fragile, and masks possibilities for liberation in the future.

While *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* is sceptical about the meaning of brotherhood in the face of profound crisis and grief, the novel asks for a new vocabulary to imagine black masculinity. The novel responds to the impotence of brotherhood in a contemporary setting by ending on a note of loneliness. Against the backdrop of Katrina's aftermath, Achilles travels back to Washington DC to bury his brother, accompanied by his recently-ex girlfriend. Troy's funeral is attended by the whole town hailing his military service, and Achilles feels a dissonance between this spectacle and his own personal, complicated memories towards his brother:

> Whistles and cheers erupted behind him and Achilles went back inside to
> find the lights dimmed and the DJ playing. Achilles stood at the end of the

bar—where as a kid he had always imagined sitting—taking it all in, and noticing for the first time the picture of Troy behind the bar and the pile of newspapers. The local press had printed extra copies. (Johnson 333)

Johnson locates Achilles physically as an outsider and observer to the spectacle around his brother, who dwarfs Achilles, even in death. Occupying a position at the bar that "he had always imagined" himself in, Achilles projects an idea of himself into cliché images in the same way as he does when imagining protecting his brother in Afghanistan. Achilles' loneliness is palpable as he is distanced from his childhood memories, from the spectacle enacted around Troy, and from himself. The scene is disjointed, fragmented, and dissonant, making the funeral's semblances of unity ring hollow and empty.

This tone may invite afropessimist readings; the novel is certainly not straightforwardly optimistic about the state of black citizenship and masculinity in twenty-first century America. But it also suggests an opening towards new formations of solidarity and subjecthood under the conditions wrought by a heavily militarised neoliberal twenty-first century. Like the distortion of Achilles' memories of war, the fanfare around Troy and his military service distorts his public memory. The preacher at his funeral venerates Troy as a man who "fought to bring freedom to Afghanistan and safety to Louisiana," although we know that Troy was found dead in Atlanta before the hurricane hit (Johnson 329). This public distortion of Troy's memory, and his veneration as a local hero, creates a sentimentalism around his military service reminiscent of what Xine Yao names as "sentimental nationalism and its imperialist corollary" (9). In *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling,* Yao argues that an economy of sentimentalism and sympathy underpins the racial hierarchy upon which the United States is organised, with structures of whiteness determining who or what can stake claim to citizenship within this hierarchy (12). Troy's memorialisation appeals to a sanitised public memory of the war on terror and Hurricane Katrina as universalised tragedies, thus

ignoring the racialised reality of the mass death they produced, and, further, the reality of Troy's death as another black man killed anonymously.

Achilles is named as a survivor to Troy in the obituary. The last few lines of the novel read, "was he really, he wondered, rereading the obit and then the news article where he was mentioned as a survivor. Was he? He felt more like a ghost…Survivor. But what else? And who else?" (Johnson 342–3). Achilles is named as a survivor—of the war, of Katrina; he survives his father, brother and friends—echoing Berlant's observation that "the attrition of the subject of capital articulates survival with slow death" (117). But he *feels* like a ghost. This type of feeling suggests what Yao describes as "disaffection": affective modes that evade the hierarchy and coloniality of sentimentalism; "the unfeeling rupture that enables new structures of feeling to arise" (6). To feel like a ghost here doesn't mean to feel dead or non-existent in contrast to surviving: it means to feel something else, something evasive, something as-of-yet intangible. This mode of unfeeling and detachment captures the personal and collective traumas witnessed by Achilles and the wider community without appealing to a culture of sentiment. It also rejects the terms of simply surviving as a black man in the United States. The novel connects the deaths that Achilles witnesses at war to a continuous stream of death at home; firstly in morgues, unseen and unspoken, and then erupting from Hurricane Katrina, seen but still forgotten. The novel's scepticism of "brotherhood" as a way to address a crisis of this magnitude leads it to end on an opening brought about by disaffection. Rather than simply rejecting trite platitudes for solidarity, and a broader culture of sentiment, the last lines of *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* make a distant, tentative gesture towards a reimagining of black masculinity that seeks more than simply survival in twenty-first century America.

III. "The world ending one person at a time": *Preparation for the Next Life's* **Anxious Empire**

A 2018 *New York Times* long-read titled "The Case of Jane Doe Ponytail" told of the case of Song Yang, an undocumented Chinese woman living in Flushing, Queens. Song had been making a living from sex work before mysteriously falling to her death from a balcony following a police raid. Despite the efforts of her brother, the details of Song's death will never be known; as an undocumented migrant, she fades into the "Flushing blur" of a densely populated urban space which ebbs and flows with transient labour (Barry and Singer). The article goes to lengths to highlight the anonymity and erasure of identity that migrants face as they enter the American underclass, not to mention the daily risk of violence which is acutely felt by women. By singling out Song's life and untimely death—a tragic but nonetheless relatively commonplace occurrence among those without recourse to American welfare or justice systems—the piece sought to bring attention to the treatment of the millions of undocumented migrants supporting the US shadow economy.

Undocumented immigration is a potent flashpoint in post-9/11 political and social discourse in the US. Identifying "illegal" immigration as a threat to national security (despite a marked lack of evidence correlating undocumented migration and terrorism), The Homeland Security and the Patriot Acts enforced the increased militarisation of the US borders, including: heavier police presence in migrant areas; broadening of surveillance powers; and permitting the indefinite detention of immigrants (de Genova 428–9). But far from deterring immigration, undocumented entry into the United States increased by 42 percent from 2000 to 2008 (Standing 155). With no access to US legal or social systems, undocumented migrants invariably enter into the precariat, subject to insecure work, dire living conditions and substandard pay (Standing 161). The rise in undocumented workers after 2001, taken together with the terrible conditions they face, speaks to the military-

economic contours of the neoliberal order established after 9/11. For all the talk of cracking down on immigration, the US economy relied too heavily on its supply of disposable cheap labour to fully legislate it out of existence. By conflating immigration with terrorism, post-9/11 security and economic policy tacitly tolerated the existence of undocumented migrants, while simultaneously rendering them an "enemy" within who deserved to be brutalised and have their rights stripped away (de Genova 427). This is evident in the US Government's *National Strategy for Homeland Security* (2002), which affirms the need to "promote the efficient and reliable flow of people, goods, and services across borders," all the while warning of a terror threat which "takes many forms, has many places to hide, and is often invisible" (viii, iii). This sense of invisibility finds its way into *The New York Times*' depictions of Flushing: anonymous workers who "use names like masks" and "restaurant signs often featuring no English at all" suggest a homogenous and alien population living within the borders of the United States (Barry and Singer).

Similar to "Jane Doe Ponytail," Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* (2014) imagines precarity through an undocumented Chinese woman, finding intrigue and tragedy in the bustling expanse of Flushing. Interrogating the contradictions of the post-9/11 security state, the novel explores the entanglements of militarisation and precarity through the relationship of an undocumented Uighur migrant, Zou Lei, and a veteran of the Iraq war, Brad Skinner. The two arrive in New York to find better lives for themselves: Zou Lei having escaped persecution in China, and Skinner having completed three tours in Iraq and looking for a way to escape veteranhood in his small Pennsylvania hometown. Their chance meeting down an alleyway sparks an intense relationship that provides endearing but fragile support through the harsh realities of Zou Lei's daily labour exploitation and Skinner's war trauma. Their relationship comes to a tragic end when Jimmy Turner—the white supremacist son of Brad's landlord—returns from prison.

Skinner murders Jimmy before turning the gun to himself, leaving Zou Lei to flee New York for Arizona to start her new life again.

Like *Cherry* and *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*, *Preparation* conceptualises veteranhood by way of twenty-first century crisis, attending to the precarity of life in the post-9/11 domestic US. While *Cherry* addresses veteranhood against the background of the opioid crisis, and *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* enmeshes the war on terror with Hurricane Katrina, *Preparation*'s story plays out under the looming weight of the 2008 financial crash. There is no reference to the exact date in which the story is set, but a series of temporal markers indicate the steady advance of time: Zou Lei's story starts with a flashback to "when swine flu season was over and the World News was carrying stories about the war on terror and the difficulties of getting a green card"; a newspaper bears a "photograph in black and white of a naked prisoner lying on the ground with a sandbag on his head" gesturing to the Abu Ghraib torture scandal of 2004 (Lish 6). Skinner's story begins with a view of "the famous skyline minus the two towers," underscoring the centrality of the gaping absence of the World Trade Center to the American imagination in the twenty-first century (Lish 33). Skinner, we learn, completed three tours in Iraq, meaning that the narrative can be located somewhere around 2007–2008.

The novel keeps sight of the financial crash in the same way that it does 9/11: by rendering it heavily and obtrusively absent. Rachel Walsh notes the silent weight of these crises in the novel, arguing that, "[s]ituated between these two epochal events, Lish's novel rejects the periodization of the 2007–2008 subprime mortgage crash as the onset of a crisis in neoliberalism" (550). Indeed, away from the white and affluent demographic that underpins much of 9/11 and 2008 literature and culture, *Preparation* turns its gaze to the "everyday and unremarked disasters experienced by those within a multiracial and global precariat (undocumented immigrants, working-class veterans, and ex-prisoners) who could not avail themselves of the paltry security credit might provide" (R. Walsh 550). Like the

veterans in *Cherry* and *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*, *Preparation*'s Skinner returns from war to a fragmented homeland in which he has no place. Walsh reads *Preparation*'s narration of tragic veteranhood as a lament for white working-class masculinity, finding echoes between Skinner and Jimmy, the novel's white supremacist antagonist (551). In contrast, my reading locates the novel's central pairing as that between Skinner and Zou Lei. Thinking through their resonances and their contrasts, I consider their doomed relationship as exemplary of the contradictions embedded in Homeland Security and post-9/11 domestic security ideology.

As with *Cherry* and *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*, *Preparation* in many ways lends itself to be read through the lens of Skinner's trauma (Zappen 161; Luckhurst "Iraq War Body Counts" 366; McKay 41). Skinner's undoubtedly damaged psyche is a pivotal narrative device which causes the wild vacillations of his relationship with Zou Lei; his landlord's suspicion that he is a threatening presence; and his ultimate suicide. Nevertheless, in this chapter I read around trauma to identify how the novel conceives of veteranhood in a way which is consistent with the perpetual sense of crisis specific to twenty-first century America. While acknowledging the role of Skinner's trauma in the narrative, I argue that the novel's driving affective impulse—that which connects both Skinner and Zou Lei—is anxiety. Further, by exploring the novel's treatment of marginality and borders, the militarisation of the home space, and its tentative projection towards an anxious future, I argue that *Preparation for the Next Life* locates military masculinity *within* the fragmented and anxious contours of the home, rather than holding it as exceptional.

What is immediately striking about *Preparation* is the granular detail with which it depicts Flushing. Reviewers have noted Lish's "journalistic will" and "documentarian gaze" in his attention to the life energy of New York City's margins, directing our imagination away from Manhattan and into the sprawling and vibrant region of Queens (Lenarduzzi; Flanery). If 9/11 haunts so much of contemporary cultural constructions of New York, then *Preparation* is concerned

more with its fallout, largely banal and unseen. The details of life on New York's margins are suffused with discourses of Homeland Security. Zou Lei's first attempt at a new life in America is short-lived, as she is arrested and spends three months in an immigration detention centre; it is here she learns that she is "in violation of the Patriot Act" (Lish 14). In jail, she comes across a Lebanese woman whose story is relayed by another cell-mate: "[r]ight after 9/11, they put her in a cell with like fifteen guys. She was Al Qaida for real" (Lish 14). The Lebanese woman's presence emphasises the gendered and racial reality of post-9/11 security policy; more visibly Muslim as a woman wearing a headscarf, she becomes the target of "the Americans" in the cell who "had uncovered her head" (Lish 14). This image speaks to the currents of fear that Homeland Security discourse pulsed through all levels of society, recruiting civilians as agents of civic surveillance by sowing mutual distrust.

Zou Lei, part Han-Chinese and part Uighur Muslim, who grew up on the Afghanistan border and who does not wear a scarf, comes across as ethnically ambiguous. Embracing this ambiguity, she heads for Flushing upon release from jail, where "[e]veryone was like her…and she did not see any police," intending to "stay where everybody was illegal just like her and get lost in the crowd and keep her head down" (Lish 49). Zou Lei's perspective responds to Homeland Security discourse, which identifies undocumented arrivals to the US as a faceless, foreign entity. Yet the narrative voice echoes the contradictions of the Homeland Security state through its acute attention to detail of the heterogeneity of the crowd: "the endless heads of strangers, the crewcut workmen, running crates of rapeseed out the back of a van"; mothers "looking at the oranges in the market stands"; "country people with gold teeth"; "a Chinese girl with no-one, with a scabbed ear and breast implants"; "a hairstyle, a black mohawk" (Lish 49). By blending into the crowd and abandoning her ideals of "living like an American," Zou Lei is at once invisible and

hyper-visible; she is anonymous and strikingly alien within the rigid boundaries of Americanness re-defined in the wake of 9/11 (Lish 50).

The contradictions embedded into the post-9/11 US are also mapped out in the spatial geography of the city. *Preparation*'s New York is simultaneously overwhelmingly expansive, and tightly hemmed in. Lish constructs the city in a multitude of small, closed-in spaces: Zou Lei takes a room in a tiny apartment "up a stair, close quarters, stale cigarettes, concrete-colored light filtering in from an angle" (47). The houses in Flushing are "tucked in under other buildings," amidst restaurants and neon signs (Lish 53). The city around Zou Lei feels at once claustrophobic and boundless; even on the outskirts of the city, the vast space is limned by borders, levels and margins. Zou Lei "went for a jog around the block, but there was no block. The neighborhood around her house was full of levels. Walls and fences. You went down the street and it closed behind you, it screened you off" (Lish 53). In passages such as these, New York is brought to definition by the juxtaposition of its apparent limitlessness and its many boundaries and edges. This reads as a dramatisation of the internal borders of the US that Zou Lei must closely navigate, paradoxically, to be "free" (Lish 50). The result is disorienting, as the city seems to take on a character of its own by creating openings and blockages in labyrinthine endlessness.

Skinner's first experiences of New York are similarly defined by margins. In his first glimpse of Manhattan, with "the famous skyline minus the two towers," the bustle of New York seems flighty and evasive: it "was very distant still and when the highway dipped it went away," appearing and disappearing over the line of the horizon (Lish 33). The city comes into view through looming, ominous walls, the "tenements rising around them like curtains, graffiti on the bricks" (Lish 33). After three days spent sleeping rough in Manhattan, Skinner spontaneously rides the subway into Queens "all the way to the end," watching the cityscape mutating in notches and lines once the train had "risen up out of the tunnel into daylight and

onto elevated tracks, passing the backs of billboards, trains yards and water towers" (Lish 73). Through his journey into and then promptly out of Manhattan, Skinner re-orients a reader's narrative desire from the traditional centre of New York's literary and cultural production out into the city's margins and beyond, generating anticipation towards lesser-known physical and cultural terrain.

Together, Skinner and Zou Lei trace the lines of the city by walking, running, and hiking along them. They go so far as to test the boundaries of the city: looking out, they view the city "uncontained" with "no definite end at the horizon" (Lish 118). James Zappen notes that the city evolves alongside Zou Lei and Skinner's relationship:

> As they traverse the streets in fear and loneliness, the city is awash with trash and graffiti and tattered American flags. As they fall in love, the city soars with them into boundless space. And as they succumb to the violence that surrounds them, the city becomes a vast wasteland of empty and burned-out buildings extending for seemingly endless miles. (161)

In this compelling reading of the novel, Zappen attributes character and agency to the city itself, which brings it into co-existence with the human characters who inhabit it, shaping and being shaped as their stories progress. Nevertheless, by ascribing it with agency and fluidity this reading of the city suggests limitless opportunity. This can only ever be a fantasy: the urban space is underpinned by a sense of claustrophobia and fragility, resonant with the precarity that unites Skinner and Zou Lei.

Skinner and Zou Lei's runs across the city speak to this sense of claustrophobia: the more and the further they run, the more claustrophobic the narrative becomes. At a turning point in their relationship, marking the beginning of its disintegration, Skinner scares Zou Lei which dissolves into a fraught and intense chase over the city, Skinner running after her "balanced on the edge of pain" and again watching the evolution of the city in the darkness as he "chased her into

hypnosis" (Lish 354–5). The further that Skinner runs, the narrower his view—the illusion of mobility represented in the expanse of the city translates to a singular folding-in to himself. Similarly at the end of the novel Zou Lei, believing Skinner has left her, walks and runs all the way into Long Island "until the edges of her feet were ragged and black," vowing "to go away, just go and keep going until the world ended or she ended" (Lish 410, 384). To Zou Lei, the prospect of this mobility and endlessness feels apocalyptic, the "end" being more imaginable than escape from the confines of her precarious lived condition. While Walsh suggests that the nature of Skinner and Zou Lei's scaling of the city renders them "[p]recarious and butch flâneurs," the panic conferred in their running denies them the flâneur's leisurely enjoyment of time (567). Instead, there is the sense that they are constantly running up against something; that the further they run, the less time they have, and the closer they get to a terrible and unthinkable end.

Skinner and Zou Lei's fraught relationship—with each other and with the urban space around them—thus leaves a sense of unease with their environment. The city's conflicting boundlessness and claustrophobia reflects the hostility of the post-9/11 Homeland Security state, whose militarised borders are simultaneously rigid and porous. To the inhabitants occupying its margins, a perverse sense of freedom is offered: for Zou Lei, this is to endure the "the scams, the tuberculosis, the overcrowding" in order "to be free and on the street" and not detained in an immigration sweep (Lish 50). For Skinner, his life in New York, however precarious, offers an exit from the trappings of his social class, which had funnelled him from small-town Pennsylvania to fighting abroad in the war on terror. Despite this move, however, he remains trapped by the war's contraction of the war into the home, as an agent of the very policies threatening Zou Lei on American soil. Together, they blend in seamlessly to the urban space while also appearing unsettlingly out-of-place, and as such they embody the imperative of Homeland

Security policy to stratify the US population into those who belong and those who do not.

The novel's affective impulses structure the narrative around the precarity shared by Skinner and Zou Lei. Indeed precarity is often noted for its affective impact; Lauren Berlant describes the precariat as a fundamentally "affective class" (195). Precarity is a state of being that constantly re-asserts itself into subjective experience by transmitting a sense of insecurity and uncertainty over the future. Guy Standing lists the feelings associated with precarity as the "4 As": "anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation" (33). Much of this relates to the negative feelings (frustration, despondency, worry) generated by the instability of one's labour, as well as from the Marxian alienation produced by the deferral of a sense of purpose to one's work. Yet *Preparation for the Next Life* suggests that the affect of precarity is not only produced by the precarity of labour, but also by the individuation of collective experience. We might add to Standing's "4 As," then, the *atomisation* of subjectivity which is conferred through the spatial geography of the novel as well as through its narrative voice.

If the physical presence of New York is constructed by inaccessible places—through its borders and margins, its "walls and fences," places that will "[screen] you off"—then these barriers are transcribed into the novel's narrative voice, which conveys closed-off and emotionally unavailable characters (Lish 53). The narrative places a firm sense of distance between the reader and Skinner and Zou Lei, leading reviewers to note the novel's unsentimental approach to romantic love (Garner; Cox). Whereas Roger Luckhurst locates the narrative voice within Skinner's point-of-view, discerning "a narrative voice that mimics a fenced-off, post-traumatic psyche," the voice seems rather to echo the detachment and atomisation of precaritised subjectivity that connects both Skinner and Zou Lei ("Iraq War Body Counts" 366). This reading does not occlude Skinner's trauma but rather incorporates it, since it brings together the characters' experience of the world

via the enmeshment of precarity and militarisation that undergirds the novel's understanding of post-9/11 New York. Skinner is traumatised not just by his experience of the violence of war, but by its precarious labour pattern. He is "stop-lossed" twice, meaning he is rotated back to Iraq after recovering from severe injuries at a military hospital, despite his evident physical and mental illness (Lish 68). Zou Lei's subjection to precarious, underpaid work in Flushing's Chinese restaurants is largely fuelled by the militarisation of her life by Homeland Security. She engages with the world solely in a way that keeps her off-grid, staying constantly alert "for undercovers" (Lish 50). The oppressive threat of surveillance pervades her waking and sleeping life, as she has recurring dreams that "ICE agents came to Chinatown in the new white Homeland Security trucks and piled into the mall and closed off all the exits" (Lish 179). The narrative construction of a physically cordoned-off urban space thus finds its way into Zou Lei's unconscious via her dreams. Patterns of intense nightmares are mirrored between both characters: Skinner, too, experiences painfully sensory dreams of his memories of war, which are relayed in long and intense passages describing sweat and heat and screaming, and punctuated by occasional shifts in perspective: "[i]n his sleep, Skinner yelled and hit the bench" (Lish 64). Sandwiched between two long immersive passages relaying his traumatic memory in sharp detail, this short line causes the perspective to oscillate between the loud chaos of Skinner's dream and a flat, removed gaze upon his sleeping body. This limning of Skinner's dream and the outside world serves to highlight his isolation. He and Zou Lei are united in such isolation; they are subject to frightening dream-sequences of war and persecution that they share in common but that they experience completely alone.

This sense of being "closed off" can be found in the flat affect of the narrative voice, which reveals nothing of either characters' interiority. During a scene in which Zou Lei finds solace with an Uzbek butcher, she recounts her situation and her exploitation by her boss: "[s]he cried a little talking about it, and

wiped her eyes" (Lish 319). This moment comes as quite a surprise to the reader, who up to this point has had no access to Zou Lei's emotional experience. In this brief moment, the narrative permits the reader to glimpse a small fragment of Zou Lei's interior life, revealing the chasm of unwritten emotional terrain that structures the rest of the novel. The prospect of community opened up for Zou Lei in her encounter with the butcher is nonetheless short-lived. Feeling sorry for her, he offers to bring her to mosque; she goes once and doesn't return. We might then read the detached narrative voice in tandem with the atomisation of experience lived by the characters. Any sense of community is dispersed, and the possibility of collective experience is consistently denied.

As readers, our detachment from the characters' interior lives does not preclude us from feeling the palpable sense of doom that weighs heavily throughout the novel and which is inevitably satiated at its tragic end. In this way, the novel both shares in and departs from Liam Connell's description of the "precarity novel": a "genre of the mundane" depicting day-to-day events in which the "depiction of immanent but unfulfilled crises forgoes the possibility of political organization because its generic convention is one of stasis" (35). If the precarity novel is organised by stasis on the level of plot, *Preparation* incorporates stasis on the level of voice, which reflects a detachment and atomisation of the characters through which we gain no sense of the possibility of such political organisation. Nevertheless, the novel maintains a feeling of "immanent" crisis, which is—contrary to Connell's description—fulfilled at the end by Skinners' murder-suicide of himself and Jimmy Murphy. We might read this fulfilment of crisis to echo the apocalyptic sentiment borne of the post-9/11 cultural imagination (Gray, *After the Fall* 48; de Cristofaro 13). Similar to the precarity novel, though, *Preparation* produces what Connell calls an "anxious reading": one that "operates between the readers' desire for the amelioration of crisis on the one hand and their expectations

of what is likely on the other" (35). That is, the reader shares in the anxiety generated by the narrative momentum.

Anxiety is the key organising affect of *Preparation for the Next Life,* and the novel articulates the contemporary economic and social currents which intertwine to form the intimate relation between anxiety and precarity. Standing understands the mind to be "fed by fear and is motivated by fear" under precarity (35). As Sianne Ngai argues, anxiety is a "future-oriented affect," and suggests a fearful drive towards an uncertain horizon (209). There is a slight tension, then, between Standing's description of a motivating sense of anxiety, and Connell's understanding of "stasis." Whereas Connell's stasis relates to anxiety over an eventuality that fails to materialise, Standing's anxiety emerges from the state of moving towards an eventuality that is unclear, but that one knows will be harmful. This anticipation of harm is pathologising: Mathies Aarhus, like Standing, understands anxiety as a "symptom" of precarious labour conditions (42). For Aarhus, the neoliberalism that produces and relies upon precarious labour can be understood "as not only a project of economic redistribution but also a project of affective redistribution" (42). Particularly visible in industries such as hospitality is the downward transmission of negative feeling from those with economic resource towards those without. Aarhus goes so far as to argue that "the distribution of anxiety is one of the central arenas where class stratification is played out today" (43). As I have explored in the introduction to Part One, the context of post-9/11 fiction reveals gaps in Aarhus' analysis of affective redistribution, as literary responses to 9/11 have often focused on the anxieties borne from the fragmentation of the middle-class home in the wake of the events. Nevertheless, *Preparation for the Next Life* also carries a heavily anxious, apocalyptic feeling that is shared among all characters of the novel. As I explore during the remainder of this chapter, the anxiety underpinning the narrative brings Skinner's experiences together along with those of Zou Lei and the working-class Murphy family whose home Skinner shares.

Such a reading enables us to interpret Skinner's veteranhood within the social and economic contours of the domestic United States, permitting a conceptualisation of military masculinity that resonates with the specificities of twenty-first century "homeland" politics and successive domestic crises.

The material effects of Homeland Security policy are evident throughout *Preparation For The Next Life,* as Zou Lei's life is weighed down by the constant threat of arrest and deportation. In the corner of New York she inhabits, there are latent traces of Homeland Security everywhere: a man recounts, for example, his Muslim neighbour's disappearance: "Homeland Security. Happen right here" he explains, as if abstract words and gestures following 9/11 had finally materialised and struck like a sudden bolt of lightning (Lish 319). In this way, security policy makes itself visible by the absences it leaves in its wake. In addition to the militarisation of public space, the novel also imagines how Homeland Security policy is refracted into domestic space, that is, how the homeland is echoed in the home. This happens similarly through its imposition of absence, fragmentation and impossibility onto the fantasy of a secure domestic life. As I have explored in the introduction to Part One, Anglophone literatures and cultures have a long history of invoking the home as a "spatial imaginary" that reproduces and sustains ideals of nation and empire (Dowling and Blunt 191). But the "home" gained new currency after 9/11 following the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, as a new word entered the American lexicon to bolster a sense of nationalism and exceptionalism among Americans (Bump). This new concept of the "homeland" helped to justify an aggressive set of policies which syphoned public money into the military, and infringed on personal civil liberties, in the name of weeding out the enemy within. Katherine Brickell notes the malleability of concepts of the home, naming them as "metaphorical gateways to geopolitical contestation that may simultaneously signify the nation, the neighbourhood or just one's streets" (575). It is this malleability that permits the fluidity of "home" and

"nation" in the collective imagination, and which, in the context of Homeland Security, rhetorically brings the war back from the "over there" into the fabric of domestic life.

Preparation plays into the post-9/11 discourses of home and nation by dramatising the transfer of militarised public space into domestic life. But it also questions the reality of what "home" looks like in this context, and seeks to tease apart the fantasy of peaceful domesticity from its contemporary reality. According to Chris Philo, Homeland Security implies that "actions on a national, even global, stage can readily be allied with protecting the intimate spaces of domesticity, the home and hearth, potentially stirring into the mix of geopolitical praxis deeply problematic connotations about who 'we' would wish to invite into or, more tellingly, debar from 'our' cozy homes" (2). By figuring its protagonist outside this paradigm and placing her as someone to be "debarred," Preparation explores the exclusivity and fragility of the contemporary American notion of home. When Skinner realises the precarity of Zou Lei's immigration status, he proposes to her. The promise of a future ratified by United States law offers a sense of solace and stability in contrast to their lived precarity, enabling Zou Lei to more clearly imagine her own personal stake in the American Dream, including freedom of movement across the US: "[s]he sees herself and Skinner leaving come fall" (Lish 275). But like the rest of New York, the spatial geography of the family courts in Preparation echoes the impossibility of such dreams of freedom in the Homeland Security state. The family courts are forebodingly shared with the criminal courts, and their structures reflect the rigid muscularity of security policy: they walk through "concrete barriers and fortifications and sentry posts," the buildings are populated with "paramilitary policemen" security staff wearing "bulletproof vests and Police windbreakers" (Lish 300). The court building thus materialises the militarisation of civic structures in the years following 9/11, resembling more a military base than a democratic institution.

In addition to the police, the militarisation and securitisation of civic life finds its way into domesticity. Those wishing to get married and those on trial are indistinguishable: "[t]here was a hot dog vendor on the corner where guys in suits— grooms and defendants—were eating pretzels" (Lish 301). The placement of these men on a nondescript street corner highlights the infringement of such intrusive laws into mundane, daily life, and their alignment locates both groom and defendant as objects of suspicion. For Skinner and Zou Lei, the dream of domesticity is broken by the intrusion of the security apparatus: for their marriage to be formalised they are told to present "passport, driver's license" before they can appear before a judge (Lish 302). The realisation that she must have legitimate ID to even apply to get married precludes Zou Lei from taking this dream any further with Skinner. The impossibility of accessing a domestic life together demonstrates the securitisation of romantic love, and it also reveals the fickleness of such conceptions of home which, consistent with Philo, accept love in certain racial, national and economic forms while excluding others.

Ultimately, then, Skinner and Zou Lei's dream of domestic life can be nothing other than a dream, and the secure futurity represented by Skinner's proposal remains forever out of reach. This temporal structure of imagined and constantly denied futurity speaks to the anxiety which defines their precarious lives. For Zou Lei, this anxiety stems from the forever-looming threat of arrest and deportation. Consistent with Standing's description of a mindset motivated by fear, driving towards an ominous and unknown future, a sense of threat accompanies Zou Lei's perspective of the world: "[t]he heat was coming. She new what to expect" (Lish 275). This heavy sense of anticipation colours New York in the summer; Zou Lei expects "[t]hugs surfing on the sides of cars, flagging...The littered floors, the strange lone males in the street" (Lish 275). The sense of doom carried by the summer is expressed in a resigned future tense:

> The Wenzhounese will sit outside in folding chairs in their pajamas…The women will be pregnant and still they will be taking out the garbage and collecting bags of recycling, collecting little fistfuls of money…People will try to sell [Zou Lei] anything they can. They will need the money, but so will she. (Lish 275)

These sequential snapshots of poverty, sutured together by the auxiliary "will," convey the dejected acceptance of a future of which the only definite is continued desperation. This depiction of precarity captures a collective people united by personal, atomised struggle, generating anxiety from the guarantee that the future is simultaneously chaotically unclear and ominously certain.

For Skinner, on the other hand, anxiety is anchored in his inability to fulfil his role as protector and defender of the home, both in its domestic and its national sense. If the soldier's role is to act as the overseas agent of the Homeland Security state, deployed to buttress a safe and cohesive domestic sphere, then the precarity he witnesses in the domestic United States—and the barriers it imposes to a secure domestic life—signals the failure of this project. The fantasy of a heroic military masculinity comes into contention with the reality of the homeland that this masculinity supposedly defends. When Skinner realises that his proposal to Zou Lei can never be fulfilled, he returns to his rented basement to regress into his memories of war: "Skinner, medicated, depressed and nihilistic, sat slumped in the basement watching IEDs exploding on his laptop, Iraqis getting shot and flopping down, the world ending one person at a time. The line shortening, getting closer to him, his turn approaching" (Lish 303). While anxiety is a future-oriented affect, trauma is rooted in the past, and in constantly revisiting Iraq through internet videos (and in other scenes through photographs and his dreams), Skinner dwells in his traumatic memory. But trauma is not the only feeling attributed to Skinner, and by invoking him as "depressed and nihilistic" the narrative invites us to consider a more complex affective map. The nihilism that Skinner feels carries the same sense of dejection as Zou Lei's resigned anticipation of the summer heat and all the misery that it

brings along. At the same time that Skinner dwells in memories of the past, he senses the same impending doom. Watching "the world ending one person at a time" projects an apocalyptic sentiment and foreshadows the inevitably tragic eventuality upon his horizon.

As much as he is limited by trauma, then, Skinner can also be read in terms of anxiety, and this anxious affect in turn aligns with the notion of masculinity in crisis. As I explored in chapter two in relation to *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*, feelings of trauma and fondness are difficult to tease apart. By revisiting his war memories, Skinner revisits a time when he had a role defined by society as heroic and exceptional. When his marriage proposal to Zou Lei fails, he determines to return to Iraq, claiming, "I'm done here. Making all these thinking errors. All the problems. I used to be a highly-locked on soldier. I need to get back in there" (Lish 346). Skinner's traumatic memories seem to conflict with his idea of himself at war, and he indulges in fantasies wherein the war enables him to provide for Zou Lei: "[h]e told her he wanted to go back as a contractor. He would make one hundred forty thousand dollars in one year. Their problems would be over, he said" (Lish 346). In this impossible fantasy, Skinner's return to an idealised vision of masculinity and war enables him to fulfil the romantic aim of the soldier as defender of the homeland and protector of the home. But by imagining himself as a contractor, he taps into the economic motivations that undercut the romantic fantasy of the homeland and the battle of good versus evil. In Skinner's imagination, he returns as an agent of the business of war and profits from the huge expansion of the arms and security industry following the United States' invasion of Iraq. Skinner's fantasy of becoming a contractor thus represents a fantasy to regain control and ownership of the neoliberal economic reformation and militarisation of the domestic sphere that had subjected himself and Zou Lei to their current precarity.

Rachel Walsh identifies *Preparation for the Next Life* as an "anxious and anticipatory text," speaking to the "dread and rage" generated by the neoliberal present (553). Walsh identifies this anxiety as representative of a crisis of working-class white masculinity. But by focusing her analysis on the opposition of Skinner and Jimmy, she concludes that the text's organising anxious structure functions to mourn "white working-class masculinities through the figure of the traumatized war veteran" (R. Walsh 551). However, while disenfranchised and aggrieved white working-class masculinities certainly play a role in the novel, they appear more as diagnostic of the contemporary social fabric than they do a lamentation. As I have explored, the novel asks us to consider Skinner outside the parameters of "the traumatized war veteran," and this is possible when we read the central pairing as between Skinner and Zou Lei rather than between Skinner and Jimmy. While trauma forms a fragment of the novel's affective cartography, the novel consistently invites us to consider the alternate affective modes shaping veteranhood in twenty-first century America. Reading the novel through the lenses of precarity and anxiety provides a fuller and more expansive picture of how military masculinity fits within the post-9/11 consensus, and within a domestic United States steeped in successive crisis.

Read alongside Zou Lei and more broadly against Flushing's bustling daily life, Skinner's role as a soldier, and his accompanying trauma, are rendered unexceptional. Through this interpretative lens, the anxious gaze of the novel is less convincing as a lamentation of the fate of white working-class masculinity, particularly as this would suggest that the novel is temporally-oriented towards the past. Instead, through the figure of the unexceptional precarious soldier, we might discern an anxious glance cast towards the future shape of American empire. Rather than mourning the future of masculinity, *Preparation* (like the rest of the texts studied in Part One) subtly questions the future of how imaginaries of military masculinity fit in the twenty-first century, at a time when American hegemony is

rapidly in flux. If imaginaries of military masculinity function as mediators between the chaos of war and the security of home, then the veteran's return to a fragmented domestic society critiques the efficacy of this romanticised figure of masculinity. Further, the soldier's failure to protect the homeland from decay strips away any myth of heroism, revealing the war's driving impulse of economic intervention and calling into question the future direction of this neoliberal and imperial project.

The novel's anxious futurity is suggested at the very end, in a short epilogue which follows Skinner's climactic suicide and Zou Lei's discovery of the crime scene. In this denouement, Zou Lei leaves New York behind to find work in Arizona. While cleaning stalls at a horse ranch, she meets "a different kind of American, a cowboy from North Dakota who had come to Arizona to date a lady rancher whom he had met online. He wore a Stetson hat, a silver-tipped cowboy string tie, and a black silk kerchief at the throat of his denim shirt" (Lish 415). Zou Lei's move to Arizona echoes the movement of the original settlers, who sought a life out west to escape poverty, overcrowding and corruption in the east (Slotkin 30). Meeting an archetypal cowboy, Zou Lei's story becomes cemented in this mythology of the frontier—a place which sits in the American cultural imaginary as wild and lawless but full of promise of a wholesome, pastoral life. As I will discuss in later chapters, the frontier imaginary is evoked in American war stories to appeal to the notion of a conflict of civilisation and savagery. Its brief mention at the end of a novel primarily about the war on terror gestures to the frontier's enduring presence in US war culture. But *Preparation*'s invocation of the frontier imaginary also speaks to the novel's approach to the future direction of American empire. If the foundation of the frontier is borne from imperialism and settler colonial violence, then Zou Lei's move out west imagines how the entanglement of mythology and history takes shape in the present and into the future; to the "next life," as the novel's title invites us to imagine. Paired with the image of the gauche and ageing cowboy, who seems a relic of a bygone time, Skinner's absence from

this picture posits a future in which empire's sustaining mythologies are no longer wedded to figures of military masculinity. Upon a western landscape that appears at once familiar and changed, *Preparation for the Next Life* casts an anxious glance towards the future: to how mythologies of empire might interact and take shape, and to the role of masculinity in this rapidly evolving and ambiguous space.

Conclusion

While they vary in their approaches to traumatic memory and masculine identity, the literary texts studied in Part One each contend with the war on terror as one of the many layered crises that make up the fabric of the contemporary domestic United States. In this way, they challenge the traditional ideological separation of the war and home spheres by bringing war and militarism within the folds of the domestic sphere in the years following 9/11. In bringing these twenty-first century crises together and reading them as layered, I have positioned my analysis in dialogue with Lauren Berlant's theory of "crisis ordinariness" to move away from the idea of crisis as a sudden traumatic catastrophe, and to understand it more as a prolonged event contributing to the slow, anxious shaping of subjectivity in the fragmenting conditions of the neoliberal present. Reading the texts together, then, we can discern among the perma-crisis a pernicious sense of precarity: the body, the psyche, family, relationships and labour patterns all feel haphazard and unstable throughout these narratives. On a broader scale, these intra-personal expressions of precarity translate into the texts' approaches to gender, as conventionally hegemonic formations of masculinity, and particularly white masculinity, are conveyed with fragility and anxiety. In their depictions of sick, corrupted, neglected and militarised domestic America, the texts in Part One put forward a home sphere whose precarity reveals the failure of hegemonic military masculinity to ensure the cohesion of the home. In highlighting this precarity and its associated affects, these

texts invite the reader to consider their military masculine subjects outside the parameters of trauma that we might expect from paradigmatic war narratives.

Such paradigmatic war stories lean upon a "trauma aesthetic" to convey the indescribability of experience at war (Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* 89). These narratives appeal largely to conceptions of trauma from the Caruthian tradition, indebted to Freud, which perceives trauma as "a crisis of representation" (Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* 5). As Roy Scranton argues, canonical Vietnam writers perform this crisis by negating language; in the war on terror age, certain writers attempt to reach to the far corners of the unspeakable through an overflow of poetic language, to the extent that the words become divorced from reality— "pure signs operating in a closed economy of literary signification" (*We're Doomed* 231). Scranton's "trauma hero" describes the plot of the embattled veteran who witnesses an arc from trauma to rehabilitation, enacting a scene of catharsis for a liberal readership conflicted about their consumption of war committed in their name (*We're Doomed* 237). In foregrounding veterans, the texts in Part One go some way to address trauma, and they certainly feature some of the conventions of the trauma aesthetic, for example in temporal inconsistency, play with pace, and the interruption of present voice into past narration. Nevertheless, in emphasising an array of domestic crisis into which the returning veteran figure is transplanted, these texts invite us to consider alternate affects that inform military masculine subjecthood. In doing so, they offer windows to consider aspects of twenty-first century military masculinity which make it unique to its time.

Common to all three texts is the veteran protagonist's sense of disaffection, or detachment. In *Cherry*, the flat, paratactic narration disconnects him both from the world around him and from his own body. But we are urged not to assume this detached voice is a response to trauma; instead, the protagonist's experience at war and with opioid addiction is "whatever," in Mitchum Huehls' words, and we are deterred from locating a causal traumatic root to the protagonist's present embattled

self (13). Indeed the circular structure of the novel severs the arc from trauma to rehabilitation that is conventional of the trauma plot. In contrast, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* seems to enact such a rehabilitation in its "letting go" of formulaic expectations of duty, family and brotherhood that tie him to a traumatic past. However, the positionality of the protagonist as a black male veteran renders the novel's approach to trauma more complex; in the end, the protagonist finds a possibility of liberation by *not* feeling. It is by letting go of trite notions of brotherhood and limp solidarity that *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*' protagonist can feel tentatively liberated as a black man in America—and we can add to this perhaps, the letting go of conventions of personal and collective trauma which, the novel suggests, become cumbersome, narrow and do not address heterogeneity of experience.

Similar to *Cherry*, *Preparation for the Next Life* conveys detachment through its flat narrative voice and through the distance it creates between the reader and the subjective interiority of its central characters. As we saw in *Cherry*, it is possible to read the detached narrative voice as reflective of the trauma of the veteran protagonist, but the narrative nonetheless seems to deter us from such a reading. In *Preparation*, the flat narration connects the dual perspectives of the veteran Skinner, and the undocumented immigrant Zou Lei. As such, we might read the dissociated narrative voice as reflective of the atomisation and detachment of precaritised subjecthood, which the two protagonists share in common. The insertion of a female protagonist into the plot of *Preparation* differentiates the novel from *Cherry* and *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*, but Zou Lei's inclusion also helps to reveal the affects that connect the soldier/veteran to civilians, thus bringing military masculinity into the contours of American domestic space.

By reading against the grain of trauma, I have aimed to demonstrate how these texts explore the complexities of the interaction between war and home spaces in the twenty-first century. If Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" explores the struggle of a Second World War veteran to adjust to comfortable, middle-class suburban

domesticity, then the texts in Part One ask what a veteran's experience may look like upon return to an insecure and uncomfortable domestic sphere. While the notion of a soldier's return to a fragmented home space is nothing new—the turmoil of the 60s made for a notoriously difficult transition for Vietnam veterans—the texts in Part One highlight the conditions of neoliberal precarity and militarisation informing the specificity of experience for the veteran returning to a post-9/11 consensus. *Cherry*, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* and *Preparation* each show their veteran protagonists returning to a domestic sphere in which they do not feel at home; but in contrast to "Soldier's Home," to use a paradigmatic example, the soldiers are rendered unexceptional in their sense of unease. From a Cleveland mired in opioid crisis, to the poverty-stricken New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina, to the underbelly of New York's undocumented shadow economy, everybody struggles in this new "homeland."

The sickness of the American domestic space thus complicates the traditional ideology of "separate spheres," or the idea that the military, represented in ideals of military masculinity, exists to protect and defend the sanctity of the feminine domestic sphere. The military masculinities depicted in *Cherry*, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* and *Preparation* suggest a sense of crisis in their failure to maintain the cohesion of the home. In *Cherry*'s case, the protagonist's insularity is refracted through conceptualising his sick body as "home," suggesting the fragmentation of social and community bonds in the domestic sphere. In *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* and *Preparation*, the veteran protagonists are unable to secure a future for their familial or romantic relationships. In this way, all three texts share in their anxieties about masculinity's role in contemporary domestic formations.

Race is an important contributing factor in the texts' articulations of masculine anxiety and the domestic sphere. As white men, Cherry and *Preparation*'s Skinner are abject aberrations in the home space, visible in their invisibility. In *Cherry* in particular, the marked male body can be read as

symptomatic of a sense of crisis for white masculinity, as the role of military masculinity becomes less clearly defined and occupies an uneasy position between the war and home spheres. On the other hand, by putting forward protagonists who do not enjoy the traditionally neutral hegemony of white masculinity, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* and *Preparation* interrogate questions of citizenship in the Homeland Security state. *Hold It 'Til It Hurts*' Achilles, a black man, and *Preparation*'s Zou Lei, a Muslim immigrant, come up against continual surveillance. The attention to alterity in these novels emphasises the militarisation of the home space and the infiltration of war into the home during the war on terror. Crucially, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* is exceptional in its critique of what "home" means for black America, suggesting that even before Hurricane Katrina, or 9/11 before that, "home" was never cohesive for black Americans. Illustrating black American men's subjection to historical surveillance, violence and neglect by the state, black mortality is expressed in *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* not as a shock event but as a slow drip that gains a confluence, although not an ending, in the human tragedy brought about by Hurricane Katrina. Whereas *Cherry* and to a lesser extent *Preparation* suggest anxiety over the positionality of white masculinity in the twenty-first century, *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* implies a sense of liberation and optimism in its desire to find new openings, arising from tragedy, for black masculinity in America.

Part One has considered how the fragility of the home space might reveal the redundancy of military masculinity's role as protector. But if military masculinity does not or cannot protect the home, then what is it for? As I have explored in this thesis' introduction, reading military masculinity as an expression of empire can help to shed light on how contemporary war stories perceive American military power in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the writers' choice to explore the war on terror via a veteran in the home space, and not via a soldier at war, is revealing for how intimately American empire is intertwined with notions of the home. We end these three texts with the sense that both the home space and

conventional conceptions of military masculinity are fragile and precarious, and with this comes a sense of uncertainty around the future shape and purpose of American power both as it exists abroad and as it is filtered through the structures of American domestic society. *Preparation for the Next Life* suggests this in the strongest terms, ending as it does in Arizona. In this ending Skinner, the soldier, has died—and Zou Lei meets an ageing cowboy who seems out of place and out of time in the modern world. Zou Lei's move out west, reminiscent of the first settler colonial movements in America, echoes the foundations of American empire. As I explore in more detail in the following chapters, the mythology of the frontier plays a significant role in American war stories both past and present. But in the contemporary moment, with the rapid advance of military technologies, the difference between war and home becomes more and more unclear. The task of war storytelling, then, is to grapple with the role of the conventional soldier/cowboy in this ever-changing and uncertain space.

Part Two
Visions of Drones and Domesticity

A familiar character to appear in the aftermath of several twenty-first century American crises, including 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and Iraq, was the PackBot. Developed by the robotics company iRobot on a DARPA contract in the late 1990s, the PackBot began as a small, unmanned machine with high mobility, able to clear debris from war-zones and defuse explosives while its operators stood at a safer distance (Buchanan). Upon its release, Colin Angle, the Co-Founder and CEO of iRobot, spoke about the PackBot's versatility, signalling the company's intention to "target new markets such as law enforcement, homeland security, commercial cleaning and elder care" (iRobot). Indeed the company had already begun orienting itself towards such markets—almost concurrently with the PackBot, in 2002, it launched the hugely popular Roomba: a hands-free, ground-level vacuum cleaner that used sensors to detect walls and corners (Solomon).

Peter Singer notes what a curious pair the Roomba and PackBot made, marking iRobot as "the only company that sells at both Pentagon trade shows and Linens 'n' Things" (24). How strange that a company's flagship innovations in robotics would be used in such disparate settings as the war and the home. But is there really such an incongruity between these spaces? As Rachele Dini explains, appliance manufacturers had had a significant role in supplying munitions during the Second World War, and their aggressive promotion of these products together, in response to Dwight Eisenhower's military budget cuts, is a striking example of the emergent military-industrial-complex (30). The Roomba, too, was developed from the military robot Fetch, which was used to "clean" cluster bomblets from airfields (Singer 22). Exemplified by the PackBot and the Roomba, the application of military technology to domestic life reveals a stark and complex entanglement between the war and the home. And as iRobot's success demonstrates, this is a lucrative relationship: writing in 2009, Singer notes the company's myriad new

"cleaning" machines as indicative of its motivation "to advance the frontier of cleaning floors and fighting wars" (24).

There is more to this notion than what is attributed to it by Singer. As I explore throughout Part Two, American culture constantly makes reference to the mythology of the frontier, conceptualising a mutually constitutive relationship between war and home. In the twenty-first century, the insertion of technology into this relationship at once reveals the intimacy of the military and the domestic, and provokes a re-calibration: if technology can re-orient our human ability to see, move, care and kill, then how does it re-orient the myths and narratives through which these actions gain meaning?

Part Two follows this line of questioning along the US military drone campaign that began in the early 2000s and increased in momentum during the presidency of Barack Obama between 2008 and 2016. Drones, also known as "Unmanned Aerial Vehicles" or "Unmanned Ground Vehicles" are remote-controlled vehicles with no pilot onboard. While they nowadays have many civilian uses, they were originally developed for the military for surveillance and dropping missiles. Their terrestrial uses, in the form of machines such as the PackBot, are to defuse bombs and clean up debris. In popular culture, drones are most commonly associated with the remote aircraft piloted by the US military from the Creech airbase in Nevada. From this airbase, situated in the Western American desert, trained Air Force drone pilots sit in cubicles in long shifts, operating drones thousands of miles away in surveillance missions that can accrue up to several hundred hours.

Variations of remote-controlled aircraft have been used for surveillance since the First World War, but it wasn't until 2001, in the aftermath of 9/11, that drones were armed with missiles for the first time (Cole et al.). In 2002, the first "Hellfire" mission deployed and killed a man who was erroneously identified as Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan (Cole et al.; Burns). By 2023, drones were being

used by a range of belligerent forces including by Ukraine and Russia, Israel in Gaza, and by Turkey in Northern Syria. For the US, however, remotely piloted warfare remains an operation that focuses largely on the Middle East as part of the long war on terror. The US drone wars, having begun in Afghanistan in 2001, increased in intensity under Barack Obama's presidency. This was partly due to advances in the technology, but notably also due to Obama's transition from Bush's strategy of "shock and awe" to "precision" strikes against terrorist cells (Peron 83, 81). Drones were used by the US in active battlefields such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, but they also continue to be used to target terror cells in countries such as Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia where the US is not officially at war. The Bureau for Investigative Journalism estimates that Obama's drone campaign increased tenfold over that of Bush (Purkiss and Serle). The impact on civilians has been devastating: thousands of civilians are estimated to have been killed or wounded in the US' drone campaign from 2010 to 2020 (Amnesty International; Khan; Kreps et al.). The American government is evasive in its admission of civilian casualties, and its criteria for non-civilians are notoriously broad, with any male from the age of 16 counting as a terrorist suspect—so it is very difficult to ascertain a precise figure for civilian casualties of drone strikes (Fielding-Smith and Purkiss; Becker and Shane; Peron 86). Research conducted by the monitoring group *Airwars* in 2021 estimates civilian deaths from drones and air strikes could reach 48,308 (Piper and Dyke). Moreover, the drones' policing of the skies equates to what is effectively an open-air prison, and the psychological impact of living under constant surveillance and fear of attack remains to be fully understood (Wells; Shah et al.).

Grégoire Chamayou's influential *Drone Theory* (2015) is one of the first comprehensive philosophical texts to consider the technology, politics and ethics of drones in response to their proliferation during the war on terror. Chamayou notes that a core component of drone strategy is the attempt to eradicate reciprocity between the pilot and the target, which plays out both spatially and temporally:

The problem is that what we call "distance" covers several dimensions that are confused in our ordinary experience but which technologies both disaggregate and redistribute spatially. So it is now possible to be both close and distant, according to dimensions that are unequal and that combine a pragmatic co-presence. (116)

The United States' drone campaign enables American pilots to surveil targets thousands of miles away, for long periods of time. As Chamayou notes, this recalibrates the spatio-temporal dynamics of warfare, as the long distances between soldier and target are contrasted by a sense of intimacy permitted by the soldier's ability to see and "get acquainted with" his target through visual imaging technology. Nevertheless, this "intimacy" is asymmetrical: whereas the drone pilot spends long periods with his target, accompanying him in his home, his community and day-to-day life, the target has only a vague but pervasive sense of being watched by someone, somewhere. The pilot attends to his target in long shifts punctuated by breaks to spend at home with his family; the target's awareness of the drone's presence is ever-present and unescapable, penetrating work and home alike.

The advancement of "unmanned" aerial vehicles in the American military has undoubtedly challenged traditional notions of military masculinity. With the threat of physical danger to the troops eliminated, warfare becomes asymmetrical as on-the-ground combat is replaced by regimes of surveillance and execution from afar. If the masculine identity of the military is shaped by notions of strength, heroism and willingness to risk one's life for one's country, then drone pilots call into question this traditional conception of masculinity. The move from Air Force to so-called "chair force" reconceptualises fighting; a military comprised of exceptional warriors set apart from the civilian population becomes simply a subsection of society—an army of gamers called to take up duty in a cubicle in the middle of the American desert (Gusterson 200). Drone pilots have expressed similar anxieties about the status of their masculine identity in the face of proliferating drone warfare. "There is no valor in flying a remotely piloted aircraft" says former

fighter pilot Col. Luther Turner (Jaffe). Former US Army Officer and counterinsurgency specialist Andrew Exum opines, "there's something about pilotless drones that doesn't strike me as an honorable way of warfare" (Mayer). Drone pilot Brandon Bryant recalls a peer mocking that drone pilots would only earn a "Purple Heart" "for burning themselves on a Hot Pocket" (Power).[2] This scathing comment encapsulates much of the social criticism within the military towards drone piloting, and touches upon the geospatial logics of drone operation which bring the war into the boundaries of domestic space: drone pilots are seen to be lazy, ineffectual, and likened to basement-dwelling "incel" culture, suggesting a lack of virility and patriarchal unworthiness.

Alongside Chamayou, there is a significant interdisciplinary body of scholarship examining drones and their cultural representations. Beryl Pong identifies in response to Obama and the CIA's drone campaign "a first wave of drone scholarship, much of which is concerned with the aesthetics of the drone's-eye view in enmeshing vision with violence" (378). Further scholarship attends to the temporal and spatial logics of remote warfare (Gregory; Parks and Kaplan); affective responses to surveillance (Rhee); the queering and gendering process implicit in drone operation (Daggett; Bjerre "Unmanned?"; Manjikian); drone logics and the reconfiguration of economic systems (M. Richardson; Jackman and Brickell); and drone warfare's complication of the boundaries separating war and home (Stahl "What the Drone Saw"; Schnepf). While my work in Part Two touches upon all these areas of scholarship, I'm particularly interested in the latter idea of how the military and domestic space becomes expanded, contracted and re-imagined via the drone—and how, in turn, military masculinity sits among that configuration. Roger Stahl argues that the themes framing the new "optical universe" brought about by the drone are, dually, an "invitation, mediated through the entertainment industries, to interactively consume drone warfare" and the

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[2] The Purple Heart is a medal awarded by the US military to servicemembers who have died or been seriously injured in combat.

redefinition of "domestic space as a sphere of martial concern" ("What the Drone Saw" 660). Stahl thus echoes Dini in highlighting the consumer-capitalist dimension which renders palatable military modes of being for a broader civilian populace.

Amy Kaplan's theory of "Manifest Domesticity" asserts that the formation of American empire in the nineteenth century can be traced through the ideology of "separate spheres," of which the true separateness Kaplan contests, arguing that an orderly, contained and feminine domestic space sits just as centrally to empire-building as its unruly and violent masculine counterpart, the frontier (*Anarchy of Empire* 25). The ideological fortification of these mutually constitutive spaces is heavily racialised and relies on the dual production of whiteness and savagery in an alien Other. Kaplan explains:

> Not a retreat from the masculine sphere of empire building, domesticity both reenacts and conceals its origin in the violent appropriation of foreign land…"Manifest Domesticity" turns an imperial nation into a home by producing and colonizing specters of the foreign that lurk inside and outside its ever-shifting borders. (*Anarchy of Empire* 50)

Discourses of domesticity in the US create a slippage between home and nation, of which the boundaries are fluid and unstable, and whose cohesion relies on the production of foreignness both internally and exported across the world (*Anarchy of Empire* 26). Kaplan's work focuses on the American imperial wars of expansion in the late 1800s, although we can apply the logics of Manifest Domesticity to the interplay of war and home in contemporary culture.

For example, J.D. Schnepf develops Manifest Domesticity to consider the drone's role in the project of US imperialism by turning her analysis of the drone's gaze back within the borders of the nation-as-home. Schnepf analyses domestic aerial photography of wealthy white American women such as Martha Stewart, whose brands are built around conceptions of upper-class homeliness, elitism and

"imperialist nostalgia," reading these photographs "as promoting and enabling the perpetuation of drone warfare abroad" (272). Schnepf continues:

> The domestic drone is envisioned as a tool for the already privileged, an imaging system that reaffirms consumer choices and revises the scale on which one might control one's image and one's home. To make sense of this newfound access to an aerial point of view, the experience is equated with seeing like a sovereign, aligning the distant and more recent imperial pasts with the empire of the home. (283)

While Schnepf's commercial photographs reveal fantasies of upper-class sovereignty and control within the nation-as-home, I have so far identified in contemporary fiction a sense of *anxiety* over the cohesion of the American homeland during the war on terror. I continue this line of questioning into Part Two of this thesis, which considers the unsettling re-orientation of domestic space under the drone's gaze in the "live action" visual forms of film and theatre. As in photography, these visual media dramatise the modes of witnessing enacted through the drone, inviting the viewer to imagine their positionality between subject and object of imperial control.

This sense of between-ness emerges from the drone's capacity to blur the imagined distinction between war and home spaces, since the pilot is no longer required to travel thousands of miles away to a war zone; he commutes to and from his cubicle in the same way as any other worker. As one drone pilot, quoted in Chamayou, reports, "we were just permanently somewhere between war and peace" (120). The removal of the soldier from the zone of combat, coupled with the drone's militarisation of the home, forces a reconfiguration of gender roles which troubles the traditional structures undergirding the American war imaginary. In an analysis of three recent cinematic portrayals of drone operators, Thomas Ærvold Bjerre considers the reliance of such narratives on heavily gendered tropes, arguing that they "cannot escape constructing a heroic frame that activates, in different ways, old, gendered narratives of male chivalry and damsels in distress" (28). While I

agree with Bjerre's assessment that drone narratives place a particularly strong emphasis on gender, I do not think it is quite as straightforward as relying on "regressive narratives" to tell the story (39). During the next three chapters I dig deeper into the mythological structures of such "heroic" narratives, firstly to reveal how the traditional heroic frame is complicated by the insertion of drone technology. Further, I argue that the invocation of such heroic narratives does not suggest a reliance on outdated modes of war storytelling; rather these narratives form a crucial and consistent part of the war imaginary, with which drone narratives must contend when conceptualising a future of technologised warfare.

In Part Two, then, I consider how drone warfare complicates the gendered conventions of war storytelling, looking to the construction and deconstruction of embodied masculinity; the reconfiguration of domestic space and time; and the drone's disruption of the mythologies that sit at the heart of American cultures of war and territorial conquest. Attending to three visual representations of drone warfare, I consider how contemporary war stories contend with the revolution in war-making brought about by the drone, asking what becomes of embodied military masculinity in an age during which the tasks of fighting and killing are outsourced to machines.

Chapter four discusses George Brant's one-woman play *Grounded* (2013), which complicates the relation between soldier and technology by centring a female pilot who transfers from planes to drones after becoming a mother. Through the figure of the female pilot, masculinity is legible in *Grounded* both as an embodied experience and an abstracted process of authority, hegemony and imperial expansion. Dwelling upon this tension, I consider in chapter four how and why *Grounded* places its primary focus on the impact of drone logics within the domestic borders of the US. The play narrates the advance of drone technology and networked surveillance, generating a muscular and masculinised vision of state control in which all human activity, from caring to killing, is subsumed into the

category of work. Through its manipulation of gendered labour through the figure of the female drone pilot, the play expresses deep anxiety over the future of human agency under late capitalism and the expansion of networked surveillance.

While *Grounded* uses gender to anticipate the future of the Western subject under drones, Andrew Niccol's film *Good Kill* (2014) addresses the anxieties of specifically masculine identity that accompany the advancement of drone warfare. In chapter five I explore how *Good Kill* expresses this anxiety through the masculine body's relation to drone technology, as the diminishment of agency effected by drone technology is measured through the extent of the soldier's control over domestic space and reproductive time. Looking specifically at the drone's mediation of American and Afghan domestic space, I contend that the film's overarching message is one of control: of the masculine imperative to claim control not only over one's own body and self, but over the spatial, temporal and technological terrains in one's occupation.

In contrast to *Good Kill* and *Grounded,* Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar-winning film *The Hurt Locker* (2008) invokes drone technology in a supporting role to the protagonist and his bomb disposal squad, thus re-articulating masculine competence and control. The drone in *The Hurt Locker* is terrestrial, rather than aerial, and is used to aid the men in their highly dangerous work. I contend that the choice to include this remotely-piloted vehicle in the narrative establishes the relationship between man and technology as akin to that between a hero and his sidekick, bringing the technology back within the control of the soldier. With this relationship in mind, in chapter six I explore *The Hurt Locker*'s play with genre, especially the western and the space opera, to centre its protagonist as a timeless storybook hero. In contrast to *Good Kill* and *Grounded*, *The Hurt Locker*'s play with generic motifs maintains an ideological separation of war and home spaces, with the effect of re-masculinising the American soldier in the age of remote warfare.

As I have suggested towards the end of Part One, aspects of national myth are enfolded into war storytelling to give spiritual and ideological meaning to histories of expansion, intervention and conquest. Richard Slotkin's detailed discussion of the mechanics of American mythmaking identifies the mythology of westward expansion, or the frontier, at the heart of this violent national lore. Slotkin explains that "the Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*" (12). By entering, assimilating and eventually conquering the wilderness, the frontiersman embodies a notably American form of heroism borne from violence.

Heroes emerge, Slotkin argues, when "history is translated into myth [and] the complexities of social and historical experiences are simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals" (13). The hero of the frontier is distilled into cultural and political discourses traversing modern American history, and this is especially evident in the western iconography which began to emerge in war reporting and representation after 9/11 (Ferguson 480; Kolbusch; White 4). However, crucial to this mythology is that the hero crosses physical and spiritual borders. As Slotkin notes:

> The moral landscape of the Frontier Myth is divided by significant borders, of which the wilderness/civilization, Indian/White border is the most basic…Because the border between savagery and civilization runs through their moral center, the Indian wars are, for these heroes, a spiritual or psychological struggle which they win by learning to suppress the savage or "dark" side of their own human nature. (14)

Kaplan demonstrates that the border between war and home is also central to this mythmaking; the discursive borders of domesticity function as a buttress to the violence of the frontier, positioning the home as a space of peace and composure far away from the war, all the while concealing the imperial violence of its origins

(50). As the mythology goes, the hero of the frontier confronts the savagery of the war to protect the sanctity of the home.

In the present day, I am interested in what happens to this mythology when such borders are collapsed and re-configured by drone technology. Chamayou asserts that:

> Men at war need to forge for themselves a special moral world in which, unlike in the civilian world, killing is a virtue, not something prohibited. There is always a latent contradiction between these normative regimes, but in the case of drone operators it is rendered manifest and permanent as a result of the superimposition of two worlds separated on every count. (121)

Chamayou here is gesturing to mythology, and while we might apply his observation universally, it is particularly pertinent to the meaning ascribed to American war-making. As Kaplan demonstrates and as I have set out to explore, the war and home spaces are, and always have been, intimately interlinked. However, as Chamayou suggests, the civilian world and the "special moral world" in war are separated through deeply rooted mythologies and cultural mores—what I have discussed in this thesis' introduction as the war imaginary. When killing by drone becomes akin to a 9-5 job on home soil, the military and civilian worlds violently collide, and the war imaginary is disturbed: not only is there no longer a stark distinction between "over there" and "over here," but those who kill in the name of "regeneration through violence" do so from a position of safety. The agent of such violence becomes a machine.

The task of war representation, then, is to imagine how heroism can be embodied amidst such a complex ethical-technological landscape. If we read military masculinity as an expression of empire—as an agent of righteous and regenerative imperial violence—then how does contemporary war storytelling conceptualise American hegemony at a time when embodied military masculinity stands face-to-face with obsolescence? As Part Two suggests, the gradual erasure

of an identifiable and embodied masculine hero to deliver tales of imperial conquest causes the fabric of mythology to unravel. What are left are the naked structures of an increasingly militarised world, in which networked violence, surveillance and control are meted out at war and home alike.

IV. Networked Masculinities and Surveillance in *Grounded*

In March 2021, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Fox News pundit Tucker Carlson made headlines when he claimed that recent efforts to retain female troops made a "mockery" of the US military. Speaking over an image of a pregnant pilot wearing a maternity flight suit and a Covid face mask, Carlson decried that "while China's military becomes more masculine…our military needs to become, as Joe Biden says, more feminine" (Ryan). Carlson's comments couch Western concern over China's military, economic and cultural expansion in gendered terms, imagining the masculinisation of the traditionally feminine-coded Asian body. Together with the Covid mask, the source and symbol of many anti-Chinese conspiracy theories and much anti-Asian hate during the pandemic, Carlson's juxtaposition of the pregnant American pilot and a masculinised Chinese military envisions the coming-to-life of the racist stereotype of an alien, unindividuated Asian populace. One year later, in February 2022, Carlson resuscitated his anxieties over women's inclusion in the military in relation to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The point of promoting pregnancy flight suits, he said, "was not to be inclusive but to degrade and humiliate the United States military" (Media Matters). For Carlson, the pregnant pilot is metonymic for a waning imperial reach. While sensitive to the rapidly shifting form and future of American empire, he conflates hegemony and embodied masculinity; women, especially pregnant women, bring the private, domestic sphere into matters of war, portending America's end.

It is tempting to dismiss comments like Carlson's; he is, after all, a tabloid commentator whose job it is to sensationalise the news. But not only do Carlson's comments reveal a deeply-held belief in the righteousness of American hegemony—they also reveal a lamentation for identifiable embodied masculine heroes to deliver and maintain this hegemony.[3] Without these, it would seem, the

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[3] Carlson has more directly articulated his belief in the righteousness of American hegemony, and his anxiety over its perceived vulnerability, in an article for Fox News dated March 23, 2023. He

future of America is unthinkable. It is with this idea in mind that this chapter explores how narrative responds to an age where storybook masculine heroes and even human faces are gradually being taken out of the picture of war. In many ways a riposte to views like Carlson's, George Brant's play *Grounded* (2013) is a one-woman monologue which interrogates the US drone campaign from the perspective of a female Air Force pilot. Written a decade before the global shifts in military power that would define the 2020s, *Grounded* is concerned by the drone wars that would increase in scale and intensity under Barack Obama's premiership. The play is confident in its construction of female masculinity, but it also tracks the dissolution of embodied masculine power against the technological, networked structures of drone warfare. *Grounded* imagines new incarnations of empire and shifting frontier spaces for military and economic conquest, but in its exploration of drone warfare and networked power, it imagines the erasure of the human agent in the delivery of this vision.

Dramatists have found enduring relevance for *Grounded* in this age of the long war on terror; the play has been staged fairly regularly since 2012 at theatres across the US and also in Edinburgh, London and Australia, to largely positive reviews. Most notably, a 2015 production at the Public Theater in New York was directed by Julie Taymour and starred Anne Hathaway as the protagonist pilot. Alexis Soloski's review of this production noted that Hathaway "wouldn't be the first actor you'd think to cast in such a macho role, and she knows it." But this casting is effective on many levels, not least because the positioning of a generally glamorous, feminine actor in the role works to highlight the play's construction of

wrote, "[y]esterday, China's President Xi turned up in Moscow to announce a new partnership with Russia…Now, what change was Xi talking about? Well, the end of American global hegemony, the end of the US dollar as the world's reserve currency for 100 years, he got it right. Since the close of the First World War, the United States has been the preeminent nation on Earth…We were the most powerful country. It was the American era. That era just ended a little over two years into Joe Biden's presidency, but amazingly, no one in this country seemed to notice that it happened" ("The Great Global Reshuffling").

female masculinity, following which the subject's erasure under drone technology becomes gradually and strikingly clear.

"The Pilot," as she is known, must quit her job when she falls pregnant and takes a period of maternity leave. When she returns she is removed from her old role flying planes, with the implication being this role has become obsolete, and she is tasked instead with operating unmanned aerial vehicles from the Creech Air Base in Nevada. The uninterrupted, one-hour monologue enables an audience to get intimately acquainted with the Pilot in all her interiority, and we witness her unravel as she struggles to manage life as a mom and a wife, the ethical dilemmas of the job, and the long hours of mundane shift work. *Grounded* leads with the flight suit as metonymic of military masculinity and power. The play begins with the stage directions: "[l]ights rise on THE PILOT, a woman dressed in an Air Force flight suit" (Brant 21). She begins,

> I never wanted to take it off
> I had earned this…
> This was who I was now who I'd become through sweat and brains and guts.
> (Brant 21)

Illuminated in stark and powerful lighting, the Pilot commandeers the stage and projects masculine authority outwards to the audience. The play's construction of gender here reveals how, in line with Jack Halberstam's theory of female masculinity, masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (2). The play's opening lines untether masculinity from the sexed body by conveying masculinity as a fluid, abstract value that can be both "earned" and affirmed in claiming one's embodiment via the de-gendered characteristics of "sweat, brains and guts" (Brant 21).

Under the conditions brought about by technologised war, the fluidity of masculinity in *Grounded* reads as what Robin Truth Goodman names as a "denial of gender" in women's combat narratives. Goodman argues:

> Women in combat narratives rely on a denial of gender—a statement about why gender does not matter in the business of war, why it no longer needs to be considered in relation to care—in the name of the body's abilities to overcome adversity, threat, and dissipation through technological enhancement. This claim of the body's merger with technology offsets expectations of work based on improving the human condition through effort, by reconceiving the protective function of civil society as technological management rather than as a response to human need. (26)

Goodman's aim is not to advocate for the maintenance of strictly gendered spheres between war and home, but rather to highlight how working time is reconceptualised in liberal understandings of women in combat. The fusion of embodiment with technology in many contemporary women's war narratives does not render a vision of democratised, progressive war delivered by women; instead, it highlights the ways in which the work of care and the work of violence become blurred and subsumed into neoliberal economic and temporal structures. Similarly, in *Grounded*, war and domesticity become legible as work through the shifting positions of the female pilot and her husband as they move between the spheres of caring and violence. I argue during this chapter that *Grounded*'s play with gender roles is revealing for the narrative's imbrication of military and domestic work, and together this foregrounds the dehumanisation of the worker under the increasingly entrenched structures of surveillance and network power portended by drone warfare in late capitalism. In its focus on the female drone pilot, *Grounded* brings to light a shift in how imaginaries of embodied masculinity intersect with those of American hegemony; but counter to the fears of pundits like Tucker Carlson, the play locates this shift not in the female body but in an ever-expanding military-technological horizon.

After spotlighting the flight suit, *Grounded*'s first few lines continue to establish the Pilot as a masculine authority figure:

It's more

It's the respect

It's the danger

It's

It's more

It's

You are the blue

You are alone in the vastness and you are the blue

Astronauts

They have eternity

But I have color

I have blue. (Brant 21)

The Pilot's initial inability to put into words her command of the sky suggests the expanse of space at her mercy. She grasps at commonplace signifiers associated with military masculinity like "respect" and "danger" until she captures the feeling in the transition from the indeterminate pronoun "it" to the determinate, second person "you," inviting the civilian audience to imagine themselves with that power at the same time as enforcing her exceptionalism. These opening lines position the Pilot in and metonymically as her environment. They therefore locate her there temporally as much as they do spatially, suggesting the fighter pilot as an enduring heroic figure. Ironically, her attribution of the "astronaut" with "eternity" reminds us that the astronaut is very much contained within a particular space and time in the twentieth century. At this point in the play, it is the fighter pilot who maintains an enduring legacy from the past to the present. Even more ironically, we know that this figure will also fall into obsolescence; the pilot will become another storybook masculine figure that will struggle to adapt to the changing military-economic demands of the present.

Following a fling while on leave, the Pilot falls pregnant and marries, and the play conforms to a liberal ideal of equality by exchanging the gender roles between herself and her husband, as he takes care of her daughter while she

becomes the family breadwinner. Thus her husband, Eric, undertakes care work while the Pilot works in the sphere of violence. When the Pilot returns to work, though, she finds that she is no longer needed as a fighter pilot, and she is disappointed to be tasked with becoming a member of the "Chair Force" operating drones from a small cubicle in the desert (Brant 30). All of a sudden the "respect," the "danger" and the freedom of roaming the skies come under threat, as the Pilot is recruited into long and boring shifts working from a position of relative captivity, at home in the US.

Noting that "the woman's war narrative understands the war as a continuation of everyday practice instead of as a time of exception," Goodman marks the contemporary narrative shift from war as adventure to war as a job (27–8). Goodman locates this shift within the inclusion of female bodies into war—a result of the neoliberal expansion of all human activity into work, and more specifically the subsumption of caring into the realm of militarised work: "women's violence became more imaginable as women's war identities were made more proximate to market appropriations, calculations, technology proxies, and abstract circuits of exchange" (27, 7). In *Grounded,* this plays out as repetitive circuits between the spaces designated as war and home. The play traces the Pilot's shift patterns, transitioning each day from the war to home spaces where her family waits for her:

> Home will be training too
> Getting used to the routine
> Driving to war likes it's shift work
> Like I'm punching the clock
> Used to transition home once a year
> Now it'll be once a day. (Brant 36)

The spaces constructed in *Grounded* reflect the stripping back of the state under neoliberalism, which simultaneously entails the destruction of public space and the maintenance and expansion of state violence and control through the military and

the police. Just as military action gets treated as work, so do work and domestic life become militarised. For the Pilot, home becomes "training," and war becomes "shift work." In disrupting what Cara Dagett calls the "home-combat" and "distance-intimacy" axes, drone warfare forces the military and civilian spheres to converge, and military, civilian and domestic labour bleed together (365).

In the same way that the Pilot's military work is brought home, so is Eric's work militarised. He finds a job working shifts as a croupier at a nearby casino in Las Vegas, acting as an eye on the punters with the casino CCTV, his own "eye in the sky," watching his every move (Brant 44). Eric's job is to not "lose too much for the Man" (Brant 44). In the casino, then, "the Man" as a familiar term for faceless capitalism becomes literalised and, in tandem with the Pilot's surveillance work, suggests the masculinisation of surveillance technology. Waking up at 2am to leave for work every day, "without [the Pilot] ever knowing," Eric's body becomes invisible as it is subsumed into the seemingly endless chain of technologised watching (Brant 45). The long and irregular hours that Eric works mirror his wife's work patterns, and the notoriously expansive and anonymous surveillance systems of the casino connect these modes of surveillance, from the casino to the drone base, to the rampant and unregulated accrual of capital.

Grounded foregrounds drone warfare as exemplary of militarised capitalist systems through which workers are dehumanised. Both the Pilot and Eric's shift patterns work in tandem, each following ritualised and repetitive circuits between home and work. The Pilot describes her end-of-day routine:

> Then I pull up and the door opens and the happy family greets their hero
> home from the war
> Every day
> Every day
> Every day they greet me home from the war. (Brant 51)

The monologue form means that the director and actor have control over the pace of this sequence—some may choose to stage it slowly, reflecting the dreariness of the routine, while others may choose to add pace to demonstrate the days becoming indistinguishable. Either way, the solitude of the speaker on stage conveys a sense of dissonance from the supposedly happy family scene, which renders the repetition of "every day" more mechanical and detached, and less "human."

The labour patterns exemplified by this sequence, and echoed in Eric's work, connect the shared care of their child with the authority and surveillance over either clientele of the casino or targets of the drone's gaze. Not only does this circuit collapse the "over there" of the war zone with the "over here" of the civilian sphere, it also locates the space of the home at the centre of this circuit, with its inhabitants looping out and back to participate in military or militarised work. Aside from the occasional anecdote from days gone by, we gain no sense during the play of a social life for the characters; they exist only in their fulfilment of their roles as, interchangeably, workers, carers, or consumers. Both male and female worker, regardless of the gendered roles they occupy, are rooted through a process of domestication that ties them to the home and removes any sense of freedom, texture or agency from their labour or activities outside the home. In this sense, the domestication of the Pilot reads as both feminisation and dehumanisation, as expressions of gender become integrated into the militarised technological structures of surveillance work.

This act of grounding or domestication of the Pilot seems to pose a threat to the adventure and heroism constitutive of the dominant conception of military masculinity. But as Amy Kaplan explains, the narrative and cultural construction of the domestic sphere has always been essential to the maintenance and expansion of empire, and we should not read the home as separate to these spaces of empire-building. Kaplan's theory of "Manifest Domesticity" suggests that the domestic sphere is a "mobile and often unstable discourse"; it relies on an expansion of

female influence under the social codes of domesticity, while simultaneously closing in on itself by constantly identifying an outside against which it must be defended (*Anarchy of Empire* 26).

While Kaplan's work focuses on the frontier in women's novels of the nineteenth century, Manifest Domesticity maps well onto modern conceptualisations of the frontier, such as the political-military space of the Middle East under the war on terror, and equally the newly emerging technological space in which drones and other surveillance apparatuses are developed. There is a moment in *Grounded* where the Pilot recalls entering a JC Penney changing room while on leave, where she notices a security camera. She quips:

> JC Penney or Afghanistan
> Everything is Witnessed. (Brant 48)

This passive grammatical turn removes an identifiable human subject from the surveillance process, instead implicating "everything" into an anonymous network and exchange of watching and being watched. After questioning this anonymity— who it is exactly on the other side of the camera—she breaks out of her usual short, sharp lines of speech and launches into an unhinged fantasy imagining that she is being watched by an outsourced surveillance company based in India:

> What if
> What if these Indians watching us eventually come here for a vacation but find themselves drawn to JC Penney they don't know why but they are and when they get there they go right past the sale racks right past the shoes they head straight to the changing room they don't know why they have nothing to change they walk in they close the door and they suddenly know why they've come and they wave they wave to all their friends back home and then they don't know why but they start to cry. (Brant 48–9)

Crucial to this fantasy is the identification of "Indians" as the outsider-other—a naming which converges those of Indian nationality who stereotypically perform low-paid and outsourced service work, and the Indigenous American who forms

the foundational threat to Manifest Destiny and American expansion; the outsider who is also already inside. The small changing room cubicle presents another claustrophobic interior in the civilian world to mirror the close confines of the drone base. While this space echoes the Pilot's paranoia and the closing-in of her psychic interiority, it also suggests a closing-in of the interior spaces the play designates as home. The changing-room cubicle as synecdoche of the American domestic sphere is atomised, intimate and sits at the intersection of consumerism and surveillance. The fantasy of "Indians" observing this interior defines a clear boundary between home and foreignness.

Focusing on its themes of visuality and surveillance, Inderpal Grewal reads *Grounded* as a call to resist empire "through visual witnessing and recognition of the insecurity produced within it" (362). Yet since it privileges the white female subject position, Grewal argues, the play is ultimately limited in its ability to critique the effects of drone violence. Connecting "the subjects of empire and its targets to produce an American liberal subject," the play produces a liberal politics that imagines resistance only when the drone's violence is brought "home" (348, 362). As part of her comparison of *Grounded* and Hari Kunzru's short story "Drone," which imagines a postcolonial South Asia where drones are used to surveil labour camps that enrich wealthy oligarchs, Grewal carves a clear distinction between the spaces of "postcolony" and "empire." The postcolonial, for Grewal, "concerns more than that which can be seen, since it is the scale of the widespread and dispersed violence of empire, capital, and postcolony that cannot be captured by the visual" (344, 362).

However, the US' potency as both a settler colony and heart of empire lies in its claim to also be a postcolony, following its declaration of independence from the British Empire in 1776 (Day 18; Young 20). As such, the US becomes slippery in its own self-definition, and collapses the distinction between postcolony and empire within its own borders—the outside is necessarily included within. In the

present day, the "frontier zones" that Grewal correctly identifies not only as America's warzones in the Middle East, but also as the regions of the global south co-opted into the service of military and surveillance capitalism, are not just "aligned" with the US through surveillance but are folded into its boundaries. The Pilot's fantasy of the Indian entering the cubicle and then reaching back out to India through the same vector of surveillance literalises this paradigm, imagining an inside and outside of national borders which are constantly in flux. As Kaplan notes, this is exemplified in the allocation of Indian territory as a domestic issue, attributing it as an "ambiguous liminal realm between the national and the foreign [which] places the foreign inside the geographic boundaries of the nation" (*Anarchy of Empire* 27). The movements that bring colonial violence "home" to empire are therefore paradoxical because such violence was always already home, and cannot be disentangled. The "widespread and dispersed violence of empire" meted out against "frontier zones" is dispersed not only spatially but temporally, as it is brought into the United States' post/settler colonial history (Grewal 362).

Further, the Indian's imagined movement is another example of a mindless, automated circuit oscillating between the frontier and the home. Echoing the Pilot's breakdown, the Indian's co-option into this circuit is a source of trauma, and the Pilot imagines the Indian to be just as helpless and nonagential a figure ("they don't know why") as herself in this process of border formation. The play thus imagines the boundaries of the domestic space as constituted by foreign spaces and actors. By conflating "Indian" in its double sense within an intimate domestic space, *Grounded* illuminates a network of imperial conquest and expansion through the co-ordinates set out by drone warfare, surveillance and neoliberal capitalism, and locates the female drone pilot firmly within this mobile and adaptable domestic space.

As Grewal notes, *Grounded* retains and indeed expands its definition of "frontier zones" to include both the warzones and neoliberalised outposts of the US'

imperial reach. Whereas the frontier of American lore would be tamed by the masculine hero, these new frontier spaces are occupied by hybrid digital technologies that enact surveillance and violence. The domestication of military work in *Grounded* thus reads as another iteration of empire building. Extending Kaplan's assertion that domesticity both divides the home from the masculine sphere and becomes the "engine of national expansion," all human bodies in *Grounded* come to fulfil domesticity, while conventional attributes of military masculinity such as power and agency are outsourced to machines. *Grounded* highlights, then, a chasm between masculinity as embodied experience and masculinity as disembodied ideology, and this is brought to light by the insertion of both the female body and of dispersed technological bodies and networks into the narrative.

Through its centring of drone warfare, *Grounded* sketches shifts and ruptures in empire, but the play ultimately avoids staking itself against war or even against drones; rather, it is a lamentation for the slow death of human agency in the information age. The Pilot's affective detachment from her labour and domestic routine suggests a sense of atomisation, which brings *Grounded*'s conceptualisation of work and domesticity in line with the precarity of the domestic United States that I have discussed in Part One of this thesis. If, as Ben Anderson argues, precarity means "not only that the present is saturated with a sort of restlessness, but also that the future is made uncertain and becomes difficult or impossible to predict," then the very repetition and predictability of the Pilot's work-home routine is contradicted by the long-term uncertainty of her value in work which is increasingly technologised (Anderson 129). As the narratives develops, the Pilot's authority is continually deferred and her personhood gradually diminished. The remainder of this chapter considers how *Grounded* posits an uncertain and precarious future for human agency in the age of drone warfare.

Towards the end of the play, as the long shift patterns start to take their psychological toll on the Pilot, she begins to confuse what she sees on the screen with her life at home. The play culminates with the Pilot being ordered to enact a strike on a target's house, despite the target's young daughter also being in the frame. The Pilot is unable to act, seeing her own daughter in the little girl:

> Her face
> I see it clearly…
> It's not his daughter its mine. (Brant 67)

This girl is the only identified Afghan in the play, and she is a source of empathy, but this only comes to be through an imagined relation to the Pilot—she can't be mourned as anyone else's daughter (or indeed as an autonomous individual). In this moment of (un)clarity, the Pilot acts against her orders and diverts the missile:

> I don't control the camera the camera is on Sam
> I don't control the camera
> But I control the plane. (Brant 68)

In this climactic act, the Pilot pushes against the limitations set on her during the play through her domestication and gradual loss of freedom. This is only momentary, though, as her act is quickly undermined: her commander instructs another drone, which had been hovering above the pilot as backup, to strike the target instead. He explains:

> We had our eye on you Major
> For weeks
> The warning signs
> Everything is Witnessed. (Brant 69)

The Pilot's omniscient eye, it turns out, was not so omniscient: the chain did not end with her, and it is revealed that she, too, was being watched. The Pilot's agency is dispersed and scattered across an anonymised and unanchorable network of

surveillance, what Nathan Hensley calls the "technic sensorium," where power and accountability are ultimately deferred (228).

The agential figure in this scene is not the human but the apparatus of watching; the technological eye is presented as pervasive and enduring. The Pilot does not "control the camera" but only the plane—she cannot control the seeing, only the doing. But the undermining of her act of resistance shows that the doing is ultimately impotent if it is not aligned with and embedded in the seeing. "Everything is Witnessed," capitalised, becomes the play's prophetic message, syntactically obfuscating the seeing subject through its passive tense.

The Pilot's gradual loss of freedom in her transition from fighter to drone pilot is crystallised at the end of the play in her condemnation to military prison. Captivity is presented as an emasculating condition: "[t]hey must have taken my suit," she declares (Brant 70). The dramatic medium is well-suited to capture the conflicting dynamics at work in this scene. *Grounded* has been staged in small, intimate venues, with the tightly-packed audience watching over the lone pilot. As a monologue, the Pilot's isolation is palpable, and strategic lighting can both expand and contract the space in which she stands. Elise Morrison's review of a Page 73 production of *Grounded* notes how the audience becomes implicated into the network of surveillance that the play sets out to trace; the theatre transforms from a site of leisurely spectatorship to a mechanism in an ever-proliferating arena of surveillance (168). The Pilot's "peace" and "power" afford her a level of respect and authority not seen since the beginning of the play, but the effect of her solitude, and the audience's mass surveillance over her, suggest impotence and vulnerability. This is heightened by the audible buzz of static, a reminder of what Hensley designates as the "technic," "networked" sensorium: the wires, bits, bytes and technological infrastructure that has usurped her (228, 244).

The Pilot's fourth-wall breaking final speech consolidates the relation of watcher and watched:

You who watch me

Who observe me watch my every move here and I know you watch me I know there is a camera for

Everything is Witnessed. (Brant 70)

In contrast to the play's opening lines, where the second person "you" generates a chasm of authority between the Pilot and the civilian audience, the use of the pronoun here is accusatory, revealing the Pilot's loss of agency and implicating the audience alongside her into an anonymous and universal network of watching. Yet into the network of seeing and doing, the Pilot introduces the act of knowing. If this part of the play acts as a means of consciousness-raising, we can question whether knowledge of the ubiquity of surveillance across the military and domestic spheres is enough to engender resistance. Certainly, for the victims of drone violence in the US' warzones, knowledge of the drone's presence in the sky adds another level of oppression to this type of warfare. The "Living Under Drones" report conducted by the International Human Rights Clinic at Stanford and NYU Law Schools contains testimonies from individuals whose lives are contained by the threat of drone attack, including one interviewee who comments on the psychological damage conferred by the drone's ubiquity: "God knows whether they'll strike us again or not. But they're always surveying us, they're always over us, and you never know when they're going to strike and attack" (81). The monopoly that drone technology can hold over life and death forges such a hugely asymmetrical relationship that it disrupts the most basic modes of being and knowing: affect, agency, subjectivity.

Similarly, the Pilot's knowing only emphasises the asymmetrical relation between herself and the network of surveillance and state violence that has her at mercy. All that can be known is the totalising future imposed through the surveillance state. She prophesies to the audience,

Know That You Are Not Safe

> Know That You Can Keep Me Here Forever You Can Bury Me in a Bunker
> of Grey But That Does Not Protect You For One Day it Will Be Your Turn
> Your Child's Turn and Yea Though You Mark Each and Every Door With
> Blood None of the Guilty Will Be Spared. (Brant 70)

Marking everyone as "The Guilty," the Pilot condemns the audience to a future pre-determined by the surveillance state. While not subject to the same annihilating violence, American citizenship becomes aligned with the citizens of US-designated warzones through the denial of the "right to the future tense, which accounts for the individual's ability to imagine, intend, promise and construct a future" (Zuboff 20).

The networked surveillance and violence in *Grounded* thus anticipates Shoshana Zuboff's thesis of "surveillance capitalism" and its related Instrumentarianism. "Instrumentarian Power," Zuboff writes, "knows and shapes human behaviour towards others' ends. Instead of armaments and armies, it works its will through the automated medium of an increasingly ubiquitous computational architecture of 'smart' networked devices, things, and spaces" (8). Feeding instrumentarian power back to its audience, *Grounded* connects the rampant tech/surveillance capitalism that has its roots in the domestic US with the networks of surveillance and violence that the US military enacts overseas. The Pilot's prophesies foreclose any future in which American citizens may be free from this system, and exports the play's picture of militarised domesticity outwards, consolidating the unwilling audience's complicity in modern networked power and violence. *Grounded*'s picture of the domestic American space is thus bound up in a fraught, precarious temporality in which the only known eventuality is technologised surveillance; the human's role within this network is as-of-yet undefined. Bringing *Grounded* in line with the precarious homeland sketched out in Part One, the human subject produced through this technologisation resonates with what Guy Standing notes as the "anomie, anger, anxiety and alienation" produced through precarity, and, as I add, the atomisation caused by neoliberalism's

fragmentation of the social contract—visualised in the Pilot's lone position on stage, all the way from the drone cubicle to the prison cell (33).

While *Grounded*'s vision of precarious humanity seems more geared towards the threat posed to American subjecthood over the precarity of life as object of the drone's gaze, the play's use of space challenges the audience to consider how the violence committed in their name intrudes into life at home. Grewal argues that the play's "limited vision of the technopolitics of violence of drone warfare" asks us to mourn only the Pilot and the girl, however I would suggest that by dramatising the collapse of war and home spaces, the play seems to more pointedly ask us to mourn the death of human agency in the age of surveillance capitalism. In its construction of interdependent military and domestic spheres, and the bleeding together of these spaces enacted through drone warfare, *Grounded* imagines the simultaneous domestication and militarisation of all work. We can read this process of domestication as a contemporary form of empire building, as new frontiers are identified, not only in the airspaces of Afghanistan but in the openings for global capital in South Asia and in the military-technological plane itself.

Grounded's focalisation of the construction, and gradual dissolution, of female masculinity foregrounds the detachment of masculinity from sexed bodies. In undoing the agency of the Pilot, the play attributes aspects of military masculinity like authority and control to the military-technological surveillance apparatus; military masculinity is imagined as a disembodied and abstracted process of authority, hegemony and imperial expansion. In his essay "Drone Form," which considers "the mediation of war in material form," Nathan Hensley discusses how both high and low cultural forms seek to replicate the structures of power particular to drone vision at the level of content and form (227). Whether middlebrow drone thriller or high-concept literary fiction, he argues that these forms are ultimately limited in giving shape to the non-reciprocity of the technologies that mediate lived experience in late capitalism, symbolised by the drone's gaze. Such forms are

stretched and "all but fallen apart in an effort to comprehend the coincidence of mediation and death in our contemporary moment" (245). *Grounded*'s monologue form, and its use of second person address, seek to remedy this by visualising the relation between watcher and watched. While the play is less attentive to the experience of living under drones abroad, it asks us to consider how the logics of empire building are brought home and shape subjectivity in the spaces that such warfare ostensibly sets out to protect.

Hensley argues that drones, as the essence or telos of empire's power to deliver putatively legitimate violence, "are a symptom and realization of empire's end" (229). While I am wary of diagnoses of the "end" or decline of the American empire, it is nevertheless undergoing a seismic historical and technological shift, to which narrative seems to be struggling to respond. Drone warfare portends a network of militarised work and surveillance in which all citizens are tasked to participate, and which disperses control and accountability for violence and extraction across a seemingly infinite chain of power. In its accounting for this, *Grounded* imagines hegemony and empire in different incarnations. Constantly projecting an outside which must be tamed in service of the domestic sphere, *Grounded* remains attached, as a war story, to the mythology of the frontier. However, it is unable to ascribe either a tangible villain or conquering hero to this narrative. Instead, the play laments the fading away of the human upon an unthinkable techno-military horizon. Written just after the US' withdrawal from Iraq and on the cusp of its proliferating drone campaign, *Grounded* appeared at an uncertain juncture for a shifting and possibly fragmenting American empire. This notwithstanding, the play seems to suggest that, to borrow from Jameson, it is easier to imagine the end of the human than it is to imagine the end of American hegemony.

V. "Sorry the house looks like a bomb hit it": Drones and the Domestic in *Good Kill*

The figure of the female pilot is a useful place to start when thinking about how gender intersects with drone technology. In *Grounded*'s Pilot, we see how masculine values are detached from sexed bodies; drone technology intervenes in this relation to absorb the masculine attributes of agency and control. This is more clearly visible when the subject is female-bodied, but it also means that *Grounded* spends a lot of time setting up its drone-human relation by insisting upon the masculinity of its Pilot through exploring and subverting her position within and against the home. *Grounded* is unusual in its figuration of a female pilot; the majority of drone narratives focalise male-bodied masculine figures, such as the focus of this chapter, Andrew Niccol's film *Good Kill* (2014). Embodying a more traditional patriarchal masculinity, the male drone pilot in this film gives us a clearer idea of how intertwined military masculinity is with notions of control. In contrast to *Grounded*'s monologue, the visuality of the cinema form means that we can see, via the drone view, how such masculine control extends past the boundaries of the home and homeland, and into the foreign territories subject to the drone gaze. In this way, the film gives us a clearer sense of the gendered nature of the technological infrastructure maintaining American empire, enabling us to think beyond the dual relationship of pilot and drone articulated in *Grounded*, and towards how the objects of the drone's gaze are triangulated within this relationship.

Good Kill's protagonist, Major Thomas Egan (Ethan Hawke), is an ex-fighter pilot turned Reaper drone operator, working from a cubicle in the Nevada desert. The film emphasises Egan's feelings of alienation and emasculation by the drone technology, which accelerates when the CIA takes over control of the command from the Air Force. Known only as "Langley," after the CIA base in Virginia, a disembodied voice emanating from the control panel orders Egan to engage in increasingly unethical attacks in countries against which the USA is not

officially at war. The diminishment of personal agency effected by Langley takes its toll; in a manner very similar to the undoing of *Grounded*'s Pilot, Egan loses control of his body, psyche, family and career. The film's overarching message is one of control—but whereas *Grounded* surrenders to what it envisions as an inevitable ascension of control via technologised mass-surveillance, *Good Kill*'s anti-hero story emphasises the masculine imperative to claim and re-claim control not only over one's own body and self, but over the spatial, temporal and technological terrains in one's occupation.

This chapter explores how *Good Kill* positions the masculine body in relation to drone technology, considering how this relationship is measured through the extent of the soldier's control over space and time, and specifically domestic space and reproductive time. By featuring an ageing ex-fighter pilot as its protagonist, the film foregrounds a conflict between a traditional, embodied warrior masculinity and a disembodied, de-centred drone masculinity. This central conflict concerns questions of surveillance and ownership of domestic space, reflected in the white American and Muslim Afghan families between which the soldier splits his attention. I suggest that by visibly opposing the white American and Afghan Muslim family, *Good Kill* sets up a biopolitical-necropolitical paradigm in which domestic space, and within it reproductive time, are mediated by the drone. Whereas *Grounded* imagines the domestication and loss of agency of all human actors in the drone age, *Good Kill* sustains a logic whereby the agential, masculine identity of the soldier, whether in its traditional or technologised forms, is contingent on the ability to control, surveil and circumscribe domestic space and time.

Roger Stahl considers the paradoxical presence/absence of the drone through the concept of "drone vision," which, he argues, "represents a special kind of looking, one that is able to project a surveillant gaze while conspicuously prohibiting its own exposure…Drone vision, framed in this way, represents a

fleeting privilege or an accidental keyhole view reinforcing the foundational assumption that power is opaque" ("What the Drone Saw" 663–4). The perspective offered by drones, he argues, "offers an invitation, mediated through the entertainment industries, to interactively consume drone warfare" and redefines "domestic space as a sphere of martial concern" ("What the Drone Saw" 660). Developing my argument from the previous chapter on *Grounded*, this chapter seeks to expand upon Stahl's observations by locating domestic space at the heart of the narrative. As Stahl and other critics such as Daggett and Miller have noted, narratives featuring drones pay great attention to the home lives of the pilots—they are often depicted leaving the air base to engage in familiar domestic tasks like meeting their wives at home, picking their children up from football or manning a barbecue. One of the key reasons for this, according to Stahl, is to play out "the logic of the security state by applying the contours of the battlefield to everyday existence" ("What the Drone Saw" 671). In this chapter, I elaborate upon Stahl's argument not only by elucidating the drone pilot's position in and against American domestic space, but by paying equal attention to an area which receives less critical attention in analyses of American drone narratives, that is the pilot's position in relation to the Afghan domestic space subject to his gaze.

As we saw in *Grounded*, there is a tendency in some scholarship and culture to focus on the gendering processes that drones exert on the operator, rather than examining their location amidst globalised and militarised networks of power between the US and the rest of the world. For example, Cara Dagett begins her article "Drone Disorientations" by stating that drones "queer the experience of killing in war" (362). Her argument is that the drone's deviation from typical conceptions of warfare, which are oriented along axes of what she calls "home-combat" and "distance-intimacy," provide a site for queer politics by challenging typical notions of hyper-militarised masculinity (Dagett 363). While my analysis in this chapter (and throughout this thesis) agrees that weapons technology

exacerbates the confounding of war and home spaces, and that this provokes a shift in how military masculinity is represented, I take issue with Dagett's framing of her essay as one which questions the queerness of the "experience of killing" in war. Provocative as this wording is, it is the "experience" of killing that interests me here; does a queer experience of killing necessitate a queer experience of dying? Dagett's essay elides this question, preferring to focus on the experience of the pilot. Further, the essay is emphatic that the queer disorientations generated through drone warfare contain the potential for new "reorientations," "paths" and "openings," without suggesting what they might look like or where they might lead (363, 374). For all its provocations, Dagett's vagueness suggests a liberal instinct similar to that which Inderpal Grewal identifies in *Grounded*, imagining resistance only when the politics of the drone are brought home and accommodated through domestic modes of thought.

In this chapter, I'm just as interested in how the soldier experiences his own sense of masculinity as I am in how constructions of military masculinity are turned outwards and exported across the globe as tools of imperialism. That is, drone technology may certainly represent a shift in the ways its operators are gendered, and it may also mark a departure or evolution in the aesthetics of military masculinity. Nevertheless, the impact upon the communities living under the drone's surveillance does not change depending on the gender of the individual in the driver's seat. There is a significant body of work from global and postcolonial writers attending to the experience of living and dying under drones, but it is essential, too, that a feminist analysis of drone warfare and its representations in American culture pay due attention to the impact of drone technology on its targets, as well as the gendering processes involved in the drone controls themselves. In this chapter, then, I aim to bring into focus how the changing masculinity of the individual soldier through drone warfare is triangulated in relation to the biopolitical and necropolitical structures sustaining contemporary empire.

Speaking to an encroaching sense of the obsolescence of masculine heroes in war, *Good Kill* emphasises the anxieties of masculine identity accompanying the advancement of drone technology. Its protagonist, Egan, is an ex-Air Force fighter pilot who has completed six tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and has been stationed as a drone pilot at Creech Air Base for three. Played by Ethan Hawke, Egan carries with him the air of an ageing heartthrob: in old-school aviator sunglasses framed by furrowed brow and crow's feet, he could be an older, alienated Maverick, out of place and out of time in a new era of remote piloting, so-called surgical strikes and disembodied combat. The Air Force is traditionally high-ranking in the military social hierarchy and roles are highly coveted due to the large amount of time and resource it takes to train pilots, as well as the physical and emotional strength and technical dexterity required to succeed in the role. Stoic and anchored by a sense of his own morality, Egan embodies such traditional heroism and rugged individualism attached to popular culture depictions of the fighter pilot. He indulges in long daydreams of being back in the air, conveyed through panning shots of the expansive desert sky. In his daydreams, his body fits naturally among the wires and controls of the pilot hatch. In his jet, he spirals and dives in intricate patterns, claiming a cyborgian ownership of the sky.

Grace Miller notes that *Good Kill* is careful to show that, in contrast to his daydreams, Egan's new role in drone operation is a process of disembodiment and alienation from combat (11). The shots of Egan piloting his drone switch rapidly between extreme close-ups of his eyes, mouth and fingers—and the drone view over the target territory, complete with crosshairs and zoom. We see either the body or the technology, but never both simultaneously, through a split screen; the effect is to separate Egan's body from the technology which executes his task. Miller suggests that this creates "a sense of complete disembodiment that problematizes the importance of the body in the selfhood of the warrior" (2). Indeed, Egan's sense of himself gradually disintegrates throughout the film as he becomes increasingly

alienated from his labour. Traditional masculine social codes disintegrate around him—best exemplified in his new sensor operator Vera Suarez (Zoë Kravitz), a notably young woman of colour, and the sea of young new recruits selected not for their strength or resolve but for their gaming aptitude. In comparison, Egan's masculinity—marked by his aviators and old leather flight jacket ("is that real?" questions a bemused store clerk)—seems a relic of the past. Moral codes associated with "just war" also disintegrate, as authority over Egan's missions is handed over to an anonymous source whose orders become increasingly dubious.

The anonymous and disembodied voice that claims authority over Egan's missions belongs to a CIA operative, and the film is emphatic in differentiating the CIA from the Air Force along lines of morality. The film goes so far as to suggest that the drone war is righteous insofar as it is conducted by the Air Force. Lieutenant Colonel Jack Johns (Bruce Greenwood)—another representative of the "old" military—apologetically informs his crew of the new MO, led by "Langley," to strike targets based on "patterns of behaviour," marking a departure from the character-based target assessments formerly employed by the Force. Chamayou discusses this process as creating a "cartography" or "archive" of lives:

> Because this model of information is predicated on an analysis of behaviour patterns rather than the recognition of nominal identities, it claims to be able, paradoxically, to "identify" individuals who remain anonymous—in other words, to describe them by behaviour that reflects a particular profile. (42)

In addition to the racist logics that underpin this profiling, the reliance on behaviour patterns to inform strikes situates drone machinery in a future tense. In *Good Kill*, the two schools of masculinity represented in Egan and in Langley are thus drawn along temporal lines—whereas Egan and his commander are relics of a traditional past, Langley and the new breed of drone pilot operate in the future anterior, working on the algorithmic assumption that a target will have passed a certain place,

or will have met a certain person, in the trajectory of their behaviour that ends with their death by drone strike.

Whereas traditional military masculinity is respectful of hierarchy, drone masculinity is de-centred. Power is anonymised and scattered across spatial co-ordinates; for example, the use of the place name "Langley" locates the drone infrastructure in a geographical rather than human setting, and it is unclear how many individuals occupy the identity. Similarly, the newly recruited drone pilots are firstly pictured in collective view as they are inducted by Lt. Col. Johns before being sent to their cubicles. The viewer doesn't see them again—we assume they each take up their respective bunker in the air base, dispersed and neatly organised to carry out their specific missions. These optics echo Obama's insistence that drone campaigns do not constitute war but are instead "a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America." The drone war's dispersal and compartmentalisation of the collective military body individuate the warfare and scatter the strict hierarchy upon which militaries are traditionally structured.

In this way, the drone apparatus seems to be the logical evolution of a neoliberalised military. The labour of the drone pilot is compartmentalised and alienating; Peter Asaro refers to the organisation and management of this particular type of labour of surveillance and attack as "bureaucratized killing" (198). The drone cubicle bears many similarities to Mark Fisher's description of the call centre as a late capitalist system "that is unresponsive, impersonal, centerless, abstract, and fragmentary" (64). For Fisher, the call centre represents a pinnacle of abstract and bureaucratised labour, and connects this centreless, continually deferred experience to the proliferation of mental illness in modernity (80).

Fisher's ideas correlate with the labour of drone operators. The conditions engendered by the drone technology, operating from a cubicle to surveil and kill far-away targets, create a paradoxical detachment and intimacy where the pilot is

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psychically detached from the environment and object of his attack, while nevertheless possessing a prosthetic reach of vision that enables him to see the aftermath of his actions up close. According to some studies, this accounts for the high rates of PTSD suffered by drone pilots, who get to know their targets' lives, and deaths, over long periods of time (Dao). Chamayou pushes back on this assertion, placing the onus instead on the nature of the pilot's labour:

> What if drone psychopathology lay not where it is believed to be, in the possible traumas of the drone operators, but in the industrial production of compartmentalized psyches, immunized against any possibility of reflecting upon their own violence, just as their bodies are already immunized against any possibility of being exposed to the enemy? (123)

This is supported by a report from military psychologist Colonel Hernando Ortega, who suggests that drone pilots' stress bears fewer similarities to PTSD than it does to that which is suffered by medical workers, that is, to the long hours and nature of shift work (Beauchamp).

The crucial difference between the drone cubicle and the call centre is, of course, that the labour of drone warfare produces the direct outcome of death. Similar to *Grounded*'s merger of forms of labour under drones, the drone in *Good Kill* represents an expansion of neoliberal, decentralised labour from office work to military work. While this results in similar processes of alienation and psychic detachment in the worker, the deferral of authority we witness in the call centre translates to a deferral of accountability in the drone mechanism. Fisher asks, "[w]hat agencies are capable of regulating and controlling impersonal structures?" (69). Similarly, we can ask who is to be held responsible if a drone commits a war crime. Lambèr Royakkers and Rinie van Est assert that responsibility cannot reasonably be held with the drone pilot, because the depersonalisation created through their working conditions means that they commit the act neither voluntarily nor knowingly (290). In this case, is responsibility transferred to the mechanic, the

designer, the Commanding Officer, or even the Commander in Chief? The potency of drone warfare lies in the very deferral and centrelessness of power.

The fragmentation and compartmentalisation of drone subjectivity, and its problematisation of human agency, feed a sense of disembodiment that in turns fuels the drone's perceived emasculating quality. In *Good Kill*, Lt. Col. Johns advises him to indulge in some "I and I" or "intercourse and intoxication" to overcome his psychic stagnation, thus appealing to masculine ideals to orient him back in touch with his body and re-centre the "I" back within the embodied self (Miller 8). Nevertheless, the opposition between Egan and Langley appears less as an opposition between masculine and feminised military identities than it does a conflict between old and new masculinities. Whereas in *Grounded* the Pilot is victimised by the drone, and her masculine attributes are entirely deferred onto its mechanisms of surveillance, *Good Kill* imagines drone piloting as a disembodied experience that maintains and extends a paternal eye over the feminised objects of its gaze.

Much of *Good Kill*'s imagery takes a drone-eye view, largely over Afghan communities but also over Las Vegas and the middle-class suburban home Egan lives in with his wife and two children. The film's opening shot is a view through the crosshairs of the drone screen, panning over a village in Afghanistan. The film makes use of the clean lines and right angles that make up the homes viewed from above, which anticipates the motif of compartmentalisation. From this view, many of the homes' courtyards are exposed and this permits an intimate view into the domestic lives of the drone's targets. The first human we see through this view is the figure of a woman veiled in black, carrying two buckets of water to her home. This image will be familiar to a Western viewer as a symbol of the war on terror—the black veil immediately marks her as other, particularly since Afghan women are more likely to wear blue burqas rather than black abayas, which are worn more commonly in Gulf states. The costume choice of the black veil signals to a viewer

that this woman is the object of our gaze—she carries with her the potential of threat, and is marked for surveillance.

As *Grounded* exemplifies, surveillance is at the heart of drone warfare: pilots can spend hundreds of hours watching a person before deciding to strike (Egan comments at one point that the team have spent "six hundred hours" on one target). The drone adapts Bentham's panopticon for a contemporary militarised age: the soldier occupies the position of the all-seeing guard, and the drone's targets live under what is effectively an open-air prison, constantly aware of the threat of the drone but powerless to know if and when it might strike (Chamayou 43). While many types of labour involve some form of surveillance, the surveillance particular to the drone operator gives him or her a huge amount of control over territory. The drone opens and expands space in that it enables the pilot to easily cross national boundaries and occupy areas along both vertical and horizontal axes. This maximises control of the vicinity and, in the case of the US' more covert operations, enables the military to evade legal and diplomatic constraints on their attacks. Yet it also condenses the distance between the pilot and his target; the advanced imaging technology enables the pilot to see the target in full view, and in real time. Dagett considers this a "distance-intimacy" paradox, where "there is a maximal distance between shooter and target, putting drones beyond long-range bombers, but at the same time there is an odd intimacy made possible by the drone cameras and surveillance capabilities" (366). However while this may certainly feel true for the pilot, the asymmetrical structure of the surveillance necessarily occludes any feeling of intimacy for the gaze's object/target. Similar to the centrelessness of the drone apparatus, this paradox is one which sustains power by maintaining a structure of anonymity, from the pilot through to the commanding officer. The drone's ability to simultaneously expand and compress space pairs with its ability to operate out of time, always moments ahead of the target's actions.

Whatever masculine essence might be lost in embodied terms, then, is regained in drone technology in terms of hegemony and absolute control of the environment. The central conflict that *Good Kill* posits—between a traditional, rugged military masculinity and a disembodied, decentred drone masculinity—is fought precisely over notions of control, specifically over domestic and reproductive space and time.

In response to the Western-centrism of Foucault's biopolitics, Achille Mbembe posits his theory of necropolitics to account for people who fall outside of the framework established through the biopolitical regulation of life. By naming a "war economy," where war and terror become new modes of production, Mbembe questions the contemporary salience of Foucault's notion of biopower—the intervention of state mechanisms of power into biological life. He argues that under the "state of exception," many populations live an inversion of biopower where sovereign power is concerned less with controlling life than with controlling death:

> In these more or less mobile and segmentary forms of administration of terror, sovereignty consists in the power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge— people for whom living means continually standing up to death, and doing so under conditions in which death itself increasingly tends to become spectral, thanks both to the way in which it is lived and to the manner in which it is given. (Mbembe 37–8)

For Mbembe, biopower cannot account for "the contemporary ways in which the political takes as its primary and absolute objective the enemy's murder, doing so under the guise of war, resistance, or the war on terror" (66). While we see this across the American military's interventions in the Middle East in the twenty-first century, it comes to particular prominence in the question of sovereignty and American drone campaigns. The US' drone strikes in countries such as Pakistan and Somalia—countries against which the superpower is not officially at war—call into question the integrity of concepts like sovereignty under a weapon that is able

to sustain such absolute control over its vertical and horizontal terrain. Citizens living under the drone's eye suffer not only potential physical harm but immense psychological damage. Says Stanford and NYU's "Living Under Drones" report: "[o]ne man described the reaction to the sound of the drones as 'a wave of terror' coming over the community. 'Children, grown-up people, women, they are terrified…They scream in terror.' Interviewees described the experience of living under constant surveillance as harrowing" (81). These individuals live under a necropolitical project of surveillance, targeted death and "collateral damage," which is necessarily centred on the monitoring and circumscription of domestic space, as the drone follows the target through his home and community.

Adjacent to the necropolitical project of empire advanced by the US' drone campaigns is a biopolitical project established on the American homefront. In her analysis of Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014), Deborah Cohler asserts the equal importance of Chris Kyle's wife Taya for the advancement of the film's white neo-imperial ideology: "the white reproductive body is far more than just the core of the logic of homefront biopolitical stability. [Taya's] self-stylings and cultural representations signal crucial homefront gendered and racial foundations of reproductive futurity, intertwined with the necropolitical project of the Iraq war" (75). For Cohler, this representation of white womanhood embodies the promise of Lee Edelman's "reproductive futurism"—the ideology which preserves the sacrosanctity of heteronormativity by organising time towards an always deferred future represented by the figure of the Child (Edelman 3). Imperial necropolitics are embedded within the processes of white American reproduction on the homefront.

This tension is recurrent throughout popular film narratives of the war on terror—it structures both *Good Kill* and *The Hurt Locker*, which I will discuss in the following chapter. In the case of *Good Kill*, the film juxtaposes white and Muslim women at the centre of biopolitical and necropolitical reproductive

temporalities. However, in contrast to Cohler's assessment of Taya Kyle, the agency of white as well as Muslim womanhood is diminished in *Good Kill* under the film's drone logics. The spatio-temporal terrains they both occupy are monitored and mediated through modes of surveillance emanating from a patriarchal, masculine gaze.

Modes of surveillance provide the key organising structure to the hegemonic masculinity prevalent in the film. Drone narratives often emphasise the pilot's role as a family man (Stahl "What the Drone Saw"; Dagett; Miller). *Good Kill* is archetypal in this way; outside his work, Egan leads a stereotypical middle-class suburban lifestyle with a beautiful blonde wife (January Jones), two children and white picket-fence house. He leaves shifts having killed Taliban members to pick his kids up from school; he spends Saturday afternoons hosting barbecues with his suburbanite neighbours. Drone pilots' work and home life balance is often cited as a source of psychological stress for pilots. The sharp and inconsistent transitions between hours spent at war and those spent at home illustrate how drone warfare confounds the traditional geographical and ideological separation of the military and domestic spheres. We see this re-calibration of domestic and military space in *Good Kill*: when the viewer is first introduced to his family as Egan returns home from a shift, his wife Molly apologises that the house "looks like a bomb hit it" and the two share knowing glances. This exchange echoes the asymmetrical nature of the warfare Egan engages in, transitioning between literal to figurative bombs, and rhetorically illustrates what Roger Stahl names "the logic of the security state" which applies "the contours of the battlefield to everyday existence" ("What the Drone Saw" 671). What begins as a glib and insensitive comment develops during the film into an increasingly difficult struggle to keep the war and the home apart; to compartmentalise these two facets of Egan's life, and indeed to compartmentalise his shifting masculine identities between warrior and patriarch.

As Egan beings to lose control over his work under the authority of Langley, so does his control over his family and self begin to unravel. Egan starts drinking heavily to suppress his discomfort at the increasingly dubious ethics of his missions, and to ease the transition from his military to domestic roles. His relationship with his wife is strained as she becomes despondent at his emotional absence. He drink-drives his old muscle car down the expansive roads crossing the desert surrounding Las Vegas in imitation of his days as a fighter pilot; a simpler time, when he filled the sky and his status commanded respect. On one of these drives, Egan sees his wife riding in another man's truck and believes her to be having an affair. Stressed and angry at this perceived betrayal, he enters his shift distracted and struggles to concentrate on his work, spending his time instead glued to his phone, sending message after message checking up on Molly's whereabouts. We see here another invocation of technology as an attempt to maintain control over Egan's domestic space. The view from his fighter jet is echoed in his car's driving seat and the wide-angle view from the windscreen, and the fast approach and receding of his wife's image through this perspective suggests the failure of this type of technology to maintain control. Similarly, his frantic, unsuccessful attempts to contact Molly though his cell phone suggest the failure of this type of communication as a mode of surveillance.

The failure of the cell phone to monitor Molly is rooted in the equal distribution of power embedded in the phone as a communication device. Set in 2010, a time before sophisticated GPS tracking and data harvesting, the film presents Egan's phone as a means for simple lines of contact between A and B. When Molly finally returns home, having been out with friends, she apologises that her phone has died—although of course it is just as likely that she had turned it off. The agency that Molly exerts in this exchange is mirrored in Egan's sense of a loss of control, both over his wife and himself. As Lt. Col. Johns had done earlier in the film, Molly implores her husband to reconnect with his masculinity by reconnecting

with his body: she demands that he hit her, suggesting that she feels his emotions are better channelled as an embodied and visible expression of masculinity than hidden from view and released at unpredictable times. Egan pushes his wife but stops short of hitting her and shatters the mirror instead, leaving his hands scarred and his psyche weak as the moral centre holding together his warrior and patriarch identities begins to fragment.

The film is overlaid by a regular drone-eye view, of Egan's home life as well as the Afghan communities subject to his watch. This perspective creates a mirrored and overlapping effect of the two domestic spheres in Egan's oversight. Miller suggests that the juxtaposition of these two centres of domesticity "implies that humans cannot shake their sense of interconnectedness, even from such a vast distance" (16). However, while Miller reads this spatial organisation as a dialogue, it is more convincing as an opposition, doubly structuring the necropolitics and the biopolitics of empire, mediated by the drone view.

Adjacent to Egan's home life is his central mission to monitor a compound in Afghanistan for a wanted terrorist. We learn that Egan has spent hundreds of hours on this mission, watching the village from afar. While we never see the man in question, the drone view pays a lot of attention to a woman who lives in the community; she is the woman we see at the beginning of the film, completing domestic tasks and embracing who we assume to be her young son. As discussed, she is dressed in black abaya, uncharacteristic of Afghan dress, which gives a Western viewer the appropriate visual cues to understand this woman as Other. Compounding this othering process are the non-diegetic panpipes that accompany her image whenever she appears on screen. This ethereal-sounding score, overlaid with the crosshairs and co-ordinates of the drone view, create a gaze which is at once orientalising and militarised. The open roof of the courtyard permits a further dimension of voyeurism, as we see the woman remove her veil and brush her hair in what she believes to be solitude. This invasion of privacy seems at first

discomfiting, although the choice and composition of this image perhaps places a disproportionate amount of emphasis on the removal of her veil, which appeals to a stereotypically Western fixation on Muslim's women's privacy and further highlights her otherness from the viewer.

The voyeuristic perspective enabled by the drone gaze creates the foundations for one of *Good Kill's* core narrative arcs, where Egan enacts a drone strike to prevent the Afghan woman from being subjected to a sexual attack. We learn early on through the drone gaze that the woman is subject to regular attacks from an unidentified man; we watch through the drone view as he enters the house, rapes her and leaves her curled up on the floor. The film triangulates a relation between Egan, the Muslim woman and the Muslim man where Egan emerges as the patriot and the saviour of the vulnerable woman from the Muslim man who, although not the target the crew are searching for, is designated as terrorist.

In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar theorises the ways in which Muslims are visually and socially coded in the wake of 9/11, arguing that "the invocation of the terrorist as a queer, nonnational, perversely racialized Other has become part of the normative script of the US war on terror" (37). She asserts with regards to the figure of the terrorist:

> Sexual deviancy is linked to the process of discerning, othering, and quarantining terrorist bodies, but these racially and sexually perverse figures also labor in the service of disciplining and normalizing subjects worthy of rehabilitation away from these bodies, in other words, signalling and enforcing the mandatory terms of patriotism. (38)

Staging the rape of a Muslim woman by a Muslim man, the film frames the Muslim male as sexually deviant and codes him as terrorist, even though he is unidentified and not of military interest to the drone operation. Further, the woman's submission and assault feeds into the popular Western narrative of the oppressed Muslim woman. Mediated by the drone view, these figures do not speak; they exist for the

viewer only within the frame established by the drone. In other words, the Muslim woman and man convey Puar's notion of "racially and sexually perverse figures" against which "the mandatory terms of patriotism" are enforced in the American subject; that is, similar to the Afghan girl in *Grounded*, these figures serve as foils from which Egan's subjectivity gains definition.

Good Kill's climax comes when Egan, having been left by his wife and demoted to a surveillance role at work, takes control of his masculinity and his sense of self by wresting control of the drone operation. He sends his team off for a break before locking the door to the cubicle and turning off the video recording. These actions show him taking control of the spatio-temporal frames of his existence; by locking the cubicle he secures the parameters of a space within his control, both in his immediate and material surroundings and in the space implicated under the drone apparatus, and by turning the recording off he ensures that his actions exist for him only in the present tense. Once in position, Egan claims control of the domestic space occupied by the Muslim woman. He strikes the compound, claiming a future tense by firing at the Muslim man seconds before he enters the building ("one Minnesota, two Minnesota" he murmurs, reminding the viewer of the imperative detailed earlier to stay seconds ahead). The strike kills the man; Egan holds his breath as he watches the woman also lying prone on the floor, before she arises unharmed. Her son runs to her, and they embrace amongst the smoke and rubble.

Yasco Horsman likens this scene to a duel or a standoff between two men over a woman, positing that on a "fantasmatic level, the killing of a Muslim man allows the soldier to reassert his masculinity, which had been threatened by the depersonalizing technology of drone warfare" (304–5). While I agree that this moment provides a platform from which Egan can regain a sense of lost masculinity, I think that the racial dynamics of the scene deserve further attention. Lila Abu-Lughod, responding to Laura Bush's now infamous radio address

advocating the invasion of Afghanistan on supposedly feminist grounds, questions the political work performed in the assertion that Muslim women need "saving": "[w]hen you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation? What presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her?" (41) Similarly, Egan's "saving" of the Muslim woman places his (and the viewer's) affective energies into who or what he is saving her from, and places no consideration on what he is saving her to. Once he has confirmed the strike is successful, Egan leaves the cubicle, hops in his car and begins the drive to Reno to win his family back. Meanwhile, we can only wonder what the woman is left with: sitting in the rubble of her home, her domestic space is destroyed. Similarly we must question the economic implications on hers and her son's lives if the man's death means the rupturing of a patriarchal family and income structure. These are all questions that the film elides, as it transitions to familiar long panning shots of Egan gliding through Nevada scenery in his car, aviators on, to reclaim his patriarchal authority.

The film's final scenes thus set up an opposition between Afghan and American domestic space as doubly necropolitical and biopolitical. The temporal structure ascribed to the Afghan domestic space in *Good Kill* aligns with Mbembe's definition of necropolitics as the ways in which "weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating death-worlds, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (92). The film represents Muslim womanhood as vulnerable and lacking agency, which is only compounded by the drone's gaze which fixes her as a silent, pixelated figure. The Afghan woman and the home she keeps are vulnerable to inevitable attack from above, and the drone thus creates a paradoxical "death-world" out of the borders of the home and reproductive space implicated therein. As the son enters the scene to

greet the woman, a viewer is reminded of a comment made by Suarez earlier in the film, that drones create a "terrorist factory." This reflects Peter Matulich's argument that "drone operations as they currently stand are of limited use if not counterproductive…Their use in 'clearing' operations produces negative effects including collateral damage and the militarization of local populations. This not only alienates local populations but can fuel further insurgency." The appearance of the boy into the frame implies that he will grow up with the memory of this and other attacks, and will himself fulfil the "military age male"—"terrorist" trajectory. From this necropolitical project, then, emerges a negative, cyclical temporality that paradoxically orients reproductive cycles along an axis determined by death.

In contrast, the symbolism embedded in Egan's pursuit of his family couldn't be clearer: whereas the Muslim family are condemned to relive a cyclical structure of death from above, Egan embarks upon the road to patriarchal family unity. The white American family is positioned on a libidinal horizon, containing the promise of futurity. The implication at the end of the film is that Egan, having exerted his personal moral code and control over the Muslim domestic space through the drone apparatus, reclaims a sense of his masculine self, from which point he endeavours to reassert his identity at the head of the American family structure. The biopolitical structure of the white American family therefore directly contrasts with that of the Muslim Afghan family.

Good Kill posits a continuous tension between military and domestic spheres across national borders. This chapter has demonstrated this as a tension between necropolitical and biopolitical space, which is mediated by the drone's gaze. This triangulation is what eventually resolves the film's central conflict between embodied and disembodied masculinities. Rather than staging a triumph of one over the other, the film suggests a folding together of the two expressions of masculinity, rooted in ideals of surveillance and control extending not only across domestic space, but along temporal axes concerning who is subject to death, life,

cyclicality and futurity. While *Grounded* surrenders to its vision of the total erasure of human agency under an endlessly deferred network of surveillance, *Good Kill* imagines that these modes of surveillance hold the key to reclaiming embodied masculine agency along axes of control over domestic space and time. Nevertheless, despite its impulse to reclaim masculine agency, *Good Kill* resonates with *Grounded* insofar as it seems incapable of producing a modernised figure of embodied masculine heroism. If a compelling figure of heroic masculinity is what traditionally drives war stories as vehicles for imperial ideologies, then both these texts fall short in conceptualising what such a hero may look like in the drone age. Instead, they focus on the struggles of ageing and out-of-time stereotypes of military masculinity; soldiers who are either outpaced or held captive by a faceless technological infrastructure. In the following chapter I turn to *The Hurt Locker*, a film whose play with genre seeks to remedy this impasse in the search for a storybook hero to represent American empire in the age of drone warfare.

VI. Freeing the "Wild Man": Masculinity, technology and genre in *The Hurt Locker*

The opening scene of Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) contains a segment filmed through the perspective of an ANDROS bomb disposal robot. A small, remotely piloted terrestrial drone used to scope out and dismantle explosives, the machine rattles over a dusty, rocky terrain to perform tasks deemed too dangerous for human hands. While certainly eerie and disorienting, these images will not be unfamiliar to their audience: this landscape could be selected from a western film; transmitted from the moon; it could be imaged from a militarised zone in the modern Middle East. As I argue in this chapter, the conditions created by this simultaneously familiar and ambiguous image permit the film to configure American military masculinity in a way which responds to the uncertain role of the military in the twenty-first century.

The Hurt Locker has received broad scholarly attention, through lenses including trauma studies (Straw; Kopka; Pheasant-Kelly); Lacanian psychoanalysis (Denny; Bennet and Diken); constructions of embodiment (Burgoyne; Andreescu); and indeed much scrutiny has been offered to the film's articulation of masculinity (Grant; Westwell; Vernon; McSweeney). Comparatively little attention has been paid, however, to *The Hurt Locker* as a film about drone warfare and the embodied soldier's position in relation to this increasingly technologised way of doing war. Roger Stahl discusses *The Hurt Locker*'s important position in response to the drone wars, arguing that the opening scene attempts to locate the drone as a foil to the main character and thus reprioritise the soldier. In doing so, however, this scene "reiterated a truism of contemporary conflict: 'war' had only slipped further down the data stream into a no-man's-land of joysticks, screens and cubicles" ("What the Drone Saw" 671). Like *Grounded* and *Good Kill*, *The Hurt Locker* demonstrates the anxieties present in the military and militarised society over the future role of embodied military masculinity, and the struggles of mainstream culture to

sufficiently conceptualise American military masculinity within the blurry ethical and technological discourses produced from the war on terror.

The Hurt Locker takes as its narrative focus an Explosive Ordnance Disposal, or bomb disposal, team based in Baghdad in 2004. Following a long and painfully tense first scene ending in the sudden death of their team leader Matthew Thompson (Guy Pearce), the team welcomes a new leader named William James (Jeremy Renner). Reckless, coarse and difficult to get along with, James is an immediate outsider to a squad which abides by strict social codes of honour and respect for hierarchy. The film's structure is episodic, and their daily encounters with IEDs (improvised explosive devices) are framed as repetitive, singular events. The film begins with a countdown of 38 days left in the squad's rotation, and ends with James re-enlisting and returning to Baghdad after some weeks at home, the countdown resetting to 365 days. This offers the film a cyclical structure, reflecting the cyclical, endless process of bomb disposal and the cycles of violence that Achille Mbembe identifies in necropolitical arenas, as discussed in chapter five.

Following the opening scene, we don't see much of the drone again once the protagonist, James, enters the narrative—James being a technician who prefers to dismantle bombs manually than outsource his expertise to a machine. But the drone remains ever-present on the film's horizon: "the bot" is constantly referred to as the logical first choice when an IED is encountered. It is up to the outsider James to eschew the technology in favour of his own eyes and hands. Technology underpins a complex set of relations between James, his team, and their enemy, the Iraqi insurgents. Unlike *Grounded* and *Good Kill*, James' relationship with American weapons technology is not one of conflict or captivity, but one of mastery. James can confidently engage or disengage with the drone or his bomb suit, suggesting neither threat nor domination but rather a kind of asymmetrical coexistence, over which he retains an essential intuition and intellect that evades the technology. The technologies mobilised by the Iraqi insurgents—roadside IEDs,

makeshift car bombs, and burner phones—are wildly unsophisticated in the face of the high-tech robotics deployed by the US military. Nevertheless, the Iraqi technologies are presented as wily and threatening, evoking perhaps the guerilla tactics of the FLN or the Viet-Cong. As noted by critics such as Terence McSweeney and Guy Westwell, the film distorts the power attached to the resources available to both the US military and the Iraqi insurgents, and asks the viewer to invest in *The Hurt Locker* as an underdog story of determined young American men fighting an impenetrable Iraqi enemy (McSweeney, *Studying the Hurt Locker* 45; Westwell, "In Country" 396). During this chapter I develop McSweeney and Westwell's critiques to suggest that the film's invocation of insurgent technology disrupts the "drone vision" that I have explored in chapters four and five, positioning American soldiers as the vulnerable objects of a hostile and omniscient enemy gaze.

In dialogue with critics of *The Hurt Locker* such as Terence McSweeney, Bruce Bennett, Bülent Diken and Alex Vernon, who have explored *The Hurt Locker*'s western themes, this chapter considers how Bigelow manipulates genre and further iterations of frontier mythology to reimagine American military masculinity. I firstly develop my argument in chapters four and five to explore *The Hurt Locker*'s establishment of disparate war and home spaces through the imagery of children and reproductive futurism. The chapter then moves on to consider how Bigelow manipulates genre to stage James' conquering of reproductive and militarised spaces and the technologies that govern them. By appealing to and rearticulating a variety of popular conventions from the war, western, and sci-fi genres, *The Hurt Locker* imagines an exceptionalist masculinity which exists outside time. Traversing genre, geopolitical borders and disparate, equally alien places between the war and home, the mythology of the masculine American hero is remade in *The Hurt Locker*, responding to contemporary anxieties over the role

of the embodied American soldier in the American military as an institution and nexus of power relations exported across the globe.

A large proportion of discussion around *The Hurt Locker* has addressed the film's perceived apolitical nature: its position outside, or refusal to discuss, the politics of the war on terror. Noting the lack of American flag iconography in the film, Martin Barker identifies a stripping out of "almost every single moment that might be judged political" (156). It is tempting to read *The Hurt Locker* as apolitical or regenerative in its intentions, particularly given the deeply polarising effect of the Iraq war in American popular opinion, and especially when considered in retrospect alongside the more overtly ideological *American Sniper* (2014). Nevertheless, the critical tendency to deny a political message in *The Hurt Locker* overlooks the ideological scaffolding supporting the film. Politics do not only manifest in overt visual displays of nationalism; as some critics argue, the film's politics can be found embedded into its structure. Slavoj Žižek identifies this at work in the film's unrelenting prioritisation of the soldier's point of view: "[i]n its very invisibility, ideology is here, more than ever: we are there, with our boys, identifying with their fear and anguish instead of questioning what they are doing there." In what he names as the "counter-entropic quest" enacted by the film's episodic structure, Westwell identifies a "humanitarian impulse" in the film, which seeks to "reclaim a sense of the heroic and effective US soldier, who puts his life at risk in pursuit of a mission informed by a moral imperative" ("In Country" 394). McSweeney challenges the persistent argument that the film's "realistic" documentary style renders it apolitical, arguing that the realist aesthetic is itself inherently political because it embeds ideology in the appearance of fact. For McSweeney, this ideology is one of American exceptionalism and Orientalism. He argues, "[t]he cumulative effect of these stylistic and narrative choices is to bind spectators to the experiences and perspectives of the soldiers at the same time as refusing to portray Iraqi characters in anything other than superficial ways, as Iraqis

are pushed to the margins of the screen or erased entirely from the film's narrative" (*Studying the Hurt Locker* 34). Elaborating upon these critiques, I explore an aspect of *The Hurt Locker*'s ideology which has received relatively little critical appraisal: the film's fixated attention to children. War films commonly employ images of children, be that in the form of the plucky "native" child kicking around the base or the Humvee, or the American child waiting for their father to return home from war. *The Hurt Locker* makes use of both of these figures, constructing an opposition between the Iraqi and white American child. Like *Good Kill*'s juxtaposition of white and Muslim women, *The Hurt Locker* juxtaposes children between the home and military spaces, which corresponds to a similar necro/biopolitical paradigm as discussed in chapter five. The film supports this paradigm by positioning the white American child at the heart of an ideology of the homeland, driven by reproductive futurism.

In his polemic *No Future*, Lee Edelman posits an ideological project wherein the limits of politics, of our political discourse, are defined by "reproductive futurism"—an ideological horizon or futurity that we always strive, unsuccessfully, to achieve. This ideology is distilled into the figure of the Child: "the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust" (Edelman 11). Not to be confused with the actual lived experiences of children, Edelman's Child acts as the reproductive motivation towards which all political discourse is oriented. Nowhere does this come into sharper relief than when we think about the military: everything the military does is ostensibly to protect the prosperity of future generations of civilians in the homeland, and this is regularly insisted upon through the imagery of children. *The Hurt Locker* embeds reproductive futurism and the figural Child within its depictions of children and the soldiers' attitudes towards paternity. Children appear throughout *The Hurt Locker*; peering out of windows, chasing Humvees, playing in the streets of Baghdad. The film's central child—the

only speaking child and the only Iraqi given anything close to a multi-dimensional character—introduces himself by the nickname "Beckham," due to his love of football. Beckham (Christopher Sayegh) is a young Iraqi boy of around ten years old who appears episodically throughout the film, firstly by selling bootleg DVDs to James and then by challenging him to a game of football. James strikes up a paternal relationship with the boy, which appears unusual and endearing for a character who is otherwise individualistic and prickly around others. The film's investment in James' relationship with Beckham transfers Edelman's figure of the Child from the domestic American context to the body of the Iraqi boy, suggesting the military's mission to secure the future of these Iraqi children.

However, a smooth application of Edelman's Child to Beckham would elide the racial and imperial currents that inform the war in Iraq and mediate the figure of the Child between the home and military spaces. Primarily, through the film's gaze, Beckham is not only a Child but is a racialised child, and as such is an embodied contradiction; he is both a child, innocent and vulnerable—and he is also an Arab Muslim. Under the gaze of the US military and also the film's dominant perspective, he is a coded threat. Placed in comparison with the unidentified terrorist in *Good Kill*, Beckham embodies a tension between potential and denial; life and death; biopolitics and necropolitics.

The tension between the biopolitics and necropolitics embodied in Beckham comes into sharper relief in a highly contested and often misread scene of the film, when James, Sanborne and Eldridge enter an abandoned school that they suspect is being used as a hideout. The scene is long and slow as they search the rooms, attentive to details like a cigarette left burning on the side, suggesting a quick getaway by the building's occupants. Eventually, James encounters a child's corpse on a table; it emerges that a bomb has been planted in his stomach. The body is mutilated beyond recognition but James is convinced that it belongs to Beckham, and so sets to the task of dismantling the device to protect his friend's honour, and

carries the body out of the building. Filmed in slow motion, with James' upright silhouette moving slowly into focus, this highly stylised sequence offers a brief departure from the film's realist aesthetic, reminding us that we are not watching a documentary but a Hollywood movie, and asking us to respond to this affectively charged moment (McSweeney, *Studying the Hurt Locker* 61). As McSweeney notes, the viewer is asked to respond less to the death of the boy and more to James' heroism:

> The fact that there is no recorded evidence of such a scheme ever being used in Iraq reveals more about the film's desire to imagine monstrosities which continue to demonise Iraqi insurgents whilst at the same time glorifying James' singular humanity and heroism, his status as an American hero, who *feels* and *understands* things more than everyone around him. (*Studying the Hurt Locker* 61)

Eventually, Sanborne's glib comment that "they all look the same" is uncomfortably vindicated, as it turns out that the body did not belong to Beckham but another young boy. This is revealed to James several scenes later, as Beckham skips up to James, unharmed and unaware of the body bomb incident. Unable to face the boy, James ignores the confused Beckham's greeting and walks away. While McSweeney argues that this confronts James with flaws in his own judgment, we can also read his refusal to acknowledge Beckham as a recognition of the cycles of violence that characterise the US occupation of Iraq (*Studying the Hurt Locker* 63). James' relationship with Beckham offers a linearity amongst the film's cyclical structure—the boy's death, while tragic, presents an ending; James' subsequent search for the perpetrators indicates a desire for closure to punctuate this ending. When Beckham returns, the cycle is reset, suggesting the process of bomb disposal to be part of a broader cycle of violence in which children are implicated over and over again. In this way, *The Hurt Locker* develops the idea implied in *Good Kill* of the negative futurity attached to the militarised territories under US control. In both films, the invocation of Muslim children demonstrates the cyclical structures of

violence, death and destruction that characterise what Mbembe calls the "death-worlds" manufactured by a necropolitical project of empire (92). The lifeless body of the Iraqi child represents the propagation of necropolitics but, crucially, defers the accountability for this process to a barbaric Iraqi Other, elevating the American soldier to hero status.

If the Iraqi child represents a negative futurity or denied potentiality, then reproductive futurism lies in the ideology of the homeland that undergirds the film. As detailed in Part One of this thesis, the post-9/11 discourse of the American homeland projected a nebulous imperative for "security," permitting both the US' military projects abroad and heightened surveillance on its own citizens, under the banner of protection from an ominous albeit ill-defined terrorist enemy. Whereas the literary texts discussed in Part One convey the political, cultural and economic landscape of the homeland as sick and fragmented, *The Hurt Locker*'s homeland ideology generates a spectral imaginary of a domestic sphere which is far more stable and cohesive. For all its attention on the military sphere as separate to the civilian, the promise of the homeland underpins *The Hurt Locker* and provides the film's core ideological momentum. The homeland is most starkly represented in the film's construction of a figural white American Child which exists in juxtaposition to the materially present Iraqi children employed throughout the narrative.

James' unnamed infant son receives much less screen time than Beckham; we see him for only a few minutes during the film's denouement. Yet the Child, and the promise of the homeland that he represents, haunts the entire film. James is presented throughout the film as coarse, prickly, and concerned only with the thrill of war. We learn that he is separated from his girlfriend although still living with her and their son. He is unconcerned with family life and domesticity; in one scene, James goes grocery shopping with his ex-girlfriend having returned to the US. Tasked with choosing a cereal, he stares lacklustrely at the rows and rows of garish branding, simultaneously bored and overwhelmed by the mundanity of the choice.

The cereal aisle, accompanied by the drone of the muzak playing diegetically overhead, is a familiar image of American consumerism—on a certain level James seems to understand that the cycles of violence he has witnessed in Iraq uphold this banal, capitalist excess. He completes other mundane tasks such as removing leaves from his gutter and chopping vegetables, all relayed through a greyish filter, indicating the stark contrast he perceives between a high-octane military sphere and the slow and grey proceedings of the domestic. The boredom, eventually, becomes too much: at the end of the film, he tells his baby son that there is only one thing in life that he loves before returning to Iraq, the countdown of days in rotation reset to 365. James' choice seems to lie in his own desire for action rather than any concern for Iraqi or American lives; indeed he regards his own son with the same apathy as he does the cereal, positioning them all indiscriminately amidst a landscape of humdrum domesticity.

James' disinterest in civilian life markedly contrasts with *The Hurt Locker*'s broody motifs. Bigelow's composition of the white American child, and her attention to the presence of children across the military and domestic spaces, suggest an impulsive reproductive futurism undergirding the film. While James might view his son flatly, the film's dominant perspective does not: the boy is pictured bathed in light, smiling and cherubic as his dad talks to him all the while in a flat and detached monologue about his desire to return to war. The film's affective and ideological impulses are poured into the symbol of this glowing, blonde little boy. Clearly, James' duty lies not in the domestic care of this infant but in the calling to secure reproductive futurism as an ideology and protect the Child, and by extension the homeland. Similarly, Sgt. Sanborne ends his tour in Iraq with an emotional confession to James that he wants a son, despite his expression of reluctance towards paternity earlier in the film. As a black soldier, Sanborne's desire to have a child echoes Jasbir Puar's critique of multiculturalism following 9/11, when "normative multiculturalism helped actively produce [a]

renewed nationalism" (41). Rather than opening a vision of equality and equity through American intervention abroad, Sanborne's desire for a son only consolidates an imperialist vision of an American homeland.

The prevalence of Beckham in the scenes set in Baghdad, along with the regular fleeting images of Iraqi children peering from windows and around corners, reminds the viewer what is at stake for Iraqi communities during *The Hurt Locker's* scenes of bomb disposal. However, the film's reproductive impulses, concluding with the appearance of James' young son at the end of the film, place more emphasis on the sanctity of the homeland than on securing the future of Iraqi children and communities. If America represents the domestic sphere of civilian life, Iraq is constructed as an alien, military space, despite the reproductive imagery that suffuses it. Domestic space in Baghdad, where it is conveyed, is constantly denied or infringed upon by the American military: James penetrates the borders of Iraqi domestic space when he charges into a family home; crowds of children are dehumanised and dispersed like pests; bodies of dead Iraqi children, as we have seen, are reproduced in cycles of violence. As we saw with regards to *Good Kill* in chapter four, *The Hurt Locker*'s manipulation of home and war spaces, anchored by imagery of children, sets up a biopolitical and necropolitical paradigm in which two seemingly disparate military and domestic spheres are mutually constitutive. Iraq, a subaltern space, is bound up in chaos, death and violence; the American homeland, on the other hand, contains a forward drive and the promise of futurity.

The Hurt Locker's construction of military masculinity stands between these distinct domestic and military spaces. Embodied in James, Bigelow paints a soldier figure who traverses the realms of war and home, but is pinned down by neither. *The Hurt Locker* positions James as an exceptional hero—a rugged individual who exists outside the codes of civilian life, and equally outside the codes of honour and hierarchy that define the military. Bigelow's interest in masculinity is evident across her body of work, and she draws on familiar themes and tropes of

masculinity to open up and subvert them; in *Point Break* (1991), for example, Keanu Reeves' characteristically deadpan style works well between the masculine stereotypes of the straight-laced FBI agent and layabout, thrill-seeking surfer (Grant 186). *The Hurt Locker* channels familiar masculine imagery from across genres to expand the war genre's conceptualisation of military masculinity in James' character. For example, Sanborne refers to James as a "redneck," and he is regularly pictured smoking and listening to thrash metal music, feeding into a "white trash" stereotype that filters traces of James' home and upbringing in ways which are less apparent for the other soldiers (except for perhaps Cambridge, whose name suggests an upper-class and well-educated background, in contrast to James). At aptly chosen moments, the dialogue borrows from blockbuster action genre films; "if I'm going to die, I'm going to die comfortable," James says after removing his bomb suit (McSweeney, *Studying the Hurt Locker* 46). Of particular note in *The Hurt Locker* is how Bigelow appropriates and folds together two temporally disparate genres—the western and, less studied in relation to *The Hurt Locker*, the sci-fi—to explore the tensions and interfaces between traditional, embodied military masculinity and the revolutions in warfare posed by military technology.

A huge amount of attention has been paid to Bigelow's employment of western themes in *The Hurt Locker.* Barry Keith Grant notes that given that "George W. Bush had invoked the rhetoric of the western to build support for the war after 9/11, one might read James' cowboy attitude as a metaphor of involvement in Iraq, and, by extension, elsewhere in the Middle East" (191). However, the weight of 9/11 on early twenty-first century discourse perhaps prevented full acknowledgment of the diversity of cultural influences on *The Hurt Locker* and the political implications, and ironies, of reviving a mythological figure borne from violent settler colonialism. Both Grant and Amy Taubin identify elements of John Wayne in Renner's portrayal of James, likening him to Ethan Edwards in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). Taubin writes:

By dismantling close to 900 IEDs, James has saved who knows how many times that number of lives. And, as the film is careful to show, he's an equal opportunity saviour. He's the latest and one of the most moving descendants of Ethan, *The Searchers'* fissured icon of masculinity. Which in part is why the last shot of *The Hurt Locker*, an echo of Ethan turning his back on hearth and home and riding alone into the desert, breaks the heart.

While *The Hurt Locker*'s western conventions certainly evoke a cowboy persona in James, Taubin's analysis elides some vital questions. Firstly, her assertion that James has saved "who knows how many" lives is based on an assumption of extra-diegetic action, made from a line in which James informs his General of his accomplishments. On the contrary, in the story that the film presents to the viewer, James doesn't save any lives that we can see. Even in the car bomb scene at the UN building, the space is evacuated and James is left to dismantle the bomb amidst an empty, desolate landscape, in a clear nod to the Wild West. In the film's climax, James is tasked with dismantling a suicide vest forcefully strapped to a man, who pleads for help, crying out that he has a family. For all his efforts, James fails at his mission: after a painstaking and distressing sequence which echoes the film's opening shots of Thompson's death, the Iraqi man is left to die.

In this scene, the Iraqi man is othered, viewer identification is denied and the Iraqi reproductive line severed, feeding again into the destruction of Iraqi domestic space and maintenance of necropolitical borders in this terrain. Taubin's analysis therefore also seems to contain a deliberate elision of the racial and imperial implications of both *The Hurt Locker* and *The Searchers*. Far from putting forward "equal opportunity saviours," both films work to differentiate the white homeland or settler colony from an abstract native enemy. The work that James invests in bomb disposal certainly evokes the rugged individualism of the cowboy, although the fast pace and editing of the film, as well as what the narrative includes and omits, suggest that James is driven by the desire for adrenaline rather than any sense of saviourdom or heroism.

Bigelow invokes the western genre both to construct James as a pioneering cowboy figure and to portray Iraq as an unforgiving and desolate landscape to be conquered by American troops. This invocation of the frontier narrative, however, surpasses the western genre, as *The Hurt Locker* combines imagery of the frontier's iterations across genre and time. Namely, while reaching back to a mythologised past, the film also reaches "back" to a mythologised future, in the form of the Cold War space opera. This retrospective projection conjures temporal dynamics which place the soldier figure outside time entirely.

We watch the film's opening shot through the viewfinder of the ANDROS terrestrial drone: vision is clunky and pixelated as the drone trundles along the bumpy, deserted terrain, echoing images broadcast to earth from robots exploring the moon's surface. As I have explained, while these images conjure a sense of alien place, they are not altogether unfamiliar; the hostile terrain inhabits our imagination as the Wild West, or outer space. As in *Good Kill,* the audio-visual manipulation of digital technology expands and challenges our expectations of traditional military masculinity: James is a soldier, a cowboy, and a spaceman. The heavy and bulbous suit he wears to dismantle IEDs, with its ominous helmet and clunky movements, evoke an astronaut in space. This is heightened by the diegetic heavy breathing which overlays the POV shots framed through James' helmet; it is as if we are accompanying him on an interplanetary mission, far away from home. The sense of alienness and distance this creates affirms the film's construction of a separate military sphere and the homeland, or domestic sphere. Again, this maintains a biopolitical and necropolitical paradigm; the domestic spaces portrayed in Iraq are cold, empty or simply neglected so as to remove any sense of comfort, home or belonging even for those who live there.

What is perhaps missed by critics such as McSweeney, who focus on the cowboy figure to suggest the film hearkens back to a traditional conceptualisation of masculinity, is that James' military masculinity is reimagined by the insertion of

sci-fi themes into his otherwise cowboy persona. The spaceman—a popular cultural phenomenon that captured the American imagination in the 1950s—has been theorised as a reinvention of the cowboy; a pioneering, rugged individual staking his claim on the new, wild "frontier" of outer space (Jacobs 72; Lucanio and Colville 102). However, as Robert Jacobs points out, the spaceman figure entails a further configuration of American masculinity which emerged in the postwar period: the Cold War technocrat, defined by their commitment to knowledge, authority and democracy, and their "unquestioning acceptance of the values embodied and promoted by the organizations they serve" (57). While the cowboy invokes popular imaginings of rugged individualism and freedom from governance, the spaceman demonstrates loyalty to his organisation and exerts masculinity in scientific and technical expertise. In *The Hurt Locker*, James' contrarian attitude around his team accompanies an impressive laser-focus and technical expertise when defusing explosives. The film makes no mistake that this expertise is in service of the broader military organisation when he is praised by an awestruck general for the number of bombs he has successfully defused: "this man's a wild man!" the general exclaims, shaking his hand. This scene acts as a reminder of the broader organisational structures James operates in, as "wild" as he may be, fusing the individualistic characteristics of the cowboy with the technocratic expertise of the spaceman.

The presence of weapons and communications technology at the forefront of the film—from the ANDROS drone, to the bomb suit and even the makeshift IEDs scattered around town that James must dismantle—fill the cowboy/spaceman's world with a looming and inescapable technological horizon. With a budget that in 2008 accounted for almost half of global military expenditure, the US military's technological capacities are advanced and far reaching (Bellamy Foster et al.). Despite this, *The Hurt Locker* depicts American military technology as unwieldy and uncomfortable, unsuited to the rudimentary but guerilla

technologies employed by the insurgents: phone-activated roadside bombs; car bombs and makeshift IEDs. James' movements in the bomb suit are powerful yet clumsy; Humvees are often shot from a low angle in a way which conveys them as mighty yet oversized—not fit for use in Baghdad's hostile, urban terrain. Much like the postwar space opera, the ANDROS drone could be, at times, the soldier's camp robot sidekick: ground-level shots taken from behind James, for example, suggest the perspective of the robot as it watches the soldier walk into the horizon to complete another mission.

The perspective of the drone-as-sidekick exemplifies *The Hurt Locker*'s manipulation of point-of-view from varying technological viewpoints. If the only drone present in the film takes a low-level perspective, suggesting vulnerability and acquiescence, then high-level technological perspectives are invoked throughout to represent the power held by the Iraqi enemy. Iraqi people are constantly looking back at the soldiers, often holding phones or digital camcorders, or looking down a gun's crosshair. As Westwell notes, the Iraqis' returned gaze is edited at a fast pace as short, sharp cutaways, and "the effect of these cutaways…is to make the threat more apparent. When the film switches back to seeing through the bomb squad's gun sights, the viewer, like James and his team, feels under surveillance from all quarters" ("In Country" 395). These frenetic cutaways cause a scattering of point-of-view and disrupt the linear subject-object fixed gaze exemplified in chapter five through *Good Kill*'s articulation of drone vision. By having its Iraqi enemy return the gaze, *The Hurt Locker* resists the non-reciprocal nature of drone vision theorised by Chamayou and Hensley. Hensley notes several attempts in art and culture to resist this non-reciprocal dynamic, including Teju Cole's use of Twitter to interrupt "drone form's unidirectional or vectored omniscience" (232). While it similarly disrupts the unidirectionality of drone vision, the effect in *The Hurt Locker* is to resist the obvious power imbalance between the US' high-tech military and the insurgents' guerilla tactics. Juxtaposed against the low-level perspective of the

terrestrial drone, the high-level Iraqi perspective and the all-encompassing sense of being watched by the insurgents render the American soldiers vulnerable despite—or perhaps even due to—their technological superiority, thus inviting a viewer to invest in their against-all-odds heroism.

McSweeney has noted that by emphasising the technological advancement of the American military as well as constructing it as unwieldy or unfit for use, *The Hurt Locker* strikes a balancing act aiming to position the military as underdogs without conceding military prowess (*Studying the Hurt Locker* 45). While this is certainly true, the film's articulation of American technological superiority must contend not only with the Iraqi Other, but also with the threat to embodied masculinity that is posed by this technology. By taming the terrestrial drone and disrupting the linearity of the drone's gaze, the film constructs a figure of embodied military masculinity which is freed from the emasculating trappings of technology. Further, by blending genre conventions, this figure of military masculinity becomes untethered from the constraints of linear time which would render him vulnerable to the advance of technology, as we saw in *Grounded* and *Good Kill*. Positioned in contrast to the scrappy yet wily technological power of the Iraqi enemy, the outsized imagery attributed to the US military technology calls to mind the bulbous, awkward imagery of the Cold War space opera, which made playful use of props and costumes in constructing speculative sci-fi futures. In this way, *The Hurt Locker* at once reaches back as it projects forward, invoking twentieth-century imagery to present the viewer with a technological military future.

James is at once implicated within and distanced from this future. He wears his bomb suit like a shell, encasing himself in this militarised technology. In one scene, he puts the helmet on before going to sleep, suggesting he gains a sense of security from this shell and desires to inhabit the perspective of the bomb/space suit, implicating himself in a militarised, technologised futurism. On the other hand, in contrast to the rest of his squad who are heavily reliant on the ANDROS bot as

extensions of their own eyes, hands and capabilities, James prefers to get up close to his adversary. In the car bomb scene, he infuriates his team by removing his suit and his headset, severing communication with the rest of the collective and shedding his protective layers to dismantle the bomb with his bare hands. In this way, he sits in a complicated position, within and away from the masculine collective. James' fraught relationship with the military technology around him reveals, as we saw in *Good Kill*, a tension between the expectations of a traditional, rugged military masculinity and one in which heroism and skill are outsourced to technological prostheses. However, by manipulating genre in its construction of this tension, *The Hurt Locker* expands the contours of military masculinity and places the soldier figure outside the temporal constraints that locate him within a certain technological and political moment.

Of the many masculine identities that James occupies, the film takes care to stress that he is not—compared to Thomas Egan in *Good Kill*—a patriarch. The alien sense of place that Bigelow constructs in Iraq is equally alien at home. As I have discussed, the slow editing pace and greyish filter through which James' home life is framed make an alien landscape out of familiar scenes like the supermarket or the front garden. James' passions clearly lie at war—although the film is careful to emphasise "war" as an abstract concept rather than as events firmly anchored in Baghdad. James is at home neither in America or in Iraq, but is rather positioned in a space extraneous to geographical borders, in a perpetual state of war. In this way, James is configured in *The Hurt Locker* as a member of an exceptional, warrior class of men—separate, indeed, both to civilians and to his fellow members of the corps not cut out for continual military service. Notably, Cambridge is killed in an explosion following bad decision-making, Eldridge is injured and airlifted home, and Sanborne, in his confession that he wants a son, marks his desire to return and remain connected to the domestic sphere. *The Hurt Locker*'s folding together of the soldier, cowboy and spaceman figures enables the construction of a masculine

figure in James who traverses genres and traverses worlds, always shifting between masculine positions; always conquering, but never quite at home.

The Hurt Locker's re-invention of the masculine American hero affirms this mythology's hold on the cultural imaginary. Released in 2008, the film seems to anticipate the rampant advance of drone technology that would define Obama's war on terror as he shifted it from a strategy of war to one of "strategic nonwar" or defense via isolated targeted interventions (Darda, *Empire of Defense* 2). Kneading and blending genre conventions, James acts as a reimagining of the soldier figure for an uncertain military age defined by rapidly developing technology and ethical ambiguity. Such conventions, namely those of the western and the sci-fi, enable the film's cultural imaginary to span from a traditional past into an imagined future. Structured by an ideology of reproductive futurism represented in the figure of the Child, the film maintains two separate spaces between the war and home. Importantly, both spaces are, in different ways, constructed as alien: the film's disconcerting sense of place positions the soldier as an exceptional figure outside space and time. *The Hurt Locker* retains such a hold on the contemporary war imaginary due to its ability to be many things at once: it is both an underdog story and an affirmation of American supremacy; it is both sympathetic and reactionary in its stance; it deals in both a traditional past and technologically enhanced future. While it remains a deeply ideological film, *The Hurt Locker*'s occupation of different positions and its play with convention conceptualise military masculinity in a way which reimagines how soldiering and masculinity interact on screen.

Conclusion

In his analysis of necropolitics, Mbembe diagnoses the era of the war on terror as one of a mutated form of alterity turned "the fantasy of separation, and even extermination" (38). Necropolitics is about creating and enforcing borders that exceed territory; a sovereignty over populations to be granted life, and those condemned to death (37). Yet as he suggests, the distinction of these borders can only be imaginary:

> There is no longer any "outside" that might be opposed to an "inside," no "elsewhere" that might be opposed to a "here," no "closeness" that might be opposed to a "remoteness." One cannot "sanctuarize" one's own home by fomenting chaos and death far away, in the homes of others. Sooner or later, one will reap at home what one has sown abroad. (Mbembe 40)

Part Two has sought to discern the collapse of such borders. While they differ significantly in their outlooks, *Grounded, Good Kill* and *The Hurt Locker* each acknowledge the expansion of military technology brought about during the early twenty-first century, and they each respond to the collapse of imagined borders between military and domestic space as a result of such technological intervention. The distinction between war and home, "over here," and "over there," is a fabrication that functions to conceal both the violent settler-colonial roots of domestic life in the US, and the militarised forms of capitalism and state power in the present. However, the future of domesticated war that drone warfare portends makes it ever-harder to construct narratives around an imagined separation of spheres. Further, as the military and the domestic more visibly bleed into each other, it becomes harder to conceptualise a palatable and accessible figure of embodied military masculinity to traverse these spaces and deliver the tales of empire and conquest that form the heart of the American war imaginary.

The texts that I take up in Part Two address the problem of drone masculinity in different ways. *Grounded*'s outlook is bleak, prophesying the total

erasure of human agency under an ever-expanding network of surveillance and infinitely deferred power and accountability. Traditional conventions of embodied military masculinity are erased, and the drone network takes on characteristics of authority, agency and control. Brant's monologue is the most attentive to the intersection of consumer capitalism and militarised power, and its anxious gaze towards the future anticipates the return of the logics of American foreign violence into domestic US society. *Good Kill* places more emphasis on the way in which American imperial power is exported across the globe. The film's triangulation of drones with civilians in the US and the Middle East generates a clearer vision of American empire as arenas of biopolitical and necropolitical power. The role of masculinity within this paradigm is centred on the control of domestic space and reproductive time. The film frames the imperative for this control as a conflict between old and new masculinities but, nevertheless, the result remains to designate the white American family to a linear, future-oriented temporality while the Afghan family inhabits cycles of violence and destruction under the drone.

This notion is continued into *The Hurt Locker*, which also constructs separate necropolitical and biopolitical worlds in its representations of Iraq and the American homeland. Of the three texts studied in Part Two, *The Hurt Locker* refutes in the strongest terms the threat that unmanned technologies pose to the traditional masculinity of the soldier. While *Grounded* and *Good Kill* struggle to envision embodied heroism amidst the blurry ethics and technics of drone warfare, *The Hurt Locker* puts forward a hero who brings the drone back within man's control. We might go so far as to say that whereas the soldiers in *Grounded* and *Good Kill* are domesticated, *The Hurt Locker* domesticates the drone, ascribing to it the status of sidekick to the story's hero. This is performed through *The Hurt Locker*'s play with genre, which permits its protagonist to occupy several masculine positions at once, all the while evading the linear temporality that sees embodied military masculinity hurtle towards obsolescence in *Grounded* and *Good Kill. The Hurt Locker* is the

earliest of these narratives, having premiered in 2008, so we could ascertain that it precedes the heightened public concern surrounding drones towards the peak of Obama's drone campaign in the 2010s. Nevertheless, the conversation in 2008 had already turned towards the direction in which the US military was moving upon the advance of highly technologised warfare (Singer 332, 385). *The Hurt Locker* is legible as an attempt to re-imagine a figure of American military heroism at a time when technology was advancing exponentially, and the American public's faith in the purpose and righteousness of its military had hit a nadir.

Throughout Part Two, children have featured as essential plot devices to help define the masculinities of its central heroes. As I have explored, this is partly to help identify the soldier's dual roles as a soldier and a parent. In *Grounded* and *Good Kill*, these roles become uncomfortably blurred as their military jobs interfere with their domestic lives. In *The Hurt Locker,* James' son embodies the ideology of the homeland that he is destined to defend; the son thus embodies the "separate" sphere of the home that James is imagined as unfit to occupy. Unlike *Grounded* and *Good Kill*, *The Hurt Locker*'s success in delivering a convincing masculine hero is in large part due to the film's dogged maintenance of a clear divide between war and home.

However, children serve another function, which is to structure the narratives temporally. As I have discussed in relation to Lee Edelman's work, the figure of the Child functions in narrative to occupy an imagined horizon, representing what he names "reproductive futurism." A common criticism of Edelman's theory is it privileges the white subject position (Muñoz 94; Bliss 85). We can certainly see this dramatised in the texts studied during Part Two, as I have demonstrated a contrast in the temporalities symbolised by the featured children. In *Good Kill* and *The Hurt Locker*, white American children represent a linear and future-oriented temporal trajectory; for *The Hurt Locker*, the promise of the homeland is symbolically channelled into his son, and in *Good Kill,* Egan abandons

his post and embarks on a long, straight road into the Nevada horizon to win his family back. In contrast, Muslim children in these films occupy cyclical temporalities of repetitive violence and death, echoing the necropolitical "death worlds" of which Mbembe writes. In *Good Kill,* an Afghan family home is destroyed, which figuratively gestures to the drone's circumscription of domestic space and reproductive time. *The Hurt Locker*'s portrayal of necropolitics in Beckham sees the Child appear and re-appear in seemingly interminable, cyclical episodes of extreme violence and misery. In *Grounded*, this cycle of violence occurs in tandem with the removal of the Pilot's agency, as the imperative to kill is scattered across an endless, faceless network of power to which, the play suggests, there is no foreseeable end. I have named the temporality ascribed to these children "negative futurity," which reflects the ongoing nature of their condemnation to death.

These narrative visions of American empire are therefore deeply rooted in how they imagine reproductive temporalities. In Part One, I identified in certain literary texts a sense of anxiety over the future of American power, emanating from the precarity of the home sphere to which the veteran returns. These literary texts ascribe anxious temporalities to American power as it exists at home and is projected abroad, looking to white male precarity and tentative openings for new affective formations in the fragile and fragmenting space of the homeland. The narratives in Part Two are similarly pre-occupied with an anxious futurity, this time symbolised by children. It is only *Grounded*, however, that conceptualises a fragile and precarious domestic sphere in a similar way to the narratives of Part One. Echoing Mbembe, *Grounded* envisions a domestic space condemned to violence and repression through its dystopian prophesies of a system of militarised surveillance within America's borders. Similar to how we saw in Part One, military masculinity is rendered unexceptional in *Grounded*; the protagonist soldier in *Grounded* is ineffective and ultimately subject to the same aggressive and faceless

state power as the civilian population. American empire is imagined in *Grounded* as an endless mutation of militarised capitalism that enfolds into its borders domestic civilians and foreign targets alike. In this way, the play's conceptualisation of empire aligns with that of Hardt and Negri, who define contemporary American imperial interests as a "global project of network power" which "resides in a world context that continually calls it into existence" (179-181).

In contrast, *Good Kill* and *The Hurt Locker* envision home spaces that are secure insofar as they are presided over by the father. Their depictions of reproductive futurism, symbolised by their white American children and families, project faith in the longevity of American hegemony. Nevertheless, through its exploration of a conflict between embodied and technologised masculinities, *Good Kill* anticipates the threat posed to traditional mythologies of war that embody such hegemonic imaginaries in the soldier/hero. While *Good Kill* ultimately affirms the victory of its hero over the drone technology, this victory feels precarious and we sense that the ageing fighter pilot's days as central to the war imaginary are numbered. In its play with genre, *The Hurt Locker* places its central hero outside time entirely. While the film is emphatic in the future-driven positive and negative temporalities represented by children, its central military hero evades temporal constraints, seemingly suspended in an infinite theatre of war. As such, the film's configuration of military masculinity recalls the timeless mythologies at the heart of the American war imaginary, predicated on the victory of civilisation over savagery and the conquest of the frontier.

To conclude Part Two, it is worth noting that the latest Hollywood film to contend with drone warfare is *Top Gun: Maverick*. Released in 2022 and featuring only vague references to a rogue-state enemy, the film is further removed from the war on terror's main timeline of events, so I have opted not to include it as a primary text in this thesis. Nevertheless, the film is in many ways exemplary of the issues that I have explored during Part Two. The sequel to the 1986 blockbuster sees the

hero Pete "Maverick" Mitchell (Tom Cruise) now well into his 50s but still the top pilot at the elite "Top Gun" training school, where he tests new models of fighter jets in the Mojave Desert. At the beginning of the film, the school's Admiral delivers a sneering speech to Maverick on the rise of drone warfare, predicting the eventual closure of the Top Gun school. Despite this, Top Gun is given one last chance at greatness: a mission arises to destroy a uranium plant in an unidentified valley which (quite implausibly) can only be undertaken by human pilots. It is Maverick's job to train the latest young crop of pilots to complete the mission. Eventually it transpires that only Maverick is up to the job, and after some setbacks he leads the squad in destroying the plant and getting his troops home safe. This represents a victory both for Maverick and for Top Gun, which have proven their worth despite being old and outmoded operatives in the impending technologised military world.

Top Gun: Maverick is the highest budget film to date that has dealt with the advance of military drone technology, and it is noteworthy because the original *Top Gun* is arguably one of the most successful and iconic American war films ever made. It asks the question of what becomes of these stories and their heartthrob heroes in the face of obsolescence; it answers that question by resignedly acknowledging the rapid advance of drone technology, and then quickly casting it aside. Like the narratives featured in Part Two, *Top Gun: Maverick* struggles, if not flat-out refuses, to envision a future of military conquest and victory that is not carried forth by an embodied, heroic protagonist. Famously a product of the military-industrial-entertainment complex, with the original *Top Gun* having received substantial support and vetting from the Navy, the film demonstrates the impasse at which the military and culture industries currently find themselves in producing narratives of American imperial power that are at once popular, convincing and timely (Zenou).

As I have explored during Part Two, drones enable a mode of seeing that confounds spatial and temporal borders, with pilots being able to surveil targets thousands of miles away for long periods of time, while evading reciprocal vision. However, the accuracy of this vision is disputed, and this is reflected in the thousands of civilians who have died by accidental drone strike at the hands of American pilots (Piper and Dyke). Personality strikes, as opposed to signature strikes, operate in a future anterior tense and designate personhood as a combination of data algorithms, predictions and assumptions. The mode of witnessing advanced by drone technology is therefore networked and expansive at the same time as being extremely limiting. As I will explore in Part Three, this contradiction finds echoes in an altogether different mode of witnessing war which defines the early years of the war on terror: the singular vision of the handheld camera.

Part Three
Cowboys and Images

You are the eyes of a soldier in the front seat of a Humvee. Your view darts wildly between the other men in the vehicle and the dashboard overhead as you plough down a bumpy road in a rural Afghan valley, surrounded by dusty vegetation and purplish mountains, shooting and being shot at by an enemy hidden along the roadside. As you drive forward, it is noisy and frightening—the men shout in panicked voices as loud gunfire envelops you, and voices shouting from all angles direct your wired anticipation. The enemy is faceless and panoptic, identifiable only by brief flashes of light as they shoot directly at your vehicle. The sonics create a remarkable spatial quality: the consistent and loud but dulled sound of the bullets raining down on the outside delineates the periphery of your vision, creating a very claustrophobic space and anchoring you within it. You are right there, alongside the soldiers, witnessing the action.

The action described here exists on a 50-second clip captured on digital camcorder by SSG Andrew Fletcher Shetland. It is now housed at the Veterans History Project (VHP) at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, donated by Shetland, and sits on a thumb drive alongside various email correspondences, accolades, and further short pieces of footage taken during his service. The VHP hosts a sizeable collection of raw digital camera footage taken and donated by veterans or their families, although a great deal more has been published on YouTube. Digital camera imagery is ubiquitous in war on terror representation. It has found its way into the deepest, most obscure corners of the Internet; it informed a large part of media reporting of the wars; it has emerged in advertising and has been employed as a narrative device across multiple literary and film representations of America's twenty-first century wars.

Indeed, war on terror narratives are strikingly pre-occupied with the digital handheld camera and its images, both moving and still. This can firstly be attributed

to the emergence of this type of visual technology into the market: whereas cameras were taken to battle by soldiers at least since Vietnam, the mobility and accessibility of digital devices that can fit in the palm and be taken out at any moment was unprecedented (Letort 1). But the prevalence of personal handheld cameras in war on terror narratives can equally be attributed to the unique mode of seeing permitted by the technology. Compared to Grégoire Chamayou's borrowing of Bentham's panopticon—which implicates drones within a broader culture of expansive networked surveillance from afar—the perspective offered by the handheld camera, such as that which we saw from SSG Shetland, is pared back, intimate, and feels viscerally proximate to the adversary (Chamayou 43). The images produced by the digital camera thus enable us to unearth stories that diverge in form and content from those offered through the non-diegetic or omniscient perspective.

Stacey Peebles names as "digital vérité" the inclusion of the handheld camera readout in film (134). A play on cinéma vérité, a style of documentary filmmaking developed during the 1960s using the observational mode to reveal hidden truths, digital vérité includes digital camera footage within the wider frame of the narrative in order to draw attention to stories which are often more personal or perhaps overlooked by the narrative's main, non-diegetic frame (Peebles 134). In this way, for Peebles, the digital camera is ascribed a revelatory function: its "vérité" is found in its likeness to real soldiers' footage, "the inclusion of that perspective and, often, the creation of a deeper empathy for those who inhabit it" (135). But the creation of an empathetic reaction is rarely a neutral outcome, and we should be wary of arguments that assume the handheld camera as an automatic object of truth-telling. We should remain conscious that every image taken by a camera is chosen, its subject selected; we must thus always question what has been excluded, limited or obscured.

War photography has provided some potent historical examples of how the "truth" of photography is contested: we might refer to Roger Fenton's "In the

Valley of the Shadow of Death" (1855), or Joe Rosenthal's "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" (1945), both of which have been subject to fierce debate regarding their authenticity (Luckhurst, "Iraq War Body Counts" 363; Mortensen 18). Peebles argues that digital vérité provides space for personal stories in a way which "doesn't reduce the conflict into an easily manageable or singular narrative" (135). But what are the perspectives given by the handheld camera if not singular? Shetland's footage, while offering a view into a soldier's experience, does nothing to help us understand the broader goings-on of the war outside this very individuated perspective, rooted in this very specific place and time. Further, the anonymity of the enemy and the sense of fear generated during the clip invite us to occupy an extremely subjective position as a viewer. Guy Westwell notes the tendency of war on terror films to defer to the "reductive" perspective of the soldier through handheld style (*War Cinema* 108). Referring to this as "grunt doc" style, he argues this is "a tried and tested way of closing down historical understanding by separating out the day-to-day action of fighting from the wider historical and political discourses that might explain why the fighting is occurring" ("In Country" 387). The prevalence of this "embedded," POV mode of narration might bring a sense of order and control to the uncapturable chaos of the war, but it is nevertheless myopic and deliberately ignorant to the causes and effects of the war outside the soldier's experience of combat.

Roger Stahl argues that the digital camera blends the perspectives of the soldier and the embedded journalist. Responding to the staged rescue of Jessica Lynch in 2003, a media event which I discuss in chapter eight, Stahl explains that "with cameras literally embedded in the soldiers' helmets, viewers at home assumed the point of view of the rescuers. The drama was simple, unquestionably noble, successful, and freed from the cumbersome need to explain the rightness of the Iraq invasion" (*Militainment, Inc* 81). Bridging embedded reporting and embedded visual technology, Stahl underscores the ability of the digital camera to

carve a singular, "soda-straw" narrative out of the war (*Militainment, Inc* 89). While digital camera footage plays an important role in documenting the war in Iraq, we must attend to all factors such as context, perspective and affect which intertwine to give us the image we see and engage with on screen, as well as considering the mechanisms and networks through which these images reach us. While it is often relied upon as an object of truth-telling, then, it is necessary to question who is behind the camera, what are they focusing on, what have they chosen to ignore, and what will happen to the image following its capture.

The constructed nature of such footage is amplified when we consider that war on terror soldiers were also the first to have access to relatively sophisticated editing software. Soldiers could cut footage, layer it and add audio and effects (Kaufman). The Internet is home to hundreds if not thousands of such edited videos; on YouTube, a search for "Iraq hype video" returns countless results, many of which are edited compilations of combat footage set to soundtracks of rap rock, hardcore punk and nu-metal. More than finding fun and idiosyncratic ways to document military experience, these videos are designed to psychologically prepare soldiers for combat by producing an affect of fear and rage to prime the viewer for attack.[4]

Far from being a neutral conduit for the truth, then, the digital handheld camera is a political object in and of itself. This is not to deny the veracity or the value of all footage captured by the handheld camera, but to emphasise the many narrative possibilities that it contains, and to highlight the selective processes and systems of exchange through which such narrative possibilities compete to be seen by a global audience. Digital handheld camera footage participates in what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls the "visual culture" of the war on terror, which "both describes and creates networks of visual events in which time and space are questions, not answers" ("Invisible Empire" 22). As much as it reveals, the work of the camera

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[4] I am grateful to Chris Velazquez for this insight.

limits, excludes, modifies, intimates and obscures. Moreover, the digital camera is significant in war on terror narratives due to its co-operation with the digital networks that inform how, when and to whom its images are disseminated, including the nascent Internet, rudimentary camera-phones, and thumb drives.

The ascendancy of these digital networks, accompanied by the proliferation of professional and amateur digital images, forge a space that I refer to later in Part Three as the "digital frontier." The digital frontier encapsulates the cacophony of information and information technology that arose in parallel and in response to 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror. It includes the news media, Internet blogs, gaming, leaked images, home video and more modes of communication that coincided not to create a coherent picture of the war but rather to forge a contradictory, disorienting and addictive noise. This is what Jean Baudrillard meant when he referred to the first war in Iraq in 1991 as a "simulacrum": images that reverberate off each other at such frequency and intensity that they become detached from the reality they purport to represent (68). The key difference between the first and second Iraq wars, though, is that by the time of the second Iraq war, the dissemination of images through the media was enhanced by the accessibility of the Internet and by digital handheld cameras, which extended participation in the spectacle to those outside the mainstream media. I conceptualise this web of information as a new incarnation of the frontier due to its (at the time) unknowability, its unpredictability, its potential threat to the established order and its continual promise to open out to something new and better. I look to the texts in Part Three for how they locate the embodied soldier upon the digital frontier, and by extension how they enter into dialogue with the mythologies that sustain the contemporary war imaginary.

The three texts that make up this chapter, then, approach visual culture and empire by attending not only to digital images, but to the technology and apparatuses central to these images' creation and dissemination. Indeed, these texts

look beyond the image produced by the digital camera—stepping back, so to speak, to question how and why these images come into being. In doing so, the texts that make up Part Three foreground competing modes of narrative composition and deeply gendered circuits of information exchange that shape the stories structuring the contemporary war imaginary. By thinking seriously not just through these narratives' staging of images but through their representations of digital cameras, I hope to bring due attention to the role of this newly accessible technology in the mediation of the stories and mythologies which we associate with American empire. Taken together, these narratives go so far as to position the camera itself as, in Nicholas Mirzoeff's words, an "agent of sight" (*Watching Babylon* 3). This is not to deny the agency (and therefore accountability) of the individual holding the camera, but instead invites reflection upon the politics of the camera as a mediator and manipulator of bodies as they are held in space and time.

Chapter seven considers David Simon and Ed Burns' *Generation Kill*. The 2008 mini-series, which consists of seven hour-long episodes, is based on the reportage of Evan Wright, who was embedded with the First Reconnaissance Battalion of the United States Marine Corps during the initial invasion of Iraq. The series plays with reporting, representation and reality, and the handheld camera sits as a hinge among these different modes of watching and understanding the war. I argue in this chapter that *Generation Kill* positions the soldier's camera in dialogue with the journalist's perspective, and in so doing the series draws self-reflexive attention to the singular perspective transmitted by the handheld camera and the embedded journalist. While the handheld camera is central to the narrative, I argue that *Generation Kill* complicates the conventions of the narratives named by Westwell as "grunt docs" insofar as the series' use of embedded modes of documentation reveals ruptures in hegemonic discourse at the same time as appealing to such discourse. By looking beyond the singular image of the embedded

camera, the series produces imperial masculinities through the tensions created by competing and often conflicting modes of visualising the invasion of Iraq.

Brian Van Reet's novel *Spoils* (2017), the subject of chapter eight, positions the digital camera as its central actor. The story of an American female gunnery sergeant taken captive by insurgents in Iraq, *Spoils* approximates the capture of prisoners and the capture of images. The camera fixes the novel's protagonist between competing ideologies, alluding to the propagandist media spectacles constructed both by jihadists and by American forces during the course of the war on terror. In doing so, *Spoils* employs the camera to illustrate the wealth of narrative possibility that inheres within this object of digital imaging, and puts forward a picture of layered, repeated visual crises challenging the composition of American empire in the contemporary war imaginary: the fabricated rescue of Jessica Lynch, the execution of Nick Berg, and Abu Ghraib. Yet the novel also looks further than the immediate visuality of these crises: as a literary representation of visual imaging technology that features no actual descriptions of images, *Spoils* positions the digital camera alongside conventions of war literature as tools of storytelling with the power to fix, mythologise and immortalise, thus inviting a reader to recognise the gendered mechanisms that structure the war imaginary.

Finally, chapter nine turns to Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016), a novel which speaks directly to the revelation of the events that took place at Abu Ghraib prison. If the camera in *Generation Kill* and *Spoils* draws attention to the networked modes of narrative composition that inform how we respond to and remember war, *War Porn* dwells upon the interaction of bodies with these networks to bring forth the materiality of imperial violence both abroad and as it is brought home. Narrating the exchange of images of torture in Iraq, in parallel with a veteran's rape of an American woman, the novel brings the digital camera and digital images together with bodies of power and bodies in pain. Through its western setting, *War Porn* generates a frontier register through which these acts of violence are narrated, and

in doing so the novel loops contemporary war into a history of settler colonialism. As with *Generation Kill* and *Spoils*, *War Porn* illuminates the digital and discursive networks through which visions of war are delivered or denied to a civilian audience at home. In its particular attention to the materiality of these networks, and in its deconstruction of the cowboy myth, *War Porn* challenges the myths that sustain the war imaginary and suggests the impossibility of disentangling the violence of the war on terror from the settler colonial violence structuring the United States' history.

It is inevitable that a discussion of the role of digital images in the war on terror will lead back to Abu Ghraib. The events that took place at the prison and their aftermath seem to hum in the background of all three texts discussed in Part Three. The revelation of torture by American military personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison facility in April 2004 has been theorised extensively. The most incisive reflections sought to unpack the politics of the interpellated horror expressed by Western audiences and critique the act of the images' dissemination. Susan Sontag noted the Bush administration's linguistic manoeuvres in expressing disgust at the photographs, "as if the fault or horror lay in the images, not in what they depict" (272). It seemed that the fact of the photographs' revelation was what struck the strongest nerve in reporting and commentary of the event. The photographs were simultaneously a form of exposure and evidence of concealment. By revealing acts of torture and humiliation which were tacitly condoned throughout the chain of command of the US military, the publication by CBS and *The New Yorker* of the photographs also gestured to the many actions, violences and ethical infringements that we do not see (Leung; Hersh). We know, for example, that Members of Congress were shown further, more shocking and violent images submitted by Joseph Darby, to which the media were denied access (Shogren and Simon). As Mirzoeff argues, this suggests Jacques Rancière's take on the Althusserian concept of interpellation: the Western subject is interpellated not as an individual but as part

of a flow of traffic. We are moved along with "nothing to see here," despite all our knowledge to the contrary ("Invisible Empire" 23). As "visual subjects," what Mirzoeff describes as "a person who is both the agent of sight…and an object of certain discourses of visuality" we watch the image-circus of the war on terror projected to us through a constant stream of 24-hour news media, knowing all the while that what we see is filtered to us through media, government and corporate authority (*Watching Babylon* 3). Nonetheless, we remain glued to the screen waiting for a kernel of "truth" to emerge.

Mirzoeff suggests that the images of Abu Ghraib, while shocking, had little staying power. I agree with Mirzoeff's assertion that the mere visibility of the Abu Ghraib photographs does "relatively little" on a politico-legal level, with little accountability having been held against the perpetrators and those at the higher end of the chain of command, but it is nonetheless worth considering in more depth the extent of the photographs' cultural reverberations ("Invisible Empire" 23). Each text studied in this section speaks to empire in its own way through its handling of the handheld camera and its relation to war on terror media production. Van Reet's *Spoils,* in particular, brings Abu Ghraib forward as a visual crisis alongside the media events of the execution of Nick Berg and the rescue of Jessica Lynch. Berg's execution at the hands of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi receives far less critical attention than the Abu Ghraib scandal, but it is important to view these events in tandem since Zarqawi claimed that Berg's murder had been a direct response to Abu Ghraib, having occurred only nine days after the images were published by CBS (Whitaker and Harding). Taken alongside Abu Ghraib, Zarqawi's creation of spectacle as an intervention in American media reporting, and the American military's manipulation of media spectacle in their fabricated rescue of Jessica Lynch, come together as moments of media crisis that show the digital camera's ability to destabilise the American military's image of itself. If "a key 'contact zone' for those wanting to contest empire is now visual culture in its fullest sense, ranging

from global visual media like CNN to the Internet and photography," then *Spoils* and indeed all three texts covered in this section explore how imaginaries of empire are maintained, but they also gesture to moments where empire is contested through ruptures in, or manipulations of, the structures and mechanisms of global visual culture (Mirzoeff "Invisible Empire" 23).

The "imperial body," for Mirzoeff, is one which inserts itself into the space it designates as the object of empire; it understands itself by negative differentiation through the assertion of a necessarily straight and white imperial sexuality ("Invisible Empire" 26). Jasbir Puar argues that such imperial sexuality gains definition in the contemporary US through a type of negative differentiation she names "homonationalism": the incorporation of certain queer subjects into the nation state, carrying with them normative ideals of race, class and gender (92). This configuration produces the Orientalised deviant Muslim subject, or what Mirzoeff would refer to, in language taken from the rhetoric of colonial expansion, as the "sodomite" ("Invisible Empire" 30). If the imaginary of empire is sustained through an imperial body, produced by negative differentiation against a deviant Orientalised Other, my intervention considers the role that the digital camera plays in producing such bodies and creating such difference. By attending to how the digital camera is invoked as a political object, this chapter considers how empire is reproduced through imagery, as Mirzoeff and Puar attest to, as well as suggesting how narrative contests, re-conceptualises or approaches the shifts in America's contemporary imperial image through its construction of the imperial body.

In Part Two I discussed how how drone warfare complicates traditional gendered positions by locating the soldier on domestic soil. This re-calibration renders it difficult for narrative to articulate heroic masculinities when such formations of military masculinity rely on being physically proximate to death. In contrast, handheld camera imagery enables the viewer to occupy a subjective position which feels viscerally close to the action of war. Framed through handheld

camera imagery, the imperial body theorised by Mirzoeff gains its power through this sense of its proximity to, and capacity to commit, violence in the space designated as "over there." By looking beyond the singular vision of the handheld camera, the narratives that make up Part Three go some way to illustrate how the imperial body is produced in contemporary war narratives using the "grunt doc" style (Westwell, "In Country" 387). Yet they also suggest how the violence implicated within the imperial body, though captured "over there," cannot be disentangled from the historical violences structuring the "over here."

VII. Competing visions of war in *Generation Kill*

In its narrativising of the invasion of Iraq, *Generation Kill* (2008) marks a formal and aesthetic contrast to the films discussed in Part Two. David Simon and Ed Burns' mini-series is an adaptation of Evan Wright's eponymous book (2004), which documents his time as an embedded reporter among the US Marine Corps' First Reconnaissance Battalion during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Similar to *Good Kill* and *The Hurt Locker*, the series comments on the role of the soldier in increasingly technologised modern warfare. However, the series offers some stark differences to the films discussed in Part Two: whereas *Good Kill* and *The Hurt Locker* focus on specialist individuals—the drone pilot and bomb disposal expert respectively—*Generation Kill* decisively positions its soldiers as non-specialists: they are reconnaissance Marines sent to front-line battle. The series is concerned primarily with the collective soldier body and isolates individuals only as they relate to the whole. Further, it examines the relationships between men, and how these relationships are constructed and shaped by the technologies that mobilise their daily lives: Kevlar, night vision goggles, Humvees, and communications technology like the embedded camera. In addition, whereas *Good Kill* and *The Hurt Locker* fit their protagonists with specialist equipment, enshrouding the soldier's body in layers of recycled masculine identity, *Generation Kill* shows its soldiers not only putting equipment on, but taking it off. The series pays significant attention to the naked male body; the rituals of dressing and undressing that it depicts create different frames through which military masculinity is animated on screen.

Generation Kill is composed of numerous and sometimes conflicting frames of reference, staging a complex interrelation of representation, reality and reportage that calls into question the verisimilitude of the action. While most of the lead roles are played by actors and the *mise en scène* is thoughtfully crafted, the creators nevertheless remain committed to delivering a loyal representation of Wright's book by including real participants in the invasion. For example, they consulted

Wright on his personal memories and hired former Marines as actors and consultants, including Sgt. Rudy Reyes as himself and Sgt. Eric Kocher as key military adviser (Morton). Visual and discursive modes of documentation— specifically the embedded handheld camera and Evan Wright, the embedded reporter—are encased in the series and suggest the workings of multiple narratives within the series' main plot. *Generation Kill*'s blurring of formal boundaries thus generates a sense of ambiguity towards "truth" by intertwining testimony, documentation, storytelling and myth.

As a television mini-series, the show is constructed to be episodic but compact. Compared to *The Hurt Locker,* which is structured episodically within the parameters of a feature-length Hollywood film, *Generation Kill* brings cinematic style to episodic form through seven hour-long episodes, or parts. In contrast to *The Hurt Locker*'s portrayal of a repetitive and directionless war, *Generation Kill* uses a rigid structure and time frame to isolate a temporally and directionally linear plot, tracing the invasion of Iraq from Base Camp in Kuwait through to the battalion's arrival in Baghdad. Due to this simple plotline, Roy Scranton has criticised the series for ignoring the "bigger picture" of Iraq through its attention to one singular, finite narrative extracted from this notoriously chaotic, fragmented, "forever" war ("Going Outside" 564). The regular, episodic structure of the show also imposes a viewing pattern unlike that which surrounded the coverage of Iraq: that we might tune in every week to watch an hour-long show about the invasion directly contrasts the bombardment of 24-hour media images that the war has become known for (Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon* 67). We might read *Generation Kill*'s rigid structure as an attempt to create, to an extent, a sense of order to the sequencing of the invasion of Iraq both as it happened and as it was conveyed to a civilian viewer.

However, the simplicity of the series' structure is complicated by the layered frames and modes of looking through which it presents the war and the competing narratives underpinning it. Developing Stacey Peebles' concept of

"digital vérité," Rachel Fox refers to *Generation Kill*'s use of such diegetic, "embedded" perspectives as "fragmentary focalizations" (471). According to Fox, these focalisations, while seemingly limited in scope, "make up that same 'bigger picture' perpetrated by the mainstream (corporate media, the Pentagon, etc)" (480). Counter to Scranton's critique of *Generation Kill*, Fox argues that the "bigger picture" is present in these focalisations, which work together to imply a larger and more cohesive narrative outside the immediate confines of the limited perspectives offered throughout the series. Fox's analysis focuses primarily on the series' heavy use of a diegetically-embedded handheld camera to provide an alternative perspective. During this chapter I intervene in the existing critical discussion of *Generation Kill*'s sense of a "bigger picture" by looking beyond Fox's identification of a hegemonic media narrative, considering the extent to which we can discern the workings of an imperial project beyond the immediate point of view of the soldier, through the series' layered frames of reference. I examine a breadth of technologies of seeing which are inserted into the series to provide alternate and sometimes conflicting narratives: from the embedded camera, to the broader use of a documentary filming style, ocular military technology such as night vision goggles, and the perspective of the embedded reporter. Looking particularly at the capture of Mirzoeff's notion of "the assertion of the imperial body, necessarily straight and white, over the confused sodomitical mass of the embodied spectacle that is the object of empire" I contend that the competing visions put forward by visual and discursive technologies gesture to an imperial narrative that extends beyond the strict formal confines of the series ("Invisible Empire" 28). As such, *Generation Kill* does not neatly align with what Westwell names the "grunt doc": the style of the typical war on terror film (documentary or otherwise) which ignores historical and political inquiry in favour of the myopic perspective of the combat soldier ("In Country" 387). While the series certainly appeals to this sense of myopia, the embedded modes of documenting together reveal ruptures in the war's hegemonic narrative and suggest, albeit fleetingly, the workings of a broader

imperial project by gesturing to what might be modified, filtered, repackaged or obscured.

Technology features in the opening episode of *Generation Kill* to establish an overarching, exceptionalist narrative of the American military as a highly competent military collective: a man-machine hybrid that fuses the technological and the corporeal. The opening scene of the episode named "part one" establishes a seamless combat operation, welding individual bodies together with technology to create a collective military machine. The first image is an extreme long shot of ominous, evenly spaced Humvees appearing in hazy view along the horizon, separating the stark blue and white of the desert sky and sands, before coalescing into one perfectly arranged convoy. The scene then cuts to fragments of machinery; extreme close-ups of wheels, wires and gun barrels are spliced with extreme close-ups of fingers, mouths and focused eyes, anonymising the men and implicating their bodies as vital components of the military machine. The men communicate urgently in military jargon, asserting their exclusivity through a technical language barrier between themselves and the civilian viewer (Jaramillo 310). The domineering appearance of the American military in this scene asserts the collective military body as physically, technologically and strategically superior. According to Fox, the extreme close-ups in *Generation Kill are* "drawn into a 'bigger picture' and are implicitly political, fitting within larger frames of discourse, which are put forward by the media and the government" (471). In the case of the opening scene, which identifies both body parts and machine components, the use of extreme close-ups scatters any preconceived hierarchy between the corporeal and the machinic—the military body is comprised in equal parts of digital and fleshy bodies. This establishes a frame of reference favoured by American media and political discourse: of high technical capability, military superiority and moral authority.

The opening scene is soon revealed not to be real combat but a training exercise—alluding to the layers of performance that contribute to the construction

of military masculinity, the soldier body, and the identity of the American military institution. As Monica Michlin argues, this scene evokes many conventions of war films as it opens *in media res,* makes use of quickening momentum, and alongside extreme close-ups, it includes plenty of long shots of spectacular explosions (5). Michlin continues to argue that this *mise en abyme* can be read either to deconstruct these cinematic conventions or to appear "as a 'coming attraction' for war as spectacle, even if this first spectacle is retrospectively unmasked as a fiction" (5). We could go one further and argue that the "coming attraction" of the spectacle of war is positioned as such *due to* its fiction. This training exercise is conspicuously sanitised, with its explosions devoid of any human collateral, and it thus directly contrasts the imagery of mutilated lifeless bodies that populate the rest of the series. This spectacular opening scene alludes to the artifice of military imagery by establishing an exceptionalist and, crucially, clean American military operation— much like the images devoid of bodies that supported the dominant media narrative of the invasion of Iraq (Luckhurst, "Iraq War Body Counts" 357). From its opening scene, then, *Generation Kill* invites a viewer to invest in the constructedness of the images that inform the narrative.

Nevertheless, it is significant that the series opens with such a striking sequence, in which machinery and corporeality merge in a demonstration of technical prowess. Unlike the tensions presented between the soldier and military technology in *Good Kill* and *The Hurt Locker*, *Generation Kill* opens by affirming man-machine hybridity and putting forward a cyborgian model of the modern soldier. In her "Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway describes the cyborg as a "leaky" entity combining machinic, organic and non-organic (11). The cyborg does away with the boundaries constructed not necessarily by science, but by the narratives that legitimise scientific discourse. She argues that while it is fundamentally porous, it is more feminine than masculine, and as such it contains the possibility for resistance to the dualisms that constitute much of Western

ideology of the self: we "don't need organic holism to give impermeable wholeness, the total woman and her feminist variants (mutants?)" (Haraway 61). However, Cristina Masters' reappraisal of Haraway's cyborg challenges the argument that the cyborg, as "illegitimate offspring" of the patriarchy, can be transgressive, or "unfaithful" to its fathers. Masters notes that in reality, the cyborg has remained loyal to its patriarchal, capitalist, militarised origins. She points to the "cyborg soldier" as a locus of militarised agency and power, transferred from the flesh-bound body onto the technologised body:

> The human/machine interface represents the privileging of technology over biology and therefore locates power and knowledge in the cyborg...The inscription of technology with masculinity fundamentally constitutes technology as rational, objective, and the source of moral knowledge claims. (313)

Masters suggests that since technology is culturally inscribed as masculine, military technology is understood as ultimately rational and objective in its composition, without questioning the discourses that have constructed it as such. Consequently, appealing to hierarchical dualisms, military technology occupies a masculine position whereas femininity is deferred onto the corporeal soldier, who is burdened with human weaknesses such as pride, desire and physical limitations (Masters 313).

In contrast to Masters' argument, technology does not feminise the soldiers in *Generation Kill,* but the merging of corporeality and technology does represent the men as "cyborg soldiers," and in doing so the technology reveals the gendered processes that subtend imperial conquest. Technology in *Generation Kill* expands Mirzoeff's notion of the "imperial body" from a "necessarily straight and white" corporeal construct to the "cyborg soldier" ("Invisible Empire" 33). The soldier's varied relationship to technology reveals moments of the "bigger picture" of imperial conquest; the soldier is articulated as an agent of empire, and it is through military technologies that he sees and is seen as such.

Mirzoeff's "imperial body" is one which asserts itself into the space it designates as the object of empire ("Invisible Empire" 26). *Generation Kill*'s use of ocular technology establishes this space in these terms. In particular, night vision technology enhances the soldier's biological capacity to see; the images it produces are inserted into the series' frame, creating a visual field which designates the landscape as an object of imperial conquest. In part one, as the battalion drive in convoy at night through unknown territory, the four main characters are pictured sat in their Humvee, each with different complicated-looking machinery attached to their eyes. The point of view alternates between close-up shots of the soldiers' faces and first-person point-of-view shots through the night vision goggles, rendering the terrain even more alien with its hazy green shapes and dazzlingly bright hue. As in the *Hurt Locker*, the series nods to sci-fi in its construction of these unsettling, alien images: with their ocular prostheses, the men could be strapped into a shuttle bracing to explore, do battle in, or colonise a far-flung corner of the galaxy.

Night vision technology came into popular use during the Iraq wars and revolutionised the way that the military conducted its operations—suddenly, darkness could be conquered, and order could be created out of the chaos that darkness imposed on the battlefield (Robben 139). Antonius Robben suggests that night vision goggles force a "hostile gaze," which mediates the image by unsettling and dehumanising its object to a degree where the sensation of killing itself becomes unreal. Battlespace becomes "a sensorium of generative mediation with a distinct visual culture—a composite of mediated combat realities that transforms humans into virtual targets and soldiers literally into killing machines that suspend natural darkness and fade out moving images with lethal force" (Robben 144). The "super-human" or indeed post-human qualities that night vision endows contribute to the circumvention of biological and emotional limitations that a soldier witnesses in battle (Masters 313). As we saw with drone technology in *Good Kill*, the mode

of looking enabled by the night vision goggles virtualises the surrounding terrain and creates an emotional distance between the soldier and his environment.

By invoking the first-person subject position through the night vision perspective, *Generation Kill* immerses the viewer into this gamified world. The night vision goggles fit into the *mise en scène* of gamified terrain and sci-fi imagery, delivering a technological specialist perspective. As viewers, we are invited to abandon our disbelief and invest in this world as seen through a high-tech masculine perspective, which suggests a context of authority and expertise behind what they see. The displacement of authority onto the technologised gaze comes into sharp relief when, in part four, the night vision perspective shows the accidental death of two Iraqi civilians at the hands of the Marines. Having misunderstood the Americans' warnings shots and approached the Marines, the moving vehicle is shot down, and the Marines continue to shoot the civilians as they escape the van and try to flee. This scene, which should be devastating, is flattened by the night vision perspective. Authority is bestowed through the technologised gaze, and it is the civilians, not the Marines, who are attributed blame. This scene's flattened affect conveys the landscape and the bodies that occupy it as objects of empire, constituted by the cyborg soldier's technologised visual field.

In addition to designating objects of empire, visual and discursive technologies in *Generation Kill* also produce the imperial body. By tracing the construction of these bodies through visual technologies we can discern multiple gendered formations underpinning empire-building in the post-9/11 American war imaginary. These formations emerge through the lens of the diegetic handheld camera; an "embedded" camera which is enfolded into the narrative. The camera provides an alternate perspective and carries an authority that comes with documenting events on behalf of American civilians watching at home, much like the role of the embedded reporter. This visual technology is pivotal to *Generation Kill*'s play with the porous boundaries of representation and reality, producing

images that seem to contribute to competing narratives, or, as one soldier notes, "versions" of the war. Rather than "feminizing" the soldiers, as Masters argues, the mode of seeing enabled by the embedded camera technology opens space for a broader expression of sexuality and masculinity among the soldiers, extending the assertion of imperial masculinity between technologised and corporeal bodies.

Generation Kill's embedded camera is brought along by one of the soldiers, Cpl. Lilley, to document the war. While it is used regularly in the series to capture the view from the Humvee, in echoes of real camera footage taken by American soldiers in Iraq, the embedded camera also offers a view into the more mundane and personal activities of the men that may not typically be shown in media reporting. In part one, for example, we are introduced to a group of Marines enjoying some down-time at their base in Kuwait, in the days leading up to the invasion. The scene is shot using the non-diegetic handheld camera, of which the shaky and reactive movements generate a sense of intimacy, immediately positioning the viewer as voyeur in this space. The camera pans over the men to reveal a homosocial setting of congregated bodies performing heteronormativity: we hear punches and slaps and see men play fighting hand-to-hand; we zoom in on shirtless, muscular body parts and sweaty skin; we overhear coarse discussions of strippers and porn films. Nested within this non-diegetic handheld view is Lilley and his camera, poised upon Sgt. Rudy Reyes, naked, as he gets changed. The viewer shares Lilley's gaze though the digital readout of the camera as it pans over extreme close-ups of his naked buttocks, chest and tattooed biceps. The movement of this close-up and closed-in passage suggests a perspective which cuts through the grand narrative of the war, represented by the media and high-budget war films, to a closed-in, intimate fragment.

If, as suggested in *Generation Kill*'s introduction, the grand narrative of the American invasion of Iraq is one of hegemonic technologised masculinity, then the perspective enabled by Lilley's embedded camera appears to construct Rudy

through an alternate frame as an object of the homoerotic gaze, shared between Lilley and the viewer. In his reappraisal of Laura Mulvey's influential analysis of the male gaze in cinema, Patrick Schuckmann examines the male erotic gaze in American action films of the 1980s, noting that "a double structure of desire…establishes a model for the relation between the male spectator and the image: on the one hand, he desires to possess the image…and, on the other hand, he desires to be or to become the image" (673). For the (targeted heterosexual male) viewer of *Generation Kill*, the shared gaze over Rudy repeats this model of objectification and identification, drawing him into the narrative and opening up the potential of desire to doubly become and possess the image. The scene's homoerotic overtones are juxtaposed with heteromasculine slang as Lilley murmurs "brah…," articulating a momentary rupture of the hegemonic grand narrative by an ineffable homoerotic desire. This brief moment can be read in terms of what Todd Reeser and Lucas Gottzén suggest is the potential for hegemonic masculinity to be transformed by "affective intensity," which "overflows and shocks the system of masculinity, leaving it transformed in some ways or less hegemonic or less 'hard' than it had been before" (152). Lilley's affective response to Rudy's body suggests a collapse of the hegemonic masculine collective and an intensifying of his connection to Rudy as two individuals, demonstrating affect's potential to "disintegrate a body, rendering it vulnerable or connected to other bodies" (Reeser 111). Providing another focalisation, the insertion of the embedded camera into this scene directs our "look" to a quiet, fleeting, intimate narrative occurring beneath the grand narrative.

The embedded camera, then, provides another frame through which to engage with the narrative of the invasion of Iraq. Its mode of looking opens up the military space to allow a perspective on the subjective processes that form the relations between the individual men. *Generation Kill*'s attention to the naked male body is integral to its exploration of male bonding and relationships because it

stages both strength and vulnerability, and it dissects the transition from corporeal to technological; individual to collective. When Lilley's gaze through the embedded camera is broken, the main, non-diegetic camera remains on Rudy, taking him in from a tilt shot, at low angle and close-up, as he puts on his body armour. The next is a tracking shot of Rudy in action, training in all his gear in the desert heat. This sequence is cut so as to appear as a series of snapshot images, each demonstrating a different stage in his transformation from nude figure to heavily-equipped warrior. This style of editing deconstructs the processes of masculinisation (and, by extension, emasculation) that I have explored in relation to *Grounded*, *Good Kill* and *The Hurt Locker.* In these texts, the act of putting on and wearing the flight jacket or bomb suit shows an uncomfortable layering of masculine identity, in each case appealing to traditional or pop-cultural images of masculinity to create a sense of unease around the subject's spatial and temporal positioning. Together these films suggest a military masculine subject who is out of place, or out of time, in the face of military technological advancements. In contrast, by creating a segmented sequence out of Rudy's suiting up, *Generation Kill* ritualises the transition from individual man to component in the collective machine. This sequencing implicates him in the advancement of military technology and the evolution of the "cyborg soldier." This process is presented not as uncomfortable but as linear and natural; the cyborg soldier is constructed as a palimpsestic assemblage, restacking layers of military masculinity to incorporate the development and insertion of technological prostheses.

Through visual and weapons technology, then, *Generation Kill* stages the play of a range of different masculinities—in fleshy and technologised bodies, individual and collective, homosocial, "metrosexual" and homoerotic. We might understand this as the dramatisation of "versions" of military masculinity in the same way that Sgt. Espera posits the notion of "versions" of the war captured on the embedded camera. Rudy is played by himself, a casting choice which adds

another layer of reality to the story that seems to pierce through this base camp scene using the embedded camera. But this sense of reality is quickly undermined by Espera, who upon seeing Lilley's camera wryly questions whether "CNN's going to want [Lilley's] version of the war." Espera is continuously placed in the series as the soldier who thinks seriously about the broader historical and political context of American actions in Iraq. That Espera raises the question of "versions" of the war raises the notion of multiple narratives, and multiple ideologies, occurring within the main frame.

Michlin contends that we cannot read the "snuff film" quality of the embedded camera's images outside the context of Abu Ghraib (17). While Michlin is referring to the series' inclusion of severed limbs and tortured bodies, we can extend this observation to the production of Rudy's body by the embedded camera. The inclusion of the camera's intimate gaze upon Rudy appeals to what Jasbir Puar calls the ideology of "US homonationalism": an "imaginative geography" which dovetails "two claims of US exceptionalism—of superior counter-terrorism intelligence and technology and of the greatest sexual freedom and tolerance" (69). Puar argues in *Terrorist Assemblages* that homosexual rights and freedoms gained a certain political currency during the war on terror. While domestically heterosexuality remains constitutive of national identity and belonging, and LGBTQ rights remain increasingly precarious in the United States, a version of white-coded "homonormativity" exists as a way for American institutions to position Muslim countries as backwards and "savage" compared to the supposedly progressive politics of the United States. Formations of hetero- and homonormativity bound in ideals of whiteness work collectively to "continue or extend the project of US nationalism and imperial expansion endemic to the war on terror" (Puar 2). In *Generation Kill*, the Marines' obsessive attention to Rudy's "metrosexuality," and their constant joking that "it doesn't make you gay if you think Rudy's hot," affirm this process of homonationalism. When the Marines find

a man with a personal photo taken with another man, they joke that the Iraqis have "their own Fruity Rudy"; they are incredulous to have found a "gay Iraqi" and they take a photo kissing his face. This attempt to violate the man's dignity exemplifies the project of homonationalism, as the American Marines are simultaneously able to enforce "gay" values at the same time as remaining highly homophobic in their language and behaviour. This short scene speaks, furthermore, to the photographs which emerged from Abu Ghraib, where a driving motivation for the abuse was the idea that sexual humiliation is the greatest source of shame for a Muslim man (Limon 545; Hersh).

Puar asserts that the rituals of torture at Abu Ghraib, and the images capturing them, were crucial to the military as bonding exercises, arguing that "sexuality constitutes a central and crucial component of the machinic assemblage that is American patriotism" (112). The production of the Muslim body as object of torture and of "deviant" sexuality works dialectically with the project of American homonationalism to underscore American "sexual exceptionalism," and these ideological formations dovetail to reveal America's own self-expression as empire (Puar 87, 92, 113). Mirzoeff argues a similar point, gesturing to the designation of the subaltern colonised body as "sodomite":

> Sodomy produces the embodied spectacle of deviant alterity as a reassurance to the imperial body that it has remained itself, despite the confusions of virtual and networked subjectivity. That is to say, the imperial subject may be confused, but it is not and cannot be a sodomite, whereas the colonized and subaltern are always already sodomitical, whether or not they practice it. ("Invisible Empire" 33)

In *Generation Kill*, the production of Rudy's body through both the homoerotic and the technologised gaze exemplifies the assertion of American empire through sexuality. Upon a narrative landscape rife with homophobia and "gay hajji" jokes, Rudy emerges as an exemplary "imperial body." The frame created by the embedded camera gives clarity to this positionality and enables us to untangle the

ideological processes that generate imperial bodies and masculinities in the post-Abu Ghraib war imaginary.

While on one hand the camera's perspective seems to cut through preconceptions of military life, it remains suffused with ideological meaning that informs how we read what we see. *Generation Kill* scatters these perspectives among other heavily stylised representations of the war through the camera readout. In so doing, at the same time as the camera appears to bring us closer to the action, it also keeps us at a level of remove. Acting as another pair of eyes on the action, the embedded camera witnesses a lot of the violent aftermath of the invasion from the perspective of the American Marines. As the tank rolls through Baghdad, this perspective is delivered to the viewer of *Generation Kill* through the digital readout of the camera: we see raw, grainy images in a flat colour scale, reminiscent of the emergent digital camera technology of the time. This imagery feels rudimentary and intimate, giving the impression of immediacy to the action. But the sense of reality generated by this imagery is complicated by their stylisation, which appeals to genre conventions similar to the perspective invoked by the night vision goggles. Driving past the smouldering aftermath of an explosion, the embedded camera captures charred cars, mutilated bodies and severed arms which appear to reach out of the ground. This imagery recalls zombie horror films in addition to digital vérité horror films such as *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *Cloverfield* (2008), which were released around the same time as *Generation Kill,* inviting a viewer to abandon their initial shock and invest in the image as a story. Whether framed through the night vision goggles or the readout of the digital camera, the perspectives enabled by technology in *Generation Kill* are complex and often contradictory. They suggest multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives occurring under the hegemonic narrative of the war. These perspectives appear disorienting in their extensive play with representation and reality, and it is difficult to gauge where the "reporting" ends and the story begins.

The contradiction between reporting and storytelling exists as *Generation Kill*'s organising principle; it is a tension that underpins all modes of witnessing and testimony in the series, but which finds its purest expression in the embedded reporter, through whose testimony the story is conveyed. As a narrative device, we can read the figure of the embedded reporter in parallel with the embedded camera. Similar to the camera, Wright's position entails both clarity and obfuscation, and he exists as a mediator between the viewer and the war through whom imperial bodies and objects of empire come to definition.

Embedded reporting, a journalistic practice in which a reporter is attached to and operates from a military unit, was introduced into the Iraq war by the US Department of Defense on a "massive" scale (Pfau et al. 75). The Pentagon's decision to embed reporters came as a strategic response to criticisms during the first Gulf war that media access was too restrictive (Fahmy and Johnson 302). Embedding enabled immediate access to the conflict, with stories emerging right from the heart of the action, while remaining heavily vetted by the military's office of public affairs. Journalists were required to undergo a one-week training session, and they were heavily restricted as to what they could report on; any information that was deemed to reveal the location of a unit, or endanger the units' safety, was forbidden, and these rules were interpreted broadly as providing "too much" information (LaFleur 4).

In practice, however, the Pentagon needn't have been too concerned about the leak of information from their embedded reporters. The practice of embedding resulted in an unequal relationship between reporter and soldier, where the reporter became reliant on the military for their safety. In a profile for *The Hill*, embedded reporter Gina Cavallaro described the dynamics of embedding as a mutually-beneficial PR exercise, claiming, "I find the media is afraid to get around on its own in Iraq, and rightly so. They're relying more on the military to get them where they want to go, and as a result, the military is getting smarter about getting its own story

told. It almost seems like a little bit of quid pro quo" (Eisele). The practice of embedding journalists attracted heavy criticism for the way it enabled the Pentagon to shape the narrative. If a journalist gave away "too much" information they would endanger themselves just as much as the military unit.

But even stronger than the sense of safety, perhaps, was the sense of camaraderie felt between the reporter and the military unit. Embedded journalists reported feeling "virtually 'adopted' by the Marines" (Reid) and "[b]ombarded with drama and emotions" to the point where "it was impossible to step back" (Zucchino). To write critically or objectively about the men who you have ridden alongside, eaten with, listened to and come under danger with would be to write critically about your buddies. Observing this dynamic, Roger Stahl notes a shift from the "war correspondent" to the "soldiered journalist" (*Militainment, Inc* 86). Embedding, for Stahl, fits into the category of what he calls "militainment," and he traces the emergence of embedded reporting during the invasion of Iraq alongside the rise of militarised reality television shows such as Fox's *Boot Camp* (2001) and MTV's Navy-sponsored *Real World/Road Rules Extreme Challenge* (2001) (*Militainment, Inc* 73-5). The emergence of such varied forms of "militainment" blurs the lines between fantasy and factual storytelling, as reporting of the war on terror provided a potent backdrop against which civilians could enact a militarised fantasy of self-improvement. At the same time, these television shows reflected well on the military during wartime, as they normalised the militarisation of civilian life. We can see such distortion of "slice of life" reality seeping into the formal elements of *Generation Kill* through the character of Rudy Reyes, a real person, who has since enjoyed a post-military life as a fitness influencer. Moreover, the ambiguity between fantasy and factual storytelling is crystallised by the series' centring of Evan Wright as the primary perspective. The very position of the embedded reporter represents a blurring of the line between objectivity and polemic.

Embedded with *Rolling Stone*, Wright appealed very much to Stahl's idea of the "soldiered journalist," commenting on the production of *Generation Kill*: "I don't care about the American public…I made this for, like, 20 Marines I know" (Sancton). He vividly articulates this sense of camaraderie in his original article for *Rolling Stone*, from which the series was adapted:

> The fact is, there's a definite sense of exhilaration every time there's an explosion and you're still there afterward. There's another kind of exhilaration, too. Everyone is side by side facing the same big fear: death. Usually, death is pushed to the fringes of things you do in the civilian world. Most people face their end pretty much alone, with a few family members if they are lucky. Here, the Marines face death together, in their youth. If anyone dies, he will do so surrounded by the very best friends he believes he will ever have. (Wright, "The Killer Elite")

Writing from within the Marine unit, Wright expresses as "fact" the exhilaration of coming close to death. He aligns himself with the Marines by claiming the authority of having experienced this near-death experience; civilians occupy a different "world" where time and space operate differently. For Wright, in the here-and-now of Iraq, he faces the very same prospect of death as his Marine friends, and as such is absorbed into the collective. While he uses the pronoun "they" for both civilian and Marine, speaking to the uncertain space the embedded reporter occupies between both spheres, there is a fondness that seeps into Wright's reporting of the Marines that renders impartiality difficult, if not impossible.

In her discussion of the representation of masculinity in *Generation Kill*, Jenna Pitchford brings Wright's narrative together alongside Colby Buzzell's memoir of the war in Iraq, *My War* (2005), as two Iraq narratives which demonstrate the immediacy of the events (365). In Wright's case, this is rooted in his role as an embedded reporter, whereas for Buzzell, an infantryman, the immediacy of his writing emanates from it having been originally written from base, as an internet

blog. While Pitchford's analysis rightly identifies the changing face of American military masculinity in these narratives, it does not attend to the difference in position of Wright and Buzzell; nor does it question how the perspective of the soldier and the reporter might differ in terms of perceiving and describing the masculinities performed within their units. This elision is revealing for the extent of the embedded reporter's integration into the military unit. His experience and authority become so aligned with the soldiers he is reporting on that his perspective becomes indistinguishable.

Michlin contends that *Generation Kill* "is more part of Hollywood's war machine than of its dismantling, in its celebration of the warrior ethic, and of the warrior's gaze" (31). Extending Michlin's argument, I suggest it is the sense of a warrior's gaze that collapses the viewpoint of the embedded reporter and the soldier's embedded camera. We might understand the embedded reporter as a discursive technology, or narrative device, which complements the embedded camera. Wright is pictured throughout the show with a notebook, or camera in hand—not a video camera such as Lilley's, but a Leica M6. As with the embedded video camera's attention to severed limbs, the series draws attention to Wright's methods of capture at moments depicting violence and horror. When the convoy rolls past the corpse of a small child with her legs severed, for example, it is Wright's horrified face, and then his camera, that take the image in. Wright's testimony and capture designate this mutilated body as an object of empire and mediate its representation to the viewer. During a time at which digital cameras had become the primary means of photography, Wright's choice of a film-based Leica suggests that his photographs are intended to produce aestheticised and thus heavily mediated images of violence and suffering in contrast to the immediacy of the digital camera of the soldiers.

Similarly, Wright is often pictured scribbling into a notebook. He is usually positioned peripherally to the subject of his writing, such as in a short scene in part

seven of the series where he records the complaint of a local Iraqi man to a bemused Marine Captain about the American presence in Iraq. These moments remind us of the several iterations of storytelling that *Generation Kill* has undergone, from the original articles in *Rolling Stone* in 2003, to Wright's book adaptation published a year later, to the series which aired in 2008. Moreover, the regular appearance of the notebook attributes a sense of authority to the story, reminding the viewer that this is adapted from journalism. While the controversies associated with embedded reporting are less immediately evident in the series compared to Wright's writing, the frequent attention to the notebook draws attention to the fact that all the information available to us in the series is filtered through the experience of somebody else. In this way, the notebook—alongside the Leica and the embedded handheld video camera—exists as a technology of witnessing and testimony exerting control over what is included in the narrative, and what is side-lined or ignored.

The narrative decisions taken by Wright have come under scrutiny by critics of the series, who have commented on how the series says "virtually nothing about the local population, whose lives were upended by the events it chronicles" (Finer). Iraqis appear in the series as shapes upon the horizon, anonymous faces in a crowd, or as wounded or destroyed bodies. Lifeless bodies scatter the roadsides like props to a horror show, and are even referred to by one Marine as resembling "a Halloween fun house." In the examples I have explored, a young girl's mutilated body is captured by Wright's Leica, and a local man's measured dissent to American presence is recorded in his notebook. Iraqi presence and testimony, where it exists, is filtered through white, American discursive and aesthetic technologies.

The moral and formal ambiguity of the series lends space for a commentary on contemporary imperialism, "even if the actual rationale for war is only questioned by the embedded reporter and one (Native-American/Mexican-American) soldier" (Michlin 2). This soldier, Sgt. Antonio Espera, appears

regularly throughout the articles, book and series. Identifying as both Mexican-American and Native-American, Espera is the most openly scathing of the politics of the war, and is conflicted about his presence in Iraq. He confides to Wright: "I refused a diploma from my community college—I didn't want no piece of paper from the white master. Then I joined the corps; figured if you can't beat 'em, join 'em." Espera's testimony—often confided to Wright at night while lying hidden away underneath a Humvee sharing a cigarette—is striking for its honesty about the conflicted positionality of non-white American soldiers, and particularly those from an Indigenous American background.

Wright generally positions Espera's speeches as a point of comic relief, characterising him as a man who "frequently rails about the dominance of America's 'white masters' and the genocide of his Indian ancestors" (Wright, *Generation Kill* 114). But there is certainly a seriousness to Espera's commentary, and it is only through his testimony that an attempt is made to contextualise the Iraq war into a bigger picture: "[h]ell, the US did it at home for 200 years—killed Indians, used slaves, exploited immigrant labor to build a system that's good for everybody today. What does the white man call it? Manifest Destiny" (Wright, "The Killer Elite Part Two"). Espera's comments place another frame over the invasion of Iraq, underscoring it not as an adventure story, or horror show or sci-fi series, but as a continuation of the logics of imperialism that founded the United States. Furthermore, by invoking "Manifest Destiny," Espera's comments allude to the frontier mythology that undergirds American war stories. Wright begins his book introducing the men in the First Reconnaissance Battalion as "the Marine Corps' cowboys," characterising the men as a collective of rugged individualists, and seemingly establishing the narrative as a genre-inflected adventure story (*Generation Kill* 23). But Espera's comments speak back to this version of frontier mythology, gesturing to the whiteness that binds these stories and their construction

of a "savage" Other—Indian, Iraqi, and many others in between—to necessitate the Manicheistic, heroic narrative.

Generation Kill is thus complex in its ambiguity, and it both opens and closes avenues for testimony. It pointedly excludes Iraqi voices, and Iraqi people exist latently in the background of both Wright's narrative and the series. Wright's narrative is fairly unusual in its inclusion of the honest perspective of a Native American soldier fighting an imperial war abroad. Nevertheless, this perspective is heavily mediated: firstly by Wright, a white reporter who couches Espera's words in humour, and then by the mechanisms of *Generation Kill*'s (re)production of his story. Espera's "Manifest Destiny" speech is heavily edited in the series. His references to slavery, Indian genocide and labour exploitation are cut entirely; all that remains is in part one where he quips, with a smile, "it's destiny, dog! White man's gotta rule the world!" The full articulation of "Manifest Destiny" is implied to be too potent to be marketable to a consumer audience. What's more, the real Sgt. Espera was relieved from his duties for his "Manifest Destiny" comments, on the grounds that they were "racist" towards the white Marines in his Battalion (Waxman). Taken in their totality, the series, article, book and the public affairs systems of the military institution work together, demonstrating the capture, manoeuvre, filtering and policing of Indigenous testimony to produce a hegemonic grand narrative of the war that smooths over any pockets of difference or dissent.

Enfolding multiple frames of reference into its narrative, *Generation Kill* embraces ambiguity. The series' representation of masculinity positions the men as components of a collective, technologised military machine; yet, simultaneously, its attention to the naked male body is striking for its representation of intimacy, vulnerability and individuality. Similarly, the series invokes technology to offer different modes of seeing that draw us closer to the action at the same time as maintaining a level of detachment. The perspectives offered by the night vision goggles, and especially by the embedded camera and embedded reporter, provide

competing, "soda-straw" view-points which heavily mediate how a viewer reads and responds to the story (Stahl, *Militainment Inc* 89). Multiple imbricated, limited perspectives structure the narrative from the flattened vision of the night vision goggles, to the personal and intimate gaze of the embedded camera, to the series' very structure, as it fixates on one small and linear narrative concerning the initial invasion of Iraq. At the same time, the series' invocation of technologies of witnessing and testimony provide frames though which we catch sight of the ideological formations attesting to the "bigger picture" of the war. Through the capture and circumscription of subjects and objects of empire, we see the entanglement of representation and reality and thus the constructedness of war storytelling, speaking to the ways in which entrenched mythologies are sustained and reproduced in the war imaginary.

VIII. Capturing Prisoners, Capturing Images in *Spoils*

Chapter seven considered how *Generation Kill* manipulates televisual form to draw attention to the layers of performance and exclusion implicit to even the most "realist" modes of storytelling. Blurring the boundaries of representation, reality and reportage, *Generation Kill*'s emphasis on the role of the digital camera in capturing, filtering and excluding information highlights the perspectives and mythologies that are enfolded into narrative and which give war stories authority in the collective imagination. The remainder of Part Three now turns to literary representations of digital cameras in the war on terror. Looking firstly to Brian Van Reet's novel *Spoils*, and then in chapter nine to Roy Scranton's *War Porn,* I consider how representations of images and technology in fiction might provide further, alternate perspectives on how the handheld camera operates within visual networks as a means of framing and narrating war.

Brian Van Reet's debut novel *Spoils* (2017) tells the story of Cassandra Wigheard, a white, blonde, nineteen-year-old American soldier who is captured by foreign insurgents in Iraq alongside her two male counterparts: the honest Sargeant McGinnis and the crass, aggressive Private Crump. The three are kept in dark, isolated cells, and brought out at junctures to be filmed making statements and reciting the *shahada* for jihadist propaganda videos. Meanwhile, an American soldier named Sleed is on the team tasked with her rescue. Crump is executed, refusing to recite the *shahada*, and McGinnis eventually dies of his injuries. Cassandra is taken to an open space to be filmed shooting at American forces. She takes an opportunity to flee and is shot and killed, ironically, by the American forces out to rescue her. The novel ends with Sleed finding her lifeless body alongside one of her young captors, the digital camera beside them, still recording.

The captive female soldier is bound by contradiction: she must be masculine enough to embody the strength of the American military, but feminine enough to appeal as a damsel in distress (Boyle 151). To be sure, Wigheard is consistently

masculine in her characterisation: she is stoic and resolute, having trained "to fight, to kill, to prove, to defy the small domestic compassions of kith and home" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 34). Her experience of embodiment is masculinised, staying "grounded" by "tensing calves, then quads, abs, lats, traps" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 34). If, as Jack Halberstam argues and as I discussed in chapter four, masculinity becomes legible as such when it leaves the hegemonic masculine body, then *Spoils* insists upon Cassandra's "heroic" masculinity, produced by her female body (Halberstam 2). As I have discussed in relation to George Brant's play *Grounded*, the figure of the female soldier foregrounds the ways in which masculinity becomes detached from the body, and this in turn highlights how the soldier becomes dehumanised through the domestication of war by drone technology. The female soldier in *Grounded* is exemplary of the "denial of gender" identified by Robin Truth Goodman as conventional of women's war narratives (26). In contrast, in *Spoils* Cassandra's body is not positioned as a site of stereotypical femininity, but femininity is nevertheless conferred upon her by the competing ideological, technological and narrative mechanisms of war storytelling that represent her. If the female soldier in *Grounded* helps to reveal the dehumanising logics of drone warfare, in *Spoils* the female soldier reveals the gendered conventions and modes of representation that create compelling stories in the war imaginary.

Cassandra's story responds to two American media crises at the beginning of the Iraq war: the capture and rescue of Pfc. Jessica Lynch in 2003, and the capture and filmed execution of the American civilian Nick Berg in 2004. The rescue of Jessica Lynch on 23 March 2003 is remembered for its layers of spectacle and artifice. On 23 March 2003, Iraqi forces ambushed a convoy in which Lynch was serving as a unit supply specialist with the 507th Maintenance Company. Lynch was severely injured, captured and taken to an Iraqi hospital, where she was kept for 9 days, before being rescued by US Army Special Forces on 1 April 2003 (Schmidt and Loeb). While much of the media spotlight was dedicated to Lynch's

rescue, seven other servicemembers were captured and rescued after 21 days, including Spc. Shoshona Johnson, who gained recognition for being the first black female prisoner of war in United States history (Collins). Lynch's Humvee driver, Spc. Lori Piestewa, a member of the Hopi tribe, died in Iraqi hospital; she was the first Native American woman to die in combat while serving in the US military, and was also the first woman in the US military to be killed in the Iraq war (Davidson). That Lynch gained the most national and international attention was no coincidence; as Deepa Kumar notes, the emphasis on Lynch as a young, white, blonde woman permitted the perpetuation of a rescue narrative of a "damsel in distress," the rehabilitation of the "girl next door" and the protection of "all American" values (300–302). The race and gender dynamics of her rescue fed a media narrative appealing to nationalist and paternalist ideals championing the masculine protection of a feminine homeland—one inscribed with whiteness and founded on a cultural mythos of a white femininity under threat (Prividera and Howard 33). Lynch's capture and rescue, then, was timely from a media perspective: only days into the United States' invasion of Iraq, this event enabled an outpouring of sensationalist and propagandistic media narratives to drive support for the war.

Of course, the veracity of the Lynch story was soon contested. John Kampfner's reporting for the *BBC* and *The Guardian* revealed that, contrary to American reports, Lynch had not fired her gun during the ambush (*War Spin*; "The Truth About Jessica"). She had not been shot or stabbed, but had gained her injuries instead from the vehicle crash, and had not, contrary to several reports, been abused at the Iraqi hospital (Tran). According to Kampfner's BBC documentary *War Spin* (2003), the Iraqi military had fled the hospital the day before her rescue, suggesting that her dramatic rescue was staged. The report further alleges that Dr. Harith a-Houssona, in charge of her care, had unsuccessfully attempted to deliver Lynch back to the US military in an ambulance before being shot at and forced to return

to the hospital (Kampfner, "The Truth about Jessica"). Lynch herself has resisted claims of her heroism and has denounced the US military and media manipulation of her story as propaganda (Tran). Despite these revelations, the story of Jessica Lynch's rescue continued to symbolise national pride, testifying to the power of such heavily binarised, gendered narratives to inform a national mythology combining masculine strength and feminine weakness; white heroism and Muslim deviancy; military prowess and domestic vulnerability.

While holding the capture and rescue of Jessica Lynch firmly in its narrative imagination, *Spoils* also responds to the filmed execution of Nick Berg by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Berg was a civilian radio tower repairman who had travelled to Iraq to search for work in support of the American campaign. Due to the independent nature of his travels to Iraq, the events leading up to his capture are unclear. On 7 May 2004 a video was released on an Islamic website of Berg kneeling in an orange Guantanamo-style jumpsuit, surrounded by masked men. Berg was then beheaded on camera, with an accompanying speech by his executor, al-Zarqawi, claiming that the execution was in retaliation for the torture of Muslims at Abu Ghraib prison, the details of which had leaked only days before (Whitaker and Harding; Masnerus and Dao). This execution would be the first of many and would inspire the methods made notorious by ISIS in the 2010s, with significant resource being invested into equipment to harness the power of photography and the Internet. As William Merrin notes, this strategy capitalised on "cheap, small-scale acts of absolute body horror [which] could impact upon the global psyche almost as forcibly and traumatically as the downing of the World Trade Center" (223). The media quickly became a focal point of jihadism: in 2005, for example, an Al-Qaeda deputy named Ayman al-Zawahiri told al-Zarqawi that "we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media" (Peritz). Berg's execution thus signalled the beginning of a media war fought by Islamic insurgents to rival the campaigns produced by the United States.

As a response to both the Lynch and Berg crises, then, Cassandra is fixed between competing American and jihadist ideological narratives. But while it is critical of some of the ways in which war is constructed and reported in the media, *Spoils* also emphasises that all war stories use rhetorical techniques to offer authority, embellishment and affective power to the narrative. This is illustrated in the novel through its attention to perspective, voice and mythology. The narrative offers three very different perspectives on the one central event of the capture and eventual death of three American soldiers at the hands of insurgents in Iraq. The story is recounted through the first-person perspective of one of the captors, Abu al-Hool, and through that of Sleed, an American soldier tasked with the rescue of the captive soldiers. Cassandra, the novel's female protagonist, is one of the captives and the last to die; she is narrated in the third person. While the inclusion of multiple perspectives in *Spoils* may suggest an attempt to represent war from competing angles, the inclusion of a female soldier through the third person reveals the implied authority attributed to the hegemonic masculine voice in war storytelling. Further, in its critique of the composition of war stories, *Spoils* places particular emphasis on the role of the digital camera in constructing and reifying war. Weaponised by both American and insurgent forces, the digital camera emerges as a key agent in the novel; its presence looms heavily throughout the narrative, threatening to capture, reveal, distort and immortalise stories.

Spoils, then, is well-aware of itself as a war story. The novel brings together the idea of competing media narratives alongside successive myths, motifs and narratives to elucidate how such familiar imagery and techniques contribute to a constructed and almost formulaic conception of war in the popular imagination. In this chapter I examine in more detail how *Spoils* manipulates the constituent components of war storytelling to draw attention to its own constructedness. I attend to the novel's use of masculine voice and perspective, as well as its invocation of both classical and frontier mythologies, to consider how its central female soldier

is held "captive" by mechanisms of war storytelling. Key to the sense of captivity is the presence of the digital camera throughout the narrative, and in looking to how the camera is represented with a power and agency denied to the human characters, I argue that *Spoils* assimilates capturing prisoners and capturing images. As I contend during this chapter, the figure of the captive female soldier brings to definition the role of agency and masculine authority in war storytelling. Through this figure, the novel reveals and disrupts the mechanisms of war storytelling by unravelling the threads that weave supposed truths into the war imaginary.

Spoils opens assertively: "[s]he is the most dangerous thing around" (3). The novel's first word, the third-person pronoun "she," brings its protagonist into view by fixing her as the object of the narrative. With distance, this story of a female soldier is told in the present tense through an authoritative masculine voice, which offers credibility to a narrative opening which is otherwise surprising: for a war story to begin with "she" feels unusual, and even more so that she would be defined superlatively as "the most dangerous." This apparent accolade is complicated by her reduction to a "thing," an objectification that is echoed later in the opening passage as she is referred to as "this one" (3). The protagonist, Cassandra, thus faces a double erasure as both a woman and a soldier: her agency is compromised by virtue of her gender and by her implication as a component in the American military machine. The entirety of *Spoils'* opening passage is presented with masculine authority. The second line reads, "[t]he best soldiers are like her, just on the far side of childhood. Their exact reasons for fighting don't matter much" (3). Employing again the superlative, the narration is attributed a knowledge that can only come with time and experience. This implication is reinforced into the second line as we gain a sense of successive soldiers with individual aspirations blurring into one entity, of which the details "don't matter much." The opening passage thus establishes a narrative voice which is anonymous and omniscient, but

simultaneously familiar in tone. This narration sets up an instantly recognisable war story, legitimised through an assuredly masculine, authoritative voice.

Spoils' assertion of itself as a war story is supported by Van Reet's invocation of Greek myth to frame the narrative. The novel opens with an epigraph taken from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon:*

> Low lie the shattered towers whereas they fell
> And I—ah burning heart!—shall soon lie low as well.
> (Van Reet, *Spoils* 1)

These words, a lament for the defeat of Troy and her impending death, are spoken by Cassandra—straightforwardly linking the prophet of Greek mythology to *Spoils*' protagonist. *Agamemnon* concerns Agamemnon's return to Argos having triumphed at Troy. He returns with "spoils," including Cassandra, who has been captured as his slave. His wife, Clytemnestra, awaits him; she kills Agamemnon and Cassandra in response to her husband's sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenîa. *Spoils* positions its protagonist, Cassandra, directly into conversation with myth through her capture and death. But *Agamemnon*'s Cassandra is also a seer—she has the power of prophesy, bestowed to her by the god Apollo, but is condemned to never be believed. *Spoils*' Cassandra echoes the Cassandra of myth in her voicelessness, with her story told in masculine-coded, third-person narration. The narration and invocation of myth work together to assert *Spoils*' awareness of itself within the long tradition of war storytelling. From this position, the novel teases apart the constituent elements of war narrative and the intertwining of action, memory and myth.

Built upon the foundations laid by Greek myth, *Spoils* further echoes *Agamemnon*, and especially the story of Cassandra, through its attention to seeing. This theme emerges towards the end of the opening chapter, when Cassandra falls into unconsciousness following the ambush of her convoy by insurgents. The narration enters free indirect style as she is shot at, and time slows down; Cassandra

reflects in these moments on the contingency of engaging in a firefight with someone who you can neither see nor know. The enemy, she thinks, operates a machine in the hope that it might kill her, "[without] ever having seen her. Or she them" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 15). She sends "rounds blindly downrange through the white cloud of dust and gun smoke" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 15). In this space, vision is obscured and split-second actions with world-ending consequences occur "blindly"—echoing the mythological Cassandra in being stripped of her ability to "see." The opening chapter ends with Cassandra's descent into unconsciousness as she slips underwater, "sinking deeper into the dark tangle of fluid reeking of pungent, musty life" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 18). This ending sets up the rest of the narrative as concerned with the dynamics of visibility and invisibility, suggesting that while *Agamemnon*'s Cassandra has no voice, *Spoils*' Cassandra has neither voice nor sight. As I explore later in this chapter, *Spoils* dwells instead upon technologies of seeing, specifically the threat of the narrative potential represented by the digital handheld camera.

The events of the ambush and Cassandra's capture are brought to clarity only later in the novel through the first-person, past-tense perspective of Sleed. Sleed learns of the ambush via radio, late at night, while he and two other American soldiers have surreptitiously left base to loot their own "spoils"—gold, guns, drugs and money—from the abandoned Al-Faw Palace. Their absence from base means that the squad is late to arrive at the scene, at which point Cassandra, McGinnis and Crump are long gone, and the smouldering shell of the bullet-ridden Humvee is all that remains. Sleed narrates:

> The streets were narrow, unpaved, empty, and it wasn't long before we found the missing truck. We spotted a heat signature and deep tire tracks in the mud by the side of the road. The Humvee had crashed through a low brick wall and rolled in a ditch, engine still running, bullet holes all through the cab. We looked around and called for survivors, but there were none. (Van Reet, *Spoils* 111)

This passage describes absence marked by lateness; the scene is striking for its visual markers of emptiness. Streets are "empty," movement is detectable only by the space left by "deep tire tracks"; presence is negatively defined through latent energy left by the "heat signature." But coming to the scene after the event, and viewing it in the past tense, is what enables Sleed to gain a clearer picture of what happened. The gaps, holes and marks leave imprints upon the landscape and create shape in our imagination, indicating the violence of the fire fight and the confused horror of the soldiers' capture. The implied clarity of vision that comes with past tense narration offers authority to the speaker, and gestures to an impossibility of making sense of war in the present tense.

In Greek mythology, Cassandra's central contradiction is that she can see into the future but is never believed. In *Spoils,* Cassandra navigates the war and her capture blindly, in darkness, and her story is only legible in hindsight. As a response to the separate captures of Jessica Lynch and Nick Berg, and built upon Van Reet's own experiences in Iraq, Cassandra's story in *Spoils* is also built upon many truths. Nevertheless, these truths are only legitimised through the double-edged masculine narrative voice, speaking both in the omniscient present tense and in Sleed's past-tense account. This echoes Aeschylus' Cassandra, whose words are attributed to Apollo speaking through her (Murray 12). In this reading, both Cassandras witness a displacement of agency and self by the masculine voice. Further, the denial of agency for *Spoils'* Cassandra echoes that of Jessica Lynch, whose story was continuously taken up, sensationalised and distorted by American media. That her capture is narrated doubly through the masculine voice both from the present and the future suggests a similar fate for Cassandra, as her story appears contained from multiple temporal positions.

This formal narrative containment of Cassandra's story acts as a frame through which we learn of Cassandra's physical captivity. Held for long periods of time in a dark cell, she is taken out periodically, alongside her fellow hostages, to

appear in front of a video camera. Throughout the novel she is made to record hostage videos in echoes of those which held the West's horrified imagination in the early 2000s. The threat of capture by insurgents is mirrored in the novel, then, by the camera's threat of capture. But whereas a hostage situation threatens death, the digital camera's threat lies in its power to immortalise. Echoing Aeschlyus' Cassandra, the camera as an agent of sight represents a distorted power of prophesy. In its ability to see, capture and reproduce stories, the camera's prophesy lies not in one but multiple certainties. Many stories and multiple eventualities are embedded in, and can emerge from, capture by one object of visual technology. Much of the emotional power of *Spoils*' invocation of the digital camera emanates from these jihadist scenes, appealing to a Western reader's cultural memory of the decapitation videos that increased in popularity and sophistication as the Syrian civil war saw the rise of ISIS. But the novel is also careful to assert that digital cameras were ubiquitous in Iraq—among Americans, Iraqis and foreign fighters—and the camera is bestowed with power and agency, regardless of whose hands are pressing record. By situating the camera, and its narrative potential, among the insurgent and the American sides, *Spoils* fixes Cassandra between competing ideologies. Her agency is doubly displaced as the camera's presence threatens to suspend her in time and immortalise her in the West's collective memory.

The American use of digital cameras is firstly introduced in *Spoils* through Sleed, in an episode taking place "32 days before" Cassandra's capture, where he recounts taking "trophies" of the war with fellow American soldiers; "souvenirs for the grandkids yet to be born" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 45). His friend, Galvan, takes photographs of dead bodies using "a digital camera he'd been carrying around everywhere" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 46). Uncomfortable with this practice, Sleed contemplates the ethics of these types of "souvenirs": "[p]hotographing dead troops fell under a gray area of the law of war…You could safely kill them but not take pictures of what you'd killed. Made sense to me. Once you start in with trophies,

even photographs, the nastier shit is bound to follow" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 46). Introducing photographs as "trophies" of war, the novel suggests here that the titular "spoils" concern representations of war, rather than the material objects such as corpses or even looted weapons and possessions, produced in conflict. The power, it suggests, lies in images. We might extend this sentiment to the capture of Cassandra, whose presence for the insurgents is so powerful because of the possibility to reproduce and disseminate her image to a global audience. But this passage also attributes agency to the camera by suggesting that "nastier shit is bound to follow" from the act of taking photographs. Gesturing to the dissemination of images of torture by American troops at Abu Ghraib prison, which I will address in more detail in the following chapter, Sleed suggests that unethical and illegal behaviour is an inevitability initiated by the presence of the camera. The camera is positioned here as the main actor, possessing power and agency displaced from the soldier, and driving the narrative.

The power attributed to the camera in *Spoils* renders it a menacing presence throughout the novel. Van Reet has cited the sense of fear that he and his fellow soldiers felt in the presence of a camera when on duty in Iraq, speaking both to the camera's known potential to incriminate American soldiers, and to the widespread fear of jihadist hostage videos that were beginning to circulate (Collier). *Spoils* is an unusual American war on terror novel in its attention to the use of digital cameras by jihadists and insurgents because it features no descriptions of photographs, preferring instead to dwell on the affects generated by the presence of the camera. The introduction of a camera in the hands of Cassandra's captors appeals to the capture and execution of US hostage Nick Berg in 2004, which was filmed and published on an Islamic website, replayed and reported on across the world. We learn of the insurgents' intentions through the perspective of Abu al-Hool, watching his co-conspirator Dr. Walid as he sets up a "makeshift television studio" using a wealth of recording equipment taken from cases that al-Hool had "assumed

contained sensitive detonators" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 88). Images, al-Hool realises, replace weapons as the most effective means of waging war.

Dr. Walid's commitment to the staging of his videos—the "enacting of his latest scripts," and his attention to costume in "black and red and white keffiyehs, ammo belts draped across their chests, rifles and rocket launchers held at the ready, faces hidden"—recalls Western media's horrified responses to jihadist hostage videos. Writing for the *New York Times* in 2004 in response to Berg's execution, Michael Ignatieff decried the use of cameras as a terrorist "weapon": "[i]n Iraq, imagery has replaced argument; indeed, atrocity footage has become its own argument. One horrendous picture seems not just to follow the other but also to justify it." Jane M. Gaines claimed in response that Ignatieff's argument rests on the notion that the blame for these terrorist acts should lie in the medium of photography (413). In what Gaines names as the "war on images," acts of violence in the Iraq war become conflated with their capture and dissemination (411). Gaines' article goes on to defend the medium of documentary from such "reactionary" critics as Ignatieff who perceive that "images are the enemy" (Gaines 413). Ignatieff's article is polemical, indeed reactionary, but I would argue that Gaines' response similarly obscures the breadth of the discursive and ideological networks in which digital images were composed and disseminated during the war on terror. Such extremely violent images as those of Berg's execution are intended to cause harm and evoke fear, just as much as documentaries are composed and edited to evoke a response in the viewer. To claim as Gaines does that scrutiny of such images as images is "blaming the messenger" ascribes a strictly informative function to imagery and forecloses any discussion of the conflicting political and aesthetic arenas in which these images operate (38). Rather than ascribing absolute reverence or absolute disdain to images as Gaines and Ignatieff do, I take a more dispassionate stance in analysing how images, and the various modes of producing and distributing them, function as tools to construct and support competing

ideological narratives. For a narrative such as *Spoils,* which certainly finds threat in the digital camera, it is the camera as an object which evokes the most visceral response. Images are feared not for the violence they represent but for their permanence; the camera's presence threatens to reify a version of the present and project it into ceaselessly into the future.

Spoils, then, very much perceives the camera as a "weapon," but the narrative perspective does not dwell on the image but rather the threat of the image; the camera as an object is what is considered harmful. The digital camera threatens to penetrate and distort the soldier's physical and subjective boundaries when brought into contention with the body. Following her capture, Cassandra awakens on a hospital bed, and the narrative traces her slow vacillation in and out of consciousness:

> A red blinking dot like the LED on a video camera, traces of light circling, bobbing, pupil dilated to the edge of the iris, something cold and wet pressing against her arm, the smell of rubbing alcohol, a needle prick going almost unnoticed in the bright cacophony of pain. (Van Reet, *Spoils* 116)

The camera is identified here through its "blinking" light, mirroring Cassandra's "dilated" pupil. The personified light, active in its "circling, bobbing" movements, appears "eye-to-eye" with Cassandra, but hovering above her, it takes on a penetrative power. This passage suggests the rupture of the borders of Cassandra's embodied and subjective self—the "edge" of the iris is challenged by her dilated pupil, and vague "cold and wet" sensations give way to the needle's piercing of her skin. Alongside this physical invasion of her bodily limits, the camera fixes Cassandra with a penetrative seeing power that brings the technology into palpable view before those directing the action.

In contrast to the camera's ability to see, the scenes depicting Cassandra's captivity reveal a narrative preoccupation with darkness and invisibility: in her windowless cell, she feels "entombed" and "buried alive" in "pitch black" (Van

Reet, *Spoils* 118, 119). This consuming darkness plunges Cassandra into spatial and temporal nothingness; echoing her time in hospital, she loses sense of the "passage of time" as well as the limits of her body, forgetting that she has "form and heft" in the "shapeless dark" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 119, 124–5). If Cassandra's sense of time is warped, then the third person narration intervenes to add flesh to her timeline. We learn, as Cassandra meets one of her captors, that "[l]ater, she'll know this man as Annas" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 123). Another captor is young; his name "she'll soon learn is Hafs" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 126). The adverbs "later" and "soon" shape the temporal boundaries of Cassandra's small existence and attribute a paternalistic tone to the narration, confirming a tentative future which to Cassandra is nevertheless "unknowable" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 122).

Assimilating photographs with physical captivity, *Spoils* suggests that in immortalising its subjects, the camera lens threatens to distort and abstract the stories that the camera sets out to represent. This sentiment is reinforced later in the novel, when Crump is beheaded for refusing to recite the *shahada*. Cassandra, watching, reflects on "Hafs taping it. What that means. What will happen with that video, Crump existing everywhere and nowhere at once, memorialized at his worst and finest" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 189). The camera mediates Crump's death, fixing him in time and space and reducing him to this one short, horrifying moment. Foreshadowing the capture of Cassandra's death on camera at the end of the novel, the question of "what will happen" to Crump's video invites us to consider how Crump's story may be de-contextualised through the brief spectacle of his death. *Spoils* permits us to see not only what is in front of the lens, but what is manipulated and excluded, and what happens before and after the image's capture. When Cassandra is taken alongside Crump and McGinnis to be interrogated on video, Dr. Walid begins "staging and directing" men to point solid, menacing-looking guns at the hostages. Noticing her horror, Cassandra's captor, Hafs, reveals to her the rifle's empty, unloaded chamber, assuring her it "is just for video" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 142).

Spoils thus responds cynically to the supposed revelatory quality of images of the war on terror that reach Western computer and television screens. By narrativising the composure of these images as much as their capture and dissemination, *Spoils* illustrates the mechanisms that construct compelling images in the war imaginary.

Echoing the scene of Cassandra's capture, Crump's beheading is given clarity in hindsight by Sleed, who notes that team morale "started to fall apart when that beheading video came out" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 191). In this passage, we gain a response to Cassandra's question of "what will happen" to the video. Sleed's invocation of "that beheading video" is enough for a reader to fill in the gaps. The vagueness of the term reifies the hostage's immortalisation, hovering in the subtext and speaking to the reader's acquaintance with the lurid, indelible imagery to emerge from the wave of beheadings captured on camera during the long war on terror. The camera denies time, carving out a moment so that, for Sleed, "it's hard to remember the way that is was before that tape" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 191). Mediating time in such a way, the camera subverts the fear of finality that comes with death into the fear of indeterminacy; limitless time. Following the publication of the video, Sleed's dreams, presented as a trauma response, contain "[n]o blood and gore, no dead bodies" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 192). Instead, he dreams he is on a stage in front of a large audience, unable to speak, but unable to leave until he does so. In this dream, death might be a respite from the never-ending spectacle in which he is fixed; what scares Sleed is the spectacle of death rather than death itself. In the presence of the camera, death is reduced to a moment that exists for others rather than oneself; "[a] dollar for a DVD in a plastic sleeve," a commodity reproduced and exchanged in local bazaars (Van Reet, *Spoils* 191).

Sleed's recollections of the days following the release of Crump's beheading video are located at Camp Marlboro. In this setting, the novel's final chapters begin to coalesce around the mythologies that sustain American imperial conquest in the war imaginary. Camp Marlboro was a real place: in 2003, an old

cigarette factory in Sadr City, Baghdad, was taken over by American forces and named Camp Hope—although it was soon nicknamed Camp Marlboro by the occupying troops (E. Wong). In 2004, after *Spoils* is set, the factory was re-opened in efforts to get it back into production and provide Iraqi jobs in one of the poorest areas of Baghdad. Major George Sarabia, in charge of the operation, reasoned that the reopening of the factory was in order to instil an "American" ethic among Iraqi workers: "[p]art of the reason why we won the cold war is because of the military. But one of the reasons is because of the Beatles and bluejeans" (E. Wong). Sarabia's invocation of "bluejeans" speaks to a particular ideal of American identity transplanted into Iraqi society. While it is most likely to have been unintentional, his mistaking of the Beatles as an American band symbolises the establishment of American power in the region after the British colonial occupation in the twentieth century. Sarabia's American linguistic appropriation echoes the nomenclature of Camp Marlboro, an American cigarette brand named in the place of the Iraqi brand Sumer, which was produced in the factory.

While *Spoils* is set a year earlier, then, Sarabia's intended "bluejeans-ification" of the Iraqi workforce is fitting, given the camp's name. Marlboro cigarettes are as iconic to American culture as blue jeans, calling to mind the brand mascot, the Marlboro Man. Represented by various models over the 45-year period of the mascot's existence, the Marlboro Man was created to masculinise filtered cigarettes, which up to that point had been considered feminine (Starr 54). The most popular figure to represent American masculinity was the cowboy, and Marlboro adverts for the latter half of the twentieth century were dominated by a smouldering, chiselled man in blue denim shirt, shearling jacket and cowboy hat (Shirk). Camp Marlboro in Baghdad is a potent crystallisation of the way in which gendered and imperial mythologies intersect in the American collective imagination. The advertisers of Marlboro cigarettes understood American masculinity to be rooted in the mythology of the frontier, and as I have touched upon in previous chapters, a

similar frontier register emerges in American war storytelling through its appeal to rugged individualism, a fight between civilisation and savagery, and its use of Wild West imagery.

Setting part of its narrative in Camp Marlboro, *Spoils* shares thematic elements with *Generation Kill,* which incidentally also sets part of its final episode in Camp Marlboro, and which also draws attention to how the war imaginary is constructed with allusions to "Manifest Destiny." *Spoils* evokes several familiar motifs from the western genre: the tough and unforgiving landscape, ambush by a savage enemy, and most notably the damsel in distress. Through *Spoils*' Camp Marlboro setting, though, we are reminded of the layers of artifice and performance that compose national mythologies in the collective imagination: Marlboro Man is, after all, just a model, and the association of masculinity with Marlboro cigarettes is the result of an elaborate advertising campaign. With its allusions to nostalgic conceptions of frontier masculinity, and as a symbol of post-war American consumerism, the "Marlboro" in "Camp Marlboro" gestures to an identifiable model of American identity which is ultimately fabricated.

While *Generation Kill* opens space to consider the western's treatment of Indigeneity, *Spoils* dwells upon the role of the "damsel in distress" trope in the war story. Cassandra's capture and captivity in an unknown part of Iraq places her in the same position as Debbie Edwards in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), or Mary Carlyle in Sam Wood's *Ambush* (1950): at the hands of foreign, menacing men in an alien, unforgiving terrain. Stacy Takacs notes the heavy use of frontier imagery to represent Lynch's rescue in NBC's TV-movie *Saving Jessica Lynch* (2003): the film pays "visual homage to John Ford's *Stagecoach*," traces the transition of Lynch from soldier to "damsel in distress" and attributes her rescue to a "loyal Indian scout": the Iraqi lawyer Mohammed al-Rehaif who informed the Marine Corps of Lynch's whereabouts (Takacs 156). Takacs argues it is hard not to read the use of western motifs in *Saving Jessica Lynch* as "calculated to reinforce the Bush

administration's depiction of the war in Iraq as a showdown between good and evil, civilization and savagery," and even more so given the film's financial assistance from the Department of Defense (156). *Spoils* also seems conscious of the ease with which Lynch's rescue was weaponised by political and media institutions to conform to national myth. The terrain, like that described by Takacs, is alien, with "no sign of human habitation," and the nature of her captivity at the hands of foreign men is conveyed as multifaceted: she feels "captive twice over" in her cell when she gets her period (Van Reet, *Spoils* 183, 178). This segment refers to her being "captive" within her female body, with its "sense of unmanageability, its alienisms, the way it imposes" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 178). But this sense of embodied captivity also gestures towards the inevitability, via her body, of the narrative shift from soldier to damsel in distress. We might then read Cassandra as captive not just twice but many times over; she experiences the "alienisms" of a body that risks no longer being hers, as the implied threat of its appropriation and reproduction across national US media underpins the narrative. Cassandra is captive in her body, her cell and within an entire narrative and media structure pinning her into the conventions of national mythology.

Bringing together the ancient myth of Cassandra with the myth of the frontier, *Spoils*' amalgamation of war mythologies reimagines the rescue of Jessica Lynch as it appeared in American media. Speaking back to the "damsel in distress" archetype exploited in the wake of Jessica Lynch's capture, the novel reappropriates the familiar narrative thread that would classically see her rescue at the hands of heroic American forces. The penultimate chapter sees Cassandra taken by her captors to an open space where she is expected to be filmed shooting at American forces for a jihadist propaganda video. This does not go to plan and she breaks free, eventually being shot by the American forces tasked with rescuing her. In the last moments of her life, Cassandra exhibits agency and heroism: she "takes hold of his rifle and jerks it free from his grip, screaming a great war cry" (Van Reet, *Spoils*

253). Similar to how she wrests control of the rifle, her narrative trajectory wrests control of the media's appropriation of Jessica Lynch's story: her eventual death precludes the inevitable gendered rescue story. We might then read Cassandra's death as restoring a tragic agency to the damsel in distress, as her death denies the fulfilment of a reader's narrative desire.

Nevertheless, Cassandra's death remains contained within the masculine mechanisms of war storytelling. As in the beginning of the novel, the narrative voice develops an authoritative and masculine tone to narrate her death. Stating that "[s]he slips deeper into a barely describable state," we gain the impression of watching paternally over her in her last moments (Van Reet, *Spoils* 254). Her death is described in some detail; several lines are dedicated to the waning of her perception of time, "those last few moments stretching slower and slower" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 254). During these lines, the narration shifts from its singular attention to Cassandra's death into a universal meditation on the nature of death and eternity. Death, it tells us, arrives unnoticed: "shaving time infinitesimally thin, like slivers off a yardstick that is your remaining life. You never really reach the moment. That's the truth. You just get closer until" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 254). Shifting from the pronoun "she" to "you," the narration moves away from Cassandra and speaks directly to the reader on the nature of dying. Evoking large, loaded concepts like time, death and truth, the narration seems self-aware in its pseudo-philosophy to the extent that we might read these lines as a parody of the sort of wide-angle, moral messages that accompany the end of war stories. The last lines of Cassandra's story are possessive, authoritative and, ultimately, masculine—couching Cassandra's death, as her life, in the masculine voice.

Cassandra's death does not signal the end of the novel, however. The narrative concludes with a page-long chapter told through Sleed's first-person perspective, dwelling on the presence of the camera tasked with filming Cassandra's transgression. As with the ambush and capture, and as with Crump's

beheading, some visual clarity is offered in Sleed's recollection of the failed attempt to rescue Cassandra. The troops are tipped off about the captives' whereabouts and they follow "the heat signature from a mortar," caught by a drone, finding Cassandra's body via a "blood trail" in echoes of the signs of negative presence that marked Cassandra's capture (Van Reet, *Spoils* 255). The rescue operation is again bound by lateness, and in that lateness is failure: expecting to find a dead insurgent, the female body's presence in the grass is "wrong" and, indeed, represents a tragic case of mistaken identity (Van Reet, *Spoils* 255). Ending the novel in this way subverts the damsel in distress archetype by emphasising the damsel's violent death alongside the rescuer's abject failure to save her. But where the human actors prove ineffectual, the final lines remind us of the agency attributed to the camera. The narrative is punctuated by Sleed's discovery of Hafs' camera: "I picked it up. It was still recording" (Van Reet, *Spoils* 255). This emphasis on the digital camera's resilience and longevity elucidates its imposing presence at junctures throughout the novel. The central captives are now all dead, but they are nonetheless immortalised, their stories captured indefinitely. This short chapter's title, "Spoil," concludes the novel with ambiguity. It is left unanswered whether this singular "spoil" relates to Cassandra's body, as in ancient myth, or the camera that bore witness to her death. Among the dead bodies, the digital camera emerges as the novel's agential character and the narrative's driving force: simmering with narrative possibility.

Taking "capture" as its central theme, *Spoils* interrogates how capture and captivity work in some of the most familiar modes of war storytelling. Cassandra's captivity is manifold; it extends beyond the physical confines of her cell to include her containment by the masculine narrative voice, her capture on camera, and the frames of genre and myth which encase the telling of her story. *Spoils*' attention to captivity by the camera recalls some of the most notorious images to emerge from American media during the early years of the Iraq war: Jessica Lynch's army

headshot and "girl-next-door" smile; Nick Berg kneeling and hooded in an orange jumpsuit; a hooded prisoner at Abu Ghraib standing on a box, wires attached to his fingers. In doing so, the novel invites reflection on the supposed truths conveyed by the camera, and the ways in which they may be stifled or distorted by their representation through snapshot images, or by the channels through which they reach their audience. By drawing attention to the different ways in which stories about war are carried in media and in memory—the authority attributed to soldier's recollections, for example; the weight given to ancient myth; or the affective power of the archetypes of the frontier—*Spoils* reveals these tools of storytelling as precisely that: tools. To return to Jack Halberstam, if masculinity is legible at the moment that it leaves the hegemonic masculine body, then *Spoils* suggests that war stories become legible as stories when their conventions come into contention with the female soldier (2). The figure of the captive female soldier reveals the many layers of artifice, performance and myth that combine to produce compelling ways of reporting and remembering war. If the work of Mirzoeff and Puar posits the production of empire through digital imagery, then *Spoils* as a literary narrative takes a step back, instead examining the technologies of such imperial production. In so doing, it asks us to question the discursive, ideological and technological mechanisms through which such visions of empire are delivered to us.

IX. "Click forward": *War Porn* and the digital frontier

So far in Part Three, I have explored how the representations of digital cameras in *Generation Kill* and *Spoils* shed light on the composition of the stories that reach the domestic sphere, looking to how these texts locate the camera as a component in a broader network of information exchange that sustains the mass-visuality of contemporary empire. By emphasising the soldiers' relationship to this technology, *Generation Kill* and *Spoils* show how the camera's construction of the gaze, the filtering of information and processes of negative differentiation help inform the contemporary American war imaginary. By showing the digital camera's role in sculpting how the war is remembered, *Generation Kill* and *Spoils* gesture to the stories and mythologies that are taken up, retold and palimpsestically layered upon each other to sustain war in our collective imagination. *Generation Kill* makes several references through its cinematography and dialogue to "Manifest Destiny"; *Spoils* interrogates the well-worn "damsel in distress" narrative that appeals to gendered binaries in times of crisis. Both these references have their roots in settler colonialism and speak back, in their own ways, to the mythology of the frontier which not only informs the American war imaginary but which also undergirds modern American political, economic and cultural life—making regular appearances in political rhetoric, sports and advertising.

In *The Terror Dream*, a post-mortem of the American psyche in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Susan Faludi locates the mythic fantasy of the cowboy in manifold, often strange corners of American society including political speechwriting, fashion and even psychotherapy, finding that calls to the "cowboys of yesterday" made a compelling appeal for national unity at a time of crisis (70). This is supported by scholarship on the contemporary western film; John White notes that Bush's "us versus them" rhetoric is reflected in contemporary western films that were released in the years after 9/11 (3). Yet as I have explored throughout this thesis and as Faludi attests to, frontier mythology is not limited to

the western genre: US war storytelling in the twenty-first century has exploited the cowboy myth just as much as political, cultural and narrative responses to 9/11, and just as much as narratives of wars that came before, by projecting the iconography of the frontier onto the figure of the soldier.

Roy Scranton's novel *War Porn* (2016) invokes the cowboy myth the most explicitly of all the texts studied during this thesis, positioning the figure between temporal junctures and physical and digital spaces. Indeed the novel updates the frontier for the early twenty-first century by layering its allusions to the West with a digital frontier: the digital space composed of the Internet, cell phones, Xboxes, thumb drives, digital cameras and their images. By appealing to this space as a frontier, Scranton emphasises the structures of power that determine who can access, navigate and ultimately control the flow of information hosted upon these nascent digital communication networks. Specifically, Scranton positions his central antagonist, Aaron, as the cowboy figure to roam this frontier. The sections of the novel that I am interested in for this chapter loop Aaron into a history of political and cultural discourse channelling the soldier into the mould first set by the cowboy.

The novel takes a nesting-dolls structure, with the story of Qasim, an Iraqi maths professor working in Baghdad at the time of the invasion, at its centre. Encasing this story are the first-person accounts of a soldier named Wilson, modelled on Scranton's own experiences in Iraq, as his battalion enters Baghdad following the invasion to take care of peacekeeping missions. The story is bookended by a section called "Strange Hells," which takes place on Columbus Day 2004 in a backyard in Utah where a young liberal couple, Matt and Dahlia, host a barbecue with their friends. We find out that Aaron, a plus-one of one of the guests at the barbecue, is a member of the National Guard: he had been stationed in Iraq and, as he shows Matt through photos stored on a personal thumb drive, tortured prisoners in a camp in echoes of the events of Abu Ghraib that were revealed in

2004. The novel ends with Aaron raping Dahlia and riding off on his motorcycle into the sunrise. These sections are divided by small interludes called "babylon" consisting of excerpts of military and media content, playing on the name of the ancient society where Iraq now stands, and the war imaginary—"babble" that informed the public American discourse around the Iraq war.

Through Aaron, then, *War Porn* produces a military masculine figure who is a modern iteration of both the cowboy and the "forgotten Vietnam vet" central to films such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Scent of a Woman* (1992) (Darda, *Culture Wars* 10). Joseph Darda argues that in the years following the Vietnam war, political discourse and the culture industries forged a minoritised "veteran American" identity to parallel the civil rights struggles of the twentieth century (*Culture Wars* 3). The emergence of the veteran American onto this landscape enabled the consolidation of white racial interests at a time of crisis. In their representations of the alienated and forgotten white Vietnam veteran, war narratives "bind whiteness to Americanness, white skin to green uniforms" (*Culture Wars* 4). It is important to note, building on Darda, that the rhetoric of Vietnam is deeply entangled with the mythology of the frontier. In 1960, John F. Kennedy famously used his acceptance speech to the Democratic presidential nomination to entreat the American people to become "pioneers" upon a "new frontier." Five years later, this language had shaped the imperial war imaginary of Vietnam, with language like "Indian country" and "cowboys and Indians" being used to describe the terrain and the military operations taking place upon it (Slotkin 3). The political and cultural discourses of recent American wars are entangled in the mythology of the frontier, and these entanglements emerge in contemporary war stories.

Narratives of the war on terror are no different, and *War Porn* attempts to think through the figure of the veteran against the backdrop of American war culture, tracing him back through Vietnam, through the culture industries' mythologisation of the frontier, and anchoring him in the founding imperial

mythology of the United States. This looping effect suggests what Roger Luckhurst calls the "polytemporality" of Iraq war representation. Writing in 2012, Luckhurst identifies a lack of substantial Iraq war narratives that address the war directly, and suggests instead that compelling contemporary representation is refracted through imagery of prior wars, and, further, this refraction is "the only way of grasping the war in its contemporaneity" ("In War Times" 722). In the twelve years since the publication of Luckhurst's article, more novels addressing the war have emerged and, indeed, this thesis is concerned only with novels published after 2012. We might then adapt Luckhurst's thesis to consider how polytemporality appears in novels that do address the Iraq war head-on, such as *War Porn.* In the novel, Aaron is rendered palimpsestically; he embodies the histories connecting the Iraq war soldier to his twentieth-century predecessors, and such evolution is "ghosted or haunted by an insistent past that intrudes on, overlays, and redetermines the present" (Luckhurst, "In War Times" 723).

Specifically, the past haunting *War Porn* is the mythologised history of the United States, Manifest Destiny and the frontier. Scranton locates the soldier as a site upon which to contest the sanitised cultural memory of the frontier and, equally, evokes the cowboy figure to contest how war culture sits in the national imagination. Polytemporality therefore enables Scranton to reflect American national consciousness back upon itself and dismantle the mythologies that inform national identity. The collapse of boundaries this entails is identified as material as much as it is temporal and ideological. The novel imagines this materiality through the embodied soldier's interactions with digital technology: by staging the novel's climactic event—Aaron's rape of Dahlia—alongside the revelation of photographs of torture, *War Porn* brings the body violently into tandem with technology and collapses the boundaries between the war and the home. *War Porn*'s technological register repurposes the mythology of the frontier for the twenty-first century. In doing so it dismantles the tropes and conceits central to the American war

imaginary, and brings into sharp relief the ghosts of settler colonial and imperial violence that continue to haunt American national identity.

In its American sections, *War Porn* is couched in language of the frontier. The novel's invocation of pioneers and cowboys upon the Wild West bridges war and home as contingent spaces, implicating the home front in the broader project of expansionism. The section titled "Strange Hells," which forms the first and last sections of the novel, is set on what has in recent years become a controversial holiday, Columbus Day, in 2004. This choice of setting for the events of Strange Hells locates them along a genealogy of settler colonialism, Indigenous dispossession and westward expansion. As a mode of memorialisation, the Columbus Day setting also implies a national identity which relies on continually looking backwards to a past mediated by myth and simplified stories of conquest. Strange Hells' particular temporal setting is complemented by the section's geographical setting in Utah, where the barbecue hosts Matt and Dahlia had moved from Washington DC, having moved westward in search of a better life. Matt explains: "after 9/11, we decided we needed a change. Get off the grid, you know?" (Scranton, *War Porn* 295). With 9/11 as the motivation of the couple's move to Utah—a state saturated in Wild West cultural memory—Strange Hells' allusions to the frontier gesture to the binarisms that would abound following the attacks on the World Trade Center: those of civilisation and savagery; order and chaos; good and evil. Matt and Dahlia's move from the political centre of the USA to the West further echoes the westward movement of Puritan settlers in that it echoes the desire to escape "tyranny and corruption" (Slotkin 30). The subtext of Matt's breezily reported desire to "get off the grid" speaks to the fear of further attacks on American urban centres following 9/11; suggests a desire to find liberation in escaping the shackles of bureaucratised society; and projects nostalgia for an imagined pastoral domesticity, reified in the stories of Willa Cather and Laura Ingalls Wilder. Like

the original settlers, Matt and Dahlia move to Utah to find stability in a world as-of-yet unknown to them, "off the grid" yet full of promise.

If Strange Hells' Utah setting recalls the settler imaginary through its appeal to pastoral domesticity, the section of *War Porn* titled "Your Leader will Control Your Fire," set in Baghdad, establishes militarism and frontier-driven expansionism through its evocation of the Wild West. Read together, Strange Hells and Your Leader will Control Your Fire illustrate the ideological separation (and at the same time the mutual dependence) of war and domestic spheres which is central to frontier mythology. According to this paradigm, the security and cohesion of American domesticity is reliant upon the bravery of a few rugged individuals acting on the cusp of civilisation and savagery—the organising mythic principle that Slotkin names "regeneration through violence" (352).

Your Leader will Control Your Fire takes place in Baghdad in 2003 and 2004 from the first-person perspective of a soldier named Wilson. These sections are modelled on Scranton's own experiences and journal entries from his service as a specialist in the Iraq war. Wilson is a quiet, studious and reluctant soldier who joined the Army in a last-ditch attempt to find meaning and a stable income. The author's voice suffuses these sections, disillusioned and weighted by irony: "we were the camera, we were the audience, we were the actors and film and screen: cowboys and killer angels, the lost patrol, the cavalry charge, America's proud and bloody soldier boys" (Scranton, *War Porn* 54–5). Filtered through its representation in western films, the pre-eminence of the cowboy in Wilson's account of his experience gestures to how the myth of the frontier is mediated by genre, or "expressive forms" which enable ways of "articulating ideological concepts directly and explicitly" (Slotkin 5). Wilson's account produces a spectre of the frontier through which the mythologised cowboy provides the standard for military masculinity, with all its romantic connotations of rugged individualism, heroism and adventure.

Nevertheless, the lumbering repetition of tropes in this excerpt suggests tiredness with the persistence of this mythology, and awareness of its incongruence with the reality of American military operations in Iraq. Scranton himself is highly critical of the influence of war culture on American national identity and looks to Slotkin's concept of regeneration through violence to make sense of his own position:

> In the frightened months after 9/11, the myth of violence was more powerful than the truth of war. As an American soldier in Iraq, I was both caught up in that myth and released from it: I could see…what American violence did to Iraqi homes and bodies, yet it remained my job to be an agent of that violence—a violence that neither redeemed nor enlightened. (*We're Doomed* 208)

Similarly Wilson—as the "camera," "audience," "actors and film and screen"—sits uncomfortably as observer, object and agent of American empire cloaked in myth. The subject and object of representation become confused to the point that it is unclear whether Wilson identifies as an observer of, or participant in, the war. Within this conflicting positionality we can glean a sense of impotence emanating from his abstraction into the circus of empire. Suspended at the intersection of experience, media and myth, Wilson is more legible as a passive component of spectacle than as a driver of action. So much for the pioneering spirit.

Embedded in *War Porn*'s language of the Wild West is a newer, sleeker, modern incarnation of the frontier which emerges in the form of digital networks, images and information exchange. Scranton draws attention to the digital-visual space which emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as the mass media coverage initiated in the first Gulf war was replicated and expanded through the TV media's intersection with a nascent, increasingly accessible Internet. Paul Virilio explains the expansion of war into the arena of information:

> It is easy to see that with this conflict in "real time," we can no longer legitimately speak of a battlefield or of a "localized" war. Even if the land

manoeuvres remain precisely situated, they are overshadowed, totally dominated by the scope of a global capacity, of an environment in which the spatio-temporal reduction is the essential characteristic. (*Desert Screen* 120)

While Virilio was writing about the TV media during the first Gulf war, his argument is fortified when applied to the invasion of 2003, as the instantaneity and borderlessness of the early Internet only accelerated this spatio-temporal reduction of the battlefield.

Scholars of digital warfare such as William Merrin have picked up on Virilio's identification of "the emergence and supremacy of a 'fourth front'—after land, sea and air—of 'information,' and a new fourth space, 'the orbital,' dominated by military and media satellites" (Merrin 32). I would argue that from the perspective of the US imperial project, this "front" is better recognised as a frontier since the terminology not only names the space to be conquered, but also channels the stories and myths which mediate this space in the national imagination. The digital frontier that Scranton conjures in *War Porn* encapsulates the swell of images that reported on and represented the Iraq war, as well as the networks and technologies that hosted them. He transcribes this frontier onto the physical space of Baghdad:

Up out of the ancient gardens of Sinbad's Baghdad and the nightmare of Saddam's Ba'athist dystopia grew the fiber-optic slums of tomorrowland, where shepherds on cell phones herded flocks down expressways and insurgents uploaded video beheadings, everything rising and falling as one, Hammurabi's Code and Xboxes, the wheels and the Web, Ur to Persepolis to Sykes-Picot to CNN, a ruin outside of time, a twenty-first century cyberpunk war-machine interzone. (Scranton, *War Porn* 85)

This complex, chaotic tableau draws together the past, both real and mythological, and the present of Iraq. Bringing the likes of Sinbad and Saddam together demonstrates the mediation of history by stories and myth, and draws a parallel with

the mythologisation of the American frontier. The Baghdad depicted here is evoked as another site of polytemporality, seeing threads of Iraqi history brought together and then scattered; rising and falling, growing up, out and along, and crossing from the physical to the digital. These temporal threads are woven through with information technology; the juxtaposition, for example, at work in "fiber-optic slums" and "shepherds on cell phones" modernises a Western reader's assumptions of rural Iraqi life—that of the wilderness or the "Indian Country"—and brings a fictionalised, Orientalised Iraqi past in contention with the globalised, technologised present. Tracing "Ur to Persepolis to Sykes-Picot to CNN," Scranton sketches a digital-visual temporal line bringing together different iterations of empire, from the Sumerian settlement of Ur all the way through to the global hegemony represented by CNN and other mass visual media.

By infusing Iraq's physical terrain with mythological and digital texture, Scranton redirects our attention away from the frontier as a geographical entity and towards the digital space that hosted and diffused Iraq to spectator-consumers of the war across the globe. The transmission of Iraq as information is rendered in *War Porn* as a noisy hum that intervenes in the chapters and scatters the narrative with fragments of text: excerpts of media reporting, military strategies, training guides, and personal accounts of the war. These appear in short interludes called "babylon" which occur between each chapter of the novel. The title brings into tandem the ancient city and empire, and the war imaginary composed of the "babble" of information that accompanied the war. These sections are fragmented and poetic:

images become

electroshocks

which will, with the muj behind us and trigger happy

have come today therefore pointless to question the political shrapnel
not only nails and patients believing that

assailants, victims of IED attacks can exsanguinate not trusting the

next level could even

those

(Scranton, *War Porn* 5)

This excerpt is disjointed and sparse, but as the novel progresses the excerpts become denser and more jargon-heavy until they feel like an overwhelming, incoherent assault of information. Scranton is not the only writer to represent the war on terror information-front in such a way; Ben Fountain's novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) also contains memorable excerpts of "babble":

terrRr

    Eye-rack,

        Eaaaar-rock,

    Sod'm,

freedoms

    nina leven

        nina leven

            nina leven

hero

    sacrifice,

    soooh-preeeme sacrifice

    Bush

                Osama

        values

                dih-mock-cruh-see

(Fountain 38)

The information front here is fragmented and indiscriminate; an informational wilderness. The instantaneous transmission of this babble contracts the "over here" and the "over there." Its immediacy and ubiquity create an intense familiarity with the events and, paradoxically, a strange sense of distance—rendering even familiar voices alien and disorienting.

The digital frontier, then, is a global space that exceeds the physical parameters of the war to bring foreign spaces and spectators into the war's orbit, eliminating the possibility of existing "outside" the events. This frontier encompasses the military penetration into Iraq just as much as it does the outwards expansion of the war, from the violent spectacle of Iraq to spectators' screens worldwide. This conceptualisation of the war has faced criticism for appearing excessively abstracted, most notably in the work of Jean Baudrillard for whom, like Virilio, the visual information front was ignited in the first Gulf war. His essay "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" was heavily criticised for eliding the material destruction wrought to bodies and infrastructure (Merrin 27). But the visual information front in the first Gulf war, and its evolution into digital-visuality a decade later in the Iraq war, was in many ways designed to wash the war of any unpleasantries for the American audience watching from home. This is the basis for the idea of "techno-war" that the first Gulf war is remembered for, and what caused Baudrillard to make his provocative but pointed assessment of how the war was disseminated to global audiences. In the 2003 Iraq war, mass TV media was also curated under the Pentagon's influence to prevent photographs of dead soldiers and even flag-draped coffins from reaching American TV screens, an extension of George H.W. Bush's "Dover Ban" from the Gulf war (Mobley 124). As Luckhurst notes, American reporting and representation of the Iraq war bore a marked lack of bodies, and it has become the task of non-American fiction to bring absent bodies back into view (Luckhurst, "Iraq War Body Counts" 370). While *War Porn* does not feature any dead bodies, remains of bodies and bodies in pain emerge in absentia

throughout the novel, captured and mediated by the images, and later the speech, of the novel's American characters. The novel reinscribes material harm by attending to the soldier's manipulation of the digital frontier, and to the transmission of digital imagery which parallels the physical transmission of violence across borders.

In the second part of Strange Hells, following an argument that erupts between Aaron and one of the barbecue guests on the politics of the Iraq war, Aaron retreats to the house with Matt while the women cool off outside. Matt, a computer scientist, shows Aaron his current project organising data to foresee "turbulence in complex systems" (Scranton, *War Porn* 305). In return, Aaron takes out a thumb drive and shows Matt some photos of his experience of the war, "some real war shit." He entreats Matt to "show me the future. I'll show you the past" (Scranton, *War Porn* 303). The thumb drive, to Matt's horror and intrigue, contains scores of images of prisoner abuse taken from Aaron's time as a military guard at a prison called Camp Crawford.

Strange Hells takes place in October 2004, and it is clear that Aaron's photos are intended to recall the photos of torture that were revealed from Abu Ghraib in April of that year. It is important not to conflate the event of the abuse with the media event—commentators have noted that at the root of the scandal was not the abuse itself, which was revealed as widespread and accepted across the military hierarchy, but rather the shock, among military and civilians alike, of these images reaching the public domain (Puar 80; Sontag 274). Jasbir Puar argues that the public outcry which constitutes the events as a "scandal" works to make an exception of Abu Ghraib in what was, in reality, an unexceptional context; the events worked "in concert with proliferating modalities of force, an indispensable part of the 'shock and awe' campaign" (79). Aaron's photographs in *War Porn* are equally framed as unexceptional: "Camp Crawford" exists separately to Abu Ghraib in the novel, and Abu Ghraib is mentioned during the narrative along with Camp Cropper, which is where Saddam Hussein was held before his execution (Scranton, *War Porn*

307). Camp Crawford thus emerges as another unexceptional site of torture and violence within the sphere of American military operations, implying space for countless other similar sites.

For a Western observer of the war grown accustomed to passively absorbing its media, the leaked photographs of Abu Ghraib appear exceptional because they break a closed circuit of what we are permitted to see. The revelation of the photos speaks to our wilful ignorance of the unethical and illegal measures taken in our name behind closed doors. Mirzoeff contrasts the obscured public visibility of the Abu Ghraib photos with the overt visual spectacle of the lynching of African Americans: "[t]he public interpellation of the racialized subject by the trophies of lynching has been replaced by the invisible visibility of a police culture that claims there is nothing to see while circulating its pixelated documents of imperial hierarchy around the Internet" ("Invisible Empire" 30). The sheer number of photographs to leak from Abu Ghraib intimates an unspoken truth: that these behaviours were commonplace, rendered spectacular through their capture on camera and circulated in email chains, floppy disks and thumb drives between military personnel. Finding echoes of Abu Ghraib in the actions of New York City Police, or Israeli Army personnel against Palestinians, Puar urges against regarding the torture as "exceptional" (79). Mirzoeff finds the techniques used by the American troops in Abu Ghraib were linked "to the torture of IRA suspects in Northern Ireland, Palestinians in Israel, and indeed to Kenyan prisoners held by the British colonial forces during the Mau Mau rebellion of 1953, who were sodomized and even castrated" ("Invisible Empire" 27). Widespread but largely ignored in the public domain, these historically recursive assertions of imperial masculinity happened, and continue to happen, within a closed circuit of information exchange not meant for the attention of the civilian consciousness.

War Porn dramatises the gendered foundations of this economy of visibility. Matt and Aaron, the only men at the barbeque, retreat inside the house following

the argument, and this is where their projects come into dialogue with one another. Matt works on a system which collates data to predict fluctuations in world systems such as the weather and the economy. His scientific endeavours point to a desire to know and ultimately control the future by way of the nascent Internet, and especially through the transmission of images in this space: he explains, "humans are primarily visual, so we interpret visual patterns much more quickly than we do numerical, syntactical, narrative, or even linguistic ones" (Scranton, *War Porn* 304). For Matt, visual representation is the key to demystifying and democratising complex systems, which enables active citizen engagement. As a computer scientist, Matt holds the expertise to build and control this system of representation, although this is ironically countered when Aaron permits him a glimpse into his own visual network. When it comes to Aaron's turn to show Matt his photos, Matt's abstract ideas are met by the absolute distillation of post-9/11 digital culture: graphic images of torture which are at once shocking and banal. Matt is shown successive photos of beaten faces, sexual violence and men stood in torture positions. His response demonstrates the fixated position of the spectator-consumer of images of the Iraq war, as he consents, despite his horror, for Aaron to "click forward" (Scranton, *War Porn* 310).

Matt is positioned here as Mirzoeff's "visual subject"—"a person all but overwhelmed by visual materials that they cannot control but cannot refuse to watch" (Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon* 17). The images that Aaron shows Matt, with their potential for endless circulation, can do nothing other than overwhelm him and foreclose any response. Aaron insists that the acts revealed in the photos are "standard operating procedure" and "not a big deal" (Scranton, *War Porn* 312). The exchange between Matt and Aaron demonstrates how the images' power to shock and incite action is easily neutralised by a sense of their banality. Matt questions his friends' complicity—"maybe they already know"—suggesting a tentative tolerance of what he has been shown; a willingness to let the flow of images wash

over him through social and digital systems that he is ill-equipped to understand (Scranton, *War Porn* 329). But the girls don't already know. What is revealed between Aaron and Matt signals a gendered economy of visibility which directs information around a privileged few while restricting, obfuscating and redefining information to those existing outside. Such filtering of information maintains the ostensible chasm between masculine war and feminine domestic spheres in the war imaginary by keeping the "over there" at arm's length in the civilian conscience.

Reading the soldier and the scientist in parallel as they navigate the burgeoning digital space suggests this space as a wilderness, or a frontier, which offers adventure and possibility for those who can tame it. Upon this information-scape, Aaron's grasp of the visual is rooted in a materiality that compounds the war and home spaces. Insisting that he "just held the camera," Aaron's navigation of the digital frontier is haptic—the stress on his hands' manipulation of the digital brings the body into the war's visual economy (Scranton, *War Porn* 312). Despite his protests to the contrary, the narrative attention placed on holding the camera secures Aaron as an actor in the violent spectacle. Hands appear as nodes in a system built around the physical, digital and visual transmission of imperial force, firstly through Aaron's manipulation of the camera, and then through his instruction to Matt to "click forward" (Scranton, *War Porn* 320). Furtive but decisive, the rhythmical snap of the finger on the mouse signals Matt's recruitment into the circuit of visual exchange, grounded in his embodiment. Jasbir Puar similarly describes a techno-masculinity underpinning the exchange of images at Abu Ghraib. Digital cameras, she argues, signify:

> ...a transition from stillness to proliferation, from singularity to fertility, like ejecting dandelion spores into the wind. But more important, motility, speed, and performance function as primary erotic and addictive charges of modernity: clicking the "send" button marks the ultimate release of productivity and consumption; dissemination is the ultimate form of

territorial coverage and conquest, yet one more layering of the sexual matrix. (Puar 108)

The war and home spaces are collapsed via an assemblage of technical and anatomical parts incorporating technologies of capture and dissemination; subjects and objects of empire; bodies of power and bodies in pain.

The transmission of violence across borders reaches its apex in Strange Hells' closing scene, where Aaron ties up and rapes Dahlia, echoing the torture captured in the photographs. Barbara Kowalczuk uses Edward Casey's work on memory and place to argue that Aaron "re-implaces" Camp Crawford into the Utah bedroom. Kowalczuk explains: "[f]or Aaron, re-implacing involves both return— deep mental immersion—and recurrence. [The prison] is an embodied space, an Iraqi living room which dwells within the veteran and affects his enactments in the Utah bedroom" (12). Kowalczuk points to Aaron's body as a vector of violence, but I add to this that his body doesn't act independently. It operates in synchrony with the flows of information which facilitate the dissemination of images: those on this thumb drive, the cache of leaked images of Abu Ghraib, and the streams of war images and commentary, the "babble" that is broadcast through the mass media. By re-materialising the torture captured in the photos, Aaron's body and acts of violence are not "exceptional" but are suggested as another component of the expanding visual cartography of the Iraq war.

Aaron's rape of Dahlia at the end of the novel functions as a climax to the photo presentation, suggesting a synchrony of the digital and the physical. Regularly punctuated by his order to "click forward," Aaron's slideshow invokes a drive which compels Matt and the reader to anticipate the next revelation of violence (Scranton, *War Porn* 312-3). In an interview with Nick Flynn, Scranton says of *War Porn*'s ending:

I wanted to fuse the generic expectations readers might have, given the dramatic structure, for some moment of redemption or truth or resolution,

with a sudden, destabilizing act of violence that, in retrospect, appears totally inevitable. I wanted readers to feel complicit in the violence, implicated by their narrative desire. ("Poetry of War")

The novel's final scene is designed to shock but, like the Abu Ghraib scandal, the shock emanates not from the act itself but from the shattering of the reader/viewer's expectations.

Aaron figures as Scranton's response to what he calls the "myth of the trauma hero," discussed in chapter one of this thesis: a veteran figure who follows a "redemptive arc of trauma to recovery," satisfying the narrative desire for a troubled, but ultimately righteous and redeemed, war hero (Scranton, *We're Doomed* 237). Aaron is disdainful of the assumption of trauma; he responds to a question from the barbecue guests by sneering, "I'm all traumatized and shit. You know what it's like. You saw the movie" (Scranton, *War Porn* 29). This is all the more significant given the chapter's title, "Strange Hells," which speaks to Ivor Gurney's 1917 poem of the same name. The poem, a commentary on trauma and the First World War, ends:

> Some civic routine one never learns.
> The heart burns—but has to keep out of the face how heart burns.

Aaron demonstrates how cultural representations of the trauma hero tend to be superimposed onto discussions of veteranhood, which suffocates critique both of the war and of the political project of American identity. Darda elaborates this through his notion of "post-traumatic whiteness," which posits that the construct of the trauma hero elevates the white veteran's psychic harm from a position of personal to "national" suffering and in doing so contributes to the furtherance of a white racial national interests (*Culture Wars* 32). As readers, we might expect Aaron's alienation from the "civic routine" to be the result of his war experience— the narrative leaves this question unanswered. But *War Porn* asks a larger question: does it matter? Stood at the nexus of "polytemporal" cultural articulations of war

trauma, Aaron and his indiscriminate violence call into question our collective romanticisation of veteranhood. Scranton embeds this debate very explicitly in the language and imagery of the frontier to draw attention to the affinity shared between the myth of the trauma hero and the whiteness of the national consciousness as explored by Darda. Through the "sudden, destabilizing act of violence" that Aaron commits at the end, the narrative structure forces a shift in perspective where we must contend with the odious, irredeemable man occupying the space where the romantic hero should stand. Further, this act is destabilising not only for the way that it shatters a reader's structural expectations of the narrative, but for how it abruptly materialises the digital representations of torture carried on the thumb drive. That is, the novel's violent ending fuses the physical and the digital in a way which contests the abstraction haunting the "babble," and passive spectatorship, of the war.

The use of a violent rape of a woman as a narrative device calls into question the meaning of a reader's "complicity" as it risks trivialising the act by approximating the position of passive spectator with the agent of the violence. We should understand "complicity" here in in the same way that we understand "visual subjectivity." The reader, like Matt, finds herself pulled along in horror and intrigue, clicking forward, so to speak, through narrative junctures tainted with unsettling undertones but which are nevertheless predictable: conflict, resolution, burgeoning sexual tensions between Aaron and Dahlia. We read on, and cannot, in Mirzoeff's words, "refuse to watch" ("Invisible Empire" 17). Mirroring Aaron's recruitment of Matt into the war's visual economy, Scranton recruits the reader as witness to an act of domestic violence. "Complicity" brings together the war and home spaces in the confines of the novel, at the same time as folding the reader into the palimpsestic mode of remembering and retelling the war.

In this way, contrary to the notion that Aaron "re-implaces" the violence of the war back into domestic territory, I suggest a counter-reading challenging the

idea that the violence can be brought "home" at all. Aaron's digital and physical transcription of the violence from Iraq to the American home reveals the torture as, in Puar's words, a "proliferating [modality] of force" that cannot be separated from or deemed exceptional to the American domestic sphere and the settler colonial violence upon which it was built (79). By alluding to the foundations upon which the United States was built, *War Porn* identifies violence as a constitutive part of the United States and suggests that the violence of imperial conquest cannot be brought home because it had never left. This is the suggestion that undergirds the novel, and especially Strange Hells, through the appeal to the frontier and the settler imaginary. The novel's ending conjures fantasies of the West, as Aaron leaves the party and rides off into the sunrise on his motorcycle:

> Bleeding over the bedrock, dawn spilled across 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, *War Porn* 334)

In addition to the Wild West captured in this passage's visual geography, from the sanguine twilight to the mountains and imposing gorge, the novel's ending is infused with cultural references that resonate with the mythology of the frontier. While Monument Valley is ancient Navajo land, and it lies on the Navajo Nation Reservation, it is also enlivened in this passage through its appearance in "those old cowboy flicks." Most noteworthy are those of John Ford, and especially *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers,* which help to form the cornerstone of the frontier in the modern imaginary and which narrate the confrontation of "civilisation" and "savagery."

We might read Aaron as a retort to Ethan Edwards, the protagonist of Ford's *The Searchers*. As explored in relation to *The Hurt Locker* in Part Two, Edwards is

often invoked as a cultural touchstone for the war on terror to represent the rugged individualism and heroism of American soldiers. According to the voiceover of the film's official trailer, Edwards is a man who commands "fear and respect," and is both "hard and relentless" and "tender and passionate." *The Searchers* is a classic revenge story that rests on a manicheistic conflict between civilised and savage, and which replicates the fears of the "foreigner within" represented to white nationhood by Indigenous Americans. Following the murder of his family and abduction of his niece by Comanche Indians, Ethan sets out on a years-long mission to rescue her. When he finally finds her, she claims that she wishes to remain with the Comanche. Ethan attempts to shoot her in fury, but is blocked by his nephew. In Strange Hells, Aaron (which is surely not by coincidence the name of Ethan's murdered brother in *The Searchers*) makes a throwaway comment, "the ladies have gone native," when Dahlia berates him for causing an argument with her friends (Scranton, *War Porn* 303). Whereas in *The Searchers* Ethan is prevented from killing his niece, Aaron completes the trajectory of violence. As a retort to Ethan, Aaron highlights the dissonance between cultural representations of the cowboy figure as both "hard and relentless" and a hero. Through this narrative displacement, the cowboy is better legible as an antagonist; an agent of violence and chaos who disrupts rather than secures the home.

It is significant that, after exploring the digital space, Scranton ends the novel by linking the frontier back to the land. In the same way that Kowalczuk conceptualises Aaron's body through the memory of Camp Crawford, so does the end of Strange Hells suggest that the land contains the memory of violence and conquest. The closing passage's reference to Dead Horse Point delves back into the memory of conquest; it is a place that, according to legend, is named for the horses that died of exposure there in the nineteenth century from its use as a natural corral by cowboys. Indeed in *War Porn*, the Utah landscape is embedded with death and decay. Dahlia recounts a recent dig in the area which produced findings suggesting

the Ancient Puebloans of the region were "cannibals," with the bones of seven skeletons found to show evidence of "defleshing, chopping, marrow extraction, and burning" (Scranton, *War Porn* 327). As the only mention of Indigenous Americans in the text, Dahlia's story firstly upholds the myth of the savage Indian. But the Native American also bears a ghostly presence in this excerpt, appearing as bones exhumed and mediated through anecdote. The examination and display of Native American bones, Quynh Nhu Le writes in her study of Gerald Vizenor's *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 5Z*, reveals a "settler colonial temporality" which encloses Indigeneity within the past tense and relegates it to memory (49). In Strange Hells, the emergence of Indigenous bones through speech exemplifies how settler colonialism as a sustaining project relies on the spectre of Indigeneity for its own self-definition, suspended in fragments of speech and visual identification.

Following the revelation of Aaron's images, and before another "babylon" section, the pause upon the terrain of the American West at the end of Strange Hells anchors the digital space as a modern incarnation of the frontier and emphasises the interrelation of settler colonial history and the war imaginary. Crucially, it insists upon the events of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq—and these events' representation and transmission through informational networks—as inseparable from the violence of settler colonialism that is condensed and repackaged into stories and myth. The cowboy that dominates the frontier of lore cannot be separated from violent conquest. This comes into contention with the way that the cowboy is conceptualised for war storytelling, where he functions as a hero who acts outside the laws and social codes, the "civic routine," of the demos for the sake of protecting those very social codes. As the novel's response to the cowboy, Aaron occupies, dominates and roams the digital-visual frontier. He also embodies the more traditional cowboy character, cutting a lonely figure in the barbecue setting and riding off into the horizon at the end, which not only echoes the ending of *The Searchers* but the ending of *The Hurt Locker*. *War Porn*'s ending enmeshes

war and frontier storytelling, and demonstrates the palimpsestic nature of the myths which animate American culture and forge national identity. The shift in perspective which sees Aaron displaced from hero to villain deconstructs the frontier myth for the digital age. The heroic mythology surrounding the frontiersman is stripped away and the cowboy is reinstated as a perpetrator of violent conquest, both in the United States' settler colonial history and in its neo-imperial present.

Conclusion

In the years following 9/11, imagery of cowboys and the Wild West abounded (Ferguson 480). Appeals to the mythology of the frontier manifested in an array of discourses across culture, media and politics. While this mythology has been reproduced in war narratives that well pre-date the war on terror, the introduction of digitality into war-making and storytelling has transformed how we interpret the myth. Part Three has spotlighted the digital handheld camera in Iraq war stories as a device employed to varying effect. While some critics have suggested that the invocation of the camera attempts to reveal some coherent truth in a complex and murky war, the chapters making up Part Three have moved beyond the singular image to show that the camera and its images produce narratives which are far more slippery and evasive.

The images captured and circulated in Scranton's *War Porn* are revelatory, but they remain enclosed in a circuit of digital information exchange which translates to a gendered economy of visibility. This is consistent with the circulation of images of torture at Abu Ghraib, where the leak of images represented an aberration of the system, rather than a constituent part. Scranton conceptualises the information-scape as a frontier—a system fusing the digital and the physical, upon which bodies operate in synchrony with technology. The three texts studied in Part Three place just as much attention on images as they do on the modes of interaction

with the technologies that produce these images and facilitate their circulation. Appreciating imaging technology on top of and alongside the images themselves reveals the way in which narratives are constructed, restricted, channelled, appropriated, redefined and rearticulated. This perspectival manoeuvring, in turn, invites a re-appraisal of the mythologies that undergird the national consciousness: of the frontier; the racial and gendered myths of the cowboy, the Indian, the damsel and the homestead; and the uncomfortable truths that entangle the war imaginary with the genealogy of US settler colonialism.

To conclude Part Three, then, I return to the concept of polytemporality employed by Roger Luckhurst to conceptualise how narratives of the 2000s approach the Iraq war in its contemporaneity by refracting it "through the iconography of prior wars" ("In War Times" 722). Each text that I have studied in Part Three has, to varying degrees, constructed their narrative polytemporally, building upon and speaking back to American mythic culture. At the heart of this project is the masculine cowboy hero, who undergoes successive transformations in history and culture and who represents the fantasy of righteous conquest. Less explicit in these narratives, but still very much present, is Indigeneity: the shadow that brings the cowboy to definition; both the constitutive outside to the white American nation, and the foreigner within. Both Native American and Iraqi people are positioned as the constitutive outside to the white soldier in these texts, which figure them equally as objects of empire. As I have intimated throughout this chapter, such objects of empire appear in all these narratives mediated by white visual and discursive technologies. In *Generation Kill,* Iraqi body parts are framed through the soldier's camera and Indigenous testimony is filtered through Evan Wright's reportage; the spectre of the savage Indian sits behind the lens and haunts the frame in *Spoils*; in *War Porn*, Iraqi bodies in pain are only made visible through the clandestine exchange of images between white men, and Indigenous bones are exhumed from the ground and filtered to a reader through speech. In parallel to the

cowboy/soldier, then, the ghostly bodies that haunt Part Three provide an alternate polytemporality, as objects of American empire are excavated and scattered across time and space. Staged through the imperial body, the myth of the cowboy/soldier is brought to clarity by the digital camera—but not without the ghosts of empire, latent images refracting through the frame.

Coda

It is difficult to know how to end this thesis about war storytelling and the American-led war on terror. As I write this conclusion at the beginning of 2024, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has entered its third year, Israel's bombardment of Gaza has left over 30,000 Palestinians dead, and the US' long war on terror has re-surfaced via the extension of its drone campaign to Houthi Yemenis in the Red Sea. During the course of researching and writing this thesis, the US has withdrawn from Afghanistan after a twenty-year occupation, Britain contends with the return of its ISIS-affiliated citizens from Syria, and Europe wages an increasingly distressing debate over the refugees reaching its shores in ever-greater numbers, fleeing violence and persecution from successive wars across the Middle East. It is twenty-one years since the US invaded Iraq, and it couldn't feel more distant.

Nevertheless, the cultural representation of the US' wars of the early twenty-first century can reveal much about our present moment. The US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 launched on a spectacular doctrine of "shock and awe," with 24-hour news cycles dedicated to documenting the war in granular detail. In many ways, this fulfilled propagandistic aims, but it also enabled a civilian audience to see the darker side of the war. The scandals of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, Blackwater—these are all touchstones in our cultural memory that caused the public to confront American imperial power. With the West's destruction of the Middle East in full view, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan became, for the most part, deeply unpopular. From the 2010s, we see a marked shift in the way in which American military power was exported and represented globally: notably, Obama's withdrawal from Iraq replaced American boots-on-the-ground with what Andreas Krieg calls war by "human or technological surrogate," involving proxy wars and a notoriously deadly drone campaign (99). These targeted aerial strikes of dubious legality were aimed at terrorist cells across Africa and the Middle East, and they continue to the present day—out of sight and out of mind of the public. According

to the airstrike monitoring body *Airwars*, the US launched drone strikes in Somalia very recently, in September 2023 and again in February 2024; twelve years after Obama declared the end of the war on terror. *Airwars* also report that US strikes have incurred "a number" of civilian casualties in Yemen since fighting broke out between Western allies and the Iran-backed Houthis in February 2024. Prior to this, the US and UK had been providing military support to Saudi Arabia's siege of Yemen for over eight years, largely avoiding scrutiny by the media and occurring well under the radar of public consciousness (Bachman 39).

What does this transition from "shock and awe" to covert war tell us about American empire in the twenty-first century*?* Writing as the century reaches its quarter milestone, this thesis has sought to address how narrative imagines and responds to the American imperial project at such a time of realignment. While some have diagnosed this quarter-century as a period of sharp decline, I have remained wary of ringing the death knell for American empire, instead identifying rapid fluctuation and uncertainty in what we understand as the contemporary American imperial project. Indeed, it is as observers of the movements of American military power that writers, filmmakers—and we as readers, consumers and critics—give conceptual shape to a notoriously complex, messy and disparate series of imperial events following the attacks of September 11, 2001. I have argued during this thesis that such shape is given narratively though representations of masculinity, especially through embodied military masculinity's relation to technology. This frame of interpretation brings together the discourse of crisis that binds conceptions of empire to conceptions of American masculinity. Looking across literary and cinematic narratives of the war on terror, I have considered how emerging visual technologies—specifically unmanned aerial vehicles and handheld cameras—are articulated against embodied masculinities, and how these configurations mediate the American domestic and military spheres as imperial spaces. Through the frame set by this relationality, the texts studied during this

thesis generate diverse visions of American empire, articulating anxiety, nostalgia, anticipation and uncertainty over the role of the man, the soldier, and the broader apparatus of US imperial power in our contemporary moment.

Over the course of my argument, I have paid particular attention to the imbrication of war and home spaces during the war on terror. By tracing successive domestic crises, Part One explored how literary fiction has conceptualised a sick and fragmented domestic space in the years following the establishment of Homeland Security. Bringing their veteran protagonists within the folds of the domestic United States, these texts re-orient our perspective on the war on terror by inviting us to consider it as a domestic issue just as much as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the financial crash or the opioid epidemic. As David Eisler has noted, war on terror representation is notable for its preoccupation with the soldier's return to the United States, as opposed to narrating combat experience (17). Eisler suggests this reveals the chasm of experience between the soldier and the civilian, underscoring the traumatic experience of the soldier who finds himself applauded by a pliant civilian population who are nonetheless disinterested in the reality of the war (118). As a counter-reading, I have read around trauma to suggest that these texts serve to bring the soldier and the civilian *together* through alternate affective modes emergent from a crisis-ridden, neoliberal present. Such a reading enables us to fully appreciate the imbrication of war and home spheres—that is, the militarisation of the home—in the period of American empire ushered in by Homeland Security.

The militarisation of the home space gains sharper definition in narratives that contend with military masculinity's relation to drone technology. In Part Two, I explored how drama and cinema imagine a conflict between embodied masculinity and drone warfare, where the characteristics traditionally attributed to military masculinity—bravery, face-to-face combat and willingness to sacrifice one's life—are effaced, as the operation of killing is done from a position of absolute safety at home. Drones bring war into the folds of the domestic sphere

resulting in a perceived domestication, and thus emasculation, of the pilot. This presents a conundrum for American war storytelling, of which the conventions rely on masculine adventure and heroism to deliver narratives of imperial conquest. The complication of these straightforward narrative conventions exposes the raw bio- and necro-political structures of American empire-building. This further reveals the entanglement of military masculinity and empire in the American war imaginary: as narrative struggles to conceptualise a heroic masculinity for the drone age, so does it struggle to patch over the legal and ethical violations enacted by American military interventions with straightforward tales of righteousness and adventure.

Indeed the only text in Part Two that manages to get around this imaginative quandary is *The Hurt Locker*, which stages a dominance of man over drone by terrestrialising and domesticating the unmanned technology. The film also harnesses and blends genre conventions, imagining its protagonist in storybook figurations of masculinity as a soldier, spaceman and cowboy. Such a melding of generic conventions places its protagonist outside time, thus rejecting the threat posed to embodied military masculinity by the linear advance of technology. *The Hurt Locker*'s figure of military masculinity is also dislocated spatially: unlike the texts preceding it in Parts One and Two, the film maintains a distinct separation between war and home, imagining its soldier traversing both spheres in perpetuity.

The texts that make up Part Three develop the line of questioning raised in *The Hurt Locker*, in which the conventions of war storytelling become exposed and problematised by the insertion of advancing visual technology. In Part Three, I focalised the handheld digital camera, an emergent visual technology that enabled a proliferation of intimate images taken from the perspective of the soldiers carrying them. Some critics have suggested that such an abundance of personal viewpoints can document the war in a way which undercuts any singular grand narrative, however I am sceptical of any such arguments given the extremely subjective and often decontextualised perspectives offered by the handheld camera. The images

which emerge from soldiers' cameras function in the same way as the embedded journalist: to provide, in Roger Stahl's words, a "soda straw" view of the war which evades critique by focusing solely on individual experience (*Militainment, Inc* 89). In this way, digital camera images and embedded reporting mirror the literary convention defined by Roy Scranton as the arc of the "trauma hero," in which narratives elide the larger political questions surrounding American military intervention abroad in favour of the "more manageable question: 'what was it like?'" (*We're Doomed* 234). A defining feature of early war on terror representation, both fictional and non-fictional, is the noisy paradox produced by the overwhelming mass projection of narrow, individuated points of view.

Such insular perspectives seem to contrast the expansive mode of seeing portended by drone technology as the war on terror evolved; while the drone enables long-distance vision, the handheld camera produces up-close-and-personal images of war. However, the spatio-temporal contraction generated by drone vision is equally as limiting as the soda-straw view of the digital camera, reducing conflict and its victims to a detached procedure based on algorithmic assumptions. From both these angles, the war on terror is delivered as fragments, and a coherent narrative struggles to emerge to give meaning to the war. As I discussed in Part Three, narratives have attempted to make sense of this fragmentation by looking beyond the singular image of the digital camera and examining how the image operates within a network of information exchange that informs how we receive and respond to war. Nevertheless, as such a disparate series of events—from 9/11, to Fallujah, Abu Ghraib, the drone programme, the occupation of Afghanistan and beyond—the war on terror is very difficult to shape in the contemporary war imaginary. The soldier's experience of military masculinity is one lens through which culture attempts to narrate such disparate events as the war on terror. Furthermore, as I have attested to throughout this thesis, war on terror representation leans heavily on traditional American mythology, the mythology of

the frontier, to attempt to narrate this notoriously messy and controversial war in a familiar conceptual language.

Imagining the rugged individual's conquest of land, frontier mythology stages the intersection of masculinity and empire-building; as such it is generative to unpack conventions of this mythology in war on terror representation. It has been my contention in this thesis that narratives of the war on terror invoke frontier mythology and the Wild West in order to ask questions about American empire and hegemony in the contemporary moment, reaching back to the past in order to conceptualise the present and the future. American war storytelling has long characterised the soldier by invoking the cowboy, and objects of empire, whether Mexican, Japanese, Vietnamese or Iraqi, are designated as "Indians." This generic formula re-packages imperial ideology as a straightforward and romantic story of adventure, at the centre of which stands a heroic, all-American figure of military masculinity. As I have explored, the rapid development of technology has complicated this formula, and it has also provided openings for writers to unravel the threads that tie war so tightly into the popular American imagination. If contemporary war narratives are struggling to produce a coherent image of American empire at this time of rupture and realignment, then the advance of visual technology has at least generated a set of tools through which to interrogate the roles of mythology and the war imaginary in producing and sustaining the American imperial project.

During this thesis I have focused on what are traditionally considered to be "war stories" in order to examine how imaginaries of empire are narratively refracted through the figure of the soldier, the agent of military power. However, this is not to discard the vast array of popular cultural production which has responded to the war on terror in a more oblique manner. As I have touched upon, the "found footage" subgenre of films, which includes *Cloverfield* (2008) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007), gained popularity around the same time as the release

of *Generation Kill* and Bush's 2007 "Surge," which saw an increase in troops sent to fight in Iraq, in a war which by then had become deeply unpopular. Usually belonging to the horror genre, these films employ a handheld camera style to frame the breach of domestic boundaries by an alien presence: in the case of *Cloverfield*, monsters attack the US, and *Paranormal Activity* sees a couple terrorised by a supernatural presence invading their home. The parallels with 9/11 and with the invasion of Iraq are all too apparent, and such allegories are intensified when read in the context of Abu Ghraib. Similarly, the "torture porn" subgenre of horror films includes franchises such as *Hostel* (2004-11) and *Saw* (2004-present) which we can read as responses not only to the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib, but also to the wide-spread dissemination of images of violence, torture or otherwise, through digital networks, permitting audiences to see extreme violence in a way that had been filtered out through mainstream media and the "Dover Ban."

Finally, the most commercially successful cultural product to respond to the war on terror has been the Marvel franchise, of which the themes of global war, militarism and a super-human "hero" elite resonate with the post-9/11 consensus established under Homeland Security and the war on terror. However, the franchise does very little to interrogate the impact of the war on terror as it has been experienced by US citizens or those living outside America's borders. The Russo brothers' film *Captain America: Civil War* is based on *Civil War*, a comic book by Mark Millar and Steve McNiven, in which the "Superheroes Registration Act" reads as a direct allegory for the Patriot Act in subjecting superheroes to heightened government surveillance following a large-scale tragedy. In the film adaptation, the Act becomes the UN-mandated "Sokovia Accords" and thus disperses Millar's direct critique of the Patriot Act and its infringement of civil liberties into a more generalised rendering of a global, technocratic sanctions system that prevents a violent yet elite set of heroes from doing their job, that is, policing the world. In their almost Randian connotations, the Marvel films fulfil largely propagandistic

aims, not least because its central hero Iron Man maintains a backstory as an arms dealer during the Afghanistan war. Hugely commercially successful but of little critical or artistic substance, the popularity of the Marvel film franchise appears as symptomatic of the popular culture industries' imbrication with the "forever war," rather than offering any critical appraisal of the workings of contemporary American empire as it is projected abroad. In 2024, as the Marvel beast begins to die, the task remains to find imaginative and innovative ways for narrative to contest contemporary empire's deep entrenchment into life at home and beyond the nation's borders.

In June 2022 I spent three months researching handheld camera footage from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars at the Veteran's History Project in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. On a Sunday spent reading at Meridian Hill Park, I came across a small protest staged by the anti-war group Gamers for Peace (GFP), a movement founded by and for veterans of the war on terror who reject the militaristic and imperialistic aims of the American military for which they served. Video games are another narrative form that have fundamentally shaped the way in which we engage with the war on terror. While falling outside the scope of this thesis, gaming, and especially *Call of Duty*, is significant for its huge commercial appeal, and the way in which it has brought the war on terror into the homes of most young men in the Western world. In this way, we might locate video games upon the "digital frontier" that I discussed in chapter nine, since they have acted as a vital battleground upon which contemporary discourses of militarism and imperialism have been advanced and resisted. A key example of this is the game *America's Army*, which ran between 2002 and 2022 and which was used to encourage enlistment into the US military, even being taken to high schools as a recruitment resource (Allen 8). In resistance to such propagandising efforts, GFP use gaming as a rallying tool to create community for veterans while providing support for PTSD and engaging in anti-war activism, particularly against military recruitment

advertising in schools and other places where children can be targeted. Such activism includes "Ad Slams" on the gaming platform Twitch, through which the activists hack into military recruitment livestreams to offer the viewers—some of whom are as young as seven or eight years old—an alternative to the narrative projected by the US military recruiters. Recognising the imbrication of narratives of empire and masculinity, GFP's resistance to militarism acts in conjunction with their resistance to gender normativity. The group entirely rejects the hegemonic military masculinity normally associated with soldiering, encouraging members to identify their pronouns, with many choosing to go by they/them, and by encouraging candid discussions of mental health. These ex-Marines, equipped with some of the toughest military training in the world, are carving out imaginative tools of resistance to contemporary empire by rejecting the ideologies of militarism and hegemonic masculinity, and providing positive alternative directions for young people. Resisting empire from within and by using the military's technological and ideological tools against itself, the Gamers for Peace wrest control of the narrative, quite literally. In doing so, they speak to the power of narrative to forge and dismantle imperial imaginaries—revealing the tools of resistance at our fingertips.

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